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"Writing as though It Mattered": The Persistence of the Experimental Novel in British Fiction of the Sixties and Seventies. B.S. Johnson, Ann Quin, Eva Figes

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Foreword

Traditionally, at least until the first years of the new millennium, critical accounts concentrating on the state of English letters in the immediate decades after World War II have tended to give special prominence almost exclusively to such phenomena as the Angry Young Men, The Movement or the kitchen-sink drama, to the detriment of any alternative voice that could possibly resound in the literary underground of that time. The picture thus provided was that of a rather dull period marked by an apparently unchallenged return to a kind of neo-Victorian social realism, which is even more striking if laced in contrast with the previous vibrant phase of artistic experimentations that had broken new ground in multiple genres, producing the unprecedented Modernist heights of writers such as of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, followed a generation later by Samuel Beckett.

In fact, despite the restored predominance of a conventional kind of novel, and the generally hostile attitude reserved by the English literary establishment for any text presenting an experimental character, or deviating in any way from the prescriptions and expectations of common literary taste, the Modernist tradition *did* persist, in its own subterranean and subdued way, in the works of a small number of non-conventional writers, who saw themselves, each after their own individual fashion, as the perpetuators of Modernism. These writers, like the Modernists did before them, wrote against convention, trying to push the limits of the novel further, in a renovated context which demanded altogether new challenges and could not possibly be narrated, they felt, through the exhausted forms of the past.

This group of writers, though they never grew to become a cohesive school in the traditional sense of the term, was mainly operative in London during the Sixties and early Seventies. They somewhat gathered around the influential figure of Bryan Stanley Johnson (1933-1973), and comprised among their ranks writers such as Ann Quin (1936-1973), Eva Figes (1932-2012) and Alan Burns (1929-2014), all of whom reached their highest – if comparatively modest – peak during the Swinging decade. None of these writers ever achieved, at least in terms of sales and critical consensus, a really widespread fame in their lifetime – Johnson and Quin even died prematurely at the age, respectively, of 40 and 37 –, ending up consequently occupying a very minor position in the English literary canon, with the majority of them slipping in fact into a sort of oblivion already by the end of the Seventies.

A series of recent literary events taking place from the early 2000s onwards, however, seems to have sparkled a belated though decisive revival of interest towards these half-forgotten voices of the Sixties, leading to a crucial recuperation and re-evaluation of these writers and their works. On the one hand, for instance, Picador commissioned Jonathan Coe to write a biography of B.S. Johnson which was eventually published in 2004[1], accompanying it with re-issues of Johnson's most acclaimed novels[2] and, slightly later, a volume of collected short prose, drama and journalism[3], some of which previously unpublished or scattered beyond retrieval. At about the same time, inspired by this general Johnsonian revival, and concurrently contributing to its sustenance, the first important extensive critical accounts of his works began to appear[4], becoming since then increasingly numerous and available. Ann Quin's name, on the other hand, timidly resurfaced first in the States, where some of her novels were re-issued by Dalkey Archive Press, with some minor critical attention being granted her more than three decades after her death[5], then more decisively in the UK: here, a young publishing house, And Other Stories, has very recently revived critical discourse around Ann Quin with the publication of a volume of collected short stories and an unfinished novel[6] – edited by Jennifer Hodgson, one of the main agents of this revival –, followed by re-issues of all her novels[7]. As to other writers of the same circle, Calder have recently started, since 2018, to publish new versions of Alan Burns' works[8], while Eva Figes, apart from the numerous mentions being made of her affiliation to this group and the odd critical contribution dedicated to her fiction[9], seems at least for the moment to remain quite untouched by this general wave of Sixties' avant-garde rediscovery.

This recent renovation of critical interest in these up-to-now minor writers is bringing about also a change in the way the literary post-war period in Britain is being perceived and reinterpreted:

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[1] Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson*, Picador, London, 2004.

[2] Picador began by publishing a renovated edition of *The Unfortunates* in 1999, to which followed a *B.S. Johnson's Omnibus* (comprising *Albert Angelo*, *Trawl* and *House Mother Normal*) in 2004. A second wave of re-issues occurred then a decade later, with paperback versions of *Albert Angelo*, *Trawl*, *House Mother Normal* and *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* coming out in 2013.

[3] Bryan Stanley Johnson, *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B.S. Johnson*, J. Coe, P. Tew, J. Jordan (eds.), Picador, London, 2013.

[4] Nicolas Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson*, Paupers' Press, Nottingham, 2000; Philipp Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2001. Critical attention bestowed on Johnson before the publication of such monographic studies seems to amount merely to a 1985 issue of "The Review of Contemporary Fiction" (number 5.2), a chapter of which is dedicated to him.

[5] Magazines such as "The Review of Contemporary Fiction" and "Music & Literature", for instance, have dedicated a chapter to her, respectively in the 2002 and 2016 issues.

[6] Ann Quin, *The Unmapped Country: Stories and Fragments*, J. Hodgson (ed.), And Other Stories, Sheffield, 2018.

[7] *Berg* came out indeed in 2019, *Three* in 2020, *Passages* in 2021 and *Tripticks* in 2022.

[8] *Dreamerika!* came out in 2018, while 2019 was the turn of *Europe After the Rain*, *Babel* and *Celebrations*, and then *Buster* in 2020.

[9] One might point here, for instance, to the monographic studies by Silvia Pellicer-Ortin (S. Pellicer-Ortin, *Eva Figes Writing: A Journey through Trauma*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2015) and Małgorzata Godlewska (M. Godlewska, *Multimedialism in the Fiction of Eva Figes*, Wydawnictwo Universytetu Gdańskiego, Gdansk, 2019), both with very specific approaches, not to mention Daniela Neri's *Palinsesti Woolfiani*, partly dedicated to her (D. Neri, *Palinsesti Woolfiani: L'Influenza di Virginia Woolf nei Romanzi 'Light' di Eva Figes e 'The Hours' di Michael Cunningham*, Il Foglio, Piombino, 2012).

no more, or not simply, as a time of neo-realistic stagnation and unopposed return to traditional models, but rather as a period concealing under the surface a whole scenario of effervescent avant-garde stirrings, with a plethora of experimental writers extending a Modernist tradition which was wrongly thought quiescent or extinguished, resuming from the point where writers such as Joyce, Woolf and Beckett had left off.

The present study intends thus to interact with and contribute to this general momentum of rediscovery and critical re-evaluation of the literary Sixties by concentrating on some of its most vociferous or underrated figures, some of which are already resurfacing at a rather convincing pace, while others appear to be still unjustly ignored. In choosing specifically B.S. Johnson, Ann Quin and Eva Figes as the authors on which to concentrate over the following pages, one does not necessarily wish to indicate the supposedly "best" writers of the period, nor even the most interesting or most deserving of attention, for many others remain little known, who would probably deserve critical recuperation as much as these. Apart, then, from the obvious limits of space at one's disposal here, and the resultant impossibility to account for any single avant-garde writer of the period without resulting exceedingly superficial, the election of this triad might sound as rather subjective and insufficiently justified in itself: it possibly is, but a number of reasons can be advanced in support of such decision.

First of all, B.S. Johnson, Ann Quin and Eva Figes can be said to form, together with Alan Burns, the central core of the avant-garde movement of this time: they were all Londoners, in the sense that they were all based there during much of the Sixties and Seventies, a period corresponding to the apogee of this group, and were personally acquainted, if not friends, with one another. Their mutual closeness and unity of intent, despite their individual characteristics, will thus provide a much more cohesive frame of references, which will hopefully permit to construct a discourse capable of accounting for both the peculiarities of each writer and for the general development of the group as a whole – and by extension, of the English avant-garde of the Sixties. Alan Burns could certainly have fitted perfectly – and deservedly – into this discussion: apart from the above reasons of limited space available, however, it appears that he ended up, already from the early Seventies, quite distancing himself from the philosophy of the group and from experimental literature in general. At the origin or inspiration of this rupture, as he himself indicated[10], lies apparently Heinrich Böll's Nobel's prize acceptance speech of 1972, in which the author advocated for a more conventional approach to be adopted by engaged writers, with the objective to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. To this, one may add Burns' increasingly engrossing involvement with academic life, which led him away from Britain – more precisely to Australia and the States – for a great part of his life starting from the

[10] See Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (ed.), *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss their Working Methods*, Allison & Burby, London and New York 1981, p. 164.

early Seventies. Other writers could undoubtedly fit as well: one could think, for instance, of recurrent names such as Christine Brooke-Rose, Rayner Heppenstall, Brigid Brophy, Giles Gordon, Stefan Themerson, Wilson Harris or Anthony Burgess. If these writers all provide valid and interesting examples of experimentation in themselves, it is also true that they are either from an earlier or later generation with respect to the period chosen, or too marginally involved in the activities the group of B.S. Johnson, not to mention that some of them already occupy prominent positions in the British literary canon.

Secondly, as regards the individualities that have eventually been chosen for inclusion in this analysis, it would be utterly impossible to give any general account of the period without taking in consideration the figure of B.S. Johnson, who ended up functioning as a catalysing personality and a sort of ideological leader to this group, were it only in virtue of his combative, militant spirit, which made him the ideal – if not perhaps the most apt – advocate for the whole avant-garde movement. Ann Quin, then, is perhaps the most authentic and original voice of the whole group, and the state of relative obscurity in which she still finds herself is a sufficient reason to dedicate to this author the space she certainly deserves. Eva Figes's case is different, for her comparatively recent disappearance in 2012 puts her in the unenviable position of an author who was already slipping into oblivion when she was still alive. Her affiliation and resilient belief in the spirit of the group even after its formal dissolution, however, brought her to produce an original body of work which represents yet another direction that the experimental neo-Modernist novel has taken during the Sixties. Her crucial engagement in the field of feminist theory, moreover, makes her fiction a site of fruitful dialogue with contemporary issues which became of great prominence in the decades under analysis.

As to the structure of the present work, it seemed the most convenient option to conceive a central part divided into three macro-chapters, each one dealing with a single writer in turn, preceded by an introduction, which will focus on the broader literary context in which these authors operated, and followed in the end by some conclusive remarks, for the sake of greater cohesiveness. Within each central chapter, a single theme will be chosen through which to construct a transversal analysis of the major texts of each author, taking into consideration the period of the Sixties and Seventies.

The texts chosen will be prominently novels, long prose being the chief occupation of these writers – though not the only one –, and possibly the medium in which they have achieved the most significant results. If occasion will require, however, references will not be spared to other minor texts as well, especially in cases in which links to sources of different kind may provide further interesting insights into a given subject. As regards Quin and Johnson, having both died in 1973, the entirety of their novelistic production will be taken into account; in Figes's case, instead, attention will be concentrated – if only for the sake of greater chronological homogeneity – on her production of the Sixties and Seventies only, leaving the rest in the background, though still reserving the

possibility of highlighting possible thematic connections and references that might shed some interesting light on the matters under discussion in her section. The methodologies and critical sources which will be adopted, on the other hand, will be as varied as the material of each single section will require them to be, in the belief that such a diverse and kaleidoscopic array of themes, styles, forms and languages as that provided by these authors could never be properly mastered and done justice to with recourse to one single homogenising approach.

The object of this study, to conclude, is thus to provide a picture of the British literary Sixties as a moment of lively, though subterranean, experimental effervescence; a moment in which, despite the general conservative attitude of an establishment decidedly oriented towards a traditional model of literature, and the consequently wide predominance of the realist novel in its neo-Victorian variant, a much more daring and ambitious kind of novel, inspired by the recent Modernist experience and by other contemporary avant-gardes from the Continent, did indeed survive and even thrivingly developed. This happened thanks to the activity of a group of writers which, in Johnson's own words, were still "writing as though it mattered, as though they meant it, as though they meant it to matter[11]". The general feeling of this avant-gardist ebullience will then hopefully be recreated, and conveyed, through an exploration of these three of its most representative and interesting voices. One further objective will be that of contributing to the rehabilitation of such underrated figures as Ann Quin and Eva Figes, while considering some aspects of B.S. Johnson's work – a figure by now returned to a slightly more prominent position in today's critical discourse – which have not yet received the attention they deserve.

[11] See B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*, in Id., *Well Done God!*, p. 29.

I: Introduction

1.1

F(r)ictions of the Sixties

> Only when one has some contact with a continental European tradition of the *avant garde* does one realise just how stultifyingly philistine is the general book culture in this country. Compared with the writers of romances, thrillers, and the bent but so-called straight novel, there are not many who are writing as though it mattered, as though they meant it, as though they meant it to matter. […]
> Nathalie Sarraute once described literature as a relay race, the baton of innovation passing from one generation to another. The vast majority of British novelists has dropped the baton, stood still, turned back, or not even realised that there is a race.
> Most of what I have said has been said before. […] What I do not understand is why British writers have not accepted it and acted upon it[1].

This notorious quotation by B. S. Johnson, one of the loudest and most representative voices of the literary avant-garde of the Sixties, perfectly epitomises the situation of a writer striving to establish himself in the post-war literary scene by espousing innovation and experimentation against the conservative views of both the reading public and the literary establishment. The cultural climate was indeed at this time particularly hostile to any form of deviation from the model of the neo-Victorian realist novel, a model that had largely re-imposed itself after the groundbreaking innovations brought about by Modernism in the first decades of the Twentieth century, which had profoundly changed the art of novel writing.

One of the most disconcerting aspects for many innovative authors of this period was indeed the observation that the Modernist revolution, with which these writers felt a strong sense of continuity, had been largely ignored by the world of English letters, or that, in any case, it had not left as profound a mark as it should have. Considering the reactionary approach adopted by the majority of contemporary writers, these authors regrettably noticed that the significance of such momentous achievements as Joyce's *Ulysses* and other Modernist masterpieces had not been in the least assimilated by subsequent generations of British writers. The novel, as a result, instead of moving forward, exploiting and expanding on the manifold possibilities opened up by previous innovators of the genre, appeared now to be looking backwards, harking back to forms that were already considered exhausted at the beginning of the century. In an article aptly titled *The Revolution Ignored*, for instance, B.S. Johnson laments that, in spite of Joyce's game-changing innovations, "all except a handful of writers go on turning out novels which […] could have been written by Trollope,

[1] B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young*…, pp. 29-30.

Dickens, name as you will dead writers[2]". Elsewhere he argues that this is "not a question of influence, of writing like Joyce. It is a matter of realising that the novel is an evolving form, not a static one, of accepting that for practical purposes where Joyce left off should ever since have been regarded as the starting point[3]"; contemporary novelists, on the contrary, seemingly continue to pursue nineteenth-century forms that in Johnson's time cannot but be perceived as "anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant, and perverse[4]". In a similar vein, Eva Figes remarks that "by and large English novelists have turned their backs on the innovative fiction of the past twenty years, done nothing with it, learnt nothing from it, and have rejected it out of hand, without understanding[5]".

The dominant mode of the Sixties was indeed oriented towards a kind of social realism which concentrated on the same recurring dynamics of middle-class lives repeated ad libitum. The predominant tendency in fiction privileged stories recounted in a straightforward way, devoid of any kind of stylism, experimental eccentricities, textual and typographical exuberances, distortions of the linear development of the plot and any sort of unorthodox treatment of the narrative material. Eva Figes bitterly summarises the literary scenario of the time in the following terms: "The 'Hampstead novel', middleclass and middlebrow, was in the ascendant, and the critics drooled over dreary narratives and suburban adultery. There was only one kind of story, and one way to tell it. Any deviation from this norm was met not so much with hostility, as incomprehension[6]".

The general conditions of the time, in short, tended to produce rather straightforward novels of quite modest scale, which had certainly not the aspiration, nor the intention, to effect any noticeable advancement in the field of English letters. Their approach, in other words, was more descriptive than oriented towards an extension of the technical possibilities of prose. As such, these novels tended to seek legitimacy in the confirmation of the literary status quo, rather than through a questioning of the rules and conventions of writing, trying to find new ways to narrate experience. The term 'Hampstead novel', which began to circulate in the decades immediately after the Sixties[7] with reference to authors such as Margaret Drabble, Margaret Forster, Fay Weldon and Kingsley Amis, is another indicator of the modesty of scope and of the disinterest for universality – or better, the interest for the extremely local – characterising this sort of literary endeavors.

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[2] Id., *The Revolution Ignored*, in "Vogue", 11.10.1966.
[3] Id., *Aren't You Rather Young…*, pp. 12-3.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 14.
[5] Eva Figes, Undated article written on commission for "The New Review", 1978, Eva Figes Archive, British Library, London.
[6] See Id., *B.S. Johnson*, in "Review of Contemporary Fiction", v. 5.2, 1985, p. 70.
[7] Critic Kate Kellaway explains that back in the Eighties this term used to denote "a middle-class morality novel - probably involving adultery and shallow-masquerading-as-deep" (See K. Kellaway, *The Places Where the Story of Britain Is Told*, in "The Guardian", 28.12.2008). Typical authors of this subgenre were Margaret Drabble, Fay Weldon, Margaret Forster, Penelope Lively.

More than one commentator lamented this shallowness, this prospective myopia and general lack of ambition on the part of most authors of the time as a typical characteristic of the age. Rayner Heppenstall, for instance, a novelist himself, and sometimes referred to as the spiritual father of the avant-garde writers of the Sixties, concludes his own account of the then state of the British novel – written from the standpoint of 1961 – affirming that "there are novelists in this country who can write, but the total phenomenon to which they contribute is less interesting than its French counterpart today. […] In this country, there is too little technical enterprise. We have endless conventional novels[8]". David Lodge – another novelist-critic – finds that, a decade later, the situation has basically not changed much: "the present generation of English novelists", he affirms, "are lacking in ambition, afraid to expose themselves, cut off from 'real life' by the inbred literary milieu they inhabit[9]". "Reviewing the history of the English novel in the twentieth century", he also observes, "it is difficult to avoid associating the restoration of traditional literary realism with a perceptible decline in artistic achievement[10]". He then offers a further interpretation of the situation of English letters, by linking it to the general existential ricochet caused by the decline of the British Empire, and the impact this was inevitably having – consciously or unconsciously – on individual sensibilities, those of writers included:

> To the contemporary English novelist, conditioned by the shrinking of power and status of his country in the world, and by the psychological defence-mechanisms – irony, modesty, cynicism, 'commonsense' – we have developed to adjust to that circumstance, such ambition does not come naturally. […] In the 'fifties, indeed, unambitiousness was built into the literary programme of the Movement. […] Useful as such an attitude may be in purging literary pretentiousness, it can obviously degenerate very quickly into a defence of the mediocre. The contemporary English novelist, therefore, is likely to feel himself wandering between two lost worlds, one lost, the other powerless to be born. The great tradition of the realistic novel, or the early modernist developments […], the richness of which is being busily mined by the literary-criticism industry[11].

Indeed, the "defence of the mediocre" alluded to by Lodge was something deeply rooted in the literary system of the time: it was not simply a matter of a spontaneous, general orientation of public taste, nor the result of some reiterated attacks by a few influential reviewers who happened to be antagonistic to experimental literature. Rather, it was a situation created by the self-perpetuating vicious circle of a middle-brow hegemony, which operated by a complex synergy comprising a variety of agents: a class of reactionary writers who tended to abuse their privileged position as critics; a number of rather short-sighted publishers who valued profit above artistic merit and significance; and a proliferation of philistine booksellers who, claiming to know the taste of the reading public,

[8] Rayner Heppenstall, *The Fourfold Tradition*, Barrie and Rockliff, London 1961, pp. 270-1.
[9] David Lodge, *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (1971), Ark, London and Boston 1986, p. 30.
[10] *Ibid*., pp. 7-8.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 26.

promoted only specific kinds of books to the detriment of others. In this regard, Rubin Rabinovitz criticises a consolidated dynamic inherent in such system, by which an obvious disadvantage is created especially for underground novelists, while the steer of public opinion remains safely in the hands of writers belonging to the more conservative brew: "The successful novelist in England becomes, too quickly, a part of the establishment […]. All too often he uses his position as a critic to endorse the type of fiction he himself is writing and he attacks those whose approach is different[12]". (And of course these successful novelists may very likely correspond to those considered 'most readable' by the public, that is to say the middle-brow ones). This stance is echoed by B.S. Johnson as well, as he laments the viciousness of the literary-industry system by affirming that "today the neo-Dickensian novel not only receives great praise, review space and sales but also acts as a qualification to elevate its authors to chairs at universities[13]", venting his anger at the biased inertia of the academic establishment: "On reflection, perhaps the latter is not surprising; let the dead live with the dead[14]".

Heppenstall, for his own part, extends this critique to some publishers as well, opining that the predominance of mediocre novelists is undoubtedly "largely due to their audiences or perhaps rather to their publishers, who, on very flimsy grounds, claim to know just what the public wants, and to those critics who underwrite the position[15]". Readers and novelists are again the target of B.S. Johnson's anger, who appears unwilling to spare anyone in his ferocious critique of the deplorable state of English letters, with its proliferation and absurd insistence on long-exhausted forms: "I can only assume that just as there seem to be so many writers imitating the act of being nineteenth-century novelists, so there must be large numbers imitating the act of being nineteenth-century readers, too[16]".

As to the indirect though all too active role of booksellers in sustaining a system that tends to elevate mediocrity above ambition and innovation, John Calder's accounts of his desperate attempts at promoting experimental literature in that period are sadly telling of the prejudices and obstacles that many avant-garde writers – and some illuminated publishers, for that matter – had to face to reach whatever public there might possibly be for them to attract:

> I made regular trips around the provinces to see booksellers and promote my books. Booksellers were nearly all a very conservative breed in those days (and they have not changed much since), and they did not like what I published very much. The odd enthusiast would support me […]. But I was an eccentric publisher outside the accepted mould, bringing out literary books that few people could or wanted to understand, and that sold too slowly. […] There was also a suspicion that my creative literature, not being written just to make money, was in some way subversive. When I called on Ainslie Thin […], [responsible for] the

[12] Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960*, quoted in Lodge, *The Novelist at the Crossroads*, p. 8.
[13] B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 15.
[14] *Ivi*.
[15] R. Heppenstall, *The Fourfold Tradition*, pp. 270-1.
[16] B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 15.

> principal university bookselling in Edinburgh, he said to me one day, 'Some of my costumers have been asking for your dirty friend Mr. Beckett. But I'll no stock him'[17].

Calder's ultimate bitter recognition that booksellers generally "liked books they knew, and disliked those they didn't. Resistance to anything new was almost total[18]" may be said to perfectly encapsulate the predominance of the anti-highbrow, reactionary mood of the time, a sentiment that seemed to permeate all sectors of the literary industry.

In a 1974 letter to the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, moreover, the highbrow critic Philip Pacey polemically comments on the effective role of public libraries in the maintenance of the aforesaid vicious circle of literary mediocrity, illustrating how the peculiar behaviour and the managerial choices of many librarians were also contributing more or less directly to the general phenomenon:

> Mr Eastwood, of Somerset County Library, is not ashamed to say, of a writer whom many consider to be a vital critic of our age and culture, that 'we shall try not to buy any more of his books in future, in view of an almost non-existent demand'. He could alternatively have taken the books off the shelves, dusted and displayed them. Instead it is likely that the few who still had confidence in the library's provision of serious books of this kind will now be eliminated into non-existence so far as the library is concerned. […] The reviewer of *The Silken Net* was right to identify the 'middlebrow' […] with the public library; it is the fact, rather than the observation, that is distasteful. What is worrying is the manner in which it is the librarian who creates the situation. His passive policy, of buying what is read and requested (rather than promoting the less familiar), is nevertheless active in consolidating one group in its taste […] and in alienating others. Supposed minorities are not, or are inadequately, catered for[19].

From middle-brow writers who exploited their privileged position of fame to defend their own fiction and attack that of others, to publishers who actively fashioned and informed their readers' taste by profit-oriented choices, to booksellers and even public libraries who further directed their customers towards very specific directions for similar reasons or out of simple intellectual inertia, it is thus easy to see how unequal the terms were on which the competition between writers of different orientations was being played in the Sixties, and how in such climate new experimental literature was unlikely to emerge and reach a wide enough audience to sustain itself.

Another concomitant aspect of this regression to mediocrity, affecting the attitude of the literary establishment and, more widely, of the reading public of this period, regards Britain's exacerbated parochialism and insularism. Traditionally, a certain degree of parochialism linked to a natural predilection for conservative attitudes has perhaps always been a quintessentially English characteristic. As some commentators have pointed out, however, such parochialism, intrinsic or not to the English character, had certainly been exasperated by the cultural segregation from the Continent

[17] John Calder, *Pursuit: The Uncensored Memoirs of John Calder*, Calder, London 2001, p. 150.
[18] *Ivi*.
[19] Philip Pacey, *Middlebrow* [Letter to the Editor], in "Times Literary Supplement", 20.09.1974.

experienced by Britain during the war, which had widened the gap especially with the cultural scene in France, and, most importantly Paris – at the time a chief point of reference for all European avant-gardes, in the literary as well as in any artistic and cultural field.

In his already cited treatise about the situation of English letters in the Sixties, for instance, Heppenstall stresses the importance of French influences on British culture at large, and repeatedly warns against the widespread suspicion he perceives in present-day England towards anything originating from the Continent, which is automatically dismissed by virtue of its supposed un-Englishness: "We cannot live without France. […] We have never lived without France. […] The language underlies our own, was ours for three hundred years. French writers have never ceased to affect the productions of our own. And France is more fully a 'second tradition' country than ours[20]". Heppenstall discusses how, shortly after the war, the existence of an increasing cultural gap with France was made evident in the way the English public reacted to the first encounter with French existentialism, which up to that moment had not yet managed to reach cultural quarters in Britain and continued to yield anything but enthusiastic responses:

> After the liberation of Paris during the summer of 1944, other people besides literary tipsters looked avidly for signs of what happened to French writing. By the time all France had been cleared of Germans in the late autumn, we began to hear the names of Sartre and Camus, and the word 'existentialism' became familiar to the knowing few. The reaction which gradually developed was one of dismay followed by resentful hostility[21].

Tangential though it may sound with respect to our main argument, this fact can be seen as a telling evidence of a growing scepticism about, if not an open hostility and fierce resistance to any possible cultural influence coming from France or the Continent in general – a reflection, in its turn, of Britain's relentless shrinking to a very insular and inward-looking position. Translated to the literary milieu, this growing reactionary insularity was mirrored by a general reorientation towards the great realist tradition of the Victorian era, logically seen as the literary expression of Britain's glorious recent past: the realist novel, regarded as quintessentially English, began thus to be promoted as the best and only possible model, whereas any kind of experimental, avant-garde or literary counter-tradition – namely, the Modernist novel of the first decades of the century and its immediate successors – tended to be seen as the expression of a decadent culture, and was on such grounds debased, altogether condemned or, in the best cases, looked at only with great suspicion.

Thus, it is not by chance that, in trying to introduce and promote avant-garde literature to the wider reading public, some publishers, writers and highbrow critics of this period felt on some occasions the need to appeal to the alleged 'Englishness' of a given text: the experimental character

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[20] R. Heppenstall, *The Fourfold Tradition*, pp. 247-8.
[21] *Ibid*., pp. 207-8.

of a novel, otherwise likely to be frowned upon, could in this way be justified, and presented under a more favourable light. Johnson, for instance, refers to Heppenstall in a *Vogue* article as “a disturbingly under-rated novelist [who] has made some original technical innovations and has a quiet command of language which is very English[22]”, while in a *TLS* instalment Ann Quin’s first novel *Berg* is presented by its publisher John Calder as possessing “a style that, while owing much to the ‘nouveau roman’, is completely English in atmosphere and presentation[23]”. This latter praise is also echoed in a *TLS* review, in which it is affirmed that “*Berg* is something of a breakthrough in the sense that, for the first time, these techniques have been used to produce a novel that is both wholly English in atmosphere and quite unpretentious[24]”: a statement that apparently praises the novel in itself, though simultaneously and indirectly criticising its broader influences and affiliations.

This latter example seems to express a typical trait of the criticism of the time: critics either condemned by default the majority of experimental literature being published on the grounds of its alleged inaccessibility and pretentiousness, or, in case of a positive judgement despite the experimental character of a text, they attempted to distance it from the wider avant-garde movement, treating it as an isolated phenomenon. In this way, reviewers had the possibility to express their opinion without appearing to be excessively in favour of a literary direction that the mainstream sensibility had instead the tendency to despise. As Robert Nye comments with reference to such a lamentably common attitude:

> The truth is that we have a tradition of ‘experimental’ writing in English but this being commonly referred to as a series of eccentric works the continuity of the thing is lost. Criticism has not yet caught up with the English genius for prose. There is really only writing that is alive, and writing that is half alive. Writing that is alive is what we call eccentric (if in English) or experimental (if in French)[25].

This tactic of labelling a work “eccentric” or “experimental” in order to dismiss it as irrelevant was widespread among critics and commentators who supported more or less consciously the middle-brow self-perpetuating mechanism. The term “experimental” has today neutral or even positive overtones, particularly when it is used to denote a kind of “high” literature that is deeply engaged with style and form besides mere content, with the ambition also to transcend mediocrity and achieve some sort of universality. During the Sixties, instead, the label “experimental” was employed by many commentators as a sort of weapon with which to attack works that appeared to follow paths alternative to that of the mainstream realist current: it was, in short, “a way of segregating or ghettoizing

[22] B.S. Johnson, *The Revolution Ignored*, in “Vogue”, 11.10.1966.
[23] Calder & Boyars, *Censorship and the Avant-Garde*, in “The Times Literary Supplement”, 6.08.1964
[24] Martin Seymour-Smith, Review of *Berg* by Ann Quin, in “The Times Literary Supplement”, 25.06.1964.
[25] Robert Nye, *The Future of the Experimental Novel in English*, in “The Guardian”, 10.09.1970.

innovative literature and preventing it from reaching an audience or infiltrating the mainstream[26]". Despite employing the term freely at the beginning of his writerly career in relation to his own literature[27], and still showing a contradictory attitude towards it in later years[28], Johnson himself famously pronounced against it in more than one occasion, as he began, from direct experience, to understand the value that was attached to this label, and the reactionary views it actually conveyed:

> 'Experimental' to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for 'unsuccessful'. I object to the word experimental being applied to my work. Certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful: that is, it has been the best way I could find of solving particular writing problems[29].

Eva Figes, too, acknowledges the factious behaviour of the literary establishment, which orients public opinion towards specific directions by labelling some writers in a certain way, only to relegate them to minor positions in the literary panorama and to go on promoting only the kind of literature they deem worthy of discussion:

> I presume I am being dismissed as avant-garde, though I cannot see anything so very 'avant' about it: after all Kafka was born in 1883 and could easily have been my grandfather, likewise Joyce and Proust. I do not feel that I am part of a vanguard, but that others are fighting a reargard action. The bestseller charts and majority opinion may suggest that they are winning, but I know that ultimately they must lose, that they have already lost. Their literary attitudes are based on a conception of the novel which is rooted in the nineteenth century, they have taken over the superficial techniques of a bygone era without understanding the original motivations which produced those techniques, presumably on the assumption that if it worked in the past it will work now[30].

As to the label "experimental" itself, her position appears to be very similar to Johnson's, in that she perceives the term as being used by reviewers mainly in relation to an idea of failure, which is not of course the case for many writers who work in this vein:

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[26] Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, Routledge, New York 2012, p. 2.

[27] "*Travelling People* […] was from the outset an experimental novel", he writes for example to George Greenfield, who was to become his first literary agent, in presenting him the manuscript of his first novel. See B.S. Johnson, Letter to George Greenfield, in Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 116.

[28] In an unpublished article from 1966, Johnson affirms that he and other fellow writers of the avant-garde "object to being called 'experimental' because of the pejorative sense the term bears for most English critics", which he variously reiterates on many other occasions. Johnson, however, does not apparently hesitate to resort to such term in his attempt to group together all these writers, and even titles his article *Experimental British Fiction*, in no pejorative nor provocative way. See B.S. Johnson, *Experimental British Fiction*, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library, London.

[29] Id., *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 19. A paraphrased version of the same pronouncement was also made years before in an article entitled *The Revolution Ignored*, in which Johnson similarly objects to the critics' use of the label "experimental", explaining the importance he attaches to the exploration of different forms in his writing process: "'Experimental' is the dirtiest of words, and invariably a reviewers' synonym for 'unsuccessful'. It is almost impossible to persuade any reviewer that he should honestly examine the validity of new techniques for achieving what they are intended to achieve" (Id., *The Revolution Ignored*, in "Vogue", 11.10.1966).

[30] E. Figes, *Interior Landscapes*, in "The Running Man", 1.1 (May-June 1968).

> A good writer does not do something 'different' simply in order to be different. A good writer is not 'experimental' either, because experiment implies failure. There are experimental stages, certainly, but you do not commit yourself to print until you know you have got where you wanted to get. A writer who does not know what he is aiming for, however intuitively, should be in another profession[31].

Looking at such repeated attacks launched by the literary establishment against the exponents of the avant-garde, as well as at the firm and sometimes equally belligerent responses elaborated by the latter, a pivotal characteristic of the cultural debate of the time begins to emerge. The all but friendly tone in which such confrontations were carried out is clearly indicative of a growing exacerbation of the long-lasting opposition between tradition and innovation, conservatism and avant-gardism, which during the Sixties reaches a level of virulence and aggressiveness rarely seen in previous British literary history. Suffice it to think, for instance, of such spiteful attacks as those coming from Kingsley Amis or William Cooper, whose essay *Reflections on Some Aspects of the Experimental Novel* (1959) qualifies as one of the fiercest critical exploits of this literary feud[32]; not to mention the many retaliations from the opposing side, whose counter-pronouncements were far from pacific and possessed sometimes an equal if not higher degree of verbal violence – one can think for instance in this connection of B.S. Johnson, who certainly never spared his aggressiveness when he had to respond to such critiques.

Contemporary commentators of this period often describe the cultural climate of the Sixties in terms of an exacerbated antagonism that subsisted between a set of opposite poles:

> Such conflicts as modernity against tradition; experimentation against conservatism (or the status quo); an outlook of futurist internationalism against the preserve of national heritage and, more broadly, the perception of an antipathy between the (seemingly) young and their (apparent) elders. Such time-honoured binaries gained a degree of systemic, disciplinary and institutional ubiquity in the 1960s[33].

"Against" is indeed a key word here, highly symbolic of the entire literary debate of the time, since groups and movements in the Sixties, however loose and unorganised they could be, always tended to define themselves *in opposition* to other categories rather than focusing on the distinctive and unifying traits that could potentially keep together the various writers of a same faction. The cause, either on one side or the other, tended in most cases to assume the semblances of a crusade against the ideas of an opposing position rather than one in favor of an internally shared system of principles (as was partly the case with the experimental writers of Johnson's circle): the mere antagonistic aspect

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[31] *Ivi*.

[32] Cooper's account contains expressions amounting sometimes almost to pure resentment, as in: "We meant to write a different kind of novel from that of the thirties and we saw that the thirties novel, the Experimental Novel, had got to be brushed out of the way". See William Cooper, *Reflections on Some Aspects of the Experimental Novel*, in "International Literary Annual No. 2, John Wain (ed.), Criterion Books/John Calder, New York 1959, pp. 29-36.

[33] Philip Tew, James Riley, Melanie Seddon (eds.), *The 1960s: A Decade of Modern British Fiction*, Bloomsbury, London 2018, p. 2.

towards competing factions, that is, tended to prevail on the propositional one internal to a given group.

This sense of widespread antagonism was undoubtedly magnified and sustained prominently by and through the press, where reviews and other articles variously related to literary issues offered one side or the other a perfect platform– with the already-discussed obvious advantages of the conservative side – to proclaim their own allegiance and launch attacks to the opposition. A brief presentation of a selection of reviews – especially the negative or sceptical ones – of some crucial experimental novels of the Sixties can perhaps help us shed some further light on the cultural climate that became characteristic of this time, leading to some interesting conclusions as to the kind of treatment that such literature generally received by establishment critics on the press, suggesting also how the press itself was being exploited to perpetuate a specific vision of literature to the detriment of any dissident alternative.

A first aspect that attracts attention is the deliberate way in which certain critics plainly disclose their literary biases as a sort of boastful incipit to some reviews, a fact that could potentially be considered as sufficient in itself to invalidate anything that follows, or at least to shed a thick veil of partiality on the entire judgement of a text:

> "As far as I'm concerned, one stream of consciousness novel is pretty well as unreadable as the next one[34]";
> "There are the usual irritations of this genre: self-consciousness and syntactical tricksiness[35]";
> "Suffers from overdose of modernism[36]";
> "One has learned to distrust such trick-techniques, which too often conceal an inability to tell a straight story[37]";
> "If this is the 1973 experimental novel, 'Back to Neville Shute!' is my cry[38]";
> "Like some other experimental fiction […] the direction in which it is heading seems to be […] a sacrifice of the characteristic excellence of fiction[39]".

Pronouncements of this kind are indeed strikingly revealing of the position endorsed by the reviewer and especially of their militancy against any form of unconventional fiction, which more often than not tends to seriously hinder any objectivity of judgement. In other cases, some reviewers seem even to derive a curiously distorted sense of pleasure from proclaiming their own inability to understand a "difficult" text:

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[34] Fred Urquhart, Review of *Konek Landing* by Eva Figes, in "Oxford Mail", 4.09.1969.
[35] Janice Elliott, Review of *See the Old Lady Decently* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Sunday Telegraph", 27.04.1975.
[36] Kenneth Graham, Review of *Konek Landing* by Eva Figes, in "The Listener", 4.09.1969.
[37] Jocelyne Brooke, Review of *Travelling People* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Listener", 25.03.1963.
[38] Anthony Thwaite, Review of *See the Old Lady Decently* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Observer", 4.02.1973.
[39] Claire Tomalin, Review of *Passages* by Ann Quin, in "The Observer", 23.03.1969.

> "I found it monotonous and often incomprehensible, a novel whose difficult surface seems unjustified by any fundamental complexity of conception[40]";
>
> "It is a hard read and I got no pleasure or stimulus from it. […] It's all mood (gloomy) and over-writing, with no discernible point or message[41]";
>
> "It's a great pity that she should have made her book so precious that it could never appeal to more than a limited readership[42]";
>
> "Racked grammar and haphazard tenses make ultimately turgid reading[43]";
>
> "Not so much a whodunit as a whodunwhat[44]";
>
> "A thank you to the publisher […] for telling me what I might not have worked out so well for myself. Even with the explanation, this remains a fairly infuriating little book[45]".

These are all affirmations that make one wonder, if anything, whether a reviewer should really be allowed to publish a comment which can ultimately influence the reception of a work they obviously have not in the least understood.

More interesting are instead such cases in which, as already suggested, the reviewer expresses some kind of approval or even moderate praise of a particular novel, but manages at the same time to launch a more or less indirect critique, if not to the novel itself, at least to the kind of fiction it stands for, to its underlying influences or the unconventional practices it endorses:

> "Gimmickry of another sort is too often present […], but precious though this may be, it does not obscure the fact that this is a most promising first novel[46]";
>
> "Typographical novelties generally annoy me, but Mr Johnson triumphs over them[47]";
>
> "Despite, rather than because of, these gimmicks Johnson has much that is interesting, witty and shrewd to say[48]";
>
> "He tries […] a variety of gimmicks, but because he is both funny and relaxed it is all perfectly acceptable, if not of great significance[49]";
>
> "It is a tribute to Mr Johnson's talent that in spite of such pretensions one does enjoy this book[50]";
>
> "There's no denying B.S. Johnson's originality, inventiveness and – when he chooses to exercise it – novelist's skill, but it's difficult to imagine for him a readership not composed largely of other writers or students of fiction[51]".

Many are the instances of this kind, in which a novel is declared to be good *in spite* of its experimental character, with the implicit belief that the only tenable direction the novel should follow is that

[40] Jonathan Raban, Review of *Konek Landing* by Eva Figes, in "New Statesman", 5.09.1969.
[41] Review of *Konek Landing* by Eva Figes, unknown author and source, Eva Figes Archive, British Library, London.
[42] F. Urquhart, Review of *Konek Landing* by Eva Figes.
[43] Mary Conroy, Review of *Berg* by Ann Quin, in "The Sunday Times", 14.06.1964.
[44] Patricia Hodgart, Review of *Three* by Ann Quin, in "The Illustrated London News", 25.06.1966.
[45] Julian Symons, Review of *Passages* by Ann Quin, in "The Sunday Times", 30.03.1969.
[46] David Holloway, Review of *Travelling People* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Daily Telegraph", 25.03.1963.
[47] B.A. Young, Review of *Albert Angelo* by B.S. Johnson, in "Punch", 5.08.1964.
[48] A. Calder-Marshall, Review of *Albert Angelo* by B.S. Johnson, in "Financial Times", 3.09.1964.
[49] Christopher Wordsworth, Review of *Albert Angelo* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Guardian", 24.07.1964.
[50] J. Elliott, Review of *See the Old Lady Decently* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Sunday Telegraph", 27.04.1975.
[51] Jeremy Brooks, Review of *See the Old Lady Decently* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Sunday Times", 27.04.1975.

dictated by tradition and convention, and that any deviation from the norm, albeit with good results, always represents a *faux pas* in itself, something a good novelist should by all means avoid doing.

There is another typical behaviour, detectable especially – though not exclusively – in reviews of B.S. Johnson's work, by which a reviewer accepts that the text under consideration is experimental fiction, but instead of condemning it immediately as such, they rather criticise it for being too imitative of other experimental models, or ironically for not being experimental enough, for concealing, that is, a perfectly conventional story beneath an unconventional surface:

> "His second novel seems at first a good deal more 'experimental' than in fact it turns out to be, for in spite of typographical and other gimmicks his departures from the orthodox are not so radical as they at first appear. Is there such a thing as a timid experiment?[52]";
>
> "Solemnly sterile and imitative, 'experimental' claims resting on melting words together[53]";
>
> "Mr Johnson gets up to a good many formal tricks to keep things going, but too many of them are derivative[54]";
>
> "B.S. Johnson's new 'experimental' novel is more like a carve-up, discreetly doctored naturalism in a brazen avant-garde wrapping[55]";
>
> "Even in its random form, *The Unfortunates* is not in the least obscure. Mr Johnson has not been able to disguise his essential straightforwardness[56]";
>
> "All this is interesting, but there is nothing particularly experimental about using a highly artificial form (like Sterne), or chatting to the reader (like Fielding and others)[57]";
>
> "Mr Johnson has an adequate amount of fancy but not much imagination: he can do his bits of Sterne and Joyce, but it's all cosily mannerist, the merest stylistic tomfoolery[58]".

As can be evinced from some of these remarks, a curiously widespread behaviour among many reviewers of the time consisted in an unwavering determination to see in a text something that was never meant to be there in the first place, and consequently judging writers for not writing the books they never wanted to write. Johnson was for instance often criticised for not being the conventional writer many claimed to see in him, as many pronouncements made by early commentators of his work testify:

> "Making it new, being original in a writerly way, is a subtler, stranger circumstance than voguish holes in a page or dealing out dying kicks. Mr Johnson, incidentally, must know this and I look forward to his next book, which will wisely be conventional[59]";
>
> "Those who admired Mr Johnson's considerable skill as a writer hope that in time he would discard these tricks and concentrate on connected prose[60]";

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[52] Review of *Albert Angelo* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Times", 23.07.1964. Incidentally, one could argue that it certainly takes some degree of critical myopia to define *Albert Angelo*'s Disintegration section as a "timid experiment".
[53] Review of *Albert Angelo* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Daily Mail", 24.07.1964
[54] Stephen Wall, Review of *Albert Angelo* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Listener", 30.07.1964.
[55] John Sturrock, Review of *The Unfortunates* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Times Literary Supplement", 20.02.1969.
[56] Stephen Wall, Review of *The Unfortunates* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Observer", 23.02.1969.
[57] J. Symons, Review of *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Sunday Times", 4.02.1973.
[58] Anthony Thwaite, Review of *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Observer", 4.02.1973.
[59] John Coleman, Review of *Albert Angelo* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Observer", 26.07.1964.
[60] D. Holloway, Review of *Trawl* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Daily Telegraph", 10.11.1966.

> "It confirms the impression […] that Mr Johnson's real talent is for the traditional novel of character and narrative. His dallyings with experiment are irritating because they produce arbitrary gaps in what elsewhere is a coherent story[61]";
>
> "As so often with Mr Johnson, one once again has the impression of a naturally traditional novelist, in no pejorative sense, tricking out the surface of his writing […] in order to produce an effect of innovation and iconoclasm[62]";
>
> "It would be nice if B.S. Johnson dropped all the visual jokes, and recognised that his master is not really Sterne but Voltaire[63]";
>
> "Embedded in Mr Johnson's tiny chapters are, as one would expect, those little nuggets of unquestionable talent which one hopes some time to see piled together in a book which – dare one say it? – eschews gimmickry in favour of ambition, and scale[64]";
>
> "The portrait of his mother is entirely comprehensible and very moving, a striking example of traditional narrative art and a saddening indication that within B.S. Johnson the experimentalist there was a fine novelist[65]";
>
> "His sensibility remained a traditional one, and the influences that shaped him and recur in his work […] were those that shaped many of his English contemporaries[66]".

Ann Quin, on the other hand, was also sometimes absurdly criticised for writing her novels in an Ann-Quinian way, instead of a straightforward one:

> "If this 'difficult' book had been written without a parade of mystification it would seem not subtle but trivial[67]";
>
> "It can still be hope that Miss Quin will chuck the box of tricks away and sit down one day to write a whole book in which observation of the heart's affections is permitted to predominate and inform[68]";
>
> "Miss Quin's helter-skelter work […] slows down every once in a while to deliver funny, sharp, properly written paragraphs. Their excellence makes the surrounding subrealism all the sadder[69]";
>
> "One cannot help suspecting that the material which has been so conscientiously scrambled would prove, if one had the patience to reassemble it in coherent form, almost as banal as Mr Gangemi's[70]".

On other occasions, she may be equally criticised for not fulfilling the wishes of some reviewer, who hoped for instance that she could produce other novels in the same vein as the first one: "Murkily original and menacing, with much of the action taking place as if in the dark, Ann Quin's first novel *Berg* promised a talent likely to develop in strength. It is disappointing to find that

61 Douglas Hewitt, Review of *Trawl* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Times Literary Supplement", 10.11.1966.
62 Francis King, Review of *House Mother Normal* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Sunday Telegraph", 23.05.1971.
63 J. Symons, Review of *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Sunday Times", 4.02.1973.
64 Review of *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Times Literary Supplement", 9.02.1973.
65 J. Elliott, Review of *See the Old Lady Decently* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Sunday Telegraph", 27.04.1975.
66 B.S. Johnson's Obituary, in "The Times", 15.11.1973.
67 J. Symons, Review of *Passages* by Ann Quin, in "The Sunday Times", 30.03.1969.
68 R. Nye, Review of *Tripticks* by Ann Quin, in "The Guardian", 27.04.1972.
69 John Coleman, Review of *Tripticks* by Ann Quin, in "The Observer", 30.04.1972.
70 D. Lodge, Review of *Tripticks* by Ann Quin, in "The Times Literary Supplement", 26.12.1975.

in *Passages* the smoke screen has thickened into almost total obscurity while the macabre power has gone[71]".

It is really difficult, in such cases, to determine whether the text being judged is really the one written by the author, or rather the one the reviewer imagines the author has written, the ideal one he/she would wish to read and against which the actual one is measured, and obviously found disappointing. The strategy, in all these and similar issues, seems to consist in trying to assess all instances of innovative fiction according to the same referential framework employed in the interpretation of traditional texts, in order to domesticise them and dismiss them on the grounds of an alleged inferiority, for not being able to achieve what in fact they never tried to achieve. Or, as Jennifer Hodgson puts it: "to pitch the experimental novel against its realist counterpart and find the former lacking – in popular success, in a tenable politics – and dismiss it to the peripheries of literary histories[72]".

This, to conclude, is the scenario in which innovative writers of the Sixties found themselves to operate: they were reduced to extremely adverse conditions and kept in the silence of the underground by their realist-traditional counterpart, a silence enhanced in its turn by the inertia of the entire literary-industry system. In spite of all these obstacles, however, experimental literature did indeed survive in this period and pursued its own parallel, subterranean trail, certainly achieving only a limited resonance and remaining distant from the spotlight of mainstream discourses, but nonetheless thriving in its own way.

For many decades the towering predominance of the realist novel has kept the names and fortunes of the chief experimentalist writers of this period in a very marginal position of the literary canon; only rarely have they been referred to in literary discourses, and in most cases they have remained in a state of puzzled oblivion. The tide appears however now to be changing, as new critical currents are beginning to re-discover these writers and give them the importance they always merited, leading even to a general re-evaluation of the Sixties as a much more innovative literary period than it was previously considered.

Glyn White comments on how important the study of these writers is for a renewed, refreshing vision of this so-far underrated period of British literary history: "We come back to the sixties avant-garde because these are the texts that got left behind during the battle for ascendancy. The novels of the sixties avant-garde […] offer us a diverse set of rule-breakers set on subverting the dominant

[71] Elizabeth Harvey, Review of *Passages* by Ann Quin, in "Birmingham Daily Post", 5.04.1969.
[72] Jennifer Hodgson, *Such a Thing as the Avant-Garde Has Ceased to Exist*, quoted in Kaye Mitchell's introduction to *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the Sixties*, K. Mithcell and N. Williams (eds.), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2019, p. 14.

paradigm of their era[73]". Other commentators have already assimilated the Sixties as a pivotal moment of literary revolutions, which not only has given a crucial contribution to the survival of the novel through to contemporary times, but has also had a salvific role for British culture at large:

> The 1960s opened pathways to a reinvigorated British literature characterized by an increased multiplicity and a sense of a proliferation of different voices dynamically usurping nineteenth-century poetic preoccupations. It is this vividness and adaptability which has allowed British culture to survive its post-imperial identity crisis by reinventing itself during the post-war period[74].

Even without extending the impact of the literature produced by the avant-garde of the Sixties' to such proportions, the fact remains that its representative texts constitute an important and long-overlooked phase that provides a crucial link between the modernist tradition of the first half of the Twentieth century and contemporary forms of experimental literature today. This proves that the Sixties did in fact pullulate with a silent proliferation of alternative forms and voices that stood in defiant resistance to the homogenising vision of mainstream conventions. These long-forgotten texts are being now finally restored to their historical importance, showing their intrinsic interest and artistic value. They demand, therefore, to be studied with the attention and dedication that literary history has so far unjustly negated them.

[73] Glyn White, *Not the Last Word on the Sixties Avant-Garde: An Afterword*, in *ibid*., p. 258.
[74] Sebastian Groes, *British Fictions of the Sixties: The Making of the Swinging Decade*, Bloomsbury, London 2016, p. 37.

1.2

The Circle of B.S. Johnson: The Making of a "London" Avant-Garde

Besides obvious commentaries on the manifest predominance of the realist novel, a number of critical accounts dealing with the British literary scene of the Sixties refer invariably to an allegedly loose association of avant-garde writers who looked to B.S. Johnson as a sort of charismatic leader. It is indeed common to see names of experimental writers of this period mentioned together or in juxtaposition with one another, as if the interpretation of any of these individual voices were not possible without reference to their mutual implications or their affiliation with a broader avant-garde movement. There appears to be no clear consensus, however, on the exact delimitations of this avant-garde group, on the specific characteristics that would unite its members and define them at a collective level, differentiating their literature from that of other more conventional authors of the period, nor do critics agree on which specific authors are to be included in its ranks. Much criticism is in fact of little help in trying to clear this confusion, since it often limits itself to simply draft provisional lists of names which are all invariably at odds with one another, and inevitably end with the same ambiguous formula "and many others", which suggests an extreme sense of vagueness and lack of clear delimitations.

To what extent, then, is it possible to speak of a cohesive group? Which authors, if at all, is it apt to include in such a list, and on what bases? Are there any common characteristics, any shared system of aesthetic principles among these writers which can justify the very idea of an English avant-garde as opposed to the plethora of conventional writers that seemed to be dominant in the literary panorama of the Sixties? Trying to answer these questions could be of great help in understanding the broad phenomenon of the avant-garde of this period, in a general sense as well as with specific reference to each individual voice that participated in its constitution, each one bringing a unique contribution to the overall movement.

The reason why today many critics speak of a collective of experimental writers loosely grouped around the figure of B.S. Johnson is partly to be sought in the importance that the latter's introduction to the collection *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* has acquired in

much critical discourse about this period. This long piece, written by Johnson only a few months before committing suicide in November 1973, is of course much more than a simple introduction to some collected short stories of comparatively minor consequence. First, here Johnson indulges retrospectively in a series of extremely detailed considerations regarding his whole development as a writer throughout the years, explaining his own motives and what exactly he has tried to achieve with each single novel he has written. Secondly, he analyses the general situation of the novel in England, pointing to some lamentable aspects of the literary panorama of his time and exposing, concomitantly, some all-important principles that appear to be guiding his own approach to writing. Finally – and most importantly for the issue under consideration here –, he mentions a list of names that in his own opinion constitute the few writers who are currently "writing as though it mattered, as though they meant it, as though they meant it to matter[1]" – the only ones, that is, that he considers at present as capable of bringing about a real advancement to the form, thus pushing the novel forward through their innovative practices.

There is a number of possible aspects which have persuaded critics to see in this introduction a sort of manifesto for a group of writers which were not otherwise formally united under any clearly stated credo or system of agreed-on principles. The conviction, force and clarity with which Johnson expresses his own positions in this piece, which undeniably gives him the aura of a true leader, is certainly a first key factor. Some of the writers appearing in Johnson's list, then, may also be held equally responsible for the consolidation of this view: Eva Figes, for instance, has admitted that "this lucid introduction would, I think, serve as a manifesto for most of us who are not writing pseudo-Victorian novels[2]". Another crucial reason is the resonance that this piece has acquired in light of Johnson's untimely death, which makes of it a sort of last literary testament. The fact, finally, that Johnson refers in his conclusion to a collectivity of specific authors he sees as going in more or less the same direction has certainly had some influence on the shaping of a coral perception of all these figures, justifying in the eyes of many commentators the grouping together of at least those among them for whom more evident mutual connections could be found.

Another concomitant factor is Giles Gordon's slightly tardive attempt at piecing together an English avant-garde in his 1975 anthology *Beyond the Words* – which was in its turn to be co-edited by Johnson, had he not taken his own life during the preliminary preparations of the volume. Gordon's intention here is to gather some pieces of unpublished work, accompanied with theoretical pronouncements, by eleven authors considered by the editor(s) the "finest exponents" of "the new writing (which is, most emphatically, British; and not necessarily influenced by the works of, say,

[1] See B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young*…, p. 29.
[2] E. Figes, Review of *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Guardian", 25.10.1973.

French or German writers)[3]". The attempt was that of reuniting in a single representative volume – in fact rather retrospectively, given the deaths of both Johnson and Quin by the time of publication –, the dispersed energies of an alleged avant-garde by the sheer force of juxtaposition and accumulation, giving them the manifesto they were lacking: "The fictions would be preceded […] by individual 'statements', the writers giving perhaps their views on the new writing and their own contributions to it, relating it to the mainstream of English literature. […] The book will be, in effect, a manifesto[4]".

The sensation is thus that the more superficial accounts of the Sixties tend to resort too readily to lists such as Johnson's or Gordon's in order to sustain the idea of a clearly defined collectivity of writers. It is fairly easy to see, however, that such lists represent only highly subjective groupings of rather disparate figures with formally very little in common, except perhaps a vaguely shared rejection of the realist tradition sponsored by the literary establishment of the time. Not by chance, Eva Figes defines Johnson's grouping as simply "a list of the writers he approves of[5]", while Gordon himself, pondering on the differences between the names of his own selection and Johnson's potential choice, wonders "whether we would ever have agreed upon a mutually acceptable list[6]". The fact alone, for example, that Alan Sillitoe, certainly not remembered prominently as an avant-garde writer, is also included among Johnson's chosen writers[7] is in itself indicative enough of the urgency with which he is attempting to enlist as many fellow authors as possible: any slightest suggestion, it seems, of a possible inclination toward literary experimentalism is sufficient for Johnson to call upon the writer in question to take arms against the forces of the establishment.

Ascribing however an excessive importance to the specific names contained in groupings of this kind might possibly lead to form a fallacious conception of the system of writerly affiliations in force during the Sixties. Our attention might indeed be more productively focussed on the very existence of a contraposition between the so-called avant-garde and the defenders of the realist tradition, whoever the precise individualities forming these two categories might be. Undoubtedly, the sense of common militancy against the then predominant conception of literature, which many writers favourable to Johnson's vision shared, represented a strong unifying element, a factor which arguably played a far more crucial role in keeping together such a range of different sensibilities than any loosely shared system of aesthetics could ever possibly do. When one looks at the comments and theoretical pronouncements made by any of these authors, it is not surprising to find that in most cases the emphasis of the debate is mainly on expressions of resentment towards the realist tradition

[3] Giles Gordon, *Beyond the Words*, p. 10.
[4] *Ibid*., pp. 10-11.
[5] E. Figes, transcription of interview with Sarah O'Reilly, London, 7.06.2011, Sound Archives, British Library, London.
[6] G. Gordon, *Beyond the Words*, p. 9.
[7] Specifically on the basis of "his last book only, *Raw Material* indeed" (B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young*…, p. 29).

or the contemporaries' apparent predilection for worn-out nineteenth-century forms, rather than on the proposition of valid alternative models of representation.

It is evident, in other words, that the individual quest for innovation pursued by some writers materialised for each of them in a strictly personal path of artistic development, which could possibly differ enormously from that of other fellow experimenters. If these authors shared anything among themselves, it was mainly the conviction that the Victorian novel was not a viable model for contemporary practitioners of serious fiction: any sense of aggregation mainly proceeded from such awareness of being all united in an ideologic battle against an exhausted tradition, whatever alternative path each individual might choose to follow in the process of this opposition. "There are not many of us, and in the English way we do not form a 'school'[8]", Johnson writes for instance in this regard, specifying that:

> The things we have in common are mostly generalities. […] We regard the novel as an evolving form in which there is no point whatsoever in doing something that has been done before: more than 99% of the novels written in England today fall for us into that category, the same things done in the same old way. […] Therefore the only honest approach is to say whatever it is we choose to say in a new manner, in a way which has not been done before[9].

This idea, that is, that a general rebellion against the contemporary predominance of the realist novel may act as an aggregating factor, informs many pronouncements by Eva Figes as well. For instance, as she admits in an interview, "[i]t's not difficult to see what brought us all together. This was the years of Margaret Drabble and writers like that, you know, the Hampstead novel, and there were war people around, and I was one of them, who saw that this was trash, and that's not the way to go"; she also adds later on: "Have a look at the sorts of novels that were being published when Bryan [Johnson] was beginning to work, and that should give you your answer. I mean, the Hampstead novel[10]".

A period like the Sixties – in which the millennial divide between conservatism and innovation in literature reached a level of unprecedented exacerbation – inevitably generated a Manichean situation in which writers tended to be ascribed either to one faction or the other, without considering all the innumerable intermediate positions that many of them could be said to actually occupy. It is indeed possible at times to see the names of certain writers listed as avant-garde in virtue of maybe the only experimental book they have written in an otherwise perfectly conventional production; similarly, some might be included as experimental authors despite an only temporary or tangential interest for writing within a much more eclectic career[11].

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[8] B.S. Johnson, *Experimental British Fiction*, written for "C.O.I.", 20.08.1966, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library, London.
[9] *Ivi*.
[10] E. Figes, Interview with Sarah O'Reily, London, 7.06.2011, Sound Archives, British Library.
[11] Considering again Johnson's list, for instance, personalities such as Giles Gordon and Stefan Themerson have certainly produced some experimental texts in the course of their career, but are prominently remembered for their contributions

Despite these inevitable distortions regarding the real extension and composition of the British avant-garde of the Sixties, a certain feeling of incumbent cultural revolution was nevertheless beginning to circulate, especially in some literary circles of the capital: a new group of writers was indeed begging to emerge, bringing forth new ideas and fresh approaches which seemed capable of stirring the all too stagnant situation of the English literary world. John Calder, for instance, a London publisher who had earned a prominent position as supporter of European avant-garde literature during the Fifties, was in this period beginning to direct his attention to more domestic surroundings, having noticed that a new interesting phenomenon was taking place: "Something new was beginning to happen in Britain that I could not ignore, a new school of British fiction, which needed to be promoted as a school[12]".

However driven by obvious commercial motives, Calder's role in shaping and consolidating the very idea of a British – one could almost say London – avant-garde remains of prominent importance. Sensing the climate of great hostility towards any form of experimentation which dominated the cultural debates of the time, Calder saw indeed the strategic importance of a united, strong and cohesive avant-garde front, and was consequently always more than active in trying to bring together different writers he considered compatible with this vision, promoting them collectively and presenting them as far as possible as a school. Other than publishing directly some of the most prominent experimental British authors of the time – Alexander Trocchi, Ann Quin and Alan Burns among others –, Calder demonstrated to nurture a much wider and collective vision. For instance, he involved in his promotional campaigns also writers who were not integral part of his roster, driven as he was by the ambition to create and sustain the idea of a group of artists with their own shared distinctive traits, as opposed to the run of more conventional fiction published and promoted by the Sixties' literary industry:

> I arranged lectures, readings and debates for my little stable of London-based authors, and involved their friends who were published by others. The last school of British writing that had successfully established itself was the Bloomsbury Group. […] After the war there had been an attempt by Wain, Amis, Larkin and their friends to launch 'The Movement', but the name had never stuck: it was a very English and inward-looking group, disliking especially Europe and America, very Oxbridge and middle-class. My group came from the newly-educated upward-thrusting working-class or lower middle[13].

to fields other than that of writing – such as cinema, journalism, criticism or publishing. Carol Burns, Alan's wife – of whom one novel was published by the avant-garde house Calder and Boyars – is enlisted by John Calder whenever he discusses the London writerly avant-garde of the time; her own contribution to innovative fiction, however, appears to be limited exclusively to that one novel, her name hardly comparable in importance to that of other experimental writers of the time.

[12] J. Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 186.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 276-7.

Among other ventures to which Calder resorted in his designs to pave the ground for the reception of a new avant-garde was also the *New Writers* series, which enabled him to gradually educate his public's taste and test their reaction by introducing short pieces by a selection of new authors, some of whom were later to become his regulars – as was the case with Alan Burns[14]. The short-lived experiment of the 'Calder Corner' at Better Books in Charing Cross Road – which managed, as long as it lasted, to attract a great deal of mediatic attention and considerable numbers in terms of participation – represented another important social platform that allowed avant-garde authors to meet and discuss their work, among themselves or with their public[15]. London-based authors such as Quin, Figes, Burns and Johnson were among the regular attendants of these social meetings, and the Better Books venue played an important catalyst role on the occasion of various promotional events and lectures organised by Calder. Events of this kind usually brought together many exponents of the ascending London avant-garde, favouring the creation of personal connections with other local as well as foreign authors – with a special regard to the *nouveaux romanciers*, whose translations had become an integral part of Calder's list[16].

Apart from John Calder, another figure who exerted a special influence in the shaping of the very idea of a London-based group of experimental writers, both in the sense of facilitating mutual encounters among them and directing their collective inspiration towards specific directions, was certainly the already quoted Rayner Heppenstall. Himself an experimental novelist of sorts, with a couple of fairly successful works published long before the Sixties, Heppenstall was born in 1911, and belonged to an older generation than that of many other experimental writers of the Sixties (many of whom, such as Johnson, Burns, Figes and Quin, were born in the Thirties). His first novel, *The Blaze of Noon* (1939), which earned him "a *succès* both *de scandale* and *d'estime*[17]", had been regarded by some critics[18] as a precursor of some key traits of the French *nouveau roman* of the Fifties; being notoriously in his turn a great admirer of French culture and literature, the author himself certainly strived to sustain this connection, and indeed made himself one of the first and fiercest advocates of the *nouveau roman* and of its practitioners in England.

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[14] See *ibid.*, p. 192.

[15] See *ibid.*, p. 277.

[16] An echo of the collective excitement spurred by one such event can be found for instance in Heppenstall's journals, a 1973 entry of which refers retrospectively to a lecture held at the bookshop by Nathalie Sarraute, which also happened to occasion the first meeting between Johnson and Ann Quin: "[Ann] first met B.S. Johnson at our flat, over a light, early dinner, after which Bryan [Johnson] drove us all to the shop called Better Books in Charing Cross Road, where Nathalie Sarraute was lecturing, with me as her chairman" (Jonathan Goodman [ed.], *The Master Eccentric: The Journals of Rayner Heppenstall 1969-1981*, Allison and Busby, London 1986, p.120). Ann Quin, on her part, reportedly "spent her nights attending happenings at the ICA and lectures at Better Books on Charing Cross Road, where Calder's authors and others in the avant-garde crowd hang out" (Julia Jordan, *The Quin Thing*, in "The Times Literary Supplement", 19.01.2018).

[17] R. Heppenstall, *The Master Eccentric*, p. 239.

[18] Notably, the French critic Hélène Cixous, to whom Heppenstall himself expresses his gratitude: "Hélène Cixous was once kind enough to describe me in print as the founder of the *nouveau roman*" (*ibid.*, p. 188).

Despite abandoning, in later years, the experimental vein that had characterised the first part of his production and reverting to more conservative positions[19], Heppenstall is nevertheless often included in lists of avant-garde authors of the period, and considered in fact as a sort of spiritual father for the entire group, sometimes by the members themselves. Johnson, for instance, pays him due respect in this sense in an article, underlining also his crucial influence in shaping the ideological affiliations of the group: "Heppenstall is a kind of father-figure to the rest of us: and he it was who first championed the French 'new novel' in England, introduced us to Robbe-Grillet and Roussel and Nathalie Sarraute[20]". His reputation as an affirmed novelist and his influential position as reviewer and radio producer at the BBC made him a crucial point of reference for many emergent authors of the time, who looked to him with respect as a guide and support in the hostile world of publishing. For his part, Heppenstall self-contentedly gave his help whenever he could, albeit not without a certain air of snobbish superiority, which was somehow proverbially attached to his character. "I was somewhat regarded as the senior *avant-garde* British novelist, also representing the French *nouveau roman*. It was therefore as to a *chef de file* that B.S. Johnson first sent me a proof copy of his first novel, then telephoned me to ask if he could see me[21]" – he observes indeed, rather paternalistically, in his journals. It is by no chance, incidentally, that Heppenstall's name was always among the first Johnson would include in his lists of influential personalities to whom to send his newly published novels.

Thus, during the Sixties, Heppenstall's flat in London became a meeting point for many young writers in search of advice and professional support. His diaries, not by chance, are replete with references to gatherings, social evenings, literary discussions or other events on which occasion he appears to have enjoyed his paternal role of aggregating authority – "It was at our flat", he notes for instance, "that the two young novelists, B.S. Johnson and Ann Quin first met[22]". At the same time, however, some pronouncements in his later years betray a certain feeling of growing distance from this group of younger writers he had nevertheless helped to consolidate as a new literary force. A 1969 entry of his journal, for example, testifies for his coolness towards a collective project that could have been of some importance to the whole group: "Avant-garde novelists at the house of one of them, Alan Burns, off Portobello Road. They want to start public readings and discussions, under the name 'Writers Reading'. I was one of two greybeards invited. […] I don't think I shall go along with them. I don't think it will work[23]". This remark is then matched by a later entry, in which Heppenstall implies a somewhat definite renouncement of any kind of involvement with the group, on the grounds

[19] He even describes himself in his diaries as "a free-lance reactionary" (see *ibid.*, p. 92).
[20] B.S. Johnson, "Experimental British Fiction".
[21] R. Heppenstall, *The Master Eccentric*, p. 67.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 120.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

of an increasingly manifest ideological distance with respect to a generation he sees as going, for better or for worse, in a direction all of its own:

> I, as an experimental father figure, am out of touch with my juniors and disciples, in that they believe in a sort of progress in the novel, their sort of novel superseding the traditional novel, as socialism or (for Alan [Burns]) anarchism supersedes capitalism. I spoke a little against this confusion of aesthetics with politics and said that I didn't even believe that time marched on, it merely staggered around[24].

In spite of this general shift in his later life, Heppenstall's role was nevertheless at least as important as that of John Calder in favouring the formation and development of this London group of avant-garde writers, especially for the part he played in directing their attention towards what was happening in French literature: in doing this, he can be said to have concurred in educating this new generation of British authors to adopt a more international stance and break away from the inward-looking, insular positions that seemed at that time to be the norm in Britain. After all, and despite all the ideological differences, Heppenstall could certainly look at these young authors as the embodiment of the reaction he had hoped would come when he wrote, back in 1961, about the state of English letters, at a time when none of them had yet published anything: in this generation he could now undoubtedly appreciate all the ambition, the originality and the universal scope that he saw as dramatically lacking in British writers of the previous decades.

It was also for this reason, one may add, that the death of B.S. Johnson in 1973, which followed Ann Quin's suicide by just a couple of months, was received as another unexpectedly bitter blow, forcing Heppenstall to recognise the affection he had felt for this writer: "I am more shocked by his death than I have been by any for a very long time. […] As I have suddenly realised, he was my only friend of his generation. Indeed, I wonder whether, outside the family, he was not my only friend[25]". An admission that betrays perhaps a certain shadow of regret for having failed to build similar relationships with the other writers of the group: a group he now perceived, alas too late, to have had an importance for him much greater than he had ever managed to realise.

In analysing the underground literary scenario of the Sixties as filtered through the viewpoint of such figures as Calder and Heppenstall, it is thus possible to see how the avant-garde of that time, more than an autonomous movement spontaneously organised on the base of a shared system of aesthetics, appears in some respects to be a rather abstract conception fashioned by a variety of external influences and circumstances. Outside of such system of distorting pressures, however, diversely exerted by the commercial interests of third parties or by oversimplifying ideological

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 71.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 122.

Manicheisms, a more contained and internally cohesive group of writers can nevertheless be individuated in the quartet of 'Londoners' composed by Johnson, Quin, Burns and Figes.

Even though speaking of a literary movement would sound – in this case too – as just another formal exaggeration, it is nonetheless beyond doubt that these four writers can be treated collectively with much more propriety than any other forceful grouping which is usually made with regard to avant-garde authors of the Sixties. Beside the fact that they were all based in London at the peak of their careers, we know indeed that these authors had comparatively strong personal ties and connections with one another, met and discussed their work with some regularity, took part together in some important writerly events of the time and generally considered themselves, if not a group in the real sense of the term, at least going in a similar direction. Eva Figes, for instance, who was probably the one among them with the strongest feeling of collectiveness, finds a common ground both in their shared opposition to the realist novel and in their common interest for fragmented narratives:

> The four of us had very different talents and preoccupations, but we shared a common credo, a common approach to writing. All of us were bored to death with mainstream 'realist' fiction at a time when, in England, it seemed the only acceptable sort. We were concerned with language, with breaking up conventional narrative, with 'making it new' in our different ways. We all used fragmentation as a starting point, and then took off in different directions[26].

This interest in fragmentation, to be understood in opposition to the unchangingly linear narratives of the "bent but so-called straight novel[27]" and the whole vision of literature these stood for, seems indeed to be a common trait uniting the much diverse productions of these four writers – at least during the high experimental phase of their writing, between the early Sixties and Seventies. Johnson himself confirms this preoccupation for fragmentation when he affirms programmatically that "[l]ife does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily. Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification. Telling stories really is telling lies[28]". Johnson's work, indeed, can be construed as a constant exploration of the tensions between the narrator's attempts to impose patterns of order on his material and on the intrinsic unruliness of experience, with its fragmentary nature and seemingly total lack of logic: a celebration, that is, as much of chaos as of the mind's constant struggle to come to terms with it.

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[26] E. Figes, *B.S. Johnson*, p. 70.
[27] B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 29.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 14.

Eva Figes, instead, draws on her Modernist credentials to create a deeply poetic language which eschews linearity and plot to better reflect the inarticulate world of her characters' broken psyches, "rendering specific perceptions as they register themselves on a flawed sensory apparatus[29]". As to Ann Quin, her interest in fragmentation translates instead in a juxtaposition of different intermingling voices presented through a kaleidoscope of angles and media: bits and scraps of experience are evoked by recurring to personal diaries, tape recordings, letters, memories or interior monologues, with each element floating among others in a unique, unbroken flow of narration. Quin eschews linearity and clearly recognisable plots, entrusting narrative progression rather to free associations of "visual shards[30]", of images and thoughts obeying to a subterranean logic of their own.

Finally, Alan Burns takes his fragments directly from reality, selecting them by cutting out bits of newspapers, magazines and other realia and rearranging them in new orders using a cut-up technique, interposing them with passages of more or less straight narrative. As is the case with Johnson, Burns too strives to "find a form" – to say it in Beckettian terms – "that accommodates the mess[31]": to create a style, that is, in which the chaotic nature of the material may in a way shine through despite the patterns of order tentatively imposed by the artist. "I start from chaos and work towards order", Burns comments as regards his method, "I accumulate as large a mass of raw material as possible and then try to order it[32]", creating "a sea of images and disconnected phrases in which I find the stories[33]".

Apart from the fragmentary method employed in their narrations, another important aspect that somewhat unites these four writers is the fact that they all looked to Modernism as a major source of influence and formal justification for their own aesthetic practices. They all in fact considered themselves as continuators of the Modernist heritage, in an age in which the majority of writers and the whole literary industry had apparently chosen to go on – or rather, back – as though the artistic revolutions of the Modernist movement had never really happened. Even in this, however, they were not all of one voice: beside their shared admiration for Beckett and the conviction that Joyce's *Ulysess* represented the model against which to write any piece of contemporary fiction[34], each of them is indeed personally indebted to a different exponent of Modernism, depending as it were on their

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[29] A. Burns and C. Sugnet (eds.), *The Imagination on Trial*, p. 31.
[30] Alice Butler, *Ann Quin's Night-Time Ink: A Postscript* [unpublished thesis], Royal College of Art, London 2013, p. 12.
[31] Samuel Beckett, Interview with Tom Driver, in John Fletcher, *About Beckett: The Playwright and the Work*, Faber and Faber, London 2003, p. 67. This famous quote is also incorporated by Johnson in his introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* (p. 17). Johnson even expresses his interest for this pronouncement in a letter addressed directly to Beckett himself: "I've seen you quoted as saying something like 'The problem is to find a form to accommodate the mess'. Did you in fact say or write something like that? I'd like to quote them myself in a piece I'm doing, so thought I'd take this opportunity of asking you" (B.S. Johnson, Letter to Samuel Beckett, 29.03.1973, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library, London).
[32] A. Burns and C. Sugnet, *The Imagination at Trial*, p, 163.
[33] *Ibid*., p. 166.
[34] Owing to Johnson, "for practical purposes where Joyce left off should ever since have been regarded as the starting point" (B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 13).

peculiar attitude or literary taste, their artistic necessities or personal history and development. Johnson, for instance, chose to "soak [him]self in the atmosphere […] of Joyce and Beckett[35]", apart from their illustrious precursor Laurence Sterne; Eva Figes, who was much more European in scope, partly alco because of her German origins, elected instead T. S. Eliot and especially Franz Kafka as her masters. She also had deep implications with Virginia Woolf, despite denying her influence in more than one occasion[36]. Virginia Woolf, and more precisely *The Waves*, is on the other hand among Ann Quin's earliest crucial literary inspirations[37].

Regardless of individual differences of this kind, however, this shared interest in Modernism and such faith in its "make-it-new" spirit has in itself a programmatic resonance. Such orientation denotes a clear oppositional response to the general attitude of the Sixties literary establishment, which was apparently devoted to suppress any form of innovation and obliterate any sign of the Modernist heritage that may still be in force among young generations of writers. Suffice it to remember, for instance, Cooper's belligerent expressions in *Reflections on Some Aspects of the Experimental Novel*, in which he affirms, retrospectively: "We meant to write a different kind of novel from that of the thirties and we saw that the thirties novel, the Experimental Novel, had got to be brushed out of the way[38]". By resorting to the Modernist tradition and making themselves continuators of its heritage, these authors intended to stress the awareness of their roots in Britain's and Europe's recent literary past, recognising Modernism and the groundbreaking results achieved by its exponents as the necessary starting point for any present literary practice of some consequence.

In the words of a critic, these authors could "see the through-lines of influence from modernism to the 1960s and continued them into their presence[39]". Their practice can thus be considered as a response to the urgency of finding new forms that could express the harsh realities of their time in a way that any exhausted Nineteenth-century model could certainly not aspire to do. Eva

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[35] See B.S. Johnson, Letter to Zulfikar Ghose, 30.04.1959, in Vanessa Guignery (ed.), *The B. S. Johnson – Zulfikar Ghose Correspondence*, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle upon Tyne 2015, p. 34.

[36] Figes laments the fact that critics too often and too readily link her work to Virginia Woolf, stressing instead the groundbreaking importance that Kafka had in her early artistic development: "Everybody thinks that I was influenced by Virginia Woolf, but that's not true, it was actually reading Kafka that made me realise that you can do other things with prose except write Hampstead novels" (E. Figes, Interview with Sarah O'Reilly, London, 7.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library). Her relationship with Virginia Woolf might however be much more complicated than this, and there certainly are some crucial, subtle and possibly subconscious affinities with her to be discovered at closer analysis. As the author herself has indeed conceded, "On the other hand I have to admit that when I began to write novels I studiously avoided re-reading anything by Virginia Woolf for twenty years, and I am pretty sure that the fact that she was a woman had something to do with it. It was partly that I was conscious of a possible affinity, and I did not want to be unduly influenced while I was finding a voice of my own" (E. Figes, *A Voice of One's Own*, unpublished article intended for "The Guardian"'s woman's page, 3.06.1984, Eva Figes Archive, British Library, London).

[37] "Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* made me aware of the possibilities in writing", A. Quin, *Leaving School – XI*, in Id., *The Unmapped Country*, p. 16.

[38] W. Cooper, *Reflections on Some Aspects of the Experimental Novel*, in "International Literary Annual No. 2, John Wain (ed.), Criterion Books/John Calder, New York 1959, pp. 29-36.

[39] G. White, *Not the Last Word on the Sixties Avant-Garde: An Afterword*, in Mitchell and Williams (eds.), *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the '60s*, p. 249.

Figes's words in this connection could be taken as a perfect synthesis of the general stance of this group, mirroring the necessity felt by these authors to innovate and thus overcome the stagnancy of the British culture of their time:

> My guess is that the problem of English fiction must in some way relate to England's insular position at the present time, her incapacity, as a small European nation, to come to grips with the problems of the second half of the twentieth century. […] The English social realist tradition cannot contain the realities of my own lifetime, horrors which one might have called surreal if they had not actually happened. For me the old forms are hopelessly inadequate, and can only say things that are no longer worth saying[40].

On the basis of their shared roots in the Modernist movement and their general reworking of some typically Modernist traits in renovated contexts, these writers have been variously defined by critics as neo-modernists, meta-modernist[41] or even proto-postmodernists. Beyond any abstract labelling of this kind, however, their chief importance should rather be sought in the continuity they create between the Modernist phase and the experimentations of more contemporary times: these authors, indeed, cast a solid if previously overlooked bridge over a period of literary history that has long be regarded as unproductive, stagnant and uninteresting in terms of literary innovations. "We come back to the sixties avant-garde because these are the texts that got left behind during the battle for ascendancy[42]", comments indeed Glyn White referring to the rediscovered importance of these authors; Groes observes instead crucially that "the obsession with Modernism in the work of the sixties writers […] acts as a key hinge moment that passes on the Modernist legacy in modified ways to our twenty-first century times[43]".

In the re-evaluation that many of these authors have been undergoing since the early 2000s, the critical focus has been variously directed either to their important bridging role between the innovations of Modernism and more recent forms of experimentations, or to the intrinsic interest and ground-breaking aspect of some individual texts they have produced. For a fairly long time, however, this group of avant-garde writers has been considered as a generally failed experiment that had not led anywhere in particular, and the feeling associated with it – sometimes expressed by the members themselves – has been essentially one of failure and disappointment.

At the basis of such a negative point of view was first and foremost the abrupt sense of loss generated by the untimely deaths of Ann Quin and B.S. Johnson, who both took their own lives within months in 1973; together with Figes and Burns, they formed the most prominent core of the whole English avant-garde of the time. Ann Quin's death was indeed a blow in itself, both to the group as a

[40] E. Figes, Article written for "The New Review", 1978, Eva Figes Archive, British Library, London.
[41] P. Tew, *Experimental British Fiction of the Sixties: Five Meta-modern Novelists*, in Tew, Riley and Seddon (eds.), *The 1960s: A Decade of Modern British Fiction*, p. 194.
[42] G. White, *Not the Last Word on the Sixties Avant-Garde*, p. 258.
[43] S. Groes, *British Fictions of the Sixties*, p. 114.

whole, for its general sense of cohesion, and, at a more personal level, to its individual members. Johnson, for instance, who continued, in Heppenstall's view, to be obsessed by Quin's death[44], felt obliged to pay a silent tribute to her in the short movie *Fat Man on a Beach*, completed shortly before his own suicide: in the closing scene of this movie[45], Johnson himself can indeed be seen walking into the waves, recalling the way Ann chose to die. John Calder, on the other hand, blames her tragic disappearance for the failure of his larger project of uniting all the Sixties' experimental writers of London under a common flag. He talks indeed of this tragic event in terms of "a waste of a great talent", that eventually "helped blight my intention to try form a group of writers, including Ann, into a school like the nouveau roman in France and the Gruppe 47 in Germany[46]".

Eva Figes, who could not but impotently witness this string of deaths in the Sixties avant-garde, was left instead with a feeling of loss and isolation: "I have only once in my life belonged to something which could be called a literary group, and that came to an end with the death of B.S. Johnson. Ann Quin had killed herself by swimming out to sea only weeks before[47]. […] Their loss still makes me feel solitary, and bereft[48]". The sense of bereavement for the death of people who were after all her close friends was for Figes, the only survivor of the group, inevitably intermingled with the impression of a general failure with regard to the avant-garde movement of her generation. This group, she felt, had not been able, at least during the immediate time in which these authors were active, to really change anything in the literary sphere:

> I was young enough to believe that eventually I and a few other writers with similar ideas would change the face of English fiction. That hope has been bitterly disappointed. I am still writing novels but I no longer expect to be regarded as anything more than an oddity. […] We have failed to change the English literary scene, or it has failed us[49].

Terminal diagnoses of this kind were evidently still in circulation among critics at the very close of the century, and are clearly detectable in such retrospective comments as the following, made by a reviewer of Figes's last novel, published in 1996:

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[44] "I feel quite sure that Ann's suicide continued to affect Bryan, from whom I first heard of it" (R. Heppenstall, *The Master Eccentric*, p. 123.

[45] See B.S. Johnson, *Fat Man on a Beach*, in G. Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, Hutchinson, London 1975, p. 181.

[46] J. Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 273.

[47] Judging from an allusive passage to be found in a draft version of the novel *Ghosts* (published in 1988), Ann Quin's death was still affecting Figes some fifteen years after its occurrence. Here, the old protagonist takes a tray from a window sill for cleaning, and appreciates its dust-covered contents – consisting in ancient souvenirs – for the first time in years. Among these, she finds a "shell, of some unspecified bird, like a spiral, with no outer casing, given to me by A – was it fifteen years ago, longer? – shortly before she killed herself. She found it in Mexico". Mexico was indeed one of the many places Ann visited during the years she spent in America between the mid '60s and early '70s (E. Figes, Notebook, *Ghosts* working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library, London).

[48] Id., *B.S. Johnson*, p. 70.

[49] Id., Article for "The New Review", 1978.

> A question that occasionally turns up in any consideration of the post-war English novel is: whatever happened to the experimental novelists, that brave band of early 1960s hopefuls who, confident that the realist novel was dead, sat down to change the face of English fiction? Alas, mortality, taste and publishing economics – not to mention a fairly dubious aesthetic template – did for them all[50].

The dissolution of the group as a whole, as well as the constant awareness that "the general climate [was] hardly conducive for the appearance of novels of true originality[51]", were factors that led then in their turn to a further lessening of the experimental drive that had been so thriving in the literary underground of the Sixties. Seeing the general downfall of the movement, the remaining members of the London avant-garde felt progressively forced to adopt more conventional stances. As Eva Figes herself admits:

> It took me quite a while to sort of find my own feet and realise it wasn't the end of everything, and I think I got more conventional, because otherwise you got to a dead-end of some kind. But this greater platitude was in a way a big breakthrough for me, because I suddenly had a huge audience, you know, overnight I was suddenly on television and my phone never stopped ringing[52].

Alan Burns, the other survivor of the group, chose to put literature aside to pursue an academic career away from Britain and the English literary scene, also decidedly abandoning the experimental vein of the first part of his production. As he reveals in an interview, expressing what sounds, from the standpoint of a former great innovator, as a clear admission of defeat:

> You say I moved away, I have more of a sense that I was moved away. First, I think I was at a dead end. […] I had fragmented myself out of existence and, this side of sanity, I don't think I could have done any more with that. I had to do something else. Secondly, I had driven myself into a certain corner in relation to the readers who were interested enough in my work to buy the books. There were not enough of them! That's the negative aspect. […] As to where I went, I was influenced by a speech made by Heinrich Böll on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature […], saying there was no point in writing for the few, one had to find a language that was accessible, close to 'the language of the people'[53].

An admission that is probably behind John Calder's retrospective affirmations of regret with regard to Alan Burns, on whom he had placed great hopes, seeing in him a potential leader for the group he had once intended to promote as a new, rising school of English fiction:

> It was the nearest we ever came to finding a Kafka-like writer. I liked *Celebrations*, but thereafter was aware that Alan's main interest at that point was in being well-known and earning big royalties, and that his books were becoming gimmicky purely to attract attention, whereas earlier it was an artist at work. […] By that point Alan Burns had become more

[50] D.J. Taylor, Review of *The Knot* by Eva Figes, in "The Guardian", 15.03.1996.
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] Eva Figes interviewed by Sarah O'Reilly, 7.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library. Figes is here referring especially to the fame she came to enjoy after the publication of the feminist pamphlet *Patriarchal Attitudes* in 1970.
[53] A. Burns, in A. Burns and C. Sugnet (eds.), *The Imagination on Trial*, p. 164.

> interested in developing an academic career and he went to an American university to teach. But he had the energy and the organizing ability to lead a movement and it is a pity it never took off[54].

Early deaths of some crucial members, then, plus the constant opposition of the establishment and the philistine policies of the whole literary industry ultimately had the better of this coterie of innovative writers, whose experimental fervour inevitably waned out of critical and public neglect and a general lack of real possibilities. If the assessment of the Sixties' experimental fiction has been until recent times decidedly negative, however, the re-evaluation that these authors are undergoing over the past decades is demonstrating the strategic importance of these writers and their texts, giving them the prominence they always deserved but could never achieved in their lifetime. Their collective experience represents a crucial chapter of contemporary literary history that, until the early 2000s, was lamentably missing in many narratives on the evolution of the novel. Its recovery could greatly enhance our understanding of the development of recent Anglophone fiction trough to the present time.

[54] J. Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 273.

1.3

A Bridge to the Continent: The Sixties' Avant-Garde and the Nouveau Roman

It is not uncommon to see the names of the English experimental writers of the Sixties mentioned in juxtaposition with a broadly understood *nouveau roman*, which is often quoted as a key influence in their work and used as an almost inevitable point of reference in many discussions regarding them. The *nouveau roman*, a literary movement originated in France that reached its apogee between the Fifties and Sixties, had become by the mid-Sixties a crucial point of reference for the entire European avant-garde scene. It might thus appear natural, in many respects, that any new literary phenomenon emerging at that period should in one way or another be related, compared to or interpreted through the lenses of the *nouveau roman*.

There is, in point of fact, a rather articulated set of dynamics which brought about the idea of an alleged affiliation between the Sixties' literary avant-garde in England and the *nouveau roman*; because of the many comparisons and juxtapositions that are made and reiterated in a number of superficial commentaries, however, often without much contextualisation, the complexities inherent in the relationship between these two literary phenomena tend to be lost or overlooked far too easily. The idea thus suggests itself, apparently, of perhaps too direct and automatic a link between the *nouveaux romans* and the experimental texts of the Sixties. A simple comparative reading of either the novels or the theories of these two literary groups, however, will suffice to show that, despite some undeniable affinities, their relationship is much more complex and stratified than it may at first appear, and, therefore, it should not be taken at face value.

To understand the actual impact the *nouveau roman* had on the world of British letters, as well as its alleged role in the formation of the experimental authors of the Sixties, it is worth investigating some of the dynamics by which it was introduced and received in Britain. A key figure in this process, and perhaps the chief responsible for the affirmation of the *nouveau roman* in Britain, is once again the publisher John Calder. It was indeed Calder who, in strict synergy with the French editor Jérôme Lindon of Éditions de Minuit – the house that had launched the francophone Beckett and practically all the *nouveaux romanciers* – first began to produce extensive translations of this new school of French experimental writers. Apart from simply publishing the *nouveaux romanciers*, Calder fervently struggled to promote them against the reservations of a cultural industry which, in that

period, was rather resistant to counter-traditional currents of this kind, especially if they came from the continent. Calder was of course not the only publisher to bring out translations of *nouveaux romans* during the Sixties, nor was he the first to do so[1], but he certainly earned a reputation as the most convinced supporter of the movement in Britain, whereas other publishers restricted themselves to small-scale investments in what they probably deemed to be simply one among the many promising avant-garde phenomena of the time. As Adam Guy indeed points out: "[b]y the early 1970s Calder & Boyars had the sole British option on every *nouveau romancier*, and was the only publisher still issuing new translations of *nouveaux romans* to the British market. The narrative of the *nouveau roman*'s dissemination in Britain is dominated, therefore, by the experience of Calder & Boyars[2]".

Calder had started his involvement with the *nouveau roman* in the late Fifties, when he produced some translations of Robbe-Grillet and later other writers such as Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute and Robert Pinget. Following his distinctly strategic vision, Calder understood however that the British public was not ready to appreciate this kind of literature without a proper introduction: he realised, in other words, that feeding his readers with translations of experimental works by some obscure French writers was not sufficient. Retrospectively, this is what he writes in his memoirs: "I had to find a way of increasing the sales of the French authors we were translating and publishing. […] The nouveau roman (the French label stuck where the English equivalent did not) needed to find a bigger British readership, and the time was ripe[3]".

It was at this point that he elaborated a project that would impress a crucial turn to the whole history of the *nouveau roman*'s dissemination in Britain:

> In France Alain Robbe-Grillet, a brilliant theorist with the ability which is the hallmark of a great teacher to make complex ideas clear and sound simple to listeners, had convinced the press and all who came to hear him speak that a new literature had arrived […]. In order to explain all this we needed the presence of the authors themselves. I approached the French embassy and a number of universities where we knew members of the faculty […] and arranged a three-author tour. Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras and Nathalie Sarraute all agreed to come for a fortnight to Britain, to tour our universities cities and explain their ideas and their work[4].

Accordingly, the first ever promotional tour dedicated to the *nouveau roman* in Britain took place in February 1961, comprising various universities and other public venues across the country and featuring the abovementioned authors, who were at the time the three most prominent exponents of the movement. From Calder's point of view, the presence of the writers themselves was crucial to

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[1] Adam Guy notes that Calder had obtained options for translations of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute already in 1957, though the first *nouveau roman* to be published in Britain was in fact Michel Butor's *La Modification* in 1958 (see Adam Guy, *The* nouveau roman *and Writing in Britain After Modernism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, p. 29).
[2] *Ivi*.
[3] J. Calder, *Pursuit*, pp. 177-178.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 178.

mediating the theoretical apparatuses underpinning their novels, so that their theories could be explained more effectively to academics, journalists and especially to prospective readers. In Guy's words, "in line with its stated belief in its educative mission, Calder & Boyars consistently sought to situate the *nouveau roman* within explanatory and critical contexts. […] Calder & Boyars explicitly presented the *nouveau roman* as a literary tendency attached to a predetermined theoretical metalanguage[5]".

Eventually, albeit moving initially in a context of mingled curiosity and scepticism[6], the tour proved to be a success in terms both of media coverage and attendance. The highest and probably most unexpected peak was reached in Coventry, where a session had been somewhat hastily arranged at short notice by the manager of a cultural association named the Umbrella Club. Recalling the event, Calder describes a packed Town Hall, especially rented for the occasion, in which a conspicuous and varied audience had gathered: "There were over eight hundred people there […]. They were all young, late teens and early twenties, and I wondered how Terence[7] had managed to get such an audience at a few days' notice[8]". After the initial ice-breaking rituals, the crowd gradually enthused and showered their observations and questions on the writers, until the session had to be called off due to the late hour: "We had been there for three hours and everyone wanted more. In the street outside, my three literary stars were mobbed. […] We were taken back to the Umbrella Club which overflowed with the crowd that had followed us and we left to drive to London well after midnight[9]". Palpably thrilled by this unexpected wave of enthusiasm, Calder remembers finally how "on the way back my mind was racing. I knew that something extraordinary and unexpected had happened in Coventry. A new public had been created almost by accident. The nouveau roman school of avant-garde writers had established a base in a working-class town without even a university![10]".

Events such as the Coventry session of the tour testify how the *nouveau roman* proved capable of reaching different levels of British society, arousing the interest of a remarkably varied audience that went well beyond the usual niche of experts and academics: "The *nouveau roman* also appears as a force in the literary field through which new audiences could develop, audiences that could more radically span Britain's population across its class and physical geography[11]". At the same time, the 1961 tour as a whole is demonstrative of Calder's ambitious intention – as well as his practical ability – to address a much wider group of potential readers than any kind of experimental literature would be normally supposed to attract, trying to capitalise the interest that was growing around the *nouveau*

[5] A. Guy, *The* nouveau roman *and Writing in Britain after Modernism*, p. 43.
[6] The Birmingham session, for instance, was cancelled because the hosting party "did not believe there was any local interest" (see J. Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 179).
[7] Terence Watson, manager of the Coventry Umbrella Club, organiser of the session.
[8] J. Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 181.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 182.
[10] *Ivi*.
[11] A. Guy, *The* nouveau roman *and Writing in Britain after Modernism*, p. 63.

roman and shape it into something short of a mass phenomenon. As Guy notes again in this connection:

> The achievements of Calder & Boyars extend beyond a proven capacity to appeal to established audiences. In the potential for media coverage of the tour to be read, watched, and listened to by mass audiences, as well as in Calder & Boyars' efforts to sell the *nouveaux romans* in bookshops that had no history of doing so, the possibility of a broader public for the touring *nouveaux romanciers* is in evidence[12].

As a result of this and subsequent promotional campaigns, which concurred decisively to its assimilation in wide sections of British culture, the *nouveau roman* had become by the mid-Sixties a term popular enough to serve as a sort of shorthand for any kind of avant-garde or counter-traditional literary practice: this meant that the *nouveau roman* could now be used to explain or mediate other emerging new instances of experimental literature, which began to be measured, more or less appropriately, against its example. "Any parallel avant-garde impulse articulated in this period in Britain would have been positioned, either explicitly or implicitly, in relation to the *nouveau roman*", affirms indeed Guy, adding that "the *nouveau roman* modelled vanguard aesthetics and the theoretical formulation of such aesthetics for a generation of British writers[13]".

A key factor in this incredibly widespread circulation is certainly represented by the elasticity of the term itself and of the concept it stood for. Since the very beginning of the movement in France, there had been a certain vagueness about the conceptual delimitations of the *nouveau roman*: this was caused, among other things, by the fact that the existing theories in support of the literary practice itself had been elaborated by individual exponents of the movement – most prominently Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute – in order to explain in retrospect their personal approach to writing rather than a wider literary phenomenon. As a result, these individual theories were sometimes hardly or only partially applicable to other writers of the group, which inevitably led the *nouveaux romanciers* to express a certain resistance to the homogenising pressure of the label that critics too often attached to them.

This air of theoretical confusion remained when the *nouveau roman* was introduced in Britain, where the theories concerning it had initially circulated only in a rather clichéd form, by means of short reviews, promotional instalments, blurbs and suchlike – certainly not the ideal conditions for any serious discussion of the subject. Press articles capturing the first public reactions to the 1961 promotional tour in Britain variously register a sense of theoretical uncertainty regarding the status of the group as a whole, whereas the public had evidently hoped that the presence of the authors themselves would eliminate all confusion, providing a set of clear answers to any curious inquirer.

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[12] *Ibid*., p. 60.
[13] *Ibid*., p. 20.

One reviewer affirms for instance that "the one thing made clear was that any general analysis of 'the new novel' was difficult, if not impossible[14]", while another underlines that "all three of the authors begin by categorically disowning their label[15]". Robbe-Grillet is then reported to say that "No, there is no 'school' of new novelists except perhaps an *école de refus* of those who refuse to cling to outworn literary conventions which have brought the novel into disrepute[16]". In a similar vein, Duras employs the metaphor of the *nouveaux romanciers* as living in "the same block of flats but on different floors, each with different views from their windows[17]".

In commenting such blurred theoretical positions concerning the *nouveau roman*, Guy points out that it functioned in fact as "a virtual rather than an actual phenomenon, a movable signifier that successively served a number of contingent agendas[18]", specifying that it was precisely "this lack of definition [which] gave the *nouveau roman* a privileged position and a particular symbolic power and value in the literary spaces in which it circulated[19]". As a critical umbrella-term, the *nouveau roman* had certainly been instrumental, in the context of these authors' emergence in France, in creating and sustaining the idea of a definite avant-garde group with some crucial shared characteristics. Likewise, the term undoubtedly played a similar catalysing role when these authors began to be known by British or other foreign audiences.

As often happens with labels of this kind, however, "*nouveau roman*" inevitably came to represent a rather artificial set of writers with fairly different visions and approaches, who were at times even quite in disagreement with one another. "I cannot imagine what kind of connection could exist between, for example, Robbe-Grillet and myself", comments for instance Robert Pinget[20], another of the *nouveaux romanciers*, conceding that the *nouveau roman* "was a useful label to introduce us to Britain or America but it should not go on much longer. I think the whole idea should be dropped now[21]". It is by no chance that, after the first promotional tour of 1961, some of the *nouveaux romanciers* started to decline subsequent invitations to joint lectures or other events involving their appearance alongside other fellow writers: this was probably made in the attempt to affirm their individual voices independently from the larger literary movement – and probably also, as Guy has it, in response to "the diminished status of the *nouveau roman* in France by the mid-1960s[22]".

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[14] Unknown author, in "The Times", 7.02.1961.
[15] Joyce Emerson, in "The Sunday Times", 12.02.1961.
[16] *Ibid*.
[17] Unknown author, in "The Times", 7.02.1961. See also John Rosselli, in "The Guardian", 7.02.1961: "They resist all attempts to see them as a school or as a sort of three-headed monster. 'We live in the same block of flats but on different floors and we see different views', is how Mme Duras puts it".
[18] A. Guy, *The* nouveau roman *and Writing in Britain after Modernism*, p. 17.
[19] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[20] See Peter Lennon, *Architruc*, in "The Guardian", 22.06.1962, also quoted in A. Guy, p. 24.
[21] *Ivi*.
[22] A. Guy, *The* nouveau roman *and Writing in Britain after Modernism*, p. 62.

However, apart from the specific differences that divided the *nouveaux romanciers* internally, the idea that crucially established itself in Britain was that they shared a rejection of worn-out literary traditions and gave voice to a contemporary need to break new grounds for the evolution of the novel: a concept that obviously could not but attract the critique of the conservative literary establishment, as well as the sympathy of the new generations of like-minded experimental writers. The same press articles covering the aforementioned promotional tour of 1961 variously register the idea that "the only thing, apparently, that the three novelists had in common was a conviction that the traditional methods of novel writing must be rejected[23]"; or again, that the *nouveaux romanciers* are part of "the tradition of untraditional novelists[24]".

More importantly, the *nouveaux romanciers* positioned themselves explicitly in continuity with the Modernist tradition: this was in itself another aspect of rupture with the post-war British literary establishment, which was trying to get rid of Modernist extremisms in favour of a social realism modelled on nineteenth-century forms. One reviewer comments that these writers "show no readiness to do more than deplore the present British harking back to the novelists of the mid-nineteenth century[25]" – a refrain that is repeat in so many other similar articles –, adding that "all three claim a distinguished literary ancestry whether through Proust or Kafka. Mme Sarraute, who is Russian born, traces herself back to Dostoevsky[26]". "The one thing the three had in common when it came to contemporary English writers", the same reporter concludes, "was this – none of them had heard of, still less read, C.P. Snow[27]".

It is then fairly easy, considering all these programmatic affirmations, to identify a potential common terrain between the *nouveaux romanciers* and the experimental writers who were beginning to appear on the English literary scene in the early Sixties. Beyond their theoretical specificities and all the possible differences in techniques and styles, these two literary groups seem indeed to be in agreement at least in their shared rejection of worn-out literary forms, their fierce opposition to the homogenising models imposed by the literary establishment, and their general feeling of continuity with the Modernist tradition. It was thus precisely along these lines that the emerging writers of the Sixties' avant-garde began to be increasingly juxtaposed with the exponents of the *nouveau roman*. John Calder in particular, who had contributed to establish the reputation of the *nouveaux romanciers* in Britain between the late Fifties and the early Sixties, later exploited the position acquired by his better-known French authors to give greater prominence and prestige to the new local writers he had

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[23] Unknown author, in "The Times", 7.02.1961.
[24] J. Emerson, in "The Sunday Times", 12.02.1961.
[25] J. Rosselli, in "The Guardian", 7.02.1961.
[26] *Ivi*.
[27] *Ivi*.

launched during the Sixties, the "new school of British fiction" which, in his plans, "needed to be promoted as a school[28]".

The *nouveau roman*, which the wider public had initially encountered as a rather obscure novelty coming from the continental avant-garde scene, had thus become, by the mid-Sixties, a phenomenon well enough known and assimilated to be used as a cultural reference, with its set of representative texts already considered as contemporary classics to which the novels of a new generation of local writers could be compared easily enough. Indeed, in the late Sixties, it became common to see literary advertisements, reviews or blurbs in which the names of the *nouveaux romanciers* were mentioned alongside those of younger English writers who were also published by Calder & Boyars – such as for instance Alan Burns and Ann Quin. In this way, the idea began somehow to circulate of a certain correlation between the French movement and the new avant-garde impulses which were coming to the fore in the English literary scene.

The *nouveau roman* thus played in the British context a catalysing and inspirational role, offering a convincing model of an innovative literary practice and showing to younger generations of writers that new ways of representation were possible as an alternative to dominant old-fashioned social realism. Guy affirms in this regard that "in Britain, the *nouveau roman* became a focal point for discussions of the numerous significations and modalities of the 'new'[29]", also "facilitat[ing] a rich and extensive discourse about the legacies of modernism and the avant-garde, about forms of newness (aesthetic and otherwise), and about the definition of literary culture beyond a national frame". He then concludes that "[m]any postwar writers developed their positions on such matters in primary dialogue with the *nouveau roman*[30]".

To what extent, then, were the Sixties avant-garde authors in England actually influenced by the French *nouveau roman*, and how direct and intense were their contacts with its exponents and their texts? Beyond any generalizing discourse about the broad strategic importance of the *nouveau roman* in this phase of British literary history, it is in fact rather difficult to reconstruct or determine exactly how crucial was the impact of the *nouveau roman* on specific writers in that decade. In fact, not all of them were able to read the *nouveaux romans* in the original, being thus limited, in their reception of the movement, to the choice of available texts translated by Calder or other competing publishers. Many of these writers, consequently, were also susceptible to the peculiar representations of the *nouveau roman* circulating in Britain, representations which at times might have been subjected to the distortions of publishers, reviewers or other agents of the bookselling industry.

[28] J. Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 186.
[29] A. Guy, *The* nouveau roman *and Writing in Britain after Modernism*, p. 19.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

This was the case, for instance, of B.S. Johnson and Ann Quin, both of whom could not read or speak much fluently in French. It is indeed not a chance, for example, that the only texts related to the *nouveau roman* featuring in the so-called "Quinology"[31] – i.e. Ann Quin's list of favourite readings – are also among the titles most publicised in Calder's promotional campaigns: namely, Sarraute's *Portait of a Man Unknown* and *Tropisms & The Age of Suspicion* and Duras' play *The Square*. The only notable exception here is perhaps the absence of Robbe-Grillet, the other prominent *nouveau romancier* promoted by Calder, whom Quin did not probably appreciate as much as the other French authors. A similar list of possible *nouveau roman* references is then to be imagined in relation to B.S. Johnson as well, whose allusions to the French movement are indeed predictably limited to Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet only. This is of course not in the least surprising: not only Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet were regarded generally as the chief theoreticians of the movement, but, more crucially, their ideas had assumed a strategic importance in the process of the *nouveau roman*'s introduction to British audiences.

As has been mentioned, Calder spent much effort in ensuring a proper circulation not only of the novels, but also of the theories of the *nouveau roman*, presenting the latter as much as possible "as a literary tendency attached to a predetermined theoretical metalanguage[32]". In this regard, Guy points out how the joint publications of essays and fiction by the French authors on Calder's part remained "a unique feature of the British dissemination of the *nouveau roman*[33]", one which was not replicated in other contexts. Thus, during the Sixties, Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute became pivotal points of reference for any English-speaking writer willing to explore the subject of the *nouveau roman* and engage in some sort of dialogue with it, as was indeed the case of B.S. Johnson.

Other writers of the Sixties avant-garde were instead in a different situation as to their possibilities to have access to the texts of the *nouveau roman* in the original. Unlike Johnson and Quin, for instance, Eva Figes was rather fluent in French, having studied it as a university subject. Her early job at a publishing house in London, for which she also translated sometimes from German and French, made her also virtually closer to the French contemporary literary world. Figes was thus potentially more open than other writers to direct encounters with the original texts and contexts of the *nouveau roman*; she might have also possibly heard about the movement, or even read some of the novels, before their actual introduction to Britain, although this is now rather difficult to establish with any degree of certainty.

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[31] "Quinology" is the name Quin herself gave to a list of suggested readings she composed in the late Sixties for a friend of hers, the American poet Larry Goodell. The document is consultable in the collection of Larry Goodell Papers, Beinecke Library, University of Yale. Also published by Goodell himself on the Facebook page "Ann Quin" (@AnnQuinWriter).

[32] A. Guy, *The* nouveau roman *and Writing in Britain after Modernism*, p. 43.

[33] *Ivi*.

What is certain, however, is that whenever Figes discusses her literary affiliations, she mainly refers to her implication with Modernist writers – most prominently Kafka, T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf –, while the *nouveau roman* is never really openly acknowledged as an important literary influence. However, she hinted at the fact that the group of experimental writers she was part of was generally "influenced by what was happening in France[34]", and once admitted that "we were all aware of the *nouveau roman*, I certainly was[35]". In fact, rather than expressing any real affinity with specific writers or texts, such affirmations would simply appear to denote Figes's obvious awareness of the *nouveau roman* as an interesting literary phenomenon that was causing at the time quite a proliferation of discussions in Britain; a phenomenon which emerging writers like herself, moved by the wish to "change the face of English fiction[36]", could not but regard with at least curiosity.

On the other hand, stronger connections between the British literature of the time and the *nouveau roman* can be found in more peripheral areas of the Sixties avant-garde, in figures such as Christine Brooke-Rose and Rayner Heppenstall. Christine Brooke-Rose, for instance, is only tangentially linked to the main group of experimental writers of this period, not least because she physically lived outside Britain for the greatest part of her life[37]. Differently from many of her other English colleagues, however, her experience appears to be somehow linked to the *nouveau roman* in many respects. She was, first of all, among the first literary journalists to work on the subject in England, also because her native knowledge of French allowed her direct access to the originals, as well as a potentially deeper insight into the literature of the *nouveau roman*. In an early article on the Calder promotional tour of 1961, for instance, she comments on the "tremor of excitement" that the visit of the *nouveaux romanciers* was causing in those days in England, remarking, however, that "nothing is completely new under the sun, and in many ways these writers remind one of others. […] But they are at least trying to save the novel from its 'representational' impasse[38]". Despite these initial reservations and very moderate curiosity, her interest in the French movement never dwindled in subsequent years, and in fact even increased.

The experimental novels Christine Brooke-Rose published during the Sixties – *Out* (1964), *Such* (1966) and *Between* (1968) – all bear the traces of her knowledge and careful reading of the key *nouveaux romans*, confirming her as one of the few British writers who assimilated the lessons of the

[34] Eva Figes interviewed by Sarah O'Reilly, 15.09.2010, London.
[35] E. Figes, Transcription of symposium for B.S. Johnson, held at the British Library on 10.12.2009, Sound Archive, British Library, London.
[36] D.J Taylor, Review of *Knot* by Eva Figes, *The Guardian*, 15.03.1996.
[37] She was born in Geneva in 1923 to English and Swiss-American parents, lived in Germany and then Belgium during her childhood, subsequently moved to Britain as a young adult, first working and then completing her university studies. Having worked for some years as journalist and literary critic in London, she finally moved to France in 1968, where she taught linguistics and English literature at a university in Paris, subsequently remaining in the country until her death in 2012.
[38] Christine Brooke-Rose, in "The Observer", 12.02.1961.

movement to any significant degree and engaged in a fruitful dialogue with it. Her novel *Out*, especially, has been discussed in terms of its connections with Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*, of which *Out* can be read as a sort of elaborated response[39], if not a "line-by-line parody[40]". Circumstances brought then Brooke-Rose to reinforce her connection with Robbe-Grillet, as Calder & Boyars commissioned her a translation of Robbe-Grillet's novel *Dans le Labyrinthe* (1959), published in England in 1968 as *In the Labyrinth*. Her late academic work – especially the book *Invisible Author: Last Essays* (2002) – show that, even in her final days, she was still returning to the texts and the authors of the *nouveau roman*, crucially recognising the achievements of Robbe-Grillet and admitting him to be "the source of her own experimental practice in her novels from *Out* onwards[41]".

Among avant-garde-related figures, it is Rayner Heppenstall who certainly displays more evident, deep and direct connections with the *nouveau roman*. As has been already mentioned, he was indeed a Francophile and an expert reader of French literature long before the *nouveaux romanciers* even began to be mentioned in English literary circles. Being an attentive observer of the French literary scene, Heppenstall had already noted with enthusiasm the formation of this new school of writers in France, praising them and discussing the phenomenon at large in his 1961 collection of essays, *The Fourfold Tradition*. It is in one of these essays that he refers to the *nouveau roman* as "a trend which cannot be ignored, […] more stimulating than anything going on at present in our own literature[42]". Here he still calls anti-novel, or *anti-roman*[43], since at the time the term *nouveau roman* was not yet in use. In the course of the same year, Heppenstall was also directly involved in the promotional tour of the *nouveaux romanciers* in England, attending in person their first reception in London[44] and directing the triple radio interview with Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet and Duras on BBC's Third Programme[45].

As regards his fiction, Heppenstall was once notoriously described by a French critic as no less than the precursor of the *nouveau roman*[46], owing to some interesting analogies between his first novel, *The Blaze of Noon* (1939), and some crucial traits of Robbe-Grillet's theory of things – the so-called *chosisme*[47]. Although Heppenstall himself doubted that any of the *nouveaux romanciers* had

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[39] For a more detailed analysis of the connections between Brooke-Roses' *Out* and Robbe-Grillet *La Jalousie*, see A. Guy, *The* nouveau roman *and Writing in Britain after Modernism*, pp. 158-162.

[40] Morton P. Levitt, *Modernist Survivors: The Contemporary Novel in England, the United States, France and Latin America*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus (Ohio) 1987, p. 58.

[41] A. Guy, *The* nouveau roman *and Writing in Britain after Modernism*. 159.

[42] *Ibid*., p. 271.

[43] R. Heppenstall, *The Fourfold Tradition*, p. 251.

[44] See J. Calder, *Pursuit*, p. 179.

[45] See *ibid*., p. 183.

[46] In an article published in 1967 on *Le Monde*, Hélène Cixous affirmed, rather controversially, that Heppenstall had inaugurated the *nouveau roman* with his novel *The Blaze of Noon* ("il a inauguré le nouveau roman dés 1939". H. Cixous, *Langage et regard dans le roman experimental*, dans "Le Monde", 18.05.1967).

[47] The blindness of the central character in *The Blaze of Noon* allowed Heppenstall to focus especially on tactual and other non-visual descriptions of objects and persons: this is somehow reminiscent of Robbe-Grillet's stated intention to rid his

read his debut novel, and that it was therefore improbable that he had influenced in any way Robbe-Grillet's or Sarraute's output, the influence certainly worked the other way around: by 1960, Heppenstall had indeed read voraciously everything Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute had published[48], and his own novels of the Sixties – especially *The Connecting Door* and *The Woodshed* (both 1962) – can certainly be seen as an Anglophone response to the French *nouveau roman*. Not by chance, in discussing these novels, Heppenstall admitted that "the *nouveau roman* had given me courage", providing him with "a moral example" to do, "without misgiving, […] what I had long wanted to do[49]".

The most important aspect of Heppenstall's engagement with the *nouveau roman*, at least in connection with the development of the English avant-garde scene of the Sixties, is however linked to the role of mentor he came to play for the younger generation of experimental authors coming to the fore in that period. A senior novelist with respect to emerging writers such as Quin, Figes and Johnson, Heppenstall was regarded as a "*chef de file*[50]" to the entire movement, and he certainly used his influential position to direct these writers toward the *nouveau roman*. In an already-quoted article, Johnson states that it was him "who first championed the French 'new novel' in England, introduced us to Robbe-Grillet […] and Nathalie Sarraute[51]". Heppenstall's diaries, moreover, are replete with entries related to various occasions in which he personally attended or chaperoned other younger fellow writers, including Johnson, to events or lectures dedicated to the *nouveau roman* – as in the occasion of Sarraute's lecture at the Better Books shop in London in 1964[52].

Considering the *nouveau roman* as the most interesting literary current of the time, it was after all obvious that Heppenstall should try his best to orientate the attention of a growing generation of avant-garde writers towards what was then happening in France; this was certainly done in the hope that, in this way, the English literary world could finally set itself free from the intransigent parochialism it had entrenched itself in during the post-war decades[53]. It is thus partly owing to Heppenstall if the writers in the Sixties were able to register and assimilate, albeit sometimes in rather distorted ways, all the impulses coming from the other side of the Channel, thus re-acquiring that international thrust British letters had lost after the waning of Modernism.

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fiction of any psychological depth and let the world of objects speak for itself, so that the reader could sense the physical resistance and the opacity of these objects free from any human mediation and overinterpretation.

[48] See R. Heppenstall, *The Intellectual Part*, Barrie & Rockliff, London 1963, p. 198.

[49] *Ibid*., p. 210.

[50] As Heppenstall himself recounts: "I was somewhat regarded as the senior avant-garde British novelist, also representing the French *nouveau roman*. It was therefore as to a *chef de file* that B.S. Johnson first sent me a proof copy of his first novel, then telephoned me to ask if he could see me" (R. Heppenstall, *The Master Eccentric*, p. 67).

[51] B.S. Johnson, *Experimental British Fiction*, 20.08.1966.

[52] "[Ann Quin] first met B.S. Johnson at our flat, over a light, early dinner, after which Bryan drove us all to the shop called Better Books in Charing Cross Road, where Nathalie Sarraute was lecturing, with me as her chairman" (R. Heppenstall, *The Master Eccentric*, p. 120).

[53] See Heppenstall's opinions on Britain's insularity and her need to rediscover and valorise her ancient cultural roots with France (R. Heppenstall, *The Fourfold Tradition*, pp. 247-8).

Returning however to the central core of the avant-garde of the Sixties, one feels the need to inquire how exactly the *nouveau roman* as a whole impacted on the experimental literature produced in that period. A first answer to this question, partial though rather revealing, is given by B.S. Johnson: in the previously quoted article, the author gestures towards the importance that the *nouveaux romanciers* had for the ideological development of his group, specifying however that "their influence has been mainly through their theories rather than their practice, which often tends to seem arid to English minds[54]". This latter view appears to be consonant with a general tendency in the British literary criticism of the early Sixties, which – owing also to the marketing strategies of publishers such as Calder – had had access to the novels as well as the theories of the main exponents of the movement almost simultaneously, ending up considering both of them as part of the same phenomenon. In this way, the theory and the practice of the *nouveau roman* often tended to be confused in the minds of readers and commentators, causing many to perceive the novels as gratuitous technical experiments carried out for their own sake – in other words, "the *nouveau roman*'s commitment to theory was widely dismissed as calculating and preconceived, defying the naturalness assumed in artistic creation[55]".

Ironically enough, however, already in 1956 Nathalie Sarraute herself had warned her readers against this popular conception of the *nouveau roman*. For example, in her introduction to the collection of essays entitled *The Age of Suspicion* she points out that:

> The interest inspired lately by all these discussions about the novel, with particular regard to the ideas of the supporters of the so-called *Nouveau Roman*, has led many people to imagine these authors as cold experimenters who have begun by first elaborating some theories, only to put them in practice in their books at a later stage. It is for this reason that their novels have been described as 'lab experiments'. […] Nothing could be further from the truth. The articles reunited in this volume, published since 1947, have followed at a great distance the publication of *Tropismes*[56].

Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, addresses the same problem in his own famous collection *Towards a New Novel*, reasoning on the fact that "the public, in its turn, willingly associates the preoccupation with form with coldness. But this is not true, since form is invention, and not recipe[57]". In another essay of the same collection, he also warns against an excessive assimilation of his theory with his

[54] B.S. Johnson, *Experimental British Fiction*, 20.08.1966.
[55] A. Guy, *The* nouveau roman *and Writing in Britain after Modernism*, p. 71.
[56] "L'intérêt que suscitent depuis quelque temps les discussions sur le roman, et notamment les idées exprimées par les tenants de ce qu'on nomme le 'Nouveau Roman', porte bien des gens à s'imaginer que ces romanciers sont de froids expérimentateurs qui ont commencé par élaborer des théories, puis qui ont voulu les mettre en pratique dans leurs livres. C'est ainsi qu'on a pu dire que ces romans étaient des 'expériences de laboratoire'. […] Rien n'est plus erroné qu'une telle opinion. Les articles réunis dans ce volume, publiés à partir de 1947, ont suivi de loin la parution de *Tropismes*". Nathalie Sarraute, *L'ère du soupçon*, Gallimard, Paris 1956, p. 7.
[57] "Le public à son tour associe volontiers le souci de la forme à la froideur. Mais cela n'est plus vrai du moment que la forme est invention, et non recette". Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*, les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1963, pp. 43-44.

own creative writing, implicitly advocating for a neater separation between the two by admitting, rather bluntly:

> That there is only a very weak parallelism between the three novels I have published so far and my theoretical views is in itself evident. Any reader will agree, after all, that there is more complexity in a book of two or three hundred pages than in an article of ten; and also, that it is much easier to point out a new direction than to follow it, before a failure of some kind – partial or total as it were – should expose in a decisive and definite way the error committed at the start[58].

Given the greater emphasis that has been apparently given to the theoretical side of the *nouveau roman* in the process of its assimilation into British literary culture, it is important to understand in which ways the ideological positions of the *nouveaux romanciers* may have affected the output of English experimental writers of the Sixties. One point with which to begin this analysis might well be Robbe-Grillet's theory of things – better known as *chosisme*, or *thingism*. This aspect of Robbe-Grillet's poetics assumed a pivotal centrality in many critical discussions of the *nouveau roman* at large, also becoming one of its most debated points. Centered on the notorious tenet "[t]he world is neither significant nor absurd. It simply *is*[59]", such theory advocates for the renunciation, on the novelist's part, of any interpretational grid to be imposed on the material dimension of objects, so that they could appear in fiction as they really are, in a totally unmediated way. In this respect, Robbe-Grillet affirms:

> Instead of this universe of 'significations' (psychological, social or functional), one should rather try and build a more solid and unmediated world. May the objects and the actions impose themselves first and foremost through their *presence*, and may this presence continue to be dominant, above all the explicative theories that attempt to freeze them within any system of references, be them sentimental, sociological, Freudian, metaphysical, or other. In the novelistic universe of the future, actions and objects will be *there* before they will be *something*; and they will still be there afterwards, solid, unalterable, forever present and as if mockful of their own meanings, those meanings that tried in vain to reduce them to the role of precarious utensils[60].

The intention of Robbe-Grillet, in other words, is to strip the novel of all the psychological layers usually attached to it, achieving the neutrality of a pure, immediate vision devoid of metaphors

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[58] "Qu'il n'y ait qu'un parallélisme assez lâche entre les trois romans que j'ai publiés à ce jour et mes vues théoriques sur un possible roman future, c'est l'évidence même. Chacun estimera, du reste, normal qu'un livre de deux ou trois cents pages ait plus de complexité qu'un article de dix; et, aussi, qu'il soit plus facile d'indiquer une direction nouvelle que de la suivre, sans qu'un échec – partiel ou même total – soit une preuve décisive, définitive, de l'erreur commise au départ". *Ibid*., p. 46.

[59] "Le monde n'est ni signifiant ni absurde. Il *est*, tout simplement". *Ibid*., p. 18.

[60] "A place de cet univers de 'significations' (psychologiques, sociales, fonctionnelles), il faudrait donc essayer de construire un monde plus solide, plus immédiat. Que ce soit d'abord par leur *présence* que les objets et les gestes s'imposent, et que cette présence continue ensuite à dominer, par-dessus tout théorie explicative qui tenterait de les enfermer dans un quelconque système de référence, sentimental, sociologique, freudien, métaphysique, ou autre. Dans les constructions romanesques futures, gestes et objets seront *là* avant d'être *quelque chose*; et ils seront encore là après, durs, inaltérables, présents pour toujours et comme se moquant de leur propre sens, ce sens qui cherche en vain à les réduire au rôle d'ustensiles précaires". *Ibid*., p. 20.

and of any other form of indirect signification – it is not by chance, indeed, that the *nouveau roman* is also remembered sometimes as *école du regard*, or "school of the gaze"[61]. Given then its intransigency and the extreme limits it imposes on the process of composition, it would not be surprising to find out that such a method has in fact encountered only little consensus among the emerging writers of the Sixties, influencing them – if at all – in a very indirect way at most. Robbe-Grillet's rejection of psychology, for instance, seems to be completely at odds with the method of Eva Figes, at the base of whose approach is a focus on the inner dimension of the characters, with the consequent exploration of a poetic language able to express the inarticulateness of such interior space. For Figes, indeed, "the interest of serious and original novelists" should be best directed "to the world of the single individual, the private and interior landscape", since "within each of us there is another universe which is not so predictable, a primitive world of shadows and sudden illuminations, of territories still largely unexplored[62]". More specifically, she stresses the importance of metaphor and of the artist's ability to find new and deeply personal connections between interior world and external reality:

> The relationship between the inner landscape and the outer one is a strange one. If art mirrors reality it does not like an ordinary mirror but like one of those antique reducing mirrors which brings the whole room into a clearer perspective without distortion. There must be of course a relationship between our private world and the public one, both because we are creatures reacting to external situations, and because as artists the only way in which we can communicate is by references to external reality. It is when those references provide a true connecting link, when we discover metaphor, when the interior landscape is externalised, that our writing has real validity[63].

As to Ann Quin, embedded as she is in a minute exploration of the distorted psychological depths of her characters and the way experience and reality are filtered by their unique consciousness, the total absence of any reference to Robbe-Grillet in her list of favourite readings[64] does not certainly sound as a surprise. It is equally understandable, on the other hand, that her attention should be rather directed to Duras and Sarraute[65]: their peculiar attention for everyday discourse, and in particular their exploration of how the subconscious world of individuals is reflected on the most superficial

[61] Robbe-Grillet himself describes the strategic importance of the gaze in his essay *Nature, Humanisme, Tragédie*: "The gaze suddenly appears in this perspective as the most privileged of all senses, and particularly the gaze applied to contours (more than to colours, glitters or transparencies). Optical description is indeed that which most effectively operates the fixation of distances: the gaze, if it wants to remain simple gaze, leaves the things to their respective places" ("Le regard apparâit aussitôt dans cette perspective comme le sens privilégié, et particulièrement le regard appliqué aux contours (plus qu'aux couleurs, aux éclats, ou aux transparences). La description optique est en effet celle qui opère le plus aisément la fixation des distances: le regard, s'il veut rester simple regard, laisse les choses à leur place respective". *Ibid.*, p. 65).
[62] E. Figes, *Interior Landscapes*, in "The Running Man", 1.1 (May-June 1968).
[63] *Ibid.*
[64] See note 31 (p. 47).
[65] As mentioned above, both Duras and Sarraute are present in Quin's list of favourite readings – albeit limited, of course, to the works available in the English translation. In the case of Sarraute, moreover, the theoretical writings are quoted as well as the fictions.

actions and verbal exchanges between people, is indeed a recurrent characteristic of Quin's writing as well.

If Duras's method has been described in terms of her intention "to suggest the unspoken depths through an obsessive insistence on the trivial, both in physical presence and dialogue[66]", Sarraute is instead notorious for her so-called tropisms – which is also the title of one of her best-known literary works, *Tropismes* (1939, re-issued in a revised version in 1957). In the language of biology, tropisms are the involuntary movements made by plants and other living organisms in reaction to external stimuli such as light and temperature: the term is consequently used by Sarraute as a metaphor for all those small, uncontrolled movements, tics and mannerisms produced in human beings by some movement originating in the subconscious. Sarraute discusses her fascination for these "undefinable movements" which lie "at the origin of our actions, of our words, of the feelings that we display to others, that we believe we are feeling and that it is possible to define[67]"; owing to Sarraute, "the articulation of these movements gives rise to authentic dramas that are dissimulated behind our most banal conversations, our most quotidian actions. They constantly surface above these semblances, which conceal and at the same time reveal them[68]".

A similar attention for everyday dialogue and actions is perfectly detectable in Quin's work as well, juxtaposed, in her case, in such a way as to reveal the subterranean psychological depths from which verbal exchanges and gestures originate and the real intentions they conceal – as a novel such as *Three* (1966) perfectly exemplifies. Apart from this quite evident aesthetic affinity, another possible Sarrautean influence in Quin can be detected in the latter's peculiar graphic treatment of dialogue. Quin's method of reporting dialogue and narrative passages as part of the same fluid and homogeneous continuum, without markers and indicators of any kind, is indeed reminiscent of Sarraute's own method, as exposed in her theories:

> But this dialogue, which in the modern novel tends more and more to take the place left vacant by action, ill adapts to the forms imposed on it by tradition, since dialogue is above all an exterior continuation of subterranean movements […]. Consequently, nothing is less justified than these pompous indentations, these dashes with which it is customary to brutally separate the dialogue from what precedes it. Even the colon and quotation marks are still too evident, and it is perfectly comprehensible that some authors […] are trying to amalgamate as much as possible the dialogue with its context, restricting themselves to signaling the separation with a simple comma followed by an upper-case letter[69].

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[66] C. Brooke-Rose, in "The Observer", 12.02.1961.

[67] "Ce sont des mouvements indéfinissables […]; ils sont à l'origine de nos gestes, de nos paroles, des sentiments que nous manifestons, que nous croyons d'éprouver et qu'il est possible de définir". N. Sarraute, *L'ère du soupçon*, p. 8.

[68] "Leur déploiement constitue de véritables drames qui se dissimulent derrière les conversations les plus banales, les gestes les plus quotidiens. Ils débouchent à tout moment sur ces apparences qui à la fois les masquent et les révèlent". *Ibid*., p. 9.

[69] "Mais ce dialogue qui tend de plus en plus à prendre dans le roman moderne la place que l'action abandonne, s'accommode mal des formes que lui impose le roman traditionnel. Car il est surtout la continuation au-dehors des mouvements souterrains […]. Dès lors, rien n'est moins justifié que ces grands alinéas, ces tirets par lesquels on a costume de séparer brutalement le dialogue de ce qui le précède. Même les deux points et les guillemets sont encore trop apparents,

The above description could indeed be effectively employed to illustrate Quin's method in much of her production, since many of her texts present a fluid narration in which narrative parts, verbal exchanges, interior monologues, memories and other psychological movements of her characters are mingled together in the same textual continuum, often without any clear demarcations separating the one from the other. The same could be said, incidentally, of some among the most Modernist works by Eva Figes – *Winter Journey* (1967) and *Konek Landing* (1969) above all –, although it is difficult in her case to determine if this aesthetic trait should be considered as an influence derived from Sarraute's theories, or simply a generality the two writers have in common.

Though apparently absent from Quin's and Figes's productions, a certain echo of Robbe-Grillet's *chosisme* can instead be found, however deeply re-elaborated, in B.S. Johnson. It is true that the fundamental presence of the author in Johnson's work[70] makes it inevitable that every element in the text should be ultimately brought back to the interpretation of the mind that presides the narration; this might sound as in strident opposition to Robbe-Grillet's intended elimination of psychology, but Johnson's own project of intruding with his own material presence in the text can still be interpreted as a response to Robbe-Grillet's claim for the tangibility of characters in the future novel. As Robbe-Grillet indeed explains in his theories:

> Whereas the traditional hero is constantly urged, possessed and trampled by the interpretations proposed for him by the author, incessantly cast into an unstable and immaterial *elsewhere*, ever distant and evanescent, the future hero will, on the contrary, stay there. Rather, the commentaries about him will stay elsewhere; in the face of his irrefutable presence, they will appear useless, superfluous, if not downright dishonest[71].

The almost obsessive focus on honesty and truth in Johnson's aesthetic system sounds indeed consonant with this latter vision, with the only difference that in Robbe-Grillet the characters are treated as neutral, impenetrable objects observed from the outside, whereas in Johnson they are living persons with their own complex psychologies. If the commentaries avoided by Robbe-Grillet are still present in Johnson it is only by virtue of the fact that, in his case, the external author coincides with the central hero of the story, and so the point of origin of any interpretation is one and the same – in

et l'on comprend que certains romanciers […] s'efforcent de fondre, dans la mesure du possible, le dialogue avec son contexte en marquant simplement la séparation par une virgule suivie d'une majuscule". *Ibid*., pp. 123-125.

[70] One of Johnson's chief tenets consists in an almost total rejection of fabulation in favour of complete honesty and truth: as a consequence, Johnson also rejects the employment of invented characters in many of his novels, putting instead himself in the text as the main character, not so much as a fictional projection, as rather a direct extension of his historical persona – this happens notably in *Albert Angelo* (1964), *Trawl* (1966), *The Unfortunates* (1969) and *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975).

[71] "Alors que le héros traditionnel est constamment sollicité, accaparé, détruit par ces interprétations que l'auteur propose, rejeté sans cesse dans un *ailleurs* immatériel et instable, toujours plus lointain, toujours plus flou, le héros futur au contraire demeurera là. Et ce sont les commentaires qui resteront ailleurs; en face de sa présence irréfutable, ils apparaîtront comme inutiles, superflus, voire malhonnêtes". A. Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*, pp. 20-21.

other words, no interpretation is forced on the protagonist, since he constitutes, so to speak, the very origin of those interpretations, which are an extension of the author's presence within the text.

At the same time, many other elements in Johnson's novels often concur in creating the impression of a tangible materiality. Reference is often made, for example, to specific settings, streets or buildings which are easily identifiable and thus verifiable in the outside world, with their tangibility also enhanced by the many accurate architectural descriptions employed by the author[72]. There is moreover a great emphasis on tactual and other sensorial descriptions of objects, so that the impression of their presence is often magnified. Moreover, Johnson's unique attention for the graphic aspect of his novels, together with the special organisation he reserves to the text, the pages and the very outlook or even the texture of the final product[73], forces the reader to interact with the book as a physical object, making its presence more tangible and exposing the material aspect which is always inherent though usually concealed in every narration.

It is of course difficult, in conclusion, to assess the extent to which all the above aspects of Johnson's style are imputable to the influence of Robbe-Grillet's theory of things; the interesting affinities that do exist between Johnson and this particular strand of the *nouveau roman*, however, certainly point to his literature as a potential site of fruitful dialogue and creative re-elaboration of the impulses coming from the French movement, testifying also to the fact that the writers in England in the Sixties were, if not directly influenced by, at least exposed and alert to the innovations coming from the Continent. The same can be said, of course, of the other experimental authors of the English avant-garde of the time, who undoubtedly developed, to varying degrees, their aesthetic approaches in strict dialogue with the *nouveau roman*, which functioned at the time as a strong inspirational model for a growing generation of authors willing to liberate themselves from the shackles of too restricting a tradition and find new forms with which to convey their contents. It is for this reason that, rather than focusing on single theoretical or technical aspects of the *nouveau roman* that may have influenced English authors, it is perhaps more appropriate to highlight the *nouveau roman*'s importance in setting an example, expressing and catalysing the need for change of an entire generation of writers in search of new directions.

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[72] Johnson is notorious for his very peculiar attention to architectural details and generally for his interest in architecture. References to architecture, architects and architectural theories abound in his work, and he often stresses the fact that literature has much to learn from architecture (for instance: "The architects can teach us something: their aesthetic problems are combined with functional ones in a way that dramatises the crucial nature of their final actions. […] Form is not the aim, but the result. If form were the aim then one would have formalism; and I reject formalism". B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 16). He was also on personal terms with the Smithsons (Alison and Peter), two of the most important British architects of the time (authors, among other projects, of the Economist's building in London), about whom he also directed a documentary for the BBC, *The Smithsons on Housing* (1970). The central character in *Albert Angelo*, moreover, is famously an architect *manqué*, which enables the author all the more to fill the novel with architectural observations.

[73] The most notable examples here being perhaps the proleptic holes cut through some pages of *Albert Angelo*, or the loose pages of *The Unfortunates*, to be shuffled and read in any order chosen by the reader, plus many other minor devices persistently present throughout Johnson's production.

It is not by chance, indeed, that the most striking affinities in the theoretical pronouncements of both the *nouveaux romanciers* and the experimental British writers of the Sixties – in a mutual sense as well as internally to each of the two groups – are not to be found in technicalities, but rather in the expression of a general need to break away from the exhausted forms of past literature. The need for a new kind of novel, for instance, is self-evident from the very title of Robbe-Grillet's collection of essays *Pour un nouveau roman*, in which he affirms, among other things, that "with regard to the art of the novel of the present day, the lassitude is so great […] that it is difficult to imagine how this art could survive in the future without a radical change of some kind[74]".

Sarraute reflects retrospectively that, at the time of the publication of *L'ère du soupçon*, "critics continued to judge new novels as if nothing had happened after Balzac. Did they pretend to ignore or had they forgotten the profound changings that had been produced in the novel since the beginning of the Twentieth century?[75]". Similarly, she then admits, in reference to her famous essay *Conversation et sous-conversation*, that "I wanted to show how the novel had changed after the revolutions brought by these authors [Woolf, Proust and Joyce] in the first quarter of this century, and how these developments made a revision of contents and forms necessary[76]".

Johnson, on the other hand, expresses very similar concerns as those of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute in his famous introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing your Memoirs?*, lamenting for instance that contemporary novelists are writing as though the revolution of Joyce had never happened, whereas for him "it is a matter of realizing that the novel is an evolving form, not a static one, of accepting that for practical purposes where Joyce left off should ever since have been regarded as the starting point[77]". For this reason, Johnson abhors the contemporary employment of exhausted literary forms, which he sees as completely out of tune with the realities of the present: "That is what seems to have happened to the nineteenth century narrative novel, too, by the outbreak of the First World War. No matter how good the writers are who now attempt it, it cannot be made to work for our time, and the writing of it is anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant and perverse[78]". This latter refrain is then of course reprised by Figes as well, who seems to virtually agree with all the preceding pronouncements when she says that "the English social realist tradition cannot contain the realities of my own lifetime, horrors which one might have called surreal if they had not actually happened.

[74] "Devant l'art romanesque actuel, cependant, la lassitude est si grande […] qu'on imagine mal que cet art puisse survivre bien longtemps sans quelque changement radical". A. Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*, p. 16.
[75] "Les critiques continuaient à juger les romans comme si rien n'avait bougé depuis Balzac. Feignaient-ils d'ignorer ou avaient-ils oublié tous les changements profonds qui s'étaient produits dans cet art dès le début du siècle?". N. Sarraute, *L'ère du soupçon*, p. 11.
[76] "J'ai voulu montrer comment l'évolution du roman, depuis les bouleversements que ces auteurs lui avaient fait subir dans le premier quart de ce siècle, rendit nécessaire une révision du contenu et des formes du roman". *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[77] B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young…*, pp. 12-3.
[78] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

For me the old forms are hopelessly inadequate, and can only say things that are no longer worth saying[79]".

Beyond the specific directions suggested in the theories of the *nouveaux romanciers* for the future evolution of the novel, the actual influence of the movement on the writers of the English avant-garde of the Sixties would thus appear to have been of a more general ideological value. The *nouveau roman* was undoubtedly among the chief avant-garde currents of the time, one that authoritatively voiced the need for a profound change in novel writing. It was somewhat inevitable, therefore, that many other experimental writers looking for similar changes should somehow articulate their aesthetics in response to, or in dialogue with, the *nouveau roman*, letting themselves be inspired by the fervour for innovation incarnated by the French movement. As Guy points out in this respect, "In Britain as much as in France, the *nouveau roman* drew most of its energy from just such a performative quality, catalysing the aesthetic and political values associated with the new; in the process, the *nouveau roman* became a powerful organizing concept both for its adherents and its detractors[80]"; "more than this", the critic adds, "it also provided a means for these writers to conceive of their diverse literary efforts collectively[81]".

It was indeed thanks to the *nouveau roman*, and to the prominent status it acquired in the European avant-garde panorama of the time, if the Sixties' generation of experimental writers in England started to look beyond the confines of the British world, re-establishing connections with the Continent and bringing back to English literature part of that Modernist cosmopolitan spirit that had almost completely waned by the middle of the century. If the literature produced in the Sixties represents a sort of cure to the proverbial parochialism which was then dominant in the world of British letters, the *nouveau roman* provided one of the most effective treatments employed in the process.

[79] E. Figes, Article for "The New Review", 1978, Eva Figes Archive, British Library, London.
[80] A. Guy, *The* nouveau roman *and Writing in Britain After Modernism*, p. 6.
[81] *Ibid*., p. 22.

II: B.S. Johnson

2

Introduction: Some Coordinates on B.S. Johnson

Bryan Stanley William Johnson was born on 5th February 1933 in Hammersmith, London, from working-class parents. He received a fragmentary education as a child, being also evacuated twice during the War: first with his mother at Chobham, then alone at High Wycombe. These experiences, especially the second one, left a profound mark on his sensibility, instilling in him a sense of isolation that he would go on feeling for his entire life. Moreover, it was at this period that Johnson began to develop his class consciousness, realising the existence of "differences between people which were nothing to do with age or size", and becoming "aware in fact of the class war[1]". This awareness would provide another crucial trait of his personal ideology and his attitude towards society in general, which is also detectable in much of his fiction.

After failing his eleven-plus examination, he was sent to a secondary modern school, then studied at a technical school in which he learnt short-hand, typing and book-keeping. On the basis of this education, he started working at a very young age at various firms and institutions as an accounting clerk – he would later incorporate such experiences into his fiction, most notably in the satirical novel *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973). During this period, he also took evening classes in preparation of university entry examinations, and he finally managed to enroll at King's College London, where he began reading English.

University, on the whole, proved for him to be a highly disappointing experience; nonetheless, he began to get involved in the world of letters and to make his first important contacts – e.g. Rosica Colin, who was later to become his first agent[2]. In those years, he also developed for the first time a certain sense of leadership, having what he calls "my first real experience[s] of the isolation of command[3]". Indeed, he had the chance to direct a couple of plays for the college's drama society, even touring some German and Danish universities with a production of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Most importantly, he took over the editorship of King's poetry magazine, *Lucifer*, a task he carried out with great dedication and managing to elevate the standards of the issue to a

[1] B.S. Johnson, *Trawl* (1966), Picador, London 2013, p. 53.
[2] See J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 79.
[3] B.S. Johnson, *Trawl.*, p. 117.

significant degree. His occupation as editor also led him to start collaborations with other young poets and editors of other university magazines, which enabled Johnson to meet people who were to become longtime friends and collaborators, such as the Anglo-Pakistani poet Zulfikar Ghose – with whom he eventually published the joint collection of short stories *Statement Against Corpses* (1964) – and the young academic Tony Tillinghast, to whom Johnson dedicated the novel *The Unfortunates* (1969), after the former's untimely death at the age of 29.

As a graduate student, Johnson was a young eclectic enthusiast with many ideas and concurrent interests, but little notion of the precise course he would follow in his life. In a personal note entitled 'Things to do After Finals', he enlists various and mutually oppositional suggestions such as "Private teaching (after holiday in Dublin? Sweden? America? Ireland?) / Local newspaper (theatre cuts etc.) / Novel / Job at BBC / Script writer for comics? / Children's stories / Translations and adaptations / Edition of Sidney's sonnets / Advertising / […] Short stories […] / Song lyrics[4]". It is certainly no small credit to him that, in the course of his life, he really tried to act on the majority of these suggestions, and actually managed to carry out many of them, albeit with varying degrees of success.

As to the prospected holiday mentioned in the above note, he eventually chose to take it in Dublin, so that he could "soak [him]self in the atmosphere (as far as it still exists) of Joyce and Beckett[5]", the literary masters he had learned to appreciate during his private readings at King's[6]. While returning from Ireland, exactly as the protagonist of his first novel *Travelling People* (1963), he was offered a job at a summer club in Wales by a man who had given him a lift. His experience at the Glyn Club of Abersoch inspired the fictional adventures of his alter ego Henry Henry, establishing thus a direct and evident connection between his life and his writing. This aspect would become, in subsequent years, one of Johnson's most notorious trademarks as a novelist.

His first novel was published in 1963 by Constable, thanks to the mediation of Johnson's agent, George Greenfield. Written in the spirit of his Irish masters[7], *Travelling People* got a generally

[4] B.S. Johnson's personal papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library, London.

[5] See B.S. Johnson, Letter to Zulfikar Ghose, 30.04.1959, in V. Guignery (ed.), *The B. S. Johnson – Zulfikar Ghose Correspondence*, p. 34.

[6] Johnson used to discuss especially Beckett at great lengths with the librarian at King's, Frank Lissauer, with whom he exchanged long and passionate letters, sometimes ending up in fierce arguments about literary and philosophical aspects that would last for pages and pages of correspondence.

[7] More specifically, in a letter to his agent, Johnson illustrates the way he further developed the Joycean "device of using a different style or literary technique for each chapter", affirming finally that: "*Travelling People* is in the tradition represented by writers such as Petronius, Apuleius, Rabelais, Cervantes, Nashe, Sterne, and Samuel Beckett". See B.S. Johnson, Letter to George Greenfield, 18.10.1961, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library, London; J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 116. The first draft was even more Sternian in character than the final abridged version, with the inclusion of drawings, schemes and maps and further juxtapositions of digressing scenes which were eventually left out. A chapter set in Dublin, very much in the style of Joyce's *Ulysses* and the early Beckett of *Murphy* and *Watt*, was also originally included. This latter excerpt then became a short story on its own, published as *Broad Thoughts from a Home* in the collection *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* (1973).

good critical reception, but most importantly earned him a Gregory Award[8], a first public recognition of his talent and a great encouragement towards the prosecution of his writing career – among the judges of the award, incidentally, were also T. S. Eliot and Herbert Read. This career he determinedly tried to pursue in the subsequent years, earning through supply teaching the income he could not immediately get with his writing. The second novel, *Albert Angelo* (1964), relates precisely of Johnson's own struggles during this period as a supply teacher, representing a desperate and genuine account of the author's frustration of "being a poet in a world where only poets care anything real about poetry": a frustration he expresses "through the objective correlative of an architect who has to earn his living as a teacher[9]".

Possibly Johnson's best-known and most important literary work, *Albert Angelo* consecrated him as one of the most interesting writers of experimental fiction emerging at the time, condensing in one single text many of the traits that would become indelibly related to the author: exuberance of style, juxtaposition of multiple narrative modes, formal experimentation, exploration of the graphic surface and of the physical properties of the book and, most importantly, a rejection of fabulation in favour of an absolute faithfulness to the writer's personal experience.

In the same year Johnson also published *Poems* (1964), his first collection of poetry and the first extensive expression of this other crucial side of his artistic personality[10]. Subsequently, after months of diplomatic battles, negotiations and rejections by more than one publisher, he managed eventually to secure an unprecedented kind of contract with Secker & Warburg, who agreed to pay him an advance on his next two novels in the form of an annual salary spread over three years. In this way, he was able to write full-time without financial worries, producing *Trawl* (1966) and *The Unfortunates* (1969), which are still among his best known and most appreciated works – *Trawl* even won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1967.

In *Trawl*, Johnson pushed the association of his art and biography to extreme degrees, deliberately embarking on a fishing trawler so that he could get to the core of his sense of isolation and write a novel about himself doing precisely that: "I'm making the trip to get first-hand material for a new novel, the theme of which is deliberate isolation in order to solve a problem mechanistically[11]", he reveals to the head of publicity department at Secker. *The Unfortunates* is

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[8] In his great talent for self-publicity, Johnson always proclaimed himself as very generally the recipient of the Gregory Award, taking care to avoid specifying that he actually ranked third place – jointly with another author. See J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 118; B.S. Johnson, Letter to M.E. Barber of the Society of Authors, 27.04.1962, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library, London.

[9] Id., *Albert Angelo* (1964), Picador, London 2004, p. 168.

[10] It must be pointed out in this respect that Johnson considered himself to be first and foremost a poet before anything else; a curious anecdote relates for instance of an occasion in which, during a trip to Hungary, Johnson and his family were detained for several hours at border controls on account of his "insistence on listing his occupation as 'poet' on his passport" (See J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 344).

[11] B.S. Johnson, Letter to Miles Huddleston, 13.10.1963, in J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 148.

instead dedicated to the memory of his friend Tony Tillinghast, who died of cancer prematurely, when Johnson was still moving his first steps in the literary world. Apart from recollections of moments spent together with his deceased friend, the novel also incorporates Johnson's own experience as a football correspondent – another of the many jobs he found himself doing to sustain himself between one book and another – and is famously made up of unbound chapters enclosed in a box, to be shuffled and read in any random order.

Meanwhile, Johnson had the occasion, from the mid-Sixties, to work on a number of parallel projects alternative to the writing of prose fiction, which meant that he was able to explore a range of different media spanning from radio to television, from theatre to cinema, from journalism to documentary. Among his most notable dramatic works is for instance the short movie *You're Human Like the Rest of Them* (1967), starring the Royal Court actor William Hoyland, who became one of Johnson's most faithful collaborators in his dramatic ventures. Originally born as a play commissioned and then rejected by the Royal Shakespeare Company, the text was eventually reworked into a cinematic version and provided Johnson with the first opportunity to experience the world of movie-making and film directing. The final product eventually won the Grand Prix at both Tours and Melbourne Short Film Festivals in 1968: a promising start which gave Johnson reasonable hopes for further commissions and a prosperous career in the field. These successes, however, remained the highest peak in Johnson's career as a screenwriter, which never really took off, owing to both the resistance of the establishment to experimental works of this kind and to his difficult character, which often led him to quarrel with producers and collaborators and made him a *persona non grata* in many quarters[12].

With regard to theatre, Johnson's achievements amount to little more than a production entitled *B. S. Johnson vs God*, a stage version of *You're Human Like the Rest of Them* which ran for a couple of weeks at the Basement Theatre of Soho in January 1971, and some fragments of a previously rejected play called *Whose Dog Are You?*. The rest of his theatrical career is a plethora of rejections, failed ventures and texts which are scarcely up to the standards of his prose fiction[13]. His attempts at play-writing for television, it goes without saying, fared similarly. Johnson had slightly more luck in the field of documentaries: he had indeed the occasion to write and direct more than a

[12] Heppenstall remarks for instance in his journal that "[a] certain pushingness made Bryan [Johnson] unpopular in certain quarters […] and it was alarmingly said to me […] that people were making me responsible for B. S. Johnson" (R. Heppenstall, *The Master Eccentric*, p. 68.). For an extensive account of Johnson's difficult business relationship with the BBC, see also Valerie Butler, *Institutional Negotiations: B. S. Johnson and the BBC (1959-73)*, in P. Tew and G. White (eds.), *Re-reading B. S. Johnson*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York 2007, pp. 117-132.

[13] His biographer, Jonathan Coe, comments – perhaps too subjectively – on Johnson's abilities as a playwright in the following way: "The plain fact of the matter is that Johnson was not a natural dramatist. […] Johnson's gift […] was not for taking imaginary characters and breathing autonomous life into them, which is what a dramatist must do; instead he was a creator of puppets, to be deployed avowedly (and honestly) at the service of an authorial thesis, and while he knew how to do this with some agility in a novel, the same technique transferred to the theatre […] always seemed to produce something lumbering and stilted" (J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, pp. 232-233).

couple of projects for the BBC and other commissioners across the years. Apart from a couple of self-referential or publicity pieces – such as the one on *The Unfortunates* for BBC's *Release* series and his very last work for television, *Fat Man on a Beach* –, he also produced some interesting documentaries on important personalities, such as Samuel Johnson (*B. S. Johnson on Dr. Samuel Johnson*, 1971) and the architects of the Smithson family (*The Smithsons on Housing*, 1970). To these, one may add the two short propaganda movies Johnson produced as part of a larger movement of protest against the Industrial Relations Bill of 1971: *Unfair!* – co-written with his friend, the novelist Alan Burns – and *March!*.

Amid all the above work, in 1969 Johnson managed to secure another contract which was similar to the one he had signed with Secker & Warburg, this time with the publisher Collins. This agreement provided him with a fixed income for three years, which permitted him to write his next two novels, *House Mother Normal* (1971) and *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973). With these works, which Johnson originally intended to write before *Albert Angelo*, the author appears to partially move away from his dogmatic faithfulness to the truth of his own experience, resorting instead to fabulation and to a fictional re-elaboration of facts. Suffering perhaps from the ideological tensions created by such compromise, these two works appear to be less harmonious than Johnson's previous novels, showing a writer struggling as never before with his own recalcitrant material – albeit this, of course, could possibly be a partially intended effect.

However, they still display Johnson's proverbial sense of (black) humour, his ability to capture everyday dialogue, and especially his fascination for formal and graphic experimentation. *House Mother Normal*, for instance, is an account of a particular day in the life of eight inmates of a nursing home, with each chapter presenting the point of view of a different character. The same events are described or referred to in each chapter, and each character reacts to them differently in accordance with their own degree of physical and mental disability. A given portion of a page corresponds to a precise moment, which always recurs at the same point in each chapter; blank spaces and increasing distances between letters and words are used to mimic a character's fading mind, the condition of sleep or death.

Christie Malry is instead a fictionalisation of Johnson's juvenile experiences in the world of accountancy, and is based on the idea of a protagonist holding a double-entry register in which he reports all the misfortunes and injustices he suffers in his life, so that he is able to determine what payment he is to exact from the society that has offended him. Starting with some minor crimes and negligible shenanigans, his actions quickly escalate to graver and graver retaliations, until he commits serious acts of terrorism leading to the mass killing of thousands of Londoners.

The last literary project Johnson embarked on promised to be a massive and remarkably engrossing one. It was spurred by the death by cancer of his mother in 1971, which was a deep blow

from which the author never really recovered. Johnson intended indeed to write a trilogy about his mother's life and death, to be paralleled, through a daring metaphor, with a narration of the rise and decline of the British Empire, interposed with references to Neumann's *The Great Mother*. If juxtaposed on a bookshelf, the titles of the three novels of the "Matrix trilogy", as it was provisionally called, were to form the sentence "See the old lady decently buried, although amongst those left are you".

Johnson managed to hand over the manuscript of the first volume, *See the Old Lady Decently*, to his then publisher Hutchinson in 1973. The narration is more than ever fragmentary, made up of comparatively short sections consisting of quotations from various sources, concrete poems, authentic interviews, reproductions of existing documents belonging to Johnson's mother and her relatives, passages of imagined scenes of his mother's past, authorial comments and references to the material conditions of the book's writing, and excerpts from historical chronicles and guidebooks to Britain's colonial past in which references to places, dates and people are purposely left out.

Johnson never saw this novel published, let alone the subsequent chapters of the trilogy, which were never written. Prey to severe bouts of depression caused by his constant financial worries, ever-worsening lack of commissions, creative impasse and, especially, a serious matrimonial crisis, he eventually took his own life on the 13th of November 1973 by slitting his wrists in the bath. *See the Old Lady Decently* was published posthumously by Hutchinson in 1975.

2.1

Not Telling Lies:
Truth, Presence of the Author and of the Outside World
In B.S. Johnson's Textual Universe

In discussing B.S. Johnson, one of the first things that inevitably comes to mind is the programmatic obsession with truth and authenticity that informs his writing, perfectly epitomised by his notorious motto "telling stories is telling lies[1]". Indeed, Johnson has a very peculiar view on how novels should be written, and what kind of mission they should accomplish. He specifically maintains, for instance, that many people seem to have a crucial misconception of the actual relationship existing between literature and reality: to many novelists, he complains, the novel is but an instrument for the entertainment of the masses, a vehicle of stories which progress by neat and recognisable plots and characters, and in which every element is arranged specifically so as to second "the idle curiosity of the reader to know 'what happens next'[2]". Readers, in their turn, have grown used to this kind of narrations, and do not usually expect anything different from novels: they are generally eager to accept these reassuring, artificially-arranged plots as faithful and authentic reproductions of reality, seeing in them a perfect reflection of their own life experiences.

In Johnson's view, instead, any such easy treatment of plots invariably involves some degree of falsification, for life is simply nowhere as neat and tidy as many novelists depict it: "Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily. Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification. Telling stories really is telling lies[3]". Consequently, in his novels, Johnson opts for a more genuine form of authenticity, one that is capable of reproducing the randomness and chaos of experience, one in which the author accepts to represent them as they really are, thus avoiding the imposition of patterns of order of any kind.

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[1] This maxim is first pronounced explicitly at the close of the novel *Albert Angelo* (p. 167), and is then repeated *ad nauseam* throughout Johnson's writing, in his interviews and in many other occasions in which he exposes his views on literature or explains his own novelistic practice.
[2] B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young…*, pp. 14-15.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 14.

Johnson's critique appears to be addressed to those writers and readers who ascribe the value of absolute truth to the reassuring, harmonious constructions offered by many so-called realistic novels. In his own view, novels of this kind represent what is generally defined as fiction, while Johnson's chief objective is to employ the novel as an instrument of truth: "I am not interested in telling lies in my own novels. A useful distinction between literature and other writing for me is that the former teaches one something true about life: and how can one convey truth in a vehicle of fiction?[4]". For this reason, he feels obliged to clear the terminological confusion that has been caused by this general definition of the novel as a "vehicle of fiction", and reinstate the neutral status of the novel as a mere form. The novel, for Johnson, can thus be made free to accommodate an altogether different kind of content from the "stories" many authors usually resort to with the sole intent to please their audiences:

> The two terms *novel* and *fiction* are not, incidentally, synonymous, as many seem to suppose in the way they use them interchangeably. […] The novel is a form in the same sense that the sonnet is a form; within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write truth in the form of a novel[5].

Following this credo, Johnson thus studiously avoids the recourse to fabulation in much of his writing, so that the truth of his own life experiences – and of the people with whom he shared these experiences – can resonate without fictional distortions of any kind. By the same principle, he also inserts himself directly in many of his novels: not as a textual projection, nor as an abstract authorial voice, but as a direct emanation of his very material presence. "He created", as Eva Figes brilliantly summarises, "a literary text about real people, real experiences and events, with himself as undisguised narrator and main character[6]".

This attitude, "towards truth and away from storytelling[7]", manifestly permeates in one way or another all of Johnson's texts, from the most autobiographical to the most fictionally re-elaborated ones. It is however with his second novel, *Albert Angelo*, that his obsession with truth is taken to some extreme degree: here, a sort of ideological point of no return is reached which has oriented the author's writing towards a very peculiar direction, from which any subsequent attempt at diversion has produced rather contrived results. Towards the conclusive pages of *Albert Angelo*, Johnson employs indeed a stunning device, consisting in no less than the direct and violent intrusion of his historical self into the narrated world: an intrusion which, far from being an innocuous authorial

[4] *Ivi*.
[5] *Ivi*.
[6] E. Figes, *B. S. Johnson*, in "Review of Contemporary Fiction", 5.2 (Summer 1985), p. 71.
[7] Johnson uses this expression in commenting Samuel Beckett's *How It Is*, highlighting what is for him a crucial characteristic of contemporary writers of serious fiction: "It is his example (towards truth and away from storytelling) which makes it clear that almost all novelists today are anachronistically working in a clapped-out and moribund tradition" (B.S. Johnson, Review of *How It Is* by Samuel Beckett, written for "The Spectator", 7.05.1964).

comment, leads to a complete disruption of novelistic illusion, sustained up to that point for as many as 163 pages. The autonomous identity of the protagonist Albert is also annihilated in this process, and the whole edifice of the novel collapses (the section opened by such gesture is indeed called "Disintegration"). With such "almighty aposiopesis[8]" – defined as an abrupt interruption of discourse – the author vents all his frustration at the inadequacy of Albert as an objective correlative of what he really intended to express: from this moment on, to judge from the author's comments in this crucial section, the employment of textual lieutenants of any kind will be banished for good and Johnson will speak for himself directly, achieving a higher degree of authenticity in the presentation of his own experience, with no more "covering up covering over pretending[9]".

This moment of revelation is not internally relevant only to the economy of *Albert Angelo*, but will exert a decisive influence on the entire corpus of Johnson's subsequent prose writing. It is Johnson himself, indeed, who stresses the importance of this epiphany for his literary development: "I really discovered what I should be doing with *Albert Angelo* […] where I broke through the English disease of the objective correlative to speak truth directly if solipsistically in the novel form, and heard my own small voice[10]". As will be seen shortly, however, Johnson did not proceed down this solipsistic path smoothly, but rather articulated the need to pursue his own version of the truth in different ways, according to the material chosen for each book and to the stage of artistic development he found himself at on each occasion. If some works – such as *Trawl* or *The Unfortunates* – start from the standpoint reached at the end of *Albert Angelo*, developing literary projects in which there appears to be no division between textual and material worlds, other novels – *Christie Malry*, *House Mother Normal* and to some extent *See the Old Lady Decently* – are more focused on the exploration of the dividing line between invention and reality, with the author in constant dialogue with his own fictional material.

It will thus be preferable to consider the issue of the presence of the author as a developing rather than a fixed concept within Johnson's oeuvre, and attempt to trace the evolution of this aesthetic trait in accordance to the challenges posed by each specific novel. It will also be interesting, in this respect, to focus precisely on those critical moments in which Johnson appears paradoxically to distance himself from his principles of faithfulness and authenticity, developing a problematic relationship with his own dogmas and accumulating ideological tensions which have a visible impact on the novels themselves.

The point of departure for a thorough analysis of this fundamental aspect of Johnson's production, however, cannot but coincide with the first novel, *Travelling People*. Despite the unripe

[8] Id., *Albert Angelo*, p. 167.
[9] *Ivi*.
[10] Id., *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 22.

character of Johnson's ideological output at this stage, and the compromises he was somewhat forced to accept in the process of composition and editing, this text undoubtedly coincides with the origin of many of Johnson's most peculiar traits, which will become more recognisable and articulated in his subsequent writing. As regards the issue of the presence of the author, moreover, and the possibility for the novel to contain and express directly the truth of his own experience, the ambiguity and the paradoxes contained in this text can be more revealing than any clearly stated set of principles or crystalised dogmas.

I. "Part truth part fiction": Travelling People

As already mentioned, from the outset Johnson developed a penchant for employing in his writing true facts taken directly from his own life experiences, as well as for featuring friends, family and acquaintances as characters in his stories. This is already in many ways detectable in his debut novel *Travelling People*, even though at this stage Johnson's ideologic output is still a work in progress, and the epiphanic outburst of *Alberto Angelo*'s "Disintegration" section is still far on the horizon. The narrator of *Travelling People* is an omniscient extradiegetic voice which never corresponds to that of the protagonist Henry Henry, let alone to Johnson himself as a recognizable person outside the textual world. The presence of a material author, if at all, is here simply gestured at metaphorically in the obtrusiveness of the narrating voice, which is the voice of an author always conscious of the story under development, constantly making comments and addressing the reader directly, making no secret of the fact that what is being read is the product of the machinations of a very specific mind.

Travelling People, indeed, opens with a prelude in which the narrator immediately establishes a direct connection with the reader, exposing the chain of reasoning that has led him to choose the novel as "the form of my allegedly full-time literary sublimations[11]", also foregrounding, rather openly, the metafictional quality of the narration:

> I concluded that it was not only permissible to expose the mechanism of a novel, but by so doing I should come nearer to reality and truth […] Pursuing this thought, I realized that it would be desirable to have interludes between my chapters in which I could stand back, so to speak, from my novel, and talk about it with the reader, […] without any question of destroying the reader's suspension of disbelief, since such suspension was not to be attempted[12].

[11] B.S. Johnson, *Travelling People*, Constable, London 1963, p. 11.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

As can be evinced by the above passage, a certain obsession for truth is already part of Johnson's method at the earliest stages of his writing, indissolubly – and rather paradoxically – intertwined with the array of convention-breaking devices he constantly employs. Behind the choice of this kind of narrating voice for *Travelling People*, however, there is not so much the intention of signaling the existence of B.S. Johnson as the material author behind the novel, as will happen in much of his future writing: the aim, here, seems to be rather that of exposing the novel as an artifact by presenting the figure of a fictional author, a sort of additional character who incarnates Johnson's own function in the text by commenting and manipulating the various elements of which the narration is made.

This device is after all very much in the tradition of Laurence Sterne and the early Beckett, Johnson's chief inspirations at this point of his career. In this respect, the abundance of references to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* from the very first pages of this novel is no coincidence at all: the fact, for instance, that in the incipit the narrator refers to his being "seated comfortably in a wood and wickerwork chair of eighteenth century Chinese manufacture[13]" has been seen by some critics as an allusion to Sterne's novel and its period of composition[14]. A discourse on the subject of literary digressions follows at short distance[15], and reference is later made to Henry Henry's parents in terms of their "Shandean fixation with economy in nomenclature[16]". To these elements, of course, one must add the more obvious device of the insertion of black and grey pages to signal the state of sleep, loss of consciousness and death of one of Johnson's characters, which is an open reference to the use of black or marble pages in *Tristram Shandy*[17].

With regard to Beckett, a clear allusion to *Murphy* can be found in the minimalistic, point-for-point description of Henry in Interlude One, which immediately reminds one of the introduction of the character of Celia in Beckett's text[18]; not to speak of the description of Henry's mind in the concluding chapters of Johnson's work, which is manifestly modelled on the exposition of Murphy's mind in the notorious "Chapter Five" of the eponymous novel[19]. Chapter Two of the initial draft of

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[13] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[14] See Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface: The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2005, p. 87.

[15] "My novel would have clear notice, one way or another, of digressions, so that the reader might have complete freedom of choice in whether or not he would read them" (B.S. Johnson, *Travelling People*, p. 12.). This passage establishes a clear if implicit dialogue with *Tristram Shandy* and its peculiar use of digressions as a method of composition. The reader will perhaps remember the "chapter on digressions" in Sterne's novel: "Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; – they are the life, the soul of reading! – take them out of this book, for instance, – you might as well take the book along with them" (Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767), Wordsworth, Ware 2009, p. 48).

[16] B.S. Johnson, *Travelling People*, p. 23.

[17] See L. Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, pp. 23; 155-156. Commenting retrospectively on his own work, Johnson maintains that he developed Sterne's device further in *Travelling People*: "Most obvious of my debts was to the black pages of *Tristram Shandy*, but I extended the device beyond Sterne's simple use of it to indicate a character's death" (B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 22).

[18] See S. Beckett, *Murphy* (1938), Picador, London 1982, p. 10.

[19] Towards the end of the novel, the following description is provided of Henry's mind: "Diagrammatically, Henry's idea of truth was a sphere, perfect, inviolate, in which he existed; his recent travelling had shown him that this sphere existed

Travelling People, later expunged from the final version, bears even more evident traces of Johnson's implication with Beckett and the "Irish school" in general[20]. The manuscript in itself presents a style that is much more Shandean in its nature than the published version, being more digressive and richer in schemes, maps and other sorts of graphic embellishments.

The obtrusive presence of the author of *Travelling People*, then, can be allegedly imputed mainly to Johnson's aesthetic porousness at this unripe stage of his development as a writer, and to his proneness to absorb the traits of his major literary influences: it is not, it would seem, the consequence of an aesthetic principle devised and elaborated on his own after long elucubrations[21]. One feels inclined to agree with Frank Lissauer, one of Johnson's closest correspondents of the late Fifties, when, upon reading some early extracts of *Travelling People*, he comments: "This novel, being your first, is quite a ritual, an exorcism of all influences one by one [...]. You seem to say: here am I, novelist: look I have read all worthwhile novels and throw in my talents with the Irish school[22]".

There are, however, some elements of originality in this first literary effort which are already indicative of some distinctive traits of Johnson's subsequent production, especially with regard to his concern for the interference of the outside world into the dimension of the text. A recurrent aspect of Johnson's writing, which is also detectable in *Travelling People*, consists for instance in the recurse to precise architectural descriptions and hyper-realistic renderings of the settings in which his characters act and move. Johnson often places his characters in settings which are easily recognizable by the reader as existing in reality, most of these referring to areas, streets or venues of London; such elements, in their turn, are part of a shared intersubjective reality which extends outside the textual world, or which inversely intrudes into it from without. Johnson, in other words, establishes in his novels some direct lines of connection between the abstraction of the text and the materiality of the outer world, so that these two dimensions appear at times to overlap, and the very distinction that is usually made between them in literary texts is questioned.

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in space, in another element which was limitless, not truth itself, but not antithetical to it either. He still retained its original conception unaltered, but now had a context in which to place it" (B.S. Johnson, *Travelling People*, p. 297.). Any reader cognisant of Beckett's work will inevitably detect in this passage an open reference to the description of Murphy's mind: "Murphy's mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without [...]" (S. Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 63).

[20] Suffice to think, for instance, of the chapter which was to be set in Dublin, later expunged from the final version, which is highly evocative of Beckett's style in *Murphy* as well as of the questions-and-answers chapter in Joyce's *Ulysses* (see note 7 on p. 59 for further detail).

[21] Many sources clearly attest that Johnson was openly conscious of the influence of Beckett at this stage. One may quote in this connection a number of entries in Johnson's journals of the late Fifties and early Sixties in which he refers to Beckett as a possible model for his own intended literary projects. In one such entry, Johnson notes, for instance, thinking of a possible idea for a book: "Novel idea: Beckett-style applied to 1956-58 material?" (Notebook 5, started 3.06.1960, B.S. Johnson's Archive, British Library, London). In a letter of the same period, his correspondent Frank Lissauer replies in the following way to Johnson's alleged intention to take inspiration from *Murphy* for his first novel: "I agree that *Murphy* is a very tempting book to imitate" (Frank Lissauer, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 15.01.1959, B.S. Johnson's Archive).

[22] F. Lissauer, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 27.11.1961, B.S. Johnson's Archive.

Paramount examples of this treatment of the setting in *Travelling People* can be appreciated, for instance, in the lengthy architectural description of Euston station in chapter three[23], or, more interestingly, in a previous scene in which Henry sets out to reach the same destination via the London Underground. In these pages, Johnson presents the stream of his hero's thoughts, in which his various considerations and reasonings are constantly interrupted by impressions caused by visual stimuli and other kinds of contacts he entertains with the surrounding space. The chapter begins with the words "*MONUMENT FOR BANK*[24]", as Henry is reading the instructions to reach Bank station on the Northern line. This sight inevitably stirs his imagination, and he begins to bend words and images treading mental itineraries of his own: "Monument for Bank? A frock-suited Victorian holding the reins of commerce from an open carriage borne upon a sea of downtrodden hands?[25]". Many such examples of interactions impacting on his imagination ensue, as Henry makes his journey from stop to stop until he mistakenly alights at King's Cross (owing to his extemporaneous infatuation for a girl who was seated close to him[26]). The text, in its turn, reproduces the various instructions, indications and advertisements that Henry meets along his path.

Interestingly here, Johnson presents these intruding details of the setting not merely in a descriptive vein, and not only in order to re-create an atmosphere of greater authenticity. More crucially, he does so in such a way that they abruptly interrupt the flow of Henry's thoughts at various junctures, giving the idea of an external dimension intruding into the text and constantly reasserting its tangible presence to both the reader and the character. Such instances as the following can thus be observed in the passages set in the tube: "Probably has a sickening name like Lover's Dreamboat or Snaffle. But since it… *MOORGATE*[27]". Or again: "The Stromboli sounds like a rich man's youth club. Or an upperclass clipjoint. I must polish my educated conversation if I'm… *OLD STREET*[28]", and many other similar examples.

In a couple of occurrences, the intrusion of the setting becomes even more visually evident: this happens, for instance, every time the graphic structure of the page is disrupted and modified to accommodate this external textual content as it is allegedly received by Henry's perceptions. It thus happens that an indication with the list of stops of a given line occurs in the middle of one line and is rendered vertically, mimicking the way the stops are written on the actual sign:

[23] See B.S. Johnson, *Travelling People*, pp. 51-52.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[25] *Ivi*.
[26] "Here! What am I doing at King's Cross? My train goes from Euston! I must have followed the girl. No. I got up first. Then it must have been telepathy. She's influencing my mind!" (*ibid.*, p. 42).
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Can't understand really how people are afraid of
getting caught in them. *Platform 4 Moorgate*
Old Street
Angel
King's Cross
Euston[29]

On other occasions, the iconic adverts found along the tube escalators are reported diagonally, so as to reproduce the way they are experienced by Henry as he ascends from platform to ground level, or when he vice-versa descends:

I Married the Virgin
Mary. The passionate
Story of Joseph, the
Earthly Step-Father of
Our Lord. Starring…

Fineform Foundation
Fillets for Successful
Stately Sylphs who…

Guinness is Good for…

Henry, yes, very[30].

On such occasions, establishing a *modus operandi* that will often recur in his writing, Johnson creates a literary device in order to signal the tangible presence of an intersubjective and easily identifiable external reality, whose very tangibility has to be signified by employing all the means the novelist has at his disposal within the medium he is working with. It is precisely for this reason that the intrusion of such reality into Johnson's texts always inevitably creates distortions, interruptions and other visual effects within the narration, thus achieving, in the intentions of the author, a sort of greater and deeper realism than any straightforward form of narration could ever hope to reproduce.

As regards the issue of the author's presence in the text – which is all part of the same plan, consisting in trying and opening the doors of the novel to the external world in its entirety –, *Travelling People* functions at a much subtler and perhaps less conscious level than any other of Johnson's subsequent novels. First of all, Johnson's personality and his integrity as an historical individual are split here into two equally fictional figures: that of the obtrusive author, on the one hand, and that of the protagonist Henry Henry on the other. These two aspects are neatly distinct, despite being both direct emanations of his persona, completing each other and, in many respects, even competing against each other. A certain degree of inner division and multiplicity of consciences is after all made explicit since the very opening of the novel, when the narrator states his intention to

[29] *Ibid*., p. 37
[30] *Ibid*, p. 36.

insert “interludes between my chapters in which I could stand back, so to speak, from my novel, and talk about it with the reader, or with those parts of myself which might hold differing opinions[31]”.

This is precisely what happens especially in the central diaristic section of *Travelling People*, which includes a personal journal attributed to Henry. This device gives Johnson the opportunity to present the direct, unfiltered voice of his protagonist, even though Henry’s version of the facts is repeatedly checked, accrued and modified by the interventions of the narrator, who arrogates to himself the right to suspend Henry’s discourse by inserting various interludes which he aptly calls “interruptions”. Henry affirms for instance, in the entry related to Saturday, August 24th that he “[m]issed a day yesterday. Nothing happened in any case[32]”, but the narrator feels the urge to correct him slightly later, stating that “Henry was unable to find words to describe the events of the night of Saturday, August 24th; I am under no such difficulty, however, and feel it no less than a duty to record what happened[33]”. In other similar circumstances, the narrator expands on Henry’s words by adding information about his past, his upbringing and other details regarding the origin of his “prejudices, predilections and proclivities[34]”.

Such dynamics show how the character of Henry Henry – despite being able to speak through what is apparently his own voice at different junctures in the novel – is always ultimately subjected to the manipulations of the narrator: it is thus the latter, rather than the protagonist, that the reader is led to interpret as a direct emanation of Johnson’s persona, as a less mediated expression, that is, of the author’s point of view. If the figure of the fictional author can be more directly and easily ascribed to Johnson, it is nonetheless Henry Henry who plays the role of chief vehicle for everything that happens in the novel, the real centre from which the narration is developed and by which it is ultimately justified. It thus becomes important to underline, in this respect, that many episodes and interpersonal relations that Johnson presents via the character of Henry are in fact extremely faithful to some experiences the author really had in his own life.

Surely the truth of many scenes, characters and events featured in *Travelling People* cannot possibly be assessed by the reader, unless they have some previous knowledge of Johnson’s life; upon publication of this novel, in any case, the correspondences between Johnson’s fiction and his biography must have been evident enough for the people who knew him best to easily detect them, and to consequently see in Henry Henry a fictional reflection of the author behind the text. Frank Lissauer, for instance, to whom Johnson sent parts of *Travelling People* for evaluation as he was writing it, reacted in this way when he read the very first draft of the opening chapters:

[31] *Ibid*., p. 12.
[32] *Ibid*., p. 163.
[33] *Ibid*., p. 171.
[34] *Ibid*., p. 155.

> First of all, I am doubly curious to see the continuation because you are describing such recent events: will he go backwards and hop about in the time scale, or will he begin to invent scenes and episodes? Secondly, my very recognition of the events makes it difficult to judge them, or rather judge them in this form, as novel[35].

This response only confirms the level of inter-penetration of fact and fiction in *Travelling People*, as well as the recognisability of the autobiographical material that Johnson has included in this text. The difference with much of Johnson's future writing, however, is that in this particular case no claim for the absolute truth of such material is made: on the contrary, numerous sources suggest that, at this stage of his writerly development, Johnson had contrasting ideas as to the legitimacy of employing unmediated autobiographical content in his own fiction. He was evidently pondering on this very issue while planning the first version of the novel, after his return from the first of his two experiences in North Wales[36]. One remark to be found among his personal notes of this period would indeed appear to refer to this very matter, offering a tentative solution to settle the dilemma, at least temporarily: "In a sense one can only write about what has happened to one; for even in observing something, that thing is in a sense happening to one[37]".

Such recognition, however, that everything one writes is after all a form of autobiography, was evidently not convincing enough for Johnson. Some time after jotting down this note, he must have reacted badly to his friend Lissauer's suggestion that the first part of his novel was so strictly linked with Johnson's recent experiences that it was difficult for anyone knowing him personally to take it as a mere product of his imagination. Johnson's allegedly reproachful letter, which is not available to us today, prompted in any case the following quite telling reply by Lissauer:

> Thank you for the latest chapter of the novel […]. I cannot understand why you should be so shirty at the suggestion of its being autobiographical; you can hardly do other than write what you know and have experienced, and your ultimate reader will either not know and not want to know about this or he will be a critic who appreciates the truth about most fiction: that it is altered fact. I must confess I look forward to the continuation but for quite the wrong reasons: I want to know just what happened next to <u>you</u> and how you have treated it. And this way of reading does of course lessen the critical value of anything I write[38].

Ironically and paradoxically enough, Lissauer's remarks sound exactly as a rewording of Johnson's own thoughts as he writes them down in his journal. This curious coincidence, if anything, is further evidence of the author's uncertainty and confusion, at this stage of the composition of *Travelling*

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[35] F. Lissauer, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 26.04.1960, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.

[36] Johnson spent two summers in North Wales working as waiter and assistant manager at the Glyn Club of Abersoch – which served as a base for the Stromboli Club of Aberfyllin in *Travelling People*. The first experience took place in August 1959, the second from July to September 1960.

[37] B.S. Johnson, Notebook 4, begun 29.07.1959, B.S. Johnson's Archive. Johnson has written this entry between July 1959 and 3rd June 1960 (date of beginning of the subsequent notebook). Given this time range, in fact, this note might have been written either some weeks before his first stay in Abersoch, during same, or in the months subsequent to his return, before his second stay in July 1960.

[38] Frank Lissauer, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 30.06.1960, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library. Emphasis in the original.

People, with regard to the status of the autobiographical material employed in the novel: should it be at all costs disguised as a product of invention, so as not to be related to the author's personal experiences? Or should he rather be frank with his reader and with himself about it, possibly even exploiting, for dramatic purposes, the very awareness of the novel being deeply autobiographical?

A letter addressed to James Martland – manager of the Glyn club and model for the character of Maurie Bunde –, written between Johnson's two spells in North Wales, introduces another interesting facet to this discussion. In this letter, Johnson is complaining about the sleeping arrangements previously proposed by Martland, stressing the importance that he should be given a room of his own, so that he could work on his novel with all the concentration he needs:

> What I am concerned with is my own work: it is absolutely essential that I have a room all to myself where I can write in peace […] Since it is obvious to you that I am not coming for the money […], you must realize that it is for other reasons that I have agreed to manage Glyn for you this summer. Some of these reasons are: the chance of living in agreeable surroundings where I can write; […]; to work hard at something I enjoyed doing last year; the offchance of picking up any material for my work[39].

On his first experience at Glyn, Johnson had basically accepted the offer so that he could enjoy a paid-for prolongation of his graduation holiday after his return from Dublin[40]. Now that he had gathered enough material to start a novel dealing with that very experience[41], however, the most important thing had become the writing itself. More crucially, Johnson was now beginning to see this prospective return to Abersoch in terms of the opportunity of "picking up" new material he could then deliberately insert in his novel. Life and fiction were thus chasing after each another. Johnson, in other words, was consciously putting himself in a very specific situation, so that he could experience certain things on his own skin and later transfer them into his fiction. This, moreover, is a scheme he repeated subsequently when working at the novel *Trawl*, as will be seen later in this chapter.

Judging especially from the first draft of *Travelling People*, Johnson amply exploited any opportunity he had in Abersoch to observe, register and collect authentic fragments of experience and insert them directly into his fiction. Comparing the archival material related to the novel – comprising personal notes, correspondence, leaflets, and other documents gathered by the author – and the text

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[39] B.S. Johnson, Letter to James Martland, 17.05.1960, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.

[40] Johnson had gone on a holiday to Dublin on 16th July 1959. At the end of the month, he wrote to a friend of his: "I am running very short of money; either I have to take a job here in a week or so (and they're very difficult to get), or I return home about the middle of August; or, a third alternative, I take a job I have been offered in North Wales next week until the end of August" (B.S. Johnson, Letter to Z. Ghose, 31.07.1959, in V. Guignery (ed.), *The B. S. Johnson – Zulfikar Ghose Correspondence*, p. 57).

[41] After the first summer in Abersoch, Johnson wrote to Zulfikar Ghose: "I have done very little work here, except gather material: I now have enough, collected in a month, for a second novel: the first not yet being written, though" (B.S. Johnson, Letter to Z. Ghose, 7.09.1959, *ibid.*, p. 67.). Retrospectively, Johnson would write in his journals in 1961: "Just as one gains strength in summer to last the winter: so in summer (last 2) I have taken enough memories (partic. of countryside) to see me through the winter in grey London" (Notebook 5, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library).

itself, it is indeed sometimes difficult to discern the differences between the reality of Johnson's experiences at Glyn and their fictional transfiguration set at the Stromboli club, with the two sources often perfectly overlapping down to the minutest detail. Certainly helped by the composite structure chosen for the novel, Johnson has accommodated in *Travelling People* a number of letters he really wrote to friends and acquaintances before and during his stay in Abersoch, as well as reproductions and descriptions of documents, brochures and leaflets related to events held at the original Glyn club, and of course many episodes and characters that were part of his experiences there. The authenticity of many of these elements can easily be proved by Johnson's own accounts in his correspondence and by the photographs he personally took in North Wales.

To list all individual cases of such correspondences between reality and fiction in *Travelling People* would be a long and perhaps pointless job. It might however be worth it to consider at least some of the most interesting cases, so as to shed some further light on Johnson's position with regard to truth and authenticity at this early stage of his writing. One such occurrence, for instance, is to be found in Henry's letter to Margaret, on pages 68-69 of the first draft[42]. Here Henry, recently arrived at the Stromboli club, is telling his friend Margaret everything about his journey and his first impressions of the destination. In the opening of the letter, retained also in the final version, he reassures the interlocutor about the beauty of the place: "Sorry to disappoint you […] but this place turns out not to be the cesspool you hoped it would be: in fact, it's all and more the brochure promised – the Garden of Gorgeous 'ydrangeas *is* lovely, there *is* a marvellous scenery all around, and the Loggia *is* romantic[43]". A report of Henry's "most appalling journey[44]" from Euston to Pwllheli ensues, to be completed by detailed descriptions of all the staff working at the Glyn club and – in the draft version – even a couple of drawings, representing a map of the area and of the club's premises, including the disposition of all rooms. This letter, addressed in fiction to either Margaret or Robert according to the version, is in fact an almost verbatim reproduction of a letter Johnson wrote to his friend Joyce Yates on the 27th August 1959: "As you will probably have gathered from the fact that I am not back in London, this is not a Fairy Place; nor yet have they kept me here by main force. It is, in fact, a lot more than the brochure promises: the garden of hydrangeas <u>is</u> glorious: there <u>is</u> a superb view of mountains and sea and islands[45]".

[42] In this first version, Johnson reports a rather long epistolary section – much of which comprises letters he really wrote –, in which the main correspondents are Margaret (characterisation of Joyce, a friend and former lover of his) and Robert (fictional version of a college friend with whom Johnson spent a holiday in Dublin). The character of Margaret, as well as the epistolary section altogether, will be cut out of the final version: only a single letter to Robert will survive in the published version, in which Johnson accommodates part of the contents previously featuring in Henry's letter to Margaret.
[43] B.S. Johnson, *Travelling People*, p. 65. See also *Travelling People*, first draft, p. 68, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[44] *Ivi*.
[45] B.S. Johnson, Letter to Joyce Yates, 27.08.1959, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.

The same details of the train journey, "most appalling" here as well, are then reported, followed by the exact list of staff to be also found in the first draft, only with a change in the names of the characters: "Let me introduce the characters[46]", the real Johnson declares to Joyce, already behaving as if he were the demiurge of a fictional world. Bernard Bradshaw – the man who gave Johnson a lift in Wales when he was trying to reach Dublin, also offering him the job at Glyn – thus becomes Trevor Tuckerson. James Martland, co-manager of the club, becomes Maurie Bunde – apparently, he is "fifty-ish but on a tremendous Back-to-Youth kick[47]" both in fiction and in reality. The pianist, Rita, Bernard's companion, is turned into Mira – "she *ogles* me, to use the right word[48]", comments of her Henry, a behaviour Johnson takes from the real character[49]. Nita becomes Kim[50] – the fact that she "wears an engagement ring out of respect for a fiancé killed in a road accident[51]" recalls an authentic detail of her life. Catherine, "a Welsh wench of sixteen[52]" who reminds Johnson – and Henry – of a character in *Under Milk Wood*, becomes the fifteen-year-old Gwendy in the novel.

As to the brochure of the Stromboli club mentioned at various moments in the novel, it is unsurprisingly modelled on an existing document. In the first version of *Travelling People*, Johnson inserts a detailed description of a publicity leaflet which Trevor had sent Henry in the first chapters:

> It was a single sheet of stiff brown quarto, unfolded, and printed in white. In the centre there were grouped a series of poor and unattractive drawings representing beaches, a river, a house with an open terrace and a loggia, glamorous girls by a pool, and another at a piano. Around this central panel were placed indiscriminate pieces of information and exhortations to visit the Stromboli. On the back was an amateurishly-drawn map giving directions to the club, and a membership application form[53].

This description of the Stromboli coincides with that contained in the original leaflet of the Glyn club, copies of which Johnson kept among his files; the only exceptions – which proverbially confirm the rule of Johnson's obsession with authenticity – are the color of the paper (blue in the original) and

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[46] *Ivi*.
[47] Id., *Travelling People*, p. 66. In the original letter, Martland is described in these terms: "He is about fifty, dresses extremely well, is very handsome, and is desperately trying to behave youthfully – and making a very good job of it" (id., Letter to J. Yates, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library).
[48] Id., *Travelling People*, p. 66.
[49] Johnson describes the real Rita as "a bitch of the first water. […] She is a really nasty type; from the moment I got here, when Bernard's eyes were away from us, or he was otherwise engaged, she would ogle me – yes, ogle, there's no other word for it, however much I wish there was; and whenever she had to pass me in a confined space – when serving at the bar for instance – she would be careful to touch me as much as she could; and don't think this is wishful thinking on my part!" (id. Letter to J. Yates, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library). All these traits of Rita's behaviour are faithfully reported in the course of the novel.
[50] Curiously enough, the real Nita had in fact already undergone some degree of fictionalising manipulation before Johnson met her in Abersoch. As Martland confesses to Johnson in a letter: "Actually Nita's name was Florence but I christened her Nita to rhyme with Rita" (J. Martland, Letter to B.S. Johnson, unknown date, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library).
[51] Id., *Travelling People*, p. 66. In the original letter: "I discovered that her fiancé was killed in an air crash, and that she wears the ring out of respect for his memory" (id., Letter to J. Yates, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library).
[52] *Ivi*.
[53] Id., *Travelling People*, first draft, pp. 53-54, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.

the position of the application form (which on the actual leaflet is squeezed in on the front, together with all the other information).

Several other interesting overlappings of fact and fiction are to be found in the cinematic sequence concerning the Stromboli's gala night. The long scene contained in the novel is actually a patchwork of events Johnson really witnessed across his two sojourns at the Glyn club: a publicity card suggests for example that a gala night was held on 22nd August 1959 – "with buffet supper, champagne ad lib., bonfire, omelette making competition, fireworks, fun[54]" –, while another refers to a Grand Barbecue night on the 27th August 1960, promising "food grilled on the terrace, games and competitions[55]". In a letter to Martland, moreover, Johnson discusses his ideas and suggestions for the summer of 1960, proposing to launch either three or two gala nights across the summer and insisting on the strategic importance of putting up a fireworks show on the opening event: "It might be a good idea to have some at the beginning of the season, […] for publicity – it would let everyone for miles around know that we are open again[56]" (in the novel, an incident is reported involving some rockets fired by Henry during the evening, which leads to an exaggerated statement being written by a reporter who was present at the gala[57]).

The pizza-making competition, which represents one of the major highlights of the night, is an almost perfect replica of the real omelette-making competition which took place at Glyn on 22nd August 1959: Johnson even kept an original leaflet containing the detailed rules of the competition, which he reproduced down to the minutest details in the novel, with only a few very minor changes[58]. If this evidence were not enough, one may also add that some pictures related to the gala scenes in the novel already existed, in a way, long before the novel was even written: Johnson's took photographs of the aforementioned gala night, so that the actual unveiling of the statue described in the novel, or the guests of the Glyn club, well-dressed and gathered around the pool in the garden, can actually be appreciated in all their authenticity by delving into Johnson's papers[59].

Fact and fiction appear thus to be intricately interconnected in *Travelling People*, with the microcosm of Glyn providing Johnson with a unique setting which already looked like the product of a novelist's mind before he as much as thought about translating it into fiction[60]. However, despite

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[54] Glyn Club publicity leaflet, 22.08.1959, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[55] Glyn Club publicity leaflet, 27.08.1960, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[56] B.S. Johnson, Letter to J. Martland, 25.05.1960, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[57] See id. *Travelling People*, pp. 94-95; 123-124.
[58] See *ibid.*, p. 92.
[59] In a scene in the novel, a "plump lady" is portrayed as falling at some point in the pool (*ibid.*, pp. 94-95). In a letter to Johnson, Martland refers to something similar having happened at Glyn: "Reg. Girl who fell into the pool. No. She was just trying for a little publicity I think." (J. Martland, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 13.08.1960). One of Johnson's pictures, moreover, shows a fully-dressed girl sitting by the pool with her clothes completely drenched, while another guy is pouring more water on her by employing one of the long-handled pans presumably used in the omelette competition (at least the mandatory use of such pans is clearly mentioned on the sheet reporting the competition's rules).
[60] Paradoxically enough, a reviewer once described the Stromboli as "an unlikely club in the Lleyn Peninsula", since he ignored the actual existence of the original club, strange and improbable though it may sound, from which Johnson took

the numberless elements taken from his own experience, the author certainly resorts to imagination in re-elaborating of all these life fragments into a novelistic form. The notion of "inventing", of adding layers of falsification to the truth of his own experience, was at this stage not as disturbing for Johnson as it would turn out to be in his subsequent writing – a 1961 note found among Johnson's working papers recites for instance: "Analyse exactly what I want this character to be; then work out how to say it by drawing on experience or 'inventing'[61]". For example, the fact alone that Johnson felt obliged to cover up any references to original places and individuals, from the characters to the venue of the Glyn/Stromboli to the area itself (the real Abersoch is substituted with the fictional Aberfyllin, with only general references to the Lleyn Peninsula being maintained) is in itself indicative of Johnson's reticence in pursuing a form of complete transparency in this novel. As already mentioned, this reticence is to be imputed to Johnson's insecurity and incomplete ideological development at this stage, as well as to his position as emergent writer, which inevitably made him more susceptible to external pressures, such as the will of agents and publishers, or his concern about captivating as large an audience as possible.

The influential interventions of an agent – George Greenfield – and of Richard Sadler, editorial director at Constable, for instance, are the chief causes behind the definitive form of *Travelling People* as the general public knows it today[62]. The revisions that these two individuals more or less imposed on Johnson had a profound impact on the eclectic, erratic, Shandean character of the original version of the novel, transforming it into a more "saleable" and straightforward product[63]. Apart from the merely stylistic aspects involved in such revisions, however, it is interesting to stress the fact that Johnson was persuaded into cutting out much of the authentic material he had initially inserted in the novel, all of which resulted in a final product which, for the sake of its marketability, was more distant from the truth of the author's personal experiences.

Interestingly, the closing lines of Henry's letter to Robert in chapter four can perhaps be read as a veiled reference to the revisions that Johnson was forced to make, albeit these are of course impossible for any common reader to detect: "So: now, mate, you've been put somewhat in the

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inspiration for his novel (see Review of *Travelling People* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Times Literary Supplement", 26.03.1963).

[61] Notebook 5, started 30.06.1960, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.

[62] Greenfield replied to Johnson in the following way after reading the manuscript of *Travelling People*: "I suspect that you have a considerable writing talent but, as the book now stands, its chances of being placed with a publisher are, in my view, negligible. […] If the first hundred or so pages were revised, my feeling is that you would have a novel potentially more saleable" (G. Greenfield, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 31.10.1961, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library). In a subsequent letter, Greenfield notifies Johnson about Sadler's reaction to the reading of the manuscript: "I am very glad to tell you that Richard Sadler, the Editorial Director of Constable, has telephoned me. […] There are several fairly minor alterations he would like you to make to the existing text and, if you are prepared to tackle these, he has told me that he will definitely make a firm offer of publication for the novel" (G. Greenfield, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 24.07.1962, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library). It goes without saying that Johnson eventually consented to all these suggested revisions.

[63] A detailed list of these modifications, at least those suggested by Greenfield, can be found in Johnson's archive, in the form of a sheet attached to the first draft of *Travelling People*. This document is dated 22.11.1961.

pickchah. Of course, there's a great deal I've left out, and it's not in any sort of chronological order: a sort of partly-organized chaos in defiance of the space-time continuum instituted for our guidance[64]". It is indeed tempting to see this reference to the "space-time continuum instituted for our guidance" as a metaphor for the homogeneous and straightforward models imposed on the writer by the literary industry, with the author tending instead towards a looser and more heterogeneous form, a "partly-organized chaos" capable of reproducing the fragmentariness of experience. Moreover, if Johnson seemed at first satisfied with the result obtained after the conspicuous cuttings and modifications made on his agent's and publisher's request[65], in later years he appears to have considerably changed his attitude towards such external pressure on the organisation of his material. As he writes retrospectively in 1973: "I am always sceptical about writers who claim to be writing for an identifiable public. […] No, apart from the disaster of *Travelling People* I write perforce for myself, and the satisfaction has to be almost all for myself[66]".

Apart from these tangible external pressures on the young Johnson, a certain inveterate uncertainty about the status and the feasibility of truth within the novel form is nonetheless remarkably detectable in the text of *Travelling People*, as well as in Johnson's notes and theoretical pronouncements of this period. One crucial, apparently epiphanic passage in the final pages of the novel perfectly encapsulates all the ambiguities of Johnson's position at this immature stage of his writing:

> He now realized the existence of an added dimension to truth. Diagrammatically, Henry's idea of truth was a sphere, perfect, inviolate, in which he existed; his recent travelling had shown him that this sphere existed in space, in another element which was limitless, not truth itself, but not antithetical to it either. He still retained its original conception unaltered, but now had a context in which to place it[67].

What does such a passage mean for Johnson? Is it an allusion to the textual dimension as a space apart from reality, in which the author has "limitless" possibilities for re-arranging the elements of his own experience, creating new meanings, and adding a further layer to them? And thus augmenting, if nor partly falsifying, the truth? Or does it rather suggest the possibility, as he will explore in his subsequent writing, of conceiving the novel as a direct extension of reality? A dimension in which this reality can be placed and observed by a different angle, without however

[64] B.S. Johnson, *Travelling People*, pp. 72-3.
[65] In a 1963 article, Johnson recounts all the passages and the dynamics that led to the final version of *Travelling People*, and confesses that Greenfield's and Sadler's suggestions resulted in an overall improvement of the novel, despite describing the process of editorial revision in terms of cutting out his own organs: "To my astonishment, *Travelling People* is a better book for being without its kidneys as well as without its liver. And I'm sure you don't find many authors saying that the surgery suggested by their agents and publishers results in a better book". At the end of the same article, Johnson even admits enthusiastically: "I think the best agent in London found me the best publisher in London". (Id., *The Travails of* Travelling People, in J. Coe, P. Tew, J. Jordan (eds.), *Well Done God!*, p. 370).
[66] Id., *Aren't You Rather Young…*, pp. 28-29.
[67] Id., *Travelling People*, p. 297.

ceasing to be real? At least for the Johnson of this period, the answer seems to lie in-between these two perhaps not so opposite poles. The importance of invention, and the somehow salvific power of imaginative creation, are after all highlighted in another crucial passage of the novel, in which Johnson, through his character Henry, seems to reflect metaphorically on the novelist's power and opportunity to re-define himself, through the creation of textual projections of his persona:

> Here I have found something of the peace I was looking for […]. I seem to have found it by creating a new character for myself based on what good I could see in my old one: that is to say, these people know nothing of my past, they know me only by what I have done here and by what I have *chosen* to tell them of my past. This has worked wonderfully, tough it has meant ruthless suppression of certain parts of myself[68].

Thus, Johnson seems to be aware of some "ruthless suspension of certain parts" of himself in the incomplete, fragmented translation of his own identity from the reality of his experience into the limitless, imaginative space of the text. To discourage any neat and facile interpretation of the content of *Travelling People* as a direct reflection of the author's biography, Johnson changed practically all names and references to the external world (at least with regard to North Wales) and, most importantly, fragmented himself into the two parallel personalities of Henry Henry and the extradiegetic narrator. In the same way, he did not altogether renounce the recurse to a fictive re-elaboration of the authentic material freely taken from his own life, treating the novel as an "added dimension to truth", that is, not antithetical to reality, but certainly other and separate from it.

It was predictable, after all, that the compromise represented by *Travelling People* would eventually turn out to be totally unsatisfactory for the truth-obsessed Johnson of the subsequent novels. From *Albert Angelo* onwards, Johnson would choose to discard any middle-way solutions and enter his textual world with the "enormous totality[69]" of himself, aiming at the collapse of any partition between reality and text. As to his first, rather timid literary experiment, he would later affirm: "Since *Travelling People* is part truth part fiction it now embarrasses me and I will not allow it to be reprinted[70]".

II. Albert Angelo*, or the "enormous totality" of the author*

Everything that Johnson had rather timidly and tentatively set out to do in *Travelling People* is carried out with much more force and conviction in *Albert Angelo*, which also leads to deeper and

[68] *Ibid.*, pp. 71-2.
[69] Id., *Albert Angelo*, p. 105.
[70] Id., *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 22.

more significant consequences for Johnson's ideological and artistic development. *Albert Angelo* is the novel in which Johnson formulates – and in fact dramatises – the epiphanic choice to discard any form of literary falsification in exchange for absolute honesty, with the intention to express the truth of himself and of his own experience as directly and genuinely as possible in the novel form. In 1973, Johnson would comment retrospectively[71] that "I really discovered what I should be doing with *Albert Angelo* (1964) where I broke through the English disease of the objective correlative to speak truth directly if solipsistically in the novel form, and heard my own small voice[72]".

This resolution about being absolutely honest, however, is not so much a starting point from which the novel originates and develops, as a painful realisation reached at the end of a long process of trial and error. An altogether new method suggests now itself to the author which apparently invalidates everything that came before, and which he seems to consider the basis of all his subsequent writing. In the novel, this epiphany takes a rather simple, though stunningly effective form, materialising itself in a device which causes a long-lasting shock in the reader, and which is so absurdly prominent and momentous as to make it natural to interpret all the other elements of the narration as somehow related to it, or at least going in the same symbolic direction.

As already mentioned, *Albert Angelo* is chiefly about an architect manqué who is forced by circumstances to earn his leaving as a supply teacher, filling in vacancies in various London schools and managing one difficult class after another[73]. Using a kaleidoscopic *Ulysses*-like technique and an impressive variety of typographical and narrative devices, Johnson creates and sustains, for a good 163 pages, the illusion of an autonomous identity for the protagonist, the namesake Albert Albert – whose "Albertness" is thus ironically emphasised[74]. Such illusion, however, is abruptly and violently broken when, towards the very end of the novel, as Albert is sitting at his desk and considering to do some architectural work, the author openly intrudes into the textual discourse, suddenly freezing the narration at mid-sentence with a liberating cry of frustration:

> Albert lazed at his drawingboard before the great window. Nearly seven weeks' summer holiday lay ahead of him in which to work; and he could not work today, always tomorrow was the day he was going to work. Part of the trouble, he thought, was that he lived and loved to live in an area of absolute architectural rightness, which inhibited his own originality, and resulted in him being— OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING![75].

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[71] This intention was in fact already vivid in the author's mind since the very compositional stage of *Albert Angelo*, as a huge note to himself, which Johnson designed to keep fixed in front of him at his working desk, seems unequivocally to confirm: "Absolute honesty in the confrontation of experience" (*Albert Angelo* working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library). Another similar note from this period, incidentally, testifies for the crucial importance that Johnson ascribed to *Albert Angelo* in his process of artistic and ideological development: "Nothing but NOTHING is more important than S.A." (the novel was initially to be entitled *Samuel Angelo*).

[72] B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 22.

[73] The experiences recounted in the novel are of course a reflection of Johnson's own life, referred to the period shortly after graduation in which he sustained himself by supply-teaching as he was moving his first steps in the literary world, but was not yet established as a professional writer.

[74] "Albert Albert, to emphasize his Albertness, hisness, itness, uniqueness" (B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 169).

[75] *Ibid.*, p. 163.

The chapter ends with this unexpected intrusion, and a new section named "Disintegration" subsequently opens, in which a first heartfelt, breathless explanation is rashly thrown in – or up? – for the reader to digest:

> fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing im my hero though what a useless appellation my first character then im trying to say something about me through him albert an architect when whats the point in covering up covering up covering over pretending pretending i can say anything through him that is anything I would be interested in saying[76].

The whole edifice of the novel is thus made to collapse, for the author clearly feels now the urgent need to enter his own novel with the "enormous totality[77]" of himself, and to communicate directly to his audience: not as a fictional projection, nor a textual reflection of himself, but as the true unmediated B.S. Johnson, in his own real skin and bones. To enhance this sense of total and all-encompassing intrusion, Johnson even makes some clear references to the material surroundings from which he is physically writing, namely the view enjoyed from his working desk, in the flat located at 34 Claremont Square, London N1, Johnson's actual address at the time: "I want to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality about sitting here writing looking out across Claremont Square trying to say something about the writing[78]". It is as if he intended to include in his own novel not only himself, but somehow the entire world he is inhabiting, as a myriad of other elements in the novel equally suggest.

This urgent need for truth and immediacy, moreover, obviously stands in opposition to any form of fabulation, for "if I start falsifying in telling stories then I move away from the truth of my truth which is not good, not good by any manner of [means][79]". This conundrum also regards the recourse to any textual lieutenant to take the author's place in what should be his own story: the author, being a poet, cannot indeed possibly be replaced by the figure of an architect manqué, which is doubly distant from the truth he feels compelled to convey. As the author-intruder explains to his reader:

> look, I'm trying to tell you something of what I feel about being a poet in a world where only poets care anything real about poetry, through the objective correlative of an architect who has to earn his living as a teacher. this device you cannot have failed to see creaking, ill-fitting in many places, for architects manqués can earn livings very nearly connected with their art, and

[76] *Ibid.*, p. 167. I am here retaining the original form of the text, with its lack of punctuation or upper-case letters, which is all part of the author's intention to convey the urgency and immediacy of the discourse in this passage.
[77] *Ibid.*, p. 105.
[78] *Ibid.*, p. 167.
[79] *Ibid.*, p. 168. This sentence in the novel appears in a truncated form, ending with "any manner of". The whole version of the sentence, though easily guessed by the reader, is to be found among Johnson's notes (*Albert Angelo* working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library).

> no poet has ever lived by his poetry, and architecture has a functional aspect quite lacking in poetry, and, simply, architecture is just not poetry[80].

There is thus frustration, on the one hand, about the growing awareness of the inadequacy of such objective correlative to convey the existential agony of the writer, and, on the other, a sense of failure almost amounting to sinful guilt, for having resorted to falsification in trying to give a true account of himself and his own experience. All this has been accumulated throughout the narration until the point in which the tension created has become simply too much to sustain. The whole project of the novel as it stood has failed: it has to be called off, dismantled. As the author points out, a huge part of this failure derives from the incommensurability of the chaos of experience, which any narration tries mistakenly and impossibly to organise in some pattern of order which always necessarily implies falsification, that is, a distancing from the truth of the experience being told:

> Faced with the enormous detail, vitality, size, of this complexity, of life, there is a great temptation for a writer to impose his own pattern, an arbitrary pattern which must falsify, cannot do anything other than falsify; or he invents, which is pure lying. Looking back and imposing a pattern to come to terms with the past must be avoided[81].

The latter remark, despite being referred by the narrator of *Albert Angelo* to what has been done previously in the novel, sounds in fact as a direct reproach that Johnson addresses to himself with regard to the method adopted in his first novel *Travelling People*: it appears indeed as a downright retraction of the principle annotated by Johnson in his journals, that is: "Analyse exactly what I want this character to be; then work out how to say it by drawing on experience or 'inventing'[82]".

If the recourse to textual lieutenants, as well as the falsification or covering up of true documents and facts, was an intrinsic dynamic in the composition of *Travelling People*, the same method is applied in *Albert Angelo* with a deliberately deceitful intent: that is, only to be deconstructed and exposed by the author himself as a principle no longer tenable in the writing of his future novels. The very act of suggesting a thesis, and then seemingly carrying out this thesis only to invalidate it altogether in the end, has thus for Johnson a sort of cathartic, exorcising aspect. By no chance does the narrator speak about the complexity of existence as something he is "trying to reproduce, exorcise[83]": as such, the act of abandoning his omniscient seat and leaving his project unfinished is a gesture towards the incommunicability of experience, a concession to the chaos intrinsic in all things and which cannot be mustered, an ultimate surrender, on the author's part, of any attempt at imposing illusory and impossible patterns of order onto his material.

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[80] B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 168.
[81] *Ibid*., p. 170.
[82] Id., Notebook 5, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[83] Id., *Albert Angelo*, p. 170.

As a logical, though perhaps rather extreme consequence of all this, and in accordance with his absolute need for truth, the author-narrator also sets out dismantling, almost point-by-point, various accidents of the plot as they have been previously presented, exposing in detail every manipulation each episode of his real life, each person's name or toponym, have undergone in the process of being worked into the narration. Details about Johnson's actual relationship with the girl amply alluded to in the novel are thus provided and rectified, while previously they were given under cover: "Oh then to talk of Jenny, […] I've had no girl called Jenny, whereas hers was Muriel, which even before I knew her I thought comic, now I hate it, you can't call a girl in a book Muriel, now can you? And not a cripple but an epileptic, he was, her lover, with whom I could not compete, being whole[84]". Johnson's crucial move towards absolute honesty is apparent in passages such as this one, especially if one considers how Johnson, in *Travelling People*, had concealed to the reader practically all references to existing persons and places, each actual correspondence being known only to the author himself, or alternatively to be worked out by a reader with a penchant for archival research.

Johnson took such momentous move in a spirit of new ideological courage at his own risk and peril: it was however obvious that such brutal honesty, openly involving people he knew personally, could lead to some unpleasant consequences for the author, as all acts of brutal honesty usually tend to do. It is known, for instance, that after the publication of *Albert Angelo*, Johnson received a reproachful letter from Muriel's mother, in which the latter accused the author of an excessive clarity of details in the description he had made of his relationship with her daughter, which had caused unpleasant frictions in the latter's marriage:

> Well Brian [*sic.*],
> You've had your revenge for any pain or headache Muriel caused you in the past, what now? Did you have to do this to her? Identify her, so that everyone who knew you both could [recognise] her. […] Now [her husband] has read your latest book review in "The Observer" which names her. Muriel had been completely honest and told him of her love affair with you. Not all the details naturally, to some people such things are sacred. He bought the book and believed every word of it, in spite of your lame attempt to water it down in the "Disintegration" the harm was done then. Now he is making her life Hell, is that what you wanted? And to totally destroy her peace of mind. I gather that you have at last found happiness yourself, so the tables are turned. […] I rejoice at your success Brian, but did you have to crucify my child in the way[85].

It is impossible, and certainly out of context here, to assess Johnson's state of mind in relation to such a desperate and perhaps unexpected reaction: personal matters aside, however, as a writer he must have somewhat rejoiced in seeing the power that the truth contained in his novel could exert on the people who read it, especially those who knew him personally. Dynamics such as this, after all, testify Johnson's success in creating a novel that is a direct continuation of the life outside of it – and of the

[84] *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.
[85] Letter to B.S. Johnson, signed "Muriel's mother", 19.11.1964, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.

fact, ultimately, that this truth was no longer outside the novel and separated from it, but crucially contained in it.

Even in *Albert Angelo*, however, the pursuit for absolute truth presents some evident limits and implies dealing with several apparently insurmountable obstacles. To return for example to the "Disintegration" section, after listing "a few instances of the lies[86]" present in the novel, the narrator suddenly stops at one point, advancing the excuse that to carry the process *ad libitum* would turn out to be simply unbearable for any reader: "I could go on and on, through each page, page after page, pointing out the lies, the lies, but it would be so tedious, so tedious[87]". Soon afterwards, however, some more serious difficulties related to this project of achieving a form of absolute truth begin to emerge, revealing some inner dynamics that have little to do with the author's unwillingness to go over every single detail of his account.

First, there is a problem of quantity: to encapsulate the enormous totality of life within a single novel proves to be impossible. At one point, the author affirms resignedly: "And oh but what other material is not now to be worked in![88]". Here, he refers to all the episodes he has been forced to leave out of the main narrative, but which he is able to include eventually in this sort of appendix of discarded narrative threads. Many other passages in *Albert Angelo* show the narrator caught in a similar conundrum, as he deals with the problem of the unmanageable enormity of the experience he would wish but cannot possibly narrate in the novel. As a sign of this all-inclusive tendency, at many junctures Johnson can be found indulging in trivia, adding details and casual descriptions of situations, people and places which turn out to be of little use to the story's general economy.

This happens, for instance, when Albert is summoned to teach in a new school and begins to call the register, listing all the students one by one: pages and pages are thus filled with names of potential characters which will never actually recur again in the novel, and whose relevance to the story as whole, if any, is not at all clear[89]. At other junctures, instead, Johnson gives hyper-realistic accounts of Albert's itineraries through London, reporting as many useless details as he can, seemingly with the sole objective of letting the outside world in:

> You walk out of Percy Circus down past the doctor's surgery. Vernon Baptist Church, rosebushbeds, the public patch with the public seats, traffic, traffic, at the one-way system intersection across Kings Cross Road, the Hansler Arms, Grove Fisheries, Connaught Dairy, Express Dining Rooms, the Northumberland Arms, the sun on Cobden Buildings with their curious half-exposed central stairway and castiron ornament, *Sausage Cases* (The Oppenheimer Casing Co. (U.K.) Ltd.), Caxton Painting Co. (Kings Cross) Ltd., The Susan Lawrence Hostel, the back of the Welsh Chapel, Ladies, Gentlemen, Radios, Launderette, Suits…[90]

[86] B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 172.
[87] *Ibid.*, p. 173.
[88] *Ivi*.
[89] See for instance *ibid.*, pp. 33-37.
[90] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Passages such as this appear to have no immediate content or descriptive value, but rather sound like mere, absurd accumulations of references to an outside world that the author is determined to fit entirely into his novel: it is as though he felt the constant urgency to re-assert his narrative as part of an intersubjective reality which the reader can also experience, the absurdity of such endless accumulations being only the direct consequence of the incommensurable size of that reality.

The solution to this aspect of this ontological conundrum can only be partial and highly subjective: "Faced with the enormous detail, vitality, size, of this complexity, of life, there is a great temptation for a writer to impose his own pattern, an arbitrary pattern which must falsify, cannot do anything other than falsify […] Faced with the enormity of life, all I can do is to present a paradigm of truth to reality as I see it[91]". If, on the one hand, the refuge into solipsism and arbitrariness offers a facile solution to the problem, on the other, Johnson's method of accumulation, imperfect and bound to fail as it necessarily is, reproduces, if not the entirety, at least the quality of the chaos of existence. Johnson's programmatic inconclusiveness – at the level of these single lists as well as of the novel's narrative as a whole – can thus be read as a hyper-realistic attempt to reproduce the enormity and the inconclusiveness of experience itself: in the process, Johnson creates a kind of novel which eschews the linear structures of more conventional fiction, in which every element always has its own peculiar place and significance, to offer instead a completely different readerly experience, based on dispersiveness and fragmentation.

Another side of the issue of truth regards the shifting, everchanging quality of reality itself – "You just can't keep up with it, life[92]", affirms the narrator in this regard. Provided that one manages to remember every detail of one's own experience correctly, that one succeeds in conveying this to the reader, and that the reader understands the message without imposing their own pattern, their own "slightly different idiosyncratic meaning[93]" on it, the ineluctable fact remains that reality is always in constant change. The arbitrary system of references that is used to mediate this reality has thus to be constantly re-arranged, and what is valid at one point may no longer be so at a successive juncture. For instance, in the narrator's words:

> So that's another shifting of reality, in the course of the book I've come to see differently events I believed to be fixed, changed my mind about Muriel […], but who knows what else will have shifted by galleyproof stage, or pageproof stage, or by publication day, or by the time you are reading this? Between writing and galleys, they've cut down some of the trees in Percy Circus, for another instance, taken down the railings, you'll just have to take my word for the description, now, now all I can say is That's how it was, then, that's the truth[94].

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[91] *Ibid*., p. 170.
[92] *Ivi*.
[93] *Ivi*.
[94] *Ibid*., p. 172.

Thus, it would seem that absolute truth in and for itself is not a tenable end for the author to achieve. In some respects, this chimera of truth functions as an ideal towards which Johnson orientates his writing, rather than as the eventual result he intends at all costs to obtain. From the start, the overarching principle at the base of *Albert Angelo* is a form of "absolute honesty in the confrontation of experience[95]", which involves, in spite of all the obvious obstacles and the impossibility of a true and ultimate form of objectivity, an unwavering faithfulness to a very personal version of that truth – "my truth […] my truth to reality[96]".

The great novelty proposed by Johnson is that, despite the intrinsic fallibility of language and the idiosyncratic fallibility of individual narrations of reality, it appears to be still possible to refer to an objective, verifiable reality from within the novel: all the apparently useless references the author makes to this reality to the general detriment of the plot, the attempts he makes at including the materiality of the outside world and the emphasis on his own intruding presence in the text can all be interpreted as the true, ultimate objective of *Albert Angelo*. The context, in other words, and the setting in which all the action takes place seem to have greater importance than the action itself – and the stumbling development of the story, accordingly, does not lead to any sort of harmonic conclusion, either at level of its single chapters, or considering the novel as a whole.

Another evidence of the importance of materiality in *Albert Angelo* is offered by an episode related to a stone Albert brings at one point to a geology class. This stone, a piece of gneiss Albert has taken as a souvenir during a trip to Ireland with his former girlfriend, has an enormous sentimental value for him, being "the only thing I have tangible of Jenny[97]": it is thus no surprise that he goes into a panic when he realizes that the stone, after he made it circulate among the students, goes missing. Apart from the obvious personal value attached to it, the stone also functions here as a powerful symbol of a solid, unchangeable and crystalised moment in Albert's past, to which he clings as an almighty source of significance and on which his very sense of identity is based. Albert is indeed even afraid of polishing the stone from the ink the students have spattered it with, for fear that the signifying power it is invested with might be somewhat denaturalised, or utterly lost: "Wipe it carefully with blotting-paper, I must wash it when I get home, salve it, though wash off her touch, her kiss, on my stone, our stone, the only stone, the only thing I have left, my Jenny-stone[98]".

An early note to be found among Johnson's working papers shows a further subtle, though profound link between this stone and Albert's sense of identity. Johnson, indeed, initially had the idea of having Albert interact with an undefined octagonal object, which was apparently to be invested with similar mysterious and epiphanic value: "[Albert] perceives 8-sidedness of octagon; tries to share

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[95] See note 68 (p. 80).
[96] B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 167.
[97] *Ibid.*, p. 90.
[98] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

it, its unique itness[99]". This latter formula curiously recalls the way the narrator refers to the protagonist in the "Disintegration" section, in which Albert's name is discussed in these terms: "Albert Albert, to emphasize his Albertness, hisness, itness, uniqueness[100]". It is thus evident how, in Johnson's mind, the essence of Albert's identity and the materiality of the stone are strictly linked and somewhat dependent on one another: in this way, a further explanation is given for Albert's panic before the prospect of losing the stone, since this loss would in a way mean for him a profound loss of his own identity. The materiality of the stone provides Albert with an example of apparent fixity and unchangeability, which gives him the semblance of a delicate equilibrium amidst the chaos and fragmentariness of his experience: if this equilibrium is threatened, Albert's very sense of identity also risks collapsing[101].

The ultimate significance of this gneiss stone in the novel would thus appear to lie in its role as a tangible token of a very specific, unalterable moment in Albert's past; its very materiality, with its texture and all its tactile properties, functions as the site through which the awareness and the reality of this past – and Albert's sense of identity with it – can be re-assessed at any moment. The very fact, however, that the stone's presence needs to be re-asserted constantly throughout this section testifies for the fragile nature of its tangibility as an object. This is because the stone in *Albert Angelo* is subjected to the law that regulates all objects in literature: as pointed out by Patricia Waugh in what she calls the "*creation/description* paradox", indeed, "descriptions of objects in fiction are simultaneously *creations* of those objects[102]". Inversely, in other words, if an object is not described, repeatedly mentioned, or otherwise evoked into being in a text, from the point of view of the textual dimension it ceases to exist, or better, it disappears into an ontological nothingness, which might be either temporary or definitive.

The problem with Albert's stone, moreover, is that it is consciously the fictional version of another stone actually owned by Johnson, likewise related to the personal memories of a bucolic amorous elopement[103]. The intermittent quality of the stone in the novel can thus be read as a sign of

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[99] Id., *Albert Angelo*'s working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library. The original note actually refers to Samuel, the name of Johnson's protagonist in the first draft of the novel.
[100] Id., *Albert Angelo*, p. 169.
[101] This equilibrium is in its turn of course only a semblance, since the very removal of the stone from the Balgy site, as Albert reminisces, has been in itself an act of destruction, of artificial fragmentation – and in the long run, a mistake: "the piece broken for the two of us, one part each, for her, for me, a mistake to break it, a mistake, a symbol, a symbolic mistake, like so many others" (*ibid*., pp. 91-92).
[102] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Methuen, London and New York 1984, p. 88 (emphasis in the original).
[103] No direct mention of the actual stone is made in the novel. In the "Disintegration" section, however, the narrator refers to the Balgy episode as something that really happened, clarifying accordingly what was true and false about the relation that was made of it previously in the novel: "But Balgy, Balgy, the name I kept, from some oddness, though it is in Scotland, not Ireland, on the southern shore of Loch Torridon; not that I could remember much about what it looked like, I had to pinch the scenery, such as it is, for that section, from North Wales, which I know much better" (B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 171). Evidence of the stone's actual existence, however, can be found in a passage of the letter by Muriel's mother: "Yes, she still has the Balgy stone, it must weigh a ton by the trouble it has caused" ('Muriel's mother', Letter to B.S. Johnson, 19.11.1964, B.S. Johnson Archive).

its lack of correspondence with the real, eternal and tangible object it should stand for. Albert's panic before the prospect of losing the stone, in its turn, can possibly be read as a reflection of Johnson's own preoccupation that the continuity between the textual dimension and the outside world, mediated and signified in this case through the stone's presence and tangibility in the text, might suddenly be interrupted, or exposed as an illusory or false concept.

Many other elements, not always nor necessarily related to the general development of the plot, similarly concur in *Albert Angelo* to confirm and re-instate this link between text and outside reality. One such is the insertion, for example, of a card by a clairvoyant named Madam Mae, "Spiritualist Reader & Divine Healer[104]". This insertion takes place in a section in which Albert is aimlessly walking the streets of the Angel district, frittering away what should have been a productive day at his drawing board. In his roaming, he constantly stops to register trivial details of the setting, also picking up useless objects from the ground and forcing the narrative flow to slow down to accommodate descriptions of these objects. At one point, he even crucially asks himself: "The question then arises, am I to consider myself bound to give a good home to every piece of wire left fortuitously […] lying around?[105]". Interestingly, this sounds as an ironic authorial comment, since after all this is precisely what Johnson appears to be doing at long intervals in *Albert Angelo*: giving "a good home" to so many random details and objects which do not add anything to the general development of the story, apart from an endless, gratuitous accumulation of trivia. The Mme. Mae's card we find in the novel, for instance, is the photographic reproduction of a card which Johnson had actually picked up in a street in London, and which he has inserted as an *objet trouvé* in the novel[106], despite its seemingly total lack of relation to anything else in *Albert Angelo*[107].

Thus, the chief significance of the card's presence appears to be that of providing a further channel of communication connecting textual and material realities: the card's insertion is another instance in which they overlap almost inextricably, confirming that *Albert Angelo* acts as intermediary between these two dimensions. As regards this interconnectedness, a fact is worth mentioning which is the perfect example of a recurring Johnsonian dynamic, by which reality and text often appear to

[104] B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 120.
[105] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[106] In the final typewritten draft of *Albert Angelo*, Johnson gives these precise instructions to the printer: "Madam Mae card below: reproduce exactly (photographically?) with marks, just as it is, recto and verso one above the other, in black and white)" (Note to printer, *Albert Angelo*'s final draft, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library).
[107] Some critics have in fact interpreted Mme. Mae's card as a symbolic allusion to the proleptic holes cut in some pages of *Albert Angelo*. The card tries indeed to captivate the reader by appealing to their wish to know details about their future – "DO – YOU – WISH – TO – KNOW ? When and whom will you marry? What the year will bring you? […]" (B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 121). Likewise, the holes play on the same inveterate wish by giving the reader the deceitful impression that they are seeing ahead in the narrative of *Albert Angelo*, only for them to discover, later on, that the episode they were shown is actually not related to Albert's story, being a piece of Christopher Marlowe's biography placed there rather gratuitously as a provocation. The fact that Mme. Mae's card is linked to the falsely proleptic holes, however, creates a kind of self-referential short circuit which only accrues the overall sense of gratuitousness and the aleatory nature of all these trivial details and objects that Johnson has inserted in the novel (See also G. White, *Reading the Graphic Surface*, pp. 99-103).

influence one another. As we apprehend from a letter Johnson wrote to an employee at Constable, the insertion of Mme. Mae's card led at some point to some copyright issues, forcing Johnson to try and retrace the real Mme. Mae in her flesh and bones:

> I went to 33 Penton Street today, which is the address on Madam Mae's card, but there was no sign of her. The barber next door told me that she left about two years ago after a stay of about three months; he did not know where she might have gone. The house has a large turnover of tenants. I suppose you could cover it by writing and hoping the letter would be forwarded[108].

In other words, a fragment of material life which has been transposed directly into the novel appears to have continued to exert a very tangible influence on Johnson after its becoming part of his literature: once again, reality and fiction chase after each other, eliding the boundaries between them.

There are many other similar instances in the novel, by which Johnson inserts modified versions of real documents gathered during his experiences as a supply teacher, such as written assignments, sheets of papers produced by some student, or angry notes received by some overprotective parent[109]. One paradigmatic example, due to its originality and extremism, which adds to this issue of the intercorrelation of textual and material reality a further level of sophistication, is certainly represented by the famous proleptic holes cut through pages 149 to 152. All the pages comprised in this range present an area, towards the bottom, in which a hole has been cut through the paper[110], allowing the reader to see through them and glimpse a fragment of a future episode which is allegedly going to take place later in the story.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the nature of this fragment and all possible interpretations of this curious device, it is important to point out its symbolic metaphorical value in relation to the issue of Johnson's presence in the text, and to his general plan of creating a continuity between the abstract and the material dimensions. On the one hand, the presence of the holes is a powerful gesture that attracts the reader's attention to the very materiality of the page: the reader is reminded in this way that the book is first of all an object, or better, that a text possesses at the same time both an abstract nature – as a virtual model made up of a fixed succession of words and sentences forming a precise narration – and a strictly material one, being an assemblage of ink signs printed on a set of paper pages, bound together within the limits of a back cover, a front cover and a spine of varying texture

[108] B.S. Johnson, Letter to J. A. Underwood at Constable, 3.03.1964, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library. The letter was written in response to Constable's request to clarify the nature of some quotations in the novel, for copyright reasons.
[109] It must be pointed out in this respect that in literally all the instances in the novel in which this kind of material is inserted, Johnson is actually reworking some authentic document into his text, simply modifying the names and other details regarding his students for reasons of privacy. The authentic models of all letters, homework, written assignments and student's notes can be appreciated in the archive.
[110] The presence of the hole corresponds to Johnson's original intention, and the first version(s) of *Albert Angelo* execute the author's will faithfully. In most recent versions of the novel, instead, such as the Picador re-issue of 2013, the intended hole is simply signalled by a blank rectangle printed on the corresponding pages, leaving the business of cutting the actual hole through the paper to the reader's discretion.

and materials[111]. Cutting a hole through a page is, in this case, a paradoxical gesture that unites more than it divides, that creates more than it disrupts: it generates a greater awareness of the interconnectedness existing between the two parallel natures of the text, consequently offering the reader a more profound and multi-layered experience of the book.

Finally, on a more metaphorical level, the holes represent another way in which the presence of the external, intruding author is signified: they can be seen as the symbol of the laceration that Johnson operates on the very partition separating text and reality, the tangible sign of the text's aperture towards the exterior dimension, the open door through which the external world enters and invades the novel. They are the desperate marks that Johnson, in his urgency to enter his text and make his material presence impossibly felt within an abstract dimension, leaves on the pages and on the very material body of his own novel.

A further aspect worth investigating with regard to the issue of the author's presence is the controversial ideological link that exists between Johnson's project in *Albert Angelo* and the work of Samuel Beckett. As a theoretical justification to the "almighty aposiopesis" of the "Disintegration" section, Johnson appropriates a passage taken from Beckett's *The Unnamable*, a text which likewise deals, amongst countless other things, with the issue of the possible presence of the author within his own textual world. These are some crucial highlights of the long and convoluted passage Johnson employs as an opening epigraph to *Albert Angelo*:

> [W]hen I think of the time I've wasted with these brain-dips, beginning with Murphy, who wasn't even the first, when I had me, on the premises, within easy reach, tottering under my own skin and bones, real ones, rotting with solitude and neglect, till I doubted my own existence, […] and similarly for all the other things that happen to me and for which someone must be found, for things that happen must have someone to happen to […]. [T]here is nothing else, let us be lucid for once, nothing else but what happens to me, such as speaking, and such as seeking, and which cannot happen to me, which prowl round me, like bodies in torment, the torment of no abode, no repose, no, like hyenas, screeching and laughing, […] I've shut my doors against them, I'm not at home to anything, my doors are shut against them, perhaps that's how I'll find silence, and peace at last, by opening my doors and letting myself be devoured, they'll stop howling, they'll start eating, the maws now howling. Open up, open up, you'll be alright, you'll see[112].

What this passage would appear to suggest is essentially the possibility for the external author – the supposed speaker of these lines – to substantiate himself within the textual dimension without

[111] Johnson himself stresses the importance of the material and typographical aspects of his novel in the Disintegration section: "A page is an area on which I may place any signs I consider to communicate most nearly what I have to convey: therefore I employ, within the pocket of my publisher and the patience of my printer, typographical techniques beyond the arbitrary and constricting limits of the conventional novel. To dismiss such techniques as gimmicks, or to refuse to take them seriously, is crassly to miss the point" (B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 176).

[112] Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (1953), in Id., *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, Grove Press, New York 2009, p. 384.

the mediation of any fictional character. Spurred by his endless admiration for the Irish master, Johnson apparently assumes this passage as an authoritative justification in support not only of the major device at the core of *Albert Angelo*, but of the general autobiographical turn that he impresses on his own writing from this text onward. Despite this direct lineage that Johnson would seem to establish by employing an epigraph taken from Beckett's novel, the operations carried out by the two authors in *The Unnamable* and *Albert Angelo* point to two rather different, if not totally opposite directions.

Specifically, what in Beckett's text turns out to be merely an accidental and precarious suggestion in a continuing chain of contradictory reasoning, a flux of "affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered[113]", in Johnson is elevated to the status of a universal assumption, which, with the sole strength of its truth, provides the foundations of a large aesthetic project, comprising a diverse range of texts written across the years.

The interesting thing is that what has become a crucial ideological point of passage in Johnson's writing career seems to be based on a partial, if not deliberately distorted interpretation of Beckett's message, at least as far as *The Unnamable* is concerned. Far from providing grounds for a condemnation or debasement of Johnson's literary achievements, however, this alleged misinterpretation might actually be regarded as the very reason why Johnson's work can be said to convey some groundbreaking new thoughts about the novel, which would probably not have been the case had Johnson merely followed blindly in the steps of his master. For these reasons, in order to better understand the uniqueness of Johnson's vision with regard to the material presence of the author within his textual world, it is worth exploring the context of Johnson's personal and problematic appropriation of Beckett's message.

In *The Unnamable*, as well as in much of his oeuvre, Becketts explores the relationship between author and text – in all its paradoxical ambivalences – within an essentially logocentric frame of reference. In his writing, the textual dimension is treated as an effervescent liminal space, equally alien to the material world outside the text and to the fictional dimension of the literary work in its traditional sense. At the same time, however, the no-man's-land of the page is a space where the textual and the material dimensions mysteriously meet, reflect each another, and constantly seek contact with each other, longing for a correspondence that is never completely possible. As the anti-protagonist of *The Unnamable* affirms at one crucial point:

> Perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the

[113] *Ibid.*, p. 285.

> tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either, it's not to me they're talking, it's not of me they're talking[114].

For Beckett, moreover, the act of "lying" has a linguistic origin: it is implicit in the telling itself, it *begins* with the telling, and is not necessarily imputable to the teller, nor to the content he conveys (it is not a question, that is, of telling stories rather than verifiable facts, as with Johnson). This conundrum has to be traced back to the impossibility of language itself to reflect reality, and of words to denote things in the real world[115]. The "I" suffers the same destiny, in that the speaker, by masking himself behind the elusive materiality of the pronoun and becoming part of the textual continuum, loses his identity and disperses himself amidst an ocean of numberless empty words:

> I'm in words, made of words, others' words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me, I'm the air, the walls, the walled-in one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes, I'm all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder, wherever I go I find me, leave me, go towards me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray, I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say[116].

Ultimately, in Beckett's view, the author is always necessarily excluded from the world of his own creation: at the very moment he attempts to convey any form of truth about himself by resorting to the pronoun "I", or to language in general, he irremediably distances himself from the truth he wished to convey. The textual world is a dimension consisting exclusively of discourse, of words that, once distanced from the utterer and consigned to the page, become something quite different, something other, living a life, or dying a death, of their own. In exploring this dimension and in trying to establish a direct, tangible connection with it, the author inevitably finds himself dealing with an uncoverable distance, an irreconcilable otherness. *The Unnamable* dramatises precisely the tragedy of the author's impossibility to be part of his own world, and of the mutual exclusion that eternally separates the fictional dimension from the reality outside:

> He seeks me I don't know why, he calls me, he wants me to come out, he thinks I can come out, he wants me to be he, or another […] He's the one to be sought, the one to be, the one to be spoken of, the one to speak, […] his story the story to be told, but he has no story, he hasn't been in story, it's not certain, he's in his own story, unimaginable, unspeakable, that doesn't

[114] *Ibid*., p. 376.

[115] The perhaps most notorious textual example of this linguistic conundrum in Beckett is the episode of Mr. Knott's pots in the novel *Watt*: "[H]e desired words to be applied to his situation […] For Watt now found himself in the midst of things which, if they consented to be named, did so as it were with reluctance […]. Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot, […] it was in vain that Watt said, Pot, pot. […] For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all. […] Then, when he turned for reassurance to himself, […] he made the distressing discovery that of himself too he could no longer affirm anything that did not seem as false as if he had affirmed it of a stone" (Id., *Watt* [1953], Faber and Faber, London 2009, pp. 67-68).

[116] Id., *The Unnamable*, pp. 379-380.

matter, the attempt must be made, in the old story incomprehensibly mine, to find his, it must be there somewhere, it must have been mine, before being his[117].

Johnson's "I" – and the operation it stands for – is instead something of a completely different nature. Reasoning from a standpoint antithetical to that of Beckett, he aims at reasserting the historical contingency and the ontological reality of this "I", as well as that of the material surroundings from which this "I" is speaking. As Philip Tew maintains, "Johnson recognizes what a critical language of authenticity divorced from context suppresses. […] The texture of the writing and its speculative method remind the reader that the 'I' or self cannot be formal and is linked to the objectivity of history and the world[118]". This "I", in other words, is still capable for Johnson to denote the identity it stands for, to personify it: it is, in a sense, B.S. Johnson himself in his own "skin and bones", in a coincidence with the implied speaker that the "I" of *The Unnamable* could never possibly hope to achieve.

With his own active and all-inclusive intrusion into the textual world, Johnson intends thus to achieve the virtual elision of any form of definite separation between the material and the narrated dimensions. The very partition for which Beckett's anti-character stands for is in this way bypassed, if not directly dismantled, and substituted by a unifying and unmediated vision of art and life as part of the same continuum. "Inscribed in his thinking", comments Tew in this connection, "is the potential offered by a period before almost everything intellectual was made textual and logocentric, with a conviction in his texts that Johnson speaks directly to and of experience[119]". All the precise and often gratuitous references to a verifiable outside reality that Johnson makes in *Albert Angelo* or elsewhere go towards the same direction. As already suggested, it often seems that, apart from his own person, Johnson intends to fit the whole world at once into his novels: this is because in his writing "there exists an insistence that something objective […] extends the dialogue between the self and the other in the nature of the communicative act of which narrative forms a part[120]".

To return however to the problem of Beckett's epigraph and the role it possibly played in informing this momentous revelation in Johnson's literary development, some doubt remains as to Johnson's awareness of Beckett's message and the interpretation he gives of the incriminated passage, considering the profound differences between the two authors' theoretical standpoints and the result they have produced in their respective texts. On the one hand, at times Johnson appears to opt for a literal reading of such passages in *The Unnamable* in which the authorial voice deceivingly resounds in the words of the protagonist, as he does for example in occasion of a review of a critical study by Hugh Kenner:

[117] *Ibid*., pp. 396; 406.
[118] Philip Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2001, pp. 100-101.
[119] *Ibid*., pp. xii-xiii.
[120] *Ibid*., p. 118.

> Firstly, in his interpretation and discussion of *The Unnamable* Mr. Kenner does not seem to realise, crucially, that it is Beckett himself who, having failed to project himself through various characters, assumes the first person in the latter section of the novel. […] Thus it is the author himself who directly reaches the impasse of 'I can't go on, I'll go on'[121].

Such an interpretation, naïve and superficial as it sounds, would seemingly confirm the conviction, on Johnson's part, of a direct intervention of Beckett in his own text, thus providing a strong reason for claiming an affinity of purpose between *Albert Angelo* and *The Unnamable*. Johnson, moreover, seems to extend here the idea of Beckett's presence to the entire novel by quoting its conclusion: the author's voice, Johnson seems to suggest, is always to be ultimately implied behind the words of the narrating voice of *The Unnamable*.

On several other occasions, however, Johnson appears rather to distance himself from Beckett, denoting, if not the awareness of a difference existing between them, at least a desire that his work be regarded in a different light from that of his master. In an interview with Christopher Ricks of BBC, for instance, Johnson points out that "I admire Beckett very much, while I don't imitate him in any sense. I look upon him as a great example of what can be done. I think personally he is in a cul-de-sac[122]". Johnson, incidentally, had already expressed this view in an article on Beckett's *How it Is*, in which he confesses a certain cooling down of his enthusiasm for this new phase of his master's writing:

> Beckett seems to me to be exploring a cul-de-sac, and while I cannot help admiring both his integrity and his dedication in breaking new ground therein, I deeply regret at the same time that he has abandoned on the way those incidental qualities of language and intellectual exuberance and wit which so magnificently characterise his first two novels, *Murphy* and *Watt*[123].

The ambiguity of Johnson's position on Beckett is then further complicated by some notes he takes in a personal notebook intended originally for a prospective biography of Beckett[124]. Here, Johnson ponders retrospectively on the crucial role the reading of his master has played in a defining moment of his own writing career, or rather, when the writer lurking inside him was still at a stage of development: "somewhere it was in *Murphy* […] that I first saw the word SOLIPSISM, […] it formed part of a solution for me, hinted at some kind of mode of being = mode of GOING ON for me[125]". And Beckett is again involved, later on in the same notebook, in an imaginary dialogue centered on

[121] B.S. Johnson, Review of *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* by Hugh Kenner, in "The Spectator", 23.11.1962.
[122] B.S. Johnson, interviewed by Christopher Ricks on his New Novel, *Albert Angelo*, in "New Comment", 31.07.1964, Caversham: BBC Written Archive, quoted in P. Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, p. 145.
[123] B.S. Johnson, Review of *How It Is* by S. Beckett, in "The Spectator", 7.05.1964.
[124] The notebook is entitled "Experiment / Venture into BIOGRAPHY".
[125] Notebook on Samuel Beckett, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.

Johnson's solipsistic revelation: "SAY – well, you 'taught' me (introduced me to) Solipsism – so if my tribute to you is of that kind, then you have only yourself to blame[126]".

Such cryptic passages would seem to indicate a perhaps belated awareness, on Johnson's part, of a certain degree of manipulation he might have exerted on Beckett's message, so as to make it serve his own purposes. Johnson, in other words, might have given a deeply personal interpretation of a partial aspect of Beckett's writing, perhaps charging it with a subjective meaning not intended in the original. (Incidentally, he wanders at some point in the same notebook: "does all he says seem significant for me in the light of what I know he is, of what I believe him to be?[127]"). It is also possible that Johnson might have interpreted Beckett perhaps too literally or superficially at an initial stage[128], but that successively, developing his own ideas about the novel and becoming increasingly more conscious that his intentions differed considerably from those of his master, he re-oriented his early, somewhat intuitive interpretation of Beckett in a solipsistic way, bending it towards an altogether different direction.

A curious but significant echo of these dynamics is to be found in the genealogy of the name of Johnson's protagonist, who was initially to be called Samuel Angelo[129]. This name inevitably recalls both Beckett and Angel, the London district in which Johnson was living at the time[130], thus giving the idea of a sort of Beckettian Londoner (a definition which, after all, can be easily applied to Johnson himself). Johnson's own note about killing off his protagonist "comically à la Murphy[131]", given the fact that Murphy is the most London-bound of all Beckettian characters, is a further telling evidence of this link. The name Samuel was eventually dropped in a later revision of the novel, a fact perhaps even more crucial to our discussion, since it betrays a more or less conscious desire to place some distance between himself and Beckett. In a letter to his friend Zulfikar Ghose, he also explains how this move will allow him to use the quotation from *The Unnamable* in a way that hopefully will

[126] *Ivi*.
[127] *Ivi*.
[128] A contention that would seem to be supported by admissions such as: "Beckett's solipsism/stoicism fitted, I read him with an intensity […]. Yet the time when I was to study him really deeply and seriously was yet to come" (Blue notebook on Samuel Beckett, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library). This passage relates to a personally difficult time for Johnson, corresponding to his breaking up with his former fiancée in 1958, an episode that informs crucially more than one Johnsonian novel and is central to the narration of *Albert Angelo* itself.
[129] In point of fact, some personal notes and correspondence indicate that the very first version of the protagonist's name was Henry Angelo, which would have established a stronger continuity with Johnson's previous novel *Travelling People*.
[130] Johnson specifies in a note that the final breaking off must occur "after a bit in which S sits at window looking at architecture, doing architectural drawings in which what he sees (=life around Angel) interferes with his own creation or architectural originalities" (B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*'s Working Papers, B.S. Johnson's Archive). A crucial detail which must be pointed out in this respect, and which is rarely stressed in critical discourses on *Albert Angelo*, is that the name of Johnson's protagonist is in actual fact Albert Albert, and that throughout the book he is never referred to as Albert Angelo. The name "Angelo" appears thus only in the title, which is an ironic, indirect allusion to the fact that the novel's protagonist is in fact a substitute for B.S. Johnson, the physical person who is writing the book from his own apartment, situated in the Angel district of London.
[131] The original entry reads: "Kill Henry – comically à la Murphy" (*ivi*). The protagonist, at this stage, was still to be named Henry Angelo.

not encourage too deep or quick an identification with Beckett in his readers: “It’s not SA any longer but AA = Albert Angelo because I wanted a quotation from Sam at the beginning and it would look as though I was writing about Beckett, or might do so[132]”.

To say that Johnson is writing “about” Beckett would be “crassly to miss the point[133]” of *Albert Angelo*; it is nonetheless evident that the figure of Samuel Beckett and the influence of his writing have always been present, obsessively and problematically, in some prominent corner of Johnson’s mind, during the composition of this novel as well as in many other stages of his development as a writer. It is perhaps not possible to assert exactly how deep had Johnson comprehended Beckett’s epigraph before incorporating it in his own text; likewise, it is impossible to establish the precise way in which such incorporation is to be interpreted, or how Johnson intended this passage to inform or direct the reader’s reception of *Albert Angelo*.

In fact, interpreting the link between these two texts in too transparent or literal a way can be utterly misleading and detrimental to the understanding of Johnson as a unique and original voice, distinct from that of the master he, nonetheless, owes so much to. Johnson has indeed certainly “only himself to blame”, for the rather partial and extremely personal interpretation he appears to give of Beckett’s text, and for basing such momentous turn in his writerly practice on such a reworked, solipsistically reoriented reading. However, Johnson’s choice to take – consciously or unconsciously – an altogether different direction, instead of blindly following Beckett and becoming an empty imitator of his master, is not to be blamed. In point of fact, this new direction led him to create a body of work of striking originality, to conceive a novelistic form that challenges the very separation between art and life, which Beckett explores to such obsessive extremities in a work so different in terms of scope, tone and nature. “Johnson”, Tew concludes, “utilizes the aesthetic example of Beckett almost as his launch-pad to other realms. Again, he is neither slavishly nor narrowly imitative, making literary allusions to register a fond recognition of source and influence of an alternative project[134]”.

Many of Johnson’s contemporaries, even those who most appreciated his work, do not seem to have thoroughly understood the nature of the project he had in mind when he wrote *Albert Angelo*. For many of them, who espoused a logocentric point of view, the author’s inclusion into his own work does not automatically guarantee the tangible presence of his historical figure within the textual world: on the contrary, it simply fragments the author’s personality even further, creating just another fictional projection of himself, which shares the same status as that of the protagonist and all the other characters. Eva Figes, for instance, expresses her mixed feelings about Johnson’s operation in the following words:

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[132] B.S. Johnson, Letter to Z. Ghose, 30.07.1963, in Vanessa Guignery (ed.), *The B.S. Johnson – Zulfikar Ghose Correspondence*, p. 204.
[133] Id., *Albert Angelo*, p. 176.
[134] P. Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, p. 146.

> Where I part company with him is in his rather puritanical and simplistic belief that telling stories is telling lies, and that one should therefore introduce oneself as the main protagonist. Still, whether he is telling an unadorned truth or fooling the reader even more effectively, it must be admitted that he introduces B.S. Johnson into his own work to great effect[135].

As an attentive reader of Johnson, Frank Lissauer shares a similar opinion, seeing the authorial figure breaking into the textual world of *Albert Angelo* as simply another aspect completing the complex figure of the writer behind the text:

> [W]hen you patently break out of a convention of your own making (Prologue – Development) into material which claim to be 'the truth', I cannot be sure whether, objectively seen, the form has been effectively broken […]. An objective reader having no acquaintance with B.S. Johnson would seem to be given no compelling reason for the greater truth of 'Disintegration'. […] I think that for the sake of the book it must necessarily be read as another aspect of Albert; as an equals-sign between Albert and you, Bryan Johnson, presumed known only by the signs in this book, it seems unsatisfactory[136].

This affirmation might sound as somewhat in accordance with Johnson's own vision, since in *Albert Angelo*, Johnson's plan is to "reproduce some of the complexity of selves which I contain within me, contradictory and gross as they are[137]"; the implacable obsessiveness with which Johnson stresses his own material intrusion into the text, however, as well as the incredible insistence on details and references to precisely situated settings in the outside world, seem amply to demonstrate that Johnson's intention is not merely that of creating one more textual projection of himself. The fact that this intrusion invalidates and causes the complete dismantlement of the whole narration is another proof of the fact that the proclamation of the author's paradoxical presence is really the main concern of *Albert Angelo*.

In any case, with this novel Johnson undoubtedly took a significant step forward in the development of his ideological and aesthetic system, bringing to perfection all those strains that he had only timidly, tentatively and incompletely explored in *Travelling People*. Thus, he opened up an altogether new direction in his writing which, for better or for worse, would profoundly influence all his subsequent works.

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[135] E. Figes, Review of *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?* by B.S. Johnson, in "The Guardian", 25.10.1973.
[136] F. Lissauer, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 16.07.1964, B.S. Johnson's Archive.
[137] B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 170.

III. Johnson's "I" beyond Albert Angelo

Trawl and *The Unfortunates*, the next two novels written by Johnson, are the direct consequence of the "Disintegration" section of *Albert Angelo*. In both, it is Johnson himself, undisguisedly and from the very beginning of the narration to the very last word, who speaks directly to the reader about himself and his own life, relating his own experiences and the stories of the people he has shared these experiences with as faithfully as he can. Here, he hardly resorts to fictional characters or covered up, fictionalised versions of true facts: the gesture of the author's intrusion in *Albert Angelo* has served as an almighty catharsis for this particular aspect of Johnson's writing, paving the way for a genuine, faithful and direct transposition of the author's biographical experiences into literature. In both *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates*, Johnson is transparently both the physical individual standing behind the textual world and the character speaking from inside of it. The novels themselves are a direct continuation of his life: they *are*, as it were, this life, only in the different form of a literary text.

The first problem Johnson had to face in trying to justify this kind of approach regards the liminal status of this kind of writing, suspended between the form of novel – which for many exponents of the publishing world is equivalent to fiction – and autobiography. For Johnson, who does not, as already discussed, consider the terms novel and fiction as interchangeable synonyms, the intention is "to write truth in the form of a novel[138]": this, in his own peculiar vision, does not necessarily imply that his books are to be regarded as autobiographies, as novels, in their turn, do not have to be necessarily fiction in order to be considered as such, but they can contain some genuine piece of truth, subjectively and transparently told by the author.

The editorial vicissitudes experienced by *Trawl*, as Johnson himself explains, illustrate this matter perfectly: "The publisher of *Trawl* wished to classify it as autobiography, not as a novel. It is a novel, I insisted and could prove; what it is not is fiction[139]". As is well known, during the negotiations concerning the paperback publication of *Trawl*, Johnson had received this rather desperate response from his then publisher, Frederic Warburg:

> Your ideas about how novels should be written are, if not unique, at least held by a tiny, but tiny, minority. Novels often described as fiction are usually fiction, but you are horrified at the idea of incorporating what you call "lies" in your novels which tends to make them equivalent to a slightly unusual form of autobiography. We shall have to wait and see what happens when we publish *Trawl* […]. If, however, at the end of our contract we are in the red to a substantial extent, as I think not improbable, I shall (of course!) remind you of your promise to write us a brilliant bunch of lies which we shall describe as fiction, which it will be[140].

[138] Id., *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 14.
[139] *Ivi*.
[140] Frederic Warburg, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 18.07.1966, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library. Quoted in J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 216.

Such diatribes with his publisher must have been a daily occurrence at the time when the manuscript of *Trawl* was being evaluated for publication – Johnson's biographer, Jonathan Coe, even goes as far as to attribute Warburg himself the infamous phrase "Aren't you rather young to be writing your memoirs?", which Johnson successively used as the title of his 1973 collection[141]. In any case, if anything, the whole matter is a sign of the obtuseness of the publishing industry of the time, and of the limitations of a label – that of "novel" – which Johnson was trying really hard to supersede and expand through his literary practice. The novel, Johnson was trying to prove, could be turned effectively into a vehicle of truth, of true stories, and free itself from the superficial need to entertain the public with intricate and improbable plots, fictional characters and other such "brilliant bunch[es] of lies".

Episodes which really took place in Johnson's life are thus firmly at the base of the composition of both *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates*. In the case of *Trawl*, however, Johnson pushed the mutual implications of his life and literature to some extreme degrees. As he explains in a letter to Warburg's head of publicity department:

> Briefly, I'm going as supernumerary on the Northern Jewel from Grimsby 2.30 a.m. Monday to distant-water fishing grounds: which might be Iceland, Greenland, North Russia, Bear Island, Labrador or Newfoundland – it depends where the skipper thinks he can best catch fish at this time of year. I'm making the trip to get first-hand material for a new novel, the theme of which is deliberate isolation in order to solve a problem mechanistically. The trip will last at least three weeks[142].

As can be evinced here, following a dynamic which had been already partly explored in *Travelling People*, Johnson was deliberately creating for himself the very material situation about which he intended to write in his upcoming novel. Instead of waiting for something to happen and then write about it, or simply write about something that happened in the past and which he needed to exorcise through writing, Johnson was deliberately procuring for himself, creating it out of nothing, the life material he would later incorporate into his novel. In other words, a piece of literature which was not yet composed was going to influence events in Johnson's real life, which in their turn would consciously become part of his literature.

As Johnson the narrator personally affirms in the novel: "I want to give substantial yet symbolic form to an isolation I have felt most of my life by isolating myself in fact, by enacting the isolation in an extreme form, by cutting myself off as far as possible from everything I had ever known before[143]". This intention gives birth to a sort of diary, in which Johnson goes over some events of his own past in an elucubrating, confessional mood with the attempt to trace the causes of

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[141] See *ibid.*, p. 204.
[142] B.S. Johnson, Letter to Miles Huddleston, 13.10.1963, B B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library. Quoted in J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 148.
[143] Id., *Trawl* (1966), Picador, London 2004, p. 105.

his inveterate feeling of isolation and exorcise the pain of some of his most hurting memories. *Trawl* is entirely written in the first person, in the form of an interior monologue, so that everything in the novel is obsessively referred to the "I" of the narrator[144]: "everything is relevant only to me, relative only to me, to be seen only from my eyes, solipsism is the only truth: can be the only truth: a thing is so only because I think it to be so[145]". It is not by chance, moreover, that the narration begins and ends with a reflection on the nature of this first person speaking throughout the novel: "I · · always with I · · one starts from · · one and I share the same character · · are one[146]"; "I, always with I · · · · · one always starts with I · · · · · · · · And ends with I[147]".

With such an incipit, this time, Johnson states with extreme clarity and peremptoriness that he himself is the "I" of the narration, that this "I" coincides with his historical person and is not to be confused with any sort of fictional or textual projection of the author, as might have been the case in his previous novels. The very graphic disposition of the text, moreover, accumulated as it is in a column at the centre of the page, with large blank margins on both sides, reminds one obsessively and constantly of the shape of the letter "I", providing an image which is in perfect keeping with the metaphor of the trawl at the basis of the novel. The convergence of the text towards the centre, in a way, mimics Johnson's own effort of concentration as he sifts through his memories, in the attempt to get at their supposed ultimate significance. This metaphor is also reinforced by the fact that Johnson, by personally "shoot[ing] the narrow trawl of [his] mind into the vasty sea of [his] past[148]", appears to mimic symbolically the activities of the fishing crew on board the trawler, going through his catch exactly as the fishermen do, cutting and cleaning, eviscerating and selecting what must be kept and what is to be thrown away.

Many images recall more or less directly the act of trawling and of going through one's catch, as the narrator is forced at various junctures, for instance, to deal selectively with the superfluous abundance of details and memories caught up in his introspections, in the same way as the fishermen have to dispose of the unwanted fish caught up by the trawl and all the rejectamenta produced in the gutting process: "Other memories are caught by the filter. I shall only think them, since everything must be considered[149]"; "Oh, how miserable the whole thing seems to me now! […] bloody get on

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[144] Johnson himself would describe his narrative approach in *Trawl* in the following terms: "*Trawl* (1966) is all interior monologue, a representation of the inside of my mind but at one stage removed; the closest one can come in writing" (Id., *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 23).
[145] Id., *Trawl*, p. 172.
[146] *Ibid*., p. 7. These dots placed at mid-line are a device elaborated by Johnson to represent "breaks in the mind's workings", and appear throughout the entirety of the novel (though they assume this invasive character only in correspondence with the incipit and the finale). Generally, "the rhythms of language of *Trawl* attempted to parallel those of the sea" (Id., *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 23).
[147] Id., *Trawl*, p. 183.
[148] *Ibid*., p. 9. This formula appears also later on in a slightly changed manner: "Why do I trawl the delicate mesh of my mind over the snagged and broken floor of my past?" (*ibid*., p. 21).
[149] *Ibid*., p. 52.

with it, then, selectively[150]"; "It must be exhausted, the subject, of its possibilities, in case the key, the whole point, is there for my finding[151]". This metaphorical situation is then paralleled by passages in which the cleaning and gutting of the fish by the crew and by Johnson himself is described down to the minutest detail, in a semantic continuity that intimately links the two processes, being both aimed at removing the useless and remain with the essential, the supposed core of everything[152].

The amalgam of metaphorical images which in *Trawl* unites the narrator's situation, his solipsistic obsession, and the activities on board the fishing boat, becomes in *The Unfortunates* a tangible metaphor in which the loose, unbound and interchangeable chapters of the novel come to represent the stray memories springing in the narrator's mind. Again, everything in this novel originates from the author's standpoint, clearly and transparently corresponding to Johnson in his own flesh and bones. The whole narrative consists of a transposition of Johnson's authentic memories regarding his deceased friend Tony Tillinghast, who died of cancer at the age of 29, from an early moment of recognition in the very first pages – "But I know this city![153]" –, which gives rise to an intermittent flow of scenes and remembered episodes of their past together.

If *Trawl* is a novel tending towards an altered form of autobiography, then *The Unfortunates* could be described as a biographical novel about Tony Tillinghast. The close link to Johnson's own biography, however, along with his tangible and obtrusive presence in the text, are staples of this work as well, which somehow turns it into an autobiography despite being dedicated to the memory of another individual. Johnson himself explains the dynamics of the genesis of *The Unfortunates*, and of its being deeply and inextricably grounded in his own biographical experiences, in the following terms:

> With each of my novels there has been a certain point when what has been until then just a mass of subject-matter, the material of living, of my life, comes to have a shape, a form that I recognise as a novel. […] The moment at which *The Unfortunates* (1969) occurred was on the main railway station at Nottingham. I had been sent there to report a soccer match for the *Observer* […]. I had hardly thought about where I was going, […] but when I came up the stairs from the platform into the entrance hall, it hit me: I knew this city, I knew it very well. It was the city in which a very great friend of mine […] had lived until his tragic early death from cancer some two years before. It was the first time I had been back since his death, and all the afternoon I was there the things we had done together kept coming back to me as I was going about this routine job of reporting a soccer match: the dead past and the living present interacted and transposed themselves in my mind[154].

[150] *Ibid*., p. 118.
[151] *Ibid*., p. 123.
[152] For an interesting reading focused on the imagery of disemboweling and regurgitation in *Trawl*, see Rod Mengham, *In the Net: B. S. Johnson, the Biography and* Trawl, in P. Tew and G. White (eds.), *Re-reading B.S. Johnson*, pp. 95-104.
[153] Id., *The Unfortunates* (1969), Picador, London 1999, "FIRST", p. 1. Given the loose nature of the chapters in this novel, the convention has been established to quote a given passage by referring to the first line of the corresponding section, followed by the section's page (each section staring from page 1 and following).
[154] Id., *Aren't You Rather Young…*, pp. 23-24.

These, incidentally, are the same words that Johnson used – though in paraphrased form – for a promotional TV short movie dedicated to the novel: here, the author himself appears on the screen in a scene set at that same Nottingham railway station, addressing his audience/readership directly and asserting even more effectively his tangible presence as the figure standing behind and within the text, once more demonstrating how the elements in his novel are strictly connected to facts of his own biography.

A further proof of the importance of the visibility of Johnson's material figure in *The Unfortunates* is the letter he wrote to June Tillinghast, Tony's wife, before starting the novel: here, Johnson expresses his wish to "write about Tony", exposing his general idea and specifying finally that "[t]his suggests itself as a film, first of all, or a television play: but the trouble is that so many other people would mess it about in either of these media unless I kept the very strictest control. So maybe a novel or short story would be better[155]".

The Unfortunates presents itself as Johnson's attempt at recreating a faithful, unfiltered image of his deceased friend, to "place his order, his disintegration[156]" into a crystalised work of art and make his memory immortal, as his body could never aspire to be. This is after all in keeping with the promise the author had made to Tony on the latter's deathbed, as is reported in the novel itself: "and I said, it was all I had, what else could I do, I said, I'll get it all down, mate[157]". As in *Trawl*, the process of remembering episodes and things down to the last details assumes a salvific and exorcising function in this novel. Here, too, the author intends to analyse his life's material obsessively in order to get at the supposed core of everything: "Not how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern, to me, only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us[158]".

However, if the objective fact of Tony's life and death, his having been and his being no more, is what Johnson intends to convey, it is also true that the processing centre of all the memories which make up the novel, as well as the emotions connected to them, is inevitably the author's own mind, with all its idiosyncrasies and unavoidable distortions. If truth is Johnson's ultimate objective, then, it is more and more evident, as the author's aesthetic ideas continue to develop, that the kind of truth he seeks is in fact a deeply personal one, always referred to him and to be justified by him alone: "the difficulty is to understand without generalization, to see each piece of received truth, or

[155] Id., Draft of letter to June Tillinghast, unknown date, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[156] Id., *The Unfortunates*, "First", p. 4.
[157] *Ibid*., "So he came to his parents…", p. 5.
[158] *Ibid*., "Last", p. 6. Such a passage reminds of the narrator's stance in *Trawl*, especially when he affirms: "What use are analyses, reasons, causes? All I am left with are just things, happenings: things as they are, happenings as they have happened and go on happening through the unreliable filter of my memory" (Id., *Trawl*, pp. 93-4).

generalization, as true only if it is true for me, solipsism again, I come back to it again, and for no other reasons[159]".

As the author himself explains, the project of *The Unfortunates* is after all that of portraying "the way the mind works, my mind anyway, and for reasons given the novel was to be as nearly as possible a re-created transcript of how my mind worked during eight hours on this particular day[160]". Consequently, *The Unfortunates* is a novel about the death of Tony Tillinghast as much as it is about the processes taking place in Johnson's own mind in remembering the event. By no chance, the narration is constellated by moments in which the narrator stops and ponders on what he has just said, trying to assess the authenticity of his own memories, asking himself whether what he is narrating is truly relevant in his portrayal of Tony, or whether he is imposing his own arbitrary pattern on the chaos of the past: "or do I invent? […] it is so easy to invent, by mistake, not remember what was there, what is truly remembered[161]"; "my mind clutters itself up with so much rubbish[162]"; "what use is such speculation? […] Why do I suppose all this from so little?[163]"; "the mind is confused, was it this visit, or another, the mind has telescoped time here, runs events near to one another in place, into one another in time[164]"; "I fail to remember, the mind has fuses[165]".

Therefore, it is not important how determined and objective the narrator can be in his pursuit of truth, since everything which is recounted in the novel comes from inside his own mind and will necessarily and ultimately imply a certain degree of manipulation and arbitrariness, conscious or unconscious as it may be: "I sentimentalize again, the past is always to be sentimentalized, inevitably[166]", Johnson reflects at one point. Such a resigned mood will eventually lead him to see the whole process of writing and remembering as "a constant, ah, distorting process[167]", and even to recognise the ultimate necessity of imposing one's own solipsistic meaning on the painful and apparently meaningless events of one's experience: "so why this, if it is so meaningless, anything means something only if you impose meaning on it, which in itself is a meaningless thing, the imposition[168]". The narrator of *Trawl*, after all, had already expressed very similar doubts as to the ultimate authenticity of some of the episodes recounted, demonstrating a similar awareness of the distortions necessarily involved in the process of retrospection: "there is a fault in my method, there must be, or so it seems. · · I create my own world in the image of that which was, in the past: from a

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[159] Id., *The Unfortunates*, "Last", p. 6.
[160] Id., *Aren't You Rather Young…*, p. 25.
[161] Id., *The Unfortunates*, "For recuperation…", p. 4.
[162] *Ibid*., "Cast parapet…", p. 2.
[163] *Ibid*., "This poky lane…", p. 7.
[164] *Ibid*., "Again the house…", pp. 5-6.
[165] *Ibid*., "Then they had moved…", p. 5.
[166] *Ibid*., "I had a lovely flat then…", p. 2.
[167] *Ibid*., "Up there, yes, the high mast…", p. 2.
[168] *Ibid*., "Away from the ground…", p. 3.

defective memory, from recollections which must be partial: this is not necessarily truth, may even be completely misleading, at best is only a nearness, a representation[169]".

However, Johnson does not see this aspect of distortion as a detrimental factor in his conception of the novel as a vehicle of truth, but rather as an aspect potentially leading to a form of more authentic realism: by espousing this method, he is able to reproduce with greater authenticity the way the mind actually functions. As he explains in a letter to the editor of Secker & Warburg, what the narrative method of *The Unfortunates* purports to convey is "a delineation of the mind at work, a representation, with some of the faults, hesitations, repetitions of my mind, I ought perhaps to add: after all, whose else do I know?[170]". Similar instructions are also widely present among Johnson's notes and working papers related to the novel, as is the case for instance of an entry reciting: "Should some of the sections break off – as the mind does?[171]", or another, more crucially saying: "This has (intentionally) all the faults of a mind working[172]". Similarly, in *Trawl*, Johnson makes the following remark – in fact quite unexpectedly for him – on the importance of subjective truth over a documentarist obsession with the minutest details of experience: "So much of this is presumption on my part. There are ways of checking these things: but I cannot do so here and it would be too tedious in any case. This does not have to be a documentary[173]".

Such passages seem to mark a slight though crucial shift in Johnson's ideological position with regard to truth, demonstrating how he increasingly perceives the centrality of the author, with his own individual, fallible mind and his idiosyncratic version of the events, as more important than any abstract form of pure, chimerical objectivity. Johnson's diaries of this period include a telling note that seems to express a mood perfectly matching this view: "It no longer seems important to be right[174]". Not only does absolute truth seem to have lost much of its importance to Johnson at this stage of his writing, but some elements to be detected in these two novels even suggest that he is deliberately trying, in some respects, to distort and manipulate the truth of his own experiences, or at least that he is presenting them in an intentionally, slightly deceiving light.

As regards *Trawl*, for instance, the novelistic situation has the narrator elucubrating on his past from the security of his own bunk, with occasional forays out on the deck to describe activities occurring on bord the ship. From the point of view of the novel itself, then, the writing takes place during the very voyage on which the narrator has specifically embarked: it starts form its bunk and

[169] Id., *Trawl*, p. 157.
[170] Id., Letter to David Farrer, 29.09.1967, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[171] Id., *The Unfortunates*' working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[172] *Ivi*. Following this compositional method, the narrative rhythm of *The Unfortunates* – and to a lesser extent also of *Trawl* – assumes a staccato, intermittent character, with suspensions, gaps, retractions and sudden additions which mimic the spontaneity and simultaneity of the thoughts as they form inside one's mind, rather than being exposed in an elegant, literary disguise, or even recurring to a classic stream-of-consciousness kind of representation.
[173] Id., *Trawl*, p. 56.
[174] Notebook 7, 1964-1969, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.

ends as the ship is approaching the dock, finally back at Grimsby after weeks spent at sea. The actual writing of the novel, however, was undergone by Johnson, as usual, in the tranquility of his own working desk – this time at 5 Myddelton Square, his address at the time of composition. Johnson must have certainly jotted down some notes during the actual journey on the *Northern Jewel*, and he generally spent great effort, after the journey, gathering material related to trawling, to the ship he was on, or the fishing industry in general, so as to be as precise as possible in his descriptions of the daily routine on the trawler[175]. The atmosphere of simultaneity and spontaneity we see in the novel, however, appears to be ultimately a recreated, artificial one, apparently at odds with Johnson's proverbial obsession with truth.

As regards *The Unfortunates*, a small though disturbing detail, largely overlooked in the majority of critical commentaries, strikes the attention of the attentive reader since the very "First" section. As Johnson himself explains in a number of different sources, we know that the novel is mostly set in Nottingham, the city in which Tony was living when Johnson first met him, and the sight of which originates in the author's mind the idea for the novel itself. The city described in the opening section – as well as in many other relevant parts of *The Unfortunates* – is fairly easily identifiable as Nottingham, even though the exact name is never mentioned throughout the novel. Many unequivocal local elements, such as the presence of boulevards, of a castle or a Council House, or the allusion to trolleybuses and the manifold references to Midland architecture[176], clearly gesture toward that specific setting[177].

Nevertheless, in the "First" section, despite the fact that the city he suddenly recognises is unmistakably Nottingham, Johnson refers to an exchange he has had previously with – allegedly – his principal at the *Observer*: "How did I not realize when he said, Go and do City this week, that it was this city?[178]". This line seems to indicate that the match Johnson is asked to report is a Manchester City home match, and indeed the corresponding section containing the match-reporting itself regards a Manchester City vs Manchester United game, as is also confirmed by the newspaper excerpt reproduced on the righthand inside of the box containing the loose pages of the novel (an authentic piece which Johnson provocatively inserts in the final book). The fact that the match narrated is a Manchester derby – to emphasise its "Manchester-ness"? – is even more ironic when one considers

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[175] Among the material Johnson amassed and kept for this purpose are for instance: drawings of the *Northern Jewel*, with a scheme indicating the disposition of the various rooms and areas of the ship; a booklet entitled *Grimbsy – The world's premier fishing port and frozen food centre*, with a brief history of the town of Grimbsy, descriptions of how the fishing industry works, history of the development of trawling vessels, information regarding the processing and marketing of fish, descriptions of the gear present on board of trawling vessels, information regarding the training and recruitment of staff etc.; various brochures and documents illustrating the functioning of various types of trawling nets and trawlers; the British Trawler's Federation Annual Report for 1962 and 1964, and many more.

[176] See such sections as "First", "This poky lane…" and "Cast parapet…".

[177] As an indirect confirmation of this, one may also signal the presence of a map and street directory to Nottingham among Johnson's working papers for the novel, which he must have consulted for greater accuracy in the relevant sections.

[178] B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, "First", p. 1.

that, in other sections of the novel, the city that Johnson-the-narrator describes as he makes his itinerary to reach the football pitch is actually Nottingham. In an early draft of the novel, moreover, Johnson clearly alludes to Nottingham instead of Manchester in the opening lines. The corresponding part originally reads "Go and do (Forest)[179]", with the allusion to the Nottingham Forest team inserted in brackets, then subsequently crossed out and substituted with "City".

This latter aspect suggests that Johnson originally intended to set his novel in Nottingham, as all the allusions and the descriptions – especially the one to the "Forest" match – clearly indicate[180]. The fact that "Forest" was inserted in brackets and soon deleted, however, proves that Johnson probably meant to keep the actual setting vague, leaving the reader free to discern it, if need be. In this way, the change of reference from "Forest" to "City" could be seen as an enactment of Johnson's intention to incorporate in his account every possible slip or mis-working of the mind – "This has (intentionally) all the faults of a mind working[181]" –, which is another sign of the greater prominence the author wants to give to subjective rather than objective truth. The later episode of the match reporting may be actually set in Manchester – more specifically, the Maine Road stadium[182] –, but that is already another episode, mingling with all the others in the distorting cauldron of Johnson's mind, distinctly from those set in Nottingham. The past-related sections, after all – corresponding to Johnson's memories of Tony –, cover a range of events expanding across several years, and referring to such diverse settings as Nottingham, Brighton and London: there seems to be no compelling reason, therefore, to think that the sections set in the present may be likewise located in different situations and surroundings – namely, Nottingham *and* Manchester.

If Johnson appears to be not only indulgent, but even fascinated by the spontaneous and inevitable distortions operated by his own mind, he does not seem to be equally tolerant towards similar distortions when they come from outside agents. *The Unfortunates*, among other themes, also deals with the resistance to the manipulating action exerted by external forces on one's solipsistic version of the truth, which must be defended strenuously. This is particularly visible in the match-

[179] Id., *The Unfortunates*, First draft, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[180] As further evidence of the novel's implication with Nottingham, one may also signal the presence, among Johnson's working papers, of some original programmes and tickets to Nottingham home matches which Johnson went to see on different occasions, even though it is not that easy to determine which one exactly inspired him to write *The Unfortunates*. One programme refers for instance to a Nottingham Forest vs Sunderland match on 24th October 1964: however, since this date precedes by some weeks the death of Tony (which occurred on 14th November), it is unlikely that this is the occasion recounted in the novel. A later programme refers instead to a Nottingham Forest vs West Ham United game, 18th March 1967, though evidences would show that Johnson already had the idea for the novel back in 1966, when he discussed it with Davide Farrer, editor at Secker & Warburg. Johnson's biographer, Coe, maintains that on this specific occasion Johnson "took a special trip to Nottingham to watch another Saturday game, to remind himself of the atmosphere of the city and how it had felt to arrive there, at that railway station, more than two years ago" (J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 232). Consequently, Coe traces the crucial visit back to Boxing Day 1964, a Nottingham Forest vs Tottenham Hotspurs game, a few weeks after Tony's death: two years must have thus passed, owing to Coe, between the genesis of the idea and the actual writing of the novel (see *ibid*., p. 230).
[181] B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*' working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[182] Maine Road has hosted all home matches of Manchester City until its demolition in 2004.

reporting section, in which Johnson, while observing the game, tries to jot down the article he has to write for the paper he is working for. Throughout this process, Johnson finds himself dealing with the mediocrities involved in football-reporting, the clichéd language and the quickly-assembled kind of writing it requires. He even wonders whether "this bloody reporting affect, destroy even, my own interest in language[183]".

His personal struggle and his contempt for the external pressures he has to sustain within the conventions of this kind of writing – in clear opposition to the freedom of expression he can enjoy in his creative writing – is perfectly epitomised and given voice to in passages such as the following: "*It was obviously not Phipp's* they'll get the apostrophe wrong, or do I underestimate them *and yet in one way it was, his lucky day: Holman, hunting* yes! *round for a way through* that's the sort of horrible pun they hate, I enjoy, and trying to get through them, too[184]". All the frustration of the writer-reporter trying to convey the importance of what he sees as the kernel of the game is then illustrated by the treatment that the papermen reserve to his final text. "That's the story, then the story, as the subs will think. It doesn't matter what happens in the last eight minutes, that's the match, that's the story[185]", says the narrator, referring to the key episode – City's fortunate late-time goal – which will define the whole match. A long and passionate description ensues, full of witty adjectives and composite words, which afterwards Johnson spends great effort in trying to communicate and spell out via phone to the papermen. By looking at the final, authentic article pasted on the inside of the box of *The Unfortunates*, however, one can sadly assess that what remains of Johnson's writerly efforts, after the cuttings and manipulations operated by the editors, is only this: "And then farce. Gordon hit a fierce shot, the ball struck Mull's outstretched foot and went over Edson into the goal[186]". Needless to say, all composite words and witticisms have been removed from the final article.

If on the one hand, with *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates*, Johnson begins to gravitate towards a form of essentially solipsistic truth, on the other a general sense of solid objectivity is still maintained, here as in previous novels, through the recourse to a marked emphasis on very tangible situations and to constant references to a material world which often intrudes into the text. In both *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates* the action is neatly divided into past and present moments, with some sections consisting of the narrator's elucubrations and analyses of his own past, while others refer to the tangible situation in which the narration and the act of remembering are actually taking place.

In *Trawl*, the materiality of the present situation often intrudes all too painfully for the narrator, interrupting the flow of his memories: as he seeks concentration and recollection in the relative peace of his assigned bunk, where he performs his retrospections, the fishing activities and the

[183] B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, "The pitch worn…", p. 7.
[184] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[185] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[186] *Ibid.*, Righthand inside of box.

maneuverings taking place on deck call him back regularly to the urgency of what is happening right above his head. As he himself explains in one of the very first passages:

> So every two hours or so, or two and a half, or sometimes longer, at the intuition of the skipper, *CRAANGK!* the towing block goes against my head, it seems, even inside my head, sometimes, it seems; and I am awoken often, if I am asleep, or disturbed in my thinking, if I have thoughts, perhaps as often, as rarely am I able to sleep through it[187].

At many junctures, then, the noise of the towing block explodes, forcing chains of reasoning and sentences to break abruptly in midway. On such occasions, the primacy of the material world is re-asserted over the much more abstract dimension of the narrator's mental landscapes, as he is consequently forced to abandon his streams of thoughts and face the tangible demands of the surroundings interacting with him: "*CRAANGK!* · · Ah, they haul again, recall me again to my state, to this narrow bunk, the ventilation orifice which plays fresh air on to my face, the curtain rail, which is not perhaps brass, merely brassed, I do not know, I can hardly tell, no matter, think, back again, where was I?[188]".

Such junctures appear to be as important in the economy of the novel as the sections in which Johnson forces himself to deal with his past, which is the alleged reason why he has embarked on the trawler in the first place: once on board, however, and despite the importance of the mental, introspective aspect of his narrative, he feels equally compelled to let the surrounding materiality seep into the text and establish its own independent rules. This happens also, for instance, in numerous passages in which he suffers from seasickness, another of the reasons why he is sometimes forced to interrupt the analysis of his past. In these situations, he often feels a sort of compulsion to recur to some firm object within hand's reach, as if in the attempt to re-establish some kind of balance or sense of rootedness, even to a temporary ground:

> The blood on my hands, the · · puke, · · · · · Lie down, · · should lie down. · · Yes, · · relief at failing to stay up here. · · · · · Yes, · · door, alleyway, avoid fishguts this time. · · Down steps, so narrow, steep, brass-treaded, wooden, down […] · · Watch the jute on the floor, for safety, unsteady […] · · Just be, build up pillow, mattress feel as though stuffed with hay, but comfortable, or straw, or grass[189].

Sometimes even a small material detail can be of help to restore him to his present situation, as the piece of mahogany woodwork he apparently sees every time he wakes up in his bunk: "oooooooooaaaaaah · · · · · worn edge · · · · · mahogany · · · · · worn · · edge · · mahogany · · ooooah · · · · · careful · · carefully lift head · · aaaaah · · not so bad, not so badly · · the head · · this morning · · if

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[187] Id., *Trawl*, p. 8.
[188] *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.
[189] *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

it is this morning[190]"; "greenblue · · · · · mahogany · · beer can · · the wood · · the polish, sheets, no pillows · · […] Christ, it's seven, I must have slept all of twelve hours[191]".

In the highly metaphorical bundle of connections linking the different narrative levels of *Trawl*, the narrator's returns to the materiality of the ship, and especially of his bunk, also signify a return to the present from the deep mental introspections he has to sink into in order to go on with his narration. So he wonders: "Why do I trawl the delicate mesh of my mind over the snagged and broken floor of my past? · · · · · In order to live, the question does not need to be asked, for me[192]". Yet, a regular return to the present and to the tangible situation of the trawler appears equally necessary to the narrator, to reassert the importance of his objectively being there at that precise moment and breaking from time to time the flow of the mental projections of his own past.

The interconnectedness of past and present, abstraction and materiality, introspection and action in *Trawl* are also enhanced by the very structure of the novel: a unique textual continuum streaming at the centre of the page, kept cohesive by the dots flowing at mid-line and reminding the reader of the lulling of the waves, enveloping both the act of remembering and the memories themselves. Curiously enough, in an early draft of *Trawl*, Johnson intended to separate past and present moments in his narration much neatlier, by signaling the introspective sections through italic and leaving the sections regarding the life on board the ship in roman type[193]. In the final top copy of the manuscript, the same indication is initially maintained, only to be crossed out later in favour of the final solution, which is the same of the published version (all sections are written in roman, with the italic used only to indicate Latin expressions or the *CRRANGK!* sound)[194]. This latter decision clearly indicates Johnson's intention to mingle past and present in *Trawl*, giving equal emphasis to the mental and the tangible aspects of his narration and exploiting the most the metaphoric potential of the trawling and fishing images present throughout the novel.

The emphasis on materiality and tangibility in *The Unfortunates* is instead part of Johnson's intention to "get it all down[195]", that is, to give an immortal shape to the history of his friend Tony and the experiences the two lived together. Despite the narrator's awareness of the fallibility of his own mind, and the sometimes faulty or incomplete memories which prevent him from achieving a definite form of objectivity, the novel is crammed with detailed descriptions of scenes and settings that originate from Johnson's compulsion to recreate as faithfully as possible on the page the situations he personally experienced with Tony. He seems to express a belief that, on the one hand, going over the details so obsessively and thoroughly will help him exorcise the pain of his friend's

[190] *Ibid.*, p. 109.
[191] *Ibid.*, p. 145.
[192] *Ibid.*, p. 21.
[193] See id., *Trawl*'s typescript, third revision, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[194] See id., *Trawl*'s final typescript, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[195] Id, *The Unfortunates*, "So he came to his parents…", p. 5.

death, allowing him, on the other, to transpose into literature these snapshots of his own past with Tony, giving him – and them – a form of immortality. The attempts at recreating exactly the settings and the scenes of his past are also indirect attempts at bringing Tony back to life, as the narrator's struggle with his imperfect memory can be read as a metaphor for the ultimate unattainability of this goal.

The final sensation, however, which is probably part of Johnson's original plan, is that in the process of trying to "place his order, his disintegration[196]", it is the chaos of experience which prevails over any attempt at imposing order on it. The final section of the novel is indeed a triumph of fragmentation, with apparently gratuitous descriptions of the setting interposed between the narrator's final considerations and his attempts at finding the ultimate meaning of all that he has been elucubrating on. At the end, all his efforts at reconstructing the past, at understanding reasons and finding meanings in what has happened are defeated by the bare and terrible simplicity of pure suffering, of the barren and basic truth of life and death: "Can any death be meaningful? Or meaningless? Are these terms one can use about death? I don't know, I just feel the pain, the pain[197]"; "only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us[198]".

The fact that *The Unfortunates* lacks the final dot after this closing sentence desperately adds to its sense of incompleteness and failure. Likewise, its fragmentary structure continuously reminds the reader, in an extremely material way, that all is chaos and disintegration, that reality always eludes our grip, as shown by the loose sections of the novel constantly resisting our efforts to keep them together and find some form of consecutiveness amidst them.

IV. Stepping back to go forward

"I shall return shortly to readers and communicating with them. But first there are two other novels, and they represent a change (again!) of direction, an elbow joint in the arm, still part of the same but perhaps going another way[199]": this is how Johnson refers to the subsequent two novels of his production, *House Mother Normal* and *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*. The change of direction represented by these texts, in fact, continues to create numerous problems to anyone trying to position them within Johnson's canon, especially considering the dogmatic conclusions he had reached in his general ideological development prior to their publication. The main issue concerns

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[196] *Ibid*., "First", p. 4.
[197] *Ibid*., "Last", p. 4.
[198] *Ibid*., p. 6.
[199] Id., *Aren't You rather Young…*, p. 26.

the fact that, whereas *Albert Angelo*, *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates* were basically autobiographical novels, all attempting to transpose, in some way, Johnson's life into literature, *Christie Malry* and *House Mother Normal* mark instead an unexpected relapse into fictional invention, freely employing what the post-*Albert Angelo* Johnson would not hesitate to dismiss – and condemn – as lies.

How can one justify such a shocking retraction of Johnson's writerly principles? The answer the author provides, for his own part, is a candidly practical one: "The ideas for both *House Mother Normal* (1971) and *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973) came to me whilst writing *Travelling People* […], but the subsequent three personal novels interposed themselves, demanded to be written first[200]". This may seem perfectly understandable, and would also match with Johnson's own resigned observation, jotted down in an early notebook, that "No novel is ever the novel I want to write, at the time I write it[201]", a bitter truth many writers are liable to face sooner or later in their career. It is however puzzling that an ideology-driven, dogmatic and self-conscious writer like Johnson, in his obsessive commitment to truth, would light-heartedly accept such a compromise, even in spite of all the practical motivations of the case. However interesting it might be to try and grasp the deepest reasons for this authorial choice, it is perhaps more important to focus on the impact that this unexpected return to fiction had on his actual production, and the way the author dealt with the inevitable dilemmas that it generated in his ideological system.

One first evident difference between these two novels and the previous ones regards the figure and role of the narrator. The authorial voice speaking in both *Christy Malry* and *House Mother Normal* is no longer that of the historical Johnson, but rather a textual projection of the author, interacting with both his characters and the reader. In *House Mother Normal*, for the first time in Johnson's production since *Travelling People*, there is a surprising variety of points of view: each chapter is dedicated to a different character and filtered through his/her personal perceptions – often faulty ones –, so that the reader is presented with eight different versions of the same events taking place in an old people's home, each time according to the reactions they provoke in one of the chosen inmates.

The closest character to Johnson, also entrusted with the scepter of authority, is in this case the House Mother herself. She is the one who addresses the reader directly from the very incipit, introducing the narrative situation and the proverbial rules of the game: "Friend (I may call you friend?), these are our friends. […] You may join if you wish our Social Evening, friend. You shall see into the minds of our eight old friends, and you shall see into my mind. You shall follow our Social Evening through nine different minds![202]". Her manipulative and prevaricating character is

[200] *Ivi*.
[201] Id., Notebook 6, 1963-1964, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[202] Id., *House Mother Normal* (1971), New Directions, New York 2016, p. 5.

soon revealed in the way she coordinates all the operations and activities of the nursing home, setting a neat scheme to be strictly followed by each of the inmates: "You find our friends dining, first, and later singing, working, playing, travelling, competing, discussing, and finally being entertained[203]". By no chance Johnson, at an early stage, had thought about stressing the leading, dictatorial role of the House Mother by giving the novel a title such as "HM to play; HM Decides / Defines / Defaults / Presides[204]".

A subtle game is being played here on the idea of "authority" of the House Mother: on the one hand, she is the actual head of the institution, exercising her power on her subjects; on the other, she is Johnson's lieutenant, representing the authority of the author himself, and exercising it in the text. The activities she foists upon the inmates have the sole apparent function of setting the narrative going, and sustaining it throughout. The way she orders about everybody, behaving dictatorially and claiming to decide every aspect of their daily routine is in a way a metaphor for the role of the external author himself, who exercises his unquestionable and omnipotent authority on his characters and on his material.

This is evident for instance in the following passage, in which the House Mother asserts her total control on her subjects: "My children. From this dais I am monarch of all I survey. This is my Empire. I do not exaggerate, friend. They are dependent upon me and upon such minions as I have from time to time. Nothing is more sure than that I am in control of them. and they know it[205]". The House Mother's vicinity to Johnson was after all part of the author's original plan, as evinced by at least a couple of entries in his personal planning notes for the novel: "House Mother: in her bit is an exposé that it is me, they are all a concoction, puppets by me![206]". The communion between Johnson and her is further emphasized in another enigmatic formula, which attributes a particular line to "HM / me[207]". In the closing section of the novel, consequently, the House Mother presents all the ambiguities of her relationship to the external author. On the one hand, she appears as the author's own reflection within the textual world[208], in that she has the power to set up rules and frames for

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[203] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[204] Id., *House Mother Normal* working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library. There is an interesting allusion to Beckett's play *Endgame* to be noted in the first prospective title, "HM to play". In Beckett's text, the blind character Hamm (the letters of whose name, incidentally though perhaps not by chance, recall directly those of the House Mother, "HM"), equally dictatorially presides over much of the action being performed on stage, forcing himself and the other characters to move as they were all pieces of a game of chess. The recurrent line of this incredibly performance-conscious character is, quite appropriately: "Me to play!" (See S. Beckett, *Endgame* [1958], in id., *The Complete Dramatic Works*, Faber and Faber, London 2006, pp. 89-135).

[205] B.S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal*, p. 190.

[206] B.S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal* working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.

[207] *Ibid.*

[208] In some passages, the discourse of the House Mother even overlaps interestingly with that of the supposed external author. At a given point, for instance, Johnson has her show an extreme metafictional self-consciousness by indirectly addressing whoever will preside over the printing processes of the final book: "When I was eight I wanted to be a fairy in a ballet, ho ho ho! he he he! ha ha ha! he he he! and similar printers' straitjackets for the gusty, exploding liberation of laughter" (id., *House Mother Normal*, pp. 193-194).

others to act upon, and to break those very frames herself, as she does in fact towards the end – "And here you see, friend, I am about to step / outside the convention, the framework of twenty-one pages per person[209]".

On the other hand, though, like all the other characters, she is also controlled and moved in her turn by the author's will: she is also a puppet, so that her authority, both in the sense of her standing for the external author and of possessing the power to direct the moves of the other characters, is ultimately exposed as an illusion and a sham. This allows us to perceive all the irony intrinsic in her previous affirmations. The closing lines reveal the ultimate difference of the House Mother from Johnson-the author, who indirectly claims back, through her, his throne as the sole omniscient agent behind it all: "Thus you see I too am the puppet or concoction of a writer (you always knew there was a writer behind it all? Ah, there's no fooling you readers!) […] So you see this is from his skull. It is a diagram of certain aspects of the inside of his skull! What a laugh! […] Still, I'll finish off for him[210]".

The figure of the House Mother thus functions also as a powerful catalyser for some of Johnson's inveterate obsessions, such as the need and desire to impose patterns of order on the chaos of experience. This is moreover effectively linked, in the context of this novel, to an underlying atmosphere of constant rebellion, a movement of resistance and opposition to any such form of artificial prevarication which can be perceived both at a formal level and at that of mere narrative action. On the one hand, we witness a more or less direct though persistent resistance of all the characters with respect to the orders imparted by the House Mother and her dictatorial behaviours: every single inmate appears to have his or her own little ways of sabotaging the activities and pass-times devised and imposed on them by the House Mother, with a clear demarcation often visible between what an inmate says and what they actually think by themselves – this being masterfully signaled by an alternation of roman and italics. It thus happens fairly often that a given inmate should express inwardly all his/her contempt for what the House Mother says or does, as illustrated for instance in this passage related to Charlie Edwards: "Some would revolt at some of the things that woman says. I do myself. But I keep my feelings to myself. It would not do to be seen to revolt, I am in some ways revolting in myself[211]".

What is more interesting, however, is how this rebellion is articulated also – and perhaps even more effectively – at an indirect level: this can indeed be easily assessed by comparing the various

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[209] *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204. The chapters of the novel are organised as sections of 21 pages each, with each page and each single line representing a given character's reaction, ideally, to the same event or action taking place at that particular point throughout all other sections. This self-imposed rule is maintained for all characters except for the House Mother, with her "step[ping] outside the convention" occurring exactly between the end of page 21 and the beginning of page 22 of her own section.

[210] *Ibid.*, p. 204.

[211] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

discourses of the House Mother in her own section with the corresponding points in all other sections. In this way, it is possible to realise how every single inmate follows in fact their own personal streams of thoughts, giving only a passing and uninterested notice to what happens all around them – the closing line of each section, by no chance, runs "Listen to her! No, doesn't matter[212]".

The way each character, despite their growing impotence, asserts their own autonomy over the homogenising manipulations and tight schedules of the House Mother can thus be read as a formal metaphor for the novel's material rebelling against the artificial orderings imposed by the author. In other words, it is as if Johnson, by removing himself as a tangible figure from the textual world and retreating again to his lofty seat of omniscient external author, was demonstrating precisely, once again, how such stance is ultimately incompatible with any model of truthful literature, since such artificial impositions cannot ultimately overcome the natural chaos intrinsic in all things. One loquacious entry to be found among Johnson's personal notes of this period, which would later be incorporated in the slightly later *Christie Malry*, seems indeed to confirm this latter view: "If it is all chaos (or even if it only seems so) then any attempt to understand or rationalize about it is WASTED EFFORT so don't[213]".

All this considered, a novel like *House Mother Normal* can be seen as a perfect embodiment of chaos having its revenge on the patterns tentatively imposed on it by any kind of manipulative exterior agency. On the other hand, it is also possible to impute the rebellious tension pervading this text to Johnson's alleged inner ideological frictions, caused in their turn by his abrupt return to fictional invention as a major compositional method. For *House Mother Normal* is, after all, the least autobiographical novel in all the author's production, the furthest Johnson has ever gone from his much cherished and obsessive ideal of solipsistic truth, and its coming right after such deeply personal texts as *Albert Angelo*, *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates* constitutes quite a huge paradox in itself. A close friend and reader of Johnson, Zulfikar Ghose, was indeed quick to detect the jarring aspect of this novel within the author's production: "I wondered – thinking of your own principle of fiction telling truth – how any of the interior monologues could be truth. It is not your experience. […] One's consciousness – even, I imagine though I don't know (and neither do you) at 90 – takes in a lot more[214]".

The presence of the House Mother, and the particular role assigned to her, especially in the closing pages of the novel, assumes thus an important ideological significance, for she can be said to function as a necessary justification which Johnson has felt the compulsion to provide for this

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[212] *Ibid*., pp. 27; 49; 71; 93; 115; 137. The last two inmates, George Hedbury and Rosetta Stanton, are not conscious enough to articulate the entire sentence, Mrs. Stanton being even possibly dead by page 16 of her own section.

[213] Id., Notebook 8, begun 1.05.1969, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library. The next available notebook was begun in May 1972.

[214] Z. Ghose, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 10.01.1971, in V. Guignery (ed.), *The B. S. Johnson – Zulfikar Ghose Correspondence*, p. 354.

apparently backward move in his ideological output. Johnson comments indeed with relief with regard to the House Mother functioning as his lieutenant in the text, a puppet-master in its turn moved by the author's strings: "in her bit is an exposé that it is me, they are all a concoction, puppets by me! Good – ties in with past work![215]". Her stepping outside the narrative framework in the final pages, her lifting the mask to reveal there is an author behind it all, is however easily perceived by the reader as an unnecessary gesture in a "Geriatric Comedy[216]" dealing with life in a nursing home and with the way old people experience reality. With a deep difference with respect to *Albert Angelo*, in which a similar gesture is the moment which gives significance to the whole novel and to which effect all other elements seem to concur, this revelation, here, appears instead to be rather out of tune with the rest of the material, and ultimately forcible, superfluous. Not by chance, the end of the House Mother section has always been the part most fiercely criticised about this novel, and the same Ghose has once again noted its paradoxical, jarring nature with respect to the rest of the book: "I was surprised by the ending where the House Mother says that it's all from the writer's skull. Surely, this is inconsistent? […] A more important consideration is that you no longer need to add this kind of statement, for anyone who knows your work is aware of the fact already[217]".

The simple truth, very likely, is that yes, this part *is* inconsistent, superfluous and paradoxical, and it even disrupts the otherwise fine equilibrium of the whole text; the very fact of its presence in the novel, however, is a telling evidence of how Johnson needed some form of justification, more for himself than for his readers or for the sake of the text in itself, so that the fictional character of the whole work would become tolerable to his own self-judging eyes, and be somehow reconciled to the rest of his production. The sensation is, to conclude with, that had this text been written at a different phase of Johnson's writing – i.e., at a stage when *Albert Angelo* had yet to be conceived, when this novel was in fact originally meant to be written –, the ending would have been of a totally different character, and the House Mother's final revelation would not have been even necessary. In other words, *House Mother Normal* is an interesting, though perhaps sad example of how Johnson, at this stage of his development, was limiting and conditioning himself by the over-obsessive architecture of his own dogmas, to which he could not stand to be untrue, despite all the difficulties that they were evidently causing in his own writing activity[218].

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[215] B.S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal* working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.

[216] *House Mother Normal: A Geriatric Comedy* is in fact the complete title of the novel.

[217] Z. Ghose, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 10.01.1971, in V. Guignery (ed.), *The B. S. Johnson – Zulfikar Ghose Correspondence*, pp. 354-355.

[218] Signs of a growing dissatisfaction towards his own work, and of his feeling of writing himself out at this point are persistent through Johnson's personal writings of the period. In one of his personal notebooks, Johnson writes, on 26.06.1972: "Sometimes I feel like Mr. Endon: in my career I played out all my pieces – now I am playing them all back again. Except one" (B.S. Johnson, Notebook 8, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library). The allusion, here, is of course to the absurd game of chess which Murphy plays against Mr Endon, an inmate at the mental institution in which the protagonist of Beckett's novel is working as a warden (see S. Beckett, *Murphy*, pp. 134-138).

Similar dynamics can be observed in *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* as well. The figure of the author, though again not present at the level of diegesis as in *House Mother Normal*, resurfaces here in a more tangible form, this time as an obtrusive manipulating voice which engages in a constant dialogue with both the reader and his material. This particular character of the narrating voice, its invasiveness and direct agency over the text, is manifest already since the very table of Contents, in which the self-conscious and playful nature of the whole text is foregrounded. Such table – "(A deliberate attempt at reviving the archaic page of) Contents[219]", as indicated in a typescript version of the novel – is indeed organised as that of a picaresque novel, in which every single entry is followed by a brief indication of what the given chapter is about (e.g. "CHAPTER V. The Duel of Dictionary Words between Skater and Wagner; and the Revelation of the Latter's Nickname[220]"). By employing this device, Johnson provides the reader with a sort of synthesised narration in itself before the novel has even properly commenced, warning them indirectly that the narration will be a self-conscious one, in which the authorial figure is transparently in charge of everything, knowing everything that is going to happen in advance, and inviting the reader since the very beginning to take part in his game.

The rest of the book proceeds in the same vein, with numerous intrusions on the part of the narrator, who freely and constantly arrogates the right to manipulate the text, move his characters around like puppets and introduce new variables and plot twists without concealing anything to the reader. Many of the characters themselves, moreover, are perfectly aware of being part of a work of fiction, and appear to collaborate eagerly with the external author: this happens for instance with Christie's mother, who accepts stoically to die once she realises that her mission in the book has been accomplished[221], or the Shrike's mother – the Shrike being Christie's fiancée –, content that her daughter has been "placed in a respectable novel like this[222]"; or again with Headlam, with his many self-conscious comments about the novel itself[223], and of course Christie, who often and profitably engages in direct dialogues with the author.

Another aspect which comes to prominence in *Christie Malry* – and which also marks an important change of direction with respect to Johnson's previous works – is the neat distinction which

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[219] B.S. Johnson, *Chirstie Marly's Own Double-Entry*, revised typescript copy, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library. The text in brackets appears crossed out in this version, a sign that Johnson – very likely under the pressure of his publisher – finally opted to drop out the first, more intricated formulation and simply write "Contents", as appears in the final version of the novel.

[220] Id., *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973), Picador, London 2001, p. 7.

[221] "My son: I have for the purposes of this novel been your mother for the past eighteen years and five months to the day. […] Now that you have had your Great Idea and are set upon your life's work there is nothing further for me to do. […] My welcome is outstayed. I have lived as much of my life as I wished. It is simply time to go. […] Christie's mother died" (*ibid*., pp. 27; 30).

[222] "Aaaaer, it was worth it, all those years of sacrifice, just to get my daughter placed in a respectable novel like this, you know" (*ibid*., p. 156).

[223] See passages such as: "Parsons looks like being indisposed for the rest of this novel. […] In fact, I think he's just caught something fatal"; "Headlam paused to provide a paragraph break for resting the reader's eye in what might otherwise have been a daunting mass of type"; "I don't know, how could I? But since I seem to be the comic relief in this novel…" (*ibid*., pp. 95; 100; 103).

is made between the authorial voice and that of the main protagonist. Since the very opening passages, it is indeed obvious that we are dealing with an extradiegetic voice, presenting from the outside the vicissitudes of the protagonist Christie in the third person – a narrative mode which Johnson had previously employed only in his first novel, *Travelling People*. The incipit of *Christie Malry* reads as follows:

> Christie Malry was a simple person.
> It did not take him long to realise that he had not been born into money; that he would therefore have to acquire it as best he could; […] and that the course most likely to benefit him would be to place himself next to money, or at least next to those who were making it. He therefore decided that he should become a bank employee.
> I did tell you Christie was a simple person[224].

Christie is thus presented as an absolutely separate entity, with no visible ties with the narrator. The general manipulative character of the authorial voice, moreover, plus the fact that it controls and presides over every element of the text, only tend to enhance the general sense of the narrator's superiority and detachedness from both characters and material. Such basic separation of authorial and the protagonist's voice, after all, was meant by Johnson to be a basic feature of this novel already since its germination stage, as is made evident even by a quick glance to the various notes in his working papers which regard this very issue: "The chief character must be in interior monologue BUT he must be set (and set up) by/through others"; "The only exception to interior monologue can be the author making it clear all the time (- decent intervals) that he is there, making it all up. / But there must be some Xtie int. mon.[225]".

In the final version of the novel the interior monologues related to Christie are reduced to just a couple of isolated instances, and much greater prominence is given to the expositions of the narrator; the moments in which interior monologues do occur, however, are greatly emphasised, both via some self-conscious disclaimers made by the narrator and with the use of italics to indicate Christie's thoughts. The narrator warns the reader in the following way, for instance, in a chapter in which he feels the need to introduce Christie's interior world more directly to his audience: "For the following passage it seems to me necessary to attempt transcursion into Christie's mind; an illusion of transcursion, that is, of course, since you know only too well in whose mind it all really takes place[226]".

In another key chapter, "In which Christie and I have it All Out[227]", the main character is made instead to interact directly with the narrator, who illustrates to him parts of the plan he has in store for him:

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[224] *Ibid*, p. 11.
[225] Id., *Christie Malry* working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.
[226] Id., *Christie Malry*, p. 23.
[227] *Ibid*., p. 163.

'Christie,' I warned him, 'it does not seem to me possible to take this novel much further. I'm sorry.'
'Don't be sorry,' said Christie, in a kindly manner, 'don't be sorry. We don't equate length with importance, do we? […]'.
'I'm glad you understand so readily,' I said, relieved.
[…] 'So I do go on a little longer?' interrupted Christie.
'Yes, Christie, you go on to the end', I assured him[228].

It is on this occasion, moreover, that Johnson expresses, via Christie, some of his most notorious and bitter remarks about the art of the novel, which almost sound as a resigned testament on the author's part: "The writing of a novel is in itself an anachronistic act: it was relevant only to a society and a set of social conditions which no longer exist. […] The novel should now try simply to be Funny, Brutalist, and Short[229]". The whole conversation between author-narrator and protagonist is perfectly summarised by Christie's final remark, that "[y]our work has been a continuous dialogue with form[230]".

If the relationship between the narrator of *Christie Malry* and Christie himself seems to be clearly established in the novel, that between Johnson and his protagonist presents some interesting ambiguities instead. Some of the motives, contents, and especially the setting of the novel, in fact, are directly inspired by Johnson's own biographical experiences, mainly related to the interim period in which he briefly worked as an accountant upon leaving school, and before enrolling at King's College in 1956. By no chance, Johnson's preparatory notes towards *Christie Malry* are full of references to his youth and to this spell of his working life spent in the Hammersmith area, which clearly pins the action of the novel to that particular milieu, and to the sensations and the memories this evoked retrospectively, after so many years, in the author's consciousness: "Motive: frustration at the way society is/has/will treat him. […] / The key is Fuller's: H'smith Bdy comes into my mind as the key situation, place, location for this frustration"; "Motives do not help us. / But this is Xtie's Young life. / (Then invent (my) happy young life in working-class Hammersmith/Barnes/Mortlake)[231]".

A certain deep link between Christie and his environment and Johnson's own memories of his days as an accountant is thus evident, and the exposition presented in the first chapter of the novel reads indeed as an indirect account of that corresponding phase in Johnson's own life:

So Christie started at the Hammersmith branch (conveniently near his home) of this nationally-known concern one Monday morning in October. From the comparative shelter of his school […] it was a painful transposition. […] What he did not expect was the atmosphere in which he was expected to work. […] This atmosphere was acrid with frustration, boredom and

[228] *Ibid*., p. 165.
[229] *Ivi*.
[230] *Ibid*., p. 166.
[231] Id., *Christie Malry* working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library. Quote in J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 316.

> jealousy, black with acrimony, pettiness and bureaucracy. […] In this atmosphere Christie quickly became bitter and unhappy himself. Nor did he feel himself to be nearer, in any sense that mattered, money[232].

The exposition of the subsequent steps of Christie's life is also a sort of rearrangement, in different chronological order, of Johnson's own experiences, and recalls both the author's attendance of a commercial school, in which he had learnt all the basic crafts of accounting, and his first professional forays in the field:

> Christie saw his move in two parts. The first was to pass up the sheltering lifelong security offered by the bank and to seek his fortune in one of those rash new companies which had been established less than a couple of centuries. The other was to embark on a course of study leading to examinations which, if passed, would give him a professional qualification as an accountant. […] Christie's new job was also in Hammersmith and not far from the bank, as it happened. […] In the evenings Christie would work at the correspondence course in Accountancy for which he had enrolled[233].

The importance of this direct link existing between Johnson's own life experiences and his novel is once again stressed in an article the author wrote regarding his own education: "I tried hard to be an accountant, to be what my education had fitted me for. Even now I have the marginal benefit of being able to touch-type this article; my new novel *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* leans very heavily on knowledge I gained in learning book-keeping[234]".

Despite the presence of such biographical links, and of some interesting convergences with his own character[235], the project of *Christie Malry* remains however totally different form previous autobiographical or semi-autobiographical novels by Johnson: this life material, in fact, has not been so much inserted here with an intention to create an atmosphere of authenticity, let alone to analyse particular moments of the author's past in order to unveil their deepest core of significance, as had been the case with *Trawl* and *The Unfortunate*. Instead, this biographical basis has served in *Christie*

[232] Id., *Christie Malry*, p. 13. At the corresponding phase of his own life Johnson was living with his parents in Barnes, 8 Meredyth Road; he began working at a branch of the National and Provincial Bank in 1951, after leaving school.

[233] *Ibid*., pp. 16-17. In actual fact, Johnson attended Kingston Day Commercial school when he was fourteen. There, he was taught "shorthand ([…] Gregg for the boys), typing, commerce and book-keeping; beside the usual things). It was a two-year course designed to turn out shorthand-typists and clerks" (B.S. Johnson, unpublished article for "Education & Training", completed 14.01.1973. Quoted in J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 52). After his experience in the world of banking, Johnson worked at a firm called Modern Builders, then at Fuller's bakery and finally at the Standard-Vacuum Oil Company. All these experiences are in one way or another incorporated into *Christie Malry*.

[234] B.S. Johnson, Unpublished article for "Education & Training". Quoted in J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 85.

[235] Interestingly, Johnson apparently intended to bring this convergence between himself and Christie to some extreme degrees at an initial stage, as the following note would seem to suggest: "Last section: all interior monologue wandering from me to Xtie and back again / […] until the two merge?" (B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry* working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library).

Malry as a launchpad to build a whole fictional structure[236], a moral, metaphorical tale[237] devised to exorcise a sense of personal and social injustice that Johnson had felt for his entire life. If in his actual experience Johnson, unlike the fictional Christie, had certainly never blown up – nor thought about doing it – any public building, nor poisoned to death thousands of Londoners in retaliation for the wrongs caused by the society in which he lived, with this novel he nevertheless took the occasion to perform an unprecedented flight of fantasy in order explore a metaphor of personal justice and address some deeply vital issues affecting his personal life.

Johnson had indeed famously formulated his realisation of a generalised and diffused social injustice already in *Trawl*, in which he expressed his thoughts in the following way:

> I now realise the point at which I became aware of class distinction, of differences between people which were nothing to do with age or size, aware in fact of the class war […]. The class war is being fought as viciously and destructively of human spirit as it has ever been in England: I was born on my side, and I cannot and will not desert: I became an enlisted man consciously but not voluntarily at the age of about seven[238].

In *Trawl*, this issue was already intimately interconnected with considerations about a sense of a more individual injustice, which Johnson feels he had to suffer either in the form of betrayals in his amorous affairs, or in the various biographical vicissitudes which prevented him from receiving a thorough education, denying him possibilities that other more fortunate contemporaries could instead take for granted. It was however with *Christie Malry* that Johnson began to address this problem in a more metaphorical, and thus universal way, relying on fictional invention to bring the issue to some extreme point, which he could perhaps never hope to achieve had he stayed blindly true to his dogma of "not telling lies[239]".

The position and the tangible interventions of the external narrator in *Christie Malry* appear to be profoundly connected to this issue. The double-entry system which Christie devises to achieve a form of personal and universal justice, crediting society for the wrongs he feels to have suffered and exacting a payment in return for them, transforms him ultimately in a terrorist and a mass-killer masked as a sort of fanatical super-hero with a crooked sense of justice. In his actions, Christie wants to substitute himself to God and acts accordingly, feeling even entitled to kill thousands of innocent

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[236] As Johnson himself variously predicted in his preparatory notes: "Great room for invention"; "Then any development is possible: it will be difficult to avoid going into phantasy?" (*ivi*).

[237] In his notes, Johnson interrogates himself more than once about the profoundly moral character of this story: "Is this a moral tale? I don't see how it can be anything else and still be true to this idea"; "Is this a moral tale? – it's a bit difficult to see what else it is if it isn't" (*ivi*).

[238] Id., *Trawl*, p. 53.

[239] Jonathan Coe also opines in this respect that "I believe it was only in *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* […] that he started to confront, as an artist, this duality, this simultaneous awareness of injustice as both a social and a personal phenomenon, and his attempt in that novel to forge a relationship between the two results merely in disintegration and breakdown" (J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 225).

people in the process. In the absence of a God – soon dismissed as a joke[240] –, Christie feels, after briefly arguing with himself, that it is society itself, by the way it treats human lives as something insignificant and perfectly replaceable, which makes such inhuman acts necessary and absolutely acceptable. This realisation, thus, eventually leads him to think that the sacrifice of so many useless lives is perfectly justifiable before the higher call and the perspective of a universal justice:

> Human life is cheap, dirt cheap, according to this society, judged by the way it acts, the only true test, saw Christie, despite its pious mouthings. […] So Christie was easily able to become one again. If they fight dirty (and they do), so shall I (he thought); if they are so callous about human life, then so shall I be (though I could not possibly kill as many as they do)[241].

At a parallel level, Johnson exploits his power as author of the text in a similar way, creating for himself the figure of an omniscient, omnipotent narrator playing God with his own material and disposing of the life of his characters in the same way as Christie appears to be doing in his acts of retaliation against society. In arrogating this right to himself, Johnson does not apparently seek, however, for balance and justice as Christie does, albeit in a distorted and solipsistic way. Rather, he espouses a vision of dominating disorder and lack of reasons, following a direction which became increasingly dear to him in the late phase of his career:

> Oh I could go on and on for pages and pages about Christie's young life, inventing and observing, remembering and borrowing. But why? All is chaos and unexplainable. These things happened. He is as he is, you are as you are. Act on that: all is chaos. The end is coming, truly. It is just so much wasted effort to attempt to understand anything[242].

In allowing Christie to do what he does, and in letting him accumulate a huge credit by his personal and more than arguable evaluations of injustices suffered and payments accordingly exacted, Johnson is in fact only playing with his protagonist. The illusion of order and balance which Christie builds up throughout the novel is indeed completely shattered, eventually, by the unpredictable major events which Johnson introduces: for Christie is ultimately killed off by a sudden cancer, and his double-entry is consequently abruptly closed by writing off the considerable balance still owed to him as bad debt. "… I need not have bothered, need I, it seems, if it all ends like this […] A mockery

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[240] It is Christie's mother who addresses him at one point with these words: "It is I who first told you the comic story of God, remember, which will no doubt be passed on to readers in due course" (B.S. Johnson, *Christie Marly*, p. 29). Some time later, Johnson reports this "comic story" as recounted by Christie's mum to him (the whole passage is in fact a paraphrasis of Rayner Heppenstall's thoughts as formulated in his autobiographical book *The Intellectual Part),* ending everything with Christie's sarcastic enthusiasm: "'I believe it! I believe it all!' / As we all do at the age of two" (*ibid.*., p. 80).

[241] *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116. In the corresponding reckonings, the voices of credit related to people killed by Christie are calculated, most cynically, according to this view: "Seven bodies, calculated at the rate of 1,30 each being an allowance for the commercial value of the chemicals contained therein: plus damage to property etc" (*ibid.*, p. 119). The "death of 20,479 innocent west Londoners" is later "calculated at the same rate […]; negligible damage to property involved, you will be relieved to hear" (*ibid.*, p. 151).

[242] *Ibid.*, p. 82.

of hope, of thinking of the next day. So I need not have bothered: all is useless, pointless waste / all, all is pointless[243]", bitterly ponders Christie in the end. It was his mother, however, who had long before warned him against the dangers of his obsession for justice and order in a life dominated by utter chaos:

> We fondly believe that there is going to be a reckoning, a day upon which all injustices are evened out, when what we have done will beyond doubt be seen to be right, when the light of our justification blazes forth upon the world. But we are wrong: learn, then, that there is not going to be any day of reckoning, except possibly by accident. It seems that enough accidents happen for it to be hope or even an expectation for most of us, the day of reckoning. But we shall die untidily, when we did not properly expect it, in a mess, most things unresolved, unreckoned, reflecting that it is all chaos. Even if we understand that all is chaos, the understanding itself represents a denial of chaos, and must therefore be an illusion[244].

Thus, the omniscient narrator of *Christie Malry* functions as a figure of negative God, an agent of chaos who demonstrates how any attempt to impose a pattern of order on the disordered and fragmentary nature of experience is ultimately futile. The obtrusiveness of the narrator and the violent end to which the novel is subjected appear to be somehow more justified here, and more contributive to the overall economy of the text than they are for instance in *House Mother Normal*. Still, *Christie Malry* does leave the reader, as the previous text, with a sense of extreme inconclusiveness and truncation, a building up of tension which leads to a final breakdown not easily nor completely justifiable in narrative terms. It might be that, once again, the massive employment of fictional elements was creating a tension in Johnson's ideological system, a tension which was eventually vented out through an abandonment to chaos and inconclusiveness; it might also be, on the other hand, that the very realisation that all is chaos was starting to affect Johnson's once unshakable dogmatic approach, causing him to reconsider his position on truth, or to re-direct his pursuit of it in an altogether new direction.

Certainly, some traumatic events in his personal life were only accruing this bitter feeling of overarching disintegration: the death by cancer of his mother in 1973 was in this sense only the latest blow, repeating a painful pattern Johnson had already experienced with his friend Tony[245]. Matrimonial tensions, financial difficulties, and a mounting sense of failure and aesthetic impasse

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[243] *Ibid.*, p. 178.
[244] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[245] Johnson comments his mother's death in these terms in a letter to his friend Zulfikar Ghose: "This Xmas has been made very drear by the death of my mother on 14th Dec, after a most distressing final illness of three weeks […]. It was just like Tony all over again, but this time I was much nearer, and saw her rot day by day, hour by hour some days. […] [H]er death upset me more than I could have suspected: I wept at her bedside, at the funeral, tears I did not suspect I had" (id., Letter to Z. Ghose, 26.12.1971, in V. Guignery (ed.), *The B. S. Johnson – Zulfikar Ghose Correspondence*, p. 365). The last four novels by Johnson, from *The Unfortunates* to *Christie Malry*, from *House Mother Normal* to *See the Old Lady Decently* (not counting the text of *You're Human Like the Rest of Them*), all contain more or less direct and extensive allusions to cancer, signalling how the chaotic and meaningless disintegration of the body caused by cancer had been afflicting and continued to afflict the author, shaping his views and possibly also his approach to writing throughout a considerably long phase of his mature production.

were doing the rest. Johnson's personal correspondence of this period betrays a growing feeling of abandonment, of giving in to the general disintegration he was seeing all around him, together with the feeling of having reached the long-feared cul-de-sac, of having finally written himself out. "The last three months […] have been full of work for next to no money. […] The two-book contract with Collins ended with the delivery of XTIE […]. I have a trilogy in mind. Then I suspect my contribution to the novel form will be at an end[246]", he confesses for instance to Ghose. Another, slightly later letter shows him in an even more desperate and bitter mood: "Thanks for being kind to my poems. […] But there, I think that no one is much good anyway, what's the point, etc.? Eh? WHAT IS THE FUCKING POINT? and don't give me all the old cock. There is no point: it is understanding this that is the point. You can […] verbiage on about what's in it: but what's in it is DEATH, nothing more[247]".

All the above elements undoubtedly influenced Johnson's formal and ideological approach to the novels of this period, distancing him from the much-cherished ideal of solipsistic truth he had pursued for much of his career. Looking at this issue from another angle, however, one could also argue that the urgency and intensity of these events in Johnson's life, their apparent character of chaos and disintegration, were at this point requiring him to modify his earlier and perhaps too rigid views, and to accept that these "lies" that were seeping in through the fabric of his dogmatic authenticity were in fact a symbolic though paradoxical reflection of the very disconcerting truths he was experiencing at this time of his life.

V. Synthesis

Johnson once referred to what he envisaged as the *Matrix Trilogy* – the projected triptych of novels on the subject of his mother's life and death, of which only the first chapter was written – as "the longest haul of all[248]". This image is in itself full of interesting allusions and associations: on the one hand, it suggests the length of the journey Johnson was to embark on, in terms of both writing time and the timespan to cover in the retrieval of his mother's past; on the other, it carries with it the same imagery of *Trawl*, with the author's "shoot[ing] the narrow trawl of [his] mind into the vasty sea of [his] past[249]", in search of anything valuable that might be fished out of those depths. A past, moreover, which on this occasion would have largely transcended even the span of his own life.

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[246] Id., Letter to Z. Ghose, 16.04.1972, in *ibid*., p. 371.
[247] Id., Letter to Z. Ghose, 13.07.1972, in *ibid*, p. 378.
[248] "Here with my yellow Fuller's pencil I begin the longest haul of all, self-consciously this Boxing Day", Johnson wrote on 26th December 1972, as he commenced working on what would become his last novel (id., *See the Old Lady Decently* working papers, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library).
[249] Id., *Trawl*, p. 9.

It is thus easy to see, already from these preliminary considerations, that *See the Old Lady Decently* marks a sort of return to an old concern of Johnson's, which was somewhat unexpectedly put aside in the previous couple of novels: the obsessive pursuit of truth. Given the fact, however, that this novel was to be dedicated to a reconstruction of another person's past not directly witnessed by the author, and so its truth, strictly speaking, could not be a solipsistic one any more, it follows that an alternative approach was required. The approach to adopt, thus, would logically involve either a documentary reconstruction, or some sort of intuitive speculation, if not the introduction of downright fictional elements, in order to fill in the inevitable gaps in the author's knowledge of his mother's life prior to his own birth. This is precisely what gives this novel its unique status within Johnson's canon, making of it an almost perfect synthesis of all the trends that have characterised the author's production across the years, that is, the equally crucial and apparently irreconcilable impulses towards truth and fiction.

One first consideration to be made with regard to the figure of the narrator in *See the Old Lady Decently* is the obvious return of Bryan Johnson as the undisguised historical individual behind the narration, which seems to place this novel back on the track the author had pursued up to *The Unfortunates* – ironically, another novel dealing with cancer. This is, after all, an alleged biographical book on the subject of a very specific person, Johnson's own mother, and the narrating voice could not be but his own, transparently and directly since the very beginning. And Johnson-the narrator appears immediately in the very first passages, addressing his readers – or what he thinks is left of them – in his inveterate sarcastic manner, challenging them to engage in his game of truth-reconstruction: "A twenties name, for this is imagined to take place in the twenties. Check me on the details, do. Though there are not so many left of you who can, are there?[250]".

Here, another crucial characteristic of this novel immediately comes to the fore, namely the necessary distinction, and indeed the interestingly peaceful coexistence, of truth and fiction within the same text. It is crucial to note, moreover, that this coexistence is carried out in this novel with a harmony which had perhaps always lacked in previous works by Johnson, where the presence of one often inevitably precluded that of the other – as in *Trawl* or *The Unfortunates* –, or where, alternatively, a juxtaposition of the two created an intolerable accumulation of pressure leading to an ultimate breakdown – in the case of *Albert Angelo*, *House Mother Normal* and *Christie Malry*. In this case, instead, the presence of both truth and fiction is justified by the very nature of the material and the subject matter chosen. As Michael Bakewell summarises in his introduction to the first, posthumous edition of the book:

> Where in the other largely autobiographical writing […] Bryan had been able to draw on his own knowledge, here he was faced with the fact that there were areas of his mother's childhood

[250] Id., *See the Old Lady Decently*, Hutchinson, London 1975, p. 17.

> and youth of which he could know nothing. […] He had therefore to draw the distinction between what was to be of necessity fiction, what was to be half fiction and half truth and what, in the final book, was to be All Truth[251].

An attentive reader will have noticed that, in this approach, all the previous strands of Johnson's writing are harmonised together, and possibly brought to an effective synthesis: from the moments of absolute truth of his most autobiographical novels, through those of compromise represented by a mixture of truth and fiction – *Travelling People* above all others –, and finally to those, equally important for the author, characterised by a transparent and self-proclaimed fiction. "The fiction he decided should be patently so[252]", continues Bakewell in his introduction: and the quintessentially fictional moments of *See the Old Lady Decently*, which comprise imagined scenes of his young mother working as a waitress in a café run by a dictatorial chef named Virrels, are indeed the passages in which the level of readerly engagement is at its highest.

Here, Johnson willingly negotiates with the reader the developments of his own imagination, refusing to conceal anything, sharing all his plans and often providing all kinds of possible alternatives: "I could have worked it in in another way, by having Virrels tell it to the Maître or to someone else, but surely you would rather have it straight, as it happens, as it occurs to me?[253]"; "The reader will at once have seen the means by which the Virrels dominance could be threatened. Given only that I have to invent a sexual appetite for the Checker stronger in the mornings than late at night, a space for the entry of the Maître can easily be created[254]" – and many other instances in this vein. At a given point, Johnson even bursts out in a pronouncement that sounds most unlikely for him, at least considering his early insistence on absolute truth, but which signals the recognition of the importance, in this mature phase of his writing, of the presence of fiction as well as truth: "but this is a distraction, the reader must be allowed to   I must be allowed to continue with the important thing: creating a fiction[255]".

In juxtaposition with these moments of absolute fiction, and in keeping with another compositional method often employed by the author in his early works, authentic documents are inserted which open important channels of communications with the outside world, letting reality infiltrate the text in a number of ways. Johnson, indeed, freely employs here elements such as photostats of real letters[256], descriptions of old photographs of his mother's family, an authentic poem

[251] Michael Bakewell, introduction to *See the Old Lady Decently*, in ibid., pp. 9-10.
[252] *Ivi*.
[253] B.S. Johnson, *ibid*., p. 29.
[254] *Ibid*., p. 55.
[255] *Ibid*., p. 57. Blank hiatus as in the original.
[256] This is for instance the case of an official letter by the Army, informing Mrs. Lambird – Johnson's maternal grandmother – of her husband's death, occurred as he was on duty on French territory (see *ibid*., pp. 42-43).

written by her grandmother[257] and scraps of audiotaped interviews he especially conducted with his father, incorporating his actual words into the text[258]. In the case of *See the Old Lady Decently*, such material is of course employed not so much in order to reconstruct an atmosphere of authenticity about a particular setting, but rather with the documentary impulse of a biographer to give a tangible life, in writing, to the person he is writing about. Not that the setting-reconstruction aspect is not in itself important to Johnson the biographer, as is demonstrated for instance by a number of allusions to the various sources he is consulting in order to give precise details about places, episodes and situations in the most reliable way possible; nonetheless, this obsession for detail is sometimes dismissed as trivial and dispersive, capable only of distracting the author from the real concern of his research, and always presenting him with the ultimate impossibility to know and include all the details of the situations he is writing about:

> So here I sit, […] surrounded by Larousse and Escoffier in search of clues as to how a restaurant Kitchen may have looked in the late 1920s when my mother began to work in one. Does it matter? Does anything matter? The thing is that all seems very similar. Nothing seems capable of being new, I feel as old as the whole of history, knowing everything that mankind can. Except the details[259].

In fact, being this novel a sort of synthesis of a range of methods and approaches previously employed in other works by Johnson, the impulse sometimes persists to give free rein to these apparently trivial details and anecdotal additions to the narrative of the author's mother. In this sense, an old concern of Johnson resurfaces at given junctures, transforming the narration in a pretext to let the whole of the outside world intrude and re-state its own urgency over the contents of the text. This happens for instance at one point, in which Johnson feels obliged to interrupt his fictional account of a Virrels scene to state the following:

> About four sentences back (I had to finish before saying this, for some reason) I went out to a pub called the Albion and what with sleeping that off, playing absurd cricket with my son and his mates, and attending to similar necessaries it was some seven hours before I could resume. But in the Albion necessary house I read written on the wall the following which it seems to me might disgust some of you but make a point for me, too[260].

An indecent joke follows, the irrelevance of which is indicative of the resurfacing of Johnson's peculiar love for anecdotes, and for the fact that this passage has been possibly inserted simply to

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[257] The poem reported on pp. 100-101, written by Johnson's grandmother and dedicated to her husband's death, was to be reproduced in an earlier version of the typescript in Mrs. Lambird's original handwriting.

[258] For example: "She started, says my father in one of a number of statements made especially for this trilogy, as what they called a Tween Maid"; "A few words from an eyewitness follow: 'Oh, I must have seen your Mum dozens of times before I spoke to her, you know, and er one evening I just spoke to her, you know, like that, she was out with the dog, and I spoke to her, I used to be on the corner there, you know, with the boys and that. We used to go cycling, and we met like that. I spoke to her, and we just went together after that'" (B.S. Johnson, *See the Old Lady Decently*, pp. 70; 86-87).

[259] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[260] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

give the right prominence to the actual situation in which the writing itself was taking place, to what was really happening to the author at the moment he was composing the very text. This is so because the process of writing, for Johnson, has necessarily to be incorporated and revealed in as transparent a way as possible, especially in correspondence with the fictional passages of the novel. Another concern also arises here, of course, in relation to the feeling that it will always be impossible, for the author, to include the wholeness of the writing situation, the entirety of the outside world in his writing. The accumulation and the meditations on the alleged irrelevance or importance of certain details, accordingly, betrays at times a certain frustration on the author's part, leading at some junctures to a sense of impotence, breakdown and failure, as in the following passage:

> Yet here again there were things that happened I have not done justice to, to which I have not done justice. My wife pointed out the box which contained the crayon holder to me, for instance, her crucial part in the prolongation of my writing life, my life, should be acknowledged, praised, glorified even, given the theme, let alone the context, the text![261].

Passages like this show how in *See the Old Lady Decently* Johnson has definitely returned to embrace truth as his ultimate concern and objective, despite assimilating the lesson that some degree of fiction is always necessarily involved when trying to achieve this truth. In this sense, incidentally, Johnson appears to have belatedly welcomed in his writing the recommendation that his friend Lissauer had once made to him: "I hope you will come to see, without much more agony […], that truth, being the most elusive and inexpressible of all ethical virtues, is only to be arrived at by obliqueness or even its apparent opposite[262]". It is thus only superficially paradoxical if the most patently fictional parts of *See the Old Lady Decently* are also the occasions on which Johnson manages to achieve the highest degree of truth, even if this truth is to be referred to the act of writing rather than to the successful reconstruction of any aspects of his mother's figure and biography.

The incorporation of the process of writing into the text itself reaches here levels of unprecedented immediacy: whereas in a novel such as *Trawl* the reader could somehow always perceive that the elucubrations of the narrator on board the ship were in a way reconstructed artificially at a later stage, the scenes of *See the Old Lady Decently* in which the situation of the writer intrudes into the narration can be appreciated in all their authenticity – an authenticity which, of course, can never be ultimately checked by the reader, but which still transpires in a much more direct way here than what happens in previous novels by Johnson.

One such case, for instance, occurs when Johnson feels obliged to give precise details as to the house in which his mother took service as a young maid: "The house I can check on. I can do that

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[261] *Ibid*., p. 58. In another similar passage, the narrator vents out his resignation in the following way: "I can manage no more. Perhaps only for the moment, I may hope. Fumet is another word I had hoped to use" (*ibid*., p. 77).

[262] F. Lissauer, Letter to B.S. Johnson, 11.08.1964, B.S. Johnson Archive, British Library.

now, this evening. It will be good enough reason not to go on writing, propitiate my guilt effectively enough. I shall take this pad with me. The next sentence you read will have been written on location in Chester Square[263]". Shortly afterwards, he provides such description of the houses' premises: "Someone is in the garden, as I sit in the car at an unnecessary meter writing this […] – again I tell you, this is written as it happens[264]". Once accepted the ultimate impossibility, on the reader's part, to actually verify the truth of such statements, it is impossible not to highlight the impression of urgency and tangibility that Johnson manages nonetheless to transmit in such passages. On these occasions, he gives the reader the vivid impression that they are truly admitted to witnessing the writing process itself in a very direct way, which in its turn helps the author to captivate the reader's faith in the truthfulness of everything Johnson is telling about his mother, even, paradoxically, in the novel's parts which are manifestly fictional.

At different junctures, Johnson once again invites the reader to participate in his real-time situation by involving them in the material preoccupations that are tormenting him at the time of writing. On one such peculiar occasion, Johnson speaks of an Annual General Meeting of a society he is part of and which has caused him great distress, apparently impeding him in the prosecution of the novel:

> There has been a terrible gap since I last wrote about Virrels. Four days. The reason is that I was preparing what I was to say at the AGM of a Society of which I am a member. It was on a subject which is very important to me. […] I was going to put in my speech as a document, the speech, what I had to say, but I realise it is probably not very important to you. In any case, my motion failed […]. It has taken me two days to settle down to this novel again. Such activity is a direct drain on the same source of energy that is used in writing. Is it worth it? I often ask myself. […] Yet I cannot be uninvolved[265].

What is interesting is that the veracity of Johnson's statement can be actually checked in this case, at least by a contemporary reader. It appears that the meeting mentioned above corresponds to the AGM of the Society of Authors to which Johnson really took part on 26th July 1973, and on which occasion, owing to Eva Figes he called for "the instant resignation of the entire Committee of Management[266]". In a passage like this, it is evident that Johnson is embracing a compositional method in which the off-chance, aleatory elements of his material life outside of the text are welcomed into it, and consequently accommodated into the narration as they truly happen to him as he is writing. In other words, the text of *See the Old Lady Decently* does not configure itself as just a photography,

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[263] B.S. Johnson, *See the Old Lady Decently*, p. 66.
[264] *Ibid*., p. 67.
[265] *Ibid*., pp. 75-76.
[266] E. Figes, *B. S. Johnson*, in "Review of Contemporary Fiction", v. 5.2 (1985), p. 71. An integral reproduction of the actual speech delivered by Johnson on this occasion can be found in J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, pp. 347-351. Figes also remembers the occasion in a recorded interview with Sarah O'Reilly (see E. Figes, interview with Sarah O'Reilly, London, 7.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library).

more or less truthful or reconstructed, of his mother's life, but also as one of Johnson himself as he is writing the very book. In another occasion, he similarly incorporates the interruptions of his little daughter, who often barges in into his study to cause pleasant suspensions in the narration – or rather, causing the narration to continue on different binaries than those originally planned by the author:

> Where were we? I did actually break off at a full stop above, at Emily's knowledge of swearwords, by the way, though it must look like a contrivance. And so must this, since that little girl with something of my mother in her face has just brought me a roll baked by her mother, […] interrupted me where I write in isolation at the top of the house, such sweet interposition!
> I shall eat now, the manuscript stained on purpose with the melting butter.
> What a pity it is not possible for you all to read the ms![267].

Johnson's incorporation of his daughter's casual interposition here is in point of fact a much more important feature than it looks: the figure of Johnson's child is indeed a crucial inter-generational, unifying element in the exploration of "the renewal aspect of motherhood[268]" intended by the author as one of the novel's main concerns. The child, moreover, represents for Johnson an image of hope against the despair of his mother's untimely death, the promise of a constant regeneration, the continuation of the eternal circle of life and death symbolised by the Uroboros, another crucial concept with which the narration opens and is ultimately closed: "O let me open as though there were a beginning, though all there can be is the Great Round, uroboros, container of opposites, within which we war, laugh, and are silent[269]"; "So: it began with the Great Round, and everything had to follow[270]".

By no chance, Johnson expresses at times the need to hold his narration in suspension by appealing to the prolonged presence of his daughter, as if her interruptions were an integral part of his text, on an equal level of importance with respect to the reconstruction of his mother's life and all the rest. So much so that whenever she does not respond to his calls, this causes a painful feeling of disappointment in him, expressed by the terrible materiality of blank spaces in the sentence which symbolise her absence: "Suddenly she leaves the room, not saying *Night Night*, and the loss is noticeable. I call her, she does not return. The loss is   [271]".

The centrality of the material situation in which the actual writing is taking place is thus exposed in *See the Old Lady Decently* as one of the crucial concerns of the novel, possibly on the same level as Johnson's proper narrative of his own mother's life. Another feature connected to this, which comes to prominence as crucial in the economy of the novel, is naturally the figure of Johnson

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[267] B.S. Johnson, *See the Old Lady Decently*, pp. 27-28.
[268] See M. Bakewell, Introduction, in *ibid*., p. 8.
[269] *Ibid*., p. 17.
[270] *Ibid*., p. 139.
[271] *Ibid*., p. 57. Gaps in the original.

himself, both as a historical person and as the authorial instance controlling and weaving together the manifold elements of the text. This need to highlight the material presence of the author and the tangible situation of the writing process may be said to function, in *See the Old Lady Decently*, as a sort of counterbalance to the very nature of the novel, which is undoubtedly the most fragmented and least linear in the whole of Johnson's production: or better, it proceeds along so many parallel threads that it would be difficult for any reader to relate all of them to a single narrative core. The text, indeed, consists in a patchwork of different fragments, all indicated by a very complex system of lettering devised by Johnson himself, and comprising the aforesaid documents, correspondence, poems, fictional scenes, interviews and descriptions of photographs, authorial considerations, quotations from various other works and excerpts of historical manuals related to the history of Great Britain and the Empire. This because, in Johnson's intention, the narrative of his mother's life and death was to be paralleled by a narration of the rise and fall of the British Empire, with considerations on the ascent to glory and on the consequent decadence of the whole nation, thus creating a complex and huge metaphor which is possibly the weakest and least effective aspect of the novel.

It is thus natural to think that, amidst this undisciplined whirlpool of fragments, Johnson would need a sort of unmovable centre, which would function as an anchor point to which he could at all times bring back any other element in the text, for the sake of homogeneity and coherence. It is also legitimate to think, given the subject matter of this book, that such centre would naturally correspond to the figure of his mother; as happened already in *The Unfortunates*, however, in which the narration of Tony's life and death was subjected to the very personal filter of Johnson's own mind, the impression in reading *See the Old Lady Decently* is that it is actually Johnson himself, once again, who functions as the pivotal solipsistic core through which every other element of this most intricated biography is ultimately justified. Despite the objectivity of some fragments and documents inserted in the novel, everything still relies heavily on Johnson's own conscience and point of view, as he is ultimately the weaver and controller of all the various strands of narrative, and the deviser of the whole narrative structure of the novel.

By no chance, moreover, what is probably the highest peak of this first chapter of the trilogy corresponds to the Shandean conception of Johnson himself:

> It is only with the greatest difficulty, and after weeks of procrastination, that I write this section.
> You would, too.
> I can think of only one man who has done it, Sterne, and even that great spunky unflincher was obliged to do I comically, to distance it with laughter, his and ours.
> I mean the occasion of one's own conception[272].

[272] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

The importance given to this moment would seem to posit the very conception of the author as the moment of greatest significance in the narrative of his mother; at the same time, this conception appears to be infused with all the powerful symbolism connected to the idea of the Great Round, presenting Johnson as the direct continuation of his mother, as much as the author's daughter is depicted as a sign of hope and continuation of Johnson himself. In this way, the idea of a significant passage and perpetuation from one generation to the next is created, which generates in its turn a strong feeling of continuity and perhaps even an illusion of immortality amidst the chaos and finiteness of one's single existence. All these ideas seem to be expressed and encapsulated in the closing formula of the novel, which indelibly unites the tangible figure of the author, the "I" of the narration, to the person to which the text itself is dedicated in the first place, namely the author's mother:

from them
from Em
            from
            embryo
            to embryan
       from Em,
            Me[273].

One last remark to be made is that if, on the one hand, Johnson's tangible figure returns here with all his obtrusive presence, it is also true, on the other, that the author appears to have renounced almost any presumption to impose his own order on the fragmentary chaos of his material. Surely, moments of despair and feelings of failure or inadequacy on the author's part were already present in much of Johnson's previous production, and they return in *See the Old Lady Decently* in at least a couple of junctures[274]; the difference, however, is that despite some glimpses of resignation and weariness, the author's attitude appears here to be much more relaxed, almost as if thoroughly accepting the supremacy of the forces of chaos and disintegration over the order he must always tentatively impose on them as a writer.

A much more serene balance between the two opposites, to say in other words, is apparently reached here for perhaps the first time in Johnson's entire writing. One could even say that, in this novel, Johnson makes of himself a silent though still tangible vehicle for both order and chaos, equally distant from the two. His presence is in a way both obtrusive and detached: he sets a huge whirlpool of fragments in motion, on the one hand harmonising them all together into a unitary literary text, yet stepping back, on the other, to let their intrinsic chaos speak as the ultimate leading element of the whole narration. To say in Beckettian terms, Johnson appears here to have found "a form that

[273] *Ibid*., p. 139. The name of Johnson's mother was Emily Lambird, here abbreviated to Em.

[274] One such instance occurs when the narrator asks himself: "What do all these letters mean? And what is it that I am saying in all this? That that is how people live, die, suffer? Is that all there is?" (*ibid*., pp. 111-112).

accommodates the mess", and he aptly warns his reader of this in the book's blurb: "It is no part of my intention to provide a continuous narrative […]. No, my purpose is to reflect with humility the reality of the chaos, what life really seems to be like[275]".

In his account of Johnson's life and works, Jonathan Coe has discussed this final novel in the following terms:

> *See the Old Lady Decently* is, then, in many ways, the work of a writer reaching the end of his artistic tether. […] It would be better to say that B. S. Johnson, sworn disciple of Joyce and Beckett, was here coming close to writing his own *Finnegans Wake* or *How It Is*: the work which would announce, once and for all, that he was parting company irrevocably with the conventional novel, driven almost to distraction by its inadequateness and evasions. […] He could not, at this point, see where his radical aesthetic must inevitably take him: either towards Beckettian minimalism or to a sort of insane Joycean inclusiveness. He was reluctant to go down either path. […] As a result, *See the Old Lady Decently* is full of compromise: it is a statement of the literary problems Johnson felt himself to be facing, rather than a bold step forward on the journey towards solving them artistically[276].

It is perhaps more accurate to say that an ultimate refusal to solve these aesthetic and ideological problems which he encountered in his writing, or even a bold and honest acceptance of being ultimately unable to solve them after a lifetime of writerly struggles, is what really lies at the basis of *See the Old Lady Decently*, and perhaps of the entire corpus of Johnson's works.

Whereas all the contradictions accumulated in Johnson's previous novels sometimes generated tensions which eroded and disintegrated many of his texts from the inside, in this final stage of his writerly career he seems to have overcome much of his early dogmatism, and taken a looser approach to the composition of his text. This, nonetheless, has not prevented him from elaborating such an intricate and precise structure, which stands in gracious contrast with the chaotic and fragmentary nature of the novel, which is both inconclusive and yet, in a way, perfectly concluded: an aspect, this one, which is part of the same compositional principle based on contradiction and paradox, a principle that has permitted Johnson to conceive a novel about his mother and yet to insert himself nonetheless as the all-important centre of the whole narration.

Considering all the above, one feels thus more inclined to agree with a slightly later remark by Coe, elaborated on the occasion of a discussion on the importance of these aspects of unresolved contradictions and tensions throughout Johnson's writing:

> What really comes across me […] is how contradictory B.S. Johnson was. And although he never resolved or even faced up to the contradictory nature of his theories and his practice, […] these contradictions are what I think continue to make his work fascinating, and what makes it alive. So, in a B.S. Johnsonian spirit, just as he said that we should celebrate the chaos

[275] *Ibid.*, blurb.
[276] J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, pp. 30-31.

> I think that we should celebrate the contradictions in B.S. Johnson, rather than trying to resolve them[277].

If there is one thing certain and not contradictory about Johnson's oeuvre, to conclude, is precisely his endless and deepest commitment towards his own writing, his lifetime determination to put himself undisguisedly and wholeheartedly in his own novels, facing with courage and honesty all the tensions and the darkness of his own experiences. In this process, Bryan Stanley Johnson has been able to create a body of work of intense beauty, made especially significant by a constant aspiration towards truth and by the absolute, unwavering honesty he has been capable to infuse in every line, from the most authentic passages to those moments in which he has given himself away, instead, to those occasional masterful flights of fantasy which cannot but always be an integral part of any form of genuine literature.

His work is there to constantly remind the reader that no piece of literature is ever born into a void, that the writing comes from the suffering and the burning amalgam of experiences of one particular individual, with their feet firmly grounded in very specific surroundings; these surrounding, Johnson has shown, must inevitably come to the surface and invade the text with the enormous totality of their presence, the urgency of their being there, the tangibility of the mark they inevitably leave on the individual, and which must be consequently passed on with the same intensity to the reader.

Johnson's literary practice has thus helped bringing the growing abstractness of the contemporary novel back to urgency of the material world, eliding in a most significant way the partitions existing between reality and fiction, between abstract and material, between life and the sublimation in writing of that life. This is, if anything, what one could call "writing as though it mattered".

[277] Id., Transcription of symposium for B.S. Johnson, held at the British Library on 10.12.2009, Sound Archive, British Library.

III: Ann Quin

3

Introduction: Some Coordinates on Ann Quin

Ann Marie Quin was born on the 17th March 1937 in Brighton, to a couple of unmarried parents. Her father left the family when she was only a ten-year-old, introducing an element of absence in her life that would exert a profound influence on her own personal development as well as on her writing. Quin was thus consequently raised by her mother and aunts[1], and was sent to study at the Convent of the Blessed Sacrament in Brighton, where she remained until 1953. As she reveals in an autobiographical story, her mother had specific reasons for electing this unusual kind of education for her: "I was sent to a convent to be brought up 'a lady' […]. The Sussex accent I had picked up from the village school […] had to be eliminated […] if I wanted to make my way in the world[2]".

This early experience in a strict religious environment left a long-lasting mark on the young Ann, providing her with a system of Christian references and a specific symbolism that would subsequently haunt her imagination for decades. Such images would indeed often resurface in various forms –in her writing, in her dreams or in several visions spurred by her repeated experiments with psychotropic substances, peyote and LSD above all. On the whole, this Catholic imprint left her with the conception of "[a] ritualistic culture that gave me a conscience. A death wish and a sense of sin. Also a great lust to find out, experience what evil really was[3]".

As a teenager, Quin was first drawn to the world of literature mainly through her private readings of "books discovered in the Public Library", especially Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, which "made me aware of the possibilities in writing[4]". Another obsession she had in her early twenties was for the world of theatre, acting in particular:

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[1] Episodes of her childhood spent at her aunts' house are recounted for instance in her later story *Every Cripple Has His own Way of Walking* (in Ann Quin, *The Unmapped Country: Stories and Fragments*, Jennifer Hodgson (ed.), And Other Stories, Sheffield/London/New Haven 2018, pp. 51-65). Apparently, the scenes related in this text were telling enough to prompt Ann's half-sister to get in contact with her at some point: "Had a strange letter from my ½ sister Pat (on my Pa's side) who I've never met – she had read my story in Nova and, of course, recognised the house, the aunts etc." (id., Letter to Robert Sward, 9.01.1967, Robert Sward's Papers, Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, USA). On another occasion, Quin refers instead to "the man I called uncle" as a person "who took the place of a father figure" (id., Written account of an acid trip, date unknown, marked 1967, Robert Sward's Papers, Olin Library).

[2] Id., *Leaving School - XI*, in id., *The Unmapped Country*, p. 15.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[4] *Ivi*.

> That world at seventeen consisted mainly of the theatre, having spent every Saturday queueing up for a seat at the Gods at the Theatre Royal to witness a fantasy world that relieved my many desires, frustrations. I decided to go on the stage. I longed for rôles that would suit my varied moods, and for an immediate audience[5].

This obsession later brought Quin to join an acting company as an assistant stage manager, working long hours and spending pocket money on train fares. In this capacity she did various menial jobs, always standing aside and admiring the actors from afar, not without some degree of envy: "I scrubbed the stage, where I recited Shakespeare, if no one was around […]. Knocked on dressing room doors, and stood back in envy, awe, as the cast transformed themselves[6]".

Such admiration for actors, costumes and masquerades would subsequently become a pervasive element in her writing, with characters often engaging in performances of various kind, wearing different identities and masks, and taking part in surreal scenes involving strange ritualistic dances, parties and orgies in which the carnivalesque aspect is paramount[7]. Quin's theatrical aspirations, in any case, were eventually shattered when she miserably failed to pass an audition for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London, on which occasion she discovered an almost pathological aversion towards acting in front of any kind of audience:

> I learned two pieces for the audition. I expected a stage, even a platform, instead a smallish room, brightly lit; ten or twelve people faced me. I began, froze, asked to start again, but was struck dumb, and rushed out, silently screaming down Gower Street. I would be a writer. A poet. Where what I had to express, say, would be my own interpretation, my own vision and be accepted by an unseen audience[8].

Once she left the convent and abandoned the idea of doing theatre, Quin went to Box's Commercial School, where she learnt shorthand and typing. On the strength of this education, she was then able to take up a number of secretarial jobs between Brighton and London. Among various spells working in solicitors' offices, she also had the opportunity to work as reader and secretary at Hutchinson's, where she had the first direct encounter with the world of publishing. During her first experience in London, she lived in a typical upstairs room in Soho, working during the day and writing at night. Her first attempt at a novel produced *A Slice of the Moon*, a story "about a homosexual, though at the time I had never met one, knew very little about queers[9]". This first novel was rejected by a couple of publishers, after which Quin began a new one entitled *Oscar*, "a novel

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[5] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[7] Suffice it to think of Berg, dressing up as his father's mistress – and being mistaken for her – in Quin's first eponymous novel, the ventriloquist's dummy which is central to the narration, with the manifold cases of mistaken identity related to it; and again, the absurd acting sessions set up by Leonard in *Three*, involving statues dressed up as immobile actors in an empty swimming pool; the colourful orgy/ritualistic scenes in *Passages*; or many similar scenes in *Tripticks*, which unmistakably opens, to stress even further this multiplicity of identities, with the formula: "I have many names. Many faces" (id., *Tripticks*, [1972], Marion Boyars, London/New York 2009, p. 7).
[8] Id., *Leaving School – XI*, in id., *The Unmapped Country*, p. 19.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

that developed into a telephone directory length of very weird content, without dialogue", about a man "who kills his monster child[10]". This second attempt was also rejected. Both these early works were irretrievably lost some ten years later, as Quin found out that the room she had sub-let to another tenant during one of her sojourns in the States had been left in appalling conditions, so that the estate agents had been forced to throw everything away, including her old manuscripts[11].

In addition to these events, Quin had also a most unpleasant experience working as a waitress at a country hotel in Cornwall. The unbearable situation she had to face there forced her to escape one night, causing also the first occurrence of those nervous breakdowns which would sadly become a recurrent event in her adult life:

> I reached home speechless, dizzy, unable to bear the slightest noise. I lay in bed for days, weeks, unable to face the sun. If I went out into the garden I dug holes and lay in them weeping. I woke up in the middle of the night screaming, convinced my tears were rivers of blood, that my insides were being eaten away by an earwig that had crawled into my ear[12].

As a consequence of this misadventure, Quin also had her first encounter with the world of psychiatry, which would then cross her path in a number of occasions. Her own account of this first experience beautifully encapsulates her point of view on madness and sanity, locating Quin in the narrow interstice between the two, a liminal space she would be bound to inhabit for her entire life: "I went to see a psychiatrist, going more from curiosity, and spent a few hours entertaining the horrified lady. I decided to climb back out of madness, the loneliness of going over the edge was worse than the absurdity of coping with day to day living[13]".

Back in London, Quin found a more stable part-time job as secretary at the School of Painting of the Royal College of Art in Chelsea, also venturing on the third of her literary efforts: the manuscript was this time accepted for publication, and the novel *Berg* came out in 1964 under the avant-garde publisher Calder & Boyars. Calder would bring out all of Quin's subsequent novels and would become a crucial benefactor for the author, always sponsoring her for awards and grants, even helping her financially with undue "advances on advances[14]" and loans as much as was possible throughout her whole life.

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[10] *Ibid*., p. 23.

[11] As can be apprehended by a letter Ann wrote to Marion Boyars at Calder and Boyars, who published all her books: "I have just been thru a rather sordid scene re my flat – the girl apparently left it in the most terrible condition: the Estate Agents went round and according to them the place was covered in cat shit! They had to remove the rush matting and a whole lot of books, manuscripts and notebooks – all covered in the stuff; all that seems to have survived are Mssrs. Camus and Beckett!" (id., Letter to Marion Boyars, 10.02.1973, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA).

[12] Id., *Leaving School – XI*, p. 22.

[13] *Ibid*., pp. 22-23.

[14] See M. Boyars, Letter to A. Quin, 14.05.1963, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library. The correspondence between Ann Quin and her publishers is replete with similar requests of advances on royalties and other monies allegedly due to the author, who was never good at managing her finances and was constantly in dire need of money. This, together with Quin's sometimes stubborn impertinence in asking, went at times to such absurd extremes as to prompt harsh responses

Berg is a sort of Oedipean black comedy set in an off-season seaside resort reminiscent of her native Brighton, and features the adventures of the namesake Alistair Berg, a door-to-door hair-restorer setting out to retrace his father, who abandoned the family years before, with the intention to kill him[15]. This is obviously an attempt by Quin to come to terms with her own past, mainly in reference to her troubled family history and the shadow of her father's absence in her life. The American poet Larry Goodell, a close friend of her from her first stay in New Mexico, has once discussed the novel in the following terms: "The book is so well-written, deals with real things yet transcends them into imaginative, into grotesque scenes that are at the same time funny. I wonder what her father will think of it if he reads it, it IS quite a bit of portrait of much of his life[16]". In a letter to Irving Sward, another American acquaintance, Quin herself illustrates rather clearly the strong autobiographical implications of her novel, especially about the figure of the father and her relationship with him:

> Berg I guess was a kind of an exercise as well as an exorcise! I went through a somewhat strange phase with regard to my father, and for many years only had contempt for him (he left my mother when I was about nine – I met him occasionally in London later when I was in my teens, then we lost contact for about 10 years); this was obviously something I had to work through, reconcile myself to the image, or rather destroy the image of him, and accept the reality. […] I am only thankful that it isn't too late for a reconciliation, though a little sad that over these years there has been so much loneliness and pain for each of us, including Mother. It does continually amaze me how much family hangups can contribute to one's actions/non-actions; how wide a gap there so often is between parents and children because of words spoken, or worse: not spoken, and creating misunderstandings, then pride enters on both sides, and often it just needs one person to extend an open hand that can close that gap[17].

It is now easy to see, in retrospect, how this first published novel established a pattern, by which Quin consciously approached every new work not only as an occasion to experiment with style and language, but, more crucially, as a way to come to terms with some past traumas or aspects of

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on Marion's side. The publisher was once forced, for instance, to answer in the following way to the umpteenth request of undue money by Quin: "We are under no obligation to let you have further advances that come into a different accounting period, but while you were poor and we were trying to help you we waived that rule, and we let you have money that were strictly not yet due […]. In other words, we were being generous and nice to you, and we will go on being generous and nice to you if you need it. It would be absolutely impossible to run this office if one were to make exceptions for everyone all the time […]. We shall of course be glad to help, but please bear in mind that this is really a favour" (M. Boyars, Letter to A. Quin, 15.03.1966, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library).

[15] Berg's intentions are laid out crystal-clearly in the incipit of the novel, which consists of one single sentence left floating in the middle of a blank page as an allusive, minimalistic and ominous anticipation of everything which comes afterwards: "A man called Berg, who changed his name to Greb, came to a seaside town intending to kill his father…" (A. Quin, *Berg* (1964), And Other Stories, Sheffield/London/New Haven 2019, p. 7).

[16] Larry Goodell, Letter to his father, 29.10.1965, Larry Goodell's personal papers.

[17] A. Quin, Letter to Irving Sward, 4.04.1967, Robert Sward Papers, John Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, USA.

her inner darkness, or to give voice to her own psychological depths and weaving them with her fantasies, “extending the ordinary into the extraordinary[18]”.

Shortly after finishing *Berg*, and in fact even before its publication, Quin began working on another novel, *Three*, in which another crucial obsession of hers is explored: that with triangular relationships. Already present in *Berg*, this aspect is at the very basis of the narrative situation in *Three*, and would subsequently become a pervasive characteristic of all her novels. So much so that one could safely say that relationships, in Quin’s fiction, are always triangular, and that individual characters in her texts are truly understood only when considered in relation to two other characters, forming dramatic triplets in which each figure gives meaning to and completes the others, as well as being completed by them[19]. The author herself explains this obsession in a letter to father Brocard Sewell, a Carmelite friar deeply implied in off-beat literary circles with whom she became closely acquainted since the early Sixties:

> In the present work I am still dealing with three people, this time a girl who lives with a couple. The relationships between three have always fascinated me, being I suppose partly because I have never known the family unit, and partly the influence of the Roman Catholic convent I spent my childhood in (the trinity etc.). In reality I have often found myself at my best, a kind of security when with two other people, most of my friends are couples, and I suppose automatically I play the role of the child. Does all this sound too Freudian for words?[20].

Published in 1966, *Three* is also set, as its predecessor *Berg*, mostly in an off-season seaside town. The story revolves around an unhappily married couple, Leonard and Ruth, and the mysterious S, a dispossessed young girl who has allegedly committed suicide some time before the beginning of the narration. S was a sort of family friend of Leonard and Ruth, and they had decided to take care of her for some time, after some trauma or illness she had undergone in her recent past – later, it turns out that she had had an abortion. As the narrative unfolds, and the three characters’ competing versions of the events are juxtaposed, the reader gradually understands that a clandestine relationship has gone on for quite a while between Leonard and the girl, and that her unborn child was probably his.

The degree of identification between the author and her work is in the case of this novel striking to an uncanny degree. After all, Quin was well aware of her vicinity to the material she was writing about in *Three*, and she had discussed this text as being more intimate and personal than her

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[18] As her friend Larry Goodell has beautifully commented with regard to Quin’s method: “Part of her nature is extending the ordinary into the extraordinary, or the unusual. I mean that would be natural for her” (Larry Goodell, Remote interview with Daniele Corradi, London/Placitas, 15.11.2021).

[19] The apotheosis of this is reached in the novel *Tripticks*, whose title refers first and foremost to a North American system of roads, but with a clear allusion also to the multiple “triptychs” regulating the interpersonal relationship of the characters, who are indeed bound together by a bundle of triangular interconnections often overlapping with one another.

[20] A. Quin, Letter to Fr. Brocard Sewell, May 1964, quoted in B. Sewell, *Like Black Swans: Some People and Themes*, Tabb House, Padstow, Cornwall 1982, p, 183.

previous one: “I don’t know about the book I’m on at the moment as being in another vein, expressing more truly myself. I think it will take many years before I strip off the layers of ‘spectres’ in my own nightmarish way[21]”. Some of her closest friends are also keen on seeing the character of S as one of the most direct representations the author has made of herself in her work[22]. Such resemblance is even more disturbing if one considers the epilogue of *Three* in the light of Quin’s own tragic end, of which S’s final suicide sounds retrospectively as an ominous anticipation:

> Such an on overall quietness that I feel an intruder, and often just let the boat drift with the tide. Perhaps the idea evolved on just such an evening – but to write down would almost be like performing the action itself. Yes it is best to let it nurture. There is time yet. […] And come the autumn, there are the neap tides. How easy for a body to drift out, caught up in a current, and never be discovered, or for anyone ever to be certain. The time is not right at the moment. The summer must be lived through. [….] The boat is ready, as planned. And all that’s necessary now is a note. I know nothing will change[23].

Quin herself would not leave any note, unless one considers this novel itself as a prophetic warning of what would happen to the author almost ten years afterwards: uncannily, S’s contemplation of suicide before the waves perfectly and tragically matches Quin’s own death by drowning in 1973. It is not a chance, moreover, that the sea assumes, in Quin’s fiction as in her actual life, a powerful symbolic aura as a site of liminality, a border which is crossed only at the subject’s risk and peril. The sea is a mysterious womb enclosing all the possible meanings of life and death, exerting a mighty magnetism on Quin and her protagonists, always explicitly or implicitly present in her characters’ visions, and underscoring every scene with its subtle humming sound and salty persistent smell.

In the early months of 1965, as Quin was somewhat halfway through the composition of *Three*, an exhilarating piece of news reached her that would give a tremendous turn to her career as well as her personal life. Also thanks to the support of her publishers[24] and to some illustrious sponsorships, such as those of the English author Henry Williamson – with whom she had a brief relationship – and the American poet Robert Creeley, her application for the “Harkness Fellowship of the Commonwealth Fund” was eventually accepted. Added to the concomitant assignation of a D.

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[21] *Ivi*.

[22] To a question regarding Quin’s closeness or distance with respect to her fictional characters, her friend Larry Goodell has answered as follows: “Well, isn’t *Three* pretty obvious? She was obsessed with three, she was always hanging out with two people, hoping to get in bed with both. I mean for god’s sake it comes up over and over! So, I mean, I can’t remember the character in *Three* that she would be like, but I mean not the couple, not Leon and Ruth, but the third one [S], that would be Ann for sure, I think” (L. Goodell, Remote interview with D. Corradi, London/Placitas 15.11.2021).

[23] A. Quin, *Three* (1966), Dalkey Archive Press, Funks Grove, Illinois 2001, pp. 139; 143.

[24] See A. Quin, Letter to J. Calder, 13.11.1964, Calder & Boyars mms., Lilly Library. Calder himself would later write as follows to support the author’s application for the Fellowship: “We believe Miss Quin has a very considerable future, and her only problem is to support herself while she continues to write. It will undoubtedly be some time before she will be in a position to earn her living from the pen, and I would therefore like to recommend her as warmly as possible for the Fellowship which I am sure she richly deserves” (J. Calder, Letter to the Warden of the Harkness House, 19.11.1964, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library).

H. Lawrence Fellowship, this award meant that Quin would have been able to travel across the States for about two years, and immerse herself in an environment for which she had always felt a strong attraction – if not culturally, at least artistically. This is what she wrote specifically on her application form to motivate her interest in visiting the States:

> My intention of going to the United States has several purposes. First I feel that I would profit from a closer sense of a culture sharing the same language as my own, but yet one whose history and present situation offer many distinctions indeed. In this respect I do feel some active acquaintance with writers such as John Hawkes […]; Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Creeley and such people as James Schevil at the Writers' Workshop, San Francisco and Tom Gunn. I would therefore welcome the opportunity of meeting such writers and generally discussing, exchanging ideas, and finding out the writers' situation as it exists in their environment, which would be of great use to me, both as an experience in relation to formal senses of the novel and to the literal issue of writing as it is dealt with in an anterior culture. I have also some background with respect to contemporary painting, and am most interested to gain further and more developed sense of its content in the States, especially as there does seem now a very strong affiliation between writers and painters […]. The most salient point I feel is that of gaining a width of background which I now feel myself to lack. […] In all I would prepare definite periods of work – which I find necessary for my own coherence – specifically toward the completion of a third novel[25].

Quin's initial plan, as stated in the application form, was to visit New York, San Francisco and the South West (namely Taos, in New Mexico, where D. H. Lawrence himself had sojourned). However, she would end her experience in America having travelled and seen much more than just that. Her first months in the New Continent, specifically, were possibly the most hectic: having arrived in May 1965, she first visited New York, which she loathed[26], spending then the summer between New Mexico (first the Lawrence ranch in San Cristobal, then Taos and finally Placitas, which would become for her a proverbial "home away from home"), Mexico City, the Bahamas, Maine, Chicago and San Francisco, and finally settling for some months in Sausalito, California.

Quin went to Placitas, New Mexico, mainly because of Robert Creeley, an American poet affiliated with the Black Mountain group[27] whom she enormously admired and whom she had already met previously in London (Creeley was, in his turn, a great admirer of *Berg*). In Placitas, Quin found a secluded, wild, inspirational atmosphere made even warmer and more stimulating by a community of poets to whom she became very close: apart from Creeley and his wife – the "Bob and Bobbie" to whom *Three* is dedicated –, these included Larry Goodell, Robert Sward, Allen Ginsberg and many

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[25] A. Quin, Harkness Fellowship application form, Ann Quin's staff file, Royal College of Art archives, London.

[26] In a letter to John Calder, for instance, Quin describes the people of New York in the following terms: "Oh these Yankee Apple Icecream people with their lives like gobbled gum with the teeth marks showing! They even have a schedule (skedule!) for suffering" (id., Letter to J. Calder, 19.02.1966, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library). On other occasions, she repeatedly refers to New York as a "whale's mouth of a city" (see id, Letter to M. Boyars, 13.10.1965, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library).

[27] The Black Mountain poets were a group of avant-garde, Postmodernist artists who formed in the Fifties around the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Among its ranks were poets such as Robert Creeley, Fielding Dawson, Charles Olson, Ed Dorn, Robert Duncan, Robert Sward and Paul Goodman.

other illustrious visitors who were regulars at Creeley's place. Goodell himself remembers being introduced to Quin by Creeley, who in the early Sixties acted as a kind of magnet for all sorts of artists and poets who came to Placitas specially to meet him, as Quin herself did: "everybody in the world went there. Poets came to Creeley's house, it was kind of Gertrude Stein's place, you know, this place where all sorts of people came. There was Bob Creeley's patio, where people got together around the kitchen table drinking almond and wine, oh, endless almond and wine[28]".

After a longish spell in California between Sausalito and the State College in San Francisco – where she developed an aversion for the American academic world[29] –, Quin was accepted for a short sojourn at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, a kind of country resort dedicated to writers and artists. Here she found a state of "grace[30]", an atmosphere of spirituality and recollection that worked as a great inspiration towards her writing[31]. In the MacDowell Colony, Quin started seriously working on her next novel, which would later become *Passages*, and got more intimately involved with Robert Sward and his wife Diane, starting a sort of ambiguous triangular relationship with them which continued for some time after her return. Back from New Hampshire to Placitas, she had her first experiences of acid trips, which would become increasingly crucial in her writing process as well as in her personal development. She once wrote for instance to Robert Sward, reporting enthusiastically her impressions of a first LSD session:

> Enclose my piece of the LSD session. But again found as I tried to sort it all out I lost patience – seems somehow inadequate to what the experience was. I mean all those hours I went thru and all I've put down only seems a very small part of it. I haven't interpreted any of the images as they seem so obvious. Main thing is how it has left me now in a much clearer state; as tho before I was a very divided/scattered person and now for the first time seem less so, more whole, and far less vulnerable. At the same time wondering how long this will last!?[32].

This first experience opened a new phase of exploration for Quin, during which she tried different psychotropic substances – mainly LSD and peyote, though she also used pot and hashish multiple times –, always paying attention to the effects these had on her imagination and perception

[28] L. Goodell, Remote interview with D. Corradi, London/Placitas, 15.11.2021.

[29] She writes in this regard to Marion Boyars: "State College full of smug shits, Academia isn't really me – however I needn't go in that much, thank God!" (A. Quin, Letter to M. Boyars, 13.10.1965, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library). In another letter, she makes jokes about the backwardness of the same academic milieu, utterly disconnected, apparently, from the contemporary literary scene: "Went into the State College the other day, and sat incognito on a class supposed to be held on Modern Contemp. Novel. Never got beyond Socrates and/or Thomas Mann they obviously need some 'new blood' up there!" (id., Letter to M. Boyars, 6.11.1965, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library).

[30] In a letter to Robert Sward, Quin laments the loss of that beatific equilibrium she had found at the Colony once back to Placitas, where her mother was also visiting in that period: "And that sense of 'grace' I thought I had arrived at up at the Colony just seemed shattered since being here" (id., Letter to R. Sward, 28.06.1966, Robert Sward papers, Olin Library).

[31] "This is a place you MUST visit one day, a place where the land gives, receives, and for the first time since I've been in this foreign country I feel settled enuf, that centre of stillness regained", she writes for instance to Goodell (id., Letter to L. Goodell, 9.05.1966, Larry Goodell Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library).

[32] Id., Letter to R. Sward, 17.08.1966, Robert Sward papers, Olin Library.

of the world. This psychedelic revelation, moreover, was going hand in hand with another, strictly aesthetic kind of revelation which Ann felt was taking place in her writing, partly spontaneously, partly influenced by her experiments with drugs. This is what she wrote to Goodell, for instance, as she was commencing work on *Passages*, at a time when she was still staying at the Colony and had not yet tried LSD:

> [A]m well immersed in new book, areas there exciting, infinite possibilities, and find myself really learning the full meaning of phrases, long lines, and above all the meaning of a period; the discovery of spatial/emotional relationships within the structure. Find myself move more towards music than say painting/films, maybe because I'm really listening, not only seeing these 'spaces between phrases'. What I'm doing in the writing now excites, stimulates, and inevitably exhausts, the risks are great, but they are risks that must be taken. The only setback to this is being too conscious of structure, when the flow is seized, grabbed at too quickly, instead of that making its own journey, and then seizing it afterwards. Like ever-expanding circles going outwards, then retracing them inwards: the breaking down of that full circle that demands the parts, the areas outside, and these areas I speak of when I say give spaces for the reader to explore in his own imagination. In Berg I failed, in Three I became aware of that, and now it is there. I think, I hope![33].

In a slightly later letter to Sward, instead, Quin was already linking this aesthetic shift to the discourse of drugs, albeit neatly separating the two things, and stressing the fact that her involvement with psychedelic experiments was only heightening and facilitating an artistic exploration which had already started previously in a spontaneous way:

> The way I seem to be going now it seems the writing is v. far removed from the novel. I'm really excited about it for the first time since I started the book at the Colony. The moving towards words and then from them, v. much like jazz improvisations. People will, no doubt, say ah that acid got into her mind; strange thing I was, as you know, taking those kind of 'flights' before 'going up'; but certainly what it has done is to make 'the flow' stronger, and the 'forces' carry more sureness. Trouble is now I can hardly bear to 'part' with it for one day, and if I come over to Taos for the weekend well I know what that will mean….. However how can I not?[34].

Together with the development of this looser, almost plotless, and more musical kind of style – which should not, though, give the idea that Quin's prose was previously a triumph of linearity and transparency –, these first months in the States brought about another change in Quin's production: she was beginning to explore, for the first time after years of novel writing, the form of the short story. In an enthusiastic latter to John Calder, she mentions indeed "writing short stories at a fantastic rate[35]", also reporting her satisfaction for the discovery of this new means of expression: "Certainly find the short story medium something new, exciting, see them in a curved shape rather than spiral, which novels for me usually are. And love that last period with the space for readers to explore – the

[33] Id., Letter to L. Goodell, 9.05.1966, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library.
[34] Id., Letter to R. Sward, 21.09.1966, Robert Sward papers, Olin Library.
[35] Id., Letter to J. Calder, 19.02.1966, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library.

alternatives but definitely defined alternatives[36]". Her editor's response was in turn so enthusiastic as to propose her a contract for a volume of short stories[37], which, however, Quin ultimately dismissed because she did not consider the stories good enough for a collected book[38]. Some of the stories were then published across the years in various magazines either in the United States or the United Kingdom, while many remained unpublished throughout her life, laying scattered in archives and private collections. They were published collectively for the first time only posthumously, in 2018, thanks to the efforts of Jennifer Hodgson and the young publishing house And Other Stories.

Having returned to Placitas after the MacDowell experience, in the early months of 1967 Quin was invited by Robert Sward to join him in Iowa, where he was working at the Poetry Workshop of the State University's English Department. Sward was at the time divorcing from his wife Diane, who was living in Mexico, and Quin got involved in an intense relationship with him that would last for roughly a year. After two years of travelling and experiencing across the States, she finally went back to England on the 24th June 1967, with Sward joining her shortly afterwards. As she herself had predicted, the re-adjustment to the insular life of Britain after two years in America proved to be far from easy, so she became restless and frustrated as a result – especially having to deal with English landladies and landlords in her flat-hunting in London.

More precisely, she came back somehow broken inside, feeling she did not thoroughly belong to either of the two countries anymore. If, on the one hand, she had felt lonely and lost at more than one juncture in the States, missing the friendliness of the English and feeling out of place in consumeristic America[39], the sense of stillness and dullness she found on her return made her terribly nostalgic for the adventurous life she had lived over the previous two years. Despite the fact that, immediately upon returning, she was comforted "to see happy smiling faces, be spoken to with friendliness and warmth![40]", soon nostalgia and immobilism crept in. She complained to friends about the change of scenery she was experiencing, having moved from the unexpected, vibrant and pregnant

[36] *Ivi*.

[37] Marion Boyars reacted in an extremely positive way to the first specimens Ann had sent her: "I am so impressed at the quality of the short stories that I would like you to send me whatever is coming out of the typewriter, and we might very soon have a volume of short stories together. I am really delighted that you can handle this form so well" (M. Boyars, Letter to A. Quin, 18.07.1966, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library).

[38] "I really can't see my doing a volume of short stories for simply ages, and in a way I don't think the stories are good enough for a book, so I would rather dismiss the idea of an 'eventual contract' for stories altogether" (A. Quin, Letter to M. Boyars, 23.09.1966, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library). Quin would however return to her publisher some three years later with the suggestion of producing such volume, mainly owing to her more and more frequent financial problems (see id., Letter to M. Boyars, 9.05.1969, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library).

[39] This is, for instance, what she wrote to Robert Sward at one such point: "I guess what I do miss is a sense of 'the daily island life' of England. Here the space is always a physical space, and the space within is blocked up, becomes cluttered with garbage. The whole country sometimes strikes me as a huge supermarket where you get or step out with your goodies, become daze, then you are stamped upon. Last night the moon, watery, green, hung over the water, and that gave me a sense of stillness, but then I began to think how strange to accept the possibility of that being touched by machinery, men in my life span" (id., Letter to R. Sward, 14.01.1966, Robert Sward papers, Olin Library).

[40] Id., Letter to M. Boyars, 30.06.1967, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library.

landscapes of especially New Mexico to the stagnant and rainy greyness of England. She wrote for instance to Larry Goodell:

> England seems very small, squat and solid. Can't somehow get the sense of awe in the country landscape, miss the unexpected, and expected spaces of the States. […] It's taking me some time to adapt to England again, still feel inwardly very distant from this country, coupled with a strange love/hate relationship with America![41].

And soon these thoughts were reiterated:

> Terribly nostalgic for N.M. [New Mexico] the light ah that light and the space – Jesus there's nothing like that anywhere else. Here in London it rains, and Sundays are dull dull dull; a kind of lethargy in people, bland, inoffensive. One feels England has really had it, that it will gradually sink into the English channel. […] [N]othing ever good lasts long in this Workhouse Country! I think the only thing that keeps people surviving, myself and Bob in particular, is the humour, the English dialogue[42].

Despite these feelings of depression and inner dividedness, together with increasing financial difficulties, owing to the fact that the Harkness grant and the various bursaries she was enjoying had terminated, Quin managed to complete the first draft of her novel *Passages* – the only outcome, apart from a bunch of short stories, of her hectic two years in the States. *Passages* portrays yet another triangle of characters, an unnamed man and a woman in search of her lost brother, possibly held captive by the police of a totalitarian regime in some unspecified Mediterranean country – the setting is vaguely reminiscent of a Greek island.

Passages is a very slim novel, but of great density and intensity, containing and giving voice to an incredible amount of biographical experiences, inner movements and obsessions which the author had experienced in the years prior to or even contemporary with its composition. Quin began it, as it would appear from her correspondence[43], as a sort of fictional transposition of events she had lived some years before, precisely in the summer of 1964, as she was travelling in the Mediterranean area between Southern Italy, Greece and Turkey – a trip catered for by advanced payments she had got from the then incipient publication of *Berg*. On that occasion, as she was journeying from Greece to Turkey, a revolt broke out in Istanbul, so she had to flee by bribing her passage back to Greece[44].

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[41] Id., Letter to L. Goodell, 21.07.1967, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library.

[42] Id., Letter to L. Goodell, 24.10.1967, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library.

[43] In 1965 a letter to a friend, Larry Goodell mentions that Ann was at that moment "starting on the next novel about things that happened to her in Greece" (L. Goodell, Letter to Pete and Fran Purcell, 19.08.1965, Larry Goodell's personal papers, Placitas, New Mexico).

[44] On 28th July 1964, Quin sent an urgent postcard to John Calder asking financial help owing to the political troubles in the midst of which she had found herself: "S.O.S. £.s.d. / Needed – desperate / Istanbul riots / Please forward to: c/o L. Matheovdaki / 4, Seremeti, Corfu, Greece" (A. Quin, Card to J. Calder, 28.07.1964, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library). Some days later, safe in Ithaca – no metaphor here –, she replied in this way to the check Marion Boyars had sent her: "Your letter was forwarded on to me here, where I have been fortunate enough to find a room for a BIG rest after weeks of worse than nightmare travelling […]. Needless to say I am more than grateful for the money (so much went on bribing, diddling – even by officials on boat to and from Turkey) as it will enable me to stay on a little while, get some work done

However terrible, this holiday provided her with an inspiration for the setting of *Passages*. The situation of terror and political instability that she experienced on her skin was also somehow transferred to the novel, in the form of a diffuse atmosphere of totalitarianism, constant danger and police control characterising the background scenario of the story, and accommodating a paranoid, conspiratorial tendency which was somewhat intrinsic to the author, and which got increasingly worse with the years.

The search for the woman's lost brother is also another biographical aspect which Quin reworked into the novel: it is known, indeed, that she had a half-brother called Ian on her father's part, whom she first met at fourteen, falling "desperately in love with him[45]". He died prematurely when he was nineteen, leaving a void in the author's life which she always attempted to fill, as she usually did, with the substitutive presence of other people. *Passages* is in this sense also a sort of fictional transposition of Quin's search for this lost figure in her life, although the search for the brother in the novel functions as a mere pretext to give free rein to the characters' inner quest for their own true identities.

Another major concern of the novel, as has been anticipated, is the exploration of the narrow distance which separates sanity and madness, a crucial theme for the author at a personal level – one should here remember Quin's consideration that, for her, "the loneliness of going over the edge was worse than the absurdity of coping with day to day living[46]". In the story, this concern takes the form of a mutual exploration carried on by the central couple, an exploration which sometimes seems to be a challenge in which each of the two characters aims at surpassing the individual madness of the other – with the male protagonist especially trying to prove at all costs that his madness is greater than his mistress's. This dance on the edge of insanity performed by the couple in *Passages* has in fact an evident biographical parallel in Quin's relationship with Robert Sward. Thus, Marion Boyars was certainly right to see this novel as "an attempt at a record of her relationship with this poet[47]". This can be also assessed, retrospectively, by comparing many passages in the novel with Quin's correspondence with Sward, taking especially into consideration a diary of an acid trip the two took together in 1967, certain moments of which are re-worked almost verbatim into the text.

Passages was as intense a novel for Quin to write as it is now to read. Its writing left the author psychologically prostrated, possibly also because of all the other pressures she was experiencing at the same time, augmented by the depression of returning to England after two years of travelling

on present novel, and RETURN – frankly I've been almost paralyzed from nervous exhaustion and worry over finances, that very little work has been done" (id., Letter to M. Boyars, 7.08.1964, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library).

[45] A. Quin, *Leaving School – XI*, in id., *The Unmapped Country*, p. 17.

[46] A. Quin, *Leaving School – XI*, in id., *The Unmapped Country*, pp. 22-23.

[47] M. Boyars, Letter to Dr. Härnjd, 23.01.1970, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library. Dr. Härnjd, of the 13th Ward of Bercomberga Hospital, Stockholm, was the psychiatrist who was in charge of Ann during her convalescence after her first serious breakdown, which took place in Sweden. Marion was here sharing with the doctor some personal information about Ann, in the attempt of helping him to reconstruct the patient's mental situation prior to the breakdown.

abroad. Upon finishing the final draft of the novel, she experienced one first occurrence of a series of mental breakdowns that would resurface and haunt her in the latest years of her life. On this occasion in particular, she developed a kind of psychosomatic mutism which was not completely new to her[48], and which she described to Larry Goodell in these terms:

> Actually have finished a whole draft of the book, but to the cost of a crazy kind of breakdown – I was working about ten/twelve hours a day on it for a week, then felt depressed after reading thru the manuscript; and just kind of felt it meaningless and everything else likewise, until I found I couldn't even talk properly, a kind of stutter developed. Saw a psychiatrist friend, then a doctor, put on tranquillisers; what seemed to emerge was the fact of my subconscious knowing Ian, my ½ brother died in November, and as I was writing, as you know, about the woman searching for her brother, that I was attempting to hasten the book before the anniversary of Ian's death – also interesting thing came up from the psychiatrist when he asked me how Ian died – polio that hit the lungs, difficulty in breathing and speaking – so it seems I was somehow taking on that final agony, a projection. Anyway I'm o.k. now, at least back to speaking normally, tho feeling exhausted physically and mentally[49].

Apart from the energy-draining exploit of *Passages*, re-adapting to the British insular life was proving so difficult for Quin that when she met with the possibility of returning to the States she immediately seized it. Exploiting the fact that Sward had some lectures and readings planned there, she left with him again for America in April 1968. They first stayed in Mexico for some months, between San Miguel de Allende and Acapulco, then Quin returned to Placitas while Sward stayed in Mexico to meet his wife Diane and their children, with the intention of discussing the divorce. Things took however an unexpected turn, and Quin's relationship with Sward terminated shortly afterwards. After "some very strange months in Mexico[50]" and an intense exchange of letters, the whole affair finally ended up in a very bitter parting of ways, which left Quin quite stranded[51]. She took refuge once again at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, but she did not find there the stillness and the inspiration she had experienced on her first visit, so she decided to anticipate her return to England, which occurred in October of the same year.

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[48] She was used to reacting with a sort of pathological mutism and withdrawal to situations of great stress, as happened for example in her teens during an audition she made for the RADA of London, or after an awful work experience in a hotel in Cornwall. Something similar would happen every time she had to read in front of an audience: the most notorious occurrence of this being an ICA reading in London, in which, according to Eva Figes, she "got up on stage, didn't read and started talking at random", which infuriated B.S. Johnson, who was among the writers present (E. Figes, Interview with Sarah O'Reilly, London 7.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library).

[49] A. Quin, Letter to L. Goodell, 24.10.1967, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library.

[50] "You have, no doubt, heard that Bob and I have broken up. Still shakey from that, from some very strange months in Mexico" (id., Letter to M. Boyars, 11.09.1968, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library).

[51] Ann's last available letter addressed to Sward concludes with such passages as: "Well I do recognise that you need to 'float free' […]. I think you are making out O.K. And I am happy for you. Sad tho that we had to 'break' as it were 'thru the mails' – I had not expected that at all. Well so be it" (id. Letter to R. Sward, 18.08.1968, Robert Sward papers, Olin Library). She would then discuss what happened with Goodell, passing some bitter remarks on Sward that sound like a definite close to their affair: "Well like the more I hear, see, hear with my eyes, see with my ears, the more that man comes across as a monster, and I'm well rid of him" (id. Letter to L. Goodell, 7.09.1968, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library).

Back in England once again, she faced the same depression of re-adapting to British life as she had experienced upon her first return, with the usual financial difficulties pejorating the situation – she admittedly spent more than a month "hibernating[52]", prey to "terrible depressions, suicidal at times[53]". Moreover, she was still suffering from the consequences of a bad acid trip she had undergone in Mexico, during which she allegedly "saw the face of God[54]", an event which had somehow blocked her inspiration and ability to get back to serious writing for quite a while. Once she managed to shake this off, however, Quin was finally able to get back to *Tripticks*, a novel about her experiences in America that she had begun and abandoned in-between her two trips to the States[55].

Further good news came when she managed to obtain an Art Council grant of £1000 in 1969. Willing to break free and evade from the stagnancy of her condition, however, she soon squandered the entire sum in clothes and especially in travelling, embarking on what she herself retrospectively defined as a "suicidal trip[56]": she went first to Ireland, then Copenhagen, sailing among icebergs to Oslo, and finally ending up in Stockholm. Here, in January 1970, she suffered from her first severe mental breakdown, because of which she was hospitalised in a psychiatric ward in Sweden. There, she was given Electric Shock Treatment and subsequently was transferred to the Atkinson Morley's Hospital in Wimbledon, where she slowly recovered until her dismissal in March.

This experience left her shattered, marking a momentous watershed in Quin's life. In a letter to Goodell, she described this transitional period in the following terms:

> It's been a difficult time since that so-called 'breakdown' and it was as if I was forming again in the bottom of the sea, only recently emerging and wow, like the world looks strange! And for the past three weeks I've been going back in order to go forward, picking up all the layers that were formed for thirty-five years […]; a kind of self-analysis that has been painful yet exciting[57].

If, on the one hand, Quin shows a positive attitude in seeing this occasion as a moment of personal evolution, on the other hand, there were people around her who were beginning to watch with some

[52] She revealed to Larry: "Have kind of been hibernating this last month or so; haven't felt physically too well, due I feel to the weather (everything in this country comes down to the bloody weather!) and attempt to adapt back to the general way of living in England, which somehow always strikes me as not really living. In many ways feel those Peyote waves – the 'magic' the openness, receptivity etc., have left, and I'm taking on the shades of lethargy that most people seem to have living over here" (id., Letter to L. Goodell, 2.12.1968, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library).

[53] Id., Letter to L. Goodell, 25.09.1969, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library.

[54] As she revealed in her interview with John Hall: "The vision and the hallucinations were so real, so vivid and fundamental that when I thought about writing there seemed no point – my vision of God was so much more purposeful than anything I could ever write […]. It was important to my work because I have found difficult to believe in writing since. I only carry on because I'm no good at anything else" (J. Hall, *Landscape with Three-cornered Dances*, in "The Guardian", 29.04.1972).

[55] The first part of this book, however, sent as an autonomous short story, had won a literary competition launched by the American magazine *Ambit* in 1968. The challenge consisted in submitting works written under the influence of drugs – Quin declared that this text was "written under my usual combination of nicotine, caffein and of course, the birth pill I take – Orthonovin 2", which were however accepted as drugs by the editorial board of the magazine (see A. Quin, Contributors' comments, in "Ambit", v. 35 [1968], p. 42).

[56] See A. Quin, Letter to L. Goodell, 19.08.1972, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library.

[57] Id., Letter to L. Goodell, 19.08.1971, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library.

preoccupation the deterioration of her mental condition, noticing how the recent traumatic events of her life were deeply affecting her personality. She directly confessed, for example, that “her doctor has just given up writing about nerves on her sick notes, and has opted instead for ‘Personality change’[58]”. John Carter, an English painter with whom she was having a relationship at the time, was sincerely worried by her change of behaviour: “Poor John in all this is of course suffering and I think he feels it’s just another of ‘Quin’s phases’! […] In all the reconstructing I’ve been going through I’ve attempted to see through J’s layers, and that’s caused a lot of eruptions[59]”. Eva Figes also expressed her concerns with regard to her friend’s condition: “I felt for quite a while […] she was heading somewhere dangerous. She had a boyfriend who was called John Carter, […] he got frightened by her behaviour […]. She was hospitalised, because I remember I went to see [her] and she was hyperactive […]. But I think what eventually happened was going to happen[60]”. Amid this inner disorder, she was even beginning to ponder about giving up writing novels: “A lot of attitudes/values have changed in the changes, the most important one being the shedding of Ann Quin the novelist! [...] I’m not going to write another novel […]. That medium no longer interests, it’s as if I’m leaving the writing, and actually there seems to be very little time for it![61]”.

Subsequently, Quin found enough time and mental energies to finish the draft of *Tripticks* and send it to her publishers, although she was increasingly falling out with them. *Tripticks*, which was eventually published in 1972, represents perhaps her most disjointed work. An attempt to capture her experiences and her vision of the States, it is indeed a kaleidoscopic triumph of triangular relationships, juxtaposed images, cut-ups and pulp-magazine-style illustrations – the latter provided by the artist Carol Annand. The vague plot of *Tripticks* is provided by the mutual chase between the protagonist – an unnamed man with “many names, many faces[62]” – and his “No. 1 X-wife and her schoolboy gigolo[63]”, along the desolate roads of the Tripticks motorway.

Quin’s intent in *Tripticks* is first and foremost that of portraying the fragmentation and the proliferation of consumeristic discourses in contemporary American society. This novel, however, can certainly be seen also as a reflection of the author’s increasingly disjointed personality at that delicate time of her life, of her feeling as a lonely, floating particle in the midst of a plethora of voices and external pressures, ultimately not belonging anywhere and not recognising any of these voices as her own. The sensation is that the closing lines of *Tripticks* are spoken very much with Quin’s own voice, expressing fears and feelings that can well be construed as her own: “I opened my mouth, but

[58] J. Hall, *Landscape with Three-Cornered Dances*, in “The Guardian”, 29.04.1972.
[59] A. Quin, Letter to L. Goodell, 19.08.1971, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library.
[60] E. Figes, Interview with Sarah O’Reilly, London, 7.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.
[61] A. Quin, Letter to L. Goodell, 19.08.1971, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library.
[62] Id., *Tripticks*, p. 7.
[63] *Ivi*.

no words. Only the words of others I saw, like ads, texts, psalms, from those who had attempted to persuade me into their systems. A power I did not want to possess. The Inquisition[64]".

Nonetheless, whatever kind of precarious equilibrium Quin had managed to find in this period, eventually proved to be not stable enough. Another breakdown, indeed, caught her in December 1971, consequently to which she was hospitalised again, this time at the Springfield Hospital in Upper Tooting. Apart from her already delicate condition, she had been facing several traumatic upheavals in her personal life which evidently brought her to this extreme. Her dreadful financial condition, first of all, had forced her to revert to secretarial part-time jobs which were taking away precious time from her writing; she was also asking her publishers financial help with increasing insistence, pressing them to pay her royalties and advanced payments even when these were not due, also starting to see them, at the same time, with mounting hostility.

Her behaviour in that period had prompted Marion Boyars to send her a resentful letter – one of the last ones she wrote directly to Ann in the year of 1971, devolving thenceforth the task to her secretary more and more often –, in which she expressed all her frustration and pain at the situation:

> In the last year or so the only communication I have had from you is when you wanted money, and although I do not in the least blame you for this, I find it a bit strange that you should express disappointment with me. I am well aware that you have been unwell these last few months, […] but however ill or unhappy you may feel, you really must not forget that other people have feelings as well, and lashing out like that is really very unfair[65].

Quin, on her part, expressed more than once her resentment and willingness to drop "out of the Boyars scene/plot[66]". As she confessed to Robert Creeley in a letter, this hostility toward her publishers was even beginning to mix with a desire to abandon novel-writing *tout court*, which was certainly not an altogether new feeling for her: "As for writing I don't want to go on with the 'novel' such a lot of deadness I've uprooted and can't see there's any more of that for that medium – maybe a children book a collaboration/a film but to get out of Calder and Boyars system I want more than anything else[67]". Things were not faring much better either as regards her personal life. Despite her incipient plans to get married to John Carter[68], and possibly put up a family with him, this relationship also ended badly[69], leaving Ann to deal with another hurtful blow.

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[64] Id., *Tripticks*, p. 192.
[65] M. Boyars, Letter to A. Quin, 9.11.1971, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library.
[66] A. Quin, Letter to the Creeleys, 18.11.1971, Robert Creeley papers, Olin Library.
[67] Id., Letter to the Creeleys, 9.12.1971, Robert Creeley papers, Olin Library.
[68] An undated Christmas card addressed to Goodell, allegedly of 1971, recites: "Have finished Tripticks and should be out next year – also next year getting married to John Carter!" (id., Card to L. Goodell, December 1971, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library).
[69] Her obsessive desire to have a child from John was possibly among the causes of their breakup. As she revealed in a letter to Goodell: "What I want more than anything now is believe it or not a baby! Not anyone's but John's he doesn't believe me and it's all been hell since August" (id., Letter to L. Goodell, 24.07.1973, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library). She had instead previously written to Creeley: "Want so much to have a family of my own – to have at least one child, and this caused considerable argument in relationship to John – who I dearly love and cherish – […] would think a

The consequences of this second serious breakdown were heavier and lasted longer than expected. "Getting the threads together inside my head a difficult adventure and one that I continually confront[70]", she wrote to Creeley as she was still recovering. To Goodell, she admitted retrospectively, some months afterwards, that "that last breakdown, 'breakthru' shattered me a hell of a lot – more perhaps than I actually realised at the time[71]". For a while, she was completely unable to write anything, and certainly the need to launch herself into various menial jobs in order to earn her bread – she took up for instance a post as waitress at a café in Notting Hill, then as secretary at London College – was not boosting her creativity either.

Some respite, however, came in September 1972, when Quin was accepted for a one-year course of further education at Hillcroft College, for which she had applied in the previous months. Having never been to university, she was beginning to feel the need to recover some ground in educational terms, both for her personal development and in view of her wish to apply to some university in the near future. She also hoped that studying and reading literature and other interesting subjects would provide some new stimulations for her writing, given the terrible impasse she was finding herself in after the last breakdown. Judging by the somewhat cheerful letters of that brief period, Quin found at Hillcroft College the atmosphere she was looking for, and she felt for a while elated and intellectually active again. "It really is super here, finding it, so far, very exciting and stimulating", she wrote to Marion Boyars in one of the few light-hearted letters addressed to her in this period, concluding "I'm very glad I did put in for coming here, as I feel sure I shall gain from it. Also I have the feeling that doing this kind of work might well spur me on to doing more writing than I have been doing[72]".

At Hillcroft, Quin picked up three courses, as was required, choosing English Literature, Psychology and Sociology. After the somewhat disappointing experience she had had of American colleges, she was delighted at least to find that her literature course included contemporary and stimulating authors such as Joyce, Pinter, and Beckett. In general, the time spent at Hillcroft was for her positive in many respects, as she would later describe it in an article she wrote for the *Guardian*:

> At long last I now know what Freud's theory of the id, ego and super-ego is all about, what the Industrial Relations Act entails, and the difference between iambic and trochee in poetry. Elementary, I guess, to many people, but I somehow never had the time to explore them in a solitary struggle of reading and trying to earn a living. Before I came to Hillcroft I had to supplement my income as a writer by part-time secretarial work; not only was I bored, but I also felt extremely insular, and the idea of having a whole year for systematic study, to attend

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man would feel privileged if a woman says she wants his child – but no, well I dare say there's a lot to go thru between us" (id. Letter to R. Creeley, 9.12.1971, Robert Creeley papers, Olin Library).

[70] *Ivi*.

[71] Id., Letter to L. Goodell, 24.07.1973, Larry Goodell Papers, Beinecke Library.

[72] Id., Letter to M. Boyars, 19.09.1972, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library.

> lectures, participate in seminars and tutorials, and discuss what I was reading with other people, seemed to me ideal[73].

Upon her return, she desperately tried to get some other bursary or grant that would permit her to go on writing without financial worries – the Arts Council declined Boyars' application for the grant in March 1973, "without giving any particular reason[74]". At the same time, Quin was beginning to act concretely on her idea of going to university, and accordingly began sending applications around. After being rejected by London, Bristol and Sussex Universities, she was finally accepted by East Anglia, where she decided to enroll, despite some initial reservations about the milieu[75]. She thus had the prospect of starting her first term there in the Fall of 1973.

Meanwhile, in spite of her recent idea of abandoning the genre, she was already working on her next novel, consisting, in her initial plan, "of two journals by a man and a woman[76]". In fact, what has reached us of this uncompleted novel, *The Unmapped Country*, is a 40-page long first-person relation by a woman protagonist, Sandra, about her daily life in a mental institution – clearly a direct reflection of the author's own experiences in various psychiatric wards across Sweden and England. The traumatic events the author had to face in the last years of her life are all there: her suicidal trips among icebergs and her Swedish breakdown, her strained relationship with John Carter – Clive in the novel –, and their arguments caused by her wishes to have a child together, the vision of God she had during one of her last acid trips, the various extravagant characters she met during her internments, and of course her lifelong feeling of moving on the thin edge separating sanity and insanity.

After all, evidently, creativity and inspiration did not desert her in this last phase of her life. Apart from this novel, Quin had also started to venture concretely into dramatic writing, producing two plays meant for television: a black comedy called *The Edge of the Forest*, containing "an important statement[77]", and another one entitled *Fallen in the Night*, which she found not as convincing as the former. Neither of these two plays has apparently yet been retrieved, but we know that at least *Falling in the Night* was submitted to a BBC producer named Graeme McDonald, who rejected it for its excessive symbolism[78]. Moreover, Quin revealed having plans for a radio play and a full-length play for the theatre[79]. "In fact I am very excited about writing plays at the moment, and

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[73] Id., *Second Chance*, in "The Guardian", 8.08.1973.
[74] Id., Letter to M. Boyars, 30.03.1973, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library.
[75] She had previously written to Marion: "Went to East Anglia and hated it, such a desolate 'Brave new world' kind of place, felt I couldn't stick it out there for 3 years, so even if they do offer me a place I shall refuse!" (id., Letter to M. Boyars, 10.04.1973, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library.
[76] Id., Letter to M. Boyars, 19.01.1973, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library.
[77] See id. Letter to M. Boyars, 19.07.1973, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library; and id., Letter to L. Goodell, 24.07.1973, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library.
[78] See Graeme McDonald, Letter to Paul Bentley, 29.08.1973, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library.
[79] See A. Quin, Letter to M. Boyars, 19.07.1973, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library.

wonder why I never got down to it before now[80]", she revealed to Marion, also expressing her relief at having finally found a diversion after "all those years slogging away at novels[81]".

With this sudden revival of her artistic vein and the prospect of beginning her degree at East Anglia in the Autumn, things were thus apparently beginning to improve in many respects; this at least on the outside, for a certain heaviness and darkness were evidently still tormenting the author in the Summer of 1973. "The 'thing' with John Carter I still, in many ways, haven't got over. My love life in other words has been absolutely 'nil' for the last year – in fact I'm wondering if I will ever know 'love' and 'loving' again![82]", she bitterly confessed to Larry Goodell in July. During the same month, she also had to cancel her plans of going to Geneva to work as a typist for a couple of months because of an unfortunate domestic accident which happened to her mother. Quin was thus forced to stay at her parental home in Brighton for the rest of the summer to assist her, unable to either evade from her situation or to even concentrate properly on her work. She expressed all her preoccupations in what would have sadly become her last letter to Marion:

> [Mum] is coming out of hospital end of this week […]. Tho it's going to be pretty difficult here at this flat – unable to get out of the place for quite a time. […]. It has been a weight […] – and adding to this, of course, of course (!) are the beastly problems of money, plus a possible eviction from this flat – tho fortunately it is unfurnished, and therefore they damn well will have to find Mum alternative accommodation. But it has created a ghastly cold-war atmosphere. Ah well….[83]

It is difficult now to reconstruct what precisely happened to Quin's interior world in those final stages of her existence. The issues and the challenges she was facing were basically not unlike those she had already been experiencing throughout her whole life. It is possible that she found herself in a more fragile and unstable state than in other similar occasions she had faced in the past. It is, however, somehow disquieting to think that she was feeling so wretched, despite having before her the stimulating perspective of going to university. Considering how much she had benefited from the one-year course at Hillcroft College, she was probably aware of the possibilities and new directions that East Anglia could have opened to her.

It is perhaps possible, however, that she could not foresee any promise of essential or tangible change ahead of her, and that the sensation of an unbreakable stagnation extending indefinitely into the future was stronger than any hope of evolution or change. Another serious matter lay in the choice she often found herself in the necessity to make, in those final years, between her mental well-being and her writing, which were for her after all so intimately interconnected: the choice, that is, between either taking her medications, and thus keeping her darkness at bay at the cost of becoming unable to

[80] *Ivi*.
[81] Id., Letter to L. Goodell, 24.07.1973, Larry Goodell papers, Beinecke Library.
[82] *Ivi*.
[83] Id., Letter to M. Boyars, 30.07.1973, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library.

write, or leaving that darkness unchecked in order to be able to go on writing, sublimating her demons into her art as she had always done, but risking much in terms of personal health[84].

Whatever the case, the tragic fact remains that at some point she could not evidently stand her situation any longer. One day in the Summer of 1973, Ann Quin took off her clothes, walked to the sea off Brighton beach, and drowned herself in the waves, thus recalling a gesture which often recurs in her writing and which some of her characters appear to prophetically anticipate. Her body was washed ashore and found at Shoreham, near Brighton, on the 27th of August 1973.

[84] Larry Goodell has expressed his personal views on this conundrum Ann was facing in the last stages of her life in the following terms: “She wrote that when she took her drugs she couldn’t write, and for her not to write is pretty bad, so she had to get off her drugs and then whatever it was that would cause her psychological problems and pain would reoccur evidently. That’s what she said. So what are you going to do if your drugs just keep you from writing and you’ve got to write? So you’ve gotta get off the drugs, and hope that whatever things occurred… I don’t know, I wasn’t there” (L. Goodell, Remote interview with D. Corradi, London/Placitas, 15.11.2021).

3.1

Limina and Liminality, Borders and Border-Crossings in Quin's fiction

Quin's production is riddled with some images and dynamics that recur obsessively in every text. Very often, these images are fictional reflections of some tormented aspects of the author's own life, more or less directly related to her material experiences, her psychic movements, or her deepest obsessions. One of the most obvious and recurring images, for instance, is that of the triangle, diversly articulated in a myriad of situations in which her characters are invariably involved. However, another image works at a subtler though more decisive level, possibly subtending all the others and constituting a powerful driving force at the basis of practically all her texts: the image of the "limen", carrying with itself the correlated concept of liminality.

"Limen" must be here understood as including all the meanings generally attributed to terms such as limit, border, boundary, or threshold. The original Latin word denotes, among other things, an extreme frontier or limit, as well as a threshold, an entrance into a different area, or also a beginning, an exordium: in this sense, "limen" comprises in itself the idea of both end and beginning, as well as of the very transitional space between these two. The term "liminality" is instead used in Cultural Anthropology to refer to "a transitional or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of a person's life; spec. such a state occupied during a ritual or rite of passage[1]". An even more useful definition is that of "liminal", which the Oxford English Dictionary indicates as something "characterized by being on a boundary or threshold, esp. by being transitional or intermediate between two states, situations, etc.[2]".

These preliminary definitions are crucial to an understanding of Ann Quin's novels, in particular of the situation of many her characters. Indeed, much in her writing is played exactly on or around such limina, or dividing lines between opposites. So much is caught by her narrative lenses in the suspension to be found in-between, in the passages from one area into the other, or in their mutual blending in a Limbo-like middle zone. Some limit or boundary is always implicitly or explicitly

[1] "Liminality, n.", *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/248158. Accessed 6.10.2022.

[2] "Liminal, adj.", *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/108471. Accessed 6.10.2022.

present in Quin's texts. This, of course, always activates all the usual dynamics that the presence of a limit generally implies. For example, it can exert a magnetic force on a subject, tempting him/her with the idea of its possible overcoming, fascinating with the promise of what might lie beyond. A limen always implies a division between two zones, two areas which can be material, psychological, or symbolical. A subject may find him/herself to be dwelling in the suspended space in-between these two areas, ultimately not belonging to any of them, feeling rootless and floating. Sometimes, the trespassing of this limen is eventually achieved, but it brings unexpected consequences to the one who goes beyond, causing indelible fractures in their identity and psyche. Sometimes, coming back from beyond a limit proves to be impossible; other times, the person who does come back is not the same anymore.

Jennifer Hodgson, in this respect, identifies liminality as the chief characteristic of Quin's writing. It is not, however, a liminality characterised by an empty suspension, or a mere feeling of passive in-betweenness: rather, it is one pulsating with the presence of multiple dimensions, with the sensation of being already thrust beyond an ultimate limit, together with the impossibility to overcome this limit completely, or to do that as a whole individual, with the awareness that some crucial piece of one's own identity will irretrievably be left behind. In Hodgson's words:

> [Quin] identifies deeply with the idea of Limbo. Her writing is much concerned with the space in-between […]. But that is not to say that she simply celebrates the freedoms and possibilities of being in-between. One of the interesting ways in which Quin's works resonate with the thought of the sixties is her refusal […] to romantically valorize such a position. Her works demonstrate an uncommon sensitivity to the cost of extremity, transgression, and limit experiences in terms of invisibility, disempowerment, and risk[3].

All the dynamics enumerated here are present in Quin's four novels. Her characters always have to deal with limits, with limina. They are usually over-reachers, since their initial situation is never sufficient to them, and what they are or what they have in their everyday life is never enough. They always seek happiness beyond some limit. Sometimes, they look for themselves on the other side of an existential threshold. They are restless, and never feel at home anywhere, for their desire to overcome their limits, or the boundaries imposed on them from the outside, force them to go on indefinitely, to always crave for something more, or at least something different. They are constantly prey to both endless movement and unbearable stasis: stasis which brings to further movement, restless movement which demands stasis, a settling down which never appears attainable. They are bound to a quest which ultimately brings them both to find and to destroy themselves.

These explorations of the idea of limen and of various situations of liminality, of the overcoming of limits or surpassing of boundaries, assume in Quin ever-different forms. This chapter

[3] Jennifer Hodgson, *Beyond* Berg*: On Ann Quin's Short Fiction*, in *Music & Literature*, v. 7 (2016), p. 145.

will try and trace a map of the evolution of this particular topic throughout her writing, in an attempt to reconstruct the process by which this aspect grows to become a central tenet, a crucial core of significations upon which the author has built a considerable part of her production.

I. Desire, incapability and unwillingness to cross limits in Berg

In Quin's first novel *Berg*, the idea of limen assumes a whole range of both symbolic and tangible forms. The first obvious manifestation of this limen, in the sense of a point of no return whose surpassing brings a series of indelible consequences, is the mission that the protagonist, Alistair Berg, sets for himself from the very incipit of the narration: the assassination of his own father. On the very first page of the novel, Berg's plan is openly revealed to the reader in a very explicit way: "A man called Berg, who changed his name to Greb, came to a seaside town intending to kill his father[4]". Patricide is thus the declared mission which sets the narration a-going, the objective which ultimately justifies, and against which one is to measure, all the actions performed by the protagonist throughout the story.

In this sense, patricide represents of course a point of no return, an obvious taboo, an extreme limit whose overcoming brings with itself evident social, psychological, moral, and legal consequences for the subject who decides to take the decisive step. Berg is aware of this, and if, on the one hand, the desire to destroy his father spurs him on and gives some sort of meaning to his existence, he is reluctant, on the other, to commit the ultimate crime. Consequently, this ambivalence creates an interesting contrast of movement and action juxtaposed with continuous hesitations, stasis, delays, and acts of violence against objects other than his father.

Another, more tangible image of limen – one, though, which still retains a powerful symbolic value – is represented by the thin wooden partition which separates Berg's room from that of his father and the latter's mistress, Judith. The word "partition" is obsessively repeated throughout the novel – 42 occurrences in total: this already gives a hint of how this liminal surface of seeming separation is made the focus of Berg's attention in many crucial passages. The partition appears to assume different values and significations according to Berg's psychological state, reflecting the meanderings of his mind as he spies on the movements of his father and Judith, as he ponders about the next move, or tries to gather enough mental energies to carry out his atrocious mission[5].

[4] A. Quin, *Berg*, p. 7.

[5] In this respect, Danielle Dutton notes that, in the novel, "the exterior world, which we come to through Berg-as-filter, is itself as active as Berg, is a world in which shapes themselves might be imbued with malevolent or sympathetic agency

Another, interconnected manifestation of limen – or better, in this case, of liminality – in *Berg* is then represented by the fluidity of the characters' identities. As much as the partition seems at times to connect Berg with his father and Judith rather than separating them, the tangible limits of bodies and identities appear in the novel to be never ultimately fixed: identities, as well as bodies, can indeed always mutate, with the partition between the various selves allowing passages from one into another, giving the sensation that the corporeal limits of the self can always be surpassed. In some respects, each character in *Berg* may at any time coincides with him/herself as well as with any other of the triangle formed by Berg, his father, and Judith.

Let us see now how all these concomitant elements, these images of limina, interact with one another in this highly symbolist and psychological novel. After the straightforward incipit, which immediately projects Berg towards the seaside town where he has discovered his father is currently living, the opening of the first chapter sees the protagonist prey to a Hamletic stasis, stranded like a fish on a beach. The ambiguous narratorial voice, suspended and constantly gliding almost undistinguishably from third to first person, introduces him in these terms: "a body rolls upon a creaking bed: fish without fins, flat-headed, white-scaled, bound by a corridor room – dimensions rarely touched by the sun – Alistair Berg, curled webbed toes, strung between heart and clock, nibbles in the half light[6]". At this point, Berg has already tracked down his father, and taken lodgings in the same hotel where the latter is staying, precisely in the microscopic room beside him, separated only by a thin wooden partition.

The initial fascination for the limit to overcome, which had at first propelled him into starting his foolish search, has already changed here into a pathological hesitation to step beyond that limit. Berg is now almost savouring the moment, playing with his prey as a cat would do with a captured mouse – or at least this is what one might think at first. "Like a love affair, it seemed too easy, therefore, the preliminaries must be prolonged; flirt a little with the opportunities[7]", he tells himself at an early juncture, convincing himself that the propitious time to act is yet to come. Sometimes, this hesitation can be partly explained by Berg's hidden desire to indulge in this renovated closeness to a father who has always been absent from his life; in other respects, it would seem simply that this change of situation is paralysing him with its utter novelty, so that he is not sure how to proceed. In any case, it is clear that the urgency to kill him, now that he has found him, is temporarily quenched, leaving room for observation, for arranging and processing in his brain all the information he is gathering by being close to the old man. "No hardship surely now", thinks Berg accordingly, "in

for as long as Berg's consciousness falls upon them" (Danielle Dutton, *Unpacking Ann Quin's Comic Tragedy*, in *Music & Literature*, v. 7 (2016), p. 153).

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[7] Id., *Berg*, p. 18.

accepting that events in consequence, in their persistent role of chance and order, should slow down?[8]".

In fact, already at this initial stage, the reader can easily grasp, behind this contemplativeness, this seeming cautiousness of Berg, his inveterate failure to act, to carry out his murderous plans – or any plan, for that matter: "A week spent in an alien town, yet no further progress – the old man not even approached, and after all these years, the promises, plans, the imaginative pursuit as static as a dream of yesterday[9]". At multiple times, moreover, Berg finds himself in a position where he could easily attack or even murder his father, but consciously delays the action, seeking various excuses and barricading himself behind his alleged perfectionism: "maybe a perfect alibi should be worked out, for the perfect crime? […] Consider, reconsider beforehand, every point, down to the minutest detail, mark out all the angles[10]". The only act of violence taking place in the opening chapter, as a consequence of all this elucubrating, is a virtual one, obviously transferred to Berg's imagination and even deviated towards another object, as he fantasises about "[t]he clean blade of a knife slicing up the partition that divides me from them[11]".

Berg's desire to act and sublimate in action the hatred he feels towards his father is thus constantly checked by his meandering, pathologically insecure mind: he spends innumerable days buying time and missing good opportunities to carry out his mission, consequently reproaching or trying to justify himself ever more ridiculously. A critic has noted how "throughout his ongoing interior monologue, Berg, much like the ever-tragic Hamlet, harangues himself for his hesitation or failure to act, for being full of desire rather than decision. But this state-of-suspension-prior-to-action is also where Berg chooses to dwell[12]". In piecing together Berg's absurd monologues, the image which is obtained is indeed that of a quintessentially Hamletic character, whose actions are constantly blocked and delayed by infinite chains of thoughts about those very actions, and in whom abstract ideas exert a predominant force over the practical side of things.

When Berg, for instance, after his initial hesitations, notices that his father has apparently departed, he wonders with frustration whether it would not be better to simply act, rather than go on just thinking about doing something: "How many times would the desire be followed by coldblooded action? Defeat the desire and act. […] Yes, that's what it amounts to, decide rather than desire[13]". Despite this, later he still finds himself in a sort of limbo, seeing himself in Pirandellian terms, as a subject imprisoned in a liminal place, dramatically suspended between thought and action: "Half in

[8] *Ibid*, p. 9.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 8
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 8. This desire refers in fact to Berg's "stale […] dream of yesterday", mentioned in an immediately previous sentence. Berg's only mental rampage has indeed already gone stale, because of his excessive meditation preventing his acting out of that intention in reality.
[12] D. Dutton, *Unpacking Ann Quin's Comic Tragedy*, p. 150.
[13] A. Quin, *Berg*, p. 42.

the light he stood, a Pirandello hero in search of a scene that might project him from the shadow screen on to which he felt he had allowed himself to be thrown[14]".

Moreover, on those rare occasions in which Berg manages to materialise the violence that is quiescent in him into some tangible act, this violence ends up being diverted towards some object other than his father, transforming his outpours into ridiculous substitutes for the murder he is never determined nor brave enough to commit. The first victim of this misdirected homicidal frenzy, for instance, is Judith's cat, Sebastian. To be precise, the narration follows Berg as he treacherously kills an anonymous cat in an alley during a nocturnal scroll, and the reader is somewhat brought to identify it with Seby only later, when Berg runs casually into his father, who mentions the fact that Judith has found the dead body of her cat down the road. The felinicide in itself is described in rather gory terms, and the corresponding passages seem to almost give the idea that Berg has just killed a man in some vicious fight – which makes it even more ridiculous, considering what his real objective should be: "A limp body, twitching at his feet. Berg looked round, wondering if anyone had noticed the episode […]. He picked the body up, threw it in the gutter. While wiping his hands he noticed how shredded they were, the blood stained his sleeves as well as his shirt-cuffs[15]". The fact that Berg is not even credited for this one killing he does carry out is even more ironical: Judith, indeed, comes to believe later that the cat has been run over by a car, and the fault is consequently blamed on his father for leaving the door open.

Not only, then, does Berg kill an animal instead of his father: he is not even credible enough to be held responsible for this "minor" murder, or to pass himself as the coldblooded agent of vengeance he aspires to be. An even more ridiculous evolution of this dynamic is later repeated when his father's budgerigar, Berty, is found dead by Berg in Judith's apartment. At this point the father, Nathaniel, has already broken the relationship with Judith, and has asked Berg to go and retrieve some of his clothes and valuables in their room, including the cage containing his beloved budgerigar, which Judith positively hates. Upon checking the bird, Berg finds it "[lying] on its side, a yellow puffed-up mound of dry feathers, and brown slits for eyes[16]". In the following scene, Berg brings the covered cage to his father, and purposely drops it from a considerable height as the two are trying to escape from a hotel window, so as to avoid paying the bill. Checking the cage, Nathaniel finds out that the bird has died, consequently placing the blame on Berg: "damn you, you know what you've done, killed the only thing I loved, did you hear Greb, yes killed, murdered the only living creature I had any love or time for[17]".

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 48.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 59.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Not even going as far as to directly kill a substitute victim, here Berg simply takes the credit for a murder he has never committed. And the absurdity of the matter does not stop here, for Berg is subsequently haunted by two strange episodes concerning the dead budgerigar. First, he finds some workers excavating on the exact spot where his father had buried the bird's corpse, but the body seems to have mysteriously disappeared: "Had they found anything? Why what do you expect mister, a body perhaps? They laughed as he turned his back[18]". Slightly later, the bird is involved in a sort of mock-resurrection, reappearing inexplicably in Judith's room to the astonishment of Berg: "He suddenly noticed a small yellow object on the table […]. He picked it up. No mistaking this, the same, the only one, the blasted bird, with its brown slits for eyes. Who had unearthed it then, was this the very clue he had been hoping for?[19]".

The next victim is possibly the closest substitute Berg could find to his father, and "killing" it positively instills in him the sensation of having finally accomplished his long-delayed mission. This substitute victim, predictably enough, is his father's ventriloquist dummy, an almost real-size homunculus clothed in Nathaniel's best suit. The absurd act of the dummy's fake murder will actually take place several times during the novel, which mockingly highlights the fact that Berg is continuously delaying the actual assassination of his father.

The first occurrence of this "jokey act of homicidal failure[20]" takes place during a party at Judith's flat on Guy Fawkes night. On this occasion, Berg, whose perceptions are partially distorted by the fumes of alcohol, mistakes the dummy for his flash-and-bones parent, giving origin to a mis-identification which will be carried on practically for the whole rest of the novel: "Nearby the old man stood on his head, surrounded by more plants […]; his face puppet-like creased, his body swayed, then crumpled – a paperbag that lay in a heap[21]". A further masterstroke of irony lies in the fact that it is Judith, and not Berg, who decides at one point, in a gesture of retaliation against Nathaniel, to throw the dummy outside of a window, for it to be burned as a "guy" in one of the bonfires lit in the yard in front of the hotel: "She opened the window. Look Nathy take your last look at your precious dummy it's going to a far worthier cause. Now shrieking in an almost hysterical fit she flung the figure out. […] That's right take it, burn it, like the rest, burn it until there's nothing left[22]". Strangely enough, on this occasion Berg even sets out to try and save the dummy together with his father, pulling it away from the preying hands of the crowd of people willing to burn it in the fire, with Judith laughing somewhat satanically in the background – "he heard Judith laughing, and looking up through

[18] *Ibid*., pp. 106-7.
[19] *Ibid*., p. 107.
[20] A. Butler, *Ann Quin's Night-time Ink*, p. 13.
[21] A. Quin, *Berg*, p. 67.
[22] *Ibid*., p. 68.

the maze of Catherine wheels he saw her leaning from the window pointing at his father then at the fire[23]".

At the end of this scene, incensed by the general commotion and experiencing a climax of hallucinated confusion, Berg takes a seemingly final resolution: "He looked around: the old man once more draped over the banisters. He picked him up. How light he seemed, incredibly so. But this time once in his room definitely this time it would be accomplished. […] Even the smell of burning mixed with wet fur could not deter him, not now[24]". This is followed by a most allusive gap, and Berg reappears in the next chapter, which takes place in the following morning.

The murder has apparently been consumed, though the reader has not been given any chance to witness the action itself, with only Berg's discourse to rely on: "At last I can rest in peace amen. Accomplished. There he is down there, beside the bed, rolled up in the rug, with the eiderdown spread over him[25]". Immediately afterwards, however, the first doubts begin to emerge as to the actual occurrence of the murder, with Berg himself behaving awkwardly towards the body allegedly wrapped in the rug: "I won't look yet, give me time, just a matter of getting used to the idea, that's all it amounts to really. To what extent can a so-called action be believed when the thing in-itself is no longer apparent? But if you unrolled the rug? No, no, let it remain[26]". In addition, his memories of what happened the previous night appear to be blurred, vague and imprecise and, as he tries to retrace his recent actions, his narration becomes increasingly confused and unreliable. His subsequent words are meant to convince himself that the murder has really happened, rather than describe it to the readers, supplying them with precise and truthful information:

> The action, last night's scene, let it take on a gradual formation. Hands, yes, your own hands round his neck, pressing into the flabby flesh, and now, even now I can feel the corpuscles of blood slide across my fingers; well wasn't there blood, yes surely a spot or two? Berg peered at the eiderdown. Yes underneath that, and under the rug there would be dry blood. […] Admittedly I would never have had the courage […] if it hadn't been for the drink. But I wasn't drunk, don't think that, not one bit, I mean I can remember everything, every detail[27].

At this point, it is clear that Berg would only have to look under the rug and check out its contents in order to quench any doubts and act accordingly, and thus carry out his original plan, this time definitely, should it turn out to contain something different from his father's body. What he does instead, in this circumstance as well as for the rest of the novel, is to avoid this recognition as long as possible, and continue dwelling in his ontological liminality, bathing in the abstract possibility that his father might be dead, but equally welcoming the suggestion that he is still alive. Anything, that

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 71.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 72.
[26] *Ivi*.
[27] *Ivi*.

is, which can prevent him from finding a definite solution to his conundrum: the need, namely, to destroy the image of his father, and the equal need he obviously has to preserve this newly-found paternal presence in his life, however disgusting the actual human being can be.

Consequently, the best way Berg can find to maintain this liminal condition unviolated and continue not to act, is to carry this rug with him all the time, keeping it safe from indiscreet eyes, not so much to hide the alleged fruit of his murderous action, as to prevent the possibility that the truth of his own failure may be brought to light. The narration is henceforth full of episodes in which this delicate and impossible equilibrium is threatened by external circumstances and the shadow of the truth comes back to haunt Berg, instilling in him the same old doubts. Nonetheless, he stubbornly continues to refuse to check the body in the rug, finding ever more ridiculous excuses and preferring to linger in his mental hypotheses rather than face the fact of his persistent failure. In a number of occurrences, for instance, Berg notices the suspicious lightness of the body he is carrying, but delays the act of checking it by telling himself that it would be dangerous to expose it to preying eyes: "But to make sure, best to look […] No, far better to get away quickly now and find some quiet spot[28]", or similarly, "later there would be time to look, in a more discreet place, then perhaps the mystery could be solved[29]". The morbid sense of attachment he develops towards this rug reaches some moments of paroxysm, in which Berg demonstrates all his unwillingness to let go of the illusions he is fabricating for himself and continue dwelling in his unsolved liminality: "He continued to clasp the rug, almost tenderly, as though it were a treasured possession, and then buried his head in the middle of the folds[30]".

Sometimes, his own obsession towards the alleged contents of the rug even gives rise to instances in which truth and lie mutually shade into one another. His father, for instance, is again described indirectly as a dummy at some point: "the body bumped against his back, once a hand flapped over his shoulder, he shoved it in quickly, aware of the rubbery texture of the flesh – ah well, the old man had never been a flesh and blood character really[31]". At another juncture, Berg comically thinks of covering the alleged truth by telling Judith a lie regarding the real contents of the rug, not realising that what he intends to tell her is in fact the very truth:

> Of course, the body! But whose body […]. What could he say, pass it all off as some sort of hoax, swear there had never been a body in the rug at all, purely her imagination? She couldn't have seen very much, just the clothing perhaps, but come to that he hadn't either, at least not since the time he had half unrolled the rug, felt the body, but you hadn't looked. In fact the

[28] Id., *Berg*, p. 78.
[29] *Ibid*., p. 103.
[30] *Ibid*., p. 91. A similar gesture is repeated also slightly later: "Suddenly as if everything was too much to cope with he slumped forward, burying his face in the rug, his arms covering his head so that he no longer heard the sea hissing" (*ibid*., p. 105).
[31] *Ibid*., p. 91.

> whole scene now appeared a faded negative, something he had begun but not developed. Best to let things slide, take care of themselves[32].

Finally, when Berg cannot but admit to himself that he has never really killed his father and has in fact been carrying around a dummy all the time, the only thing that is left for him to do is "the last gesture[33]" of getting rid of it, "killing" it once again by throwing it off the cliffs. Which, however, he also proves comically uncapable of doing:

> He threw the dummy down, but did not hear it touch the ground, as in fact it had been thrown down a well, still falling through endless space. He peered into the darkness. But why bother any more […]? As though I'm still thinking, acting in terms of a dead body, yes, going on as though it had been something real, made out of flesh and blood, […] when it's only something made of some sort of rubbery plastic stuff[34].

In a final image of spiteless mockery, added to the many ones of which the narration is constellated, the sea even spits the artificial body out to haunt him again, as Berg re-emerges from the waves after a confused chase by two of his father's men, only to see the dummy itself floating at short distance from his face. At the end he is still carrying the dummy with him, appearing tragicomically unable to get rid of it once and for all, and when he does so, the gesture strikes as totally anticlimactic:

> He caught hold of the dummy's leg and dragged it towards the sea, the head suddenly bounced off and rolled into the water. […] Berg propped what remained of the dummy against the boat, and brushing himself down he walked along by the edge of the water […]. He walked back, picked the dummy up and threw it into the sea, watching it bob on the waves, headless, a tree's stump, ignored by the birds[35].

The final absurd action Berg indulges in, in the attempt to quench the awareness of his own failure and go on illuding himself that his father is really dead, is to recognise the corpse of an unidentified man as his father's. It is however clear, from an allusion to a "scar, running from his left ear to the jaw[36]" and the absence of any tattoos, distinctive marks of his father, that the body belongs to one of the men who were chasing him, whose corpse he had already come across among the waves together with the floating dummy.

Moreover, not only does Berg appear ultimately incapable of destroying, but he turns out to be unable to create. His Hamletic nature, his indecisiveness and intrinsic inability to act often involve the sexual sphere as well, and many images and passages clearly indicate that he is haunted by constant failures also in this field. First of all, Berg is revealed early on in the narrative to be sterile,

[32] *Ibid*., pp. 120-121.
[33] "The thing to do now, the only thing, would be to catch an express train home, secure an empty carriage then once in open country the dummy could be thrown away to the four winds – the last gesture" (*ibid*., p. 125).
[34] *Ibid*., p. 139.
[35] *Ibid*., p. 144.
[36] *Ibid*., p. 149.

so that the sterility of his actions is paralleled by a literal inability to procreate: "At seventeen discovered to be sterile, followed by secret injections: incurable[37]". In addition to this, he appears to be far from successful in his sexual performances. In an early scene, for instance, he fails to satisfy a girl picked up in a dance hall: "Once he had ventured across, and brought back a giggling piece of fluff, that flapped and flustered, until he was incapable, apologetic, a dry fig held by sticky hands[38]". As is the case for his attempted murders, in Berg's experience the sexual act is also substituted, mostly by a habitual recurse to onanism. He is indeed said to find "consolation in masturbation[39]", and even illustrates at one point the advantages of this practice, since it perpetuates his beloved suspension of all commitments and sense of agency: "For the time being masturbation was perhaps better in the mind as well as the body, no commitments, no responsibility; thoughts leaking out with dreams, becoming whole, entire universe made up of myself alone[40]".

As the narration progresses and Berg's psyche is fathomed in more detail, the reader begins to perceive, on his part, a certain aversion towards sex and to everything related to procreation in general. In one dense flashback session related to his childhood, for instance, the possible origin of Berg's problem with sex is revealed, as he assists from a distance to a sexual scene taking place between his parents. The core of his inability to act or function sexually, his view on sex and his feelings of inadequacy, as well as the first signs of his Oedipal complex, are here perfectly epitomised in a series of images with a high symbolic power:

> While they turned their backs you scaled a silver tower, swayed on an oaken throne, spying on the antics of a woman and a man you promised there and then to disown. Her voice gently chiding, until gradually raised – a creature trapped – his cooing and the movement back and forth on the grass, weaving of arms, legs scissor-opening. Nearby a startled thrush left seven eggs. You clinging to the bars above, breaking them one by one, throwing six eggs on to the dry moss. Through the keyhole afterwards, in the long dark hours, when you dared not look anymore – the sap that creeps from wood on fire[41].

A certain aversion towards sex can be perfectly understandable in a child, but one soon finds out that the situation has not changed much for the adult Berg: for him, the passing of time has not evidently healed or solved any of these complexes, but possibly, on the contrary, it has even intensified them. All the imagery present in the passage above is indeed masterfully paralleled in another scene which takes place by the pier. This is how he reacts when he finds a couple who are having an intercourse during one of his errands by the sea:

> Berg walked down to the beach, and sheltered behind a boat. Here he smoked, watching a couple make love under the pier, watching the maneuvering of their limbs, as though they were

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[40] *Ibid.*, p. 65.
[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 32-3.

> assorted feelers searching for a hiding place. The girl's slight resistance for the pleasure of the final surrender, the momentary security of the victim. Berg stared at the pebbles, picked two large ones up, threw them towards the sea. He heard the girl giggling, the man murmur. He threw three more pebbles, only the last one hit the water[42].

There is an evident similarity between the imagery of this passage and that previously related to Berg's childhood memory. Berg, for instance, appears to be prey to the same voyeurism he had experienced as a child, an act of passive watching of the sexual act which functions as a clear substitute for the act itself, and which the adult Berg proves to be never determined enough to carry out successfully. The intercourse is again described in unromantic and almost bestial terms, with the sexual maneuvers of the male sinisterly similar to a violent aggression. Such description is, on the one hand, an obvious reflection of Berg's disgust with sex, while, on the other, it is inextricably linked with his murderous intents towards his father, sounding as an indirect mockery of Berg's inability to bring his intentions to accomplishment, and thus linking the two discourses intimately together. The destruction of the eggs – symbols of the successful intercourse of others – is then for Berg a way to vent out his frustration at his inability to achieve similar results in his own life. So this act plays a similar role as the throwing of the pebbles to disrupt the activities of the couple. The throwing of all the eggs but one, as well as the image of the only one pebble which manages to reach the sea, finally provide another substitute image for the moment of conception, which is impossible for the sterile Berg: one which mimics the victorious achievement of the one spermatozoon reaching the ovum, laying the basis for the creation of new life.

All these anxieties regarding sex resound tangibly in an early scene which looks like a delayed repetition of his childhood trauma. Here, Berg, lying inactive in bed and thinking about masturbation, hears his father entertaining Judith in the adjacent room, which is possibly for him even more humiliating than seeing the old man making love to his rightful mother: "Oh yes I have seen you with her – she who shares your life now, fondles you, laughs or cries because of you […]. Afterwards their laughter bounced back, broke up the walls, split his door; still later the partition vibrated[43]".

Observing the behaviour of his father and his mistress after this occasion, moreover, Berg begins to fall prey to the fascination exerted on him by yet another limit to overcome which begins to form in his mind. It is indeed increasingly obvious, as the narration progresses, that Berg intends to conquer Judith for himself, in a somewhat incestuous substitution to his father. This plan, rather than being spawned by a genuine carnal desire for Judith, is of course deeply interconnected with Berg's thirst for revenge against Nathaniel[44]. As with his patricidal intentions, however, this desire is

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[42] *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[44] This, for instance, is what Bergs thinks of doing about Judith at some point: "Yes, that's all that's necessary, he felt sure, to play on her presumption, her emotional ambitiousness. For him she would be the perfect revenge" (*ibid.*, p. 27). At another juncture, he admits to himself that the satisfaction he might get in seducing her would be strictly linked to the

constantly frustrated by Berg's inability to act and by his pathological Hamletic disposition, which makes him incapable of any sort of action.

Not surprisingly, the narration of Berg's attempts at seduction is riddled with hesitations, excuses, interrupted impetuses, and meditations or gestures which substitute hypothetical real actions. In one particular scene, for instance, Berg has the opportunity to console Judith in a moment of weakness, caused by a fierce argument which has just taken place between her and Nathaniel. Having gently tapped on the partition after hearing her sobbing, he decides to enter her room: contrary to any expectations, however, all that happens afterwards is just Judith venting her frustration on him, while Berg stands there intimidated, saying or doing nothing of significance. The scene ends with him leaving the room, with nothing accomplished as usual:

> He lowered his head. […] He swayed between doorway and landing, watching Judith shrink away, finally collapse on the couch, in another fit of weeping. […] Berg advanced, stopped, circled, stared at the fox's mask, fingered some artificial flowers […]. Then swiftly he left, quietly closing the door, and jumped the stairs two at a time[45].

On multiple occasions, Berg's body language, gestures and thoughts suggest that his desire for Judith might be even genuine. At one point, for example, he observes his hands, registering "a great longing to press them between Judith's breasts[46]". At other junctures, he performs gestures which sound as more or less subtle substitutes for sexual acts or advances he has rarely the courage to carry out for real. He is seen, for instance, stroking a cat while thinking of Judith[47], or kissing a leaf in a transport of secret joy after being invited to her party[48], or more daringly squeezing "two pink balloons" which Judith is holding in front of her[49].

Whenever the circumstances seem to accommodate his plans, however, and especially when it is Judith herself who openly flirts with him, Berg shrinks away in fear, unable to seize the occasion and fleeing sex as a fearful virgin. This, for instance, is what happens at the end of an early scene, in which it is actually Berg who introduces himself into Judith's room with the original intention to attempt a first approach with her:

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idea of stealing her from her father's grasp: "Making love to her prior to really getting rid of the old man would surely bring greater satisfaction, indeed he had to admit it, there was the possibility she would not prove so fascinating after his father's death" (*ibid*., p. 65).

[45] *Ibid*., p. 49.

[46] *Ibid*., p. 30.

[47] "He made diagonal trails through the leaves, stopping once to stroke a cat, a bushy tiger with azure eyes, half contemplating the idea of taking him back, a present for Judith" (*ibid*., p. 50). This gesture is even more striking, considered the earlier scene in which Berg kills viciously another cat for no particular reason.

[48] "By the way Mr. Greb we're holding a party tonight, call in, bring some friends, booze if you like, just a few fireworks, a bit of fun, do come. He held his hand up, caught a leaf kissed it and threw into the fountain" (*ibid*., p. 64).

[49] "Judith in velvet, two pink balloons moved against him, he squeezed one until it burst, and Judith screamed, prodding him in the chest. […] He poked the other balloon playfully with his finger, eyes riveted on Judith's ample anatomy" (*ibid*., p. 66).

> She crossed her legs, her housecoat slipped back, a dimple showed, a mole on the side of her knee. […]. Berg moved quickly across the room. Judith rustled behind […]. He reached for the handle, felt Judith clasp his arm. Must you go, are you tired then, just a teeny weeny bit tired, why not relax here, just for a little while […]. He twisted the handle, pressed Judith's fingers, then propelled himself out[50].

During the Guy Fawkes's night party slightly later, as Judith approaches him with manifestly clear intentions, he wriggles out of her grasp preferring to follow his father who is rushing out of the room to save his dummy:

> What a state to get in, honestly Nathy's quite mad, still why should we bother about him. Aly kiss me, kiss me now, oh kiss me here, I've been dying for you darling, oh Christ how I want you. Her mouth soft, wet, taking in the lobe of his ear, moving down, hands fumbling his bow tie. He pulled at her dress, saw the huge white lump rise out, pushed his face against it. How can I go further when there are things to be cleared up – when I could… He struggled away[51].

In these situations, the original position of Berg is ironically reversed, as though Judith had become the pursuer and he the pursued one, trying to escape from her advances. The truth is probably that Berg does not genuinely wish to be with her, or better, that his own advances reach their intended purpose. If the conquest of Judith represents for him another limit to overcome, whose very existence in his mind fascinates him and spurs him on, then the position he really wishes to occupy is ultimately one of liminality. Berg, in other words, is totally incapable of transcending any limit completely: it is sufficient for him that a limit, potentially surpassable, exists, provided it is never truly surpassed. The real Berg, it seems, comes out in the moments of greatest frustration, when he complaints about an impossibility, debasing himself for being incapable of any action. His role is not that of the Latin lover, but that of an ever-dubious virgin, half wishing to experience and half struck into inaction by his own overarching fears: "But these hands, are they adequate, capable of producing more than just pity on her part, her thighs, would they open at the slightest provocation – these fingers, now flat, white, uncaressed, a language of their own, what are they really capable of?[52]".

Further ironic demonstrations of Berg's unwillingness to go on with Judith are given in all those passages in which he doubts that he will be able to get any pleasure from her once his father is dead: "But would she be desirable still, when there's no sense of betrayal behind my touch, and she more than willing […], what possible pleasure can I hope to gain from her now[53]". This, however, is obviously a hesitation for its own sake, for the reader perfectly knows that Berg, deep down, is absolutely conscious of the fact that he has never really killed his father, and even does his best to avoid being reminded of it and to persist in his suspended situation.

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[50] *Ibid*., p. 24.
[51] *Ibid*., p. 69.
[52] *Ibid*., p. 48.
[53] *Ibid*., p. 76.

In a late scene, in which he is finally having an intercourse with Judith, so many jarring elements are involved that the event assumes a somewhat sinister aspect. The focus, instead of being on Berg's relief, joy or satisfaction, is rather placed on images of solitude and death: "Like entering the sea. The sea alone. Alone by the sea. By the sea. By yourself[54]". It is worth remembering that, throughout the novel, the sea plays the role of an ominous reminder, an almost threatening presence which haunts Berg and instills in him a strange fascination, always harbouring at the same time images of death and decadence. Comparing the act of penetration to "entering the sea alone" provides thus an image which is far from anything positive or reassuring. The ultimate humiliation, as if everything he has already experienced were not enough, comes when, more or less mistakenly, Judith pronounces his father's name instead of his: "Oh it's nice when you do that, do it again, oh it's lovely. Nathy, oh Nathy my darling[55]". Berg, it appears, has so much desired to substitute himself with his father that he has somewhat lost his own identity: it is as if he were not even there in his flash and bones to savour the moment, engulfed in the oblivious waters of a liminal sea mostly of his own making.

Thus, in his ridiculously failed attempts at both murdering his father and sleeping with his mistress, Berg demonstrates an utter incapability to overcome the limits he has set for himself. His experience is essentially one of liminality, a suspension of all true agency and responsibility which he never really desires to solve: "This state-of-suspension-prior-to-action is also where Berg chooses to dwell […] While on the one hand he professes his desire to kill his father, sleep with his father's mistress, and avenge his mother […], he remains throughout a bumbling coward, aspiring mostly to shelter and comfort[56]". What he really needs, rather than to overcome his limits, is the continuous presence of these limits in his life, combined with the certainty that they remain always unsurpassed. What really moves him is the constant fascination that those limits exert on him, and the experience of suspension that originates from his obstinate refusal to cross them.

As has been already mentioned, there is another powerful image of limina which haunts Berg, casting its symbolical as well as tangible powerful presence throughout the whole narration: the wooden partition that divides, or better puts in communication, Berg's room with that of Judith. This partition acquires a great significance in many crucial passages, both in contexts of action and of stagnation: Berg refers to it with morbid obsession, sometimes directly, other times indirectly, depending on the level of assimilation of the extremely movable narrating voice, so that the reader has the feeling that the image of the partition is constantly present, in one way or another, in Berg's

[54] *Ibid*., p. 135.
[55] *Ibid*., p. 135.
[56] D. Dutton, *Unpacking Ann Quin's Comic Tragedy*, in *Music & Literature*, v. 7 (2016), p. 150.

thoughts and perceptions. There are moments in which the partition is there as a symbolic limen, charged with all the fascination and frustration of the other limits Berg has to deal with; at times, though, it is a material barrier which circumscribes and limits his actions. On some occasions, it even seems to acquire a sort of life of its own, assuming a feral or a human character, and absorbing on itself all the jarring emotions which Berg directs at either his father or Judith.

At the beginning of the narrative, when Berg has just arrived at the hotel and is still making up his mind as to how to proceed with regard to his father, the partition mainly plays the role of a barrier between him and his parent: it is a symbol of impossibility and an obstacle. In an already quoted passage, Berg transfers to it – exclusively in dream, of course – the murderous violence that he is nurturing against his father: "The old man not even approached, and after all these years, the promises, plans, the imaginative pursuit as static as a dream of yesterday. The clean blade of a knife slicing up the partition that divides me from them[57]". At this stage, the emotional agitation caused in him by this unprecedented closeness to his father, matched by his hesitation and incapacity to gather enough courage to act, provokes Berg's anger toward this piece of wood, which is mockingly separating him from a long-desired object that is both at hand's reach and yet still somehow inaccessible. In addition to this, Berg's anger is also augmented by the humiliation of seeing his father entertaining a love relationship with a woman different from his mother: the partition, vibrating with their laughter and with the very movements of their lovemaking[58], becomes thus an obvious object onto which Berg projects the hatred and violence which are originally meant for is father.

Soon enough, however, as Berg's Hamletic nature anesthetises his initial urgency to act, he begins to see the partition in a different light, realising that, more than a dividing agent, it is rather a strategic point of contact and communication with that which lies beyond. It is at this point that Berg begins to practice "the art of listening to the other side of the partition[59]", as he calls it, learning to exploit it as a transparent vehicle of emotions and feelings, a close informant transmitting to him the emotional state, the actions and the moods of the two inhabitants of the room on the opposite side. The partition is thus increasingly portrayed as a most empathetic surface: it is seen to shake, shudder, sway and vibrate in unison with the psychic and corporeal movements of Nathaniel and Judith, participating in their joys and sorrows, their arguments and lovemaking, absorbing and transferring hatred, preoccupation, danger and laughter, as well as affection, lightness, exaltation, and sobs.

A paramount example of this emotional communication carried out through this wooden surface is provided in the scene in which Berg is notified by the partition that Judith is prey to tears of discomfort, which prompts him to her rescue:

[57] A. Quin, *Berg*, p. 8.
[58] "Afterwards their laughter bounced back, broke up the walls, split his door; still later the partition vibrated" (*ibid.*, pp. 8-9).
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

> Berg leaned towards the partition. Definitely a woman crying, Judith by herself? […] He pressed himself closer, then as the sobbing merged into howls, he tapped several times on the partition, to be instantly rewarded by an absolute silence on the other side. He tapped again, this time however a fierce knocking answered him. He quickly dressed, all previous plans now forgotten. Judith in distress needing his help, advice, sympathy, obviously alone, what else could he do[60]?

Berg's behaviour towards the partition in this passage and other similar episodes, his delicate and intimate gestures, his gentleness in caressing, tapping or leaning on it, are all demonstrations that the wooden surface can assume almost human traits, attracting responses and treatments that are normally reserved to an affectionate lover, or a loving parent. At more than one juncture, Berg is indeed portrayed as straining against the partition, tenderly abandoning himself to it in search of comfort and consolation, as a scared child would do with their mother or father: "when the house seemed quieter, darker, he lay down and pressed himself against the partition, listening to the sea hissing in the distance[61]".

At different moments, the partition even seems to take on a life of its own, turning almost into a character of flesh and blood. More than once it is described as an animal, especially on those occasions in which Berg threatens to pierce holes through it or otherwise attempt at its integrity, but is consequently blocked by the dolorous response coming from the partition itself: "If only he could make a hole in the partition, just large enough for his eye. He fingered the wood, felt it respond. He searched for his penknife, and started scraping, but the noise alone made him pause[62]"; "He pulled the knife away, with it came a splinter of wood, the partition shuddered – an animal in pain[63]". The very end of the novel confirms this view, as the partition is described as "a piece of wood, five foot by seven, that shakes now and then – an animal thumping its tail[64]".

This identification with the feral world is after all in keeping with the way animals are treated in the rest of *Berg*. Pets are indeed generally employed as vehicles for emotions, however positive or negative they may be: they are made the object of transferred love, or implied in acts of retaliation originally addressed to other human beings. Suffice it to think of Berg killing Judith's cat instead of his father, of his subsequent wish to take another cat home to Judith as an affectionate present, or of Judith's resentment towards Nathaniel's budgerigar, and her killing it once Nathaniel abandons her. The partition, within this context, is just another living animal, channeling love and hatred between the various characters.

At some points in the narration, the flash-and-blood partition is even elevated to an almost human status. Berg, for instance, curiously appears to treat the partition as it were part of him at one

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[60] *Ibid*., p. 113.
[61] *Ibid*., p. 25.
[62] *Ibid*., p. 35.
[63] *Ibid*., p. 74.
[64] *Ibid*., p. 153.

particular passage, a mysterious extension of himself breathing the same oxygen and thumbing with the same heartbeat: "How quiet the place seemed except for the partition that now and then creaked – but that's just to remind me I'm still alive, that I'm not alone in all this[65]". However, the closest bond which the partition appears to entertain with a human character is that with Berg's father: the partition is identified with him on more than one occasion, and, as the narration progresses, this communion proves increasingly more distressing for Berg. In an early scene, for instance, in which Berg rescues his drunken father and brings him to his room, subsequently accommodating him on his bed, he observes that Nathaniel's foot is "now and then jerking, nodding in secret communication with the partition[66]". This identification is subtly confirmed in the scene immediately later, when Berg leaves the drunken father asleep on his bed and tries an approach with Judith in the room beside. On this occasion, during his flirting with Judith, Berg appears constantly tormented and distracted at the thought of his father waking up and rushing into the room. His discomfort, in this case, appears to be directed in particular towards the partition, which is seen to vibrate and move as though it were about to wake up. Berg's preoccupation here, clearly intended towards the father, is thus actually addressed to the piece of wood: "had the partition moved?", "the partition shook", "half turning Berg noticed the partition still vibrating[67]".

The identification of this wooden surface with his father, and generally its role as a powerful limen dividing and connecting different identities in the novel, is made even more apparent once the partition is finally broken. Admittedly, given the special significance attached to it, the episode in which this barrier eventually comes down results in a much less climactic gesture than one would have thought – especially considering that, up to that moment, so many limits in *Berg* have been tentatively crossed, invariably without success. The scene that prompts the breaking is again a chase, this time by Berg's father and one of his men, who follow him up to his room and try to bring the door down:

> His door continued jerking, and they were panting, grunting the other side. He jumped on to the bed, pressed against the partition. Back, then heavily forward, until the wood began giving away, a few more thrusts, and it would be down. He swayed on the bed for a moment, heard the shouts, fists and feet against the door. He swept the dummy and with his elbows pushed once more against the wood, which broke apart. He jumped through, landing on their bed[68].

Urgency, danger, and the commotion of the moment are thus the elements which push Berg to finally break the partition: no particular significance is attached by him to the gesture itself, which is not seen as a ritual of any sorts; nor is it a moment charged with any particular pathos, except for the very prosaic one provided by the situation of the chase itself. Considered in this light, the breaking

[65] *Ibid*., p. 75.
[66] *Ibid*., p. 20.
[67] *Ibid*., pp. 22-4.
[68] *Ibid*., pp. 130-131.

of the partition could be even taken as a missed opportunity, on Quin's part, to construct a powerfully symbolic scene which could have qualified as one of the most significant passages in the whole novel. The perspective changes, however, as soon as one remembers that, for Berg, what really counts is not so much the breaking or overcoming of limits, as the obstinate search, even the longing for situations of unbreakable liminality.

And this is exactly what the breaking of the partition leads to, as the sudden disappearance of the wooden barrier does not appear to solve any of Berg's problems. In subsequent scenes, references to the partition are simply substituted with mentions of the gap that has opened in its stead[69], attesting how that site of liminality and contact between worlds and identities has not ceased to torment him just because it is no longer there. On the contrary, now that the reassuring limen once represented by the partition has been destroyed, the situation gets even worse: a dangerous gate has been opened, allowing for fluid and uncontrollable passages between the identity of his father and his own. Already in the first explicit scene of sex between Berg and Judith, for instance, when Judith calls him "Nathy" by mistake at the peak of her pleasure, Berg's final remark is reserved exactly for the absent partition: "The gap in the wall seemed wider from the angle of his head. He closed his eyes[70]". Later, as his father has apparently disappeared for good and circumstances are much calmer, Berg is nonetheless still haunted by the ominous gap, which he sees as a foul mouth he expects any time to reject half-digested demons from his own past:

> Someone laughed […]. The sheet covering the gap, where the partition had been, began flapping, and for a moment, yes there, just now, a face between the jagged edges of wood. […] He swept back the covering, stared into his room, at the door swinging on hinges. He climbed over the bed and entered […] Aly what do you think you're up to, looking for a ghost or something?[71].

After this episode, various mentions are made either by Judith or the landlady regarding the necessity to mend the broken partition. A temporary piece of wood is thus set up, a new lodger is apparently going to occupy what was once Berg's room, and Judith even mentions having ordered a new cat. All these elements, inserted at the very closing passages of the narration, seem to point to a re-establishment of a previous order. Instead of transmitting any feeling of reassurance, however, the whole situation seems rather to revive the sinister shadows of Berg's initial position: the new lodger staying in Berg's old room carries around a cage meant for a stuffed budgerigar, and looks absurdly like his father, only with a beard and more studied manners[72]. The triangle has thus apparently been

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[69] "The gap in the wall, where the partition had been" (*ibid*., p. 131).
[70] *Ibid*., p. 135.
[71] *Ibid*., pp. 147-148.
[72] "Of course bird cages look all the same, if you pass them in a shop, they all have gilt edges round the doors and little silver bells – but mirrors cracked, and dry yellow feathers clinging round the edges? Said he was going to get a budgie stuffed, funny how most of my tenants like to keep pets […] Funny thing is my new tenant now, the one who's moving into the room you used to have, reminds me a little of Mr. Berg, first thing I thought when he entered the house, carrying

restored, and Berg is ready, secretly more eager than ever to re-enter the same condition of liminality which has always been his declared element. “A window just cleaned. Above the sea, overlooking the town, a man motionless, bound by a velvet-covered couch, and a woman, whose hands flutter around a butterfly brooch. They stare at a piece of wood, five foot by seven, that shakes now and then – an animal thumping its tail[73]”: the end of *Berg* is a self-mocking, slightly modified version of its own beginning. The limen of the partition has been set up again, even thinner and more provisional than before: an illusory dividing membrane that absurdly stands in-between spaces and identities which have already mutually mixed beyond retrieval.

Other than the physical symbolism represented by the partition, or the abstract aspect of the limits which Berg only partly wishes to overcome, other crucial sites of limina and liminality in the novel are represented by the identities of the three major characters. Borders between one person and another, indeed, appear in *Berg* to be quite fluid, allowing passages from one identity to another. Such passages may involve names, bodies and even sexes. Each character appears often able and even willing to transcend his/her own confines, transforming into something or someone else, losing him/herself into the image of a different body, a different name, or a different face.

A certain fluidity of identity is apparent from the very beginning, when the protagonist is declared to be “a man called Berg, who changed his name to Greb[74]”. This simple detail is enough to originate a subtle nominal ambiguity which will be maintained throughout the whole novel. A first aspect of this ambiguity lies in the fact that all characters refer to the protagonist either as Aly – short version of his first name, Alistair – or Greb, his adopted surname, while the narrating voice always calls him Berg, thus establishing a sort of duality which remains as a basic feature of his persona. Secondly, there is a subtle detail which has a profound symbolic resonance: given the fact that Berg is actually the protagonist’s surname, it goes without saying that the name is shared by his father as well, which is perfectly in keeping with the theme of mutual transformation and shifting taking place between the identities of these two characters.

A perfect example of this latter aspect is provided in a scene in which Berg thinks he has just killed his father, wondering in panic whether Judith is looking for her missing companion. In the speech Berg delivers on this occasion, the image of Judith’s lover is conjured as a fluid identity which stands mid-way between his father and himself. Interestingly, this image appears also to absorb part of Judith’s own identity and body, thus providing a perfect expression of the triangle in which all three characters are merged:

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that cage, why there’s the old man himself, I must ask for the rent. But then this one’s got a beard, looks older too, and I don’t mind telling you either, he’s more classy, and I hope has a bit more money” (*ibid*., p. 152).

[73] *Ibid*., p. 153.

[74] *Ibid*., p. 7.

> She would be the first to call, enquire where Mr. Berg is – Mr. Berg indeed, yes here I am, ready for the taking any time, and don't deny you haven't desire me, dreamt of me; I know, don't I know the shaking of that partition, even when he wasn't with you, then those tears which are only an orgasm of the eyes, those fingers you automatically put into place, you realise they are mine, always mine, do you hear?[75].

The initial change of name adopted by Berg is then progressively translated into a seemingly physical transmutation, observable in his appearance and facial traits and demonstrating how this facet of his personality is also far from fixed, and liable to modifications. Many are indeed the moments in which Berg catches his reflection in some mirror or other reflecting surface and scarcely recognises himself, admiring his own image as something alien and as though different from his allegedly usual self. Sometimes the change is unspecified, though no less sinister or distressing: "he stared at his reflection in the plate, a faint glimmer of someone barely recognisable[76]"; "he snatched the mirror up, peered anxiously into a distortion that made him quickly turn away. May as well be dead for who would ever accept a face like that?[77]". Other times, it is apparent that Berg is gradually changing into an exact copy of his father.

Initially, when he meets his father for the first time after many years of absence, the disgust and resentment he feels towards him prompt him to prove at all costs, to himself and to the reader, that he is quite a separate and different person with regard to his disowned parent: "That I come from this? No, no should have rested with the image of a mellow self-respecting father, who had died in thought alone[78]", or "[p]ositively no connection, there can never be any kind of communication between us[79]". As the narration progresses, however, Berg begins to notice disquieting similarities with him that he finds hard to accept: "In the telephone kiosk he fingered the receiver while squinting into the mirror. The close resemblance to the old man made him nearly drop the telephone; the shape of eyes, mouth undoubtedly the same. Only thirty years younger[80]".

Berg's drama originates from the fact that, despite his initially stated intention of murdering his father, what he secretly desires is to replace him, that is, to transform himself into his father. This is made progressively evident in the novel, from the first time that Berg expresses, more or less directly, his wish to sleep with his father's mistress. In the already discussed scene in which Berg attempts a first approach with Judith, Nathaniel is meanwhile occupying Berg's bed, while the latter takes his place in the next room. When Judith and Berg are finally making love explicitly for the first time, the level of identification between Berg and his father is so advanced that Judith calls him Nathy instead of Aly. On the same occasion, Berg loses himself into admiring the gap in the wall where the

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[75] *Ibid*., p. 73.
[76] *Ibid*., p. 40.
[77] *Ibid*., p. 55.
[78] *Ibid*., p. 17.
[79] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[80] *Ibid*., p. 27.

partition once stood, which is a powerful symbol indicating that any division or difference between himself and his father have now been deleted.

In the final part of the novel, the opening of this physical passage allows for free fluctuations from one identity to the other. This is epitomised by Berg's gesture of crossing the gap in the partition on two occasions: the first when the partition breaks and Berg lands from his own bed to that of his father on the other side[81], and the second in the opposite direction, when Berg intrudes into his old room from Judith's bed, believing he has seen a face appearing behind the flapping sheet covering the gap[82]. When the gap is finally mended, a photograph can be taken of the same initial triangular situation, only with two of its vertexes exchanged: Berg now occupies the place of his father, and his father lodges in Berg's old room, possibly intending to kill the son and conquer back his mistress.

In one of the final scenes, Nathaniel himself demonstrates all his abilities in disguising himself and becoming another person, as the landlady describes the alleged new lodger in terms of someone resembling Mr. Berg, but seemingly older, with a beard and "more classy[83]" manners. Before this scene, Judith related an anecdote about Nathaniel Berg, which reveals that his tendency to take the place of other people is in fact an inveterate one: "He told me once that he went to a psychiatrist, taking a friend's place, for a lark, he said, and in just one session she told him he always had to dramatise every situation because he had missed his true vocation, he should have gone on the stage[84]". During the same episode, Judith notices that Berg has also similar characteristics, and a similar tendency to disguise his true identity and intentions: "Ah you're a strange fellow, really sometimes I can't make you out, it's as though you are always playing a part[85]".

The same insistence on disguises and transformations is also highlighted in many passages concerning Judith, who becomes, through Berg's discourse, the epitome of the fluidity and multifacetedness of all women. Berg often indulges in observing her rituals of transformation as they unfold whenever she makes herself up, or chooses which clothes to wear for some appointment she has: on these occasions, she appears "busy making up her face, pencilling her eyes, eyebrows, […] concentrating on transforming herself[86]". In the scene in which Berg sneaks into her room in her absence, the spectacle of scattered clothes that is offered before his eyes reminds one of the various layers of skin shed by a snake, or by some mysterious creature mutating her aspect layer after layer, while keeping her true identity always secret: "clothes covered the chairs, bed and floor. Obviously Judith had tried on various dresses before deciding upon a suitable battle-dress for the day[87]".

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[81] See *ibid*, pp. 130-131.
[82] See *ibid.*, pp. 147-148.
[83] See *ibid.*, p. 152.
[84] *Ibid.*, p. 137.
[85] *Ivi*.
[86] *Ibid.*, p. 121.
[87] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

On other occasions, Judith's ability to mutate appears to possess a more passive aspect, as a result of the manipulative action of male discourse, which tends to fashion women according to different projected versions of the "ideal woman". For instance, at one point, Berg's fantasies about Judith trigger his realisation about women's ability to accommodate any image that is tailored on them by their men: "how often one plays with a projected fictional love: the image of a Ruth, a Helen, Beatrice, Cleopatra. Woman, the mythical creature who warmly welcomes the part her lover hands her[88]". Passivity, active performance and consciousness of such dynamics on women's part are then epitomised by another passage towards the end of the novel, in which Berg's appreciation of Judith's mysterious character spurs a meditation on the nature of all women:

> Isn't she the very prototype of the woman one dreams of being caught up by, at rest in her omnipotence, knowing her to be ruthless, but never accepting the fact, half the fascination in wondering how far she will go – the wiles, lies, all the vanities accepted, but never quite confronted? The so-called mystery of a woman, so involved in the many-sided portraits of herself, eternally eluding one's grasp, knowing she would lose all if she ever showed her true identity, her real worth[89].

The theme of women's adaptability is also strictly linked to another subtler transformation Judith undergoes. When she surprises Berg carrying the rug which contains the alleged body of his dead father, she does not only appear uneager to inquire into the matter, but even accepts the situation readily, taking Berg's side almost immediately: "What's in it Aly, it feels like a body, it isn't, I mean you haven't – Aly what's under that ghastly eiderdown? […] Aly you don't have to tell me I can guess, it's him isn't it, but I can't look, it is him isn't it rolled up in there, oh Aly love I understand[90]". The surprising aspect of this demonstration of faith towards Berg lies in the fact that, at this rather early point, their relationship has not yet developed into anything definite or concrete, and the thought of Nathaniel being murdered by Berg should have logically spurred a wave of panic, fear, or terrorised disgust towards the latter, rather than acceptance and seemingly genuine comprehension. (By no chance, Berg is the first to marvel at this unexpected outcome, reacting with a fit of suppressed hysterical laughter[91]). Later, meditating upon this episode, Berg wonders once again on the miraculous and almost uncanny ability of women to adapt to new circumstances: "How adaptable women are – practical? No, just irrational to suit their needs, that paradoxical fascination for their anarchy of destruction, yet retaining an air of complete innocence[92]".

From this moment on, Judith becomes in all respects Berg's accomplice, following him in his plans and sharing with him the burden of the alleged corpse, which they carry around and keep hidden

[88] *Ibid.*, p. 65.
[89] *Ibid.*, p. 134.
[90] *Ibid.*, p. 82.
[91] "He bit the inside of his mouth; laughter, absolute deep belly laughter mounted up, now like trying to control a climax" (*ivi*).
[92] *Ibid.*, p. 83.

from preying eyes. Like him, she also deludes herself into thinking that it is really Nathaniel's body which is rolled up in the rug. Like Berg, she also could, but would not check the contents, readily accepting this suspension of awareness so as to maintain the illusion alive. When, finally, the already-known truth emerges, and she is also forced to come to terms with it, she talks about the whole issue in very casual terms, giving the impression that she knew it all along, but that, like Berg, she was willing to carry on the fantasy as far as possible: "Oh I forgot to tell you Aly it was that they found in the rug, a bloody dummy, not a body at all, imagine you thought and so did I that… Not a body at all ah well what did I expect, after all there had been the discovery of the thing at the station, they had all known of course[93]".

In all these respects, Judith almost appears as Berg's double. In various crucial scenes, in which Berg is carrying the rug and is attacked or menaced by tramps or by Nathaniel's men, Judith's somehow fluctuating and intermittent presence seems to sustain this idea, almost giving the impression that she does not really exist, and is in fact just a projection of Berg. It is not clear, in the end, whether the closeness of these two characters is more due to Judith's convergence towards Berg, or to the latter's transformation into his father. The second option seems to be more convincing, and yet Judith's histrionic abilities to shift from one role into another, or better, to play the same role for different characters, are in any case a key element to the development of the story.

If the fact that Judith turns into a sort of Berg is somewhat debatable, Berg's desire and ability to slide – literally – into Judith's clothes is, on the other hand, a much more evident phenomenon. Apart from simply musing about the fascinatingly uncanny aspects of Judith and of women in general, some of Berg's peculiar behaviours demonstrate that he secretly desires to transcend his own corporeal and sexual limits by transforming himself into a woman. In a couple of occasions, he appears almost willing to relinquish his own manhood, variously expressing a desire to be castrated.

The first of these two occasions happens in correspondence with the episode of Berg's fiasco with the woman from the dance hall. After this scene, Berg is seen reveling in dark thoughts about his useless member, distorting its semblance into a series of kaleidoscopic images which end in a nightmarish climax: "longing to be castrated; shaving pubic hairs. Like playing with a doll, rising out of the bath, a pink jujube, a lighthouse, outside the rocks rose in body, later forming into maggots that invaded the long nights, crawled out of sealed walls, and tumbled between the creases in the sheets[94]". On another occasion, he goes back in his mind to his experience in the army, describing it in these terms: "Then came the army, head shaved, emerging like sheep, the awkward youth into –

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[93] *Ibid.*, p. 137.
[94] *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

what though? hardly manhood. Two years of castration, the silent masturbation in lavatories, after lights out[95]".

Apart from these images of self-debasement, mutilation and unsexing, which characterise his most depressive moments, Berg also expresses a more or less direct wish to transcend the limits of his own sex. If, on the one hand, his obsessive curiosity for Judith's rituals can be an indirect hint at this wish, on the other hand this same curiosity grows into something resembling a desire for a more corporeal identification with her, and by extension with the female body and the condition of being a woman: "maybe women felt like this after being made love to? What could it be like having pendulous pears strung practically round one's neck, a triangular fur piece, blood every lunar month?[96]".

These very general and indirect fantasies become explicit in a picturesque scene in which Berg actually dresses up as Judith, and transforms himself into her in different ways. The excuse for such a move is provided by Berg's need to disguise himself in such a way as not to be recognised by either Judith or anyone else lodging in the hotel. This practical reason, however, is soon overcome by the evidence that Berg is visibly enjoying the idea of disguising himself as a woman – "the prospect of a further masquerade", it is revealed, "excited him[97]". In the following passages, in which, step by step, he dresses up as Judith and imitates her moves, it is more and more obvious that this transformation is actually a materialisation of much deeper needs and desires, which up to that moment had been expressed only indirectly:

> Soon he found a skirt, jumper, stockings, and a pair of shoes. Solemnly he tried them on, and hobbled across the room, gesturing, fluttering his hands, as he had seen Judith so often do. Quickly he went back to his own room and put the whole disguise on; the nylons against his legs gave him an almost erotic pleasure […]. Putting one of his best auburn wigs on, he patted it into place, and arranged the fringe until it came well over his forehead and met his eyebrows. What about makeup? He went back to their room. He handled the cosmetics tentatively, then slowly powdered his face, his hands shook so much that at first he made a mess with the mascara – what a ritual, all to flatter the ego of man – the vanity of woman! He peered into the mirror and nearly toppled over the dressing table with laughter; if only the navy were in, and for a moment he mused on the possibilities, the delights of the adventures he could have had in such a disguise[98].

His fantasies about the adventures he could have experienced in the army are only a prelude to what happens immediately afterwards. When his drunken father enters the room and mistakes him for Judith, another surprising psychological dynamic is revealed about Berg, which provides further insights into some of his most secret desires. The following scene, indeed, demonstrates how apparently Berg does not only desire to steal his father's place in the triangle with Judith, because his

[95] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
[96] *Ibid.*, p. 104.
[97] *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.
[98] *Ibid.*, p. 109.

Oedipean complex also functions in reverse. This is what passes through Berg's mind as his father pushes him/Judith on the bed and begins to approach him/her in a bout of sexual desire:

> Fingers running up his legs, further and yet further up. This is how it had been, with Edith, with Judith, how they must have revelled in it, giggling, panting, helping the old man's hands, opening their thighs, unsnapping their suspenders, arching their backs, opening up everything, wide – wider. Lead him on, lead him right there, produce it in his face, in his ear, in his eye, let him have it, so he'll remember to the day he dies. A flowerless stalk waving in the wind – a frog leaping – and in one bound there over the old man's stained waistcoat[99].

Here, Berg transforms himself into both Judith and his mother, transcending the limits of his own sex, his body and his identity so as to identify corporeally and spiritually with the experience of humiliation suffered by them both at his father's hand. Only in this way is Berg able to find enough courage to take revenge on his father, tormentor of all three of them, in the most concrete way he has at his disposal. Albeit in a symbolical and partial way, this remains the only episode in which Berg proves to be capable of transcending his own limits. The kind of revenge he takes, in any case, is evidently still a surrogate of his initial murderous plans, which he will never be able to carry out effectively.

The powerful fascination of different kinds limina is thus what really drives the protagonist and the characters of *Berg* through the meandering pages of this novel. Despite some images of apparent crossing, and the numberless moments in which the transcendence of some limits is imagined, wished, attempted, or even partially or disguisedly achieved, the experience of Berg is ultimately one of unbroken, if perhaps not necessarily unbreakable, liminality. The place he occupies, and that which he, deep inside of himself, wishes to continue occupying, is on the safe side of the border, located, at most, on the narrow space occupied by its dividing line, with a comfortable view of what lies beyond. A beyond, nonetheless, which remains only a view, to be admired from a distance.

For if, on the one hand, the kind of movement Berg wishes to perform is ideally configured as a straight line, projected forward and traversing perpendicularly the red line of some limit, the truth of his situation reveals something different. His experience is indeed better described by an image which appears only in passing at some point in the novel, as Berg observes the pattern weaved on the rug containing the alleged body of his father: a shape which is described, certainly far from casually, as "a triangle within a circle[100]". A perfect description for Berg, for he is captured within a situation of triangularity, concerning his relationship with his father and Judith, or with his mother and his father, but he is seemingly condemned, at the end of the novel, to an endless, circular repetition of his initial stasis. Whatever limit he sets out to transcend, his destiny is ultimately always one of

[99] *Ibid.*, p. 110.
[100] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

liminality and stagnation. Which, however, is made significant and poignant by the very existence of those limits.

II. Stagnation of too-narrow limits: Three

Similar dynamics as those depicted in *Berg* are also at force in Quin's second novel, *Three*, a text in which the consciousness of existing limits pervades the actions, the discourses and the thoughts of the three protagonists: the couple Leonard and Ruth and their surrogate daughter, the mysterious girl named S. Rather than on a fascination for crossing these limits, however, the narration focuses on the stagnation and the sense of liminal suspension which follows from their passive acceptance, and on the consequent feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration which derive from dealing with the narrowness of these limits. The context in which this frustrated stagnation is analysed is that of an apparently average middle-class family, and the limits considered coincide with the narrow and stifling boundaries dictated by traditional bourgeois values, morality and sense of decency. Another aspect of stagnation which is explored within this frame regards the system of seeming securities, habits and appearances that the bourgeois model promotes and tends to impose, keeping out the chaos and the "dirt" of life on the one hand, but preventing people, on the other, from experiencing all the genuine areas of life which can only lie beyond these artificial limina.

From the very beginning of the narrative, there appears to be a somewhat neat separation between the couple Leonard/Ruth and the girl S, a separation which is the direct expression of two unreconcilable worlds and worldviews: the artificial and hypocritical fixity of the middle-class system, and the wild, untidy genuineness of the real life beyond this system, obviously represented by S. The limen separating these two worlds is in a way the central protagonist of *Three*, and much of the novel is played on the mutual impossibility and the more or less conscious desire to cross this barrier to reach one dimension or the other.

Leonard and Ruth's world is one dominated by a system of habits and rituals designed so as to give their life an illusion of security and eliminate any possibility of change, sustaining indefinitely the sense of slumbering suspension given by their impermeable comfort zone. The void of their empty existence is constantly warded off by such half-heartedly performed activities as listening to classical music on the radio, reading newspapers or watching the news on tv, in addition to the occasional dinner out or house party. In the diary and tape-recording sections in which S's point of view is presented, this artificial ritualistic aura is assessed through S's filter as an "existence bound by

habit[101]". In her chameleonic attempts to find herself a comfortable niche in Leo and Ruth's quiet life, S refers to their artificial and affected ways as something she is trying almost perversely to assume for herself, expressing a sense of distorted satisfaction in imitating a way of living that deep down she finds absurd and almost inhuman: "Habits. Their habits fallen into easily. Perversely[102]". In the present-tense sections in which Ruth and Leonard's dialogues are reported, instead, this ritualistic existence is to be apprehended more indirectly, as the reader follows the endless repetitions of empty gestures that both characters constantly perform, and which are obviously aimed at transmitting a sense of artificial order and purposeful rhythm to an otherwise meaningless routine.

In the presentation of Leonard and Ruth's interlocutions, moreover, Quin chooses a most peculiar *nouveau-roman* style, in which dialogue markers are mostly elided, so that every line is fused into the next, making it sometimes difficult to determine where exactly a character's utterance ends and the next one begins. This gives an overall sense of muffled homogeneity, constructing an artifact flow of casual discourse in which individual identities are lost, thus alluding to the way in which, in the artificiality of bourgeois surroundings, the unique traits of each person are sacrificed for the sake of a necessary conformity to a fixed set of norms. Critics have noted in this respect how "this collision of dialogue […] allows the reader to feel the uncomfortable closeness of their speech[103]", giving the impression that it is "as if they have merged into each other after staying together too long[104]".

As is the case with *Berg*, here too Quin employs style to extend and enhance the overall sense of liminality and stagnation expressed in her narrative[105]. One of the earliest exchanges in the novel functions as a perfect example of how Ruth and Leon tend to complete each other's discourse and transform even the most touching or horrifying topics – like the initial allusion to S's possible suicide – into the same flat nonsense, in order to save the fragile appearances of their world and sweep the dirt under the rug, or out of sheer superficiality:

> We should have gone with her Leon. She liked rowing out on her own. You went with her sometimes. Only once or twice then felt I intruded. But didn't she ask you to go the evening before? We had shopping to do. And it was stormy in the morning even she remarked how the clouds were low-lying mountains couldn't be seen either. She should never have gone. How – how will we ever be certain Leon how? We're not to blame remember that no one is responsible for another's actions – any tea left by the way? A little left I've cut you a slice of lemon. I'll have it without. Just as you like[106].

[101] Id., *Three* (1966), Dalkey Archive Press, Funks Grove, Illinois 2001, p. 21.
[102] *Ibid*., p. 56.
[103] Brian Evenson and Johanna Howard, *Ann Quin*, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, v. 23.2 (Summer 2003), p. 60.
[104] Juliet Jacques, *Fundamental Uncertainties: On* Three, in *Music & Literature*, v. 7 (2016), p. 156.
[105] Commenting on *Berg*, Dutton points out that, in this novel as well, style and content are interconnectedly exploited by the author to express the same atmosphere of liminal suspension which pervades all levels of the text: "If Quin denatures the mythic quest, it is not only through her treatment of dramatic content, but also through the stylistic ambiguities that envelop and even partially, and at times, comically, obscure the action. […] This emphasis on impression over clarification, over plot, is characteristic of Quin's style in *Berg*, and it's this impressionistic style that allows Berg to dwell in indecision rather than action" (D. Dutton, *Unpacking Ann Quin's Comic Tragedy*, in *Music & Literature*, v. 7 (2016), pp. 150-151).
[106] A. Quin, *Three*, pp. 1-2.

The scarce punctuation of passages such as this, the impersonal staccato rhythm and the lack of clear attributions to either of the two speakers creates a sense of depersonalisation and flatness which makes it impossible to let any kind of feeling, emotion, or humanity emerge from anything that is said. This style, in its turn, is a perfect counterpart of the middle-class sense of false modesty and moderation which binds Leonard and Ruth to a world of rarefaction and coldness, in which the true stuff of life is banished and substituted by empty simulacra.

If, on the one hand, their verbal exchanges do not really show anything of their true character or interior world, and the image which is given is a flat, emotionless and impenetrable one, on the other hand a completely different version of Leonard and Ruth shows up in the sections in which their personal diaries or tape-recorded confessions are separately presented. Here, in the intimacy and introspective mood allowed to them by being along with themselves, all filters are finally lifted, and the real individuals lurking beneath Leon and Ruth's dead skin are at last revealed.

Thus, artificial masks and structures designed to cover up the innermost urges and the most primitive side of their nature crumble, showing how, in fact, both Leon and Ruth have been all the time playing the part assigned to them by the society they live in, and to which the institution of marriage has constricted them. The confessions and the meditations they both make in such private sections are strikingly jarring in tone and profundity in comparison with the flatness, superficiality and self-restrain showed in their everyday conversations. The image of Leon, for instance, is that of a troubled character once full of ideals, now all shattered and stifled, obliviated in the slumbering acceptance of a role imposed on him from outside circumstances:

> That I've been in a trance no doubt. Confronted by an existence I can no longer believe in. But who can say there's any definition in what has been? Three aspects yes yes that can be recognised. Now. The boy. Youth. Man. Each contradicting. How come to terms? A compromise. […] She understood this. Perhaps not. An ambiguity certainly. The sensible husband. Practical. Desiring to do what is expected. Accepted. Adjusted to the role. A member of society. Composed. Controlled. Known for action alone. […] A change was admittedly known. But recognised only by myself. For others the pattern is set by which they refuse to alter. Soon one believes that is oneself and the change settles into corners. Roused only in moments say by stimuli or objects. Smell. Sound. That remind. Then the image topples. But still no one notices. Least of all those living the most close to you. Least of all… Then there's subterfuge and one goes on automatically complying being doing. For that is the easiest way. Besides one soon forgets. Habits take over, the pain becomes an object looked at from a distance[107].

Ruth, on the other hand, is revealed as an animal in cage, renouncing her true identity so as to comply with her role of wife and decent woman which is expected of her, relinquishing in the process her true needs, as well as any hope of ultimate happiness, or simply the possibility of being herself:

[107] *Ibid.*, pp. 120-122.

> I can feel nothing. Only think and wonder. […] That I was too passive I realise he made me so. And in all that the wish to please satisfy what I thought he most wanted yet wanting myself something other something else. But exactly what? […] I see him as from a cage. […] When we met he was a God, a brother I never had, perhaps a father too. His faults were endearing. I felt I understood. In awe of his idealism, intelligence, and above all secure in his respect for me. When did all that falter, what day, night did I feel this appalling separation, a certain loss of identity? […] And we remain. I watch as a guest might. Waiting for his next move. An element of restraint is necessary, knowing there is at least a sense of power in such passiveness. And perhaps tomorrow[108].

The most appalling and interesting aspect here is the mutual, histrionic covering-up that Leon and Ruth carry on, putting great effort in concealing their secrets, the truth about themselves and their feelings towards each another. At the same time, however, they both demonstrate a prurient need to materialise this whole area of consciousness which is otherwise kept hidden to everyone, though constantly yearning to get out: unable to keep this truth locked in the inviolable chamber of their hearts, they have been compelled to exteriorise it, consigning it to the tangible, though unsafe, materiality of a diary, a journal, or a reel, making it potentially open to intrusions from the outside. In fact, this very aspect may betray a hidden desire to be discovered, to be found out by the other, in the impossibility to confess and reveal directly to him/her one's personal truth. The presence of objects treasuring these individual secrets leads to another crucial aspect of this masquerade: Leonard and Ruth appear to be also desperately in need to lay their hands on the concealed truth they know to exist in the most intimate recesses of the other, and this brings them to violate the secrecy of each other's interiority as soon as the occasion arises.

It is extremely telling, in this respect, that the sections of Leon's and Ruth's diaries, journals and tape-recordings are never presented in real-time by the direct interested, but are rather clandestinely appropriated by the other party: both characters, indeed, often wait for the appropriate opportunity to scavenge into each other's personal possessions, and delve into their mutually untold secrets. It thus happens that Leonard finds Ruth's diary under a cushion, and does not waste the opportunity to spy on her writing[109]. He then gets infuriated with her, later on, as he finds out she has been likewise rummaging through his private stuff: "Have you been tidying my desk Ruth? […] Were you looking in this file? […] Were you looking for something?[110]". Moreover, Ruth gets Leonard's tape recorder when he is out for a walk, selects the most suspicious reel – the one standing separately from the others[111] –, puts it on and listens to it, until Leonard comes back and she accidentally destroys the reel in an attempt to rashly cover up her traces: "Leonard's voice muffled, then high-pitched.

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[108] *Ibid*., pp. 124-125.

[109] "He picked up a cushion. […] Looking down he saw the open journal. He leaned over and began reading Ruth's large widely-spaced writing" (*ibid*., p. 123). Later, he takes great care covering the traces of his intrusion: "He heard her move back into the kitchen, among saucepans, plates. […] He put the journal back under the cushion" (*ibid*., p. 125).

[110] *Ibid*., p. 85.

[111] "She went into the other room. The tape recorder, reels, she pulled out, one by one. One separate from the rest, she put on. Leonard's voice, sharp, slowly came over. She turned the volume up, leaned over, eyes closed" (*ibid*., pp. 119-120).

Switching on the light, she looked down at the recorder, turned it off, and took up the spool. The tape broke as she tried to re-wind. Twisted as she straightened by unwinding further, until a twisting mass lay in her lap, curled about itself in her hands[112]".

Passages such as these show that, despite the masks and the appearances that Leon and Ruth are forced to maintain throughout their daily lives, unspeakable secrets lurk in every remote corner of their interior sphere. Every time this structure threatens to collapse, it only takes one of them to allude to the secrets possibly stored by the other to keep him/her on check, and silence any further attempt to unveil the truth. S, who observes these absurd rituals as a sort of outsider, moves with suavity and awareness between Leonard and Ruth, reveling almost amusedly in the plethora of their false appearances and little or big secrets, conscious that these have the only function of keeping their relationship artificially alive, creating a fragile balance that could burst at any given moment under the least external pressure: "Games that would be difficult not to join in. And in such secrets, however small, I share with either of them, there is a feeling of – how can I say – a sense of closeness. A conspiracy in a way, when each knows that only I can play at traitor if I choose[113]".

The actions, the words and even the identities of Leonard and Ruth are thus circumscribed by the stifling limina of the fragile walls of hypocrisies and appearances they have erected all around themselves, in order to keep the chaos of life and of human nature illusorily out of their system. The house they have chosen to inhabit is a doll-house, in which order and fixity appear to reign and everything is seemingly catered-for. The lack of trouble and the absolute calmness of their life betrays however a stillness that resembles in many respects the stillness of death. Many are the images in the novel which seems to transmit a disturbing atmosphere of rarefaction, stagnation and immobility which are passed as serenity, while they are an expression of utter passivity, of an incapability or unwillingness to live, act, and face the harsh realities of life.

Two of such persistent symbols of stillness in the novel are for instance Leonard's impeccably organised collection of orchids, kept artificially protected in a summerhouse, and the absurdly grotesque arsenal of statues he has arranged in an empty swimming pool by the garden, which he uses as a surrogate theatre, in which the statues are spectators or immobile actors participating in his ridiculous pantomimes. Leonard often retires into this summerhouse as if into a sanctum, a place from which the ugliness and the disorder of life are shut out and temporarily denied, and where he can revel in an illusory Eden which could never exist in the real life outside. In the passages describing his interactions with the flowers, Leonard appears almost as an Adam-like figure, poking here and there on leaves, petals, stems, and setting eyes on the wonders of nature for the first time in human history. Quin's language reaches here such exaggerated peaks of poesy, totally out of tune with

[112] *Ibid.*, p. 122.
[113] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

Leon’s register throughout the novel, that it is clear how she manifestly intends to ridicule his sensation of false bliss:

> A bee orchid leaned over from the moistness around, touched his mouth. The petals fluttered. He put the pot on another shelf. Touched others. Slits of brilliant colour amongst a mass of green dripping foliage. Roots emerged suddenly as he parted leaves. Thrust through. He poked about with his little finger. He murmured with pleasure, sometimes sighed. […] He pressed the earth in, smoothed over. Paused longer at some, peered into centres, ran a finger along stems, pink against pink laid there. Turrets of intense purple. Wings. Tongues striped, tilted towards him […]. Breathing slowly, he listened with the plants that sucked, dripped around and above[114].

The same atmosphere of artificial immobility, rarefaction and illusory incorruptibility is evoked by Leonard’s statues and the games he plays with them. The statues, too, like the orchids, seem to provide Leonard with an indispensable outlet in his self-restrained and compliant life, to give him the possibility, that is, to become a child again and don off the role of sensible husband and working man he is compelled to assume in his everyday dealings with the world and with Ruth. Thinking of the surrogate theatre of the swimming pool, S observes for example that “[i]t seems to delight L every time we can get down there. Sometimes just the two of us, exchange masks, hide behind the statues, pretend making love to them, and L’s laugh loud, louder until darkness drives us out, back to the house[115]”. Again, these descriptions show a different and unsuspicious side to Leonard’s character which is profoundly at odds with his usual controlled and considerate behaviour in his routinary dealings with Ruth.

It is again S, however, who realises that the statues are only empty simulacra which Leonard needs in order to give his life an appearance of order and joyful serenity, instruments he resorts to, from time to time, to temporarily cover up the emptiness and meaninglessness of his own existence. In the descriptions of these statues made by either S or Ruth, grotesque elements alluding to death, decay or simply lack of liveliness begin thus to emerge, and this casts a sinister light on these figures which is revealing of the darkest truths they have been specially designed to mask: “Statues revealed. […] Figures unfinished. Row upon row. Salute the house. Arranged disorder. Surround / the swimming pool. Some fallen. Broken. After storms. Damaged / by trespassers. Pedestals remain. […] Embellishments / in their life. An attempt / to add / amend / defend[116]”.

In Ruth’s point of view, Leonard’s statues appear as absurd and even sacrilegious attempts to bring corpses back to life, or to give life to something which never had any. In this way, the statues become symbols of his pathetic and childish refusal to accept the void of existence, and of his inability to come to terms with the condition of death-in-life into which the bourgeois model has ensnared him,

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[114] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[115] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
[116] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

in exchange for a serenity which is only apparent and intrinsically empty: “And as for making the swimming-pool into that ridiculous sort of sunken theatre well really […]. Those ghastly statues of your father’s too disembodied pieces of bronze stone and bits and scraps of metal you tried making into flesh and blood participators or audience of your little charades frankly grotesque Leon quite quite horrible ugh[117]”.

If, on the one hand, the limina erected all around Ruth and Leonard manage to some extent to keep the darkness and chaos of life at bay, it is evident, on the other hand, that the stagnation and lifelessness at force within these narrow confines do not represent an idyllic substitute for the disorder which is only apparently avoided. Many allusions and images constantly remind the reader of the deeply negative consequences that this general stagnation is silently inflicting on both Leonard and Ruth, whose vitality, willingness to live and even sense of identity are progressively consumed away by the lack of action and meaningfulness in which they are immersed on a daily basis.

A powerful symbol of their inability to shake themselves off this condition is provided, for instance, by their continuous mentioning of a lake in the mountains, to which daily trips are regularly suggested and unfailingly postponed, to the point of transforming the whole issue into a sad family joke. A masterfully ironical scene, reported from S’s point of view, shows one occasion in which the trip has been miraculously organised in earnest and seems finally about to start, were it not for a sudden shower of rain which causes them to call the plan off. Returning consequently, not without relief, to their own respective empty businesses after this last-minute cancellation, both Leonard and Ruth appear as if they were actually looking forward to just such an epilogue:

> In the evening we made plans for climbing the Sugarloaf the next day. Though R was not very enthusiastic. In such heat she said it would be heavy going. […] Just after midnight I heard a slight patter on the roof […]. [G]radually the patter grew into a steady fall of rain, […] which continued all today. R seemed relieved, played, sang at the piano, brought out the cards. While L shut himself in the summerhouse, where he also took his meals[118].

In addition to these aspects, Leonard and Ruth’s preoccupation with the prolongation of their existential stasis is enhanced by a couple of more or less manifest references to the theatre of Samuel Beckett, an author whom Quin greatly admired, not least because themes such as stagnation, empty waiting, meaningless movement and impossibility to go on are central and pervasive in his work. A first, rather veiled reference is made to Beckett’s *Endgame*, when Leonard, in one of his sudden childish outbursts, proposes an acting exercise to the following tune: “Let’s pretend we’re the only inhabitants after an atomic war. Or prisoners all in one cell[119]”. This idea recalls the initial situation of Hamm and Clov in Beckett’s play, in which the two are trapped in a sort of atomic bunker after a

[117] *Ibid*., pp. 6-7.
[118] *Ibid*., pp. 133-134.
[119] *Ibid*., p. 105.

non-specified natural disaster, emptily waiting for their unavoidable end in an atmosphere of slow decline into nothingness[120].

Another reference, this time more evident, concerns the text which quintessentially encapsulates the whole meaning – or meaninglessness – of waiting as an existential stasis: *Waiting for Godot*. On the occasion of another miming exercise, Leonard alludes to the notorious exchange between Vladimir and Estragon on the subject of hanging themselves, mandrakes and erections: "I'm contemplating hanging myself. […] They say one gets an erection that way. […] And did you? No – well not exactly – as you can see there's no mandrake sprouting at your feet[121]". This intertext, subtly inserted by Quin, does only amplify the negative aspect of Ruth and Leonard's stasis, giving it a universal resonance which sounds at the same time jarring, if juxtaposed with the pettiness and banality of their middle-class life: theirs is only a pretense, a game at being profound intellectual souls, while their destiny is in fact one of unredeemable shallowness.

Another way in which Ruth and Leonard's existential stagnation materialises is the sense of homelessness they feel in whatever place or circumstance they find themselves in. Their summer house by the sea, for instance, evokes positive memories for Leonard, but it is soon made manifest that Ruth feels restless there, as if S's death had broken any possibility of serenity within those four walls: "If I'd known you really loathed the sea that much I'd never have accepted Father's offer of the place after all we could have easily bought a house further inland. Thought it something I'd get over conquer in time with you Leon – with the three of us here together[122]". It is clear, moreover, that Ruth feels an equal sense of homelessness and extraneity also back in town, indicating how her intention to avoid spending more time at the seaside house is actually only an excuse to cover darker and deeper preoccupations which she keeps to herself[123]. Ruth's sense of dissatisfaction with the city house, which she indirectly expresses here, is matched by Leonard's insistence on escaping their habitual surroundings. Try as they might, however, and wherever they find themselves at any given moment, the image of both Ruth and Leonard remains that of restless flies endlessly bumping onto

[120] In Beckett's play, Hamm and Clov progressively realise that their resources and provisions are thinning out, as what is left of the world around them is slowly diminishing into extinction. This is perfectly encapsulated in exchanges such as the following, where the material situation of the world becomes one with a universal human condition, from which no living soul is ever spared: "Nature has forgotten us. // There's no more nature. // No more nature! You exaggerate. // In the vicinity. // But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals! // Then she hasn't forgotten us" (S. Beckett, *Endgame*, in id., *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 97).

[121] A. Quin, *Three*, p. 138. In Beckett's text, Vladimir and Estragon have the following exchange: "What about hanging ourselves? // Hmmm. It'd give us an erection! // […] An erection! // With all that follows. Where it falls, mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you not know that? // Let's hang ourselves immediately!" (S. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in id., *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 18).

[122] A. Quin, *Three*, p. 3.

[123] "We've got to exorcise that place Ruth sometime. […] It would be nice to have friends around so desolate down there in the winter Leon and – well there's not very much to do there nothing to see at least… But we never see anyone here love. Well we'll think about it heaps of time darling. Yes I guess so" (*ibid.*, pp. 125-126).

the barriers of a narrow glass cage, of a vase whose lid is left open, with the fly within somewhat reluctant to get out.

Despite the huge system of hypocrisies, illusions and cover-ups which Leonard and Ruth have built all around them in the course of an entire life together, it is evident that these fragile and artificial limina cannot keep the darkness and chaos of life indefinitely at bay, but can only temporarily delay or mask them. Whenever the smallest creak opens in this unstable system – which happens of course regularly –, all the darkness and the silenced ghosts come to the surface with redoubled force to haunt them both. This re-emergence of the repressed takes place in different ways in the course of the narration: sometimes it can be assessed indirectly, through Leonard's and Ruth's speech and behaviours, sometimes it is symbolically alluded to by external events which happen in their life, and sometimes, when the pressure between them cannot be withheld any longer, it becomes tangible.

For example, a powerful symbol of the chaos of life re-appropriating its space by overcoming the illusory limina erected by Ruth and Leonard is represented by the group of trespassers who constantly threaten to disrupt their domestic peace and break into their property. This group of non-identified hooligans assumes a highly symbolic value with respect to Ruth and Leonard's bourgeois sense of decency and order, in that, apparently, there is no precise reason behind their disruptive actions. They do not mean to rob or to take revenge for anything in particular, nor are they moved by any specific feeling of protest, ideal or motive. They appear to be just embodiments of a gratuitous kind of violent chaos, perpetrating disorder for its own sake.

In describing the premises of Ruth and Leonard's estate, and enlarging her view to accommodate the reality beyond these narrow confines, S' more objective and extraneous eye detects the strongly oxymoronic presence of an entire world of utter disorder, coexisting in juxtaposition with Ruth and Leonard's artificial and illusory order:

> Weekend spent at their house facing an empty stretch of coastline, which belongs to them up to a certain breakwater. Beyond are the bottles, cartons, orange peel, banana skins, sanitary towels, stockings, contraceptives, gloves, boots, spare parts of prams, cars, bicycles, tins, mattresses, dolls, occasionally a chair that needs just upholstering. L continues a correspondence with the County Council, his father began, to bring into force a law that litter must be thrown here. Their own notices pulled down, chalked over with obscenities, thrown into the front garden, hung through statues, stuck in flowerbeds[124].

Already in this preliminary and general description, and especially in the City Council's apathetic reaction to either Leon's pleas or those of his father before him, it can be perceived that Leon and Ruth's life-model and their way of conceiving the world are not compatible with the realities of the milieu in which they find themselves. In other words, it is them who are out of place here, rather than

[124] *Ibid*., p. 54.

the disorder and chaos surrounding them; it is as if their structures of apparent order were perceived as an oddity, something which should not be even there.

Leon's reaction to the presence of the trespassers and the threat they represent to his fragile system of certainties, stabilities and assurances is one of absurd refusal, which symbolically expresses his inability to come to terms with the harsh realities of life that exist beyond his artificial confines. All he can do in response to these external pressures is to conceive ever higher walls, ever thicker barriers to mask the problem and delay the final confrontation with the world waiting for him just beyond his doorstep:

> Well I've plans to stop them bloody trespassers well will too get a high wall built all the way round that'll put an end to their vandalism. […] Have cut glass on the top and wire yes that's it an electric wire soon cure them. […] Yes a really high wall with thick cut glass all the way round that'll teach them stop them from peering in too no privacy these days[125].

All the velleity of Leon's plans and his attempts to keep the trespassers and the chaos they represent away from his quiet routine are finally shattered when a group of them makes a definitive step beyond the limit, launching a violent assault on Leon and his family. The first time this happens, it all comes as a violent gesture of disruption, a sort of anticipation or foretaste of what these hooligans are capable of, as well as a tangible reminder that their violent chaos will always find a way past the illusory barriers erected against it. This is how S describes the event in her journals:

> What was that? Just another statue fallen. Perhaps. Then they came. In the middle of a storm. One night. Waving torches. Throwing / fireworks / into the swimming pool. Stampeded / round the statues. While he stood quivering. In the summer-house. In the dark. They screamed. Tore flowers out. She buried her face in cushions. Crying. Hands covered her ears. Then they left. When the storm passed. A trail of torn flowers left. Plants. Broken bronze pieces. Littered paths. Over lawns[126].

The sense of juxtaposition between the storm caused by the trespassers' invasion and the actual storm raging in the sky gives the situation a further aspect of universality: it is as if the whole world were here revolting against Leonard and Ruth and their false pretenses of peace and order, at once reminding them of the inevitability of chaos and mocking their illusory layers of masquerades and their hypocrisies – it is by no chance, in this regard, that the trespasser's assault takes place precisely during one of Leon's pantomimes.

In another, later scene of assault, the passivity and impotence of both Leonard and Ruth against the overarching pressures of the forces of chaos are again confirmed, this time with the trespassers' intrusion exceeding into a kind of physical violence which is far from symbolic:

[125] *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
[126] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

> For a time I couldn't make out anything, hardly see, as earth, metal pieces, broken pieces of bronze fell around. When finally I could see, L lay flat on the ground. He was being beaten up by three men, whose faces, arms, legs were whitewashed. How patiently they must have waited, motionless, for us to come down, arranged themselves amongst the statues, not daring even to breathe. They looked like clowns giving vent to years of repressed feelings, as they punched, and kicked L[127].

The irony of the final epilogue of this event, with the police's cold and skeptical reception of Leonard's statement, is perfectly in accordance with the absurdity and the gratuitousness of the trespassers' assault. In this occasion, the impression is once again confirmed that, in the harshness of the real world, there is no place for the kind of artificial quiet and decency that Leonard and Ruth take so much for granted: "He went to the police station later in the evening […] and made a lengthy statement. He returned, convinced they were mad there too, he felt they hadn't really believed him, kept giving each other knowing looks, winks[128]".

Leon and Ruth's problems, however, do not regard solely the spillage of external chaos into their constructed limina. The barriers they have built also possess the function of limiting and containing the darkness inside them, of keeping the wildest side of their human nature on check, since it would be totally incompatible with the model of life they have elected for themselves. However, it is also evident that these barriers are insufficient and only temporary, and that chaos is bound to break out sooner or later. Juliet Jacques has noticed in this regard that "[h]aving set up Ruth and Leonard as a 'normal' couple, Quin immediately destabilizes them[129]". This means that behind every single gesture or behaviour, beneath every word and every verbal exchange between them, the reader can constantly feel the presence of all that has been removed or left untold in their relationship: a vivid sense of pressure pervades the whole narration, giving the idea that something could burst at any given moment, potentially giving rise to acts of violence or hysterical desperation on both parts.

One of the ways in which especially Ruth's inner frustration becomes manifest, for instance, is through her passive-aggressive expressions of disgust towards any kind of behaviour by other people which she considers inappropriate, or in any way incompatible with her bourgeois idea of decency and appropriateness. In his unquestioning acceptance of Ruth's judgements and observations of other people, Leonard certainly participates in and extends the same dynamics, despite the slight and unconvinced resistance he opposes from time to time to Ruth's harsh comments. His and her words, in any case, constantly ooze a fastidious attitude of condescendence, a fake and hypocritical sense of morality and an insecure affirmation of superiority over the rest of the world. This behaviour sounds at once as a refusal of everything that is different from them, and as a pretext to silently and

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[127] *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.
[128] *Ibid.*, p. 137.
[129] J. Jacques, *Fundamental Uncertainties: On* Three, p. 156.

indirectly vent out their dissatisfaction with their own situation, and with the stifling system of rules and appearances that keep them chained to their places and routines.

In Jacques's words, "[Quin] does not just examine how Ruth and Leonard talk to each other, but in her forensic […] detailing of the passive-aggressive ways in which their frustrations become manifest, puts the most influential class in post-war Britain's consumer society on trial, focusing on their attempts to handle their guilt[130]". There are many instances in the novel in which this passive aggressiveness is manifested either towards S or other people. S's behaviours are indeed constantly checked by Ruth, who ruthlessly judges every single move of hers according to her own standards of decency. She is scolded, for example, for putting up too much make-up[131], for dancing too wildly[132] or drinking too much[133], or for being too libertine in her attitudes toward the other sex or her sexual life. In these occasions, all the frustrating self-restraint exercised by Ruth in her private life is sublimated into violent disgust toward S's practices and behaviours, to which Ruth contrasts her ideal model of how a woman should behave and appear, finding of course S's savage kind of freedom at fault.

In her confrontations with Leonard, however, what really emerges is that Ruth is somehow trapped within the character she is forced to play by society, the circles and the institutions she moves in. At some junctures, it is thus subtly implied that the innermost needs and urges she so tenaciously denies to herself would push her in completely different directions, if only she allowed herself to be the person she is meant to be. Her unwillingness to cross these limits and the social inhibition which blocks her, moreover, appear to be in contrast with Leon's desires to go beyond the accepted limina: he too, however, is likewise impeded in his fantasies, both by Ruth's frigidity and fear to act freely and instinctively, and by the image of adequate husband and working man he has accommodated himself into. All this is perfectly detectable in the following exchange, in which Ruth and Leonard are trying to share their secret sexual fantasies with each other:

> Leon do you have fantasies when – well when we make love ever I mean do you love? Just wondered not obscene things darling not awful dirty things like – like…. […] Who do you think of – who – when you…. Oh not a particular person Ruth what about yourself? Oh never I mean it's always you just you I mean women aren't supposed to are they apart from images of their lover or something like that […]. She did Leon awful things or at least whoever she made love with did sort of verbal fantasies I suppose some people have to a kind compensation I think. Mmmmm what would you do if I did that you know started saying things? Such as

[130] *Ivi*.
[131] "Blue Leon she liked using my blue eye-shadow. Certainly enhanced them. Put on too heavily I always thought" (*ibid*., pp. 9-10).
[132] "You know something Leon I saw her dancing once with one of them on the beach I didn't mention it at the time…. […]. I thought she looked obscene really the way her legs spread out and…. […] The primitive urge Ruth quite natural really. Natural ugh when you danced with her I've never seen anything look so unnatural quite revolting especially at that party all our friends looking on what an exhibition don't know what they must have thought" (*ibid*., p. 44).
[133] "She drank too much that time for instance over the Chinese food and vomiting the whole lot up in the ladies such a waste always me who had to cope with it all too" (*ibid*., p. 86).

> what Leon? […] I want to fuck you? Oh Leon don't use that word it's so awful. As good a word as any – it's – well it's immediate as she would have said. Well I don't like it[134].

The sensation of constant limitation which Ruth and Leonard feel does not only come from their own self-restraint, or the pressures they put on themselves to behave according to the model they adhere to. These dynamics, indeed, are also projected onto other individuals of the same social circles they belong to, mirrored in their behaviours and expressed in the mutual expectations of what is considered to be decent and appropriate. When Ruth and Leonard appear socially, they enter a world of overarching hypocrisies which is the extension of their little private world, where everything is bound to appearance and everyone has to perform a very precise role, moving and behaving only within the limits prescribed by the bourgeois model. Social evenings are in fact games of chess where every individual is expected to move only towards certain fixed directions, and every wrong move can lead to disastrous consequences.

With the peculiar objectivity and detachedness which her special status allows her, S observes all these absurd behaviours by Ruth, Leonard and their bourgeois friends during a house party organised at their place. Here, the theatrical and performative aspect of the event is laid out in all its absurdity and fictional quality, not without some degree of amused curiosity on S's part, who is so extraneous to these rituals by virtue of her totally different nature and social upbringing:

> A few friends invited for dinner. […] Before the guests arrived L reached a near hysterical pitch. Nothing seemed right, everything had to be changed, reversed, rearranged. […] R changed dress several times. […] She tried on all her jewellery, wept at her hair until she listened to my reassurances. […] Then they came. Two by two. Incriminating each other's appearance by a point by point investigation. Only when the last guest hadn't turned up did L succumb to the evening's entertainment. Performed with R a defiant, unapproachable, unity. Everyone immediately concerned in being, doing what is expected of them. As if given the choice of two packs of cards to set the pace, but were misled by an invisible third. […] L dedicated himself to the moment, person, subject. R smiles only when he pauses, touches her necklace, bracelets, rings. Glances at women, estimating. If L should stray in any one direction for too long she asks for a cigarette, refuses all offers except his[135].

Apart from these verbal and indirect ways to vent out their frustration, Leonard and Ruth are at times prey to more physical and tangible externalisations of the tension they repress inside. Leonard's repressed sexual drives, for instance, caused by Ruth's frigidity and total inhibition, lead him to find symbolical substitutes for lovemaking in the acting exercises he performs with S – which are also, as will be soon seen, sublimations of his desire for her, masking in its turn a grander desire for freedom. One of the many examples of this is the already-mentioned Beckettian exercise, in which Leonard subtly reveals to S his desire to exchange bodily fluids with her[136]. Another instance is a

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[134] *Ibid*., pp. 88-89.
[135] *Ibid*., pp. 56-57.
[136] "I'm contemplating hanging myself. […] They say one gets an erection that way. He shouted at R. But she had gone to prepare tea. And did you? I asked. […] No – well not exactly – as you can see there's no mandrake sprouting at *your*

mime staging a triangular situation, which is in fact only a symbolic mirroring of the real situation involving S, Ruth and Leonard:

> A plan devised. For their amusement. With masks. Situation / insoluble. Three points *A B* and *C* on a rigid body in a straight line. When the points *A* and *C* being given *B* is chosen such that the sum of distances / *AB* and *BC* is as short as possible. Suggestion *A* walks past *B* and *C*. *A* might run. Stop. Shrug. Walk on. *B* and *C* watch. Perhaps follow *A*. Or separate. Possibly disappear together. Variations endless[137].

On another occasion, Ruth catches Leonard performing a strange scene against a windowpane, a mysterious behaviour which is never fully explained, but which looks like another episode of sublimation of his repressed sexuality, mixed with a need to let go of the tension caused by the secrets he is concealing:

> His nose wrinkled against the glass. […] His lips moved across the window, head worked up and down, finger rubbed until a high pitched sound came. What are you doing – what are you doing behind there? […] What is it – what's the matter – what did you see? Nothing – nothing Ruth. […] Smiling he edged again nearer the window, which he pushed up a little, and leaned there[138].

As for Ruth, she also has her own ways to vent out her inner tensions just as Leonard does. S reports for instance that she goes into hyperactive states whenever Leonard is called away for some job-related trip and she can finally enjoy some freedom, despite falling immediately afterwards into bouts of depression caused by his protracted absence:

> He was called away. Abroad for a week. Suddenly. She went to the hairdressers. Bought several dresses. Hats. Went out for / tea / lunch. Invited friends round for dinner. And went to the pictures. Or theatre. For four days. The fifth day she stayed in bed. Curtains drawn. Radio on. just have a bad period. […] Do stay with me[139].

On other occasions, when she is alone in the intimacy of her bedroom, she is seen trying on compulsively different items of clothing or jewelry, burying her face in the pillow, or even playing with her body, thus letting out some of her unexpressed sexuality, which is generally kept under strict control:

> She dropped the beads one by one into the box. Two remained, which she held against her nipples. Kneeling she looked down, swung herself from side to side. Her tongue slithered over lower lip, drew it in. She licked the beads, replaced them on the extended nipples, her head thrown back, knees parted pressed into the carpet, feet together[140].

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feet…" (*ibid*., p. 138. Emphasis added). Here, Leonard is alluding to the alleged properties of hung men's semen to give birth to mandrakes.

[137] *Ibid*., p. 21.

[138] *Ibid*., p. 47.

[139] *Ibid*., p. 112.

[140] *Ibid*., pp. 12-13.

When pushed by Leonard to share her opinion on the subject of masturbation, however, her sense of decency and appropriateness prevail, and she rejects the thing as something filthy which a proper lady should never dare doing: “Did you know she masturbated? Who? Yes she did told me one afternoon even suggested I do it. And? What a thing. […] I thought most girls did at school and so on. They certainly didn’t where I went[141]”.

The only occasion in which she lets herself go is during an evening out with Leonard. Here, Ruth launches into a wild – at least for her standards – dance, to which, quite predictably, Leonard responds with untold reproaches, if not downright alarm. The irony here lies in the fact that, on the one hand, Leonard seems to encourage her to lead a more emancipated life, while judging her, on the other, with great hypocrisy, at least whenever she shows any sign of doing so, to say nothing of his implicit terror of seeing her lose control in public:

> Sit this one out I think love. Ohhhhh no Leon it’s lovely look I can do it just watch. She flung herself back, shoulders twitching, hands shook around her body, his. […] She flung herself round faster and faster, a look of concentration on her face. […] Her mouth open, eyes closed, hair came undone, she continued dancing, even when the band stopped. […] She collapsed, adjusted a brassiere strap, tidied her hair. Her hand shook as she held a cigarette out for him to light. What about some more to drink darling? I think you’ve had enough Ruth really you know you suffer in the morning if… […] The girls came forward, bent their heads, and swept off their wigs. People applauded loudly, cheered. Ruth collapsed laughing. Well I’m damned all bloody men who would have thought it fantastic quite fantastic. Imagine going off with one of those Leon hahahahahahahahahah poor old thing do you feel cheated then – ohhhhhhhhhhhhh dear ohhhhhhhh how funny you look[142].

However, the aspect of Ruth and Leonard’s unhappy marriage in which their frustration becomes most dramatically apparent is their sexual life. On many occasions, Leonard attempts approaches with Ruth, which invariably end up in him being rejected with various excuses. Every time Leonard is rejected, his tension and frustration grow, and his next approach becomes less relaxed, less controlled, more desperate and beastly. These behaviours rapidly escalate to excessive pressures he exerts on Ruth, who is of course forced to react with even greater conviction, being at times legitimately scared by his approaches.

At the beginning, Leonard’s approaches are milder, thus eliciting in Ruth relatively gentle forms of rejection: “He stood behind her, took the lobe of her ear between his teeth. […] Oh darling not now we’re being watched[143]”; “[t]hey gazed at the purple flesh protruding from the water. You always have to get sexy in the bath Leon. Sorry. Well you must admit it’s hardly the time or place[144]”. As the tension inside him grows, however, he partly loses control and approaches Ruth with an increasingly animalistic rampage, which she responds to by an ever-strenuous defensiveness. On

[141] *Ibid*., pp. 45-46.
[142] *Ibid*., p. 87.
[143] *Ibid*., p. 42.
[144] *Ibid*., p. 44.

these occasions, the distance between them widens, as the sexual tension implied in Leonard's acts assumes an ever darker and more controversial aura:

> Look you've made me bleed oh really Leon why do you do it? Rigid, he mouthed to the pillow. Just like the cat…. What was that – what did you say Leon? Nothing – nothing. […] I knew you'd bruised me just look nasty purple marks all over. […] Sometimes you're like a beast Leon the way you…. Well get yourself someone else Ruth a nice sweet tender gentle little boy. How can you say that really Leon?[145].

The worst happens when Leonard, no longer able to contain his frustration or accept Ruth's rejections, loses control of himself and of his actions completely. His animal side takes thus hold of him, and the primitive urge brings him to overcome limits which should be never crossed. On one particular occasion, his approach is so violent and disrespectful of Ruth's will and dignity as to resemble an act of rape:

> You smell nice. Don't…. Don't what love? My head ah darling don't…. I want you Ruthey – Ruth. Ah nooooooooh. She shifted away until she hung over the bed, shaking. He lifted her back, parted her legs. No Leon don't not now – not like this. He pressed down, held himself over her face, mouth, between her breasts. Don't cry shhhhhh there. He touched her with his fingers. Leon did you ever make…. Shhhhh there you like this don't you like this and this. Her arms spread out, he brought her legs up, until they clutched his back. He twitched several times, then sank down. She lay motionless, tears ran into her mouth[146].

Sadly enough, this turns out to be no isolated episode, for Leonard's behaviour here is only an anticipation of the actual rape which takes place shortly afterwards, and which marks a definitive point of no return in his relationship with Ruth:

> Please leave me alone – alone. He tried to see her against the wall, clinging there. He sat up. Her hand came out, fist against him, in space, areas of darkness around him. He caught hold of her arms, and pulled her down under him. I hate you – hate hate hate… He pulled her dress up, slid the underwear apart, and went into her quickly, as she cried out, her arms above, hands clawed the wall. Her body sank into the bed, as he moved above her. Not like this oh God Leon not… He panted as he strove faster, deeper. You're hurting oh Christ it's hurting me don't – no Leon are you mad? She tried bringing her legs together. His knees pressed them further apart, his hands planted either side of her arms. She dug her nails in until her fingers were covered in his blood. Going to fuck you fuck you fuck you until… She screamed out as he went deeper in. She tore at his hair, face. […] Her body limp, head alone moved, twisted, came up, sank back, her mouth open, but no scream came. He withdrew, falling across her legs, his head over the bed. […] She stood up, pulled her dress down. Ruth I… Don't speak to me don't you dare… She went out, slamming the door[147].

Moreover, the dehumanisation Leonard undergoes in such situations is paradoxically matched by his apparent serenity after the act, which contrasts with Ruth's desperation at trying to cope with the consequences of her trauma. Here, Quin masterfully weaves her paragraphs, by juxtaposing

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[145] *Ibid.*, p. 89.
[146] *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.
[147] *Ibid.*, pp. 127-128.

Leonard's nonchalant moves and his vague hints of remorse with Ruth's closure in herself, as she lingers in her pain and impotent sense of loss. Leonard's thoughtless whistling in front of the mirror after nearly raping his wife on the first occasion[148], his unconvincing reproaches to himself without actually doing or saying anything to her after the actual rape[149], convey the image of a man who has definitely crossed the limits of his own humanity, which is so diminished in terms of empathy as to make him totally incapable of even realising the seriousness of his actions.

Leonard is a paramount example here of a negative crossing of limits, one which is performed to the cost of a regression into an almost feral condition: after this extreme episode, moreover, he cannot but return to the same condition of apathy and stagnation of old, only in an even worse state than before. Ruth, who had at least given the illusion of being able to break her stasis and abandon Leonard for good after this event, returns a in fact to him and lets herself be passively enveloped again by the stifling limina of their relationship. The final image is of her sliding into her bed and gazing into the darkness of the room, while Leonard quietly reads a newspaper. As S concludes in her journal, the impression is that ultimately "nothing will change[150]" in their situation.

If Leonard and Ruth are embodiments of stagnation in the novel, S is presented instead from the very beginning as a potentially disruptive force, capable of introducing an element of unpredictability and possible change into the soporiferous life of this middle-class couple. Through Leonard and Ruth's speeches, S is depicted as a sort of over-reacher, an individual coming from beyond the limina within which they are entrenched. She is a symbolic representative of those areas of experience they have always denied to themselves and which evoke in them mixed feelings of fascination and horror. From the beginning of the narrative, she appears to have crossed at least two limits, two points of no return in her still young life: one is epitomised by the experience of abortion, while the other by her apparent suicide (she is thought to have taken her own life some time prior to the beginning of the narration).

Her suicide is a matter of debate between Ruth and Leonard, since despite the fact that all the evidence seems to be pointing towards that direction, there can be no ultimate certainty as to how things actually went. The important aspect here, in any case, is that the possibility that S might have

[148] After the first episode of rape, Leonard is shown to react in the following way: "He whistled, while slowly dressing, and squinted into the mirror, inspected his teeth, contemplated the row of ties. He snatched one up, and put it against his shirt, tried another, stretched his neck, grunted, and clipped the tie on. Picked the catalogues up, hesitating over a large picture of a dark maroon-purple orchid, rigidly fleshy dark green. Sighing he put the catalogue on the table, turned and faced his reflection" (*ibid*., p. 79).
[149] The highest peak of remorse Leonard is able to show at this point is indeed encapsulated in the following scene, in which his behaviour appears in total contrast with the gravity of what he has just committed: "He threw the book onto the floor. Looked in the mirror, rubbed his eyes, and raised the glass to his reflection. You fool – fool – bloody fool" (*ibid*., p. 130).
[150] *Ibid*., p. 143.

taken the decision to put an end to her life proves to be doubly disquieting for Leonard and Ruth: apart from the loss of a family member – which S in all respects was to them, despite all her controversies –, the symbolic power of the act she has had the courage to perform has decisively shaken Ruth and Leonard to the roots of their passivity and stagnation. Used as they are to masking any problem in their life behind layers of pretensions and hypocrisies, to sweeping all dirt under the rug and going on pretending everything is alright, they cannot but be tormented by the thought of such a final and determined gesture as S's suicide: despite its obviously negative outcome, this gesture still represents an expression of strong will and self-determination they recognise as being totally beyond their capabilities. Apart from this, S's tragic end evokes the spectre of a sense of guilt that, in their own constant attitude characterised by inaction and procrastination, they have never previously known and are not equipped to deal with.

Their response, as ever, is one of refusal and closure, masking a willingness to evade any sense of responsibility:

> I mean we can't really be sure could so easily have been an accident the note just a melodramatic touch. No one can be blamed Ruth we must understand that least of all ourselves. Yes yes I know and one could say it was predictable her sort of temperament […]. How – how will we ever be certain Leon how? We're not to blame remember that no one is responsible for another's actions[151].

Whenever they think of the eventuality of S taking her own life, they always try to convince themselves that there is no ultimate certainty that she actually did it: "Still those tides are dangerous she should have known that. But darling she did. Did what? Know about the currents I mean that's why…. But we can't be sure. Pretty certain I mean how could it be otherwise? Oh I don't know I just don't know[152]".

These psychological dynamics are even more ironically evident whenever Ruth and Leonard pretend to be looking for clues of S's motives for killing herself in her diaries and tape recordings. On these occasions, they appear to filter out the numerous clear allusions S makes to her imminent suicide, self-sabotaging their own efforts to find out the truth in order to keep up their assuring appearances. This is, for instance, how S formulates her final decision in her tape recordings: "[E]verything / waited. Stopped waiting / adapted. Then the change came. In the change. The knowledge of what had to be done / what there is to do. […] The possibility of what might have been sinks away. Into what is left[153]". This passage is far from crystal-clear of course, but the falsely uncomprehending way by which Leonard and Ruth receive it is much telling of their unwillingness to really listen and understand: "Leonard pressed the switch down, and looked across at Ruth. No

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[151] *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.
[152] *Ibid.*, p. 50.
[153] *Ibid.*, p. 115.

more then? That's the lot only two reels. And not a word not a clue. Why did you expect something love?[154]".

Similar instances of incomprehension abound in the novel, taking place whenever Ruth or Leonard leaf through S's journals or listen to her voice on the recorder. Invariably, their reaction is one of stubborn refusal to understand: "Where did you put the journals darling? […] Have you been reading them? Good God no practically impossible her writing so illegible takes an age to wade through a page. […] I prefer to listen. Still it's difficult to follow the way she says things[155]". Every time they try to penetrate into S's secrets, it is as if there was some communication barrier separating them which makes any kind of true contact totally impossible[156]. At the same time, it is not altogether clear whether they are incapable of understanding S, or if they are simply doing whatever they can in order to postpone or avoid acknowledging certain truths about her. The answer possibly lies in the ending passages of *Three*, coinciding with the final parts of S's journals, in which she alludes more openly – though never in an ultimately clear way – to her suicide:

> Perhaps the idea evolved on just such an evening – but to write down would almost be like performing the action itself. Yes it is best to let it nurture. There is time yet. [..] And come the autumn, there are the neap tides. How easy for a body to drift out, caught up by the current, and never to be discovered, or for anyone ever to be certain. This time is not right at the moment. This summer must be lived through. Somehow. With them[157].

The very ending of S's journal reads even more clearly: "The boat is ready, as planned. And all that's necessary now is a note. I know nothing will change[158]". The most ironic and perhaps revealing part of it all is that Leonard and Ruth could have easily read these final passages of the journal and come to their conclusions. The fact that this part is left for the very end of the novel confirms that Leon and Ruth are only indefinitely postponing the acknowledgment of the truths they will never be ready to accept in a life largely based on false and artificial assurances.

The other limen S appears to have crossed is that related to abortion. Both an experiential and a moral limen, especially if seen through Ruth's eye, abortion is another element which immediately presents S as a castaway, an individual coming from beyond the border of what is permissible, accepted, or generally considered to be "normal" in the kind of society to which such people as Ruth and Leonard belong. We initially apprehend that S has come to their household to recover from some kind of unspecified illness, on the grounds of her knowing Leonard as a former colleague of hers. Her diaries, however, reveal hints of what has really happened to her prior to the events narrated: "Injected

[154] *Ibid.*, p. 116.
[155] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
[156] A distance which seems mutual, as is apparent from such statements as the following made by S: "Three months now of living with two people and not any nearer – nearer. Tactics flounder before even begun. There seems no answer. And yet…." (*ibid.*, p. 75).
[157] *Ibid.* p. 139.
[158] *Ibid.*, p. 143.

/ made ready. In white. Like half drunk. Must not lose consciousness. […] Chromium. Breathe deeply. Push. Where is it – was it big enough to see. Three months. What do they do with it in a bottle throw away?[159]". In another passage of her journal, S ponders retrospectively about her decision as an act of liberation, a re-appropriation of her body despite the trauma involved in the process. On the same occasion, she also considers Leonard and Ruth's potential judgement of her actions, implicitly pointing out the existence of some sort of moral distance between her and them:

> The words 'traumatic experience' dealt out religiously that would probably be mine to cope with afterwards. But how to convey the utter sense of relief of having my body back again related to the mind that functioned in freedom divorced from the computer system they had set up. R is, of course, against such things, the very idea horrifies her. What would her reaction be if she knew?[160].

Ruth, for her part, seems to further confirm this mutual distance later on, when she discusses her discovery of S's recent past with Leonard. On such occasion, she appears barely able to bring herself to even pronounce the word "abortion", also experiencing a wave of indignation when she realises that Leon does not completely agree with her in the condemnation of the act: "Did you know she had an abort – abortion? When? Before she came here in fact that's what she had and not the illness we were led to believe. Oh. Is that all you can say Leon? What is there to say I know you don't agree with that sort of thing but she was a practical girl in many ways[161]". This conversation implicitly resonates with Ruth's own inhibitions in life, the lack of freedom in her own situation, and her concealed desire to live beyond any moral schemes or obligations, which S seems instead perfectly capable of doing – "I somehow envied her life, that sense of freedom she so obviously had, when everything seemed possible[162]", she confesses later in her own journal.

Already in these preliminary presentations of her personal life-story, S is thus configured in Ruth and Leonard's view as a person coming from or inhabiting the areas of experience that lie beyond the narrow limits they never dare to cross: in this, she is construed as a symbolic representative of absolute freedom and lack of restraint, albeit this image does not fully correspond to reality. In this way, S comes to play the role of a constant reminder, for Ruth and Leonard, of the kind of life they might live, if they only ventured beyond the doorstep of their empty routines and repetitive frustrating life. The kind of power she exerts on Ruth and Leonard certainly instills in them some sort of fascination and curiosity, but also a natural movement of rejection and recoil, coming from fear and horror of the consequences they might face in case these limits were really crossed.

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[159] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
[160] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
[161] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[162] *Ibid.*, p. 125.

Jacques discusses the peculiar image of freedom S stands for in the following terms: "S's pleasures come when she can forget the taboos of her upbringing and celebrate her desires. This freedom comes from being cast out, though: […] more than anything, the disapproval that came with her not becoming a mother […] hurts S and confirms her inability to fit into a heteronormative world[163]". This free character of hers inevitably creates a distance, which affects Ruth and Leonard in different ways according to the nature and the hidden desires of each of them. On the outside, Ruth cannot but condemn certain traits of S's character, certain things she does or has done in her past, or some of her wildest behaviours. Her conversations with Leonard are invariably replete with more or less direct judgements and critiques addressed to S. As has been already seen, every time the latter appears to cross the border of decency and appropriateness expected of any proper lady, condemnation and disgust are Ruth's automatic answers: S is thus scolded for putting on too much makeup, drinking too much or dancing too wildly, flirting too openly with waiters, wearing too short or transparent clothes, and so on.

It is of course easy to see how all these critical observations by Ruth betray in fact a hidden desire for freedom, for being like S, as free and liberated as she is, as capable as she is of impersonating the character she was born to be. This secret admiration is also matched by Ruth's jealousy and suspicion with regard to a possible relationship between S and Leonard. Indeed, her attempts to extort possible hints of this clandestine relationship from her husband, as well as her repressed resentment and envy towards S, can be perceived in a number of exchanges she has with him. More than proper jealousy, what she expresses in her journal when referring to her suspicions is a certain frustration at being kept out of things: "I see him as from a cage. Then I think of them together. Yet there is nothing definite to go by. No substantial evidence as it were. At least everything around us has substance gives security. A home we have built up together. But lately I have felt almost an intruder[164]".

Even in this respect, however, the dividing line between indignation and fascination is not altogether clear. More than resentment, what Ruth often seems to feel towards S is a feeling of frustration for the sexual appeal and the magnetic power which the girl, through the marvelous aura of freedom surrounding her, is able to exert on other people. In addition to this, a subtle dynamic is created with regard to S's abortion, which is for Ruth a disturbing issue. Ruth is said at some point to have a mother fixation, caused by her apparent inability to have children: "R has given up going to the fertility clinic, feeling a specialist might be more helpful. […] She arranged to see an analyst, who suggested she had a mother fixation, which made her laugh[165]". Not having children of her own, and

[163] J. Jacques, *Fundamental Uncertainties: On* Three, in *Music & Literature*, v. 7, p. 157.
[164] A. Quin, *Three*, p. 124.
[165] *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

being strongly fascinated by S, she sometimes seems to seek a kind of strange intimacy with her, like that of a mother towards a daughter, or that between two lovers. S herself analyses these dynamics in her diary, focusing especially on Ruth's peculiar behaviour towards her whenever Leonard is not with them:

> L was called abroad to meet a publisher. R suddenly like a child, whose parents are out of the house, grew restless. […] Today she remained in bed, asking me to stay with her. […] [She] lay, half naked under the sheet. I brushed out her hair. Ran a bath for her. While she chatted continually. A certain intimacy sprang up between us, that somehow never exists when L is around. So much so that I found myself wishing he would remain away longer. As if R plays a role when he is with us. Except I wonder if it is not a certain role she plays with me, when we are on our own[166].

All the ambiguities of Ruth's feelings for S, her concomitant wishes to be like her, to take her as her daughter, as her lover, but also to destroy her, to annihilate her and suffocate the image of total freedom she represents, and which Ruth could never accept to suffer, are encapsulated in the following heartfelt confession in Ruth's private journal, the only medium in which she is free to express her true self:

> [Y]es perhaps the realisation that here was someone who shared something with him I failed to find. Didn't I then immediately feel a kind of relief when she was dead, hadn't I almost wished this to happen? The time when we were on the bed together, her white neck, hadn't my fingers felt a strange tingling sensation, as though they were someone else's hands, a murderer's hands gifted? […] Her eyes at times as though she knew what I felt, was in fact the spinner of my dreams. […] I somehow envied her life, that sense of freedom she so obviously had, when everything seemed possible. Yet at the same time there was pity, yes pity for what I saw in her eyes, and her desperate clinging to us. Which now I'm not sure about. What did she want of us, need from him, myself? We shall probably never know[167].

As for S, she is certainly aware of her disruptive power within the unstable equilibrium of Ruth and Leonard's life. She appears uncertain, however, as to how to employ this power or to what end. Her wishes are vague and undefined, deriving by her sense of absolute freedom which refuses to be channeled in any specific direction: her position is characterised by an extreme liminality. In particular, S appears to be constantly torn between the irreconcilable desires to let herself be absorbed in Ruth and Leonard's universe, creating a family bond with them, and to sadistically destroy their system of appearances and false order for the only sake of seeing them finally unmasked.

At times it is as if S, coming from beyond all limina and having experienced so much of the life outside of the socially permitted, felt now the need to become "normal" again, to settle on this side of the divide and be accepted again by society. After many traumas and erratic movements, she is now looking for the same "stillness" which Quin herself so often evokes in her private

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[166] *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142.
[167] *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

correspondence[168]. Her compulsion to become part of Ruth and Leonard's life is expressed rather evidently in many passages of her diaries and recordings: "A recognisable nausea provokes the desire to become something in their lives, anything[169]". At times, the distance she feels from them provokes sadness and frustration: "Three months now of living with two people and not any nearer – nearer. Tactics flounder before even begun. There seems to be no answer[170]". When she cannot get any closer to them, she tries to fill the gap in her imagination:

> I become almost a shadow. The kind that extends up the wall, across the ceiling, dwindles gradually into other larger shadows. In my room. Theirs. […] [A] situation I long to wade in right up to the very limits of imagination if possible. Gain another level, an added dimension, preferably bringing them both with me[171].

On other occasions, however, her desire of disruption/destruction of Ruth and Leonard's illusory peace takes over. She admits for instance at one point being "pursued by a compulsion to jeopardise such a bourgeois stronghold[172]". On another occasion, she revels in the awareness that "my certainty shall be their confusion[173]"; or again, she marvels at the thought that theirs is a "conspiracy in a way, when each knows that only I can play the traitor if I choose[174]". The scenes which are most revealing of S's dreams of destruction take place in correspondence with the trespassers' assaults to Ruth and Leonard's property. Before the most violent episodes of invasion towards the end of the novel, S already demonstrates a certain complacency with these vandals: in these circumstances, it is almost as though she recognised them as agents of the same chaos she also represents, projecting on them the hope that the absolute existential immobility to which Ruth and Leonard seem to be condemned may be finally broken. All the controversial feelings she stores inside are revealed in a passage in which, with unmasked exaltation, she admires the havoc caused by the trespassers, which in her eyes confers finally a semblance of life to the whole place:

> I cannot deny a certain amount of pleasure in adopting an outward aspect, contrary to what my real feelings are. So that when the storm broke out tonight, and people entered the garden, with torches, fireworks. Instead of joining in, I remained by the window, my hands folded in my

[168] It was not a secret that Quin considered *Three* to be the most autobiographical of her novels. As she explained in a letter to her friend Brocard Sewell regarding this text: "I don't know about the book I'm on at the moment as being in another vein, expressing more truly myself. I think it will take many years before I strip off the layers of 'spectres' in my own nightmarish way" (id., Letter to Brocard Sewell, May 1964, in B. Sewell, *Like Black Swans*, p. 183). Similarly to her character S, Quin herself constantly felt in her life the concomitant needs to evade from an insufficient or stifling reality, and the need to settle, to find her centre of stillness and achieve the peace and quiet necessary to find herself and go on with her work. The constant oscillation between these two made her life a succession of sudden evasions and travels juxtaposed with moments of calm; a calm, however, which all too soon assumed for her the character of an existential stagnation, prompting her to leave everything and launch into ever new adventures which were really attempts of evasion from her own self.

[169] A. Quin, *Three*, p. 60.

[170] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

[171] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[172] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[173] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

[174] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

> lap. But laughter bubbled up inside me, especially when I noticed, in the flashes of lightning, L's face behind the summerhouse glass, and heard R's frightened cries. All was over far too soon. Though for the first time the gardens look alive. Even the statues seem human, so much so that at times I wonder if perhaps they are, maybe a few people remained[175].

If S's position with respect to Ruth and Leonard as a couple remains somewhat ambiguous and fraught with jarring feelings, her direct relationship with Leonard is characterised by completely different dynamics. Despite Quin's style and content organisation, which are meant to obscure rather than explain, thus leaving the reader with a range of equally valid alternative interpretations, a clandestine relationship has clearly gone on for quite a while between S and Leonard, as it is equally clear that S's feelings for him constitute a driving force behind many of her actions and gestures. Several hints may even lead one to think that S's unborn child might be Leonard's. Apart from this unavoidable suspicion, which remains unsolved in the novel, many passages in S's diaries and recordings allude much more clearly, though not always directly, to their relationship, tracing all the meaningful moments of contact which have brought them to become closer and closer during S's stay with the couple.

There are some junctures in S's diaries and recordings in which she fantasises on the possibility of something happening between her and Leonard – often only vaguely alluded to as "him", but easily recognisable as Leonard. For instance, she is shown at one point struggling with some repressed feelings which are likely to be addressed to him: "Mantis-like I hang over many desultory designs, toy with subterfuges. Attempts at censoring any desire to think what should be felt. This the most difficult[176]". At other times, her feelings are vaguer and more confused, mixing actual love with the need for a substitute for the family she has never had: "Speculation in assuming a love for a substitute absorbed me long before suspecting it of myself [...]. Days of exultation, but moments of cross-sectioned feelings. How can I explain, reveal all, arrive at some kind of clarity? Supplant these huge areas of unspoken thoughts. Their voices. Wish-fulfillment – revenge?[177]". In a nocturnal scene taking place during a holiday, S's fantasies about Leon take a more tangible shape, in an image in which the figures of lover and father appear to merge together:

> I stopped periodically holding my breath, and play around the idea of sleepwalking, never really getting further than the space separating my bed from theirs. But suppose a nightmare? Scream, run over, flying myself on L's bed, but immediately confronted by his face looming up in the glare of the bedside lamp, [...] and R saying it's all right, go back now, you'll be all right, tell us all about it in the morning[178].

[175] *Ibid*., p. 136.
[176] *Ibid*., p. 56.
[177] *Ibid*., p. 61.
[178] A. Quin, *Three*, p. 67.

At other moments, the contacts between them become balder, and the sexual tension more tangible. In her reel, S constructs a web of vivid imagistic allusions, such as the following: "Collision of water / rocks / bodies / hands. Demanding more. From the night than they would dare to by day. Sharing a cigarette. The contact it promises[179]". Another scene, taking place in Leonard's summerhouse, is also a triumph of sexual allusions, hinting at what is likely to happen between them – or what has perhaps already happened – if they continue on the same track: "He touches. With little finger. And talks of the operation of cross-pollination. […] You see when the stigma is mature and ready for fertilization – look can you – come nearer look see how sticky and moist it is to touch. In the sand / dunes / our fingers / touched. Accidentally[180]". Some points of S's journals, moreover, refer more explicitly to love scenes she has entertained with a mysterious lover. As the narrative progresses, the reader can easily piece together all the information which is glimpsed in S's writings, and conclude that this lover is in all probability Leonard himself:

> Compelled to talk / about everything. Except what there was / to be confronted by. […] The dot of cigarette light. Before pretence at sleep. Waiting / for that / first faint light. In a darkened room. Hurt me hurt / me hurt me / there / here / anywhere. This way. If you like. Talk to me talk. Talk / to / me / Was it like this with / Never before. Not like this. No one has touched me ever / never never / like this. Before. Like waves. The coming / slowly. Dual roles / realised. Yes yes / yes / Be a boy. If you like. Anything. Be / Just be[181].

This dance of mutual seduction to be glimpsed behind S's obscure chronicles creates a subtle undertext of constant tension gravid of significances concerning her and Leonard. In these dynamics, the idea is evoked of the presence of yet another limen to be crossed in S and Leonard's relationship: the constant goad of a distant thought, a dream, a possibility, a desire which generates an unavoidable magnetism between them, drawing S and Leonard together, and stirring them out of the different impasses which prevent them from living their lives to the full, keeping them chained to their individual forms of existential suspension. At last, when this tension and mystery enwrapping their relationship has grown to its maximum degree, the truth is finally revealed, showing clearly that this limit between them has been crossed, changing their reciprocal situation irreversibly:

> I remembered other nights spent in the hotel […]. We were invisible. Contained in our bodies, that had crossed borders never before realised. Attempting to hold onto the smell of each other, knowing only too soon, soon it would evaporate, something which would be impossible to recall. But the sense of fantasies re-explored. Pretend I'm tied to the bed. And his tongue whipped over, across, under. Have you tried it with three? Have you? Be three now. And incest? Whip me with your hair. Let me come between your breasts. In your mouth. Ear. Hollow in your back. Hair on his chest burnt with a cigarette. […] What are you thinking? Of

[179] *Ibid.*, p. 110.
[180] *Ibid.*, p. 104.
[181] *Ibid.*, p. 113-114.

> you. Thinking now? That this could last like this. When will you fuck me next? I'll fuck you any time you want[182].

S and Leonard appear thus to inspire each other to cross the thick though transparent barrier which divides them: they walk towards each other, or rather in parallel, along a limen on whose edge they perform a subtle and dangerous dance, which might possibly bring them either to their mutual salvation or to destruction. For Leonard, S represents the inspiration and the invitation to cross those limits he is not allowed to overcome in the artificial and self-restrained life he is bound to live within the institution of marriage, and according to the rules of the society he has chosen to be part of. For S, Leonard represents instead the chance to finally settle on some stable ground on this side of the limen, at once retaining her true self, and feeling herself finally accepted by a society to whose eyes she has always been a castaway. Having finally crossed this border and left their original positions, they now find themselves in a liminal place in which a return to previous circumstances is not possible anymore, and a definitive change is somehow still precluded, especially because of Leonard's ultimate incapability to act and choose what he desires deeply inside.

As S has painfully realised, however, Leonard's lethargic condition and unwillingness to leave the security of his narrow confines, however frustrating and inhibiting they are, are ultimately stronger for him than any true desire for freedom and change. For he and Ruth "swing each other against walls that bounce them back to themselves[183]", which makes any possibility of evolution and change in their life ultimately impossible: "The possibility of what might have been sinks away. Into what is left[184]". And the thing which is left, she perfectly knows, is not enough to go on.

The awareness of the final insolvability of this conundrum, and at the same time the knowledge of having gone too far to go back, result for S in the only possibility she has to wriggle out of her existential suspension, namely her own destruction. With a gentleness and determination which Leonard and Ruth would never be capable of, she thus walks one final time towards the water's edge, another powerful image of limen which has tantalised her with its mysterious promise of both salvation and annihilation, and lets herself become one with her own true element.

Despite her tragic end, S stands out arguably as the only positive character in *Three*, the only individual who has had the courage to live her life to the fullest, free of any inhibition or imposition dictated by society or other external circumstances, obeying to her own rules and opening herself up to the possibilities which only genuine experiences can bring. She chooses freedom, but she cannot possibly achieve it in the prison represented by Leonard and Ruth's world: "Quin resists […] determinism, creating something that rejects the possibility of *going* anywhere, leaving us with a

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[182] *Ibid.*, p. 142.
[183] *Ibid.*, p. 72.
[184] *Ibid.*, p. 115.

sense that in a world made by and for people like Leonard, there isn't really anywhere for women to go[185]".

Compared to her, Leonard and Ruth appear as much more miserable characters. Despite discovering the most feral and inhuman side of her husband, and despite suspecting the truth of his numerous betrayals, Ruth does not demonstrate the necessary courage to leave him, and accepts once again her frustrating role of passive spectator in a lethargic life which is crumbling to pieces: "Now there are the nights of self-pity, wishing in a way he would leave. That I could go, but the effort. Effort. And we remain. I watch as a guest might. Waiting for his next move. An element of restraint is necessary, knowing there is at least a sense of power in such passiveness. And perhaps tomorrow[186]". Leonard, for his part, has let go of his only possible chance to be himself, to break an already defunct marriage and change his life for good. The image of Leonard, sunk in the darkness of the room after watching a video of S on the beach he had recorded some time before, abandoned to the realisation of his ultimate failure and irremediable defeat, is the perfect encapsulation of his entire condition, of the destiny, that is, of endless frustration and regret that now awaits him:

> He tapped on Ruth's door, opened a little, then closed. Quietly he set the projector up, and put a film on. A girl, naked, emerged from the sea, hair over her face, she approached, then turned away. Picked up a towel, held out to the wind. […] In slow motion gulls circled as she approached again, towel clutched round half her body, a mask covered her face. She danced away to the edge of the sea, where she flung towel and mask down, dived into a huge wave, bobbed up, hair and seaweed caught in a spray. The film slowed down. He stared at the square piece of light on the wall, in the middle flecks of black like hair. He switched off. In the dark he sat, hands over his face[187].

III. Dances on the borderline and ever-shifting boundaries: Passages

In Quin's third novel, *Passages*, the concepts of limen and liminality acquire new significations. If *Three* is mainly a novel about stagnation, *Passages* celebrates constant and restless movement, active and feverish search, in contrast to the passivity and impotence haunting the protagonists of the previous text. Paradoxically enough, the two main characters in *Passages*, a couple formed by an unnamed man and an unnamed woman, are also trapped in a condition of utter liminality: unlike what happens in *Three*, however, this liminality is the product of an exactly opposite

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185 J. Jacques, *Fundamental Uncertainties: On* Three, in *Music & Literature*, v. 7, p. 158.
186 A. Quin, *Three*, p. 125.
187 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

existential attitude, originating, that is, from the restless movement of the protagonists and the constant changes and explorations they experience.

Movement, for them, assumes different forms and significations, ranging from a physical changing of setting (a movement from place to place, as they are looking for the woman's missing brother), to a spiritual search for themselves, together and individually. The limina they constantly cross, or better, which constantly shift in front of them as they move along, are likewise both physical and spiritual: they are either the borders of cities, islands, states or hotel rooms they find themselves in at every new juncture, or the thin confine separating so-called madness from so-called sanity, around which some crucial aspects of their relationship are negotiated.

On these dividing lines they perform their demonic dances, frenziedly shifting from one side to the other, challenging each other and themselves to cross their own limits and reach ever new stages of their restless personal evolution. They explore the unknown areas which lie beyond the limits of the already known and the permissible, and even challenge one another to achieve the supreme degree of grace they seem to identify with madness. They do anything to oppose the stagnant destiny deriving from an acceptance of the limits imposed on them by fixed institutional or societal roles, which, on the contrary, in *Three* Ruth and Leonard are so reluctant to renounce.

The situation of the two protagonists of *Passages* coincides thus with an experience of life beyond the limits. These limits can be diversely understood, but they are mostly geographical borders. Throughout the novel, the action develops in foreign lands, as the man and the woman travel across a non-specified country, apparently in the Mediterranean area, in search of the woman's missing brother. This country is currently prey to an extremely unstable political situation: the wreckage and the poverty caused by a recent war are still visible in every corner of the country, and a dictatorial regime exerts its power and control over each individual, creating a pervasive atmosphere of paranoia, hostility and surveillance from above. There is the possibility that the woman's brother has been arrested as a political suspect, held in some prison or detention camp, or that he might be already dead, or have changed identity and managed to flee the country. This is how the general socio-political conditions of the place are presented:

> The political situation here is intolerable. There's no hope unless a revolution starts. Bloodshed under clear skies. Such a climate brings murder/war crimes easily. Restlessness, can see it all, the way they look, or not look at us. They still have their rituals their God(s); their traditions. They have a cause they'll willingly die for. And the women wait, […] no illusions, no ideals, wanting to be slaves, knowing no other role, accepting death as the order of things[188].

The same climate of tension is reiterated in another passage:

[188] Id., *Passages* (1969), Dalkey Archive Press, Funks Groves, Illinois 2015, p. 35.

> Threats, suspicion. Talk of detention camps. […] Growth of police power. Court martials. The regime, apparently has admitted in writing to the International Committee of Jurists that telephones are being cut off; the reason offered is that it prevents left-wing elements from plotting over the telephone. Relatives of political opponents are victimized. Very few people now allow themselves to get drunk[189].

The preliminary situation of the two protagonists, searching for a missing person through exotic lands in which chaos and devastation seem to be ruling, obviously inscribes the whole narration within the discourse of travel-literature, in which everything feels new at any moment, as if every element were seen and experienced for the first time. The scenes, the objects, the places and the people described by the man or the woman do not belong, for them, to the sphere of the ordinary, but to the category of the strange and of the unknown: everything, for them who have launched themselves beyond their usual geographical limits, is an expression of something which comes from another dimension, an altogether different world[190].

This aspect of novelty and strangeness, apart from the climate of terror and chaos caused by the political situation of the country, is variously expressed by a number of elements in the narration. A significant one is the frequent description of deformities, degradation and decadence. The pervasive presence of tramps, crippled or maimed figures, for instance, is also a distinctive feature in both *Berg* and *Three*, where they appear especially in relation to the sea – itself a huge container of opposites and a constant reminder of both liberation and annihilation –, and are employed to create a subtle accumulation of tension and an atmosphere of slow decline into death. In *Passages*, the presence of such figures becomes even more disturbing and pervasive, since the two protagonists constantly walk among them, and are reminded of their existence wherever they direct their attention, or in every exchange they entertain with other individuals.

Scenes such as the following are recurring in the novel, populating it with grotesque and almost supernatural elements: "Beggars shouted from crouched positions. Legs, half legs curled under arms. Some had hands, but no feet. Some had legs, but no arms. They could not be ignored, though their faces were part of the wall they leaned against[191]". Disfigured and limbless guides with black teeth[192], poverty-stricken mothers offering their skinny daughters to the first stranger passing by[193], wild parties with masked people, tarot-readers and inebriated dancers performing contortions and

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[189] *Ibid*., p. 90.

[190] Critic Philip Stevick has noted in this regard that "[i]n all four of [Quin's] novels, the characters are never at home. Even if they occupy a place where they have been for some time past, it is not perceived as home. Physical surroundings tend to be perceived in the way in which one sees them on a trip. Features of the landscape are seen as strange and unaccostumed […] [T]here is no ritualized, routinized base. The merest detail seems unfamiliar" (Philip Stevick, *Voices in the Head: Style and Consciousness in the Fiction of Ann Quin*, in Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (eds.), *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1989, p. 234.

[191] A. Quin, *Passages*, pp. 15-16.

[192] See *ibid*., p. 20.

[193] See *ibid*., pp. 50-51.

strange sexual rituals[194]: all these elements concur to render *Passages* a story which starts and develops from beyond the confines of the known world, in which everything is heightened and new, as if coming from a different level of experience, and where the ordinary always and inevitably coincides with the extraordinary.

The motif of the brother's quest, together with the constant feeling of persecution deriving from the political situation of the country, give the idea of a scenario in which a kind of constant and restless change proves necessary to survive. Because of this, both characters appear accustomed to accepting sudden shifts of scene and perspective, being perforce open to the introduction of ever-new elements into an already altered routine, made up by default with out-of-the-ordinary situations. Most sections of the novel begin or end with a transfer, a change of setting, a new journey which is about to begin, or which has just brought them to yet another place: "They couldn't bear it a moment longer. They knew that they were being followed. Despite it being in the middle of the night they ran away[195]"; "Soon we will pack our cases, leave once again, and move on. Move to another place. Another city where perhaps…[196]". The whole narration, likewise, is riddled on both the man's and the woman's side with statements alluding to the nomadic and everchanging character of the couple's situation, such as "we move on[197]", or "we move with the weather[198]".

Movement thus proves salutary for both characters, who appreciate the basic fact of being in transition from one place to another on a number of different occasions, confessing it either directly to each other, or thinking about it privately in their inner ruminations. The man, for instance, registers at some point in his journal "a longing for other cities. Cities I haven't been in before. Some hotel where each room is different. A cooler more temperate climate[199]". In moments of discouragement, he also points out the fact that "to be on the move again at least is something[200]". His need for change is readily matched by the woman's obvious restlessness, her constant search for new adventures, action, diversions, sexual exploration and entertainment – which is even more striking, if one considers that her most absorbing concern should be the quest for her missing brother. The man, observing her feverish hyperactivity, notes down in his journal a much telling exchange they have had on this aspect: "He You live with such frenzied intensity / She Because there's nothing else to do – I would be eaten up by reality[201]".

Statements such as the latter add a more disquieting and subtler aspect to the couple's constant need for movement and change. If, on the one hand, the positive aspect of novelty gives a semblance

[194] See *ibid.*, pp. 23-26.
[195] *Ibid.*, p. 45.
[196] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
[197] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[198] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[199] *Ibid.*, p. 43.
[200] *Ibid.*, p. 45.
[201] *Ibid.*, p. 85.

of liberation and progress, there is, on the other, a certain awareness that settling down in any place has become for them impossible. Whenever they spend enough time in the same place, they begin to show signs of discomfort, as if stillness caused an unbearable itch in them, making a change of scenery from time to time indispensable. Of the two protagonists, the man is probably the one who shows more evident signs of a deep sense of rootlessness, a suspended condition caused by his belonging nowhere in the world, sometimes not even in the confines of his own body or identity. This is especially detectable in passages such as the following:

> How many hours I waste lying in bed thinking about getting up. I see myself get up, go out, move, drink, eat, smile, turn, pay attention, talk, go up, go down. I am absent from that part, yet participating at the same time. A voyeur in all senses, in my actions, non-actions. What a delight it might be actually to get up without thinking, and then when dressed look back and still see myself curled up under the blankets[202].

The pages of his journal are replete with similarly desperate appeals in which he voices his frustration at his own sense of placelessness, passages which show him as a floating particle without provenance or target, totally at the mercy of external circumstances and events. At some junctures, he laments for instance being incapable of adapting to his new surroundings, of feeling comfortable and at home there: “What are we doing in this city, this land I find no reconciliation with[203]”; “Another hotel I can’t get attached to[204]”. At others, he appears to be baffled by the extraneity of the setting, as if the emphasis were shifted from his own incapability to feel at home anywhere to a universal feeling of homelessness intrinsic in every new place he visits: “Another climate needed. Another place. No sense of place here. Perhaps not even other places. But a place[205]”; “What does waking up in this shuttered room mean – sounds of the city – all is foreign. What am I doing here, what is the point of this laughter, these gestures, this woman whose legs I part? / Admit I find everything strange and foreign[206]”.

On other occasions, instead, the prevailing feeling seems to be one of regret, a sense of loss for what is constantly left behind with each new transition: “When I leave this country will I look back on it with nostalgia – only the possibilities that were missed. Perhaps[207]”. All these sensations are sometimes mixed together, in passages in which need for change, stagnation, nostalgia for a place once considered home, longing for a future place to call home, and a certain unsolvable intrinsic homelessness appear mutually confused into one another within the same discourse:

> Days like this are taken up with nostalgia – longing for some other climate, another person, another love, until they are all spread out like a vast geographical map. There are so many

[202] *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.
[203] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[204] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
[205] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[206] *Ibid.*, p. 91.
[207] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

> routes, they all lead me finally to the edge of where I am at the moment: in a room I know only too well, a woman I love, but hardly know, a city where every street declares its defeat[208].

On the one hand we thus have this male protagonist, shown as an uprooted figure giving himself freely to an endless succession of transitions and changes, whose meaning he does not seem completely able or willing to comprehend; on the other, instead, is a woman who is apparently moved by the solid motif of her brother's quest. What seems to be a potentially profound difference between them, however, is soon revealed to be a sham: the woman's quest motif, indeed, turns out soon to be a mere pretext for propelling her forward, to provide her with endlessly new possibilities of movement for its own sake. As happens with the man, her quest only responds to a deeper need to constantly escape from herself and from reality: it is, in other words, the expression of an inveterate inability to stop and face the truth, to come to terms with herself. The constant shifting of borders undergone by both characters, in other words, appears as a mere stratagem adopted so as to avoid dealing with whatever is contained within the confines of the self.

After all, the fact that the search for the missing brother might be only a pretext is hinted at in the very incipit of the novel, which declares this quest as the founding reason at the base of the whole narration, only to frustrate it immediately afterwards, by alluding to the tangible possibility that the whole mission might be thoroughly futile:

> Not that I've dismissed the possibility that my brother is dead. We have discussed what is possible, what is not. They say there's every chance. No chance at all. Over a thousand displaced persons in these parts, perhaps more. So we move on. Towards. Away. Claiming another to take his place, as I place him in profile. Shapes suiting my fancy[209].

This contradictory and oxymoronic exposition of the protagonists' initial situation is enough to cast doubt upon the whole quest the two characters are committed to. Another thing which is detectable in this introduction, moreover, is that a certain degree of artificiality and self-delusion is involved in their mission, at least on the woman's part. Given the complete absence of evidence to guide them in their search, the whole thing necessarily falls into the fluctuating and everchanging realm of instinctual sensations, fantasy and abstract possibilities: this makes it evident that the woman is placing herself in a situation in which the entire quest can be either extended, diverted or called off at any moment according to her personal whims.

It may thus happen that small details are taken as possible evidence, consciously charged with significance and over-interpreted, providing them with a further turn or a new trail to follow, another direction towards which they can focus their attention and move on: "She looked for her brother against marble, steel railings, entrance halls, hotels. A museum I remember where I came across his

[208] *Ibid.*, p. 109.
[209] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

signature, that perhaps wasn't there at all[210]". The man, conscious of the volitional and arbitrary aspect of these sudden changes of direction – which he nonetheless never opposes –, sometimes looks at the woman's efforts with some sort of mockery or lack of conviction, considering them to be based mostly on obsessions and fantasies[211]: "She looks for her brother, whom she believes came to this country. She is positive she will find him. Meanwhile[212]".

As the narration proceeds, the hope of finding her brother becomes less and less tangible and probable, being frustrated by an infinite number of contrasting possibilities, all equally valid and impossible to determine with any degree of certainty. Consulting some records of political suspects, for instance, the woman ponders on the possibility that his brother might have changed his name. The reading of this list, instead of leading to any progress, accruing her hopes or giving her hints that would help her re-direct her attention elsewhere, gives the impression that the more she looks for her brother, the more he appears to recede into a mist of inaccessibility and uncertainty: "A list of names, those reported to have Communist records. A list she went through several times. He might have changed his name. She could not tell. What name would he have chosen. A foreign name. Spelling of proper names can vary[213]".

As the possibility of finding her brother becomes less and less concrete, the woman appears to progressively lose her trail, giving way to diversions and detours which make her true objective appear even more distant and abstract than it would normally be. With the passing of time and the thinning out of her hopes, the contours and the motif of her quest become progressively blurred, as though enveloped in some sort of ontological mist. At some point, her mind and imagination play tricks, as when she projects the identity of her brother onto her lover: "At such times I nearly forget, call him by another name. There seems little choice, when the possibilities of finding my brother prove negative. He is no longer startled[214]". Sometimes, it is apparent that she is losing sight of the object and even the nature of her search, as the memory, the figure and even the name of her brother progressively slip into oblivion, taking with them also the woman's sense of her own identity:

> The other photograph I no longer take out. Description adequate enough. But in that describing, at times, I lose track, as in relating a dream. The sense of touch, single, double touch in the identity conjured after midday sleep. Half awake, two strokes from a distant clock.

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[210] *Ibid*., p. 6.

[211] The first section of his journal opens with this statement: "Obsessions she has, that at least admitted. Equal to mine?" (*ibid*., p. 28). In the very last paragraph of the novel, his somewhat mocking tone is reiterated as he affirms: "She still has her obsession to follow through and her fantasies to live out" (*ibid*, p. 112).

[212] *Ibid*., p. 34. Owing to the peculiar style of *Passages*, many paragraphs such as this have a suspended ending, with a sentence often truncated and left unfinished without any dot at the end of the final line, to be prolonged in the next paragraph or simply left it as such. In this way, the utter inconclusiveness inherent in the protagonists' respective searches is extended and mirrored in the very organisation of the text.

[213] *Ibid*., p. 76.

[214] *Ibid*., p. 61.

> My eyes sightless, until focusing on some near object. My own hand. His eyes in sleep. Mauve veins of the eyelids[215].

At the end of the last section dedicated to her, another extremely revealing episode takes place, which shows all the contradictions manifest in her attitude towards her own search, and perhaps even her ultimate subconscious unwillingness to really find her brother. At some point in the narration, indeed, the woman comes across the negative of a photograph taken by the man, in which she is almost sure to have recognised her brother:

> He did not cut up the negatives. She found them buried beneath a pile of clothes. She held each one up to the light, vague shapes, outlines occasionally that could have been faces, rocks, trees. Frozen forms. One she held up to the light again and again. A man, in profile, his hand held up, could be waving, or shielding himself. A warning. A gesture of welcome. She could not be sure. Only that this was unmistakably like her brother. She would have to get the negative printed. And then…[216]

A commotion follows, and it turns out that she and the man have to leave the place in a hurry. The photograph is put aside momentarily, though some crucial contradictions in her behaviour begin already to emerge at this point. In the following scene, she appears as though reluctant to pursue this trail to the end, almost as if her brother had suddenly become a disquieting perspective for her, to which she prefers an indefinite prolongation of her suspended condition of uncertainty: "The negative would have to wait. She had waited long enough. Wanted to go on waiting[217]". Later on, when the immediate danger which had come upon them seems to have temporarily abated, and she could finally have the possibility to return to the issue of the photograph, she performs instead an unexpected and rather incomprehensible gesture, destroying the very negative which could have potentially led her to find her brother: "She brought out the negative, held it once more up to the slant of light through leaves. She tore it up until the black pieces fluttered down, around her, scattered with leaves under the swing[218]".

The reasons behind this gesture are not perfectly clear: the destruction of the negative could well be interpreted as an ultimate relinquishment of all hopes and a renunciation to pursue her quest any further, though the sensation one gets from the subsequent paragraphs seems to be a different one. At the end of the section, the two protagonists are shown to have gone on with their mission, as they are travelling on board a train towards yet another destination. As a further touch of irony, the man produces at some point the actual photograph developed from the negative, informing the woman that, consequently to his inquiries, it turned out that the person appearing in it is not in fact her brother:

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[215] *Ibid.*, p. 62.
[216] *Ibid.*, p. 82.
[217] *Ivi*.
[218] *Ivi*.

> He took out a photograph, passed it to her. I looked at it several times. It was obviously the same one, he had printed just before leaving. I felt a slight ache between the eyes. Head spun from the passing landscape. Looks very like him doesn't it but it is a man born in this country – I made enquiries, he said, however there's the possibility that where we're going…[219]

The woman's physical reaction of pain to the photograph is quite telling, and the reader has the sensation that, in all probability, the confirmation that the man in the photograph is not her brother has been met by her with something like a huge sigh of relief.

Judging from passages such as this, and also considering the inconclusive character of the narration as it "develops" in the following section, it is more and more evident that the search for the missing brother has only been a pretext all along, an excuse which has provided the woman with the chance and the necessary freedom to flee from her responsibilities and commit herself to quite a different quest: the exploration of herself and the quest for her true identity. On a narrative level, it is evident that the motif of the search for the missing brother functions likewise as a pretext Quin exploits to launch herself into a totally different kind of exploration, one of a much more intimate and psychological nature. The importance of the brother is indeed progressively dimmed out, blurred and utterly lost, until it is clear that, despite the initial statement in the incipit and the semblance of a plot underlying the whole narration, *Passages* is really a book about something entirely other.

This aspect is further confirmed by the last section of the novel, consisting of the second part of the man's journal, in which almost any reference to the brother is lost, and the focus is shifted to the personal exploration he is carrying out, concerning his own alleged madness and his inner demons. The character of suspension, inconclusiveness and liminality given by the progressive abandonment of the quest postulated initially is then perfectly epitomised by the conclusive passage of the novel. Here, the image of utter suspension of the train halting in the middle of "a vast stretch of sea[220]", to be found at the end of the woman's last section, is reprised and further accrued by the celebration of rootlessness and movement for its own sake present in the man's last statement. The absence of the final full-stop, moreover, constitutes an ultimate confirmation that the constant movement portrayed in *Passages* is not meant to reach any final destination, and that the only meaning to be looked for is in the process itself, the journey, the exploration, and the endless escape from and search for oneself, which are ultimately so deeply interconnected as to resemble two faces of the same medal:

> So let us begin another journey. Change the setting. Everything is changing, the country, the climate. There is no compromise now. No country we can return to. She still has her obsession to follow through and her fantasies to live out. For myself there is less of an argument. I am for the moment committed to this moment. This train. The distance behind and ahead. And the sea that soon perhaps we will cross[221]

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[219] *Ibid*., p. 83.
[220] *Ivi*.
[221] *Ibid*., p. 112.

The paradoxical sense of liminality given by the ceaseless movements of the two characters has been recognised by critics as the central issue of the novel, masked behind the alleged search for a tangible object which provides the initial pretense of plot: "*Passages* is, at every level, possessed by such claustrophobia, akin, I think, to the prison that traps our characters in their endless freedoms, that deep stasis of their constant travels, passages that return them always to that same endlessly new place they already fled from[222]". This plot is alluded to initially, only to be abandoned as the narration progresses into the much more nebulous areas of abstraction and psychic landscapes:

> As it operates by juxtaposition and image, providing brief narrative moments that fail to accrue into a larger narrative whole, *Passages* offers exceptional challenges to the reader. […] *Passages* pushes a certain range of possibility just about as far as it can go, asking readers to suspend a great deal of what they have traditionally read fiction for in exchange for fleeting narrative moments, arresting images, an unresolvable flux between the real and the imagined, and unusual juxtaposition[223].

As demonstrated above, the search motif provides the image of an ever-receding limen, creating a situation in which borders shift endlessly, as the movement of the two protagonists takes them further and further towards ever-new destinations, albeit with no precise end in sight. There is, however, the image of another shifting and vague limen, around which many passages are performed by the two characters, and which provides the occasion for an endless chain of movements of a more psychological and abstract nature. This limen consists of the diving line between so-called madness and alleged normality. The personal search for themselves, which the two protagonists carry out in parallel to the mock-quest for the missing brother, is brought forward mainly along this dividing line: both appear engrossed in exploring their own individual madness to the uttermost possible limit, stretching this limit further and further in the attempt to surpass the other's madness and achieve some kind of superior state of insanity.

In a way, especially regarding the man's sections, *Passages* is a chronicle of this inner exploration and willful descent into madness, the narration of a daily attempt to "extend the ordinary into the extraordinary[224]". If the woman performs this exploration mostly silently and through her actions, the man appears more prone to do it at a purely intellectual level, recording his erratic and not always comprehensible introspections in his journal: as a result, a great deal of the analysis of their relationship is inevitably entrusted to his own point of view. A certain degree of mutual observation, however, is perfectly detectable at multiple levels of the narration: comparisons and remarks about their relationship and reciprocal behaviours are reported in the man's journal, and a couple of interesting observations are present in the woman's account of the facts as well. The very

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[222] Jesse Kohn, *Pas // Sages*, in *Music & Literature*, v. 7, p. 163.
[223] B. Evenson and J. Howard, *Ann Quin*, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, v. 23.2, p. 66.
[224] As already mentioned previously, the poet Larry Goodell has employed this very appropriate formula to explain a pivotal trait of Ann Quin's aesthetics (L. Goodell, Remote interview with D. Corradi, London/Placitas, 15.11.2021).

structure of the text, moreover, with four sections juxtaposing the man's and the woman's versions of the same episodes, is a further aspect which enhances this element of constant, reciprocal analysis in their relationship.

The very first remark in the man's journal already betrays an attitude of constant comparison on his part, giving the idea that a challenge is in place between them, pushing each one to prove he/she is more insane than the other: "Obsessions she has, that at least admitted. Equal to mine?[225]". Other entries testify to the crucial presence of an obsessive mutual observation regulating their relationship: "How she watches me. God how she watches herself watching. However if no one observes me I have to observe myself all the more[226]". At other junctures, it is not clear whether they are accusing one another of trying to achieve ever-higher degrees of madness, or rather encouraging one another to do so. The man remarks for instance at one point: "She likes to think people look upon her as essentially quite mad, almost a prerequisite for any lover she has[227]". It is instead clear, in the woman's section, that she observes the man's behaviour in the same judging way, with a perceivable veil of criticism: "He often sees himself as the scape-goat. This according to some whim in moments. Including the madness he almost wants. Her madness he no longer questioned. Made her feel less mad. More mad[228]". At some point, she is witness to a paroxysm of insanity on his part, which looks so erratic and exaggerated as to resemble a willful and artificial display of madness, a performance of some kind:

> He lay on the floor. I thought he was in some kind of stupor. One eye opened slowly, a madman's eye. He spoke of a death demon, said he had celebrated a divine madness. His body had not belonged to him, did not know how to occupy it again. Of feeling a victim of my medium at times. I watched him closely. At a distance. His eyes wide, I think that's your problem you know hoping to reach a state of divine madness, he shouted, sat up, clutched his knees. […] I guess I only wish to dominate, he continued, do you think I'm mad – have I killed someone – is there someone dead – I feel I am your brother[229].

In the moments of greatest vicinity between them, however, this exploration of madness appears to be a journey they are taking together, as they try to assess how far they can push their individual limits and where this process can lead them, both at a personal and a mutual level. Between one delirium and the other, in solitaire or together, such questions and affirmations as the following crop up, on this psychic quest intended as a trip they do together, as well as individually, to probe the

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[225] A. Quin, *Passages*, p. 28.
[226] *Ibid*., p. 31.
[227] *Ibid*., p. 39.
[228] *Ibid*., p. 62.
[229] *Ibid*., p. 66. A certain performative aspect on the man's part with regard to his alleged madness is detectable also in other passages, most interestingly when there is no one around to watch: "Hot face against the gun's cool metal. The sound of the safety catch. He put his tongue along the trigger, poked it in the barrel. Ah what happiness, he said, watching this whole performance in the mirror" (*ibid*., p. 89). This performative aspect, however, is somehow present in the woman's behaviours as well: "She now used him to perform her own tragedy of herself" (*ibid*., p. 91).

limits of their own sanity and madness: “We are mediums inhabiting each other’s imagination[230]”; “I don’t know whether I’m going more into your mind or you into mine[231]”; “Do you think we take on each other’s madness?[232]”.

At more crucial moments, in any case, the individual sphere appears to be predominant, and this exploration takes on the contours of a dance with only fleeting moments of togetherness, but whose most decisive movements are performed in solitude. The man, for instance, registers at an initial stage his “morbid habit of self-examination[233]”, laying out his situation as a quintessentially personal conundrum: “Decision between madness and security is imminent. // Approach of death – madness the only way out?[234]”. At some point, the focus on himself also brings him to question the consequences of his relationship with the woman. In particular, he seems to be afraid lest their individual ways of exploring their own personal insanities might somehow bring them to clash and lead to the destruction of either of them, or cause him to relinquish his own madness and be absorbed into hers: “The problem is to discover whether I can live with this woman’s demons without forfeiting my own[235]”.

The prospect of leaving his individual madness behind in this process proves disquieting for him – “What if one loses all one’s demons – surely new ones will leap in?[236]”. Nonetheless, he is constantly confirmed in the durability of his inner fractures, which he cherishes beyond anything else: “Several new perceptions of the disintegrating creature that I am have dawned upon me consolingly[237]”. Eventually, he realises that “[a]ll I ask is to be left in peace with my own madness[238]”, and one of the final passages shows him still intent to pursue his own trail, in total autonomy from his companion: “I am midway in the funnel – both ends I can see, one perhaps more clearly which I go towards, then the funnel breaks in half. There’s only the one way now to reach. // A new order of space[239]”. The woman is still there with him, but looked at as some distant object, caught in her own world and observant of her own rules. What one gathers from the man’s already-mentioned last remark is that he has decided to leave her to her own obsessions and fantasies, while he feels committed only to the present moment, in a silent celebration of his individual insanity.

If one crucial image of limen in the two protagonists’ relationship is the dividing line separating normality and madness, there are also a number of other more or less tangible limits which

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[230] *Ibid.*, p. 39.
[231] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
[232] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
[233] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
[234] *Ivi*.
[235] *Ibid.*, p. 91.
[236] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
[237] *Ivi*.
[238] *Ibid.*, p. 107.
[239] *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

they appear to cross in the passionate exploration and experimentations they carry out. The desire and the need to cross the limits of the possible, to stretch possibilities as far as one can get, is indeed a guiding principle for both the protagonists. The woman, for instance, as reported in the man's journal, "says she knows no limits in/for herself[240]", and is dominated by an existential restlessness which leads her to "ris[k] with her body, her imagination (her heart/mind?)[241]". The man, for his part, variously expresses his desire to overreach in terms of seeking "to exhaust the limits of the possible[242]", "[h]ave excess within limitation[243]", being "on the verge of discovering my own demoniac possibilities[244]", or, with more articulation, "[s]eeing everything through, extending possibilities/limitations, until these seem exhausted, and all that's left is a backward movement[245]".

One limit which the two characters appear at times to cross, for instance, coincides with the limen of one's own identity, body and personality, which, as seen previously, are never definitely fixed in Quin's writing. With regard especially to the man, there are many passages stressing the existence of multiple personalities, or experiences of temporarily transcending his own body and mind. Already in the early stages, while elucubrating on his Jewish identity, he admits: "What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself[246]". This fading sense of identity is then confirmed by other passages in which he feels no continuity in the various changes of personality he undergoes every day, no sense of a fixed chore he can recognise, in the various versions of himself which crop up in his experience: "How is consistency ever possible I have no sense at all who I was yesterday […]. Am I a creature of my own imagination[247]".

At times, the cause of this multitude of personalities within himself is attributed to the nature of his relationship with the woman, in which ever-new roles are devised every day, according to chance or to the whims of the one rather than the other: "Relationships based on the master/slave situation. Roles reversed from day to day. As soon as one wakes up: the way the blankets have been taken over – the first one to get up – the role begins from there[248]". Owing to the same dynamics, he feels the woman's will has the power to mould him into a new personality or role according to moment: "Can be any of these, according to whim/projection. What is it/shall it be for today // lover / husband / brother /father / guardian / prophet / mystic / writer / addict / = demi-god / = beast[249]".

[240] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
[241] *Ibid.*, p. 49.
[242] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
[243] *Ibid.*, p. 93.
[244] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[245] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
[246] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[247] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
[248] *Ibid.*, p. 90.
[249] Ibid., p. 38. In the original version, the text is disposed in different columns, reproducing the chaotic and random order of a piece of notebook-writing. The change of column is here signalled by //, the change of line by /.

At other junctures, his multifacetedness assumes a much darker and demonic character, and is thought to originate from within himself, regulated by some evil force outside his own will. The affirmation that "I enter a thousand subterranean passages when I close my eyes[250]" is already a hint at the disquieting abysses he perceives within himself. Later on this sensation is confirmed and augmented, when the whole discourse assumes otherworldly and occult proportions. At some point he affirms for instance: "once on my own I am confronted with those who inhabit me. I become a prisoner of my own imagination[251]"; or "I am on the verge of discovering my own demoniac possibilities and because of this I am conscious I am not alone within myself. // The question then: who is it today that inhabits me?[252]".

These demonic perspectives are also matched by moments of mental[253] or physical abstraction from himself, in which dynamics of dispossession and re-appropriation of his body and personality are staged, as in the following passage:

> Then I knew I had experienced a kind of madness. Coming back to my body, a sense that I was perhaps someone else, some drifting thing that at least had found somewhere for inhabiting […].
>
> There has been a death recently no one has occupied the body since.
>
> If going outside my body I lose my ego what happens next? It no longer matters[254].

The apparent solution he reaches eventually is to embrace this multifacetedness as an integral part of himself, accepting the absolute fluidity of the confines of his identity and personality as an unalterable fact of his own nature: "There must be time enough for preparation and for destruction, for the scheming, for reconstruction. A kind of dream made to order. To arrive finally at a unit with contradictory attributes never moulded or fused together, but clearly differentiated[255]".

The woman, on the other hand, appears to be prey to an endless change of different roles and personalities, shedding them as a snake would shed its skin, both as a result of the projections the man makes of her, and because of her natural disposition to perform different parts and put on different masks. The man recognises the existence of a variety of aspects and personae in her, which she interchangeably assumes according to the moment: "Her faces: Mature woman […] // Femme fatale [….] // The mystic […] // Country girl 'at heart'[256]". He also observes that this change of roles is often spurred by or strictly linked to the outfit she chooses for the day, highlighting thus how unstable and liable to sudden transitions her personality can be: "[t]he illusion she creates is the most

[250] *Ibid.*, p. 101.
[251] *Ibid.*, p. 107.
[252] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[253] "The mind goes out to meet itself" (*ibid.*, p. 86).
[254] *Ibid.*, p. 94.
[255] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[256] *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

real thing for her. The dress she wears becomes the foundation of the part she'll play, and he'll take his cue from there[257]". As a further complication to this, he observes that "[o]ften she gets pretty high then she forgets which role she had started with, and a delightful mixture of them all appears, leaving the man confused or even more infatuated[258]".

At other moments, however, the man seems to recognise that he has some active responsibilities in the numerous changes of personalities she undergoes: "In her nakedness she presents to him the surface of marble, which he slowly begins to cut other shapes from[259]". Since these dynamics are observed to take place also the other way around, with the woman creating new personae for the man to assume on himself, an interesting element of reciprocal manipulation is brought to light in their relationship. Ultimately, however, this fluid changeability seems to appear as an intrinsic aspect of her character, as a couple of mythological allusions purport to suggest: "Medusa in her essence is a head, nothing more: […] a mask with a body later appended[260]". This link with Medusa, only suggested indirectly in this erratic entry in the man's journal, is later confirmed by the woman herself in her section, in an emblematic scene in which she is encountering some difficulty in coming to terms with her own identity: "The sense of touch, single, double touch in the identity conjured after midday sleep. Half awake, two strokes form a distant clock. My eyes sightless, until focusing on some object near. My own hand. […] My face a mask, body later attached[261]".

This occasional correspondence across the man's and the woman's sections introduces another issue, which further complicates the multifacetedness of the two characters. There are several moments in which the identities of the man and the woman seem to overlap and confound into one another, sometimes with the looming presence of the missing brother mixing in as well. In an already quoted scene, for instance, the woman con-fuses the identities of her lover and her brother: "At such times I nearly forget, call him by another name. There seems little choice, when the possibilities of finding my brother prove negative. He is no longer startled[262]". This confluence of the brother's image into the man also works the other way around. On one particular occasion, it is the man who notices the mysterious appearance of the brother's traits in those of his mistress, also talking of himself in terms of a "metaphor", a vehicle she is allegedly using to give materiality to the object of her own search: "She brings her brother's presence in the sharp turn of her head. What can I do – continue being a metaphor for her despair?[263]".

[257] *Ibid.*, p. 43.
[258] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[259] *Ibid.*, p. 88.
[260] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[261] *Ibid.*, p. 62.
[262] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
[263] *Ibid.*, p. 107. On another occasion already mentioned above, as the man is caught in one of his seemingly demonic deliriums induced by psychedelic substances, he even pronounces the sentence "I feel I am your brother" (*ibid.*, p. 66).

As to other interesting and all but casual correspondences between the man's and the woman's sections, there is one passage in particular which indirectly positions them so close to one another as to produce an image in which their identities seem to fade into each other. At some early point, the woman describes an episode in which she finds herself walking among a group of cripples in an unspecified part of a city she is visiting: "She stumbled over cripples in alleys, passage ways, knew they heard the rattle in her throat. The thought of knives thrown at her back, bent over the bill. Waiting. […] By the sea, event here eyes evaded, knowing he watched as she searched shapes appearing, crawling towards her[264]". Several pages later, the man finds himself in a similar situation, which he describes by employing almost exactly the same words: "I left and stumbled over crippled in passage ways, alleys. The thought of knives thrown at my back made me continually turn round, but the beggars only held out their withered hands, plates. […] I walked by the sea, even in the dunes, there seemed grotesque shapes appearing, crawling towards me[265]".

Identities, as well as any form of separation between consciousnesses and bodies, are kept willingly vague in the speech of both characters. This material and psychic fluidity, moreover, is further enhanced by the style employed by Quin: in both the man's and the woman's sections, sudden shifts of point of view and person complicate the possibility of discerning a coherent narrative centre at any given point of the novel. The reader has constantly the impression that the echo of a multitude of other identities can be always perceived behind that of the speaker. Likewise, at any time, one particular character can always somehow slide into the consciousness and even bodily confines of another, or be appropriated by the external voice of an impalpable third person. This is perfectly detectable in passages such as this:

> Another city. Some hotel. She would pace the rooms. He'd continue with his notes. She smiled across at him, and took hold of his hand. He placed her fingers against his lips. I saw her face in the window, in profile. Her hand came up, raised as if to strike out, but passed slowly across his head, through his hair, and swung further down, as the train halted on a high bank overlooking a vast stretch of sea[266].

In this case, as in countless others, the "I" which crops up suddenly in the midst of an apparently third-person section cannot be attributed with any degree of certainty to any of the two speakers. Even though it is often perceivable that this "I" is closer to either the man or the woman, the sensation is always there of a third person travelling with the two protagonists at all times, an intruding and impalpable voice which plays the role of an agent of confusion, fusing identities, voices and discourses together in the same textual amalgam, and opening up the limina of the narration to an infinite series of alternatives. Quin's commentators have detected this crucial aspect of this novel,

[264] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[265] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
[266] *Ibid.*, p. 83.

pointing out that "[i]n *Passages* narrative progression is attenuated, other voices taking the place of a developing narrative in a way that encourages confusion in character and in identity, a swapping of voice and personality", and that "at times there seem to be three people traveling, at others one, and at no point can the number of characters be resolved once and for all[267]".

As happens also in other texts by Quin, a fleeting image appears at some point which seems to perfectly encapsulate this whole issue of fluid identities, with all the beauty and gentleness of an indirect, mysterious allusion: "He threw two stones into the pool. I watched the circles increase equally, one within the other, without the one destroying the other[268]". *Passages* is in a way exactly enclosed within this image, these two circles growing one within the other, these two or perhaps more identities which are given all the room to evolve, following their own ways, free to overlap each other and wriggle out of the imposition of coherence and clarity usually at force in any piece of straightforward literature.

Quin herself, after all, had recognised this floating and musical quality in *Passages*, the fact that this text represented for her an attempt at finding a new kind of artistic communication, outside of the impositions dictated by coherence and by a more conventional narrative progression based on plot and characterisation. What she intended to create here was rather a kind of musical, unanchored narrative movement obeying to subterranean rhythms, whose significance, that is, is not to be found in the words themselves, but behind or beneath them, the words being only temporary vehicles to an entirely different system of significations. As she explained in a letter to her friend Larry Goodell, discussing *Passages* when it was still at its initial stages:

> [I] am well immersed in new book, areas there exciting, infinite possibilities, and find myself really learning the full meaning of phrases, long lines, and above all the meaning of a period; the discovery of spatial/emotional relationships within the structure. Find myself move more towards music than say painting/films, maybe because I'm really listening, not only seeing these 'spaces between phrases'. What I'm doing in the writing now excites, stimulates, and inevitably exhausts, the risks are great, but they are risks that must be taken. The only setback to this is being too conscious of structure, when the flow is seized, grabbed at too quickly, instead of that making its own journey, and then seizing it afterwards. Like ever-expanding circles going outwards, then retracing them inwards: the breaking down of that full circle that demands the parts, the areas outside, and these areas I speak of when I say give spaces for the reader to explore in his own imagination. In *Berg* I failed, in *Three* I became aware of that, and now it is there. I think, I hope[269]!

This musical imagery is again employed in another letter, this time to Robert Sward, in which Quin talks of her style in terms of a "moving towards words and then from them, v. much like jazz improvisations[270]". On this occasion, the author also confesses her feeling that the path she was taking

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[267] B. Evenson and J. Howard, *Ann Quin*, in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, v. 23.2, pp. 62-63.
[268] A. Quin, *Passages*, p. 27.
[269] Id., Letter to L. Goodell, 9.05.1966, Larry Goodell Papers, Beinecke Library.
[270] Id., Letter to R. Sward, 21.09.1966, Robert Sward Papers, Olin Library.

with this work was leading her further and further away from traditional compositional and narrative methods, so as to make her work potentially unrecognisable as what is generally described as "a novel": "Actually in future I'm going to ask publishers not to put 'a novel' under title page; I'd much rather let it stand as a 'piece of writing' or 'a work'. And the way I seem to be going now it seems the writing is v. far removed from the novel[271]". Stevick has described this aspect of Quin's literature in the following terms:

> Classically, of course, fiction, even densely interior fiction, operates in the assumption that the mind tells stories. Even when the story cannot be found, the mind remains in pursuit of a story, as if the Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end were not properties of artifice and art but irreducible properties of the mind. […] But Quin […] comes to her version of mind […] from a private conviction that the mind does not only ordinarily tell stories – it doesn't even try to[272].

Another critic, Alice Butler, similarly traces in Quin's predilection for chains of images over linguistic coherence the key factor of her prestidigitational style:

> The architecture of the novel speaks through its figurative linguistics, a performance in writing itself: a metaphoric language of imagistic rebellion. […] Quin favours truncated images – visual shards, curiously incomplete and unnatural, rather than narrative wholes. […] She combs through the debris of language to pick up the delinquent word, and to delight in its fractured arrangement[273].

One final limen which the protagonists of *Passages* purport to transcend – certainly facilitated, again, by Quin's peculiar style – is that between reality and whatever dimension lies beyond it. In all their efforts, in all the activities and movements they engage themselves in, it appears evident that there is an attempt at going beyond the limits of experience and explore the unknown areas which open up as soon as the safe standpoints of normality, restraint or modesty are left behind. Their experience is thus developed as a condition of constant excess, extremity, of reality distorted or re-organised either through dreams, hallucinations or other situations characterised by an augmented perceptiveness.

Normality and routine, for one, are often evaded by recourse to occasional sex, which gives both characters the opportunity to overcome the limits of everyday existence and live each day as an occasion to collect new sensations and achieve pleasures yet untasted. Numerous are the scenes, for instance, in which the woman is portrayed spending days and nights of passion with random strangers

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[271] *Ivi*.

[272] P. Stevick, *Voices in the Head*, in E. G. Friedman and M. Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence*, p. 237.

[273] A. Butler, *Ann Quin's Night-Time Ink*, p. 12. In another passage, Butler comments instead on Quin's use of language in the following way: "Language is her governing material: descriptive and representational, it is also bodily and erotic, despite it dealing with the seeming neutrality of objects and spaces. […] Words shift and agitate; sometimes they work in isolation, sometimes in pairs: often in spiralling, corkscrew syntax, screwing convention. Words come into light to disappear into the darkness. Clarity comes and goes: images come and go too, travel into the future and into the past" (*ibid.*, p. 8).

encountered during her wanderings, while she is allegedly looking for her brother. As the man reports in his journal, "[s]he returns each morning just after the sun has risen, bathed in smoothness from the sea, from someone's caresses[274]". In these random love scenes, a certain disquieting feeling can be perceived in the way the woman abandons herself into the arms of strangers, "risk[ing] with her body" in situations of excess which she appears to look for purposefully in order to lose herself. On such occasions, her own sense of identity can be perceived to fade, to vanish into the inexhaustible variety of acts which have lost all meaning through endless repetition:

> [W]aking up with someone she didn't recognise, couldn't remember. The night. Several nights before. who forced himself into her, forced her body to move until she cried out. Then no longer. Just his shadow against hers, until the form of three covered the space between door and window, between his thrusts, breath, the air through shutters, later cooling the wetness. Air she lifted her face to, watched the cigarette smoke curl, drift up, along, out. […] While she took the other in her mouth. […] No sense who touched her, who she was stripped by, who woke her as soon as she tried to sleep[275].

In the man's eyes, her promiscuity may be either the expression of her attempt at eluding the inexorable passing of time, or a sort of distorted compensation for the absence of her brother: "She lives with/from her passions / She wants to recapture her youth, not accepting she has lost hers. She makes love with men younger than herself (the age her brother disappeared?)[276]". In either case, sex appears to be employed as a means to escape from or transcend an unacceptable or insufficient reality.

Similarly, random sex is for the man an integral part of his obsessive search for himself; he resorts to it every time he feels the need for new sensations and experiences that could appease his constant sense of dissatisfaction with himself. As happens with the woman, however, he also seems to have exhausted any possible significance he could get from this kind of experiences, because of the endless repetitions of empty acts of love he has exposed himself to through the years – he questions at some point, for instance: "what is the point of […] this woman whose legs I part?[277]".

A sort of revelation, however, is apparently achieved during a scene portraying a wild party, in which he finds himself involved in an intense ritualistic dance with a girl and a woman. The almost otherworldly character of this episode, induced also by the hallucinatory atmosphere of augmented reality which characterises the whole scene, seems to have granted a special spiritual status to the whole event in his mind. The sensation is that he has reached some sort of forbidden, irretrievable truth in that miraculous moment so abstracted from everyday reality, and that what happened has somehow brought about some crucial change to his system, at least with regard to the sexual side of his quest:

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[274] A. Quin, *Passages*, p. 50.
[275] *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
[276] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[277] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

> Random love: the realisation now that there's no longer the same excitement. Sex alone: dull, and yet – yet the pleasure of making love with the strange gipsy woman from the café, completely abandoned, like some wild dance, the feeling of devouring, being devoured. Smell of her body, hair linger. The variety in her amazed and frightened me. I felt vulnerable, yet superior at the same time[278].

The sensation of bliss which has remained in him after the party has left a burning desire to repeat the experience, and possibly extend not simply the pleasure, but especially the sense of spiritual trespassing of which he has only had a foretaste. On another occasion, in which he finds himself in the company of two other women, he tries to re-create the scene he has previously lived, this time however without success: "I went back to the next room, the two women were furiously making love, biting each other, in a frenzy of limbs, licking each other, their bodies making strange acrobatic positions. I asked them if they liked being whipped, they refused. They left and I heard their laughter[279]".

Towards the end of the novel, the man still appears lost in his search, still haunted by the memory of the party, on the one hand, and terrorised, on the other, by the possibility that repeating the whole scene would result in yet another, even more excruciating sense of dissatisfaction:

> Day after day I search for the girl. Ah yes and then supposing I do eventually find her, what then? Perhaps the orgy my imagination composes is better than the actual thing? The bend of her body under the whip, would I really arrive at the same satisfaction a second time? But a dozen times I go over it, half awake, in dreams sometimes it is the other woman who handles the whip, who dances over me, my body covered in sperm, sweat and blood[280].

He has the sensation, to conclude, that this search for himself, this life of daily excesses have brought him to cross limits from which he is not able to come back anymore, or because of which he can no longer be the person he was before: all his experiences have left him changed and stranded in a kind of existential liminal suspension.

Another dimension, moreover, to which the two protagonists often tend to escape in their attempts at transcending reality is that of dreams. The emphasis on the oneiric realm is pervasive in *Passages*, and there are numerous instances in which the narration is suspended so as to leave room for the description of mental landscapes, especially on the man's side. As shown by some parts of his journal, dreams function for him as moment of subconscious and almost magical revelation, in which elements of reality and of his lived experiences are extended and rearranged to suggest new interpretations and juxtapositions. No ultimate answer is of course given in such dreams, for their function is evidently part of Quin's general strategy of "extending the ordinary into the

[278] *Ibid.*, p. 56.
[279] *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.
[280] *Ibid.*, p. 110.

extraordinary[281]". The oneiric dimension provides the characters with a means of prolonging their own existential quest, and, at the same time, it shows them the possibility of yet another, more abstract arena on which to carry out their spiritual journey.

Obsessively looking for answers and significations, the man notes down meticulously all the dreams he experiences in his sleep, hoping to find solutions and revelations by transferring his existential quest to this other, extra-liminal dimension: "Recapitulating a dream – attempt at interpretation: an exorcise. // The horror that lingers, sensing some prediction/premonition: a crisis/death/loss[282]". Unable to find explanations by the simple recourse to logic, he also resorts at times to more aleatory methods of interpretations, isolating the elements of his dreams and re-arranging them casually through cut-ups, hoping that new associations of images will yield different and more revealing results. Judging by results such as the following, however, the more he attempts to interpret these otherworldly images, the more mysterious and impregnable to his understanding they become:

> *Cut-up dream*
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> I am walking in a glass stairway. I climb into the sky, mother's grave. The cemetery a bank of snow. I collapse. All sides to the horizon. Body covered by fish scales in the open grave. I swim in snow. The family throw flowers, star-fish. I dance underwater, between arrows in large boxes, tied with light that pierce the ripples, waves above. I haul myself up. I float between stars, between ladders. I am pursued by the sun and moon. A centipede settles on the cave. A flock of geese blacken the sun with blood that drips. White horses come onto my head, eyes. I plunge into hot blood, oil, white bones. Ice whiter than shells. A woman bends over me. My father dressed as a carnival. The pinkness, wet, dripping. My mouth full of crazy Rabbi, walks along the fish. I go down into transparency. Father looks at me, hands me a book. Alone I cry out in halls of icicles. I say nothing, and walk on. I crawl towards a shaft that opens onto a skeleton. I begin to follow my father. Gees/horses cry above. The sun and moon beat their wings on my head. They have been blotted out by a thousand and one centipedes, feet, my genitals[283].

The general feeling is that the characters' initial hope – that the dimension of dreams, that is, might provide answers which cannot be retrieved in the real world – is ultimately disattended. All they are left with, indeed, is a succession of floating images, which bear no more significance than those provided by the real objects and experiences they stand for. But once again, this is part of Quin's project in this novel: to create, namely, a kind of narrative progression and a system of significations which work autonomously from traditional plot-development and characterisation. Interestingly – as is revealed in a letter –, the cut-up technique the male protagonist of *Passages* employs on some occasions is the same the author herself has adopted for some sections of the novel:

[281] L. Goodell, Remote interview with D. Corradi, London/Placitas, 15.11.2021.
[282] A. Quin, *Passages*, p. 36.
[283] *Ibid*., p. 53.

> [H]ave got into the cut-up/fold-in technique and find it does some fantastic things […]. The cinematic approach in this excites me, and what comes random finally arrives at some interesting possibilities. It is a device, I realise, but as long as one starts out knowing it is a ‘device’ then it kind of opens out into something else[284].

Another correlated way by which reality is distorted into something else concerns the world of hallucinations – which is, in a way, a sort of intermission of the imagistic world of dreams into the wakeful reality of the characters. Elements of daily experience, indeed, are not re-arranged and extended only during sleep, for there are many passages in the novel in which material perceptions of the world appear as though through a veil, a distorting membrane which transforms ordinary objects and events into mystic and otherworldly experiences. The scene of the party, for instance, already discussed as probably the most pregnant moment in the entire novel, is introduced in both the man’s and the woman’s section as an event in which the extraordinary is manifested in the ordinary.

As already mentioned, the man refers to the party in his journal as “crazy in the sense that I felt so high, and still do, without having had all that much to drink[285]”. After the long succession of images, scenes and movements of the party, he awakes the next day as though everything had been a dream, an experience which took place out of the tangible realm of contingent life: “I fell asleep, and woke up hanging over the bed. The room, the house silent, empty. The women had gone, there was not a trace they had ever been there, except for the strong smell of herbs, incense. I wondered then if I had dreamed the whole scene, until I saw the whip swinging over the rocking chair[286]”. In the woman’s section, the scene is also presented as a huge, prolonged hallucination: “I saw / what did I see, for when that scene reappears it merges with a dream, fallen back into slowly, connected yet not connected in parts. So what I saw then was as much a voyeur’s sense. And since has become heightened. Succession of images, controlled by choice[287]”.

Again, as happens in connection with the dream passages, this kind of heightened, hallucinated experience leaves the characters high and dazed by a multitude of information, visions and perceptions which do not appear to translate into any kind of knowledge or ultimate revelation. They always have the feeling, after such occurrences, of having lived something momentous, but whose meaning continues to elude them, leaving them with nothing more than vague, incomprehensible memories which will not bring them any further in their existential quest. The final sensation, it appears, is always one of ontological stupor, an inability to understand or discern truth from hallucination. The man, for example, confesses in one passage of his journal that he feels “[m]ore and more unable to observe, determine the truth of things, share an experience. Is knowing

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[284] Id., Letter to L. Goodell, 4.04.1967, Larry Goodell Papers, Beinecke Library.
[285] A. Quin, *Passages*, p. 57.
[286] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
[287] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

this as clear as the thing itself? writing these thoughts, if only to see what I might think[288]". In other scattered and floating statements to be found in his section, the categories of clarity and obscurity, of naturalness and strangeness, appear to be utterly confused into one another, creating an atmosphere of ontological suspension, which makes it impossible for him to move with any degree of certainty among the objects and experiences of the world: "The clarity of all the events makes it mysterious[289]"; "I am constantly amazed by the strangeness of natural things and the naturalness of strange things[290]".

This overturning of categories and dimensions is also linked to the discourse of drugs. Hallucinations and visions, indeed, are sometimes spurred by psychotropic substances of various kinds, which are more or less directly presented as alternative means of evasion from reality, or of its extension into a parallel world made of perceptions and significations of a different order. Drugs are explicitly alluded to twice in the novel, both times by the man. In one such instance, he mentions an "afternoon spent with naked bodies, sunlight and hashish[291]", while on the occasion of the party it is one of the women he meets during the evening who offers him a mysterious pill: "The woman opened a pill box, with many compartments, some filled with aromatic herbs, and round, oblong coloured pills. She handed me one. I asked her what it was, what it might do. She smiled, nodded, her arms like large wings came out at me, over me. I took the pill[292]".

The link existing between *Passages* and the discourse of drugs, however, is only tangentially related to what happens in some sections of the novel: its deepest implications are to be found in Quin's biographical experiences, which lie, crucially though undetectably to an unaware reader, behind the composition of this text. There is no room, here, to retrace all the correspondences with or allusions to aspects of Quin's life present in this novel. Suffice it to say that Quin was perfectly aware of the influence of drugs – especially peyote and LSD – on her writing process, and that she has pointed out the importance of her psychedelic experiences on a number of private and public occasions, convening that they provided her with an incredible extension of her artistic possibilities[293].

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[288] *Ibid*., p. 29.
[289] *Ibid*., p. 100.
[290] *Ibid*., p. 103.
[291] *Ibid*., p. 95.
[292] *Ibid*., p. 58.
[293] These, for example, are the concluding remarks she makes about an acid trip she took in 1967: "As effect of acid wore off a tremendous sense of release. Of things being much clearer. More open. A recognition now of not wanting to force anything in my writing. Of letting the form be an unforced extension of content. Of riding with the forces now they are replaced. Acknowledged. Accepted. After seeing them. been their victim for ten hours or more I now realise how I have used myself/people/situations in a frantic attempt to escape/extinguish these forces to a point of self-destruction. It has left me with a kind of quiet intensity. A knowledge that I can no longer be 'their' victim or equally they cannot be mine. If there are limitations then these forces are. But not inhibiting ones any longer. And they are limitations that can be a kind of strength. Lead into wider dimensions. Infinite possibilities" (A. Quin, Diary of acid trip, 1967, Robert Sward Papers, Olin Library). In an interview with John Hall she made for The Guardian, she discussed instead the impact that especially peyote had on her imagination and writing: "Taking peyote was particularly beautiful taken in such a fantastic landscape, with all that vast space. Maybe if I'd stayed in England and not taken drugs, it would have taken me to 15 years to reach the particular stage that I reached then. Peyote verified and made concrete things I'd thought about, and

Drugs, sex, hallucinations, dreams, restlessness and endless movement are all elements which are used in this novel to create an atmosphere of excess and constant transcendence of the confines of the known world, in an obsessive search for existential answers that are not retrievable in ordinary experience. Whereas both *Berg* and *Three* are works dealing with an impossibility or unwillingness to cross limits, *Passages* is a story that develops entirely beyond these limits, only to portray the mysterious amalgam of salvation and perdition which awaits the one who, like Quin herself did in both her life and her writing, takes the risk of crossing them.

IV. Tripticks*, or the prison of limitlessness*

A feature that specifically characterises the narration of *Tripticks* is endless accumulation. From start to finish, the novel reads like a dense list of varying elements piling upon one another, with only a very vague and thin plot to guide the reader through. This accumulation assumes different forms, ranging from the protagonist's streams of consciousness to quick successions of actions, and a proliferation of voices produced by a central epistolary section, cut-ups from ads and magazines, enumerations of objects and random pieces of information offered by the narrator. As a result, the reader experiences an endless cluttering of a huge and apparently self-sustaining mass of inert, empty things, apparently functioning to mask an appalling nothingness.

Tripticks is also the result of Quin's prolonged and varied experiences in the American continent. Apart from – or perhaps because of – this, it is a spiteful, desperate satire of a capitalist, consumeristic society: one in which people dedicate their lives to amassing objects, empty experiences and superficial relationships with the only hope of using material wealth to hide their utter moral and existential poverty and the desperate lack of meaning which afflict their lives. The vague plotline of the novel consists of an unnamed male narrator who is followed or alternatively runs after his "No. 1 X-wife and her schoolboy gigolo[294]" across the deserted highways of some unspecified part of the States. A present-tense chronicle of what is happening is juxtaposed with various reminiscences about his three ex-wives, his own family and theirs. This elementary situation provides the basis for a continuously moving narrative, like a of constant adventure with a wealth of

made fantasies more real. It made an outer reality, and outer landscape seem equivalent to an inner landscape. It seemed to make all things possible. I just found that when I did write, it all seemed to tie up, and I don't think it would have been the same if I hadn't had this experience of drugs" (J. Hall, *Landscapes with Three-Cornered Dances*, "The Guardian", 29.04.1972).

[294] A. Quin, *Tripticks* (1972), Marion Boyars, London and New York 2009, p. 7.

things happening, presenting the reader with an endless journey which is both physical and mental, "a Burroughsian [journey] – out to the dank corners of the mind of a mediatized man[295]".

Owing to these general characteristics, the novel has been aptly described by Jennifer Hodgson as "a bizarre travelogue, a raucous and Rabelaisian excursion across a spectacularized American dreamscape. […] America – or, at least, a phantasmic vision of it[296]". Similarly detecting the underlying satirical humour of this work, other critics have affirmed that "[t]o read *Tripticks* is like being barraged with spliced-together advertisements and other information, with a plot vaguely wending through, vanishing and re-appearing. It is as much a commentary on/immersion in capitalist American society as it is a story about a given character[297]".

Thus, the ever-moving attitude of the main character and the apparent unending nature of the accumulations shaping the very narrative create a sensation of limitlessness, or better, a situation in which the very idea of limit seems to have been eliminated. This happens first of all geographically, since the chase between the protagonist and his ex-wife causes the narrative action to shift constantly from one place to another. Therefore, borders seem to be only temporary and perfectly crossable, as though they were not even there in the first place. At a more general level, instead, the lists and accumulations of happenings, voices, information, objects, letters and commercials also give the impression that there is no limit to anything that might be potentially included and worked into the narration.

Paradoxically, however, limitlessness in *Tripticks* does not mean that its characters enjoy absolute freedom, nor does the reader have at any moment the sensation that they are essentially free to any extent whatsoever. The abundance and material accumulation which at least superficially characterise their life are only temporary distractions from the existential emptiness, banality and stagnation of which they are all prisoners. Their restless movement, their frenzied recourse to things, activities, experiences, and relationships in the hope of acquiring some sense of apparent meaningfulness, only serve to expose the underlying void more decisively, as well as the insufficiency of the resources they deploy to deal with this void. Soulless, orphan of moral principles and lacking definite existential guidelines, these characters tend to let themselves be easily manipulated by the logic of consumerism which regulates the society in which they live, and to lose their fragile identities in the proliferation of discourses with which their lives are constantly bombarded.

All the above-mentioned dynamics, which characterise the entire narration, are transparently exposed since the very incipit of the novel:

> I have many names. Many faces. At the moment my No. 1 X-wife and her schoolboy gigolo are following a particularity of flesh attired in a grey suit and button-down Brooks Brothers

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[295] J. Hodgson, *Beyond Berg*, in *Music & Literature*, v. 7, p. 141.
[296] *Ibid*., p. 144.
[297] B. Evenson and J. Howard, *Ann Quin*, in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, v. 23.2, p, 69.

> shirt. Time checked 14. 04 hours Central Standard Time. 73 degrees outside. Area 158, 693 square miles, of which 1, 890 square miles are water. Natural endowments are included in 20 million acres of public reservations. All outdoor sports are possible. Deep sea sleeping, and angling for small game are favourite pastimes. The man who doesn't reckon his pleasures on a silver platter is a fish that walks by night. Batman's the name, reform's the game. Farm out the elite, the Ruff-puffs, stinking thinking, temper tantrums, strong winds, captivating experiences, Burn Down Peyton Place, and inhale deeply stretched time with red eyes[298].

The opening formula is at the same time an essential exposition of the basic narrative elements, as well as a playful evasion of them: the excessive accumulation of useless details which follows immediately afterwards certainly frustrates the reader's potential understanding rather than facilitating it. It is also interesting to note that this incipit hides a potential allusion to the first line of Beckett's *The Unnamable*: in Beckett's text, the opening formula of the impalpable narrator, "Where now? Who now? When now?[299]", seems likewise to involve the reader in a game of subversion of the basic tenets of any narration.

In *Tripticks*, the questions about who is speaking and of where and when the action is set are only apparently answered, for the unnecessary abundance of information which ensues has the only effect of obfuscating any certainty. The multiplicity of the main character's names and identities, indeed, destroys the very idea that there is a definite identity behind the text, while the list of numbers and data about the time and the setting creates a profusion of information which at the same time leaves the reader's fundamental question unanswered: we do not know precisely where we are, nor when, apart simply from the time shown on the clock.

It is almost as if the anti-hero of *Tripticks* were playing with the reader, illusorily accomplishing his basic task of good narrator in situating his narration in time, place and characterisation, only to make it clear, immediately afterwards, that he is adamantly determined to evade any such responsibility, preferring to lose himself among the avalanche of empty accumulations of which the text will turn out to be composed. In analysing this initial bizarre self-introduction, indeed, some critics have noted that "[w]e end up learning a great deal more about what he's wearing than about what he looks like, as if, being a man of 'Many faces', what he's wearing is, in a sense, who he is[300]". This emphasis on outer appearance and material items of clothing rather than psychology, behaviour or any other deeper aspect of characterisation is perfectly in keeping with the consumeristic discourse of which the text is pervaded, showing *Tripticks* to be a text based strongly on materiality rather than abstraction.

This situation of adventurous pursuit which is laid out in the beginning immediately introduces the element of restlessness and constant shift of setting which determines a great part of

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[298] A. Quin, *Tripticks*, pp. 8-9.
[299] S. Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in Id., *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, p. 285.
[300] B. Evenson and J. Howard, *Ann Quin*, in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, v. 23.2, p. 69.

the protagonist's experiences. The endless movement generated by such pursuit, however, does not appear to be directed towards a specific destination. It does not bring any kind of spiritual advancement to the main character, or any tangible progression to the narration. If in *Passages* the frantic search of the protagonists, albeit equally desperate, could still be appreciated and considered in terms of a genuine existential quest, any such meandering in *Tripticks* appears ultimately to be a void and meaningless movement, which is performed with the sole objective to evade from oneself and elude one's inner despair.

The style and tone with which the chase is presented on the very first page is a parodic re-elaboration of the typical sensationalism of American pulp-fiction, an element which is enhanced by Carol Annand's illustrations accompanying Quin's text throughout. A certain spectacularising exaggeration is often detectable in the words of the paranoid narrator, who professes early on to be "hunted by bear, mountain lion, elk and deer. Duck, pheasant, rabbit, dove and quail. […] The enemy is all around and awesome[301]". This feeling of persecution projected onto his chasers, augmented by his fervid and restless fantasy, tends to distort their appearance into ever-more sensationalistic forms, adding to the general climate of exaggeration which pervades the narration: "It was when hitting Highway 101 I noticed they were following. […] Their faces, glass faces behind me, twisted into grotesque shapes by the Pacific winds[302]".

At some junctures, he can be seen losing himself in his magnifying fantasies, lulling himself in paranoid musings and expectations about what is going to happen, mentally transforming everything into some wondrous pyrotechnic cinematic performance:

> They stage a modern Wild West drama that has everything – 110 m.p.h. running gunfights, full-speed crashes, through roadblocks, horseback posses with blood-hounds, a pretty blonde who knows plenty – and violent death in a mountain cave. […] And when he bleeds, falls and dies, he does so in a beautifully obscene slow motion, a star swimmer in his own aquacade of blood[303].

This spectacularising attitude expresses the protagonist's need to bestow a character of extraordinariness and theatricality on any event which befalls him:

> The bloody ending as inevitable as the climax of a Greek tragedy. So they would want. The episode could hardly be bettered: the vaporous, honey-coloured scene as my body writhed to earth in a quarter-time choreography of death. a mythical legendary, balletic ending. The tone of the scene shifts in a split second as the bloodied victim attempts to aim his gun, forgetting it is unloaded[304].

301 A. Quin, *Tripticks*, p. 8.
302 *Ibid*., pp. 11-12.
303 *Ibid*., p. 25.
304 *Ibid*., p. 39.

Such epic exaggerations of events which take place in the protagonist's imagination are a visible symptom of his being trapped in the logics of a society which tends to transform every minutest item of experience into a loud and colourful entertainment show: everything, in such a situation, becomes a pretext for spectacularisation, so that the intrinsic banality and meaninglessness of experience are temporarily forgotten, and the acknowledgment of this mystifying process is delayed indefinitely.

The emphasis on this negative role of imagination is one of the main focuses of this novel, while factual narration or actual plot development are, as already mentioned, only ancillary aspects. The narration, in fact, turns out to be articulated as an endless succession of inconclusive digressions, only occasionally interspersed with moments in which the protagonist stops his mental peregrinations to return to his chronicle of the chase. In a way, it is almost as though he needed to remind himself, at given times, of the fact that he is being chased in order to reassert a semblance of plot and conclusiveness, so as to justify to himself and to the reader the prolongation of his empty elucubrations, which so often appear to be his pivotal concern. The plot in *Tripticks*, in other words, is almost an accidental element functioning as a mere pretext for the existence of the book itself. Alice Butler discusses this aspect of Quin's style by referring to "semantic departures that push language into spaces typically inexpressible […]. Excursions from the journey; off the novel's beaten track"; she also adds that "[i]f you try and connect the swirling dots of *Tripticks* you will fail; to read it is to experience dream, the structural disharmonic[305]".

Even more ironically, from some point of the narration onward, the protagonist begins to show a certain fastidiousness towards the excessive prolongation of the plot, as well as towards the dynamics of the chase he is involved in. This is especially evident in a couple of circumstances, in which he overtly tampers with the basic narrative roles which have apparently been established for him and his two pursuers, reversing the situation of the chase parodically. At some point, for instance, he turns his car suddenly and dons off the role of the pursued character, possibly to become the pursuer himself, even if only for one fleeting moment:

> Now I enjoy violence as much as the next guy, but enough is enough. Five days is plenty for the most exciting series, and with the heat penetrating my brain wires, and swelling my rocks, I decided to turn back. I passed them at 110 m.p.h. So I didn't have the chance of seeing their white sun sunken faces turn crimson. This is the sin against an awkward power structure. The refusal really to take the situation seriously[306].

This gesture reads simultaneously as an overt metafictional rebellion against the machinations of the external author, the chief representant of that "awkward power structure" which organises the text according to her own interest, and a veiled statement by Quin herself: it is indeed as though she were

[305] A. Butler, *Ann Quin's Night-Time Ink*, p. 98.
[306] A. Quin, *Tripticks*, p. 26.

ridiculing writers' traditional subjugation to their own plot, by subverting her own narrative and playfully betraying the expectations of the reader.

Similarly, at a later stage, the protagonist further mocks and frustrates these expectations by swapping his car with that of his pursuers, another absurd game he plays to expose the artificial and pretextual nature of the sub-plot of the chase in *Tripticks*:

> No I can't chicken out at a time like this. Just before reaching the freeway the gas ran out. I slid under the car as they turned the corner. […] Soon the car heaved above me. They had got into my Chevy! […] I crawled out and ran across into their Buick. […] I started the car up and drove past. She ran shouting, waving after me. […] I slowed down, but as her face approached it somehow reduced the level of tragedy to mere silliness and I pressed hard on the gas, until she became a pale distant desert figure. Liberty and Independence or Death in pursuit of it[307].

The absurdity of the situation, the self-conscious theatricality of the protagonist and his overt willingness to sabotage the very plot he is supposed to carry out as a central player are all elements which point to the empty and gratuitous quality of the experiences he goes on narrating almost by inertia. Every new aspect which is introduced represents only a void and meaningless numerical addition to the heap of everything which has been accumulated before, bearing no intrinsic value or quality enhancement to what is said.

Taking the whole situation as drearily and half-heartedly as he does, he is indeed disturbed by the apparent determination shown by his pursuers, which he feels at times to be totally out of place: "They were still pursuing. They really were taking the whole thing very seriously. That worried me[308]". At some point, he even expresses his intention to bring the chase to an anti-climactic halt, and negotiate the conclusion of this absurd predicament with his pursuers: "Maybe they really didn't have any idea I was the other side of their wall! […] Don't let this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity get away from you. Face them both, demand what are they up to[309]". The meaning of the chase evidently wears off completely for him towards the end of the novel, when he appears to have definitely lost track of his supposed role or that of his pursuers: "And this ridiculous drama now? Pursuing my first X-wife, or rather being pursued. Who was chasing who I had forgotten[310]".

Having run out of narrative gas and topics, and having exhausted any willingness to go on with this pathetic chase, all he wants to do is simply to drop off, quitting a game which has dragged on long enough. The result of these dynamics is that Quin, after establishing a certain style and tone, presenting her text as some sort of adventurous thriller, proceeds to disattend completely the anticipations she created in the incipit and artificially sustained at some strategic passages of the novel. In doing so, she indirectly criticises the consumeristic logic of a literary industry which

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[307] *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.
[308] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[309] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
[310] *Ibid.*, p. 136.

purports to produce a specific kind of novels: books which are meant especially for readers whose approach is essentially plot-oriented, only looking, that is, for sensationalism and adventure, dominated as they are by what Johnson would call "the idle desire […] to know 'what happens next'[311]".

Not only do events in the novel heap on one another to create a mass of meaningless narrative action, but this empty accumulation of material is also accrued by the insertion of proper lists, which tend to cram the text with useless details, items and objects, exasperating the general sense of unnecessary abundance which pervades *Tripticks*, and enhancing a certain feeling of being stifled by a frenzied over-production which has gone out of control. At any time throughout the novel, the narrator is likely to interrupt himself abruptly, to open up his discourse to an avalanche of objects which push to invade his narration:

> I saw myself in the near future living like a modern pasha. Indulging an insatiable yen for the luxuries
> a Falcon jet
> Convair turbo-prop
> Jet Commander
> Rolls-Royce
> Custom Lincoln
> Caddy
> Sting Ray
> a houseboat
> and a Riva speedboat, and perhaps a thoroughbred racing stable, and two Eliza Doolittles for maids[312].

According to Butler, "[t]his kind of aesthetic listing is reminiscent of Flaubert's attention to sartorial ephemera; his compulsive retreat into stylistic display; his obsessive desire to describe scenes out of all meaning, whereby pinpoint precision disappears into immaterial blankness[313]".

In these lists of items, moreover, it is possible to detect moments in which the personal voice of the protagonist is annulled, infiltrated and colonised by the overarching discourse of advertising by which he is constantly bombarded:

> Ah yes that bed. And others larger, smaller, narrow, wide, where we played our experiments. […] We even dressed up for these scenes, and hall all the necessary equipment:
> Prostitute half-bra of shimmering satin the sensational lift supported the under bust urging her up and out and leaving her excitingly bare but fully supported.
>
> Lesbian a penis-aid to assist, non-toxic, flesh-like material with LIFE-LIKE VEINS
>
> Nymphet grease-resistant – easy to clean. Soft. Pliable.

[311] B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young*…, pp. 14-15.
[312] A. Quin, *Tripticks*, pp. 13-14.
[313] A. Butler, *Ann Quin's Night-Time Ink*, p. 20.

Flagellist a raised clitoral stimulator. Comes in three colours. EBONY. BROWN. FLESH-COLOUR[314].

At times, because of this proliferation of objects, the experience of reading *Tripticks* is like having to wade through an amass of rubbish washed on the shore of some polluted beach. These discarded objects impede every level of the narration: they seem to come from all around to suffocate the characters, no matter where they are or where they are going. Sometimes it is as if these objects were springing from their very discourses, as if obstructing their throat, their lungs, their entire system: lumps of undigested food that at some point they have to throw up[315].

Such moments of material accumulation in the novel read sometimes as those annoying commercial breaks infesting television palimpsests or other spheres of our life today. In the idea of limitlessness and abundance they express, in the apparent freedom and infinite possibilities of choice they would seem to stand for, they paradoxically create a totally opposite effect of imprisonment: they are a disquieting symptom, in fact, that the protagonist's voice is controlled and infiltrated by alien voices coming from outside systems much greater and powerful than himself, on which he cannot exert even the slightest form of control.

Judging by many of his comments and remarks, the protagonist clearly occupies the position of an outsider almost, looking in onto a society he does not fully approve of and which he criticises, albeit indirectly, interestingly mixing his critique with some measure of distorted admiration[316]. At the same time, he is inevitably involved in this system, a prisoner as well as anybody else. The conclusion of the novel is a perfect expression of this dichotomic position, giving voice, on the one hand, to a certain resistance on his part, though illustrating, on the other, the extent of the infiltration

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[314] A. Quin, *Tripticks*, pp. 40-41.

[315] One of the aspects of American society which most amazed Quin was the omnipresent and suffocating presence of objects and material things in the daily life of most Americans. This often created in her the sensation of being encircled and sieged by a multitude of products, submerged by an overarching materiality which left her almost breathless, stifling any possibility of spirituality in her, which seriously threatened the inner peace she so much needed for her writing and her personal well-being. She expresses similar feelings in a letter to Robert Sward, which reads like a perfect compendium to any given section of *Tripticks*: "I guess what I do miss is a sense of 'the daily island life' of England. Here the space is always a physical space, and the space within is blocked up, becomes cluttered with garbage. The whole country sometimes strikes me as a huge supermarket where you get or step out with your goodies, become daze, then you are stamped upon. Last night the moon, watery, green, hung over the water, and that gave me a sense of stillness, but then I began to think how strange to accept the possibility of that being touched by machinery, men in my life span" (id., Letter to Robert Sward, 14.01.1966, Robert Sward papers, Olin Library).

[316] A similar position was shared by the author herself. Her friend Larry Goodell, for instance, questioned about Ann's point of view on life in America as a British individual, has related one particular anecdote which perfectly illustrates her amazed admiration for the exaggeration and commercial spectacularisation which goes on daily and which permeates every level of American society: "So here was Ann in the right seat and I'm driving of course […]. It was a pretty rough trip […]. But her reaction to things that we passed […]. We were going through Arizona and there are all these billboards and stuff like that. And she found that really funny, these American billboards, you know, like there was this huge sign of 'Body Shop' […]. So she was… coming in to a town like in Arizona, crossing Arizona, and there was one billboard after another, you know, and it's in the desert, and all advertising is very strange, you know, it is like… What did she say? Something like 'It's like a funfair!', or something like that. And all there was is advertisements, you know, going into a town, to go to a certain motel or something like that" (L. Goodell, Remote interview with D. Corradi, London/Placitas, 15.11.2021).

reached by this daily mediatic colonisation: "I opened my mouth, but no words. Only the words of others I saw, like ads, texts, psalms, from those who had attempted to persuade me into their systems. A power I did not want to possess[317]".

Apart from this pervasive presence of lists, fragments of advertisements and other similar mediatic discourses, material accumulation also assumes in the novel a range of other different forms. If the existential emptiness of the characters in *Tripticks* leaves them exposed to the manipulations of consumeristic society, the general objectification they have absorbed from their milieu is extended to any other aspect of their life. The constantly new experiences they desperately seek in order to escape boredom, the relationships and other alleged salvific activities they undertake in order to acquire some improbable sense of meaningfulness, are only some of the symptoms of their consumeristic frenzy. Everything in their life is repeated with so much frequency and convulsiveness as to be totally emptied of any possible signification, leaving only bare happenings and things which accumulate on one another, together with all the other products that submerge them, adding nothing of value to their existence, apart perhaps from mere quantity.

Such dynamics are perfectly exemplified by one long sequence in which the protagonist, during one of the many dead moments in the chase of his ex-wife and her escort, arrives at a curious place whose sign, written in the capital letters of the sensationalist advertising language, recites: "CENTRE FOR STUDIES OF THE BODY AND THE SOUL[318]". Here, as he apprehends from the eccentric guy at the entrance, people gather in an atmosphere of "sharing of experience", to "observe, discuss, and ask questions about each other's traumas, in addition to demonstrating our own[319]". The morbidity of the discourse in which this inquisitor – as the narrator calls him – launches himself after this introduction hints at the kind of people who might attend these workshops:

> Most of us are self-prisoners cut off from our potential being. We don't talk. We produce shit in three different brands: rat shit, cat shit and elephant shit. Our intellect is an ever-chattering computer that splits us. We don't allow ourselves to FEEL. In the workshops our aim is to stop the cortical chatter and open the flow of existence. Lose your mind, and come to your senses. We seek to restore the mind's connection with natural rhythms within and without, to loosen the intellect's controlling grasp and free it for discovery. Don't push the river it flows by itself. If you try to make the semen flow, it turns into piss[320].

Punctually, in the subsequent pages, we follow the protagonist as he is escorted by the inquisitor on a Dantean voyage through a series of bizarre rooms and corridors: here, a kaleidoscopic gallery of freaks is accommodated, various existentially lost individuals who have abandoned themselves in the arms of some ridiculous amalgam of cheap spirituality, esoterism, psychology and

[317] A. Quin, *Tripticks*, p. 192.
[318] *Ibid.*, p. 163.
[319] *Ibid.*, p. 164.
[320] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

charlatanism, in a desperate attempt to find the answers they lack in their empty everyday life. Before this succession of bizarre figures, the protagonist is caught by some sort of sublime stupor, a sense of existential bewilderment similar to that provoked in him by the proliferation of advertising discourses which constantly assail him:

> I felt the beginning of a deep-set terror that they were all away on an ego trip of Shakesperean proportions that I could only watch moaning or huzzahing as they were inclined but thoroughly helpless to influence the course of the royal madness, an equivalent feeling of being there at the sunset of the long night. I felt if I said anything my voice would come from some odd and perilous psychic area still being charted, some basic metabolic flashpoint where the self struggles to convert its recurrent breakdowns into new holds on life and reality[321].

The objectifying process of experience exemplified in the above passages involves also the sphere of amorous relationships, and more generally of sex. Throughout the novel, the narrator describes sexual or amorous experiences with the same materialist, sensationalist and sometimes even commercialising approach which pervades all of his other experiences: "[Quin] abuses the form, turns sex into a performance to be packaged and sold, only to make the product strange by the nature of its nonsense-syntax. The list-form breaks down the textual insides of the porn-brochure, extracts its materials, robs it of any human emotion; turns it into a care-label of catalogued words[322]". Sexual encounters are reduced to numbers and caught in the consumeristic machine just as anything else, leaving no room for introspections and spiritual considerations of any kind.

Already in the first passages of the novel, for instance, the protagonist's three ex-wives are presented as "ranked according to value / vehicles / food / allied products / fabricated material / machinery / stone / clay / glass / lumber and apparel[323]". The passage which illustrates the protagonist's first time with the woman who would later become his first wife is also emblematic of this objectifying, collector-like attitude:

> Later at a health resort under hot-water geysers we made it for the first time in the mineral springs and mineralized mud baths. My mouth searching for hers by means of siphon pipes. And later that same day I got a strange blow-job in a parking lot, it was 35 degrees outside, by a weird woman, two days later I was still weak at the knees and couldn't think about it[324].

Here, the narration of the intercourse with his wife-to be, already completely devoid of any depth and thrown in almost in passing, is followed by that of a sexual encounter with a random woman in a parking lot, which has taken place immediately afterwards. Any possible significance of the amorous experience with his future wife is thus utterly annulled by the empty randomness of the next episode with that woman: everything is reduced to the level of an anecdote that one would superficially refer

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[321] *Ibid.*, p. 171.
[322] A. Butler, *Ann Quin's Night-Time Ink*, p. 97.
[323] A. Quin, *Tripticks*, pp. 8-9.
[324] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

to some group of friends over a glass of beer, with the only intention to show off and give oneself the air of a successful macho.

Many other similar instances give the same impression, causing the reader to feel just like one of those friends, importuned by the protagonist's sometime morbid flux of amorous narrations. A similar effect is produced, for instance, when the protagonist's penchant for lists resurfaces, and he attempts to enumerate all the possible places and situations in which her wife might have conceived their unborn son:

> I tried reassuring her that it might not have been at the picnic area at all. But in some resplendent
> wildflower gardens
> an enclosed gondola lift
> an enchanted mesa 430 feet above surrounding plains
> beside frozen blue lakes high above a valley floor
> a rolling plain dotted with isolated mountain ranges […]
> Snow-banked forests
> Fountain basins lined with masses of cave onyx resembling lily pads
> Tall graceful stalagmites formed like totem poles
> […][325].

For the narrator of *Tripticks*, sex has almost become an addiction – as he mockingly confesses to the inquisitor at the Centre for Studies of the Body and the Soul: "I lust – and am in fact in a semi-permanent state of erection[326]". At the same time, like any other activity he explores, the impression is that sex is never lived with any true passion. Consequently, his increasing dissatisfaction with the meaninglessness and boredom of his amorous experiences forces him to seek refuge in wilder and wilder sexual fantasies, which only shifts the discourse to an abstract sphere without ultimately solving his problems. The thirst for sex, which in real life brings him to collect sexual experiences as though they were cars to store in his garage, is thus only translated into another numeric accumulation of fantasies in the gallery of his own mind, carried out by the same principle of meaningless addition:

> I dreamed of being a love slave to a gang of outlaw women. Ah those cabinets of dreams.
> Always the hero to the rescue of wonder women who were continually being molested by
> giant lizards
> snared by dissolute white slavers aboard a baroque submarine
> enslaved by a sacred polar bear
> cultivated by a mad fungologist
> hostess to a Tupperware party in Kew Gardens
> slain by a blind zen archer
> attacked by a pack of half-starved gila monsters […][327].

[325] *Ibid*., p. 145. The list extends much further than this, mixing undistinguishably facts and fantasies, and following the same trend in which every episode is reduced to a numeric entry devoid of any psychological depth or meaning.
[326] *Ibid*., p. 165.
[327] *Ibid*., p. 22. Again, only a small portion of the original list is reported here.

The acme of such fantasies is reached during a period of triangular relationship with his second and his third wife. As soon as he stops drawing enough satisfaction form either the actual sex or the imagined perversions he indulges in regularly, he comes to discover the uncharted pleasures of zoophilic phantasies: "I mean what does one do when there isn't a sexual fantasy left to get a hardon for 18 miraculous hours? I began having fantasies about animals[328]". A long illustration of various mental combinations involving a range of animals ensues, until he feels he has thoroughly mastered this new resource:

> At first it took time, but soon I was so accomplished in arriving at the right setting that inside of 3 minutes I had automatically released a surge of new-found delights. […] [W]hen I stepped up the visual sense I'd feel the instant new power response, feel in fact the new leap of power that was mine to command at a touch of my fingers, and I realised that something just short of a power-boosting miracle had taken place within minutes. I got up to 83% more power potential[329].

Within the context of this triangle, not only the protagonist, but also his two women resort to such fantasies and to the power of imagination to reach a satisfaction that in real life has almost been drained by too much dispersion, promiscuity or copious repetition. At some junctures, the mental experience of sex appears almost to take over the corporeal one, which becomes a mere pretext for the enactment of those fantasies:

> Soon while the women played out their fantasies with me, with each other, I had a varied collection to choose from. Unknown to either, they were winged, antler headed fish-tailed creatures. Mammoths 12 feet tall with tusks 6 feet long. By creating these I somehow exhibited a remarkable adaptation to the peculiar surroundings, resisting burial under the constantly shifting roles[330].

As to his second and third wife, we apprehend that their subjugation to fantasy takes on different forms. For his second wife, the enactment of a subconscious sexual fantasy turns out to be so revealing as to lead her to marry the protagonist, demonstrating how the key to pleasure, for her, is to be found in a purely mental situation rather than a physical one, in the materialisation of a fetish, that is, within the sexual act itself:

> On her birthday she received a long Victorian nightrobe sent by her mother, which she immediately threw in the garbage. Later half stoned I lifted it out, and told her to at least try it on. she refused, but suggested I put myself in it. I did, and giggling, we made it on the kitchen floor, with the garbage clinging to the robe. She achieved the ultimate satisfaction. […] Two weeks later we were married, and went off on our honeymoon, the robe carefully packed, which I was destined to wear every night, sometimes in the afternoons[331].

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[328] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
[329] *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.
[330] *Ibid.*, p. 132.
[331] *Ibid.*, p. 59. Curiously enough, this passage conceals some parallels with Quin's private life. In a letter written by her lover Robert Sward to a common friend of theirs, we discover, for instance, that this cross-dressing fetish had also been a concrete part of Quin's personal sexual imaginarium: "Sometimes I think to have stayed with Ann Quin would have

His third wife, instead, shares with the protagonist a proneness to zoophilic fantasies, which they enact together during a particularly happy phase of their liaison. Even a cursory reading of the corresponding passages, however, shows that, once again, it is the purely mental intercourse definitely prevails on the actual one:

> Later I discovered my third wife had a thing about unicorns, plus centaurs. Never very good at adapting to either of these, she was fantastic. I realized then that marriage with her could be a recreation in previously unopened regions. Extensively developed winter playgrounds, when she leaped over dome-shaped ground, neighing out for me to hunt her down. I eventually caught up with her near a hanging gorge, where spectacular panoramas unfolded as the snow dripped slowly off her. Entering her on that over-hanging gorge, in a snowdrift, was similar to being in an amphitheatre-like pit with terraced sides[332].

At some crucial junctures, the protagonist appears to be even partly aware that this constant abandonment to a world of private fantasies is progressively detaching him from reality: "The problem, of course, is that at times he gets so enthusiastic about his fictionalised images that he isolates himself from fact[333]". Sometimes, the process is brought to such extreme degrees that reality and dream appear to him as merged dimensions, and his kaleidoscopic and fragmented perception yields a distorted vision of the world, in which the status of his own experiences remains suspended and somewhat beyond his grasp:

> What was real, what wasn't? All merged into an immense interior region. […] My mind was a crucible containing a constantly burning fire. A row of musical stalactites surrounding. Electrically charged. The night. Days were nights. Dreams were reality. Reality seen through a rear-view mirror. No sense of time[334].

In the most lucid passages, the protagonist recognises that this extensive recourse to fantasy in the context of his amorous relationships is put into practice simply in order to counteract the boredom and banality of more conventional affairs. Whenever he appears to be finally settling on some stable form of relationship, finding a balance with one or even more women and building with them a system of routines and a zone of comfort, things become for him too stagnant and restlessness takes over. In the context of his first marriage, for instance, he feels a sense of imprisonment by living with his wife and parents in their family estate, immersed in – or rather, submerged by – the stifling limitless wealth, carelessness and comfort guaranteed by an upper middle-class household. In one particular passage, he tries to figure out what his perspectives will be in this unbreakable atmosphere of stereotyped artificial calm, expressing his repressed disgust for such life model:

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meant becoming Ann Quin which – if I had done this, and in Cuetzalen she had reached the point of asking me to wear her clothes, which I refused – would have gone on a month or so and she'd have killed me. I at least want to die me, or not-me, but not Her" (R. Sward, Letter to Robert Cohen, 26.09.1978, Robert Sward Papers, Olin Library).

[332] A. Quin, *Tripticks*, p. 133.

[333] *Ibid.*, p. 148.

[334] *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

> She sat beside the pool, a huge floral sunshade decorated the sky above her. She waited for her parents' guests. The lawn had been duly sprayed with green paint over the bare patches. […] I was under the shower, surrounded by the hi-fi, bookshelves, television, weighing machine and the two sun-lamps fixed above the shaving mirror. The thought then was: my greatest accomplishment while I remain here may be my mere survival[335].

He does not, of course, last long in such situation. At some point, as a result of a prolonged exposition to this unbearable peace and banality, his desire and obsessive need for novelty and action come forth violently: "I emerged from 2½ months of 'married life' and delivered an impressive speech in which I rejected the idea of retiring in such a way at my age because 'there's no safety in hiding'[336]".

In the course of his triangular phase with his second and third wives, which he nonetheless considers as the happiest period of his life[337], there comes a point, too, in which the excessive perfection of the situation becomes equally stifling for him: "I had soon lost most of my energy living with the two women, and it had not taken long before I felt a prisoner in a snow-padded fortress of Gothic Madonnas[338]". Therefore, his inveterate consumeristic fever for novelty creeps in, killing off any sense of satisfaction and preventing him from finding any serenity in the prolongation of this relationship, even in spite of its totally unconventional character: "We experimented and kept experimenting until we arrived it seemed at exactly what we wanted. Until it was one neatly controlled vista after another. Everything was nice, pat and predictable. It was all too much. It was like dying and going to heaven and deciding we really didn't like it there[339]".

His final view on marriage is then revealed at one point when, having freed himself from any kind of marital commitment, he considers whether the position of married man he once occupied is really worse than the relational void he is experiencing at the moment. His conclusion, predictably, is in line with his previous impressions on stable, conventional marriages, and reads like a final, bitter bequeathal after all the experiences he has accumulated in life:

> Did half of me want her back? No. No. Remember marriage, any relationship with a woman is a gruelling, dehumanizing trial. It is repeating the same familiar phrases again and again, accepting vicious abuse with a grin, and living in a fishbowl without privacy or time for introspection. The moments of high drama and decisive confrontation are rare. The face-to-face debates, the adrenaline-liberating rallies in bed, and the euphoria that follows are just the glamorous top of the iceberg. Mostly marriage is dull meetings, petty intrigues, tranquillising repetition and exhausting hours of uncertain results, and eating hotdogs all day. Nothing but belching and burping[340].

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[335] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[336] *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
[337] "The girl remained, there was a recognition between the three of us. Obviously my wife was turned on by her, or more possibly turned on by the attraction of competition. So for 6 months we shared her, or rather they shared me. […] That was, now I think back on it all, one of the happiest times in my life. I really did feel like a God" (*ibid.*, p. 62).
[338] *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.
[339] *Ibid.*, p. 65.
[340] *Ibid.*, p. 184.

A similar opinion about the pettiness of married life is shared by his third wife. In a letter written to him prior to their actual wedding, she describes the future perspective of their being together through a series of stereotypical images, an absurd accumulation which expresses a mixture of disgust and fascination, in perfect keeping with the overall tone of the novel:

> Well as you know since K.K. left I'm all for it, marriage included! Can't you just see us hitting that middle road: you'll wear white starched shirts, suits with baggy pants, white ankle-high cotton socks. Toothpicks. Lunch in a paper sack. Off-duty bourbon and 7-up. And I'll wear a wire stiff bouffant, girdle, at-the-knee print dresses and save Green stamps, and be active in the Girl Scouts and PTA. A Bible adorns the coffee table, and there'll be a flag decal on the family car. I'll live for 'the kids'. And we'll survive in a gritty decayed inner-city neighbourhood. A treat will be dinner at the Burger King. And family fun will be a Sunday drive, a backyard hamburger barbecue, or watching T.V. Darling I can't wait – can you?[341].

As if even the most daring and perverse fantasies were not enough, the characters of *Tripticks* resort to other kinds of excesses as alternative options to try and relieve the tedium and void of their existence. Another "solution" which crops up when both experience and imagination have failed is suggested, once again, by psychotropic substances. As was the case in *Passages*, drugs in *Tripticks* are a means for evading reality: however, this time any semblance of spiritual journey or possibility for self-discovery caused by the use of such substances is totally lost. As also part of the consumeristic logic at the centre of the novel, drugs in *Tripticks* are just another empty product, heaped upon all the others.

During a ritualistic orgy organised by the protagonist's second wife, drugs are mentioned as just one of the manifold elements of excess. The event is supervised and guided by the so-called Nightripper, the leader of a sect of which the protagonist's second wife is also part, who is described by the narrator as someone who "struck me as a complete phoney. […] He looked like a flagellist, in fact capable of every perversion possible[342]". At some point of the ritual, allusions are made to the fact that the participants might have been drugged by the Nightripper, and in the final, chaotic climax of the scene the protagonist appears prey to some unlooked-for infernal hallucination:

> I had the feeling that other than the potions Nightripper had handed out he had also passed around something else. The scene resembled a Bosch vision of hell. Some of the women were staring, some were unusually happy, some were sick, others were screaming, and some said the walls were moving. […] As soon as I thought this I began hallucinating, and ultimately freaked out, overturning the altar, calling the Nightripper my motherfucking father. […] I felt I was capable of anything, by merely putting my hand out things would fall or rise. I was Satan with God as my servant[343].

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[341] *Ibid.*, pp. 118-120. K.K. stands for Karate Kitten, one of the nicknames attributed to his second wife.
[342] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
[343] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

The ridiculous exaggeration and empty excess of this scene create a situation in which every single element is utterly lost in the chaotic whole, and meaningfulness is completely suffocated by too much abundance. Ultimately, even this "black mass orgy[344]" is only just another way to pass the time, the umpteenth attempt to introduce some variation, some semblance of fullness into a devastatingly numb existence.

At a later point, when the protagonist finds out that his third wife is "on the needle[345]", the reader has once again the chance to see, this time through the woman's perspective, how the use of drugs is inextricably entangled with a generalised objectification of every aspect of life:

> Dear me, I'm so depressed now. We must have some medicine. […] Let's have a party, let's have a fix. […]. You got a habit, you like your habit, it makes you feel so good, so very very good, you gotta feed your habit, you gotta be good to your habit, it's gonna be good to you. […] You know that commercial we watch I always get a bang out of it. You know the one a bunch of women doing yoga, and this babe starts laying it on another babe about how good this yoghurt is for you. The second babe takes a mouthful. She swallows the stuff and closes her eyes. Then she says something that always makes me break up. She says "Now this is inner peace." And every time I see that commercial I say, "yeah, inner peace," and I think about my habit[346].

The utter superficiality and inconclusiveness of such a speech demonstrates how the proverbial next fix, as well as the next fuck, the next relationship, the next product to buy, the next activity to numb oneself with is only another number, another piece of valueless garbage added to the heap. The impression, here, is that amidst such limitless abundance of *things*, the ordinary has become so extraordinary that the basic value of the little things of life has been completely lost: by dint of looking for meanings always beyond the sphere of what one already has, the characters of *Tripticks* have lost the ability to understand and appreciate the very meaningfulness of ordinary experience.

Another consequence of the general objectification portrayed in the novel, and of the endless fragmentation of reality into a plethora of voices and items, regards the issue of individual identity. Caught in an infinite whirlpool of things no sooner produced than consumed and discarded, identities, too, tend to thin out and break into fragments, pulled in different directions and moulded by a multitude of competing discourses. Identities in *Tripticks* appear vague in the first place, never fixed, often multiple or multi-faceted, and ultimately always on the verge of fading away, of mingling with the general mediatic cacophony which envelops every aspect of the characters' life.

As already discussed, the narrator is presented from the very beginning as an individual of "many names" and "many faces[347]": this multiple aspect of his personality is alluded to at several junctures throughout the novel. On the one hand, he demonstrates that he is aware of this

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[344] *Ibid.*, p. 59.
[345] *Ibid.*, p. 133.
[346] *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.
[347] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

kaleidoscopic quality of his, and consciously plays on it on different occasions. In the middle of a chase scene between him and his first ex-wife, for instance, he is caught trying on different faces while observing himself in one of his car's mirrors, not without some degree of complacent narcissism. He must choose one for this umpteenth chapter of the ridiculous mutual pursuit he is involved in: "He tried on his faces in the rear-view mirror: a health faddist and sometime plumbing engineer and now an itinerant diemaker on his way out[348]".

The gallery of masks to wear is endless, subjected to the same list-making frenzy which tends to extend everything to numerically infinite possibilities. At the same time, though, this set of alternative identities betrays the absence of a central core on which to rely on. This is why, with every new face or identity which is introduced, the focus is always on some aesthetic detail of a rather material quality, and not a single mask is ever explored in-depth. The first identity which is mentioned, for instance, is articulated as "a particularity of flesh attired in a grey suit and button-down Brooks Brothers shirt[349]". Slightly later, the narrator refers to his own identity at the time of his first marriage in these terms: "White gold her hair one of my faces married (I displayed at that time a droopy Stephen Crane moustache and shiny eyes fixed on some wild interior vision)[350]". Such descriptions are always of a vague character, never exhaustive nor particularly introspective, so much so that the recourse to other external identities, such as celebrities or fictional characters from various pulp magazines, proves to be often necessary. These identities, in their turn, are constantly subject to changes, never lasting longer than some fleeting moments; as everything else in the narration, they remain extremely superficial, mere objects to be donned and soon discarded in favour of something new which will shortly meet a similar destiny.

Other than resulting from a series of conscious operations, this variation of identities in *Tripticks* is sometimes presented as a product of external agencies. A perfect example of this is present in the central epistolary section of the novel, in which the narrative baton is passed for the first time to all those characters who have been presented up to that moment through the eyes of the protagonist only. In this way, different images of the man of many names and many faces are provided, as many as the points of view of those who describe him. Filtered through this set of different eyes, the identity of the protagonist is thus further pummeled and fragmented into a myriad of new and contrasting shapes, obscuring even more decisively whatever centre there might be. This effect is enhanced, moreover, by the fact that only the letters written to him by others are reported, while no chance is given to him to reply.

[348] *Ibid.*, p. 163.
[349] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[350] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

It thus happens, sometimes, that the image of a fascinating, masculine man comes to the fore, evoked lovingly and admiringly by his various women. His first wife, for instance, pleads him to come back to her with flattering words of admiration and praise: "Oh honey please come back […]. I was a kid when we were married, even if I was twenty-two. Now I'm a woman. You made me one. And a woman wants her man with her". This woman's very mother, with whom he had a clandestine moment of passion at some point of his first marriage, writes to him with a likewise verve, determined to conquer him and bring him back to her:

> I often think of a certain night spent with you in my car. […] Will you let me know by return where we can meet, or call me by collect. You know before you left I felt I had an almost telepathic ability to anticipate your needs. I feel right at this moment you need me […]. [Y]ou need a woman who can mobilize and release the good qualities that you have in you. […] Not to sound foolish but I feel we are meant for each other[351].

Ironically, this positively distorted vision appears elsewhere to be completely at odds with the image his own mother has of him. So much so that, when his first wife's mother begins pestering the protagonist's mother for information about him, the latter is prompted to write to her son in the following way: "I had a real surprise the other day, your wife's mother suddenly called me up, wanted to know where you were, of course I didn't tell her. […] She talked a lot about you, but it was as if she spoke of someone else, certainly not my son I kept thinking. […] She really seemed slightly cranked to me[352]".

Concurrently, other letters appear to completely reverse any possible positive opinion his ex-wives, their families or his own parents might have had of him previously. As the correspondence progresses and certain disruptive events take place between one letter and another, his correspondents begin to vent out their disappointment, rage, hatred or even homicidal sentiments at him. This is, for instance, what his second wife finally comes to think of him, in her pseudo-esoteric crooked formulation, speaking also on behalf of the other end of the triangle, the third wife:

> You wanted our relationship to be successful, I wanted it to be outrageous. We had the power to make things happen and the whole idea was to do that, and now you are a shadow of your former lustrous mystical self. It's a farce a big goof. I think it was necessary for us to first love and then hate you, and now we must learn to understand you. You had a dream of something beautiful, but your soul had a broken slave at its centre […]. The dream was true but the slave chained the three of us. […] You were a corrupt prophet but we have at last come out of the wilderness[353].

His first ex-wife, on the other hand, reaches similar and perhaps even worse conclusions, openly waging her war against him in one of the last letters of this inglorious epistolary session, which sounds as the perfect prelude to the beginning of her ridiculous chase:

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[351] *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.
[352] *Ibid.*, 112.
[353] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

> You impressed me with your effort to be serious, but the time spent with you has taken a heavy toll. […] A pretentious pitifully empty fraud. I gave you the benefit of the doubt originally and feel embarrassed to think of my words of praise. […] [O]ur relationship was like a conventional melodrama, formal, contrived, milking me like a cow, squeezing every ounce of bitter-sweet irony from our closed-in life. […] You, there, a rotten, no good stinking, cowardly snickering, stupid squirming yellow bastard with your stupid creaking ugly voice […]. I have only this to tell you: WATCH OUT! Remember this: watch out, on your way home. I'll be there, in the dark street, waiting for you with a heavy hot splicer in my hand, and you should begin to count your seconds by the time you finish reading this letter. […] [Y]ou horrible creature, destroyer of everything I hold to as beautiful, watch out, this is my first warning![354].

In the third and last session of the book, after this gallery of alternative points of view, competing against or collaborating with one another in shaping and re-shaping his inexhaustibly multi-faceted personality, the protagonist's identity appears as feeble and fading as ever. The abundance and infinite choice of alternatives which beforehand seemed to be the focus are now replaced by an increasingly preoccupying loss of one's own centre, the utter disintegration of one's own voice amidst the infernal proliferation of alien voices. Having lost the image of his own self, the protagonist's main concern is now what others think of him, and how they picture him from the outside. In his eagerness to don on the mask which others provide for him, he demonstrates at this point to have turned into a defenseless prey of the consumeristic machine devouring the whole world around him.

First, he loses himself in ruminations about how his first ex-wife's new lover conceives him. In thinking about this, his features progressively disintegrate into yet another meaningless list, pushing him further and further away from himself:

> But how does he see me?
> Steel-rimmed glasses
> sideburns
> semi-successful moustache
> a wool cap pulled far forward
> […]
> Intense idealistic impatient gentle
> radical intellectual direct shrewd
> No. Possibly old an impotent, with a future as narrow as my shoulders, striding along like some sort of sagebrush propelled by winds of unknown origin […][355].

Later, at the Centre for Studies of the Body and the Soul, he is fiercely contended by a group of pseudo-therapists, who battle over him with competing interpretations of his psychological profile. Before this phenomenon, he appears to be totally at a loss, erupting in a statement which can also be read as an indirect metafictional comment about the whole novel which he addresses to the author: "I

[354] *Ibid.*, p. 113-114.
[355] *Ibid.*, p. 124. The list extends much further than this.

was unable to respond; a desperate competitiveness around me what could I say that would justify an interruption to all that verbal glory?[356]".

At last, still wearily fleeing from his first ex-wife, he picks up a mysterious Indian by whom he feels scrutinised and judged, as though he were able to watch straight into his soul. Once again, here Quin works into the text some revealing allusions to herself and her own life, dispersing her own presence into both the figure of the Indian and that of the protagonist, as if inserting her own voice and identity into this mad whirlpool of discourses of her own devising:

> Most of his life he pushed himself at such a headlong pace into anything new – a new project, a new theory, a new friendship – that he often seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. His role is to sting minds, being provocative rather than profound. A life of dazzling transitions that sometimes makes him seem unstable. A life so intense that must exact its costs. […] Never had I felt more of a punk. As if this Indian could detect the numberless ludicrous incidents, the infinitely dull stupid indulgent anglo I really was[357].

In the scene which closes the novel, he is caught in a strange and almost supernatural ritual, a hallucinatory performance involving masked figures, dancers, inquisitors and wild animals chasing after him, expressions of the endless accumulations and proliferation of voices which have submerged him since the beginning of his narration. At last, he finds refuge inside a church, "the only place I felt where I could seek shelter without necessarily intruding[358]", where he is free to recollect and find himself again. Here, he concentrates for the first time on his inner dimension, gathering all his energies and abandoning himself eventually to an almighty scream, which is the instinctual articulation of the only possible reaction which is left for him, the last form of resistance he can possibly oppose to the polyphonic havoc which encircles him. Ann Quin's own voice is inextricably mingled in this scream, which is a powerful explosion venting out all the emotions and inner turmoil accumulated across the intense years she spent in America:

> Sitting there brooding, I discovered a breathing space, but a space before the scream inside me was working itself loose. A scream that came from a long series of emotional changes. Fear for safety and sanity, helplessness, frustration, and a desperate need to break out into a stream of verbal images. The pulpit could become an extension of my voice, my skin, my dreams. […] I opened my mouth, but no words. Only the words of others I saw, like ads, texts, psalms, from those who had attempted to persuade me into their systems. A power I did not want to possess. The Inquisition[359].

The absence of limits, the infinite possibilities, and freedom that the society depicted in *Tripticks* appears to offer to its characters conceals in fact the threat of the manipulation carried out

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[356] *Ibid.*, p. 175.
[357] *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.
[358] *Ibid.*, p. 191. The church here conceals a rather clear allusion to Quin's own biography. It is not at all by chance, indeed, that the protagonist, looking for his lost centre in the middle of a quintessentially American landscape, ends up in a religious building, a sort of fictional parallel of the convent Quin spent her childhood in. This apparently insignificant element, it can thus be interpreted, grants to the following passages a possibly deeply personal meaning for the author.
[359] *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

by its consumeristic logic. In this situation, the self is so much bombarded by a plethora of sensationalistic and commercial discourses as to progressively lose its substance and fragment into a thousand meaningless parts, open to the infiltration and manipulation of alien forces – a disposable object just like everything else. Some critics have, in this regard, recurred to the Bakhtinian category of multivocality to illustrate the situation of *Tripticks*, demonstrating how, for Quin, this polyphonic quality is an instrument of persuasion employed by capitalist societies towards the ultimate annulment of individual voices, in order to pave the way for the undisputed dominion of its materialism:

> Theorist Mikhail Bakhtin sees this belief as a joyful thing, the collision and flux of language allowing for intersubjectivity, constant dialogue, and constant struggle; for him, this very flux of language makes it possible for no word ever to be finalized, for no monolithic power ever to completely dominate. For Quin, however, Bakhtin's notion of dialogism is complicated by sheer volume: the issue lies more with frequency, the barrage of information, the repetition of information, the rewiring of the brain, as the words of others overwhelm the ability of the individual to express[360].

Tripticks is the most direct expression of Quin's experiences in America, a sort of fictional chronicle of the world she has witnessed beyond the borders of her known dimension. All her novels represent, in different ways, narrations from beyond the limits of the ordinary, or reflections on the nature of such limits, of the fascination and the dangers of crossing them. In her prose as well as in her actual life, she has always put herself in the forefront, risking, as her characters, with her body and her imagination[361], exploring with courage untrodden roads and unmapped countries in search of herself and her own voice. As a critic observes, "[t]hat is what makes her four novels so powerful and unusual. They take the self and others, one's voice, the voice of the nonself into areas not quite occupied before[362]".

If Quin had to face, in her own experience, the sometimes terrible consequences of stepping beyond the limits of the possible, the known and the acceptable, the testimony of a life beyond borders in her multifaceted fictional projections represents an unmissable chance to live the same prohibited journey at one safe remove, offering us the excitement and joy of tasting the forbidden fruit, without the backlash of any consequent punishment. If her experience of constant excess has left indelible wounds on her psyche, eventually leading to her annihilation, the mark she has impressed on the history of the novel certainly has far more positive resonances.

With her practice, Quin has managed to instill this spirit of transcending limits into every level of the literary work, revolutionising and transfiguring style and content, textual surface, characterisation, and narrative progression. Everything in her texts feels new and vivifying, leading to unexplored directions and uncharted territories, pointing to new possibilities, and giving the

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[360] B. Evenson and J. Howard, *Ann Quin*, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, v. 23.2, p. 71.
[361] See A. Quin, *Passages*, p. 49.
[362] P. Stevick, *Voices in the Head*, in E.G. Friedman and M. Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence*, p. 239.

impression that the novel can still and will always evolve, and find ever new ways to narrate experience.

In her hands, prose elevates itself out of the prison of conventions, opening up to incorporate the precious lesson of other visual media such as painting and cinema, also letting itself be inspired by the constant variations and loose structures of jazz music. Quin's desire for otherness, moreover, and her irreverent and enthusiastic approach to any kind of source, has allowed her to absorb a plethora of different influences, stretching the boundaries of British fiction to meet and converse with literary experiences from the other side of both the Channel and the Ocean. In the process, she has equally captured impressions deriving from examples of so-called elevated literature and more popular forms of entertainment, taking something from all of these, and working them into a body of striking originality and refreshing potential.

Reading her texts feels indeed like an act of crossing limits in itself, a revolutionary experience which can only bring enrichment and evolution. It shows us a way, in conclusion, to push the confines of reality and incorporate whatever lies beyond, to recognise the wonderful in the everyday, thus transforming the banal into the magical, and extending the ordinary into the extraordinary.

IV: Eva Figes

4.0

Some Coordinates on Eva Figes

> I carry a lost world within. I will not forget it, nor will it let me go. Those who might have shared it, or part of it, are not here. I am left to carry it, this burden, a fragile sphere, quick with the light of memory, living things, silver fish darting in a glass bowl. I am both its captive and its custodian. I cherish it, but I also fear it, so much so that for too many years I have tried not to bring it into the light, buried it so deep, hurrying into a constructive future, ever further from my starting point, from history. I saw it as a dwindling wake vanishing, under a blue and cloudless sky, as I sped forward on uncharted waters. It is only now, nearing the end of my journey, that I find myself unexpectedly moving into the ghostly waters of the seafront, the harbour from which I set out so long ago, into exile[1].

There is possibly no better introduction to Eva Figes's life than this moving incipit she wrote for the autobiographical novel *Living with Loss*, which has unfortunately remained unpublished. Her a life is deeply entwined with the traumatic and inevitable events of history. History, with the capital "H", both shaped and forcibly propelled her evolution towards very specific directions: uprooting her from her homeland, in the first place, and consigning her to a country, a language, a culture and a literary tradition of which she would become herself, in time, a remarkable exponent and contributor. History and its consequences also provided her with an inexhaustible though painful source of subject matter: indeed, it could be said that Figes, to paraphrase Stephen Dedalus, has spent an entire life trying to awake from the nightmare of history, re-working and sublimating her traumas into an extensive literary corpus, ranging from fiction and autobiography to criticism, including feminist theory.

Eva Unger[2] was born in Berlin in 1932, to a German family of secular Jews. Her family, especially on his father's side, was quite wealthy, which enabled her to live a happy childhood devoid of worries of any kind. However, a sad watershed moment took place on 10th November 1938, which is remembered today as Kristallnacht. Reportedly on the following morning, when she was only six years old and just a few weeks after the beginning of her first schooling term, Figes was suddenly told she would not go back to her classmates:

[1] E. Figes, *Living with Loss* (c.a. 2000), Unpublished manuscript, Eva Figes Archive, British Library, p. 1.

[2] Unger was the author's actual family name. She acquired the name Figes after marrying her husband, John Figes. As she remarked rather jokingly in an interview: "I didn't want to write under German name because we always anglicised it. But of course everyone says 'Figes? Where the hell does it come from? And how do you pronounce it?', so in a way I am sort of worse off by doing that" (Id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, 25.06.2010, London, Sound Archive, British Library).

> And then, suddenly, without warning, I am not sent to school. Autumn is turning into winter, I am up early as usual but my mother says: you are not going to school today. I am slightly at a loss, perhaps the feeling of winter tedium I associate with the nursery suite belongs to that terrible winter when, instead of taking the tram ride to the Grunewald each morning with my satchel strapped to my shoulders, I am back with Schwester Eva and my four year-old brother. I do not comprehend that when my mother says 'not today' tomorrow will be identical to today, and the day after too. If, sometime during the weeks that follow, I ask why I do not go to school, the reply is too cursory, too abrupt to stick in my memory[3].

Of this period, she remembers mainly being "stuck at home with nothing to do. I was surrounded by books I could not read, which I occasionally flung across the day nursery in sheer frustration[4]". The truth, of course, was still being concealed to the uncomprehending child. In the meanwhile, Figes's father had been arrested while on a business trip and sent to Dachau concentration camp, and her mother was desperately trying to get him out of there, and the whole family out of Germany:

> It would be years before I knew the reasons for my mother's mysterious absences during that bleak November. The endless visits to foreign consulates, the queues of desperate people filling in forms in a manner likely to appease or even hoodwink the Gestapo, a clandestine visit to a member of the Wehrmacht reputed to get prisoners out of concentration camps by bribing the guards[5].

Fortunately, her mother's efforts led to the successful, though slightly belated, release of her father, who came home, but sick with scarlet fever. His need to recuperate from this illness meant that Figes's family was not able to embark on an already-booked ship voyage to Bangkok, which should have been their prospective permanent destination after fleeing Germany. As she explains in one of her autobiographies:

> [I]n the winter following Kristallnacht there was an atmosphere of *sauve qui peut*, wives trying to rescue their husbands from concentration camps, making agonizing choices about their children, or trying to persuade elderly parents to uproot themselves, an almost impossible task, both from the psychological and the practical point of view. Perhaps, if [my mother] spoke […] at all during those frantic months, it was of another destination, taking ship to Bangkok or Shanghai, where Jews could land without visas. We ourselves had been booked to take passage on such a voyage, but missed the sailing when my father arrived from Dachau with scarlet fever[6].

Finally, also thanks to the business connections of her father, who worked as a representant for British textile firms, the Unger family managed to obtain a British passport and a safe passage to the UK. English lessons were arranged in haste for Figes and her brother, and eventually, one day,

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[3] Id., *Living with Loss*, p. 89.
[4] Id., *Journey to Nowhere. One Woman Looks for the Promised Land*, Granta Books, London 2008, p. 13.
[5] *Ibid*., p. 17.
[6] Id., *Living with Loss*, pp. 101-103.

her father, thin, emaciated and almost bald after his detention at the concentration camp, announced that the whole family would move to London, where some relatives were also living:

> [I]n my astonishment I paid scarce attention to my father. I hardly noticed how thin he was, or that he seemed to have lost most of his hair. The huge reception room […] was almost empty of furniture. […] Yes, he said, we're going to England. The abnormality, the falling apart of our lives which had seemed to start […] was gathering momentum[7].

So, as arranged, on a grey clouded morning of March 1939, Figes, her brother, mother and father packed everything and flew to London, leaving Berlin and Hitler's Germany behind for good. Other relatives, such as Figes's uncles, aunts and cousins, had fled instead to France, where they remained for the rest of their lives, becoming French subjects in all respects[8]. Figes's grandparents, however, much more rooted in what was their lifetime home, sadly chose to remain in Berlin. Her paternal grandmother, it was apprehended afterwards, managed to survive the war period by going into hiding and subsequently fleeing to Stockholm, where she eventually died shortly after the war. Figes's grandparents on the part of her mother, instead, were deported and met their death at Belzec extermination camp, despite being listed among the deceased of another camp, in Trawniki[9]. The farewell scene which took place at Berlin's Tempelhof airport, which was to become the last time Figes saw her grandparents, remained in her subconscious for a long time, and was finally exorcised only years later, when she was attending some psychoanalytic sessions to cure a severe eczema she was suffering from at the time:

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[7] Id., *Journey to Nowhere*, pp. 18-19.

[8] In one of her autobiographical texts, Figes remembers an episode about her Paris cousin, which made her think of the unpredictable turns their lives had separately taken after the Holocaust, leading them to embrace different languages, different cultures and countries, making them almost strangers to one another despite having both lived in Berlin under the same roof, albeit at different moments in time: "Half a century later I sit in my cousin's Paris apartment […]. He speaks French, spells his name as the French do, is an amateur of French wines. But I learn for the first time that he once lived in the Tauentzienstrasse apartment, leaving it at the age of six. I left at the age of six too, five years later. It is odd to think of us with overlapping childhoods, our footsteps echoing down the long corridor. I speak in French, he speaks English. When my daughter-in-law, hearing me talk to him in French on the telephone, asks me why we do not speak to each other in German, I am nonplussed. In all the years since we got to know each other after the war, neither of us has ever done so. […] Now I recognise something akin to a taboo. Both of us deeply attached to our adopted country, vying with each other in patriotism on my first visit to Paris in 1946. […] Nor does either of us speak of this lost childhood" (id., *Living with Loss*, pp. 64-65).

[9] Figes herself narrates the moving story of how she felt the necessity, on the occasion of her first return to Berlin as an adult, to find out the details and the truth about her grandparents' death. After finding their names on a register at the Jewish Community Centre's library in Berlin, which stated Trawniki as the place of their death, she made further researches, and understood that the information was probably incorrect: "I re-read the entry many times, compare it to references in other books. Each time my eye sees the word Belzec I dismiss it quickly. I remember only the entry. Todesort: Trawniki. So my mind skitters in a fog, briefly seeing images, only, thankfully, for the mist to shroud my imaginings. […] Often my research seems futile. I read the only book on Trawniki, about its history as a forced labour camp. But all the prisoners were Polish […]. Whatever happened to them, I knew my grandparents could not have survived a winter" (*ibid.*, pp. 284-285). Some time after this, Michael Treguenza, a historian she had contacted who was researching the history of Polish detention camps, shared the result of his studies with her, telling Figes that "[f]rom the information I have given him on the date and transport number from Berlin, he is convinced that my grandparents died at Belzec. From his researches he has come to the conclusion that this was the final destination of all Jews deported from the Reich in the spring of 1942, who had been killed by May, with no known survivor" (*ibid.*, p. 288).

> For ten years I had intermittent dreams of Berlin airport, but did not feel upset when I woke up. I had, I thought, dealt with adolescent survivor guilt by recognising its irrationality. Lying on the analyst's couch, and merely for want of something to say, I told him I had dreamt of Berlin airport last night. And? He asked. Inexplicably, to my astonishment, I burst into tears. The dream never recurred. The severe eczema for which I was being treated was as bad as ever, but the dream went[10].

The first period of the Unger family in England was, as predictable, rather tough. Accustomed as they were to wealth and comfort, they found themselves suddenly at the bottom of the social ladder, with a life to reconstruct almost from scratch: "My father had depicted England as the promised land with its own mythology […]. Reality became, first a sordid boarding-house off the Finchley Road where I was scared to go to sleep at nights, then a small suburban flat where the furniture which we had brought from Berlin would not fit[11]". Passing from one shabby accommodation to the next, they temporarily settled in areas as diverse as Swiss Cottage, Hendon, Cricklewood and Rochester Court, having to adapt to dire circumstances to which they were certainly not accustomed, but which somehow fascinated the young Eva, despite leaving her with the memory of some miserable scenes:

> I was instructed never to leave food lying around – not so much as a crumb – or [the mice] would come down to our flat. But this was nothing. In winter the pipes all burst, and [the neighbour's] bathwater lay inches deep in the hallway, and the Persian rug had to be rescued. My brother, then sleeping in a sort of kitchen dinette on a camp bed, had an umbrella open over his head to protect him from drips. […] [W]e had also moved, not only from Berlin to London, but from the top end of the housing market to somewhere near the bottom[12].

Meanwhile, the threat of war was reaching Britain, too, and so Figes moved with her family to the border village of Hawick, in Scotland, where her father had some business acquaintances, with the intent of getting "as far from the Channel as possible[13]". Once returned to London, her father announced to the family his decision to join the British army as a volunteer, as a gesture of thankfulness towards the country which had welcomed him and his family as refugees: "It was explained to us, as children, that he considered his moral duty to help our adopted country, which had taken us in[14]". When the actual war broke out and air raids over London became a regular event, Eva

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[10] *Ibid*., p. 233. The scene in itself became then recurrent throughout Figes's writing and was reported also in more than one interview, appearing for the first time in print in her autobiographical *Little Eden*: "Crowded into two cars, accompanied by two grandmothers, my grandfather, and an aunt, we drove in a rather sombre mood, like a funeral cortège, to the airport at Tempelhof. It was a bleak, overcast day. During the custom formalities it began to hail and I saw my grandfather outside the plate glass windows peering in to try and catch a final glimpse of us. He looked very forlorn outside, with the hailstones coming down on him, though he did not seem to notice them. He had not seen me: I pulled at the bottom of my father's coat to draw his attention but he was much too busy to take any notice. Afterwards, settled in the aeroplane, they were only a remote group of tiny figures standing outside the building, waiting for the plane to take off. We were told to leave, but I do not suppose they even saw us. […] [W]e took off, leaving everything behind. For years I was to take off, in a recurring dream, leaving them all behind, under that dark menacing sky" (id., *Little Eden: A Child at War* (1978), Persea Books, New York 1988, pp. 15-16).
[11] *Ibid*., p. 16.
[12] Id., *Living with Loss*, p. 127.
[13] *Ibid*., p. 133.
[14] Id., *Little Eden*, p. 20.

was evacuated, as happened to many other children of her generation[15]: the place where she went to stay with her mother and brother was the village of Cirencester, where her father happened to be stationed.

Despite the war going on, and the umpteenth uprooting she was experiencing in her still so very young life, Figes would always remember this period as one of the happiest of the second part of her childhood in Britain, so much so that she dedicated her first autobiographical book – *Little Eden* (1978) – to her experience as an evacuee in Cirencester. Thinking again of her idyllic time in this countryside English environment, she wrote, some twenty years later than the publication of *Little Eden*:

> I was happy during my stay there, experienced a kind of blossoming, an excitement of new ideas and images which stood me in good stead for the rest of my life. I also fell in love with England, a concept of Englishness which now seems very nostalgic but was real enough then. […] I saw the English countryside as it perhaps now only exists in the collective imagination, and was entranced by it. And if the war was omnipresent, it was, for a child, benignly so[16].

Apart from all the exciting novelties that living in a farming context involved, with all the fascinating activities going on all around her, the atmosphere of greater relaxation she found in the village school made a huge difference to the young Eva, allowing her a room for movement and self-exploration which she could not enjoy in the rigid and strict scholastic context of London:

> After my schooldays in London it was a truly amazing experience, and I could not get enough of it. At the primary school in Kingsbury […] school was rather like being in the army. […] [T]he roomy Victorian villa in Lewis Lane seemed like a home from home. It was peaceful, and relaxed. No marching in single file, no physical training in vest and knickers. Zoe and Hillie [the teachers] spoke to each child as an individual. Neither of them was ever heard to shout, blow a whistle, or discipline a child with a ruler, let alone a cane[17].

Here she was also able to discover for the first time the magical world of books, which became for her instruments of pleasure and a source of infinite wonder and constantly new knowledge:

> Real books, that was perhaps the most important of many discoveries which made that semi-detached Victorian villa a turning point in my life. In our state primary school back in London we had been issued with graded readers, […] and we could choose from a tattered collection of pulp as uninspired as the compulsory readers through which the more backward pupils […] stumbled painfully […]. But at Arkenside books were a pleasure, not a necessary obstacle course to get through life[18].

Most importantly, together with books, Figes discovered the fascination and beauty of language, which she was now beginning to master to a more than satisfying degree. In many respects, her

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[15] The reader will certainly remember the experience of evacuation as narrated by B.S. Johnson, for example.
[16] E. Figes, *Living with Loss*, p. 155.
[17] Id., *Little Eden*, pp. 59-60.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

intention to become a writer is traced back exactly to the serene learning environment she found in Cirencester. As she wrote in her unpublished memoir:

> At the same time, using language had suddenly become a joy, not a difficulty to overcome. […] I remember standing at the school gate during that winter of 1940 and experiencing a moment of pure elation at the sheer multiplicity of words, suddenly knowing that I wanted to grow up to be a writer, to collect, as I thought of it, lots and lots of words in a big book. […] It is only now that I realise that part of the source of this elation was the realisation that, after a year and a half, English no longer presented obstacles[19].

Figes's process of self-discovery in Cirencester, however, was not always a positive and unpainful one: for it was there that, for the first time in her life, she also began to understand what it meant to be a Jew. The episode of childish cruelty involving a schoolmate of hers which led to this revelation is variously reported in more than one autobiographical source, always referred to as a crucial watershed moment in Figes's journey of self-exploration:

> It was Isolde who unwittingly inflicted a mortal wound on me. […] One night in the dormitory, as we mumbled our usual bed-time prayers under the bedclothes, she told me I could stop saying mine right away. I did not believe in God anyhow. Indignantly I protested my faith. Of course I believed in God. No, she said, she had heard that I was a Jew and Jews did not believe in God. I lay awake and miserable, staring into the dark. […] But I was also bewildered and puzzled. How could other people know things about me that I did not know myself? I had never heard the word Jew before, and I did not know what it meant[20].

What troubled her most, in this connection, was the bitter awareness that "[i]n spite of everything, the liberty bodice, the school hat, I was not like everybody else. In a way I could not quantify, could neither see or feel, I was different. […] Uniformity was not an option. In some mysterious, unspecified way, I was different[21]". She could do nothing about this difference, which was a sort of new gap with the rest of the world she did not know how to bridge, and which was to mark her perception of her own identity for the rest of her life: "It seems my understanding of the word Jewish was gradual, vague and, by implication, negative. Part of an ancestry I could not help[22]".

Soon, another little trauma was added to the other previous ones in Figes's troubled life. Similarly to what had happened during her early school days in Berlin, whatever kind of personal development she was undergoing in Cirencester came to an abrupt end during the Christmas holidays of 1941, when she was informed by her mother that she would not go back to the village school after the festivities: "'I've got a surprise for you. You're not going back after Christmas'. The shock left me speechless. A trick had been played on me. […] My misery was boundless […]. [T]he gates of

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[19] Id., *Living with Loss*, p. 183.
[20] Id., *Little Eden*, pp. 72-73.
[21] Id., *Living with Loss*, pp. 186-188.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 188.

my happy childhood had clanged shut behind me[23]". Apart from the hurtful disappointment that derived from this, Figes felt somewhat betrayed by her mother. This episode, as she confesses in her writing, is probably at the basis of a lifetime antagonism that developed between the two, a mutual hostility which was to made their relationship a tense one for the rest of their days: "This deepening rift between us, when she never attempted to find out what I might be thinking or feeling, and I knew I could not tell her. Not for my sake, but hers. Our relationship was to be like this for ever, and this was its defining moment. From now on it was downhill all the way[24]".

During the rest of the war period, Figes lived alone with her mother, while her father continued to serve in the British Army and her brother was sent to a boarding school. During this period, she became the target of her mother's outlets of frustration, which exacerbated even more the already-frayed aspects of their relationship. Shortly after re-emerging from the war in the Spring of 1945, another traumatic event occurred which was to stick in Figes's mind for her entire life, recurring again and again in practically all her autobiographical texts. On different occasions, Figes confessed how her mother one day had suggested – in fact, almost as an order – she should go to the Odeon cinema and watch the testimonies recorded during the liberation of Belsen concentration camp, an experience which left a profound mark on her, and added an even more painful shade of awareness to her identity as a Jew:

> The time came when I understood completely, and the last shadows of secrecy were torn away. One bright afternoon in early spring my mother gave me ninepence and sent me to the local cinema. 'Go and see,' she said. 'Go and see for yourself.' I sat alone in the dark cinema and watched the newsreel of Belsen: mounds of corpses, dazed survivors with huge haunted eyes staring out of skulls which had become too heavy for the frail emaciated bodies, mute evidence for the prosecution posing for the camera. At last I knew what it meant to be a Jew, the shameful secret which had been kept hinted at but kept from me for so many years, the mark on my head which I did not recognize but which Isolde had known about four years before, in the dormitory, when I was a small child, innocent as Eve in the Garden of Eden, and as ignorant[25].

Returning home from the cinema, Figes met her mother's thick veil of silence: "I knew it would continue, this silence, it was now the bedrock on which my life, her life, any future which the family might have, would necessarily be built[26]".

Meanwhile, after the chaos and vicissitudes of the war, and amidst this tense familial atmosphere, Figes proceeded with her personal evolution and her process of adaptation to English culture, language and society. The rest of her school years were a collection of small but crucial successes that confirmed her in her ambitions and dreams to become an artist. Now "a grammar

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[23] Id., *Little Eden*, p. 140.
[24] Id., *Living with Loss*, p. 194.
[25] Id., *Little Eden*, p. 131.
[26] Id., *Living with Loss*, p. 230.

school girl expected to go far[27]", she was quickly outpacing her parents and planting her roots deep in the British socio-cultural soil: "With a new school I had acquired a new identity. I had friends now, clever girls, and I was clever too. I was not the foreign child now: on the contrary, I was best at English[28]". The gradual and uphill construction of this new identity was achieved, however, to the expense of a progressive erosion of her former self:

> But getting to the point where I was a grammar school child who regularly came top of the class in English, particularly composition, was a long and difficult journey. It involved acquiring a new persona, suppressing the old one, rather as a man might seek to acquire a new identity after serving time in prison. Because the self into which I had been born, as natural as breathing, as much my birthright as the colour of my eyes, was suddenly a source of social embarrassment, a shameful stigma[29].

As to her German identity, which was somewhat forcibly left behind in her process of Anglicisation, Figes tried hard to maintain it, or at least its linguistic aspect, by reading books aloud and letting her mother intervene to correct her pronunciation, which was becoming inevitably more and more that of a foreigner. This linguistic dichotomy never abandoned Figes throughout her entire life[30]. Actually, she herself came to recognise this condition of liminality between two cultures and languages as a crucial factor in her formation as a writer:

> What would have been if I had grown up in [Berlin]? What sort of person would I now be? […] Would I still have become a writer? And if so, would I have been a very different kind of writer?, or would I not? Because you know, the whole switch of language obviously does something to one's head, you know. I don't know, but I feel in a way you're impoverished by it, because you've lost so much, you know, the whole family thing you've lost, but in other ways you've gained, because you have this whole other culture which you can dip into, or you can draw from[31].

After completing her school education, Figes chose to proceed with a degree, not seeing any fascinating perspective in the working world which lay before her. She thus enrolled in Queen Mary's College in London, where she studied English, French, German and Latin. The experience of college was for her, as for other writers of her generation[32], rather disappointing. As she confessed in an

[27] *Ibid*., p. 247.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 146.
[29] *Ivi*.
[30] Figes's speech in English was always characterised by a strong German accent. Even in the latest interview available to us, recorded in 2010 shortly before her death, her perfect command of English is sometimes broken, especially in correspondence with the most emotional moments, by a sudden re-emergence of her suppressed Germanness, mostly detectable in the harsh Rs which inevitably crop up here and there (see Figes's interviews with Sarah O'Reilly, whose recordings are held at the British Library's Sound Archive in London). Conversely, moreover, her German always remained at a scholastic level, and was once defined by Günter Grass, who became a close friend of hers from the Seventies onward, as that of a "very grown-up child" (Orlando Figes, Interview with D. Corradi, London, 28.09.2021).
[31] E. Figes, Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 15.09.2010, Sound Archive, British Library.
[32] The reader should here remember, once again, B.S. Johnson's disappointing experience at King's College, in which he enrolled after much preparation and with great anticipation, to find out eventually that all they were doing there was reading old texts which had nothing new to teach him about the more recent developments in the literary field, which was what really interested him.

interview, “I wasn’t particularly happy, it was a disappointment, and I very soon sort of did my own thing rather than concentrating on getting good grades – I didn’t actually get good grades. […] I soon felt the best thing I’m doing in my time here is reading[33]”. The continuation of her education, moreover, was creating other tensions with her parents – this time, especially with her father –, who expected her to comply with her social role as a woman, by marrying and bringing up a family. Years before, when she had informed her mother that she had passed the eleven-plus examination, she had reacted quite coldly, demonstrating her inveterate wish that her daughter, rather than chasing personal success, should better conform to the role which was expected of her:

> It was true, she really would have preferred me to do more housework, rather than pass my eleven-plus, and the urge to call me away from my books went on long after the war was over. […] The fact that I was a girl, whose function in life was first and foremost domestic, justified her using me. I was being taught my role in life. […] I was told that my first duty in life would be to look after my husband and children, who must never be sacrificed to other ambitions. Outside work must be ‘fitted in’, or abandoned. I was showing disturbing signs of not conforming to this norm. I always had my nose in a book which, as far as my outgoing father was concerned, was downright unnatural[34].

As to her father, his reaction to her dreams of literary glory was even more antagonistic, especially when he found out she was not doing a degree in order to become a teacher, as girls usually did in those times:

> I realised that what they had to offer wasn’t giving me anything, so I lost interest in the exams and stuff and didn’t get a very good degree. And my father then got the idea that girls that do degrees they become teachers, and I had no intention of doing that. And he said ‘What are you going to do?’, and I said ‘I’d rather be a writer’, and he said ‘You’re completely mad!’, you know, the tune was that people outcast didn’t do that sort of thing…[35]

These family tensions climaxed one day, when Figes had a fierce argument with her father after hosting a friend of hers for the night without his permission, and was severely punished the next day. As she narrates in an interview, this last blow was what finally prompted her to literally flee from home and seek refuge elsewhere:

> When you’re down finals and you went out with a group of friends to celebrate you came back at 1 in the morning there was trouble, and there’s a friend of mine who missed her last train and she lived outside London, and I said ‘Don’t worry about it, we have a spare bed in my bedroom’, and ah God there was an almighty row next morning […]. So my father sort of more or less expelled me from the house, well he more or less got dictatorial and said ‘You’re only allowed to sit in your own bedroom and go to the bathroom but not come in the living room or anything like that’, and I thought I’m not putting up with this, I’ve done finals and there’s no reason I should stay, so I rang the friend who stayed the night before and asked ‘Can I come and stay with you?’, and she said yes and I went there, then I went somewhere else[36].

[33] E. Figes, Interview with S. O’Reilly, London, 27.10.2010, Sound Archive, British Library.
[34] Id., *Living with Loss*, p. 210.
[35] Id., Interview with S. O’Reilly, London, 15.09.2010, Sound Archive, British Library.
[36] Id., Interview with S. O’Reilly, London, 27.10.2010, Sound Archive, British Library.

Eventually, Figes ended up in a sort of residence for students in Windsor Park, where she met John Figes, who was to become her future husband and father of her two children.

After she graduated in 1953, she had a first encounter with the publishing world working as secretary at Longman, as well as translating occasionally from French and especially German. As she revealed, this experience was helpful in teaching her some important dynamics about both the writing and the publishing process, which would turn out to be useful in the near future, when she embarked on her first literary efforts: "Actually it was quite a good education, because I hadn't started to write myself yet, and I really learned what not to do. I brought home these piles of promising work they send us unrequested, you know. And you began to see the mistakes the people did when writing a narrative, and that was quite useful[37]".

The career prospects she saw ahead of her, however, were far from bright, so she reportedly got pregnant almost on purpose, partially also to counter the existential stagnation she was experiencing in her working life:

> I just took it as the best thing life had to offer me at that time. Because career prospects were… I'd go to the head of the Publishers' Association and they said 'Well, if you were a man I could offer you a sort of traineeship as an editor, but as you are a woman I suggest you learn short-hand typing'. That was it in those days. […] I think I got pregnant on purpose[38].

Her first child, Kate, was born in 1957, followed only two years later by a son, Orlando. By this time, her marriage with John Figes was already beginning to show evident signs of an imminent crisis, until her husband finally abandoned her when Orlando was still only a toddler. Divorce soon ensued, in 1962, marking another major trauma in a life already troubled by so many tragedies and difficulties[39].

Here she was, in the early Sixties, not yet in her thirties, with already a long collection of unfortunate events piled up behind her: a holocaust survivor, with relatives either dead or scattered in different parts of the world, transplanted into another country, a different culture and a different language, divorced and single mother of two children, in a historical time when such a condition was particularly hard to face, since the state of women's rights was much poorer than nowadays.

Forced by the circumstances, Figes went back to working in the publishing world, this time at Blackie, a publisher for children's literature. It was in this period that she began to write in earnest, certainly spurred by the difficult events of her life and the accumulated troubling emotions of her first

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[37] Id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 17.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.
[38] *Ivi*.
[39] Owing to Orlando Figes, "an old friend of her, who was actually my godfather, said that there were two just terrible things that happened to Eva: one was the Holocaust, and the other was her divorce" (O. Figes, Interview with D. Corradi, London, 28.09.2021). Not only did these two major dramatic happenings come to shape the course of her life: they would also be reworked over and over again through much of the fiction she wrote subsequently, with the experience of the divorce certainly lying at the basis of her feminist writing as well.

thirty years, but more determined as ever to pursue the dream of becoming a writer, which she had been nurturing since childhood.

The first novel she wrote, *Lights*, would never be published, but it set an important stylistic beginning for her: here, her interest in fragmentation and the poetic possibilities of prose are already pivotal characteristics, marking an aspect which would subsequently become a staple component of her aesthetics, at least in the first part of her production up to the early Seventies. As she herself explained in retrospect, discussing this first unpublished novel:

> When I was at school I was only interested in poetry really, not storytelling. Then I decided I was running out of poetry and it wasn't really for me, then I thought you can use prose in a poetic way, and the first thing I did was a book of fragments, which […] was a sort of first step, you know, to where you were going. […] I started with my very early childhood in Germany and just through images and things I could remember. […] [T]hey were just detached paragraphs […], you just take it like a series of photographs or images and leave it at that. […]. And coming up with this made me feel 'This is me, this is the beginning. I don't know where it goes from here but…'. And I did get a feeling from that time on that I wasn't going to be a poet in a conventional sense, but the thing about all the way I was going to write prose would be like poetry[40].

For *Lights*, Figes solely drew on her biographical experiences, ranging from her childhood in Germany to the experience of childbirth, a fundamental point of passage in the lives of many women, which she found however lamentably untouched as a literary subject[41]. The peculiar kind of progression she elaborated for this novel – a narration proceeding by a series of unconnected narrative snapshots, organised on the page as autonomous, floating paragraphs – was used again in her next novel, *Equinox*. Her first published text (1966), *Equinox* equally reflects aspects of her life, this time in a more partial and masked form. The protagonist, Liz, is a young woman who is recuperating from an abortion she has had recently, and whose marriage is clearly deteriorating. Her relationship with her husband grows colder and colder every day, as he is increasingly more distant and absent from her daily life, with evident allusions, moreover, to the fact that he is cheating on her. One more biographical connection lies in the fact that, at some point, Liz finds a job as a secretary in a publishing house, in order, at least partially, to counter the void and frustration of her everyday life and her disappointing marriage. Towards the end of the novel, her husband leaves her for good, and she starts a clandestine relationship with a married man she has known since her school days.

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[40] E. Figes, Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 27.10.2010, Sound Archive, British Library.

[41] Thinking back about this decades later, she wrote in an article: "I also came to realise that […] there was really what amounted to a conspiracy of silence on the agonies of the labour room. […] As a would be-writer I now had something to write about. In the intervals between contraptions when my first child was born I suddenly understood that the conspiracy of silence extended to the world's literature. This earth-shattering function, which made sexual love seem merely an hors d'oeuvre for the meal itself, a bland prelude to the real business of living, had not even been touched upon in imaginative literature, let alone explored" (id., *Menopause*, written for a Virago anthology, 29.09.1992, Eva Figes Archive, British Library, London).

As regards the plot, *Equinox* is not much different from those kind of Hampstead novels so in vogue during the Sixties, portraying petty stories of adulteries and other such minimal situations, which Figes notoriously came to detest[42]. Its strength lies in its poetic and fragmentary style, which sets the tune for Figes's much more experimental and neo-Modernist production of the following years. *Equinox* was written at her office at Blackie during the early mornings, before the other employees arrived and she had to begin working: this was the only slot throughout the day which allowed her peace and quiet away from her noisy children. She managed to have it published without much effort by Secker & Warburg, thanks to an acquaintance who worked there and who contacted Figes when he heard she had written a novel[43].

Her second published text, *Winter Journey*, was also written at Blackie's headquarters. It is the story of an old dying man called Janus, who drags himself possibly through one of his last days on earth. The story is narrated in a quintessentially Modernist fashion, both in the sense that the narration encompasses only one day, from early morning to night, and because of the extensive use of the stream-of-consciousness technique, which is employed to mirror the protagonist's broken psyche and faltering bodily and mental functions.

Janus is a war veteran haunted by painful memories, who has recently lost his wife and whose ties with his closest family members are growing colder and colder every day. The world around him appears to be crumbling to pieces, which reflects the decay he is experiencing in his own interiority. Faced with this relentless quotidian downfall, the only thing he can do is to continue moving in spite of an increasing impossibility to do so, opposing an exquisitely Beckettian resilience to his existential predicament[44]. The Janus-ness of the protagonist lies exactly in the fact the he is constantly looking both backward, to the traumatic past that will never cease to torment him and which has left indelible traces in him both physically and mentally, and onward. His movement for survival is paralleled by passages from Robert Falcon Scott's *Antarctic Voyage*, which he reads every day in the public library

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[42] By no chance, she soon repudiated this novel in subsequent years: "They asked me to reprint it, but I said 'No thanks', cause it's embarrassing, I mean, it's everything you'd expect a first novel to be, it's autobiographical – well, not entirely, but… I think there were some things about marriage in it that I recognised, and basically the narrative was very conventional, and I knew that wasn't actually what I was aiming for" (id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 17.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library).

[43] "There was somebody who worked in publishing who I knew because I'd taken over his job, he rang me up and said 'I've heard you've written a novel, can we see it?', and I said alright and they bought it. That was Secker. So that's how I came to be published" (id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 27.10.2010, Sound Archive, British Library).

[44] Despite the obvious Modernist, and especially Woolfian undertones, Figes indicates Shubert and – more indirectly – Beckett as the main influences behind this text: "*Winterreise* has a very strong powerful narrative, and interestingly when later I got hooked to Samuel Beckett I found that he was literally obsessed with it as well. It's an extremely sad and lonely narrative. That must have influenced me. I can't think of any other specific work that has had that sort of effect on me" (id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 17.06.2011). "I think I thought that this lonely wanderer and this kind of bleak landscape would translate into something in fiction, and I thought of this old man whose wife had died, and that really was triggered by Schubert, as a sort of kernel of an idea" (id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 28.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library).

and which mingles with his actual thoughts, giving thus a metaphoric parallel to his material condition.

Winter Journey represented for Figes a breakthrough in many respects. First stylistically, in that it allowed her to find her own voice as a novelist and identify the road she was to take with her subsequent production: "It's hard to say what changed between my first novel and my second. It must be confidence, to do something nobody had ever done before. I think that's part of it[45]". "And this time I knew it was quite different. […] I just knew I was now on different territory, and that from now on I'd do a different kind of stuff. I think I've changed quite a lot. I now think that when I was young I made things unnecessarily difficult for myself[46]". Secondly, it was also a material breakthrough, since the book won her the prestigious Guardian Fiction Prize in 1967. This meant that she had now the confidence and the recognition – also, no less importantly, by her parents[47] – necessary to dedicate herself to writing at a professional level. She thus left her job at Blackie and became a full-time freelance writer, who would be able, from that moment till the end of her days, to sustain herself and her two children by writing only in one form or another, producing a remarkable amount of novels, books of social critique and an extensive corpus of articles and contributions to magazines, journals and papers of various kinds.

The idea for her next novel, *Konek Landing* (1969), came to Figes in 1966, when she returned to her native Berlin for the first time after fleeing Nazi Germany in the Thirties. As she explains in an article, the novel originated from her attempts at coming to terms with the problem of collective guilt, the uneasy separation of good and evil she experienced when thinking about the Holocaust, and the memories triggered by the sight of the city of her childhood, at once so completely changed and so perfectly recognisable[48]:

> Other problems haunted me. My attitude to Germany, for instance. During the war it was natural for my parents to make anti-German remarks as virulently racist as anything the German said about the Jews. But even as a child I realised that the problem of collective guilt could not be simple. My father had been a German as well as a Jew, so a mere accident of birth had absolved him of responsibility. What would he have done if he had not been born Jewish? The problem continued to haunt me, and came to a head when I eventually visited Germany for the first time. […] I came back and wrote my third novel, *Konek Landing*, an epic story of

[45] Id., Interview with S. O'Reily, London, 17.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.
[46] Id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 28.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.
[47] The change of attitude and the encouragement she was to receive from now on, especially from her father, would become crucial for her: "when he saw my photo on the paper he said 'That's my daughter, you know'. So then he completely changed his tune: before he thought I had my head somewhere in the clouds, but when I started publishing and getting prizes and things he suddenly... he was really proud of me. And I loved him, he was nice, it was sort of nice that he reacted that way. […] It probably gave him a lot of pleasure. He probably didn't understand what I was writing, because he said 'I'm not sure I understood it, but it is very beautiful'" (id. Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 15.09.2010, Sound Archive, British Library).
[48] In one of her autobiographies, Figes describes her visit to Berlin in the following terms: "Cut off from my childhood for so long, the city had become a dream world: I could not be sure how much I actually remembered and just how many images might be distortions, or simply fantasy. To my delight, despite the devastations and rebuilding, streets and buildings verified the home town I had carried in my head for so long" (id., *Living with Loss*, p. 275).

> a survivor of the holocaust who cannot come to terms with the present or resolve the problem of killer and victim. Konek ends up as a sacrificial Christ figure, the only possible resolution I, and he, could find[49].

Konek Landing, possibly her most difficult and obscure novel, and among her most fascinating works, revolves around the peregrinations of the protagonist, Stefan Konek, a dispossessed man of unspecified origins with a traumatic past of persecution and loss. From the fragmentary, disconnected and confused narration, which mixes flashbacks and sections set in the present, first-person and third-person accounts, we apprehended that, as a child, he was victim of some ethnic persecution, torn away from his family and forced to leave his native country. Having subsequently embarked on a ship as some sort of sailor, he soon deserted his post and went into hiding. Now he is constantly running from the authorities, who are looking for him everywhere.

His endless wanderings from place to place in search of an unattainable peace and stability bring him to entertain relationships of various kinds with characters who are diversly caught in the general gloomy post-apocalyptic climate pervading the novel: an orphan equally fleeing persecution and war; an old woman who mistakes him for her missing nephew; another woman whose husband has disappeared – possibly killed by her –, and who accepts him first as a lodger and then as a lover; a couple of dispossessed foreign children, a boy and a girl with whom he enters into a disquieting carnal relationship; and finally the miserable crew of the ship on which he had once served, and which he is forced to join again after being caught by the police.

Narrative action develops as if enveloped in a sort of impenetrable mist, created and sustained by a most obscure style, proceeding by disjointed fragments which distort the underlying plot almost beyond recognition. Guilt and victimhood are inextricably confused in Konek's experience, who appears both as a criminal and as a martyr, depending on the circumstances; no clear reference, moreover, is made to either the Holocaust or the protagonist's supposed Jewishness, nor to the exact geographic location of the story, so as to avoid any easy identification with notorious historical events, or the suggestion of any neat separation between good and evil. In the rather absurd end of the novel, Konek finds himself as a reversed Robinson Crusoe figure, stranded on some exotic island inhabited by a primitive tribe, and ends up eventually being sacrificed as a sort of surrogate Christ.

After these first more or less successful forays into fiction, Figes launched herself into a most ambitious project of social commentary and critique, which would mark another crucial turning point in her career as a writer. Since a very young age, she had always been sensitive to the injustices many women had to suffer in different spheres of their public and private life. For instance, she always remembered a conversation she had with her mother on the subject of teachers' salaries, noticing that men earned more than women, apparently on no specific grounds:

[49] Id., *The Long Passage to Little England*, in "The Observer", 11.06.1978.

> When I found out that women teachers got paid less than men, I asked my mother why. Because men have families to support, she said. With total conviction, no criticism, no doubt. I knew better than to argue, but I pondered. It made no sense at all, and was also glaringly unjust. I was living in a world where women were doing most of the supporting, men absent. Doing men's jobs […]. I knew, as time went by, that I had a fight on my hands. I wanted love and babies, but I wanted other things too, with all my being. So, a girl with attitude[50].

This early awareness, together with the negative experience of the divorce that she lived on her own skin, had made her into a convinced feminist, only waiting for the right occasion to articulate her sense of injustice in depth and try to offer her personal solutions to the world. Such an occasion came about in 1968, when Mary Kay of Faber & Faber commissioned her the writing of a text which would become one on the milestones of Britain's second-wave feminism: *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970).

Admittedly, Figes began working on the project "motivated as much by a wish to stir women out of their apparent passivity, their acceptance of an intolerable status quo, as by anger at a society dominated by men who discriminated against women in so many ways[51]". *Patriarchal Attitudes* is articulated as an insightful analysis of different aspects of society and various institutions regulating the life of men and women, starting from the assumption that society is a machine largely devised by men to sustain their own interests and dominant position, to the detriment of the female counterpart:

> When I got the contract I thought 'And now what do I do?', […] and I thought suppose I look at society as man-made, cause women hadn't been allowed to be part of it, and then it all fell into place. If you look at *Patriarchal Attitudes*' index you see that everybody gets demolished, you know, Darwin, the Church etc., they were all male chauvinists, they don't think straight, they all think that men were superior to women[52].

The success was immediate, and the book aroused enormous interest, both in men and women, despite the initial hostilities. So Figes suddenly found herself trampled by a wave of notoriety she had never enjoyed previously, when she published only fiction:

> I was suddenly all over the television, and it was sort of extraordinary, 'cause I thought this was going to be an uphill battle, I went to dinner parties and men all said to me I was wasting my time, that women were women and men were men, I had a lot of hostility from men friends. And then the book came out and every paper ran it as lead review, people came to photograph me. I remember somebody called Philip Oakes, he was working for *The Sunday Times*, he came to me to interview me and he said 'Do you realise what you've done?' […] So I spent a couple of years making speeches. […] I thought, when I wrote the book, 'This is going to take twenty years', and it took about three months, you know! And suddenly everybody was saying, 'God, you're absolutely right!', and I was sort of tossed all over the town, going places and making speeches and all that stuff[53].

[50] Id., *Living with Loss*, p. 212.
[51] Id., *Why the Euphoria Had to Stop*, in "The Guardian", 16.05.1978.
[52] Id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 7.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.
[53] *Ivi*.

Finally, however, the commitments, commissions and collateral work deriving from her success with the book proved to be simply too much to sustain indefinitely, and she sensed at some point that it was time to go back to her own writing, that she had already done her own part for the women's cause and it was now the turn of new generations to carry on their own battles[54]:

> Everybody was at me do to things, and for a while I really enjoyed it, because I could see everything changing, it was like watching a ball going downhill you know, I couldn't stop it anymore. But then I got tired of doing it. […] I decided I am a writer really, I've got to go on writing, I'm getting tired of saying the same thing over and over again […], and if they haven't got the message by now… I was not made to be a politician, not in that sense[55].

Figes would return to feminist subjects and social criticism again, first with *Tragedy and Social Evolution* (1978), then with *Sex and Subterfuge: Women Writers to 1850* (1982), and finally with *Women's Letters in Wartime, 1450-1945* (1993). The experience of researching and writing *Patriarchal Attitudes*, however, exerted a profound influence on her subsequent fiction, too. An obvious echo of her recent reflections can be detected already in *B*, the first novel she published after *Patriarchal Attitudes*, in 1972.

B is the metafictional story of a writer, Paul Beard, obsessed with another writer named B, an artist of great genius but financially unsuccessful, whose biography he is now trying to compose. Profoundly admired by his talent, Mr. Beard had offered to host B in an annex of a family countryside estate in order to help him in difficult circumstances. After some vicissitudes, including a car accident and a controversial love affair with a young girl from the village, B had abandoned the cottage and died shortly afterwards due to an unspecified illness. The novel presents two narrative levels: one is set in the past, the other in the present. The past sections are constituted by either the protagonist's memories about B or the portions of the actual biography he is writing about him, but sometimes these two parts overlap in such a way as to make the dividing line between them blurred beyond recognition. The sections regarding the present situation of the writer portray him dealing with his everyday life, thinking about his work or dedicating himself to the odd extra-literary activity, or venting his frustrations on his wife.

The central theme of the novel, as it becomes apparent in the course of the narration, is in fact the protagonist's attitude to women and his relationship with his family, both of a disastrous kind. He has indeed a failed marriage behind himself, and a son contested between him and his drunken ex-wife, whom he has always mistreated. His present wife, whom he also continually abuses, is alluded

[54] She would reveal decades later in an interview: "As a feminist I feel the battle is no longer mine, and the younger generation have to go on. […] It seems to me that the things I'm writing about are things that affect all human beings, whichever gender they are. I think they are very serious issues to be written about which have nothing to do with whether you are a man or a woman and I really do not want to be labelled" (Manuel Almagro and Carolina Sánchez-Palencia, *Eva Figes: An Interview*, in "Atlantis", V. 22.1 [Junio 2002], p. 181).

[55] E. Figes, Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 7.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.

to as an accessory presence in the house, good only to interrupt him in his work. Whatever remains of this ill-fated domestic peace, however, is completely shuttered at one point, as it becomes apparent that the wife has mysteriously disappeared. The event progressively absorbs his concerns and energies, making what was the alleged main plot-line about the writer B shift to a secondary position. Eventually, yet another sabotage of narrative progression is provided, as the unidentified body of a dead woman is found beneath the pavement of the annex in which B had once been hosted. After this, the narration is left suspended, with none of the mysteries previously raised being solved.

Once B's secondary importance to the economy of the story has been exposed, the novel reveals its true purpose: to attempt a transposition into the mind of a male chauvinist: a study, that is, of a patriarchal, misogynist character carried out indirectly through his attitude to the other sex and his distorting discourses on women. In an interview, Figes explains that behind the letter "B" there is an allusion to the figure of Beethoven, taken as an example in virtue of the interesting contrasts that exist in him, with his undiscussed artistic genius on the one hand, and his evident personal defects on the other:

> I had reasons for calling *B B*, I mean I was thinking of Beethoven, and also *Bluebeard*. Certainly Beethoven's relationship with his nephew was one thing I was fixated on at the time. Beethoven had a nephew and he got custody of the boy against the wish of the boy and his mother and the boy actually tried to kill himself, because Beethoven was so overbearing as a guardian. And *Bluebeard* of course, because I think a wife disappears in it. So that was the reason for *B*[56].

After the publication of this novel, Figes lived one of the gloomiest periods of her life: "1973 has not been a year I look back on with relish or satisfaction: too much grief, too many sudden bereavements[57]", she reflected in an article at the close of the year. Her father had indeed passed away at a fairly young age, soon followed by the suicides of B.S. Johnson and Ann Quin, who died within months from one another. They had been more or less close friends, but most of all collaborators and fellow writers with whom she had been able to enjoy a communion of purposes and a sense of being in a group which was now suddenly shattered, leaving her somewhat stranded and with the feeling of having survived yet another small-scale Holocaust:

> I have only once in my life belonged to something which could be called a literary group, and that came to an end with the death of B. S. Johnson. Ann Quin had killed herself by swimming out to sea only weeks before, and shortly after these two deaths Alan Burns, closer to both of them than I had ever been, chose to dig himself in to an American university, and stayed there. Their loss still makes me feel solitary and bereft[58].

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[56] Id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 17.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.
[57] Id., *Against Security*, in "New Humanist", December 1973.
[58] Id., *B. S. Johnson*, in "The Review of Contemporary Fiction", v. 5.2 (Summer 1985), p. 70.

Fortunately, however, like her character Janus, Figes found a way to go on with her writing, leaving behind the highly experimental phase of her beginnings and constructing a more conventional, yet not less original, style: "it took me quite a while to sort of find my own feet and realise it wasn't the end of everything, and I think I got more conventional, because otherwise you got to a dead-end of some kind. But this greater platitude was in a way a big breakthrough for me[59]". Apart from adopting a comparatively more conventional style, Figes's interest was in this period shifting from the fragmentary obscurity of the first part of her production to an attempt at imposing some kind of narrative order on experience, though still far from the restrictive grid of the conventional realist novel:

> Having begun with an interest in the fragmentary nature of remembered experience I have found myself increasingly involved in making new connections, creating new networks which, if different in method from the traditional novel of the nineteenth century, nevertheless do create a narrative of a kind and do impose a sort of order on chaos. I am using a different grid, which I first have to construct by a painful process of trial and error[60].

After *B*, and most importantly, after three consecutive novels in which the protagonist had been a male figure, Figes returned to a female point of view in *Days*, published in 1974. Again, the author herself relates this momentous change of perspectives to the experience of writing *Patriarchal Attitudes*, which granted her a renovated feminist conscience, together with a greater confidence as a writer presenting experience from the point of view of female characters. As she explains in an article:

> So, after an early fairly autobiographical novel which I judged to be an artistic failure, I stopped writing about women for several years. My next three novels all had male protagonists, and although I had perfectly good rational reasons for choosing this gender (more suitable for the plot, theme etc.) with hindsight I now know that I did it in order to maintain control of my material. The moment I contemplated a female protagonist the character lost its clear outline and became me: pain, anger and resentment spilled over on to the pages in a muddled sort of way. Instead I had to choose men. Women are always in the background, part of my peripheral vision, often perceived through the eyes of the male protagonist who, of course, got it wrong. In that sense writing *Patriarchal Attitudes* was something of a watershed in my career. [...] And if I ever felt some sort of sneaking embarrassment about the possibility of being labelled a woman writer by the opposite sex, that was certainly gone. Women were suddenly on a winning ticket, the sex with something to say. Men, by comparison, seemed tired, played out, and on the defensive[61].

Days is a story almost completely set in a hospital room, and draws on Figes's numerous experiences of poor health, which she suffered from especially in her youth. The protagonist is a woman who, like Beckett's Malone, has an illness which forces her to stay almost immobile in bed.

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[59] Id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 7.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.
[60] Id., Letter to Giles Gordon, 25.03.1974, Eva Figes Archive, British Library.
[61] Id., *A Voice of One's Own* [unpublished article], 1984, Eva Figes Archive, British Library. This article was not written on commission, and was intended for either the Guardian's women page, some literary magazine, or even "one of the more intelligent women glossies" (id., Letter to Charles Walker, 3.06.1984, Eva Figes Archive, British Library).

The narration focuses on the small events taking place in her immediate surroundings, with the occasional flashbacks and introspections in which she thinks about her private life or meaningful moments of her past. A curious sense of generational continuity is created by the parallel situation of the protagonist's mother, also a patient in the same hospital but on a different floor, and by the occasional visits of her daughter, who takes her seat on a chair facing the bed. The sense of a common destiny which all the female characters are bound to share is also reinforced by the lack of proper names, and the use of the same pronoun "she" to indicate all of them, with the "I" of the narration also shifting from character to character, making it sometimes impossible to discern immediately who is speaking. The bed and the chair become objects symbolising a condition and a peculiar stage in life which is occupied in turn, or destined to be occupied, by all the characters: depending on the moment, one can be either a visitor or a patient, and who was once a daughter, attending an ill old mother, may soon find out that she has become an ill old mother herself.

After *Days*, it was the turn of another novel with a female protagonist, at the centre of which lies a metaphorical situation triggering a profound reflection on the position of women in society. To be precise, Figes conceived *Nelly's Version* (1977) as a sort of diversion after the previous serious and engaging projects, but it developed nonetheless into one of the most important works in her production:

> *Days* […] was particularly difficult to write: I had frequent blocks, usually resolved by strange dreams which I then used in the text. I then decided to give myself some light relief by writing a comedy about a woman with amnesia. It was only when I corrected the proofs of *Nelly's Version* that I realised that I had created a Kafkaesque nightmare. I was shocked and a bit puzzled by this[62].

The starting situation of the novel is simple, though fraught with consequences and possibilities: a woman with absolutely no notion of her own identity and her past finds herself checking in in a hotel in some town she does not know anything of, discovering soon afterwards that she is carrying a bag full of money of whose provenance she is equally ignorant.

From the initial moments, in which she looks puzzled at her ow reflection in the mirror and checks with contempt the arsenal of clothes present in her wardrobe, as if they belonged to someone else, she engages in a series of daily explorations with the attempt to discover details of herself and of her previous life. Day after day, she strenuously resists the efforts by all the people around her to bring her back into the grids of her old life, to play again the role she held before her amnesia, which has consigned her to a state of unprecedented freedom. Refusing to re-assume the responsibilities of wife and mother she apparently had before, she now exploits the occasion to re-define herself and her own life without any external imposition. In this context, her situation becomes a metaphor for the

[62] *Ivi*.

possibility – or impossibility – of all women to wriggle out of the impositions of patriarchal society and construct for themselves a new role, choosing a destiny different from the one men devised for them.

After the parenthesis of *Little Eden* (1978), which represents Figes's first autobiographical attempt, the novel *Waking* came out in 1981. An extremely short text – Secker & Warburg rejected it exactly on the grounds of its brevity[63] –, it strikes the reader especially for its structure and the peculiar kind of narrative progression the author has chosen for it: "I have this theory that when you wake up you enter your body again, and I wanted to write about that. So I did a sort of seven-ages thing starting with being a small child and you know, how you feel when you first wake up and become aware of yourself as a physical being[64]". The novel is divided into seven short sections, all starting with the protagonist just gaining consciousness after sleep, gradually re-appropriating her body and mental faculties and registering the world around her. Each section coincides with a different phase of her life, starting from infanthood through to old age. *Waking* marks a sort of slight return to the fragmentary, photographic style of Figes's first novels: it presents a series of snapshots, minimal moments concerning one consciousness through time, and creating an extremely poetic biography of floating images and sensations characterising the development of a female identity at different phases of her life.

Figes employs a similar cinematic method, though applied to a completely different material, in her next novel, *Light*, which was published in 1983 – the author regarded it as her best work of fiction[65]. The history of the genesis of *Light* is a rather complicated one, involving several modifications and alternative projects, later discarded in favour of the final one. Figes was evaluating at some point two or even three parallel narratives, centred on a travelling photographer, a retired astronaut and a painter[66]. Eventually, after much pondering, she settled on the central figure of Monet, and decided to dedicate the novel to the chronicle of one day at the Monets' estate in Giverny:

> I remember *Light*: originally my conception of that book was to have it at two time levels, the present and a hundred years ago, and it simply didn't work. My original idea was to have two narratives of characters very distantly related. It simply didn't work. So I ended up doing a lot of careful research about Giverny, which actually I had visited twice – it had just been opened to the public and I'd seen a sort of documentary and it inspired me. What inspired me really

[63] "They turned it down because it was too short. I mean a book is what it is, you cannot expand it… It was sort of revolutionary in a way" (id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 17.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library).
[64] *Ivi*.
[65] Owing to her friend Eva Tucker, "[h]er own favourite was *Light* […]. She felt if she were remembered for nothing else, that would do" (Eva Tucker, *Eva Figes Obituary*, in "The Guardian", 7.09.2012).
[66] This, for instance, is the scheme of the three narrative levels she sketched at some point in her working notebook for *Light*: "Three male characters: 1) the business man travelling from London to Paris in one day. […] Ends up by looking at a reproduction or original of Monet painting of water lilies. 2) Man flying to the moon (or planet) totally mechanised, alienated from earth (and possibly a figment of business man's imagination). […] 3) The obsessive painter who does not 'travel' but sits in his garden all day painting" (E. Figes, *Light*'s working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library).

was the generosity of Monet in the way he treated a woman who was not his wife and who hadn't got him any children. But the contemporary narrative simply didn't work[67].

The leitmotif is thus represented by Monet's obsession with the subtle changes of light he is able to register, trying to capture in a time span ranging from early morning to dusk (again, a tribute to the quintessentially Modernist time unit). Strictly speaking, however, Monet is not the protagonist of *Light*, since practically all the members of his family are portrayed and given equal importance throughout the novel. Indeed, *Light* presents a constantly shifting point of view, as the narrative baton passes with incredible fluidity from one character to the next, using a technique which reminds one of a camera constantly changing its angle. The whole narrative, once again, relies less on a specific plot than on an attentive recording of impressions caught by different consciousnesses, responding differently to the same stimuli in accordance with their own unique interiority or mood of the moment.

After *Light*, Figes composed a text which belongs to yet another genre she had not yet tackled before. As she confessed, *The Seven Ages* (1986) is "the nearest I got to sort of magic realism[68]", and represents an attempt to re-write history from the point of view of women, who have, historically, always been excluded from it: "I do feel, History, again, because of women, has to be re-angled. I called *The Seven Ages* the flip-side of History, because, you know, half the population is never mentioned in official History. […] The main reason is, or in that case was, to present a woman's perspective[69]". The novel is divided into seven chapters, each of which presents an autonomous narrative set in a different historical period – from ancestral times to contemporary age – through the eyes of one or more women, while men always remain in the background. The attempt is to create a sense of underlying continuity and of common destiny across centuries, which leads to the creation of bonds of solidarity between women, and a system of little but decisive forms of resistance against patriarchy, which has always kept them silent and chained to an ancillary position.

As to the influence of magic realism, Figes admits that, at the time of writing, she felt close to the German Nobel-Prize author Günter Grass, whom she had met in London in the Sixties and with whom she had a short love affair, which successively turned into a lifelong friendship[70]. In the early Sixties, Figes was actually one the first in the England who expressed admiration for Grass, at a time when his work had not yet been translated into English. Her native knowledge of German and her early job as a literary translator allowed her to read the seminal *The Tin Drum*, which she had heartfully appreciated, even suggesting to the publisher she was working with to buy the rights for

[67] Id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 17.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.
[68] Id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 28.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.
[69] M. Almagro and C. Sánchez-Palencia, *Eva Figes: An Interview*, p. 180.
[70] "She met Günter Grass when he was visiting London. Their short affair turned into a lasting friendship – one of his drawings, which hung in her sitting room, was a treasured possession. In May this year, she went to Germany with Orlando [her son] to visit Grass in Lübeck. Their affection for each other was undimmed" (E. Tucker, *Eva Figes Obituary*, in "The Guardian", 7.09.2012).

translation: "I remember coming to the office and saying 'I haven't even finished reading this, but you've got to buy it!', and Justlin Banes, who was working there then, said he couldn't understand some of the language, and of course within months he knew he made a huge mistake[71]". In an interview, she also revealed how Grass directly influenced the genesis of *The Seven Ages*, because he was staying at Figes's place when she began writing it (he, in turn, modelled one character of his novel *The Flounder* on her[72]).

In 1988 *Ghosts* was published, another novel of a highly poetic nature, not only at a stylistic level, but also in strictly structural terms. The central figure, as in *Winter Journey* – which can be considered its pair, only twenty years younger –, is again that of an old person, this time a woman, meandering through the streets of her city. The novel is divided into four chapters, each one dedicated to a different season and in its turn split into four sections, corresponding to different parts of the day. Again, there is no specific plotline, and apart from the neat organisation of the various sections, internally harmonised according to the cycle of the seasons, narrative progression solely relies on a fluid accumulation of sensorial impressions mixed with the old woman's memories, which are often triggered by objects or images she comes across through the day. The structure, as Figes revealed in an interview, is derived by one of her most favourite poems, T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

> Originally I wanted to be a poet, but by the time I graduated I realised it wasn't really going to happen. I got my scholarship by doing a paper on T. S. Eliot and I was particularly influenced by his work at the time, and I'm still in love particularly with the *Four Quartets*, which I think it's probably the best poetry written by an Anglophone person in the Twentieth Century. And I think with *Ghosts* I thought 'I could do it', that I took the four seasons and each season had four parts. So the form was like Eliot. Each one was in a way a separate episode, but using language in a rather particular way. It didn't make any sort of mark when it came out. I just wanted to do it, I had finally done something that was poetic, but that was prose, and in a way I had finally meshed the two things together. […] I have absolutely no regrets about it[73].

After *Ghosts*, Figes returned to feminist issues with her next novel, *The Tree of Knowledge* (1990), which is centred on the figure of one of John Milton's daughters, Deborah. The intent is similar to that which she had in mind when she wrote *B*, in which the aura of greatness associated with gifted artists contrasts with their lack of qualities as men and husbands. In *The Tree of Knowledge*, there is no high praise for Milton as an artist and one of the greatest minds of his time:

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[71] E. Figes, Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 7.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.

[72] "In fact [Grass] did influence a book of mine. […] He rang me on a Monday morning, he was clearly in some sort of state, I said 'Well I'm working a book, so if you're working too that's fine by me', my daughter had just moved out upstairs, so I moved him in. We'd meet for coffee in the kitchen for coffee break and I'd work down here. And he told me that this was going to be a history of cooking, 'cause he was very keen on cooking in those days. I thought that's an interesting idea, and I thought 'What do I choose?'. I thought about medicine, I think the reason was because I've had a lot of ill health in my life, so I eventually wrote a book which was the nearest I got to sort of magic realism. It was called *The Seven Ages*. It was certainly enjoyable to do, but just not my normal sort of thing" (*ivi*).

[73] Id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 17.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library.

the focus, rather, is placed on the shameful way in which he treated his daughters, exploiting them for his own work – waking them up, for instance, in the dead of night to read and dictate after he had lost his sight –, and generally keeping them in a condition of utter poverty and restrictions of various kinds. The female voices of the Milton family are given prominence through Deborah's words, whereas in life they were kept silent, chained to an ancillary role at the service of the great artist and intellectual. Here, these obliterated voices are all mingled in the creation of an alternative narrative of the author's life and persona: as was the case with *The Seven Ages*, *The Tree of Knowledge* represents another attempt at re-writing History from women's perspective, this time only on a more focussed and smaller scale.

Other two novels, *The Tenancy* and *The Knot*, came out respectively in 1993 and 1996, and they were followed by an unpublished novel (1998) provisionally entitled *Forgetting*[74]. After these, having almost reached the turn of the century and finding herself already in her seventies, Figes began thinking about the issue of her legacy, and started dedicating herself prominently to autobiographical writing. The one and only autobiographical text she had written up to that moment was *Little Eden* (1978), which dealt with one particular aspect of her childhood, that is, the short but joyful parenthesis of her evacuation in Cirencester. Her first novel *Lights* was the most pregnant of autobiographical elements among her works, consisting in memories ranging from her German childhood to the experience of her first childbirth. However, this text was never published, nor did Figes ever show any clear intention to do so.

Many of the images, themes and memories explored in *Lights*, however, were re-worked and expanded in the much later *Living with Loss*, a book she completed around the year 2000, and which possibly constitutes the most intense, moving, beautiful and exhaustive piece of autobiographical writing Figes ever wrote. This text too, however, remained unpublished, possibly because of publishers' lack of interest, at a moment in which whatever fame Figes had ever enjoyed was beginning to dwindle. It is possible, however, that she decided not to publish it on the grounds of its intense and direct quality, and the lack of filters by which she deals with events of her past life, expressing rather harsh judgements on some members of her family.

The impression, in any case, is that the writing of *Living with Loss* had a most beneficial therapeutical impact on her as a person, allowing her to break the ice with certain unresolved issues of her individual past, and return to themes such as the Holocaust and the loss of part of her family in her successive autobiographical texts. Unlike the previous ones, these were published as *Tales of*

[74] An indirect assessment of this novel can be appreciated in one letter by the novelist and Eva's friend John Berger, in which he praises the manuscript saying "it's beautiful because it is marvelously wrought, and because it's exemplary in its nobility. […] It is also moving". In the same letter, Berger also expresses his sympathy to Figes on the fact that "the book has had trouble finding a publisher" (John Berger, Letter to E. Figes, 11.03.1998, Eva Figes Archive, British Library).

Innocence and of Experience (2004) and *Journey to Nowhere* (2008). The first deals with the experience of becoming a grandmother, and a sense of her life coming to a full circle after the early loss of her grandparents. The second revolves instead on the story of Edith, a Jewish maid who used to work at Figes's parents' house in Berlin and who was left behind during their escape to England in 1939. Her sudden and unexpected re-appearance, years after the war had ended, prompted the still adolescent Eva to ask her all sort of questions about her experiences in the period in-between, after which Edith narrated, little by little, her own experiences in the newborn state of Israel. *Journey to Nowhere*, a book completed after much research and reconstruction of her own and of Edith's past, is thus constructed as a sort of summary of Figes's family history at the time of their migration from Nazi Germany to England, woven with the relation of Edith's experience in Israel and the author's socio-political comments on the creation of the Jewish State.

Looking back on her career towards the end of her life, Figes expressed feelings of loneliness and a certain frustration, the same sensation of being a survivor she had experienced after her escape from Germany as a child, and which was enhanced by the dissolution of the group of experimental writers from which she had derived such a powerful sense of common purpose:

> I suppose I do feel alone, because when I was young and setting out there was this small group of us who were all writing differently and had the same attitude about the status quo of literature, our literary values were the same. […] I now feel slightly as a sort of dinosaur, because I always thought that one of the good things about my situation is I'm ahead of my time, therefore when I get older I will come into my time, but that hasn't quite happened because of all these postmodernists who are playing all these tricks and doing all these things, so anything I can do is not very unusual and so you don't actually have to concentrate on what I'm saying which might be worth listening to. And unfortunately one tends to get increasingly neglected, and there's not very much I can do about that, except possibly die a dramatic death in which case I would have an immediate revival[75].

Figes died an undramatic death on 28th August 2012, at the age of 80. The longest living of the group of experimental writers of the Sixties, she has been the one to carry the torch on through the following decades, after the others had either disappeared or stopped writing – as Alan Burns –, in order to undertake different careers. The isolation of the survivor she had felt for all her life was furthermore exacerbated by her sensation of being stranded between an age where the literature she proposed was considered too daring or obscure, and another, more contemporary one, in which that kind of experimentations had already come to be regarded as something belonging to the past.

The revival which Johnson and Quin are now beginning to enjoy, however, can certainly be a key also to the re-evaluation of Eva Figes, a most interesting author whose ceaseless innovations and experiments with form, structure, and style provide a meaningful bridge linking the Modernism of the first half of the century and Postmodernists' "tricks" of more recent times. Moreover, what makes

[75] M. Almagro and C. Sánchez-Palencia, *Eva Figes: An Interview*, p. 182.

her writing even more meaningful and worth investigating in our time is the fact that, in her fictional as well as critical production, Figes has also given voice to an entire area of female experience which had been almost neglected until then, also casting new light on patriarchal dynamics which are largely still at force in our society.

4.1

Dealing with Destiny:
Forms of Resilience and Resignation in Figes's Early Writing

It is rather difficult to find a clear *trait d'union* in such a diversified and prolific production as that of Eva Figes. One of her pivotal characteristics as a writer, indeed, is her inveterate eclecticism, her willingness to find ever new themes and subject matters to write about, tailoring suitable forms to match each and every one of them. Drawing sometimes on her biographical experiences and inventing at some others, Figes writes diversly about failed marriages, the decay of old age, the Holocaust, amnesia, illness, cross-generational frictions and continuities, childbirth and the experience of being a woman, assuming on herself the voice and point of view of both men and women, of the old and the young, of common characters and illustrious figures such as Monet.

There is, however, one founding aspect which recurs in many of her works and which can possibly be elevated to a transversal characteristic in her literature: the theme of resilience, or the stoic resistance to destiny. It is not after all surprising that an individual with such a troublesome and traumatic life as Figes would not somehow feel the need to transfer into her writing that willingness to oppose the adversities of life, deploying any means at her disposal to counter the apparently unavoidable action of destiny, in many possible forms and spheres of life.

Figes's characters often find themselves resisting or rebelling, with varying degrees of courage and determination, against forces above or beyond them which keep them chained to a condition of suffering. These forces can be of different kinds, depending on the focus of a given text: sometimes, it can be the simple though inexorable passing of time, associated with the physical and mental decay brought by old age, or some illness inflicted on the individual; sometimes it is a more artificial kind of destiny, as that clothed in the garments of History, which is nothing more than the addition of mankind's actions and decisions, yet involving forces and dynamics amply transcending the will of the individual and against which little can be done; other times, it is the biological destiny of being born into the body of a woman which afflicts Figes's protagonists, while the overarching millenary power of Patriarchy is the force to resist or rebel against.

A character's reaction can be at times determined and courageous, at others much subtler, to such a degree that it may assume the form of resignation or even passivity. Even in those cases in which Figes's characters appear to be more stranded and at the mercy of the forces of destiny, history,

society, or simply circumstances, however, the fact that they are still there to narrate their own experience represents in itself a little though far from negligible act of resilience, which tells much of the author's willingness to inspire forms of resistance in the reader.

This chapter will analyse how these acts of resistance are portrayed in Figes's early writing of the Sixties and Seventies, taking into consideration in particular the themes of old age and bodily decay, History and Patriarchy, mainly in novels such as *Winter Journey*, *Konek Landing* and *Nelly's Version*, with inevitable allusions also to other notable works of her extensive production.

I. Winter journeys: resisting the erosion of time

Rather surprisingly, the themes of old age and of bodily decay always fascinated Figes from a very young age. Certainly the many experiences of illnesses, hospitals, doctors and treatments the author had, especially during her youth, played an important part towards the formation of this interest[1]. Another biographical aspect which probably made her over-sensitive about these aspects was the excessive protection which her mother reserved to her as a child. In one of her memoirs, she reports a curious anecdote about Mrs. Unger, revealing how she used to shut her and her brother up in the nursery so as to shield them from any possible disease. In this way, however, she created an atmosphere of terror and obsessive carefulness, also triggering, at least in her daughter, some inevitable psycho-somatic mechanisms, activated so as to compensate the almost total lack of human contact between mother and daughter:

> Shut up in the nursery suite, I would hear her firm footsteps going the length of the corridor, her white outline briefly visible through the rippled glass panel in the door. If only she would enter. But she almost never did, or so it seemed to me, and if she did it was only for a moment, wearing a white overall which afterwards came to symbolise her fear of touching, of contagion, as if my welfare depended on living in a germ-free zone. It was only my father who did the hugging and kissing. My early symptoms of eczema fit neatly into the theory which links this ailment with over-protection in early childhood. She was in her element when an infantile illness struck[2].

These over-sensitivity towards illnesses and hypochondria[3], induced by her life experiences and upbringing, were thus transferred to the character of Janus in *Winter Journey*, a novel Figes wrote

[1] It is known, for example, that Figes suffered from a severe eczema during her first years at Queen Mary College, which occasionally afflicted her for days on end and forced her to rush in and out of hospitals or analysts' rooms (at the time, eczema was thought to be a psycho-somatic disease).

[2] E. Figes, *Living with Loss*, p. 40.

[3] Questioned about her mother's peculiar interest with the theme of aging at such a young age, her son Orlando has revealed: "Well, my mother was a hypochondriac, so if you asked her 'How are you?' you had to be prepared to listen for twenty minutes before you could speak again. […] I mean my mum was a depressive, there's no doubt about it, she

when she had barely entered her thirties. A man in the winter of his life, Janus appears to struggle even in his simplest daily gestures with the symptoms of his advancing age, which involve bodily disfunctions, difficulty to move, pains of various kind, a strange sensation of something dripping in his head, faulty or distorted perceptions, imperfect comprehension of other people's speeches, and a general sensation of falling behind with respect to a world which revolves faster and faster all around him. His personal decay, strictly of a biological nature, is paralleled by the physical decay of the building he lives in, which appears to be crumbling to pieces in unison with its lodger. This general sense of downfall, moreover, is further enhanced by an emphasis on aspects of degradation he detects in his daily urban itineraries, while the fractures in his body and in the architecture around him are also mirrored in the psychic wounds left in him as a consequence of his past in the army. Amid all this, Janus must get up anyway and face the umpteenth day of his life, moving through all this general disintegration and looking for ways to resist, to look onward in spite of the overarching weight of all the things that lie behind him, dragging the ballast of his failing body and of his troublesome past along with himself.

The first, very tangible obstacle Janus has to deal with is his own body, a machine frayed by the erosion of too many years. In the opening chapter of the novel, while he is lying almost immobile in his bed, struggling with insomnia at four in the morning, one of his first thoughts is addressed precisely to the negative effect he feels time has had, and is still having, on him: "You get nothing back. Which is why I don't sleep. Skin stays slack, nothing renews. And yet the clock goes on ticking. What shall I do?[4]". From this first consideration, it is already apparent that time is envisaged as one of the sworn enemies he has to fight, and against which there can be no possibility of winning. As the narrative drags itself on, and Janus with it, all his physical problems begin progressively to emerge, showing the reader how even the simplest and most banal daily actions have become for him a fatiguing travail, repeating itself ever more painfully every day.

The simple gesture of getting up from his bed, for example, assumes in his account the overtones of a universal struggle against the weight of the entire planet: "Bend knees encrusted with cold, old cold turned to rust, lift shoulders against the pull of the old earth turning, the whole of the heavy earth is against it[5]". Walking up the stairs of the place he lives in is another torture, a toil which gets more and more difficult every day. The only occasion in which he appears to do so effortlessly, by no chance, is in his dreams – "I dreamt, that was it. […] Just went up the stairs as usual, except no, not as usual, quicker, not stopping for breath[6]". Otherwise, his slow and pathetic ascent evokes

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was a depressive, so she was quite pessimistic… Not self-pity, but she was... […] She wasn't particularly obsessed with aging, not at all. But she was a hypochondriac, yes, but she wasn't in the slightest afraid of death or her own mortality or anything like that, not at all" (O. Figes, Interview with D. Corradi, London, 28.09.2021).

[4] E. Figes, *Winter Journey* (1967), Panther, London 1969, p. 8.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

mixed feelings of preoccupation and disgust in his neighbours, who listen to him dragging himself up the stairs every day:

> Janus comes. She can hear his slow shuffle and then the stairs being taken. One, pause two three, pause five six seven eight pause one of these days he will fall nine then he'll be weeks in plaster and probably never heal at all. Sick people turn me over, and old bones needing help, spending hours in the lavatory and you wonder whether they're still alive in there or if they've had a stroke[7].

Another major problem he has regards his hearing: it is made evident, since the very beginning, that Janus has to recur to a hearing aid to perceive sounds properly, and his neighbours even suspect that he turns it off on purpose whenever he wants to shut himself off from the surrounding world and have an excuse not to interact with anyone: "he doesn't hear a thing you say, simply takes no notice. He just turns his aid off, I'm sure of it, on purpose, as though that's why the government gave it to him. Might not exist[8]".

Figes's notebooks show that she paid great attention to constructing the clinic situation of her protagonist down to the minutest detail, researching all the possible physical afflictions that might torment an old veteran like Janus, with a past in the army[9]. All these obsessive details are concentrated especially in one spiteful paragraph, in which the cold and detached voice of the external narrator enumerates some of Janus's ailments in the form of a medical bulletin:

> While Mrs. Griffin is peeling her potatoes and her husband is trimming hair the synovial fluid in Janus Stobb's joint cavities is still on the increase, whilst the synovial membrane is swelling and thickening. One of the very serious characteristics of the granulation tissue within the joint is its characteristic development as a thin coating which destroys the smooth surface so that it no longer functions properly. […] Janus's breakfast is only slowly being broken up. There are signs of abnormal tissue in the stomach wall which will become more evident soon, long before his joint surfaces are deeply pitted and furrowed[10].

On the same occasion, another important aspect emerges regarding the theme of physical degradation: as the novel progresses, it becomes indeed more and more apparent that the individual disintegration afflicting Janus is paralleled by a similar one afflicting objects, people, inter-personal relationships, and practically every element which he meets in his meanderings through the day. It is important to highlight that this sense of general decay is not simply a result of Janus's partial point of view, or of his alleged projection of his own predicaments onto the surrounding world: in fact, it is often presented and pointed at by the objective voice of the third-person narrator. In this way, the protagonist appears as just one of the innumerable victims of a corruption which is embedded in

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[7] *Ibid*., p. 32.
[8] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[9] For instance, she annotated in his working notebook details about rheumatoid arthritis, hemiplegia, coronary heart disease, aphasia and cerebral arteriosclerosis (id., *Winter Journey*, Notebook 1, Eva Figes Archive, British Library).
[10] *Ibid*., p. 40.

existence itself, and which bites equally into every single living creature or even inanimate object participating in the everyday dealings of human beings.

As soon as the scope of the narrative lens is extended as widely as to include the situation of other characters, the same dramatic disintegration afflicting Janus is seen to affect everyone else as well with all its terrible and inexorable action:

> Mrs. Griffin's skin scales into the muddy potato water […]. One of her discs, though she does not know it yet, is slipping. […] Nan's period are getting shorter: her womb is slipping and a hysterectomy is indicated. The same doctor has suggested that Dan should have his tonsils out soon. Nan has once saw a television programme where a child bled to death after it and she is afraid[11].

In this passage, the erosion of time on the human body is not simply a matter of old age, for even characters younger than Janus, like his daughter Nan or even his grandson Dan, are not exempt from it. Janus can recognise a reflection of his own condition whenever he has a brief exchange with some acquaintance of his same age. On these occasions, the conversation becomes an endless enumeration of complaints which pile up upon one another, sustained by both participants in the hope of establishing bonds of solidarity based on their shared suffering, and also springing out of a common need to vent their individual frustrations on someone who can hopefully understand:

> 'Morning Tom.'
> 'Morning Janus.'
> 'Cold wind.'
> 'Reckon it'll snow.' […]
> 'I've always dreaded the winter.'
> 'Nothing to look forward to.'
> 'Nothing to do.'
> 'Can hardly move these days.'
> 'It's the frost gets into your joints […].'
> 'Wind coming in through the cracks.'
> 'Drains blocked up.'
> 'Flush won't work'. […]
> 'Nothing functions any more.'
> End of conversation[12].

By the end of Janus's day, the accumulation of signs of a world crumbling to pieces all around him has made him weary and conscious that the end is omnipresent, and manifested in all the people he encounters. The enemy is everywhere and closing in on him, wearing a thousand different masks which constantly remind him of his condition. Deep inside, Janus is aware that this destiny of corruption is inevitable, but he continues nonetheless to journey on, absurdly though resiliently

[11] *Ivi*.
[12] *Ibid*., pp. 43-44.

defying his own end with his weary stubborn movement, which can obviously never ultimately save him from death:

> They took aunt Esther's left breast off, then her right, they kept paring bits off till there was nothing left to cut and her face was a grey hollow round two eyes. Uncle Simon's side should have been cut away if it could have been cut away, a dead weight anchoring him down, but he wept like a baby and said the pain on his broken side was killing him, and so it eventually did, eight months later. Cousin Mora took five years, three of them in the end bed of the hospital ward where they sprayed deodorant round her because the smell of her open bowels in the unhealed abdomen used to upset the other patients. […] Grandmother Stobbs lived to be ninety-two, sitting in the armchair by the kitchen stove, snapping sticks for kindling. And then she got up to pick up the poker and broke her leg, by that time dry and brittle as last year's kindling, stiff with sitting around so long. You've got to keep moving, make the circulation run, muscles work, or you're done for[13].

As the narration progresses, Janus's condition is thus progressively transferred to the whole world around him, assuming at times the semblance of an unescapable universal predicament. The "Mid Morning" chapter – a sort of re-working of Eliot's incipit in *The Waste Land* – opens for instance with a bitter consideration on the nature of January, which becomes, in the narrator's words, the personification of senility itself:

> January is a static month, a month of palpably false beginnings. Dark mornings draw into the day, night edges into the afternoon, leaving a small puddle of grey daylight that comforts nobody, fools nobody. The new year has been born old, granite-faced, cold in extremities. The shops are full of last year's soiled goods being sold off cheap. The tawdry frills of Christmas go back in the cupboard for next year, god helps us. God helps nobody, that much is obvious. The old get older and the young get older too[14].

A powerful metaphor of the protagonist's crumbling to pieces, as has been already mentioned, is provided by the building he lives in, an old edifice which presents evident signs of deterioration and numerous structural problems which nobody has the time nor the willingness to attend to. Similarly to what happens to Janus as an old person, judged as useless and discarded by the society he lives in, one has the impression that the building he occupies has been judged to be beyond repair, and that everybody is simply waiting for the lodgers to abandon it in order to bring it down and build something new, more in tune with modern times.

When Janus goes back home at night, he notices the increasing signs of degradation of the staircase, the walls, the roof and all the other evidence of structural failure in the building. His personal condition and consideration on his failing body are curiously mixed with observation of the crumbling house, which seems to unite the two elements in a common and relentless coming to pieces:

> There's no doubt about it now, the structure's getting flimsier. Perhaps one day I shall open the door and there will be only night city sky, rose smoke round the bottom rim, like a stage

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

> backdrop, smooth, uninterrupted, suggesting inner curvature, the skull of sleep. […] You come home and the shell gets flimsier, more fragile and useless[15].

In an earlier passage, thoughts about the house's disintegration are equally mingled with considerations about his own condition, and further extended to include the incipient and inevitable senility of his own daughter. In the spiral of general decay which is thus suggested, the destiny of corruption to which human bodies are bound is inextricably paralleled by the buildings they live in, as if the two elements were extensions of one another, all subject to the same erosion of time:

> Who is she to know corruption, destruction, walls sagging in under the strain, light coming in where it ought not to, dust chocking the air, gutters leaking. She doesn't notice yet but she will, and by then she'll be talking to dirty walls, listening to gutters leaking, smelling the outworn sewer, seeing the inside of her own skull[16].

The same feeling of impending disintegration that Janus feels on himself is transmuted into a sensation that his home might either progressively go to pieces or be purposely brought down by estate developers, who come to symbolise new generations now occupying his once active place in society, discarding old and useless relics of the past like himself. As he locks the door behind him, when he goes out for his daily errands, his home has become so fragile to his own conception that he is even afraid the building will no longer be there when he comes back, which makes him reluctant to leave: "Lock the door as a sign of possession, and put the key in my pocket. […] I'll go, and if they start pulling the place down while I'm gone it's no great matter either. Only. Only nothing, no turning back[17]". These anxieties, moreover, are reflected and given substance to in his initial nightmare, in which his home appears at its final projected stage of decay, providing the image of a not-so-distant future Janus is unconsciously preparing himself for:

> And then suddenly, round the bend of the landing: sky. Ordinary blank sky. And the doors had gone too, frames looking into rooms open to the sky. And the silence. Nobody swinging a sledgehammer on the skyline, nobody walking past with a door balanced saying excuse me. Nobody to explain. Somebody should have said. Silence coming in at me. They've no right. Have to notify you. And her, what happened to her, she must have known, it was her house. But the things belonged to me. Had her eye on them for a long time[18].

Mrs. Griffin, who is also Janus's landlady, seems often to conspire against him[19]: she abandons herself to expressions of disgust and contempt whenever she runs into him, or when she hears him miserably dragging himself up the stairs, and she also speculates about evicting him and

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 97.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[19] Thinking about Mrs. Griffin and her husband, Janus himself openly observes, at one point, that "[t]hose two are in league against me" (*ibid.*, p. 17).

renting the room he occupies for twice the price he currently pays[20]. All these aspects seem to point to her as just another exponent of those new generations who capitalise on people like Janus, treating them as beasts to be exploited, and eliminated as soon as the effort to keep them alive surpasses the profit. The fact, however, that she lives in the same ruining building as Janus, and that, despite being younger than him, she is long past her prime too, binds her to the same destiny which awaits the protagonist of *Winter Journey*. If Janus is journeying through winter, Mrs. Griffin is living the autumn of her life, and the preoccupations that haunt Janus are clearly beginning to afflict her as well.

This is especially detectable in one particular scene in which Mrs. Griffin is scrubbing her doorstep, which she does many times every week in the desperate attempt to keep it clean. On this occasion, it appears clear that her attempts to keep the dirt at bay functions as a metaphor, mirroring the resistance she daily opposes to the degradation that is biting into everything in her district. Her gesture of scrubbing "the same slab of concrete three times a week for the past twenty-three years[21]" assumes thus an air of tragicomic Sisyphus-like futility, being an absurd and clearly insufficient measure to counter a power that is above her, and against which she will eventually have to succumb. The narrator highlights indeed the uselessness of Mrs. Griffin's efforts by remarking that:

> [t]he area is not conducive to maintaining white white instead of grey, grey grey instead of blackening, curtains free of smut, to say nothing of eyes and nostrils […]. The din of traffic is constant, articulated lorries, motor-bikes, coach-loads bound for the airport, everything heavy and noisy and calculated to crack old structures and rock cracked structures to their hollow foundations[22].

In addition to this, while she indulges in her small-scale speculations about Janus's flat, she too risks being absorbed in and annihilated by the great changes that are affecting the district. Whether she realises it or not, her roots are also about to be shaken, and her own house to crumble under her own feet. The passing of time is affecting the foundations of her life as well. She will also be left behind and discarded by society in the near future, as the new generations are taking over and implementing their own plans and vision of the world:

> The place has changed since Mrs. Griffin took up residence at number twenty-four. […] There are plans, too, to build a fly-over which would mean knocking down number twenty-four and the rest of the street. […] Ten years ago there was a spired church in a little island of green […]. Ask Mrs. Griffin, she watched the bishop deconsecrating it, and the process has never

[20] "Should have tied his notice to quit on to Nora Stobb's wreath […]. Such a nice gesture, I always think, saying it with flowers, and it saves the embarrassment of saying anything direct" (*ibid*., p. 15). "Get rid of him, in so many words. […] I could let those rooms for double the money. It doesn't pay in repairs. […] Why won't he die, he might have the common decency to do that much, help me to make him die. […] Be a blessed release really, especially for us. […] We could get three ten for that room, furnished, I know it's his furniture but for all the use he makes of it he, it might just as well not be there" (*ibid*,, pp. 17-18). The possibility of eviction works in the novel as another tangible metaphor for Janus's condition of imminent departure from life: by no chance, among the possible titles for the book Figes had thought at some point about *Notice to Quit* (id., *Winter Journey* working papers, Notebook 2, Eva Figes Archive, British Library):
[21] Id., *Winter Journey*, p. 30.
[22] *Ivi*.

> really stopped. A row of three houses, already amputated eight years back, was evacuated in the summer and last week the demolition men set to work[23].

A powerful symbol of the new supplanting the old, a threatening presence in the urban world in which Janus and the other characters move, is a huge tower that has been recently built in the centre of London, which is apparently visible from every corner and window of the district. The first time this tower is mentioned, it is presented in grotesque terms as a huge dark shadow, a supernatural evil entity over the whole city, threatening to suffocate Janus's living space: "The new tower grows a great black shadow now, eating space. It takes my window light, my sky. Who's to stop them filling it all up, seeing they think they've the right and no one tells them any different[24]". In his Manichean vision of war veteran, Janus sees the tower as the tangible manifestation of a will irremediably antagonistic to his own, the expression of a faceless enemy who is planning to sweep away people like him, leftovers of a past which cannot find any place in society. In a city which is still dealing with the visible devastations left by the recent war, the actions of property speculators represent another kind of parallel devastation, bearing consequences which are as serious as the damages of a world-scale military conflict. On the contrary, whereas Janus can envisage a hope of rebirth after the war, he sees no future for him when he considers the changes his city is undergoing under the actions of these people: "The bombsite blossoms, flourishes, birds nest in niches. Only the tower has no niches, smooth as glass, shining blind, reflecting the outside out. impervious it is, embracing space, too much, stunting our boxes, out-houses, empty chimney-pots[25]".

The tower is also a sign of a different attitude to the world which is being espoused by the new generations: in the post-war London of the Sixties, where the young seem to have taken the lead in so many different spheres of life, an atmosphere of seeming resentment towards everything old is spreading, and all signs reminding of a past world tend to be wiped away and substituted instead of being treasured and cherished. The value of tradition is being progressively lost, and an apparent obsession with the new is bringing people to cut any point of contact with the past in too quick and acritical a way, which leaves people like Janus stranded and alone, facing the world with a sense of mounting hostility:

> The old city is crowded out, crumbling, walls overlapping, no room for anyone or anything, creaks appear and don't get mended. Time was they were smart, nicely built, now empty houses cave in on themselves and turn to dust. What happened to the care? No one left over to. Throw everything out and start again, that's their motto. They. Who are they, anyway, how did they all get here, what right have they?[26].

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.
[24] *Ibid.*, 22-23.
[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.
[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

For people like Janus, the tower symbolises so-called new values which appear irreconcilable with the attitude and worldview of past generations, a triumph of cold, artificial modernity which defies nature and has nothing to do with it, as if belonging to a different, devilish dimension, threatening now to kill any sign of life as we know it:

> The tower swung over Alma Gardens like a solidified concentrate of sky, grey, gleaming, air-coloured. It was finished now but no one window gave a sign of life. Windows and walls were one smooth surface, throwing back reflections of clouds; rain ran off it, wind buffeted round it, light bounced. […] Roses do surprisingly well in Alma Gardens, considering the soil has been cut off at the roots for so long that it now consists almost entirely of brick dust, soot, ash, dried blood and decomposed or partially decomposed litter, a thin topsoil on pipes and wires and ancient sewer systems[27].

Being the personification of the ascending youth, moreover, the tower speaks differently to the various characters, according to the stage of life they find themselves in and to their degree of vicinity, or extraneity, to a modern vision of the world. This is perfectly exemplified by the countenance of the tower as it is seen from different windows. For Janus, for instance, the tower looms too close, an impending menace which exerts its dark aura whenever he looks out on a city he can now barely recognise: "The sooty brick backs of other houses are very near […]. Janus looks at them but is careful to avoid looking at the tower beyond. Its proportions lack all proportion, and the sight of it brings giddiness, so that he is in danger of falling into the little area below[28]". For Janus's daughter, already in her middle-age but still more in touch than her father with the present, the tower appears in a much more benign light: "Her window has the new tower too, but from this angle it is small, distant, of no real account, away over the solid old roofs like an ancient cliff. Rock of ages, ages and ages[29]". Its distant presence, however, can be still seen to act as a disquieting reminder that senility is rapidly closing in for her too, and will catch her sooner than she realises.

The world around Janus is revolving much too fast for his rhythms, which are certainly slowed-down by age, but which are also an expression of a way of living that once cherished slowness and which has now been abandoned in favour of a frenzied kind of progress. At several junctures, the sensation is that Janus is simply falling behind, unable to follow the pace of reality, while the distance he hopes to maintain from his approaching destiny is getting relentlessly shorter and shorter every day. In some passages, his slowness has the air of a genuine alienation from reality, as Janus tends to spend more and more time with his own thoughts and his connection with the external world becomes thinner and thinner. At one point, as he is having a conversation with her daughter, he experiences two moments of puzzlement and intellectual short-circuit which reminds one of some passages of

[27] *Ibid*., p. 83.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 34.
[29] *Ibid*., p. 72.

Beckett's *Watt*[30]: "'Give it to me'. Janus tried to focus on the moment. He did not know what she meant: perhaps some previous remark had got lost in the fog, or he had forgotten something, more than just something. You could never quite tell[31]". Slightly later, this circumstantial conundrum is translated and pondered in the interiority of his mind, which appears to follow its own track, completely divergent from the one trodden by the rest of the world:

> 'Are you out of your mind?'
> Was he out of his mind? Janus tried to consider the question. From the way she was looking at him, something wasn't connecting, certainly. Perhaps one could say that she was out his mind, which was why she was looking at him like that, but as for my mind, I know where I am there, one thing leads to, there's a thread like a railway track which leads on and on and it all follows, only she hasn't followed[32].

On other occasions, his lagging behind is imputable to the too-rapid changes of the surrounding world, which is fast outpacing his capability and elasticity to re-adapt to: "People and streets shifting, walls coming down in one sheet under the iron ball, you can never learn it all, you turn a corner and everything's changed, gone, once it took me three hours to get back, spent most of what I had on fares going in the wrong direction[33]". At some point, Figes inserts a floating paragraph very much in her signature fragmentary style, in which the condition of her protagonist is perfectly epitomised: "The lights had changed from green to red again. The flood of traffic moved forward, leaving Janus stranded on the island in the middle[34]". This line, abandoned on the surface of the page, detached from the rest of the narration and interposed between two unconnected paragraphs, appears as the mirror image of Janus, stuck on the platform in the midst of a trafficked road, left uncomprehending in a world which has developed too fast and gone too far beyond him, and which does not seem to take the slightest care of the ones who happen to fall behind.

Another major consequence of Janus's senility and of his feeble connection with the present is his increasing spiritual distance from the younger members of his family. Apart from the above-mentioned little failures of communication with his daughter, and the contempt she sometimes shows towards the old father, this unbridgeable generational distance can be detected especially in relation to Janus's grandson, Dan. A first sign of this distance is provided by Janus's evident difficulty in keeping the pace of his grandson, when they go out together for a stroll: Dan's constant evasions from

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[30] I am referring here especially to such episode as the that of the piano tuners: "The incident of the Galls […] seemed rather to belong to some story heard long before, an instant in the life of another, ill told, ill heard, and more than half forgotten. […] What distressed Watt […] was not so much that he did not know what had happened […], as that nothing had happened, that a thing that was nothing had happened, with the utmost formal distinctness, and that it continued to happen, in his mind, he supposed, though he did not know exactly what that meant" (S. Beckett, *Watt* [1953], Faber and Faber, London 2009, pp. 61-63).

[31] E. Figes, *Winter Journey*, p. 64.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

the grasp of his grandad, like a fish slipping from the fisherman's fingers, is a clear symbol of Janus's inability to keep the pace of the younger generations, to whom the present and the future belong.

A powerful and more tangible symbol of this inter-generational lack of communication is provided by a stone which Janus found many decades before during his service in the army, and which he has been keeping in his pocket throughout all the years. At some point, this stone catches Dan's attention, and Janus appears more than eager to share with his grandson at least part of the significance that this token of the past bears for him. The stone has for Janus a crucial meaning in more than one respect, which makes of it an object of inestimable spiritual value for him.

First, the stone is an object which has won, as it were, the universal battle against time: it has resisted time's erosion stoically, it still bears the traces of its passage but has remained always true to itself, unlike the corruptible body of the old man, now changed beyond recognition. As Janus comments: "That's the thing about stone, it lasts forever, not like skin and bone. And then the shape, have you noticed the shape, ice and water did that, thousands of years[35]". Secondly, Janus feels some sort of personal attachment to it, for the constant presence of the stone in his pocket has the ability to bring him back to the person he once was, to a moment in time and a photograph of his own identity which will never fade in his memory, while all the rest is slipping through his fingers like sand: "Janus considered, looking at the stone between the two small hands. I've had that stone a long time, before you were born. Picked it up and took it with me as a proof, the feel of it is proof that. The earth, rock of ages, distant places, no man trod built dug. Moraine they call it. The feel of it in pocket[36]". Thirdly, the stone symbolises the passage of time, it contains a myriad of stories and treasures in its incorruptible body all the meanings of distant times and past eras, the core of history itself, to be passed on to future generations, so that they will not commit the same mistakes over and over again.

The stone is the living proof of something that extends much further back in time than the mere existence of one single human being, although its universal value is reflected in the very individual importance that the stone as an object has assumed for Janus, as an indelible reminder of his own personal life history. The fact that Janus has carried the stone for all these years, moreover, is a sign of his almost referential respect towards the past, of his disposition to treasure and honour that past, and shows a profound care for an object carrying invaluable memories. Janus's dedication to the stone reflects how he would expect the rest of the world to behave towards the older generation. This is what he tries to convey to his grandson Dan in handing the stone to him: "With stars you look into the past, did you know that? […] One day you'll understand just how important it is, a link, like

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

that stone. Proof that the past existed, a continuing line. When I look at you. Into the future, if not very far[37]".

In giving the stone to Dan, Janus performs a crucial gesture of reconciliation towards the younger generation, a last meaningful attempt to establish a solid connection with those who will continue after him, to pass on to them the lessons painfully learned in a lifetime of suffering and experiencing. This all-important rite of passage, however, is portrayed in the novel in a strangely anticlimactic way. In fact, Janus hands the stone to Dan almost casually[38], trying, on the one hand, to convey the importance and the symbolical value of the object with almost epic words, while giving the impression, on the other, that he is simply dispensing himself with a burden he no longer wishes to carry, and which he is more than eager now to entrust to someone else.

Dan, however, does not appear ready or disposed to appreciate Janus's life lessons, and shows himself to be thoroughly disconnected with the system of values the grandfather is trying to pass on to him. The impression, once again, is that what Janus has to say cannot in the least interest or sound even vaguely meaningful to a young exponent of the world which is to come: it is as if all his experiences had been in vain, and after everything he has suffered he has nothing to teach to a little man who is going to face a similar life of painful exploration, or at least he has no idea how to transmit this knowledge to him. Dan, for his part, shows evident signs of weariness before Janus's attempt to narrate his wartime past. His attitude is superficial, suggesting he only looks for pure entertainment in listening to stories, thus overlooking the deepest meanings which Janus is unsuccessfully trying to convey: "That's not a proper story. I know proper stories. […] There were once three cowboys, Ham, Shem and another whose name I forget, and they went out to look for gold, north, south and west. […] I can't remember the rest. Something about an Indian squire[39]".

Being just a child, Dan looks for a cheap sensationalism which Janus is not prepared nor willing to provide. Janus's audience is possibly the wrong one for the story he has to tell, but what is crucial here is that his methods appear to be out of touch with the new generation, which exacerbates an already difficult communication, leaving him all the more isolated and meaningless in the present world. The bitter irony of the scene, eventually, lies in the fact that not only does Dan demonstrate that he has not in the least understood the meaning of his grandfather's lesson, but he also completely vilifies his inestimable gift by eagerly swapping it for a simple toy of no intrinsic value as soon as he has the chance:

> Dan turned his head and after a moment's hesitation came running, his eyes laughing.
> 'Look what I've got'.

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[37] *Ibid*., pp. 86-87.
[38] "Dan took the stone and turned it over slowly, appraising surface texture, shape and weight. You take it, said Janus with his eyes and fingers, put it away" (*ibid*, p. 70).
[39] *Ibid*., p. 88.

> He showed Janus a small metal car, the red paint chipped. A white, rigid little man sat at the steering-wheel. […]
> 'You can't take that from him, give it back'.
> 'It's all right, we did a swop'.
> 'What did you give him then?'
> 'Only that old stone'[40].

Janus's grandson, moreover, is only the last of the relatives with whom he has failed to create any sort of enduring connection. His daughter feels contempt for him – "Thinks I'm a dirty old man, no, doesn't think, says it, all over her face[41]" –, while his son Edward has eloped to Australia and writes him more and more rarely – owing to Janus's late wife, he has done so only to escape from his father's grasp[42]. Janus's tragedy also lies in the fact that he has not managed to communicate anything substantial about himself to any member of his family, nor to leave them with lesson to carry on into the future. Any attempt at establishing lines of continuation with his dear ones, who might allow his memory to continue beyond his death, has miserably failed.

The only possible solution that Janus has for his predicaments, the only form of active resistance he can oppose to the disastrous erosion of time, both physical and spiritual, is movement. "Keep moving" is the keyword of his whole life, the phrase he repeats to himself constantly and which sets the rhythm of his incessant wandering. Movement is for him a countermeasure to the physical degradation brought about by immobility, a means to escape from the grasp of time and from the thousand faces of the alleged enemy, to give himself the illusion he is still active and functioning, and that he still has a purpose in this world.

Whenever he thinks about people who have capitulated to the erosion of old age, or sees them around him, he immediately reminds himself of the importance of movement to elude or at least postpone the inevitable destiny:

> Keep moving, have to keep moving, once you stop there's no hope left, they'll shut the white door on you, take away your things and lock them in matron's room, strip the last few items, a clean body in a clean bed, nail down the lid […]. You've got to keep moving, make the circulation run, muscles work, or you're done for[43].

In his absurd logic, Janus tries to impart to his own body the order to keep going on in spite of all the impediments he obviously has to face even in the most banal gestures, in the stubborn belief that sheer action will extend his life indefinitely: "If you could keep moving for ever you would keep alive for ever, it stands to reason[44]".

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[40] *Ibid.*, p. 91.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[42] "You drove him, she said, you drove him as far as he could go, five thousand miles to the other end. It was you, she said, a fine thing when a boy has to run away to Australia to get away from his own father" (*ibid.*, p. 59).
[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.
[44] *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

Janus's belief in the crucial character of action is also a notion that has remained in his system since his military training and his war experiences. It is a movement for survival, also in the sense that it is aimed at anticipating and countering the moves of the enemy. For this reason, the constant need to identify an enemy is also pivotal in his process of survival. Janus's vision of the world is invariably a hostile one: he needs to think of himself as being followed and haunted by some adversary, or engaged in some form of battle against someone or something, and his general attitude is one of cautiousness and alarm towards anything that might be done against him. Most of his exhortations to move are thus inevitably interspersed with allusions to some enemy, be it a tangible individual or some abstract opposing force, if not a general "they" to which no specific features are attached: "Keep muscles working, circulation going […]. Then no one can catch you, no hole keep you[45]"; "Keep moving, that's the important thing, keep moving. They can't get you if you keep moving[46]"; "Don't wait till they take me feet first, wrapped in a red blanket like Nora[47]".

The survival aspect of this ceaseless meandering is also strictly connected to the idea of keeping warm to survive the winter, which is an obvious metaphor for old age. Rather than in his actual peregrinations through frostbitten London, however, this metaphor finds materialisation in two other situations haunting his imagination and recurring fairly often throughout the narration, intermingled with his streams of consciousness. One regards a painful memory dating back to his time in the army, when Janus deserted his regiment and found himself fleeing through a winter landscape, sleeping roughly in barns and suchlike and warding off stray dogs and hostile children throwing stones at him. The other consists in mental projections of one of his favourite readings, Scott's *Antarctic Voyage*, which he reads in the public library, and whose passages continue to linger in his mind, mingling sometimes indistinguishably with his personal war memories or his own errands across the frozen streets of London.

Janus is obsessed with the Antarctic expedition mainly because he sees a reflection of his own situation in the toil undergone by the explorers: they have to journey on through ice, wind, and frost in inhumanly harsh conditions, trying to keep warm in order to stay alive and having to survive on less and less resources, with hopes thinning out by the hour. In their stoic resistance he implicitly sees an inspiration for his own stubborn opposition to approaching death and the corporeal decay he has to face, a bit more wearily every day. The identification is so deep that the actual passages of the expedition often fade into thoughts about himself; objects on board the ship are automatically transferred to what Janus sees in front of him, and some sentences pronounced by captain Scott are appropriated by him and applied to considerations about himself and his own personal toil. The ship's

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[45] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

must, for instance, is inextricably fused with the image of the menacing tower and the consequent imagery of spreading destruction he attaches to it: “And we will have gone, water closing in after us, leaving no trace in the trackless sea, and the mast swings finding no hold in the wind and the tower takes all the room and towers too tall where everything was small and like home and now it has gone under the axe under the iron ball and chain[48]”.

Scott’s men’s struggle for survival echoes Janus’s own attempts at keeping his body functioning despite the biting frost of January: “The important thing is to keep moving. That’s what I keep saying, keep moving, as long as the blood’s going round and the old ticker tocking there’s nothing much to worry about. Though the provisions are dwindling day by day, and the skin folds over slack as the fat is burned away[49]”. As Scott’s men are facing an approaching inevitable disaster, Janus also feels that the natural stimulus to go on will not necessarily lead to his salvation, being just a stratagem to keep death temporarily at bay. The metaphor of Scott’s journey is transparently clear, and when he relates his own considerations about the impending tragedy he sees ahead of his expedition, the implicit end which also awaits Janus can be glimpsed rather clearly through his words:

> A monotonous life this on the whole, as monotonous as one can well imagine it – to turn day after day, week after week, month after month, to the same toil over ice which is sometimes a little better, sometimes a little worse – it now seems to be getting steadily worse – always hoping to see an end to it, but always hoping in vain. […] Things cannot hold, it is useless to hope for better things now[50].

Scott’s words of hopelessness resurface towards the end of the novel, when Janus is lying in bed waiting for sleep or possibly his own death to come. The text, at this point, gets more and more sparse, the paragraphs are increasingly short and fragmentary, the last sentence in each paragraph lacks the final dot: paragraphs resemble small clusters of ice, inertly floating on the page without any sense of direction, the only elements still moving in a dystopic frozen landscape which smells of immobility and silence. The sensation is of having finally reached the end of the journey.

If movement, as seen through the filter of Scott’s chronicle, is thus revealed as an empty temporisation meant to elude death, Janus’s memories of his desertion reveal another disquieting aspect. Any mention of Janus’s past in the army which is made by other characters shows some respect towards him, on the grounds of the time he has served for his Mother Country. Moreover, the dynamism which Janus has apparently derived from this experience, and which has not yet left him, can be regarded in many respects as a positive thing, from which he draws the necessary courage to face his situation and keep going every day. Any sense of honour is however shattered when, while talking to his grandson about the meaning of the stone he carries in his pocket, he reveals that he had

[48] *Ibid*., p. 36.
[49] *Ibid*., p. 51.
[50] *Ibid*., p. 52.

in fact abandoned his fellow soldiers and the army in secrecy and with great dishonour: "I decided to run away. I'd had just about enough, I mean, they think they can do just what they like with you. […] Raided the larder and took a meat pie and some apples. […] Nobody heard me go, I was very careful, shutting the door behind me. It was a clear cold night, with a few stars[51]".

In the episode of Janus's desertion, movement becomes sheer evasion. It is true that his escape, on the one hand, could be still considered potentially as an affirmation of his personal will and a refusal to bow to the coercion of external agents; on the other, however, especially when juxtaposed with his attitude of stubborn refusal before his wayward condition, it only enhances his utter incapability to come to terms with himself and his own destiny. Seeing the issue from this point view, the fugitive attitude Janus opposes to everything, from his bodily and mental disintegration to that which he sees all around himself, from his little everyday failures to the major fiascos he experiences in his inter-personal relationships, only appears as a repeated attempt at escaping from a reality he is not able to face with honesty and firmness.

Janus, as his very name suggests, is an ambiguous character. It is rather impossible to truly sympathise with him: except for perhaps a sense of pity elicited by his genuinely human predicament as an old man, the sensation he leaves in the reader is a rather negative one. The impression he gives is of a man who has suffered much, but whose suffering has not led to any sort of superior wisdom. He is a man who has journeyed through the dolorous tempests of life without learning any possible lesson from his own experiences. His resilient attitude certainly bears some degree of heroism, but the legacy he ultimately leaves is rather poor, because his example does not elevate the other, but can only evoke pity at most.

And yet, the very fact that he is there to narrate his empty going on, his inconsequential suffering and moral barrenness, and that he forces himself to continue in spite of everything, of himself and the utter meaninglessness of doing so, is perhaps the most moving aspect of this novel. Being capable of nothing, and having perhaps nothing to communicate, Janus's decision to move on is a powerful affirmation of a will to live, to do his best despite the hopeless nothingness affecting him, and to eventually stop only when he is ultimately forced to do so by his biological destiny:

> Night falls on the white horse and only the stars remain. It is time to sleep but now there is no more turning back, the journey has to go on. Moving, keep moving, all we can do is to press on to the end, to where the sun does not move and light is shadowless and the lakes lie still under their blanket of snow and the moon falls in silence on a silent sea of snow. […] And there, where a day is as long as a year and the year is as long as a century and eternity splits into a second and only one direction remains whichever way you turn, I will sit down[52].

[51] *Ibid*., p. 86.
[52] *Ibid*., p. 111.

Perhaps, the implicit message in *Winter Journey* is precisely that suffering does not necessarily lead to any kind of spiritual elevation. Pain is just pain, and the only thing that we, as human beings, can do before the inevitable dissolution which lies ahead, is to resist and journey on with as much determination as we can afford, with all our idiosyncrasies and evident limitations.

It is now worth considering, however briefly, the profoundly different treatment which the theme of old age receives in another novel written some twenty years after *Winter Journey*. *Ghosts*, published in 1988, is the story of an old woman, equally wondering through the streets of London and dealing with the sense of isolation and the physical ailments brought by old age; the tone of the narration, however, as well as the final message conveyed by the protagonist's experiences, are thoroughly different from those of its predecessor.

The links between *Ghosts* and *Winter Journey* are alluded to and reinforced by a series of elements. At the level of structure, both novels are poetic accumulations of impressions, building the narrative development on a sense of time passing rather than on a consequential succession of events – the unit is one single day in the latter, while the former is organised in small chapters taking place in the four different seasons. Embedded in both texts are allusions to the work of T. S. Eliot, a juvenile obsession of the author: as seen above, *Winter Journey* reworks the incipit of *The Waste Land*, while *Ghosts* appropriates the very structure of the *Four Quartets*[53]. Moreover, a continuity between the two novels is created by the fact that Figes, at some point, has the unnamed protagonist of *Ghosts* pronounce the same line which is used as a refrain in *Winter Journey*, where Janus, both in the incipit and in the last session of the novel, tries to re-asses his sense of identity by symbolically recognising the surroundings of his own home: "The key fits[54]". Both Janus and the woman in *Ghosts* pronounce these words, though in different circumstances: the woman goes to her deceased mother's house in order to compile a list of her possessions, dealing with objects pervaded by bittersweet memories, which is already revealing of a more positive attitude towards the past than Janus's somewhat cowardly evasions.

Several elements in the early pages of *Ghosts* would seem at first sight to suggest a close affinity with the character of Janus. The woman is, like the latter, a victim of the painful erosion of time, prey to the physical degradation of a body she does not recognise as her own anymore: "My body which is not my body, sweating into the sheets. My life which is not my life, waking up round me, as the walls become faintly visible, what is laughingly called the here and now rises up like a

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[53] "I got my scholarship by doing a paper on T. S. Eliot and I was particularly influenced by his work at the time, and I'm still in love particularly with the *Four Quartets* […]. I think with *Ghosts* I thought 'I could do it', […] I took the four seasons and each season had four parts. So the form was like Eliot" (id. Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 17.06.2011).
[54] See *Ghosts*: "The key fits into the lock, and I enter into the stillness" (id., *Ghosts*, Pantheon Books, New York 1988, p. 70). See *Winter Journey*: "the key fitted, no mistake there" (id., *Winter Journey*, p. 7); "This is the place, the key fits" (*ibid.*, p. 97).

prison, my prison walls[55]". Like Janus, she also exhorts herself to move on, and starts wondering through the streets of a city changed by time, destructions and reconstructions beyond recognition: "Demolition, reconstruction. Dust rising and falling. The same city, but subtly not the same. […] My city. / This is not my city. Is, and is not[56]".

Her sense of time too is fading, and past and present are indistinguishably mingled both in the surrounding and in her interior landscape, as the mental, remembered version of streets, buildings and even people is juxtaposed automatically to the actual objects she sees in front of her, even if she is not sure that reality is actually *there*: "At times I think I have no sense of the actual. Are things really here at all, I wonder, are any of us present? I think of my brain as a film negative that has been doubly, perhaps trebly exposed[57]". Like Janus, furthermore, she sometimes feels cut out from the present world dominated by younger generations, hostilely scrutinised by people she considers different from herself, as if they were exponents of some strange exotic species: "Who are these people, ask our glances, with their funny looks and their weird hair styles? […] Where do they come from, these invaders from space? How is it that I have not noticed them until now, or not in such numbers?[58]". She too, like the protagonist of *Winter Journey*, feels an unbridgeable distance from the younger members of her family, as though they were moving on totally different wavelengths, so that no true communication can take place between them: "I am only conscious of being excluded. This is the first act of a new play, in which I am just the ghost. / I am a ghost of the periphery, watching. I am the child shut out. Overhearing, I want to join in. For now I am oblivious of the fact that it is not my turn. Io have had my turn[59]".

As the story unfolds, however, and as soon as one takes into consideration all the facets of the woman's personality and her way of dealing with her situation, it becomes clear that her attitude is completely different from that of Janus, and that she is the bearer of a much more positive message. Janus looks at his past as a source of trauma and fracture, the seat of many present ailments, an area of darkness in his life which has imprinted on him an inveterate necessity to evade from reality. The woman of *Ghosts*, instead, treasures her past and revels in the possibility of objects, people and places to re-activate ancient connections in her mind, which re-unites her with the person she was in previous phases of her life. She has also journeyed through life, taking on herself all the suffering which is the lot of every human being: unlike Janus, however, she demonstrates to have learnt some lesson from her experiences, to have something to pass on to future generations.

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[55] Id., *Ghosts*, p. 2.
[56] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[57] *Ibid*., p. 133.
[58] *Ibid*., pp. 16-17.
[59] *Ibid*., p. 137.

Whereas memory is for Janus a painful source of fragmentation, it appears to have a salvific function in *Ghosts*, making it possible for the individual to find connections through the scattered and otherwise incomprehensible events of life, holding together the collapsing edifice of one's identity, as body and mind are threatened by the erosion of time. Senility has its painful consequences also for the woman of *Ghosts*, and the biological destiny which awaits every human being remains something inevitable, but this time death is not envisaged as an adversary to overcome, or to elude until the inevitable happens. It is faced serenely, with the awareness that the most powerful weapon at one's disposal, the only way to win the ultimate corruption and annihilation of the body, the caducity of life, consists in preserving the flame of memory and to pass it on to the next generations. To transmit, if not a higher moral lesson learned through the endless toil of an entire lifetime, at least the simple but invaluable narration of that life. To contribute, that is, with one's individual story to that continuous circle of individual stories which is History, the pile of collective memory.

The stone which Janus gives to his grandson as though unthinkingly, almost as a burden he wishes to dispense with, is soon lost, without even the faintest glimpse of significance having been transmitted in this passage of hands. By contrast, the family photographs which the woman in *Ghosts* reviews with his younger relatives in one of the final scenes of the novel provide a cathartic moment of communion and sharing. In this circumstance, through the power of memory, the woman is able to open a portal on the past and make of herself a channel to convey to the others the meaning of that past. In the process, she manages to create, if but for a fleeting moment, a strong inter-generational bond, which gives the impression of securing the transmission of a lore acquired through lifelong experiences, providing the foundations on which future generations may construct their own sense of identity and continuity:

> I am called upon to recount history, a litany of names and relationships. I am aware of a world beyond their reach. I open a door on that invisible world, and allow them a glimpse of it. No, not a glimpse, something else. Only a story handed down. […] The further away, the more distant, the more clearly I remember […]. And for a brief moment, in the warmth of the lamplight falling, I feel them by me, not as they once were, but as they are, flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone, in the warmth of a shared memory strewn around us. […] We sit around the circle of memory, and are the circle[60].

A decade later, as she was trying to come to terms with some deeply submerged aspects of her past for the first time in her life, Figes found herself to be both the "captive and […] custodian[61]" of a painful narration of loss, whose transmission, however, she came to see as a necessary act of survival and redemption. Whereas in *Winter Journey*, at a much more delicate stage of her personal development, the passing of time mainly evoked a sense of loss and inevitable disintegration, a feeling

[60] *Ibid*., p. 141.
[61] Id., *Living with Loss*, p. 1.

of constant chase as if from a wild ravenous animal, in *Ghosts* time feels like a lifetime companion, a friend treasuring an inestimable collection of stories which make up identity.

Memory, in this context, is presented as the only possible key to salvation, the most crucial act of resistance that a human being can oppose to the biological destiny which awaits everyone at the end of the road. The solution is not to turn and run away, as Janus appears to be doing, but to face destiny with courage, with the fire of comprehension and the willingness to carry on the flame into the future, to light up the road for those who will come after us.

II. Konek Landing*, or the nightmare of History*

Another face of destiny, one which Figes sadly came to know all too well in her personal life, and which has consequently influenced some of her most notable works, is undoubtedly that represented by the upheavals of History. Some major historical events which took place during the author's childhood, such as the Second World War and the Holocaust, have played a crucial part in shaping the direction her life has taken at certain junctures. In later years, this awareness has triggered in her some inevitable reflections about the role and the impact of History on the lives of individuals, also raising the issue, with respect to what happened in Germany during the Nazi period, of collective responsibility, and of the far-from-straightforward separation between the categories of victim and culprit.

As has been already discussed, Figes was haunted by disquieting thoughts about the degree of responsibility of German civilians in the crimes committed by their country before and during the War. What complicated things even further, in her view, was that the delicate issue of their alleged complicity in the atrocities carried out by the Nazi regime was potentially contrasted by an opposite opinion, which saw them instead as victims of circumstances well beyond their powers, being simple individuals caught in the hurricane of History. If, on the one hand, it would simply be inconceivable to put Germans and Jews on the same level, on the other, when dealing with average people which did not have anything directly to do with the Holocaust, it is rather absurd to think that the matter of victim and victimiser can be settled with any neat black-and-white separation.

The infinite areas of greyness to be found in-between had impressed the author since a very young age, as is clearly suggested by the conversations she had with her father, when she was still only a teenager:

> Other problems haunted me. My attitude to Germany, for instance. During the war it was natural for my parents to make anti-German remarks as virulently racist as anything the

German said about the Jews. But even as a child I realised that the problem of collective guilt could not be simple. My father had been a German as well as a Jew, so a mere accident of birth had absolved him of responsibility. What would he have done if he had not been born Jewish?[62].

This attitude, together with the inner reflections associated with it, was inevitably incensed and brought to light again as soon as Figes had the occasion to go back to Berlin, the city of her childhood, decades after the end of the war and her family's escape to England. As she herself revealed, the emotions awoken by this trip, plus the necessity she felt to ponder again on certain unresolved issues of her past, were translated into a novel which she began writing immediately afterwards, *Konek Landing*, "an epic story of a survivor of the holocaust who cannot come to terms with the present or resolve the problem of killer and victim[63]".

Konek Landing explores the situation of a stateless man, constantly on the run through a devastated post-war European landscape: the protagonist, Stefan Konek, is a sort of allegorical figure on which Figes projects both her personal life history and the condition of thousands of Jews who faced prosecution and loss during the Holocaust. It is an exploration of how the major events of History impact on the life of a powerless individual, and, as such, it is a story of resignation rather than resistance. Konek is portrayed as an eternal victim of circumstances, ultimately unable, it seems, to rebel against his persecutors and rise above his miserable condition; he seems to be transformed into a beast or an unthinking automaton by the constant suffering and dispossession he is subjected to.

To begin with, one most peculiar characteristic of the novel is the fact that the story is recognisably about the experiences of a Jew during the Nazi persecutions, although it never openly mentions Jews at all. At no point in the novel, indeed, direct reference is ever made to the Holocaust or to the relevant historical period, nor is the geographical setting of the story ever clearly specified, or some other coordinates inserted which could help the reader identify the situation beyond any shade of doubt. The story of Konek is purposely rendered in the most obscure way possible, so that the reader is unable to relate it easily to anything already known, and to prevent its interpretation from being excessively influenced by other biased or politicised discussions on the subject.

In point of fact, Figes had initially intended to be much more specific as regard the Jewishness of the protagonist and the historical circumstances in which the narrative takes place. Her working notebooks reveal a wealth of background information about situations and characters, as well as numerous references to Jews and concentration camps, which in the final text are recognisable only indirectly. In one entry related to the section about Lotte, for example – who becomes Nelly in the final version, an old woman who deliberately mistakes Konek for her lost nephew –, Figes specifies

[62] Id., *The Long Passage to Little England*, in "The Observer", 11.06.1978.
[63] *Ivi*.

openly that she "[k]eeps saying 'You are a Jew, aren't you' wants him to be. Denies it. / Lotte mothers him, treats him as her long-lost Jewish nephew who died in concentration camp[64]". In the first draft of the novel, moreover, Lotte/Nelly's brother is called Adolf, a clear allusion to Hitler, which sounds bitterly ironic, since he is in fact a German who goes into trouble for having married a Jewish woman.

Although the phrase "concentration camp" is never actually formulated in the novel, it is rather easy for the reader to relate some scenes described or alluded to by some characters to the bleak and tragic realities associated with it[65]. Similarly, although the word Jew never overtly appears through the pages of *Konek Landing*, it is impossible not to put together automatically all the pieces of the puzzle, and guess the true implicit object of the narration. The way many characters refer generally to "the race", however, certainly renders the discourse much more universal. To be more precise, Figes's choice of concealing to the reader any direct identification with the Jews seems to suggest that what happened with the Holocaust can be the potential outcome of any form of racism or discrimination: if an inhuman attitude, brought to extreme degrees, has once led to such a catastrophic result, there is no guarantee that the same could not happen again, perhaps concerning a different form of discrimination. As can be evinced from Figes's own words, this latter reflection seems to tie in perfectly with her opinion on discrimination and anti-Judaism, as well as with the feelings which prompted her to write *Konek Landing:*

> This time the Jews, next time who? People with blue eyes? With the wrong sort of DNA? It could be anyone. It could be you. This is not to deny Jewish suffering. I was born German and am now a Jew, history saw to that.
> When I tried to deal with the shadow in my life as a young novelist I wrote about a tormented, stateless survivor wandering through a Europe ravaged by war, unable to settle anywhere, a man who can neither love nor hate, only offer himself up to die sacrificially. I avoided specific place names, did not call my hero a Jew or his old enemies German, and the result was a very bleak picture, a world of lost souls beyond redemption. I was still battling with the old problem of collective responsibility, my inability to accept easy divisions between them and us, good and evil, black and white[66].

The specific experience of Jews, in any case, was clearly a vivid source of inspiration for the composition of many scenes, as is evident in some secondary characters' speeches, or in the misadventures happening to Konek himself. As a further proof of this, one can refer to another

[64] Id., Notebook A, *Konek Landing* working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library.
[65] At a later juncture, for instance, a description of gas chambers is randomly brought up by an attendant of some sort of nursing home for wounded or disabled people, into which Konek ends up in one of his peregrinations, accompanied by a blind man: "Nobody heard what happened to Brest? asked a voice. Just like a bloody morgue growled a voice. […] If they gas you, ought to do it fast, this is bloody torture. […] They all piled on top of one another, fighting for the last bit of air, so the kids and women landed down at the bottom. That's chivalry for you. And corpses came out in coloured spots. Did you know?" (*ibid.*, p. 169). At some other point, a touching scene of a camp's liberation is instead described by one of Konek's fellow sailormen: "I don't know who first saw that all our guards had gone, but no one moved through the gates / For hours no guards had returned / One man walked through and dropped dead outside / Lorries made a loud noise arriving. A man cried you are free now and picked him up from the road" (*ibid.*, p. 149).
[66] Id., *Living with Loss*, pp. 295-296.

extensive section of Figes's working notes, consisting in a series of collected information and anecdotes, coming from unspecified sources, regarding the everyday life of Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. It is possible that this section was in fact intended as an early skeleton for the plot of the first section of the novel, referring to the child-Konek, who lives roughly among shattered buildings together with other persecuted people who are trying to hide from the State police. The precise setting of these notes, in any case, plus the wealth of accurate and plausible details about the Jews living in Warsaw, demonstrates that Figes had a specific landscape in mind when she envisaged the initial situation of her protagonist. Some details contained in this section, indeed, recall certain junctures of the opening chapter of the novel, such as the reference to "[a] child locked in a cupboard most of the day for safety[67]", the harsh conditions of people living in hideouts, with tunnels excavated in order to move secretly between one place and another, or the child's eventual transfer from the ghetto to a Christian orphanage[68].

Other interesting historical parallels with Konek's situation, moreover, are to be found in a later book by Figes, the autobiographical *Journey to Nowhere*, published in 2008. Despite its late appearance, this book collects some memories related to Figes's adolescence, most importantly her family housemaid's tale of how she survived the Nazi persecution and the harsh period of the war in Berlin. Having managed to track down the Ungers in England, after years spent between Germany and the newborn state of Israel, the housemaid Edith had revealed her story to the young and inquisitive Eva, desirous to know the destiny of the city and of the people she left behind when her family fled Germany in 1939. Some aspects of Edith's story must have left a deep mark on Figes's imagination at the time, for some of its details are still perfectly recognisable in some passages of *Konek Landing*, written some twenty years after[69]. The following excerpt, for instance, could have come directly from Konek himself, thinking back on the harsh experiences lived with his mother and the other people hiding among the rubbles and the devastations left by the war:

> By that time I was spending most of my time in the cellar. About six of us were more or less living down there, so it was rather overcrowded. The top of the house had been completely blown away in an air raid but we used to come up in the daytime to cook in the kitchen, if and when the power came on. Often there was no water either, and we'd have to fetch it in buckets. Washing was a luxury[70].

[67] Id., Notebook A, *Konek Landing* working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library.

[68] "The boy smuggled out of the ghetto. Taken to work outside the ghetto wall and collected by a friend who wd take him to a place in the country. Told before that he must forget his parents, deny he had ever lived in the ghetto. The boy pushed around – made to learn Lord's Prayer, into church where he wonders at priest in a nightshirt. Locked in a room all day and told to keep very quiet as no one supposed to know he was there. Put in a catholic orphanage and turned against Jews – that they kill Christian children and mix their blood in the matzos. Times of hunger – ate potato peelings meant for the rabbits" (*ivi*). In the final version of the novel, the boy is handed out by his mother to a non-Jew relative, who equally tells him to forget his name and conceal the truth about his parents. After some days spent hiding at her place, he is taken to an orphanage run by Christian nuns, who accept him, though often showing signs of hostility towards his faith.

[69] A further tribute to Edith, moreover, is present in the novel, for Figes gives her name to the aunt who takes care of Konek for a brief period, after his mother manages to take him out of the ghetto to save his life.

[70] E. Figes, *Journey to Nowhere*, p. 95.

Early in the story, very similar conditions are illustrated in Konek's typical blurred and obscure manner of narrating. Such obscurity, nonetheless, does not manage to mask revealing details, such as the number of people hiding together under the same crumbling roof, the lack of electricity, or the impossible hygienic and living conditions:

> [A]ll the people in the house came together apart from father who had disappeared but the other tenants and mother, the entire house cold no electricity the balustrade broken […]. An airless hole the candle guttering pots and pans stacked in the corner under the sloping roof squeezed up together, six not counting him. […] Took it in turns to shit in the bucket, pissed down the wider gaps in the floorboards[71].

Rather than on direct analyses or clear portrayals of the condition of Jews during the Holocaust, however, the focus in *Konek Landing* is on the exploration of a dispossessed man, uprooted and tossed about in all directions by the events of History and other forces beyond his control. In this respect, the figure of Konek does not exactly provide an example of active resistance against destiny, but rather one of stoic suffering. As in the case of Janus in *Winter Journey*, the difference between resignation and resilience proves to be rather thin, sometimes even indiscernible, as the experience of sheer pain and loss to which the protagonist is subjected seems to yield no spiritual progression or inspiration.

One thing which immediately emerges in the bizarre incipit of the novel, for instance, is a sensation of ungraspable enormity and universality, against which Konek's successive misadventures appear as something utterly insignificant, despite the tribulation and pain they evidently involve:

> It began where the tide ran, the water rocking, air and water and air; there, you might say, the cradle of life. Weight of water ran and sank and sank and ran, advanced and retreated, left small circles, air enclosed in liquid, which glistered in the hot sun. Where the earth turned heavily, the sun sinking under the sea and the water continued to heave, leaving coastline black against night sky[72].

The opening pages present a sort of Biblical account of the appearance of the first forms of life on the portion of Earth on which Konek's future narrative allegedly takes place: a pre-historical chronicle condensing the whole evolution of the first living organisms, from algae and jellied particles to more complex specimen, until the emergence of the first man. Immediately afterwards, rather unexpectedly and anticlimactically, the narration shifts to the present time, illustrating how the same area described initially in such epic tones is now covered in concrete, bastions and wired walls. At this point, the figure of Konek is introduced, a fugitive man sheltering in a warehouse, compared to the same rats he appears to be afraid of:

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[71] Id. *Konek Landing*, p. 20.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

> Left are only rats to the rotten stinking dockland, furtive predators of morbidity. And just as furtive, though without the protection of a predatory instinct, hidden amongst a pile of mouldering timber, lurks one man. Afraid of the rats scuttling sure in the dark warehouse, he nevertheless remains hidden there. Since a more dangerous predator lurks outside the door on two legs[73].

Appearing ex nihilo in this fashion, after pages of chronicle encapsulating millions of years of evolution, Konek is thus presented as though he were an accidental product of a long chain of transformations and biological processes, of a universal movement, that is to say, extending far back before him and mysteriously proceeding after him, into a future he will never see in his limited earthly experience. He is a drifting creature stranded on these shores, forced by circumstances to fight for his own survival, as the first beasts found themselves obliged to do in prehistoric times, equally guarding themselves from possible predators impending on them. Read against the example of what comes afterwards, such an incipit appears rather absurd and out of all proportions. Metaphorically, it intends to position Konek at the end of an infinite accumulation of years and past events on which he has had no saying, no control whatsoever. The juxtaposition with this past eternity only provides an extreme extension of the passivity into which he is presently forced, as a result of other major socio-historical phenomena which have reduced him into the present imprisoning condition.

A first major symptom of Konek's vulnerability towards the erosive action of external circumstances is the extreme fragility of his own sense of identity. Throughout the narrative, Konek demonstrates a tendency to lose his name, or to step out of a mask which has been assigned to him, to assume constantly new roles according to the situation. In the various sections of the novel, he is thus accommodated more or less forcibly into a plethora of different identities and labels which he is called to perform, as if he lacked a will or a personality of his own. Judging from Figes's working notes, she regarded this aspect as crucial from the earliest stages of planning Konek's character. In one of the very first entries of her notebook, for instance, she clearly indicates that the various sections were to be differentiated in accordance with the protagonist's changes of role and identity: "1) Pre-packaged identities – Jew, husband, lover. […] / 2) The scapegoat and confidant of men on the run. / 3) The King of primitive community[74]". Later, she expands on this aspect by specifying that "[p]eople always [try] to fit him with an identity, to step into empty, dead shoes. […] At the same time any identity that did fit he would also reject and run away from[75]".

Konek seems doomed to this constant loss of self from his early childhood, at least from the moment in which his mother hands him out to a non-Jewish aunt, in order to save him from the harsh

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[73] *Ibid*., p. 16.
[74] Id., Notebook A, *Konek Landing* working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library.
[75] *Ivi*.

conditions of the ghetto and the grasp of the police, so that he is consequently forced to change his name and conceal his family ties:

> Just for now, he must not cry, of course mother and father will come back, but just for now you are going to have a nice holiday with auntie, and just for a game you are going to have a new name. You are now Pavel Zuck, I shall call you Pavel Zuck, and if anybody asks you, you will pretend you never even heard of Stefan Konek. And what is more, Pavel dear, although of course it is not true, you must say that your father is dead and your mother has gone away to the country. To nurse a sick sister, whom we shall call your aunt, which she would be if your mother ever had a sister[76].

From this tender age, the uncomprehending Konek is thus compelled by external forces to assume constructed identities envisaged for him by other subjects, becoming sadly accustomed to being told what to do and, more crucially, who he is. He is not given a single chance to determine his own self, but is robbed instead of his own name, uprooted from his parents, and thrown at the mercy of a world which will continue to impose ever-new masks on him in exchange for sheer survival.

This forceful change of name operated by his aunt, despite the good reasons behind it, establishes a pattern of dispossession and prevarication which will be repeated several times throughout the novel. At the orphanage, where Konek is taken shortly afterwards, he suffers the bullying of the other children and even the pressure of the nuns, as he is submerged with contrasting versions of the truth, with every single person trying to convince him of a different narrative concerning him, with a certainty he could never hope to achieve on his own. One Sister Agatha, for instance, speaks to him of "a god who would damn him unless he was good, particularly little boys […], and those of your race are the worst[77]". Owing to her, his father and mother are cursed on the grounds of their different – that is, wrong – faith, while the other children try to convince him that his parents are dead.

Konek thus stands, confused and impotent, amidst this plethora of contrasting voices, which claim to know realities he is ignorant of: he absorbs inertly all the blows he is dealt, numbly accepting every piece of received truth without comprehension, for this is the only thing life seems to have taught him to do. Struggling with these different versions of the truth, he feels at a loss, and begins to dramatically lose his own centre for good: "Confused, he clung desperately to his lies, but the warnings, prayers and exhortations made even that impossible, since his father was both dead and damned and somehow, according to incantations repeated daily, in heaven too[78]".

In these passages, it is fairly easy to recognise a feeling which was sadly familiar to the author herself. Notoriously, Figes had felt a similar painful confusion when, while staying at the boarding school in Cirencester during the evacuation, she discovered for the first time that she was a Jew. On

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[76] Id., *Konek Landing*, p. 27.
[77] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[78] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

that occasion, she was told by one of her classmates that she could well stop praying, since Jews did not really believe in God. The bewilderment which followed was also accompanied by a sense of injustice and incomprehension towards the fact that people seemed to know things about her that she did not know:

> Now it seemed that I did not know myself at all, or at least that the world had a label for me which I did not understand, which flatly contradicted everything I knew about myself. How was this possible? Was it like a disease, something under the skin, in my blood, which I did not know about? […] The puzzle of my identity remained at the back of my mind. I suppose it has been there all my life[79].

Similarly, Konek is forced to carry this mystery with himself for all his life: unlike Figes, however, he will never truly manage to come to terms with it. His sense of identity remains feeble, and he is too busy fighting for his own survival to truly explore himself, and ever reappropriate the self he has lost amidst the upheavals of his troubled life. Even as an adult, he continues to offer himself to the manipulations of other people, resembling a piece of clay ready to be plummeted into ever-new forms, and made to perform whichever role is demanded of him. A further materialisation of this dynamic, for instance, is provided in the episode of the old woman, Nelly, who takes him for his lost nephew, whom the reader can easily guess to have died in some sort of concentration camp. On this occasion, Konek, who has only just arrived at the war-devastated city of B – most probably a projection of Berlin –, is looking for the address of a boarding house, and runs into Nelly by chance in the course of his peregrinations. Having started a conversation with him, she notices an odd resemblance with her lost nephew – who strangely shares the same name as Konek, Stefan –, and insists on taking him back home with her:

> I expect you think me a silly old woman but you remind me very strongly of someone. The moment I saw you I thought. Many years ago now, I suppose he would be older now, but I thought that is Stefan's face. […] I am called Stefan. […] How strange, how very strange. I had a premonition, only this morning. You must come back with me[80].

Taking advantage of this fortunate coincidence, the woman convinces herself more and more that Stefan Konek is indeed her disappeared nephew, so much so that she addresses him in various situations by referring to objects once belonging to the other Stefan, old habits he used to have, or people he knew, taking for granted that Konek will duly play his part. At some point, for instance, she informs Konek that she has kept an old collection of lepidoptera assembled by Stefan, telling him "I've kept *your* butterfly collection[81]", as though momentarily glossing over the fact that the man in front of him is not her nephew. Konek indulges the old woman's whims and remains silent, as she

[79] Id. *Little Eden*, p. 74.
[80] Id. *Konek Landing*, p. 69.
[81] *Ibid.*, p. 72. Emphasis added.

describes, shortly afterwards, old family memories involving her Stefan. At some junctures, she appears to have reappropriated some degree of awareness, for she refers to her Stefan using the third person. Slightly later, however, talking about Lili, who used to be Stefan's woman, she confuses again their identities, warning Konek of Lili's withered beauty after all the years and the troubles she has gone through, as if Konek actually knew or even loved this woman: "Once I pulled a leaf out of her hair and she laughed, […] blushing and glancing over at him. Of course I know what they'd been up to. But I'd better warn you, you must not expect her to look the same, she's not a young woman any more and those years have been hard on her[82]".

In the scene which follows, this very Lili pays a visit to them, immediately recognising that Konek is not her old lover who has come back, but keeping up appearances and indulging Nelly's fantasies in her turn. In the absurd conversation which ensues between the three of them, moments are alternated in which Konek is addressed to as if he were the real Stefan, and others in which the women speak of the latter in the third person, leaving Konek in a sort of embarrassing limbo. Torn between these contrasting voices, Stefan appears intermittently either as himself or as somebody else. He tries to participate in the game which is being played at his own expenses, but he is clearly at the mercy of the two women, who appear in full control of his own identity, twisting it one way or another to make it suit their own ends, regardless of the actual individual who is standing with them in the room. Passages such as the following perfectly illustrate Konek's utter impotence amid the crossfire of the two women's speech:

> [H]aving picked up his hand [Lili] pushed his finger across her brow: Feel the lines – have I got so old? […] Don't let her go on, […] I'm as bad as she is, two old women, memories all faked. How he must have hated us. No! The old woman's protest, a wild shriek almost […]. Don't take any notice of her, doesn't know what she's saying, one of her attacks. Breathing in his ear the other voice mumbled still close enough to be heard how could you know, what is it to you? […] [H]eard the old woman arguing on, he loved adored me, that's how I know, the hours we spent talking, proof enough, what he told me in this very room, where did I put that album[83].

This confusion of identities is further complicated when, later on in the novel, Konek meets a character going by the name of Stefan Koenigson, who already from this improbable particular looks like a sort of absurd projection of himself. The man is described as a mysterious type, "aloof and uncommunicative[84]", of undeterminable age and apparently with a troubled past behind him. As some anecdotes and details about him begin to accumulate, the suspicion grows that this man might actually be Nelly's lost nephew, as his peculiar love for butterflies would seem to confirm: "Now considered distinctly an odd fish, […] not only because there is no woman glued or pinned to the head of his

[82] *Ibid*., p. 73.
[83] *Ibid*., pp. 84-85.
[84] *Ibid*., p. 136.

bunk, […] [b]ut because in place of a female head he has fixed a vast spreadeagle butterfly, coloured red and yellow[85]".

If this possible coincidence is kept adumbrated in the novel, by Konek himself, who apparently does not notice it and does not expressly give voice to any such suspicion, Figes's working notes demonstrate that this Stefan is actually the man Konek had been mistaken for in the previous chapter. A draft of the initial exchange between Konek and Nelly/Lotte in the park shows for instance that the nephew's full name was to be Stefan Koenig[86], and that he is the same man with whom later on Konek makes acquaintance on board the ship. A predicament similar to that of Konek, moreover, was originally to afflict Stefan Koenig(son) as well, since Figes specifies that he is "a man heavily scarred and lamed from tortures who has lost all memory of his past because too painful to remember[87]", and he is characterised by "the guilt of the victim who found he had to survive, who wanted to survive, who found himself unable not to survive. The weight of living with such a past to remember keeps him constantly on the run[88]". Furthermore, these uncanny overlapping traits in their personalities are somewhat confirmed and even enhanced by a remark Konek makes in the novel, when he affirms that Koenigson "has begun to talk to me occasionally, much as a voice coming out of my own head[89]".

Such a statement only seems to sustain the idea that Koenigson functions as a sort of external projection of himself, a tangible metaphor for his sense of fragmented identity, on whose pieces he does not appear to exert the least form of control. Thus, the whole idea of Konek's identity looks more and more like a huge hallucination, extending to the world outside and absorbing all the other characters. Not a single person Konek meets appears able or even willing to give him any solutions to the conundrum of his own identity, which, strictly speaking, he does not even try to solve: on the contrary, all characters set out to eagerly accrue this general confusion, treating Konek as a malleable piece of unspecified matter, to be made into anything or anybody, depending on the needs of the moment.

As the narrative progresses, it appears clear that Konek's destiny will forever force him to pass from one identity to another, assuming on himself masks and roles that other people fabricate for him, having no fixed personality to rely on. Once escaped from the grasp of the old Nelly, for instance, he becomes the substitute of Mrs. Brest's husband[90], a woman who manages a boarding

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[85] *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.
[86] "Name – Stefan Konek / Lotte: Did you say your name was Koenig. / K. No, Konek. / Lotte: Because his name was Koenig. Sounds rather alike, doesn't it? He was called Stefan, after my father" (id., Notebook A, *Konek Landing* working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library).
[87] *Ivi*.
[88] *Ivi*.
[89] Id., *Konek Landing*, p. 139.
[90] This aspect is laid out much more openly in Figes's notes. In the original plan of this section, this was to be the situation between Konek (Kapak at this stage) and Mrs. Breast (here still unnamed): "An older woman, calling herself Mrs. –.

house and whom he originally contacts when looking for an accommodation. After this, he is involved in a controversial relationship with a clochard girl and her little brother, for whom Konek was originally intended to play the role of a surrogate father, judging by Figes's notes and early drafts[91]. Finally, in the absurd last chapter of the novel, Konek ends up on an island inhabited by a primitive community, becoming a sort of idol and being finally sacrificed in some kind of propitiatory ritual.

In all these circumstances, Konek appears to oppose almost no resistance to what other people ordain for him. It is true, on the one hand, that he demonstrates at times some hint of a rebellious character, as happens for instance whenever he reaches a point of saturation and eventually abandons one specific role or identity which has been previously imposed on him. These rebellions, however, only serve to bring him almost immediately into the prison of just another similar situation, consigning him into the grasp of other people who exert on him authority or fascination, ordering him about and assigning to him a part he cannot refuse to play.

Another of Konek's problems, deriving from his intrinsic lack of will and sense of direction in his life[92], is that he is constantly subjected to the manipulations of other individuals, and does not appear capable of resisting the demands and prevarications of other people. Authorities, such as his mother or aunt, when he is still a child, or the police, or his former captain, invariably determine his destiny, showing sometimes even the power to change his very identity. Women and girls manipulate him with their fascination, drawing him into their net and using him – like Mrs. Brest –, or awakening sexual lust in him in order to serve their own ends – like the clochard girl, who hopes to transform him into a protector for herself and her brother. Sometimes, the puppeteer can simply be a person who shows a greater charisma to whom Konek blindly entrusts his own fate, barely questioning their true capabilities. This is what happens for instance with Jan, another dispossessed child he meets at the orphanage, who takes the lead and convinces Konek to follow him in a series of rebellious acts, which eventually lead them to rob the cashbox, leave the institution, and take shelter in a shattered building.

Takes lodgers. Gradually he takes over the husband's place, though never actually has intercourse with her. Takes over his bed, clothes, name. She calls him her husband to neighbours but never makes sexual advances, she undresses in the dark with her back to him. Then the police start making enquiries about her husband. She says he has gone away. Doesn't know when he'll be back. But K. has been drawing his wartime disability pension (man had wooden leg)" (id. *Konek Landing* working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library).

[91] As is revealed in Figes's working notes: "It turns out that Mela is a state orphan, her brother too. So the police finally clear all three together. At this point K. has a choice. Because Mela's parentage is not known and Kapak [Konek] could have claimed to be her relative – this is why, the ulterior why, that the boy brought K to his sister. He might have passed as her uncle, or even her father" (*ivi*).

[92] In a beautiful image which is provided at some point, Konek compares himself to a homing pigeon who is intrinsically incapable of finding his home again: "Homing pigeons would fly for, once pushed to recognition points round a dark hole they know as home. How could I / having missed what / probably been born without it / the proper homing device, internal nose / for direction" (id. *Konek Landing*, p. 128).

Konek accepts Jan as a leader because he "had ideas, knew what to do[93]", and especially because he shows great confidence and a sense of place in the world which Konek totally lacks. It is again Jan's advice which Konek seeks years later, as an adult, when he has nowhere to go to and no idea of what to do in order to survive. Jan's advice, appearing at times as veiled orders, and the influence he manages to exert on Konek, always propel him forward, in that they give him a sense of direction he would never be able to find for himself. It does not matter that these instructions Jan imparts to him always cause him further troubles and sufferings: he will always remain a fixed point of reference for Konek, who constantly returns to him for advice as a faithful disciple.

Konek's sense of drift and his tendency to let himself be manipulated by people and circumstances are already detectable in the first section of the novel, but they are particularly reinforced by the visual metaphor of the ship on which he is forced to embark again in the second half. Figes's notes reveal how this second part was intended to enhance Konek's existential passivity, the sensation that he constantly finds himself at the mercy of external events:

> This whole section is permeated with description of the sea, and things appertaining to sea and land by contrast […]. In contrast to section 1, which has cold clear narrative, the clarity and logic of dream, this section is both more lyrical and more broken […]. There is an analogy here too of the sea, fluid, of waves, and the land, maternal, stable. NOTE that Part 1 was a journey inland. From now on K is always on the shore, dockside city and coastal village. A sense of drift[94].

This section, by no chance, opens with some of the most desperate and resigned passages attributed to Konek, whereas in the first half of the novel these feelings remained unexpressed, only to be implied in what happened to him. The first paragraphs are floating, scattered on the page as flotsam carried by the waves, condensing all his sense of loss and resignation before his unfathomable destiny:

> I also go on
> much the same way, what for?
> the question somebody ought to be asking but nobody has
> stopped for long enough to ask
> […]
> I am all washed up.
> If the water reaches me, pulls me back out
> […]
> All that could has already occurred
> No more, nothing to follow
> […] perhaps the odd thing will recur
> But that is all[95].

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[93] *Ibid*., p. 37.
[94] Id., Notebook A, *Konek Landing* working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library.
[95] Id., *Konek Landing*, pp. 126-127.

The ensuing descriptions of the treatment reserved to the sailors on board this ship reminds one of the depersonalisation occurring to inmates and patients of total institutions, or to prisoners of concentration camps: they are inserted here to enhance Konek's loss of agency and humanity, as he is progressively transformed into an automaton, programmed to follow the instructions of his superiors. The existential surrender to external forces greater than him which has characterised his entire life assumes here a new tangible form. Konek sounds almost eager to ultimately renounce the burden of any form of responsibility and achieve a triumph of passivity: "Not that I have to worry. They will march me on board under guard, which one could hardly call release. From now on most decisions will be made on my behalf. A number among other numbers. Instructions are fairly easy to understand[96]".

This aspect of depersonalisation introduces another consequence of Konek's abandonment to the flux of the events that tramples him. The difficulties and the suffering he has had to face since early childhood have progressively eroded his human character, substituting any moral principle and nobility of soul with the sheer necessity to survive. Like Janus in *Winter Journey*, suffering has not brought him any spiritual advancement: he has merely lived, surviving as best he could, toiling through the experiences of life without comprehension, living by instincts as an animal would do – and by no chance is Konek first presented in bestial terms, living in close contacts with the rats and hiding from the predators who are hunting him.

His diminished humanity and incapacity of judgement are further exasperated by the peculiar obscure style adopted by Figes, consisting of extremely dense paragraphs, entire sections with sparse or no punctuation, dialogues mingled with narrative parts, sudden passages from first to third person, use of impersonal pronouns instead of clearly defined subjects, flashbacks and streams of consciousness which add further layers to the narration. On the whole, such a style tends to create a sensation of nebulosity, as though a mist enveloped every element of the text, adumbrating especially Konek's emotive sphere, which rarely ever transpires, not even through his words or interior monologues.

In the first two drafts of the novel, in fact, much more space is given to Konek's dialogues and thoughts, so that on many occasions his chains of reasoning, disposition towards other people, reactions to situations, and feelings are more clearly detectable and extensively articulated. With each successive revision, it seems that Figes made a great effort in condensing her text, reducing the number of explicit descriptions and too direct transpositions of the characters' interiority, while deliberately complicating the reader's comprehension of what is happening, also turning Konek into a much flatter and ungraspable figure.

[96] *Ibid.*, p. 128.

This aspect of the narrative style contributes to elide any easy differentiation between good and evil, thus objectifying everything that happens to Konek or the actions he performs, mainly by silencing any emotive or moral reaction to the events he experiences. Despite the endless succession of misfortunes which befall him, moreover, he is never openly presented as a victim, nor does he ever appear capable of attracting the sympathy of the reader, except perhaps in the early sections illustrating his experiences as a child. Surely, one can easily empathise with the traumas he suffers at such a tender age, when he is forced to live in impossible conditions amidst the devastation of the war, when he is abandoned by both his mother and his aunt, or has to put up with the bullying and the discriminations of the other orphans and even of the nuns at the institution he is sent to. To feel empathy for him as an adult, however, proves to be quite impossible, due to the distance one feels from him as well as to Konek's seeming harshness and lack of human qualities at this stage of his life.

These dynamics reach a sort of climax in the section in which Konek meets the clochard girl and her brother, Mela and Nicolas Rostrovic – at least these are the names attributed to them in the early drafts of the novel, while in the final version they remain unspecified[97]. On this occasion, Konek is taken to the girl by the little boy: the two are evidently looking for someone who could act as their protector, or their safe conduct through the alien country in which they now find themselves, possibly in exchange for some form of sexual favour. After some passages, in which Konek tries condescendingly to explain his situation to the girl, admitting he cannot be of any help to either of them, he finally lies down with her, taking advantage of the circumstances:

> She shook her head, shuddered and wanted to pull her arm away. The candle snuffed out, in utter darkness he pulled her down, pushed her under the old clothes, the stink doubly foul in the dark, her bony pelvis dug into him, stroked her shoulder, the boy muttered, coughed twice and turned over, wonder has she begun to menstruate, if I was a father, but how can I, huddled up, head and shoulder, arms round, for warmth, safer locked up, supervision, more than I could do, not able, growing in the dark, having come after all, what, passed this way before, back full circle, could not understand, must control, not so hard now, only a kid, more relaxed, perhaps dropped off[98].

In such confused descriptions, considerations and scraps of consciousness suddenly surfacing through the narrative fog, Konek's fleeting sense of guilt can be perceived; in some respects, one could even say that he is visited by a glimpse of recognition at one point, seeing in the young girl a sort of mirror of his own past situation. As blindly and unthinkingly as Konek commits himself to every turn of destiny, however, also in these circumstances he lets himself be carried by chance and

[97] "They've gone through the records and we've found where the two kids come from. Mela and Nicolas Rostrovic. Ran away from the state home about four months ago. No parents, no next of kin known" (Id. *Konek Landing*, first typescript draft, *Konek Landing* working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library, p. 182).
[98] Id. *Konek Landing*, p. 121.

by his basic animalistic instincts, performing an act which verges into the criminal, and which is certainly much more sordid and lamentable than the little larcenies he was forced to commit as child, merely in order to survive.

In the earlier drafts of the novel, however, this scene of almost-rape is treated much more extendedly, and enriched by deeper insights into Konek's consciousness and his train of thoughts, as he struggles against both his sense of guilt and his uncontrollable animal lust. Interestingly, in the first draft Konek is ambiguously presented as both a victim and an aggressor when, just before lying with her, he pathetically prays Mela not to seduce him, promising he has no intention to hurt her, and putting on the false mask of a condescending father:

> Please, he said, I don't want to hurt you. Why don't you tell me, confide in me. I don't know why you should have trusted me, let me come here unless… it isn't any of my business. Let me be nice to you. […] Come here, let me tell you a story, a bedtime story […]. Come here, come to me, I could be your father, I promise I won't hurt you, I promise I won't force your legs apart and rip the young thin skin, tear the membrane, bruise you. You're too small. Have you started to menstruate, does it give in you? Stay innocent, please stay innocent, only don't provoke me, don't provoke me beyond endurance[99].

Possibly for the first time, this pathetic monologue shows Konek to be a much more complicated character than one would have expected, demonstrating the existence of a kind of double nature lurking in the recesses of his soul. Here, he seems to have both the luminous side of a man who has suffered much, and who recognises the suffering of a fellow creature he is willing to save, and a darker one, made bitter and vicious by all the experiences of humiliation, debasement and pain he has endured for his entire life. Eventually, despite Mela's active role in the dynamics of seduction which lead to the actual intercourse, it is impossible not to hold Konek responsible, given his position of advantage. The darkness lurking inside him can be evinced in the last cruel remarks he makes, which seem to betray a suppressed need to retaliate on the world part of the same violence he has passively absorbed for all his life:

> The next thing she left her brother and came and lay with him, snuggling up against him like a young animal. He lay rigid, angry, feeling his heart pounding against his ribs and her small tight breasts, until she ran her small cold hands inside the belt of his pants and her crooked teeth dented his mouth. She was like a small rodent, her thighs hard, no movement in them, clinging with tooth and claw. He probably hurt her a good deal, she asked for it, hardly a squeak, still breathing, breathing a bit hard but not letting go, not finishing either[100].

Guilt and victimhood appear to be almost perfectly mingled in this situation. In the second draft of the novel, instead, the same episode is described in slightly different terms, and Konek's scarcely contained need for violence emerges much more clearly in his unspoken consideration of

[99] Id., *Konek Landing*, first typescript draft, *Konek Landing* working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library, p. 172.
[100] *Ibid*., p. 176.

Mela. His being torn between his lust for her and his moral reserves to spare an innocent girl, which characterises him in the first version, is here replaced entirely by his most feral instincts, causing him to derive a seemingly sadistic pleasure from thinking about ravaging her body: "The wrists so thin he could put two fingers round them and hold her down, feel her struggle the thin pelvis under him. Or perhaps she would not struggle, lie tight under him, rigid. Bite, scratch maybe, her small breasts, sobbing, not even bleed[101]". Likewise, the illusory mask of the protective father Konek dons in the first draft is here completely abandoned, since, even as a father, he imagines himself as a cruel figure who punishes her, reveling in an even more crooked kind of pleasure, deriving from the violence he would inflict on her: "If she were my daughter I would tan the living daylights out of her whip her backside lock her up buy her something nice teach her what for what does she think she is strip her have her under me on the floor would she bleed not a drop it's a mother's job teaching her not to get herself into ugly situations[102]".

Apart from any possible opinion on Konek's presumed good or evil nature in the first two drafts of the novel, the most substantial difference which emerges in the final version is his moral indifference, and his almost total emotional flatness. It is as if, with the final revision of the text, Figes had opted for removing with a clean slate the whole of Konek's spiritual side, giving the idea that all the suffering he has endured, all the experiences of isolation, uprooting, humiliation and prevarication he has collected along the years have completely erased his humanity, transforming him into a beast, incapable of the slightest glimpse of empathy. In the ultimate version, Konek appears indeed to be beyond good and evil, unable to discern the one from the other, and simply participating, against his own will, in the general struggle for mere survival which seems to involve the whole world around him. He is a product of the world's violence, the violence of History, the accumulation of endless crimes committed before him and on which he has had no saying whatsoever, but whose consequences he is certainly suffering from.

Konek's inertia before the events of the world is evident in the narration of his troubled experiences in the central sections: both inland and on board the ship, as has been seen, he appears always to be drifting, without sense of direction nor aim. If the epic prehistoric chronicle which opens the novel functions as an absurdly disproportionate introduction, symbolically enhancing his sense of predetermined damnation, his experience is delimited, on the other end, by an equally absurd finale, which grants a further allegorical aspect to his figure, again seemingly disconnected and out of tune with the rest, at least superficially.

[101] Id., *Konek Landing*, second typescript draft, Eva Figes Archive, British Library, p. 165.
[102] *Ibid*., p. 166.

Figes once said that she saw Konek's eventual martyrdom as the "the only possible resolution I, and he, could find[103]" to his existential conundrum. At a first reading, in fact, the sudden shift of setting to the exotic island of the final section, and Konek's act of consigning himself as a willing sacrifice to the primitive community which inhabits the island, are totally unexpected and somehow misplaced in juxtaposition with the rest of the narrative. At a closer inspection, however, the symbolism of this final part ties in interestingly with all the other themes and motifs of the novel, transposing Konek's experience into a different order of significance.

As soon as Konek encounters the population of the island, it is immediately evident that he is being treated in a totally different way from how people have generally approached him in the course of his life:

> [I]t had ceased, drumming, singing and dancing had stopped, he found all eyes turned on him, now clearly visible, standing near the fire in his damp clothes, I suppose he thought I must look rather odd, my white face. He stirred uneasily, […] made a conciliatory gesture towards those black watching faces […]. [I]t appeared as a signal, tension changed to excited whispers, all crawled forward, he heard a word mumbled, *misra* it sounded like, by each bowed head as it reached him, word passed in a dark breath of awe from bowed head to head as he touched each cropped skull as much for reassurance as reassuringly[104].

However, not even these savages seem to be able to give him the only thing that would probably save him, and which he has always lacked in his entire life: humanity, that is, being treated simply as a fellow human being. His elevation to the status of an idol, a sort of middle way between a king and a god, is absurdly out of proportion with the only condition he has known in his earthly experience. On the one hand, this sudden elevation sounds as a redemption for all the suffering he has endured; on the other, it is simply an extension of his exile from everything human, the ultimate confirmation of his unsolvable exclusion from the human consortium. Once again, he finds himself on a different level with respect to the other members of society; the fact that this difference, for once, is of an apparently positive character does not alleviate his sense of isolation, since his exclusion finds confirmation even among the members of this primitive community which lives outside the dynamics of the urbanised modern world.

Having taken on himself all the sins of the world[105], his final Christ-like sacrifice does not and could not ever redeem mankind, let alone himself. According to Silvia Pellicer-Ortin, despite all appearance,

[103] Id., *The Long Passage to Little England*, in "The Observer", 11.06.1978.

[104] Id., *Konek Landing*, pp. 179-180.

[105] In her planning notes, Figes specifies that Konek, both in the first and in the second chapter, almost seeks to transform himself into a kind of martyr, absorbing on himself the sins of the world and the guilt of the people he meets: "Rejecting […] offers of love, of a niche in the chimney corner, he becomes a self-appointed martyr, a kind of saviour and at the same time scapegoat for the sins of the world. […] [E]ach time he runs he has someone's guilt on his back" (id., Notebook A, *Konek Landing* working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library). His end as a sacrificial victim, in this sense, ties in with both his status of scapegoat and, symbolically, with his Jewish nature.

> Konek's final sacrifice has strong negative connotations. Stefan is not really free to choose the role of scapegoat. Rather, he evinces a lack of agency, […] that deprives him of the freedom to choose his death. […] This journey leads Konek to final exclusion from a social system where he has no place, and a death he has not chosen[106].

Thus, martyrdom is for him the only escape from the lifelong pain to which he has been apparently sentenced since the moment of birth, the only condition he has ever known. Death, for Konek, only means a release from all suffering, with no other spiritual or higher significance attached. The fact that this ultimate resolution is offered to him in this exotic setting, totally abstracted from the flux of History and the vicissitudes of the world, can be seen as a bitterly negative confirmation that there can be no redemption nor salvation within the confines of human society, as long as the individual is immersed in the catastrophic succession of events which shape the course of History. As Pellicer-Ortin again explains:

> This solution does not emanate from the Western world, but it comes from an ancestral Eastern culture which still believes in a holistic conception of self and world, and in the possibility of healing through ritual. This implies a severe critique of Western rationalism and the Enlightenment, the mode of thinking that produced Nazism[107].

The only positive note in this ending is the mesmerising scene in which he engages himself in the liberation of a group of caged birds, held captive by one of the island men, the only image of redemption which suggests a glimmer of hope in the otherwise bleak and gloomy narration of Konek's life. Amidst the general awe and stupefied curiosity of the savages, Konek exploits his temporary status of man beyond all laws and rules to return the caged animals to their original condition of freedom:

> Took out one bird already dead, placed it, head hanging, bead eye half closed and clouded, carefully down, small fleas crawled out of its ruffled feathers, close by his foot; a second cage revealed one alive, it paused on his hand and took off in a rush of read feathers. […] Several dead birds now added, spread out round him, one still moved faintly, or was it just a breath of air, cages tumbled in a heap, but a throbbing sky alive with moving wings[108].

Recognising in the imprisoned birds some fellow creatures who are suffering from the same condition he has endured for his entire life, Konek is finally able to kindle a spark of human empathy into his hitherto barren heart, exercising whatever power is left to him in a final gesture of gratuitous altruism.

The liberation of the birds, after all, is a surrogate for the freedom Konek would wish to attain for himself, but which he has never been able to achieve. In the scene of Konek's final sacrifice, he

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[106] Silvia Pellicer-Ortin, *Eva Figes' Writings: A Journey through Trauma*, Cambridge Scholars, Cambridge 2015, p. 151.
[107] *Ibid.*, p. 150.
[108] E. Figes, *Konek Landing*, pp. 183-184.

similarly projects his dreams of freedom onto the white bird placed on the ritualistic raft by his feet, which is elevated to a symbol of his ultimate release. Even though the bird is trapped and Konek himself is tied, unable to even taste the food offerings which surround him, the final image of the novel is one of hope: "They are taking him, carrying him away, lifting his heavy body on to a floating raft. Gifts round his head, fruit he could not touch, a white bird caged now, but afterwards, dark waves washing, night would release it[109]".

The white bird provides an image of purity and innocence redeeming Konek at the end of a life spent in darkness, so that his sacrifice seems to be truly capable of amending the sins of the world. Yet, it is a glimpse of impossible beauty, shining for a mere instant in a world deeply plunged into obscurity, devastation and pain. This image, moreover, subtly resonates with the only other spark of hope in the entire novel, that is, the butterfly that Konek's double, Stefan Koenigson, sees flying by the wires of the concentration camp, amidst a whirlpool of inhuman atrocities:

> [T]he butterfly, he remarked, hovered in the bare patch beyond the high voltage wire and the watch tower manned with guns. Nothing appeared to drive it away, or kill it off, though the fumes must have been poisonous for such an organism, small, naturally integrated. An old man hung on the wire as if he was also watching it, though in actual fact he had hung on the same spot for two days […]. Odd how butterflies remind me of those days[110].

If, on the one hand, a message of hope, resilience and purity can be detected in these two fleeting images, the novel's finale, on the other, suggests that Konek's release cannot but be of a purely symbolic and almost supernatural character. Ultimately, the only form of liberation he can envisage is the one implicit in the end of all his suffering, achievable only through death. Essentially, he remains an outcast and exile, forever defeated by the circumstances of life and the overarching weight of historical destiny.

In her subsequent production, especially in the much later *The Seven Ages*, Figes would provide examples of positive resistance to history, opposed by stoic figures of women who, strong with their bonds of gender solidarity and the inter-generational transmission of lore carried out across the centuries, are capable of reappropriating the awareness of their pivotal role in the flux of events, besides the much more celebrated chronicles of men. The narrator of the first chapter of *The Seven Ages*, for instance, is finally able to pronounce these words of hope and confidence, despite the destiny of collective suffering she has been narrating up to that moment: "Though the names of Medhuil and Moruiw did not figure once in those pages, besides the saints and the killings, she saw in her dream

[109] *Ibid*., pp. 188-189.
[110] *Ibid*., p. 140. Pellicer-Ortin remarks that "[t]he butterfly symbolises the insignificance of humankind in such extreme situations as such as those of the concentration camps, while its capacity for resilience suggests that humanity was not completely lost even in the camps" (S. Pellicer-Ortin, *Eva Figes' Writings: A Journey through Trauma*, p. 143).

that their seed would be everywhere, though no one knew it, would multiply with time over hill and dale, meadow and pasture, their strong roots binding the earth[111]".

Figures such as the female characters of *The Seven Ages* and Milton's daughter in *The Tree of Knowledge* show a possibility of collective and individual redemption in the awareness of a shared historical destiny of oppression and humiliation, and a consequently common battle of silent resistance to bring forward: in Pellicer-Ortin's words, "they display a regenerative and healing potential, by underlying the importance of allowing future female generations to continue the collective story-telling that can keep female memories alive[112]".

In *Konek Landing*, instead, utter isolation and solitary, meaningless pain dominate, and no such solidarity or victorious resistance appear to be possible. Life is for Konek only toil and constant deprivation, offering no opportunities for salvation, nor room for true redemption. His example of resistance evokes no idea of nobleness, nor does he appear to have learnt anything from his endless chain of sufferings. Similarly, no trace is left of his miserable experience for future generation to build their own sense of identity or continuity. The final liberation he finds in death can hardly be seen as a victory.

III. Overturning patriarchal attitudes

As already mentioned, one of Figes's pivotal characteristics, both as a writer of fiction and as a social commentator, is her interest in women's experience of the world and position in a society largely fashioned and controlled by men. For many of her characters, who reflect the situation of flesh-and-bones individuals in the real world, the simple fact of being born into a woman's body implies a condition of constant subjection to a set of social norms and expectations strictly related to their gender. Much of Figes's production exemplifies the observation that, historically, being born a woman rather than a man is not just a biological difference: more often than not, this biological destiny carries with itself a position of inferiority and disadvantage in several different spheres of society, to say nothing of the history of prevarication, humiliation and violence which women of all extractions, geographical contexts and historical times have had to face, and continue to face, on the sole ground of their gender.

Figes already showed a strong awareness of the existence of such dynamics when she was still merely a teenager, at least since the first time she had discussions with her mother about the issue of

[111] E. Figes, *The Seven Ages*, Pantheon, Ney York 1986, p. 14).
[112] S. Pellicer-Ortin, *Eva Figes' Writings: A Journey through Trauma*, p. 92.

women teachers' salaries, and conducted her own small-scale rebellions against the expectations of her parents[113]. From the end of the Sixties and through the Seventies, this fervent feeling of social injustice inspired her to become one of Britain's leading figures in the feminist battle for women's rights, during which period she produced a groundbreaking text such as *Patriarchal Attitudes*, contributing also with a plethora of other interventions both in written and oral forms.

Throughout her career as a writer of fiction, however, this combative attitude was not always placed in the foreground. The author herself, for instance, has stressed how difficult and problematic it was for her, especially in the earliest phase of her production, to employ female protagonists and filter the world through their eyes: "The moment I contemplated a female protagonist the character lost its clear outline and became me: pain, anger and resentment spilled over on to the pages in a muddled sort of way. Instead I had to choose men[114]". By her own admission, the composition of *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) and the overcoming of devastating personal experiences such as the divorce and its aftermath, gave her the confidence she needed to start placing her female characters in more prominent positions, thus starting to sublimate in fiction aspects of her life she had not dared to deal with before:

> In that sense writing *Patriarchal Attitudes* was something of a watershed in my career. […] I think it gave me confidence in the central humanity of women: it certainly made me aware that I was normal, and not some sort of intellectual freak […]. And if I ever felt some sort of sneaking embarrassment about the possibility of being labelled a woman writer by the opposite sex, that was certainly gone. Women were suddenly on a winning ticket, the sex with something to say. Men, by comparison, seemed tired, played out, and on the defensive. […] By the time I wrote *Patriarchal Attitudes* […] I knew I was strong enough to withstand anything society could hurl at me, and perhaps throw it back with good measure. Without really knowing why or who, I began writing with female protagonists. For the first time I had real control over my material, a control which comes, I suppose, from knowledge and assurance. At the same time these books were exploratory at a deep and intimate level, revealed a lot of unexpected surprises to the author, and were often extremely painful to write[115].

The period considered here, between Sixties and Seventies, is thus exemplary of this pivotal turn in Figes's writing, and can be particularly functional to the analysis of her treatment of female characters, as this changed from one phase of her production to the next. If, in the early texts – with the exception of *Equinox* –, Figes's female characters occupy secondary roles, it does not mean that they are not there: on the contrary, the fact that the narration is carried out through a male filter can provide interesting insights into men's conception of women, or at least into how Figes imagines such

[113] "The fact that I was a girl, whose function in life was first and foremost domestic, justified her [my mother's] using me. I was being taught my role in life […]. I was told that my first duty in life would be to look after my husband and children, who must never be sacrificed to other ambitions. Outside work must be 'fitted in', or abandoned. I was showing disturbing signs of not conforming to this norm. I always had my nose in a book which, as far as my outgoing father was concerned, was downright unnatural" (E. Figes, *Living with Loss*, p. 210).
[114] Id, *A Voice of One's Own* [unpublished], Eva Figes Archive, British Library.
[115] *Ivi*.

conception to be, drawing on her observations, deductions, and experiences. “Women”, she explained, “are always in the background, part of my peripheral vision, often perceived through the eyes of the male protagonist who, of course, got it wrong[116]”.

If juxtaposed with the texts belonging to the “feminist” phase of her production, in which women take the lead and speak directly through their own voices, these early novels create indeed an interesting contrast and a fruitful dialogue. The issue of the biological destiny faced by Figes’s female characters can thus be said to have two aspects, since the matter is explored in her fiction both through female and male points of view. To give voice to the opinion of men, after all, is of strategic importance, in that men are responsible for the creation and the perpetuation of the patriarchal system, which aims at the preservation of the status quo, keeping women chained to a position of inferiority. In the novels centred on male protagonists, women are mainly considered through the distorted projections of men, through their desires and idealisations, their difficult and invariably flawed understanding of the female character. In different cases, instead, women are given prominence, so that they can communicate transparently the unique quality of their experience, quintessentially different form that of men.

Judging by her programmatic pronouncements, Figes’s aim was to reach a sort of synthesis between these two points of view, arriving at a sense of universality through the partial representation of the world provided by characters of both sexes: “It seems to me that the things I’m writing about are things that affect all human beings, whichever gender they are. I think they are very serious issues to be written about which have nothing to do with whether you are a man or a woman and I really do not want to be labelled[117]”. The period between the end of the Sixties and the Seventies represents in this sense a moment of crucial transition from one phase of her writing career to another, a site where the dialogue between the two sexes reaches its apogee.

In this phase of gravid contrasts, two texts in particular can be said to provide an interesting occasion for comparison between male and female points of view, demonstrating how, in the same period, the author was absorbing and re-working into her fiction the issues and the consequent reflections which had engrossed her during the composition of *Patriarchal Attitudes*. One is the novel *B*, in which Figes provides a perfect illustration of a man’s chauvinistic vision of women. *B* is indeed an insightful attempt at penetration into the mind of a misogynistic patriarch, an artist full of himself who exemplifies, through his conduct, a whole collection of negative behaviours which men typically adopt towards women, and which can be easily detected in the rest of the community. A perfect response to *B*, also due to the chronological closeness of these two novels, is then *Nelly’s Version*. This novel can be considered instead as a huge allegory, dealing with an extreme situation which is

[116] *Ivi*.
[117] M. Almagro and C. Sánchez-Palencia, *Eva Figes: An Interview*, in “Atlantis”, v. 22.1 (Junio 2000), p. 181.

nothing but a projection of men's worst nightmares with regard to women's behaviours – or, if considered from the opposite stance, of women's utopias of freedom in a patriarchal society.

In juxtaposition with other allusions contained in Figes's earlier production, concerning women as seen through the eyes of male characters, these two texts offer an exhaustive representation of the situation of pressure and predicament women daily encounter in a world dominated by men. They give insightful illustrations of the thick layer of prejudices and the complex system of social expectations women are constantly subjected to, along with examples of resistance, if not downright opposition, which can be attempted against such constricting paradigms. They also provide reflections of the usual consequences which typically derive from any such attempts at non-conformity.

The character of Paul Beard in *B* is a sort of fictional reworking of the figure of Beethoven, mixed with some elements of the fable *Bluebeard*. At the time of the novel's composition, Figes was interested in Beethoven, and particularly in his controversial relationship with his nephew. Beethoven, indeed, provided a perfect example of a man of great artistic genius, but incapable of preserving balanced inter-personal relationships, especially within his family circle:

> Certainly Beethoven's relationship with his nephew was one thing I was fixated on at the time. Beethoven had a nephew and he got custody of the boy against the wish of the boy and his mother and the boy actually tried to kill himself, because Beethoven was so overbearing as a guardian. And *Bluebeard* of course, because I think a wife disappears in it. So that was the reason for *B*[118].

The inspiration deriving from Beethoven eventually led Figes to choose the figure of a writer with a failed marriage and a contested son in the past, but also with a problematic relationship with his present wife, a woman much younger than himself. His attitude towards both women, his asides and considerations to himself, together with his dialogues with other male characters – mainly the writer B, plus various inhabitants of the English countryside village he is temporarily residing in –, provide a commentary which is a perfect illustration of an average patriarchal microcosm at work.

From the very first pages of the novel, Beard is presented as an artist who is totally and morbidly immersed in his own work, to the detriment of all personal relationships in his life. His attitude towards other people is one of coldness and detachedness: the closer another person is to him, the deeper their ties with Beard, the more resentful he appears to be towards them, and the more violent his reactions may become in case they irritate him. When the figure of his present wife Judith is introduced, for instance, the focus is first and foremost placed on the negative impact she appears

[118] E. Figes, Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 17.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library. Initially, at least until the first draft of the initial pages of the novel, the author had planned to call the story *Bluebeard the Creator*.

to have on his work routine. Indeed, Judith is seen basically as a nuisance, an unnecessary accessory impeding his daily activities, a sort of domestic pet, demanding to be constantly entertained and threatening to disrupt his concentration with her sudden intrusions:

> She has a distinctly ambiguous attitude to my work: although she enjoys the social status attached to it she will not allow me to get on with it undisturbed. The real awe she accords me as an author (and it was this aura which I suppose first attracted her to a middle-aged man) does not stop her from feeling that the attention I give my work should really be given to her, that it has been withdrawn from her in some way[119].

His attitude towards her is generally one of contempt: he treats her with aloofness and condescendence, overstressing the importance of his own work above everything she does or might do. In fact, a certain ambiguity is soon manifested in the conception Beard has of his wife, and of the alleged role he has assigned to her in their domestic life. On the one hand, he complains about her constant interruptions (even when they involve favours and material services she delivers to him, such as bringing him meals or tea), and about her irksome insistence to perform the part of the famous writer's wife, which he considers an expression of vanity he has little sympathy with:

> I hope Judith does not decide to come in now, not simply because I do not want her to look over my shoulder and read what I have written about her. […] No, it is the uncomfortable fact that, since we have moved up here, she feels impelled to play the role of author's wife. […] There must be something she could find to do during the day, the women's institute in the village, for example. […] I want to be left in peace to get on with my work, which is why I moved up here […]. The truth is, she wants to invite up a lot of friends, because she is bored, and have a constant houseparty going on, and I won't hear of it. I suspect she would like to impress her friends, just as she enjoys being married to a famous author[120].

On the other hand, and with great hypocrisy, he also complains about the interruptions of Judith's services when she no longer takes care of the most material incumbencies of their domestic life, such as for instance answering the door, or preparing meals: "the trouble about wives disappearing is that one stops having regular square meals which provide a stomach lining for alcohol[121]". Similarly, on another occasion, when he is reminiscing about his ex-wife Martha and the period immediately after the birth of his son William, he expresses his disappointment at her inability to give him the pleasure he was used to in their moments of intimacy: "I could not make love in the way I wanted, used to, once I put my mouth round her nipple she suddenly gasped with pain and pushed me away, said her breasts were sore from the baby gnawing all day. Bloody hell, she swore, both of you is too much[122]".

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[119] Id., *B*, Faber and Faber, London 1972, p. 7.
[120] *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
[121] *Ibid.*, p. 84.
[122] *Ibid.*, p. 101.

What is even more bitterly ironic, with regard to his complaints about the distractions caused by Judith, is the fact that he turns out to be the sole responsible for the situation of existential suspension and excruciating boredom to which she has been condemned, and which naturally pushes her to vie for his attentions, causing his distress and accruing his contempt for her: "'You shouldn't have let her give up her job.' I shrugged. 'It was of no importance. And I wanted her around. Why should she wear herself out, working office hours, when we don't need the money, and it only meant we could never get away from London?'[123]". These examples demonstrate Beard's typical materialistic behaviour, a tendency to treat women as disposable objects, exploiting them because of the pleasures and the benefits he can derive from them; at the same time, he never shows any sense of responsibility for their own welfare and mental wellbeing, nor does he demonstrate any willingness to fulfill his own duties as a husband or parent, sometimes not even the awareness of the fact that any such duties might be required of him as well.

If, on the one hand, he does not take any notice of Judith when she is around, or even resents her attempts at catching his attention or spending more time with him, he nonetheless gives vent, on the other, to unexpected expressions of jealousy towards her, which appear even more absurd in light of his usual behaviour. At some point, for instance, when the local schoolmaster comes to visit Judith with some work-related excuse, Beard gives rein to conspiratorial thoughts about his wife's possible betrayal, to which she reacts quite desperately:

> I don't see why she should have taken the whole episode so seriously, unless there was some other motive. I had a suspicion they fancied each other, why should she have made friends with a local schoolmaster unless she found him sexually attractive, […] if she is bored she would be quite liable to flirt with somebody. […] What do you expect to do, she cried, […] when you shut yourself away for hours with your precious books – talk to the cows? I can't even talk to my friends because you had the telephone taken away[124].

With his usual hypocrisy, Beard criticises his wife whenever she spends time innocently with other men – that is, on the very few occasions in which she has the possibility to do so –, but then, in the majority of other circumstances, he wishes that she could stay away from him as much as possible, and leave him in peace to go on with his work. Once Judith has seemingly disappeared from the house for a little longer than usual, he draws a sigh as though of relief, happy that "perhaps she really has begun to lead her own life rather more, instead of revolving like a helpless satellite round mine. A development devoutly to be wished[125]".

These behavioural incongruences in Beard's attitude towards Judith appear even more exacerbated if one takes into account some dynamics of his past relationship with his ex-wife, Martha.

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[123] *Ibid.*, p. 114.
[124] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[125] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

In his dealings with Judith, Beard demonstrates his wish to be accompanied by a respectable woman, observant of his own needs, devoted and faithful, the perfect incarnation of the angel of the house: he falsely encourages her to be more independent, though secretly rejoicing in the control he is able to exert on her, who is rather evidently subjugated to an ancillary position. In discussing retrospectively some of Martha's personal traits and vices, or in some fictional projections of her in which he sometimes indulges, Beard appears to deal, instead, with a much more corporeal and sensual image of a femme fatale, whom he both repulses and desires.

Martha is the prototype of woman outside all schemes, resistant to all the social pressures which usually tend to mould female characters into subdued and restrained individuals, such as Judith apparently is, at least on the outside. Martha's greater freedom of spirit can be appreciated in such details as her refusal to concede herself to Beard in the period immediately following her childbirth, or in the strength and even irreverence with which she responds to some observations or reproaches he addresses to her. Especially regarding alcoholic consumption, which Beard considers unfit for the image of respectable woman he would like her to conform to, she is adamant in pursuing a libertine line, claiming her right to behave as she pleases: "'Well, Paul, don't I get a drink?' […] I poured her a very short drink but she pushed the glass up to my face and said: 'More'. […] 'Paul doesn't really approve of my drinking, you know, I think he thinks it unladylike to knock back whisky'[126]".

However, the greatest sign of rebellion, albeit infused with subdued resignation, is represented by Martha's opinions on the experience of parturition. She expresses a sense of humiliation and impotence at finding herself manipulated by nature to serve the end of the prosecution of the human species:

> Afterwards Martha, in the harassed months that followed the boy's birth, […] told me that it was because of those hours in the labour ward that she had changed her ideas, had somehow stopped believing in herself or anyone else as having absolute importance as an individual. 'It's as though a huge hand came down and took hold of your body, squeezed life out of it. It was just a pod ready to burst, nothing more. As far as this force, the squeezing hand was concerned, it didn't matter whether I lived or not, after I had fulfilled my function, and it certainly didn't matter how much agony I endured'[127].

In Martha's words, the blind action of the hand of nature disquietingly echoes the same kind of manipulation she is subjected to on a much more mundane level, being a woman compelled to take part in a society in which men exert all the power and control. Despite the seeming impossibility of wriggling out of a system which exploits her in so many respects, implicit in her observations is a desire to refuse all manners of compliance to what is expected of her as a woman and as a wife, a wish to break free of the biological destiny to which she has been doomed since the moment of birth.

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[126] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[127] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

Martha's freedom distresses Beard, and scares him much more than he would care to admit. At the same time, however, he naturally demonstrates signs of a morbid admiration, if not downright infatuation, for the aura of liberated woman she seems to emanate, and for the strong character she shows in many circumstances. This is especially evident in one curious episode, in which Beard is narrating his first encounter with B, in a bizarre mixture of truth and fictional re-elaboration of the same. The strangely oneiric quality of this passage allows Beard to give tangible expression to some desires he evidently prefers to keep concealed: the impression is that admitting the existence of such desires would be like yielding to their influence, and possibly relinquishing part of the control he intends to maintain in his dealings with the opposite sex. Before Martha's half-joking suggestion that she could consider starting a career as a stripper, for example, Beard has B admit that she is "too individualistic, half the men would go mad if they saw you, and the other half would die of embarrassment[128]", without specifying which of the two options would describe his own situation. In the scene which ensues, Beard describes B's explicit approach towards his wife, which results in an absurd acrobatic sexual performance he imagines taking place in front of him, in response to which he hardly manages to hide evident signs of arousal:

> I have to confess I was excited, more so than I have been for a long time. The memory of Martha's body is one that I have not allowed to intrude for a long time. I thought I had buried it with distaste years ago. […] [P]erhaps I am discovering a voyeur's instinct in myself, certainly nothing of this was planned, but now that the sexual act was being performed on the sofa my erection was urgent and unmistakable, even if, as I write, I am wondering how we are all going to get out of this embarrassing situation[129].

In spite of these revealing projections, however, the sexual desire for such a liberated woman, or better, the anticipation of the pleasure Beard imagines he would get from her, does not prove promising enough for him to renounce his role of plenipotentiary husband. It is possibly exactly because of his incapability to master Martha that he has substituted her with Judith, a much more docile and malleable woman, allowing him to go on performing his role of superior man, always in control and content in his patriarchal aloofness, holding the puppet's strings in his hands and twitching them according to his own whims, encountering little or no resistance on the other end.

From Beard's attitude towards his second wife, it appears clear that his main concern is to exert a kind of total control over her whole person, both in terms of mind and body: he wishes to move her around like a puppet, allowing her to do things only when it suits him, and limiting Judith's freedom when this begins to impede his own routine. She is required to love and respect him as a husband, to be a moderate and loyal wife, but only as long as this does not interfere with his work. If she wants to divert herself, this must be done within precise limits, since she is not entitled to spend

[128] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
[129] *Ibid.*, 39.

too much time with other men, let alone show any kind of interest in them. At the same time, she is not encouraged to entertain too many relationships with friends, because they would disturb the climate of quiet and recollection he has meticulously created in the house. The domestic space is for him a workplace, and she is more or less forced to stay there, not having other activities in which to engage herself; but she is not really free to move within this space either, or exploit it as she would wish.

On some occasions, Beard appears so self-contentedly immersed in his authoritarian role as to allow himself to feel, at the peak of his condescendence, some semblance of pity towards the poor Judith. In a passing remark about her, for instance, he lets himself go to one of the few seeming movements of empathy he is able to show, admitting that perhaps he has excessively neglected her: "Poor Judith, hardly impinges on my consciousness sometimes, really does have a lot to put up with. I understand. And then I am liable to be suddenly irritable for no reason evident to her. […] It is B. I want to concentrate on […]. She hovers on the outside of my mind, trying to find a way in[130]". One should not, however, pay much attention to such remarks, judging by the general behaviour Beard reserves to his wife, and by the rapidity with which he dismisses her whenever his work is concerned.

In spite of all his lack of empathy and his carelessness, however, we are left with the impression that all these maltreatments and prevarications he has abused her with have left some deep mark on him as well. At some point, the sense of guilt he has necessarily repressed in the fulfillment of his own despotic functions resurfaces in his sleep, assuming a nightmarish form which perfectly illustrates the existential situation of his wife:

> Afterwards I dozed off, the sounds of the house moving became something shut up below, this dumb animal moving on its chain, which would rattle and clink each time the monster shifted inside its prison. I had prepared for a dinner party, but now I could not go down to the cellar for fear of the beast; silence, I listened anxiously but heard nothing, my fear now had become the guilty knowledge of what I would find, a suffering animal starved to death[131].

The monster he sees in his dreams has an ambiguous function. On the one hand, it can be seen as a projection of his inner monstrosity, the suppressed awareness of his aberrating conduct towards his own wife; on the other, it is a demonic transfiguration of Judith herself, a visual metaphor for the condition of captivity she has been forced into.

Curiously enough, the impediment which afflicts both himself and his monster-wife in this oneiric projection would suggest that, in some way, he also feels victim of an oppression akin to that suffered by Judith: it is as though Beard were also bound by the limitations of a precise role, in his case that of the prevaricating patriarch, which society has strongly encouraged him to assume, and

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130 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
131 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

were now incapable of giving it up. Despite his fleeting awareness of the violence implicit in his actions and in his domestic behaviour, however, he does not appear willing or perhaps even able to change anything in his or his wife's situation. His attitude is one of total conformity and acceptance, and these momentary resurfacings of his moral reservations are soon pushed back into his unconscious, and replaced by the more urgent necessity to exercise a total control over his woman.

Beard's obsession with control comes to the fore at many junctures, demonstrating how this is the real concern polluting his dealings with the opposite sex. Coming from a relationship with a woman such as Martha, who stands in his eyes as the epitome of female liberation, Beard sees now in Judith a docile animal he can easily control and keep at her place. Secure and self-contented in his role of condescending patriarch, he pays her so little attention that it takes him a rather long while to realise she has actually disappeared. The first signs of awareness he shows in this respect, apart from some doubts he expresses in the opening passages, appear tragicomically only at page 53, after several chapters of unnoticed evidence of Judith's disappearance:

> There is no doubt about it now: Judith has disappeared. I had forgotten all about it, both her and the stupid scene after the visitor left. […] It does not seem like Judith to keep up a tiff for so long, and anyhow, no woman could resists coming back to the attack, or how could she be certain that the message was getting home and her behaviour was having some effect? […] The whole business was trivial anyhow, not worth so much fuss, but trust a woman to make a mountain of a molehill. […] Judith simply is not in the house, and it is more than probable that she has not been here at all for the past two days[132].

As soon as he metabolises her disappearance, the serenity he so much cherishes crumbles to pieces and a bitter sense of general defeat takes hold of him, as he assesses his progressive loss of control over so many elements in his life: even worse than this, he realises that the control he believed to possess over everything and Judith was in fact a delusion. Employing the system of references he knows best, this sense of failure and inadequacy is soon translated into the writerly sphere: "What was it all about anyhow, an escape from my real problems, an attempt to play God on paper, create order out of chaos because real life is always beyond my control?[133]". His abilities as a writer, a clear extension of the author-ity he exerts in his domestic life as a prevaricating husband, are exposed as insufficient, against Judith's unexpected resistance to his grasp:

> My wife, not a character in one of my novels. That was the rub: not nearly so easy to find a convincing explanation. Action alone illuminates a whole that lies in darkness. You see, I tried to explain, although I have known my wife for two years and lived with her, that does not mean I could possibly really know her. The notion of character is a false concept[134].

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[132] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[133] *Ibid.*, p. 56.
[134] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Moreover, one darker aspect which can be detected in Beard is that whenever his grasp on things, and especially on Judith, shows evident signs of loosening, a violent reaction often seems to loom in his mind as a concrete possibility – and this, as will be seen shortly, is in many respects encouraged by the society he is part of. In the sections of Figes's working notes which regard the embryonal character of Bluebeard the Creator, as Beard was initially called, his violent temper appears much more explicit, suggesting that this was originally to be elevated to a founding trait of his personality. One entry, for instance, highlights the emotion of "Rage", attributing to Beard scenes of domestic violence such as the following: "For God's sake woman, his hands were round her throat and he was shaking her, a lifeless doll[135]". The irritability he shows in the novel, whenever someone threatens to intrude into his study and interrupt his work, sublimates here into a scarcely repressed homicidal frenzy: "Someone is knocking at the door. Who is it. Go away. I wish to be alone. Leave him alone or he will kill you. If she has come to nag at me again I will strangle her. I cannot stand the way she goes on[136]". In an even more explicit entry, Beard is imagined to go as far as to rape Judith in an excess of resentment and frustration: "Final violation of Judith, who would not bear him a child [had become afraid of him – his rage against Martha turned blindly towards her, whose individuality he did not recognise at all][137]". In yet another note, relating instead to the episode of Judith's disappearance, Figes has the entire village sinisterly gossiping about the fact that he is "mad", "as good as killed her, just as if he had murdered her with his bare hands[138]".

All this underlying violence of which Beard is evidently capable, at least potentially, appears in fact in the final version of the novel in a softened fashion, reduced to expressions of controlled contempt and irritation towards Judith, Martha, or the housemaid. In one late episode, however, taking place when he is progressively losing his patience and self-control owing to Judith's protracted absence, a succession of memories about his father's funeral gives rise to a sudden impetus of rage. This outburst of verbal violence, addressed in particular to his mother, gives voice in fact to the reservoir of suppressed hatred he harbours towards all women. If juxtaposed with Figes's planning notes about him, and with all the other expressions of misogynism of which the novel is replete, this somewhat unexpected behaviour provides a solid demonstration of the character Beard is truly hiding within himself, and which can potentially come out of its shell at any given moment:

> I stopped the car at the side of the road, oblivious of the danger of parking on a curve, and leaned arms and head on the steering wheel. […] My whole body shook with dry, violent sobs. Your betrayal, you bitch, all of you bitches behind your graceful gestures, arranging flowers so prettily in a vase, trying to rub off the green smears on your fingers and keeping your plans carefully hidden inside your head[139].

135 Id., Notebook 1, *B* working papers, Eva Figes Archive, British Library.
136 *Ivi*.
137 *Ivi*.
138 *Ivi*.
139 Id., *B*, p. 65.

Differently from Figes's planning notes, however, no act of violence is ever explicitly reported in the final version of the novel, although violence is often implicit or potential in many expressions and behaviours provided especially, though not exclusively, by the male characters. Considering the general attitude not only of Beard, but of all the inhabitants of the small countryside village in which he resides, one crucial impression which can be derived is that any act of violence over women, if ever committed, would not only be allowed to take place, but generally defended by the entire community.

On a small-scale, this impression is somehow confirmed by many exchanges between B and Beard, especially by the way the latter always seems to find in the fellow writer a reflection of his own opinions on women, and a mutual justification for the perpetuation of their patriarchal attitudes. When B seduces a young girl from the village and she moves with him in the cottage, B's considerations can be seen to perfectly mirror Beard's remarks about Judith: the same complaints about being interrupted[140] and about the girl's desperate and morbid clinging to him[141]; the same condescendence and scarce consideration for her; the belief that all she does is far less important than his own work; and the same stifled sense of guilt which resurfaces from time to time, but which ultimately does not lead to any change of attitude[142].

B demonstrates the same tendency to hypocrisy which characterises Beard, augmented by an even more mercurial character which makes him oscillate between expressions of seeming affection and a much more dismissive attitude towards his girl and women in general. At one early point, for instance, he launches into an exaggerated serenade which sounds terribly artificial, especially if juxtaposed with his subsequent behaviour with the girl: "Ah Beard, […] what would we do without woman, a gentle bosom upon which to lean our weary head […], the inspiration of our foolish male genius, the delight and relaxation of our leisure[143]". The lesson which Beard, from the ivory tower of his greater experience, does not waste the opportunity to impart on the young writer after such a panegyric seems to represent much more closely the kind of worldview which informs also B's attitude towards women:

> Allow me to give you a word of warning […] about the most materialistic sex in the world. Women are supposed to love love above everything else, the sentimental little dears, but don't you believe it. Wherever a capitalistic consumer society flourishes on the torn guts of humanity, *cherchez la femme*. It's because they are not creative, all they can do is latch on to some poor devil of a man and make him work for them […]. Have you ever thought why men

[140] "It had all started once he was back on his feet, as so often happens he was overcome by a fever of work after this longish period of inactivity, the girl became more than an irritation, cooped up in such a small place, she was in the way" (*ibid*., p. 105).
[141] "Look, you ask her to go. […] I wouldn't mind, to tell the truth she irritates me beyond endurance. She follows me around like a lost dog" (*ibid*., p. 98).
[142] "B. shook his head: he was miserable, not only did he feel responsible, but the worst of it was, he felt lonely without her. At least it was a human being about the place, even if her mind was limited" (*ibid*., p. 106).
[143] *Ibid*., p. 20.

> scuttle off to work every morning, half killing themselves in the rush hours twice a day like a lot of lemmings, dropping dead in their prime of premature heart attacks? Not because they enjoy that sort of life, who could, but because the little woman back home is driving them[144].

At a more general level, instead, it soon becomes apparent that Beard's poor opinion of and his negative bias regarding women are amply shared by many exponents of the village as well. When he goes to the police station to report his wife's disappearance, for instance, he receives the following dismissive remark by the head officer, which implicitly positions the latter within the same system of attitudes from which all of Beard's misogynistic outpours also originate: "We'll initiate inquiries, of course, […] [b]ut it's more than likely she's gone off to Paris to buy a new hat, or something similar[145]". Apart from this somewhat innocent, if not at all innocuous comment, other examples demonstrate how the general mentality of the village makes people potentially ready to justify behaviours that go well beyond the simple denigration implicit in certain stereotypes about women. In relating a series of anecdotes regarding the destiny of B's girl after the former's departure, Beard appears to lose his individuality behind the mask of the village's collective consciousness. Through his words, this consciousness becomes an invisible force which serenely validates the recourse to violence in the maintenance of the status quo, as well as in the defense of the community's alleged purity against deviances of any kind, especially if they concern female subjects:

> It was rumoured that she wanted to leave the village, her ambition was to move to London, but her father would not allow it, he had more or less refused to speak to the girl since she came back home […]. [I]ncidents had come back to me in my isolated house […]. Her father had put his hand to her, not hard, mind, just enough to bring her to her senses, the red weal across her face brought water to her eyes, […] but you could see her pulling herself together, perhaps that's what she needed, a strict hand, perhaps you won't believe this, Mr. Beard, but the girl smiled then, yes, actually gave an odd sort of smile[146].

An even more disquieting proof of the degree of penetration and of the diffused status of such dynamics among the inhabitants of the village is provided at some point by Judith's sister, Susan. When Beard seeks her help in the hope of tracing his missing wife, Susan narrates an episode dating back to Judith's school days and concerning her being once harassed by a maniac. Implicitly, she warns Beard of her dangerous tendency to encourage this kind of behaviour in other people, which might sadly provide an explanation to her recent disappearance:

> It happened to her once before, when she was still at school. This man kept following her on the way home. She had told me about it, giggling, not in the least alarmed, in fact I think she was quite pleased. I warned her that he might be dangerous, but she just scoffed […]. Perhaps she even encouraged him. You know that smile she has, and even at fifteen she could somehow

[144] *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.
[145] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
[146] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

> make a drab school uniform look sexy. […] I thought she was partly to blame, and I told her so. I hoped it had taught her a lesson[147].

This story seems to suggest that Susan essentially agrees with the set of arguments typically employed by men in order to justify, even only partially, the most vicious acts of violence perpetrated against women. Susan seems to imply that, even if the victim in question is a family member, if that person crosses the societal limits of decency and steps out of the conventional path, any possible tragic consequence of his/her behaviour is not only to be expected, but it must also be understood and accepted as a perfectly natural thing. The fact that this attitude is espoused by a woman shows a total lack of female solidarity within the community, and the effective persuasiveness of the patriarchal logic which lies at the heart of this kind of vision of the world, indicating also the insurmountable difficulties which prevent any substantial change from happening.

The impalpable though menacing entity of the village's collective consciousness extends its threatening, judging shadow over every single member of this microcosm, closely checking their behaviour and their every move, ready to condemn gravely and irremediably even the slightest *faux pas*. It is the community's faceless though tangible pressure, for instance, which pushes Beard to talk to B about his controversial relationship with the girl, warning him of the possible consequences that could derive from this: "I felt I owed it both to him and myself, since this was my home, to warn him about the intimate and at the same time exposed nature of village life, a small world which I guessed he probably had not yet fully understood[148]". Eventually, it is the same distorted moral spirit of the village which brings the girl's father to repudiate her, the students' mothers to call for her expulsion from the school in which she had started to work, and finally to lock her up in a mental institution, so as to prevent her deviant example from corrupting the puritanic compliant model promulgated by the rest of the community.

More sinisterly, the village's consciousness is also exposed as a mechanism of connivence, which has imposed and continues to preserve an impenetrable veil of silence on a series of violent acts apparently perpetrated in the past, which have led to the assassination of a number of female members of this small countryside community. From a certain point of the narration, allusions, anecdotes and references to women who have been murdered both in the recent and remote past begin to crop up almost casually, casting a somewhat grotesque shadow on the whole place. The schoolmaster, for instance, is reported at one point to be working on a play based on a piece of local crime news involving a feminicide:

> [H]e had dug up the records and written a melodrama round the death of mad Mary, the bailiff's daughter, the one in the song who was supposed to have died of a broken heart after

[147] *Ibid.*, pp. 11t6-117.
[148] *Ibid.*, p. 66.

> being crossed in love and seduced by the squire's handsome son, but actually the body was found strangled in a lane about half a mile away from here, months after she had disappeared, and nobody was ever accused and brought to book for the murder[149].

At another juncture, a similar story of murder is brought up almost randomly in the middle of a conversation between B and Beard, in the form of one of his typical interior monologues: "(The body of a woman had been found, years ago, not more than a mile or two away. Partially decomposed, it was impossible to make a positive identification)[150]". The anecdotal nature of such statement, enclosed in brackets, as if to signal its distance from the rest of the narration, echoes the presence of a generalised silence among the village people, which tends to keep such pieces of controversial collective memory stifled in the underground. Even a tragic event like the murder of a person, which should acquire even greater resonance given the restricted size of the local population, is glossed over and encouraged to be soon forgotten.

In the conclusive passages of the novel, a policeman refers to Beard that another body has been found under the floorboards of his cottage. Hearing this news, Beard goes into a panic, believing for a moment that the body could belong to his missing wife; the mystery is accrued, moreover, by the fact that the reader may have some reason to think that the person buried there could in some way be related to B, who used to stay in the cottage and, due to his unstable and unpredictable character, might potentially fit the profile of a murderer. Eventually, the body turns out to be that of a another woman, already decomposed and believed to have been buried there some twenty years previously. The whole event ends up in an anticlimax, with Beard's relief and the subsequent excitement with which he meets the concomitant news of Martha's sudden death, which means he will obtain the custody of his son, William.

The umpteenth piece of local tragedy goes thus unnoticed, swallowed by the whirlpool of everyday life which goes on in this unperturbable rural community. At an individual level, this is exemplified by the dismissive and almost serene attitude by which Beard eventually salutes both Judith's disappearance and Martha's death. The issue of his second wife's absence is closed with a simple, pragmatic resolution: "She will not come back now. Judith has gone for good. Did she have lovers? I do not know. Anyhow, I need not wait for her here, standing at the window facing the drive. In a few days I can shut the place up and leave, it will not change anything[151]". Martha's death, on the other hand, is even received with something resembling a scarcely contained bout of enthusiasm:

> 'I regret to inform you that Mrs. Beard was found dead this morning […]'.
> I forced back a blind impulse to laugh.
> […] 'Officer, […] you gave me a terrible shock. Are you talking about Mrs. Martha Beard?'

[149] *Ibid*., pp. 130-131.
[150] *Ibid*., p. 107.
[151] *Ibid*., p. 140.

> [F]irst and foremost I had to see William, break the news to him. He would be distressed, naturally, but once his pain eased I would take Martha's place, at last I would not only enjoy the confidence of somebody, but come first in his eyes, be totally necessary. Excitement makes me want to hurry, pack up my things, lock up the house and go[152].

At a global level, instead, the indifference of the village and the connivence of its inhabitants makes it possible to obliviate a whole string of feminicides as soon as they take place, to say nothing of all those softer, yet as serious, forms of daily prevarications which are perpetrated on the female subjects of the community. If the body found under Beard's pavement does not belong to any woman he has killed, this female amass of bones still functions as a tangible metaphor for his and every man's guilt of having subjugated and locked up women in an existential cellar – a guilt which resurfaces from time to time in his nightmares. This neglected skeleton is the product of everybody's violence, past, present and future, which every male individual of society shamefully conceals under the various layers of false appearances and collective justifications, tragically shared by most women as well.

Beard can wash his hands of the responsibility for the corpse that lies buried under his own house, and for the inherited dirt accumulated across the ages and literally swept under the rug, because the patriarchal system allows him to do so, and because the conduct of its every member continues to perpetuate the same mechanisms indefinitely, providing daily examples which condone and justify the violence committed by every single individual. Moreover, the fact that the only two examples of rebellion to such order of things, represented by Martha and B's girl, end up respectively dead of overdose and locked up in a mental institution, is a symptom that the battle fought by the few resistant women of the community, of any community dominated by the same patriarchal logic, is invariably an uphill and endless struggle.

It takes no average woman to challenge the overpowering mechanism of a patriarchal society, and the point of view Figes adopts in *Nelly's Version*, indeed, is certainly not that of an average woman. Nelly Dean[153] – as the protagonist chooses to be called in the incipit, not remembering her true name – is a woman whose past has been completely blotted out by a stroke of severe amnesia, which enables her to make an existential fresh new start and to leave behind the character she had been forced to be in her previous life, constructing her new identity day after day. The symbolic

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[152] *Ibid*., pp. 143-145.

[153] Some critics, as for instance Susan Faludi, have tried to work out the possible connections, points of commonality and divergence between the protagonist of Nelly's Version and the homonymous narrator of Emily Brönte's *Wuthering Heights* (see S. Faludi, Introduction, in E. Figes, *Nelly's Version*, Dalkey Archive Press, Funks Grove 2002, pp. i-vii). Figes, on her part, has denied any such connection in an interview, in which she affirmed that "[a] lot of reviewers said it had to do with Nelly Dean and I had got the idea from *Wuthering Heights*, and I hadn't. I just thought that she checks in into this hotel where I actually had been, and I remember that someone that owns a mill by the stream was called Nelly Dean, and that's why I thought of Nelly, no other reasons. I mean I love *Wuthering Heights*, it's one of my favourite books, but I hadn't thought of that. And of course a lot of people began to interpret it that way" (Id., Interview with S. O'Reilly, London, 17.06.2011, Sound Archive, British Library).

power of this situation lies in the fact that not only does Nelly forge a different persona for herself, but she also calls into question a whole set of social rules she is expected to abide by, but which now, having been reverted back to factory settings like a malfunctioning computer, she no longer recognises as natural. Being reintroduced into the world like an alien subject, she appears to have obliterated the whole education and social training she has received in the bourgeois milieu in which she has been raised; as such, she is now able to create rules of her own, discarding any other external imposition as extraneous to her system. Her conduct, in other words, becomes an open challenge to the model of woman society wants to re-impose on her, but which she has now the power and the unique opportunity to refuse.

The first time Nelly becomes aware of a fracture in her identity is when she glimpses her own reflection in the mirror of the hotel room into which she has just moved. The impression she gets on this occasion is one of alterity, since she does not recognise this projection as her own, and feels the consequent impulse to treat it as the shadow of a stranger:

> Someone was in the room with me. I swung round sharply and said out loud: 'Who are you, how did you get in?' and found myself staring into a long mirror. She stared back at me, this middle-aged woman, […] her accusing stare held mine and dared me to turn my back on her, allow her to vanish into thin air once more[154].

Having started her life all over again, and being now in search of a personality in which to accommodate her new self, Nelly assesses the appearance of this woman in the mirror, deciding instinctively that this projection cannot represent the person she wants to be. The fracture she has experienced has created a separation between the old Nelly and the newborn one: the person she has once been does not exist anymore, but the new personality is inevitably still imprisoned in the old body, which bears all the traces that the previous life has left on it.

A conflict thus originates from the very first moment Nelly sets her eyes on this body. She cannot accept the idea of having to carry around the living vestiges of this identity, which she intends to leave behind for good: "Well, […] I wasn't expecting somebody like you. […] But now that I know, we'll have to get on as best we can – won't we? I'll have to put up with you, won't I? Somehow[155]". What distresses her most is that the woman she sees in the mirror represents exactly the kind of subdued individual she does not want to become, someone who has evidently let others decide for her, manipulate her and determine her fate in her stead for an entire life. The new Nelly, with her strong character and her irreverence towards any form of prevarication on her freedom, cannot recognise this outer appearance as her own, and the refusal to conform to this avatar of hers kindles the flame of her upcoming rebellion towards the entire system: "She did not answer back. I

[154] Id., *Nelly's Version* (1977), Dalkey Archive Press, Funks Grove (Illinois) 2002, pp. 12-13.
[155] *Ibid*., p. 14.

suspected her of being one of those women who had quietly put up with many things without answering back, so that it had become a lifelong habit. Her face wore a resigned expression[156]".

As Nelly begins to explore the surroundings of the hotel and the town, trying to assess the role she is supposed to play in such a new environment, she also starts to engage in a game of mirrors with the reflection of the woman which appears to her from time to time, reminding her of the cumbersome presence of the past she has left behind. The constant confrontation with this problematic double leads her at one point to admit to having "developed a dislike, almost amounting to horror, of mirrors […]. They are dangerous, and you never know what is going to come out of them next. I give them a wide berth, avoid looking into them[157]". In the confrontations which occur at these crucial moments, the new persona she is willfully tailoring on herself is forced to face the woman she once was, that is, the character other people expect her to perform.

As time passes, and the pressures which push her back into her old self become progressively more and more oppressive, she develops a burning aversion towards it, together with the awareness of the inevitability of having to come to terms, at some point, with this forgotten identity. At times, this interior division reaches moments of paroxysm, as in the scene of the hairdresser. Here, Nelly is obliged to sit in front of the mirror for an extended period of time, having to suffer the gaze of her own reflection until this becomes unbearable, and she gives vent to all the resentment and contempt she feels towards her double: "once more I was required to confront the stranger, this alien and unlikely female, in the looking glass. Only this time it was worse, since on this occasion we were forced to look each other in the eyes at close range for an unusually long period. I could not really take to her, but now I came close to pity[158]". In this extremity, the distance Nelly feels towards her older version appears wider than ever. As she analyses the woman's reactions to the manipulations of the hairdresser, and finds more and more confirmations of her weak and subdued character, her contempt grows, exacerbated even further by a renovated awareness of the impossibility to get rid of this integral part of her own person:

> I got the impression she was the kind of woman who had always relied on other people to make decisions for her; as I watched her mutely being manhandled, I suspected that she had all her life known what she did not want, but had not dared to voice her objections for lack of an alternative. […] I supposed that I would have to defend her, become her unwilling ally. But I could feel something close to contempt rising up in me, and suspected that I would never grow to like her. But we were stuck with each other now, like two inseparable sisters. One timid, the other hard and rebellious[159].

[156] *Ivi*.
[157] *Ibid*., p. 188.
[158] *Ibid*., p. 168.
[159] *Ibid*., p. 169.

If the woman's countenance and attitude provide Nelly with elements of the person she once was and which she now repudiates, another channel by which she can assess an irretrievable distance with this past version of herself is represented by clothing. Nelly proves indeed to be sensible to the symbolic language of clothes, and able to extrapolate further details about her double by analysing her wardrobe. Conversely, throughout the narration, clothes turn out to be extremely functional in the performative game played by Nelly, as she tries to construct a new identity for herself. The clothes she finds in the wardrobe after her amnesiac rebirth at the beginning of the novel, for example, are still the expression of the subdued woman she once was, willing to merge with the situation and become invisible, an outer reflection of her renunciation to speak her mind, show her suppressed character and appear as the person she would really wish to be.

For this reason, the clothes of the old Nelly inevitably become yet another source of contempt for the new one: "whoever started this whole thing off seems to have had little sense of style and an aversion to colour, and the clothes I am fitted out all seem to be in muted shades of grey, as though a person were trying to remain unseen, merge into the background and become invisible[160]". Thus, understanding the importance of clothes as an extension of one's personality, the new Nelly affirms her intention to modify her wardrobe, in her programmatic attempt at giving a new direction to her life, and sending the world the message that the subjugated character she used to be has now disappeared for good:

> [T]he wardrobe was minimal, and more suitable for a wet weekend than any sort of great adventure imaginable. No clothes which could be used for a magic transformation, and no disguises, unless they were it. […] Still, there was money enough to scrap all this, change like a chameleon, once I had decided who I was, and what role I was supposed to be playing[161].

When, towards the end of the novel, she progressively yields to the pressures of her son David to become her old self again, clothes are again signalled as an instrument of manipulation, designed to express the role she is being forced to play after her initial dreams of rebellion have been dispelled by the old reality reassessing itself. As she tries on various clothes, having to choose her outfit for a reconciliatory tea with her son and daughter-in-law, the struggle between her two identities resurfaces as fiercely as ever, and the new Nelly cannot but observe with contempt and resigned impotence the reverse transformation her character is undergoing: "The mirror called her a liar. With each change of costume I found myself facing a figure whom I did not like and refused to recognise, a reflection which, however alien, continued to look inescapably solid with each change of colour and cut: a hideous solidity which no shade could soften or shape transform[162]". The blue woolen suit she finally

[160] *Ibid.*, p. 135.
[161] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[162] *Ibid.*, p. 167.

chooses, which she describes as “not only suitable, but designed for the person I had been chosen to play[163]”, becomes thus in the end a universal symbol for the submission of all women. In a moment in which she is being progressively led to give up her rebellious fight for non-conformity, the acceptance of this garment, more or less imposed on her by external circumstances, consigns her back to the consortium of subjugated women she had so ardently wished to liberate herself from:

> Finally I bought this particular suit […] because I thought it might at least serve as a kind of disguise. I could have been anybody in it. It was ordinary, but impeccably ordinary. No doubt, in a thousand similar places, thousands of identical women would be wearing this uniform, trying to conceal unsightly outlines under the cut of good cloth. On a clear day one might hope to merge with the blue of the sky and look invisible[164].

The theme of clothing highlights another crucial aspect of Nelly’s experience, which can be also linked to the condition of women in any kind of society: the issue of performativity[165]. From the very first steps she moves within the new environment of the hotel, Nelly appears perfectly conscious of being constantly watched and judged by other people: consequently, she starts paying great attention to each minutest gesture or even posture she assumes, as though convinced of being an actor punctiliously preparing her part to be played on a stage. Having suddenly forgotten everything about her past, about the person she is supposed to be and the position she used to occupy in the world, Nelly feels now as a Pirandellian character in search of her author, orphan of a plot which could guide her in her daily dealings with the world. If, on the one hand, this absence of purpose opens an unprecedent array of possibilities before her, it also transmits to her a vivid sense of loss on the other, caused by the lack of clues as to how she is supposed to act and behave.

Despite her oblivious state, Nelly demonstrates a somewhat instinctive awareness of the existence of a set of social norms that she, as a woman, is called to abide by. This is evident from the very first movements she performs, when she feels compelled to inform the hotel’s receptionist, for instance, that a phantomatic Mr. Dean will join her in a few days, conscious of the social suspicion potentially raised by a single woman checking in in a hotel:

> My instinct, or the expression on the face of the man behind the desk, told me that my arrival, unaccompanied and without prior booking, ceased to be questionable the moment I ceased being just myself, by myself, and became a married woman in the looming protective shadow of a mythical husband who would shortly arrive to join her[166].

[163] *Ibid*., p. 166.
[164] *Ibid*., p. 167.
[165] For a focus on the crucial role of performativity in the definition of gender, see Judith Butler, “Subversive Bodily Acts” [chapter], in Id., *Gender Trouble* (1990), Routlegde, New York 2007, pp. 107-194.
[166] E. Figes, *Nelly’s Version*, p. 10.

From this moment onwards, she will pay attention to every single move, adjusting herself, as events and situations unroll before her, either to the character she wants to be, or the one she feels others expect her to perform. “The trouble with staying in a hotel”, she reflects at some point in this regard, “was that one had to be ready to play a role at all hours, and my lack of one that was even half-way defined made this more than usually difficult. So far I had dithered between possibilities, and succeeded only in over-acting each time[167]”.

The performative aspect of Nelly’s behaviour is thus emphasised at several junctures, and it becomes progressively clear that her situation stands as a smaller-scale metaphor for the condition of all women, obliged to perform pre-arranged roles assigned to them a priori by the society they are born into, on the sole grounds of their gender. Nelly’s amnesia causes a sense of alienation in her, augmented by the fact that she finds herself thrown into a world regulated by precise rules, established long before her appearance and on which she has had no saying, despite the fact that these rules evidently limit her personal freedom to a considerable degree. Her amnesia, however, is precisely what allows her to momentarily subtract herself from the game, to observe it from a distance and to question the validity and legitimacy of its mechanisms. In doing this, she is able to wonder whether a change would be possible, being by no means convinced of the ultimate necessity to follow these conventional prescriptions blindingly or unquestioningly. The idealistic cry of rebellion she addresses to a Miss Wyckham, another woman apparently affected by bouts of amnesia, sounds as a universal freedom call intended for all women, or perhaps as a warning against the danger and the absurdity of sticking to roles designed essentially by men:

> Remind me, […] what were we like as girls? […] I mean, did we have dreams, aspirations, secret desires? […] Or did we just go along from day to day like everybody else? […] Is this what we dreamed about from the start, or did we just allow ourselves to be carried along the conveyor belt, until it was too late and we found ourselves trapped? Did we even struggle, protest? […] Did we even whisper rebellion amongst ourselves, in between lessons, the physical training, grammar lessons, religious instruction, and the rest of it?[168].

Apart from Nelly’s amnesia, Figes also explores the predicament of women in a patriarchal society by recurring to the discourse of metafiction, which comes to the fore at several junctures in the course of the novel. Nelly’s performative awareness, her attempts at discovering the role she is supposed to play in the microcosm of society represented by the hotel, are indeed paralleled by her condition of clueless character caught up against her will in the machinations of a narrative text, without any notion of the plot she is supposed to follow, or the function she has to absolve within the economy of the story. The metafictional passages of *Nelly’s Version* create thus further metaphorical layers, in which the prevarications Nelly suffers as a woman in a world controlled by men are

[167] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
[168] *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.

transformed into, and paralleled by, her feelings of impotence at being seemingly controlled and moved like a pawn by an external author. The textual architecture, recognised as artificial in all its typical dynamics and mechanisms, becomes another face and an extension of patriarchal society, a different expression of the same large and powerful system, equally taking decisions affecting her fate and freedom without even considering her wishes.

In the initial stages of her re-awakening, Nelly appears as if in dialogue with a supposed external agent she imagines to be in charge of the situation. Her plea is that of a character desperately in search of an author, of a plot which could inspire and give sense to her future movements:

> As yet I had no notion why I was here, and until I received instructions of some kind, telling me what to do, I had not the least idea who I was meant to be, the purpose of my presence in this place, or the exact nature of the action I was supposed to take part in. I was waiting for a cue of some sort, anything which could be regarded as a clue. I lacked definition[169].

This appeal, while assuming superficially the disinterested air of a piece of metafictional extravaganza, acquires in fact a totally different meaning when juxtaposed with the general feminist undertones evidently present in the rest of the narration. Nelly's words here could indeed be construed as an expression of bewilderment by a woman who has just wriggled herself out of the patriarchal grid, albeit only temporarily and thanks to an unusual stroke of fate. Her sense of being at a loss, of lacking a precise guide and sense of purpose, derives from the fact that, in her previous obliviated life, she had always been accustomed to complying to a pre-determined role and moving along pre-arranged binaries, designed for her by others. Her lifetime habit to comply is still imprinted in her system, despite her blotted out memories: the initial shock she feels is simply caused by the unprecedented air of freedom she is now breathing, which her lungs have never known before, nor are equipped to filter.

Other passages seem later to confirm the feminist implications of these metafictional layers, further accruing the mutual resonances between the different levels of interpretation of the text. Nelly's sensation of being manipulated from both the inside and the outside, for instance, her instinctive consciousness of being constantly watched by some preying eye assessing her moves and making sure that she follows the prescriptions, are all elements which can easily be related to the treatment women normally receive in society. As happens to any other woman, the freedom Nelly appears to enjoy is only a nominal one, while myriads of unseen but all too tangible limitations restrict the array of behaviours and movements she is authorised to perform:

> Had I […] been brain-washed in some hospital ward and then set free, apparently free, to wander the face of the earth, but really programmed in advance to do just what I had gone on

[169] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

> to do? This, however horrifying, would have accounted for the uneasy sense I so often had, of waiting to participate in some pre-arranged plan[170].

The constant normative drill Nelly has received for an entire existence has evidently left some deep scars in her, which have not been cancelled by the cleansing action of her amnesia. The judging voice of the outside world has spoken so long and insistently into her ears that she now hears this voice as part of herself, as though coming from inside of her. The prescriptive mantras of society, which direct the actions and behaviours of thousands of women, still resounds inside Nelly's head, concealed behind the mask of the domineering manipulations of the plot enforced on her by the implied external author:

> I had thought of myself as a free agent, but how could I account for such oddities coming into my head, out of nothingness, so to speak? The idea that I might have been programmed had to be considered […]. Perhaps […] somebody else had planned it all, and was perhaps even now controlling my movements. […] I then had to consider whether someone had triggered me off to behave in just this way[171].

The metafictional component of the novel reaches then its apogee when Nelly visits the town's public library. Looking for readings that would help her kill some time, here she wanders through the bookshelves, drawing out volumes and reading passages at random, which the reader can easily recognise as slightly re-worked versions of previous passages of the novel *Nelly's Version* itself – that is, of Nelly's own notebook, of which the whole narration consists. Surrounded by this imposing amass of books, Nelly feels an odd magnetism drawing her towards them, as though the answers to her existential doubts were contained in those pages:

> I simply had no idea where to start looking, which volume to pull out first: none of the names or titles meant a thing to me, and each was as meaningless or, put another way, as potentially meaningful as any other. They all seemed to have a claim on my attention, something about the mysterious phrase of a title or the portentous ring of a name included in that title was, I felt, intended to suggest that bound within these pages, and these pages alone, the secret of life lay concealed[172].

As Nelly reads, random passage by random passage, a contrast is in fact created between her seeming unawareness and the inevitable sense of *déjà vu* which grows instead in the reader. A certain sense of conspiracy – a word which, by no chance, she employs on several occasions – is thus indirectly created: the reader, obviously, is constantly aware of the correspondences between the passages read by Nelly and her own experiences, but there is nothing he/she can do, apart from witnessing her obliviousness with utter frustration.

[170] *Ibid*., p. 214.
[171] *Ibid*., p. 50.
[172] *Ibid*., p. 84.

When, later on in the novel, Nelly happens to read another passage which corresponds exactly to the incipit of her first notebook, she dismisses it as incomprehensible for the umpteenth time, confirming once again the impression that she is totally unable to retain anything of what occurs to her, let alone to learn anything of value through her experiences:

> I found it difficult to take anything in. *He watched my hand moving across the page as I signed a false name and address* I read, and thought, how stupid of me, I must have had this book out before. Or perhaps I was simply reading the same pages a second time, because of my lack of concentration. I had failed to comprehend what it was all about, and could not make out the plot, even if I had read it before[173].

If referred back to the same feminist framework which informs the whole novel, Nelly's incomprehension here could be said to assume a symbolic value. Her incapability to come to terms with her past or capitalise on the lessons learnt seems to mirror the same inertia which keeps women of all times, social extractions and ethnicities subjugated to a position of inferiority, preventing them from forming a collective spirit which would help them in their struggle for liberation. The history of prevarications suffered by the whole female side of humanity unites them under a common destiny, but without a historical perspective or a sense of continuity, nor a shared consciousness of their own condition, women are simply bound to accept their fate as pre-arranged and inevitable, paving the way for the same dynamics of subjugation to recur again and again.

In a similar way, Nelly's incapability to remember seems to hinder any liberating effect which her amnesiac rebellion could possibly achieve: not being even totally conscious of what she is trying to liberate herself from, she is destined to be brought back under the patriarchal yoke, after enjoying a superficial freedom which is ultimately only temporary and illusory. At some point, she even appears to admit to this temporary quality of her rebellion, as though conscious that, eventually, she will have to revert to being the character she was always meant to play: "I'm just having a break from my normal humdrum existence, a little holiday. One needs a break now and then, don't you think?[174]". In the concluding chapters, as she ponders again on her attempts at rebellion against the patriarchal system, her liberating thrust appears to be totally exhausted, and her inveterate obliviousness relentlessly pushes her back into the same old limitations she had once so eagerly relinquished:

> I cannot help asking myself – what made this poor woman so spineless in the first place? I have only to read the other notebook to understand that she undoubtedly was rather mixed up and confused. She seems to have been quite lost. I have now decided to try and impose some kind of narrative coherence on my life, or what is left of it. There must be some sense to it somewhere. Meanwhile, it is passing, and I cannot get a grasp on it. […] The whole thing slips through my fingers like water or sand. […] There must be surely something abnormal about a

[173] *Ibid*., p. 208. The sentence in italics, reported here as in the original, corresponds to the actual incipit of the novel.
[174] *Ibid*., p. 140.

mind with such a conspicuous lack of retentive power, whether of purpose, emotion, or memory[175].

As long as her game endures, however, she is able to oppose a fierce resistance to many of the expectations, impositions, and limitations intrinsic in the roles she was once obliged to perform. At the climax of her rebellious phase, she stubbornly rejects all the masks that the alleged members of her family try to impose back on her. Wife, mother, lover, even grandmother: she refuses the prison of all these labels, asserting her absolute independence and freedom. The way she behaves towards the two individuals who claim respectively to be her son and her husband incarnates the nightmare of all men: for Nelly, on these occasions, is a woman who simply refuses to play the part assigned to her by the man-made society, doing the exact opposite of what is demanded of her, and liberating a kind of suppressed power which men, used as they are to the docile subjects they have instructed their women to be, are absolutely not prepared to deal with.

When her alleged son shows up, Nelly shows him none of the motherly love and comprehension he expects from her. The unconditional support her son has evidently always been accustomed to receive has been now totally withdrawn, and all the words of encouragement and false praise that a mother would naturally reserve for a son are substituted with Nelly's crude assessment of this young man's absolute mediocrity: "I looked up and saw this rather conventional young man […]. Nothing about his features was in any way remarkable. It was not the sort of face that sticks in the memory: […] his dark brown eyes had a look of uncertainty, a tendency to shift and lose ground under scrutiny[176]".

Nelly's refusal to recognise any sort of responsibility over this young man is for him, as well as for the entire society which backs him, the ultimate form of aberration. Whenever David, her son, tells her that he does not recognise her anymore, that she is not herself or that she seems a thoroughly different person, he is after all only expressing his bewilderment before a woman who is refusing to behave according to the prescriptions of her role, something which in normal circumstances would be totally inconceivable. Nelly's final cry of rebellion is not addressed particularly to her son, a subject towards whom she does not feel any sort of obligation anymore. It is a bold statement of personal freedom against the whole of society, which ideally gives voice to the cry of millions of oppressed women: "I am not who you think I am. But I have been trying to tell you that all along. You have obviously been living under some enormous misapprehension. […]. But you really cannot expect me to try and fit in with your image, stop being me, and play some role you have assigned to me in your mind[177]".

[175] *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.
[176] *Ibid.*, p. 118.
[177] *Ibid.*, p. 161.

Similarly, in her dealings with George Wilkinson, her alleged husband, all the usual trite matrimonial dynamics, all too familiar to a myriad of married women, come to the fore, with Nelly likewise refusing to respond obediently to the demands which are made of her. As a wife, she is supposed to be devoted, respectful and supportive towards her man, stand by his side in sickness and in health, preferably satisfying his physiologic and otherwise needs whenever urged to do so. If David openly demands her support from the start, encountering her sudden hostility, George appears initially to indulge her game, and approaches her gently, with more discretion. Confronted with Nelly's continuous refusal to play at his game of seduction, however, his frustration progressively accumulates, until he bursts into a complaint which sounds as incredibly average, and could be attributed to any husband who finds himself dealing with a woman who has the courage to assess her own independence from him:

> You women are all the same. What's so difficult about an ordinary chap like me? All I need is a bit of understanding. I've never yet met a woman who could understand that. […] I've got normal physical needs, I see no reason to be ashamed of that. In fact I could be bloody proud of it, a man of my age. But that's not it, it's emotions that count, what I need is a woman with a bit of understanding. Instead I keep getting impossible demands made on me, falling into a trap[178].

When, later in the novel, George becomes bolder and more explicit in his advances, he takes Nelly's attempts at warding him off as signs of undeserved frigidity from a wife who is supposed to obediently absolve her duties and pay due respect to him: "Why are you so cold? […] Are you totally devoid of sentiment, feelings?[179]". Her aberrant refusal to be a mother is thus matched by an equally unacceptable refusal to play the role of wife and lover, disattending the expectations of a man who, by marrying her, has received totally different guarantees. Betraying these expectations, Nelly is not only hurting George Wilkinson as an individual, but also, more crucially, contravening to the very rules on which society depends for the maintenance of its founding order. When she eventually yields to George's urges, by a disinterested playful disposition rather than out of any sense of duty towards him, the anticlimax which concludes the scene of their intercourse seems to put an ironic end to whatever claim George might have had on her in sexual terms:

> After a time he stopped moving on top of me, though I could still scarcely breathe. His penis, which had been getting progressively smaller and more limp as his motions became more furious, flopped damply between my legs and just lay there. He now let me stroke it for a bit, but it did no good. I would have preferred to masturbate to a climax, but I thought he might be offended, and it did not seem to occur to him to help me. Suddenly he got up, put his clothes on, and left my room without saying a word. It occurred to me that we had not exchanged a single word since it started. I wonder why he behaved like that. I suppose I shall never understand now[180].

[178] *Ibid*., pp. 142-143.
[179] *Ibid*., p. 151.
[180] *Ibid*., p. 155.

Just as her son David ceases apparently to care for her, or even to seek her, as soon as she appears to be safe back into her old role[181], George's apparently implacable sexual impetus soon exhausts itself as soon as he comes to the point he had so ardently struggled to reach. Thus, in retrospect, the actions of the two men sound as terribly ungenuine and artificial: it is as though what they truly desired was not to have their wife or mother back, nor to be reassured in the re-establishment of their domestic harmony or relational stability, but rather simply to reassert their dominance and control over a rebellious woman who has threatened to shutter the entire structure of their personal certainties.

If Nelly eventually capitulates to the pressures of the outside world, seemingly stepping back into the shoes of a docile woman observant of the prescriptions of society, the rebellious flight she has experienced has nonetheless left a profound scar on her. A certain resistance to fully absorb her newly-imposed identity is indeed detectable in the re-emergence of her double, and in the emphasis, in the second part of the novel, on her feelings of being split into two opposing versions of herself[182].

As soon as she is presented with the perspective of becoming her old self again, she feels on the verge of an identity crisis, uncertain as to which of the two versions it is better for her to assume for good:

> But then, I was not myself – David had reassured me of this more than once, not realising that this did not help, and only made the situation more confusing. I did not know what sort of person I was supposed to become, once my health returned, or if I wanted to be that person, though David seemed to have a clear image in his own mind of how she could be expected to behave[183].

When she finally lets herself be inveigled into her abandoned role of mother and reintroduced to the family life she had apparently happily relinquished, her restoration to the domestic sphere, the place she, as woman, is designed to occupy, cannot but feel like reverting back into an existential prison:

> I realised that to many people my position must have seemed enviable. The demands made on me by my supposed family were hardly onerous, and in return I was living in considerable comfort. I found it hard to explain that I was not living at all, that my freedom to think and act had been taken from me as surely as if I had been put behind bars. More surely. Only by whom? Was David really to blame?[184].

[181] At some point, Nelly observes for instance that "he could have picked up almost any woman in that hotel foyer, given a certain age and build, without looking at her too closely. He was not, I concluded, choosy about whom he picked up as a mother, so long as he had one" (*ibid*., p. 175). Later on, assessing his neglect with an edge of bitterness and puzzlement, she remarks again: "David rang several times to make sure I had not disappeared, but did not come to see me. […] I did not want him to visit me anyhow, but I nevertheless thought his behaviour odd. He had seemed so anxious to acquire a mother, it was difficult to understand why he had bothered" (*ibid*., p. 199).

[182] The very structure of the book, after all, explicitly reflects Nelly's inner division, presenting two separate notebooks, the first written during her rebellious amnesiac phase, the second starting with her gradual reinsertion into the family circle.

[183] E. Figes, *Nelly's Version*, p. 166.

[184] *Ibid*., pp. 207-208.

The fact that leading such a subdued family life, obedient and complying with the role assigned to her, represents the maximum achievement that a decent and accomplished woman can wish for is only a direct consequence of that patriarchal system which Nelly, with her sacrilegious attempts at rebellion, has desperately tried to subvert. Her experience shows to all women that what is considered to be the normality is in fact an aberration, something that can and must be absolutely changed. Her son David or her husband George are not strictly speaking her direct enemies or jailers, nor are their actions towards her informed by any intrinsic malevolence or any conscious desire to hurt her: in behaving as they do, they are simply perpetuating manners and attitudes to which they have been accustomed for an entire life. Their attitude is only an expression of the millenary system into which they are born, and whose validity or legitimacy they have never felt the urge to question, belonging as they do to the part which most benefits from its endurance.

Nelly's destiny at the end of the novel is sadly similar to that of many women who have attempted to follow different routes from those traced for them by men: unable to tame or thoroughly control her, she is locked up in a mental institution, labelled as mad by a society which cannot understand her non-conforming behaviour, let alone accept it. Once her rebellious impetus is sedated, she is brought back into the slumbering condition enforced on all women so that they may stick to their place: "This place encourages a strange lethargy which is new to me[185]", she observes of this umpteenth prison into which she has been immobilised. The impression, at this point, is that the place she really has in mind in pronouncing these words is not simply a psychiatric ward, but rather society as a whole. If she is ultimately defeated, and her efforts to liberate herself have ended up stifled against the apparently insurmountable barrier of the patriarchal system, her example can at least serve as an inspiration for the resistance of all women. She may not have shown the definite way to follow, but her challenge to the system has certainly brought her to question the very foundations of the iniquitous order which governs the world, pointing to the chore issues which impede the freedom and wellbeing of millions of women.

In her insightful analysis, the critic Silvia Pellicer-Ortin approaches Figes's texts through the lenses of Trauma Studies, dividing the author's production into three different phases, according to the degree of metabolisation and overcoming of traumatic experiences one is able to detect in the novels of a given period. In her words, "the evolution of narrative techniques used by this author in the course of her career mirror the different stages in the individual and collective process of recovery from traumatic experiences, from the initial process of 'acting out', or repetition compulsion of trauma, to the eventual phase of 'working through' trauma[186]". According to such division, the texts

[185] *Ibid.*, p. 218.
[186] S. Pellicer-Ortin, *Eva Figes' Writings: A Journey through Trauma*, p. 4.

written by Figes which have been considered in this present analysis, ranging from the Sixties to the late Seventies, comprise an early phase, characterised by texts involving compulsive repetitions of traumatic experiences, and a crucial passage into a different phase in which such traumas begin to be absorbed and worked through. In many respects, as has been seen, this hinge moment can be said to have taken place around 1970, more or less in correspondence with the composition of such a breakthrough text as *Patriarchal Attitudes*, a work which infused Figes with a deeper awareness of her possibilities as a writer, and with a renovated courage to deal more directly and consciously with her own experiences as a woman.

In two novels such as *Winter Journey* and *Konek Landing*, still deeply influenced by the recent character of the author's traumas, Figes's protagonists are characterised by a shattered conscience and a sense of existential drift. Janus and Konek seem capable of nothing but simply dragging their exhausted bodies and minds through a devastated world, which has always been insensible to their sufferings and which has made them devoid of all humanity. They do not qualify as positive examples of resistance or active reaction against the adversities of fate, and do not appear to possess the necessary strength and willpower to elevate themselves from their miserable condition. In their passivity, however, they still show the stamina to resist to their last resort, offering the puzzled narration of their earthly and spiritual suffering as the barren product of their experience, which has left nothing else to them. "*Winter Journey* and *Konek Landing*", concludes Pellicer-Ortin, "mimic the phase of acting out of trauma", and "set up a neurotic and disjointed time and spatial dimension comparable to the processes of anxiety, mental dissociation and paralysis, survivor guilt, hyperarousal, and the compulsive repetition of traumatic events that characterise the failure to abreact trauma[187]".

With novels such as *Days*, or the analysed *B* and *Nelly's Version*, belonging to what can be described as the post-Modernist phase of Figes's writing, the author shows signs of a progressive metabolisation of her past traumas, which is mirrored by her somewhat clearer style and the creation of characters with a more combative, if not necessarily more positive, attitude towards the adversities of fate. Seen through the lenses of feminism, which began to absorb the author's attention from the Seventies, this change of attitude translates into the preponderant use of female characters instead of male ones, as was the praxis in the initial phase of Figes's production. The succession of novels *Days – B – Nelly's Version* registers the exact moment of this passage, with its predictable oscillations in-between. If the novels of this middle phase register an importance change of pace, however, it is also true that the characters they portray still do not appear to offer clear solutions or victorious examples

[187] *Ibid.*, p. 241.

of resistance; the struggles they still undergo, the battles they carry on, are waged against enemies and obstacles which often give the impression of being invincible.

Considered as a whole, the novels Figes wrote in these two decades provide us with examples of attempts at verbalising, of finding a language and a style capable of narrating some collective traumatic experiences which Europe still had to thoroughly process at the time, and which literature was perhaps not yet equipped to deal with. As Figes wrote at the end of the Seventies:

> My guess is that the problem of English fiction must in some way relate to England's insular position at the present time, her incapacity, as a small European nation, to come to grips with the problems of the second half of the twentieth century. […] But I am European by birth, even though I write in English. My starting point is inevitably Kafka. The English social realist tradition cannot contain the realities of my own lifetime, horrors which one might have called surreal if they had not actually happened. For me the old forms are hopelessly inadequate, and can only say things that are no longer worth saying[188].

Spurred by this need to fill in the gaps she saw in the system of English fiction, Figes managed to produce a corpus of works which can be said to bring a remarkable contribution to the Anglophone novelistic tradition. Her variety of registers, her fascination for formal experimentation, and her innate ability to deal with any kind of subject matter, finding ever new forms suitable for the realities she set out to express, have enabled her to bring considerable advances to the possibilities of prose, helping to stretch the limits of what can be narrated within the novel form.

Moreover, her status as an individual split between two cultures, two languages and two different visions of the world, turns her work into an invaluable site of contacts, extending the reach of English literature both chronologically and geographically. By entering the realm of English letters, she has instilled in them a refreshing European consciousness, which was certainly a challenging aspect in the insular British milieu of the Sixties. She also assumed on herself the recent heritage of Modernism, adapting its innovative thrust to narrate her own experiences and give voice to the historical necessities of a new epoch, contributing in the process to the evolution of the novelistic medium itself.

[188] E. Figes, Article piece on the state of English fiction and the future of the novel, written on commission for Ian Hamilton, *The New Review* (undated, 1978), Eva Figes Archive, British Library.

Conclusions

The history of literature is made of continuities and fractures, periods of stagnation and settlement and moments of great creative outbursts, in which a wealth of novelties and fresh new impulses are introduced which sometimes can go as far as to change an entire literary epoch. Some periods are characterised by abrupt changes of direction, some others even by apparent movements of regression. Innovation, on the other hand, is not always constant and gradual: some literary revolutions have caused a great and profound impact on the texts produced in a given period, while others, for one reason or another, have remained silent and have been ignored or glossed over, bearing little or no consequence on the general spirit of their age.

Until fairly recently, at least as far as British letters are concerned, the period of the Sixties has been regarded as rather sterile in terms of literary innovation. The great revolutions of Modernism, which had opened so many new possibilities in the European literature of the first decades of the past century, had already exhausted their thrust by this time. The War had somehow cut Britain out of the vibrant cultural life of the Continent, and made her blind and deaf to whatever revolutionary ferments were brewing in countries such as France or Germany. In that period, Britain generally tended to slide back to her inveterate insularity, cloistering herself from any influence coming from the outside, and entrusting her literary future to the easy and venerable forms of tradition, which had worked so well in the past and so had no reason, as according to the views of literary Establishment, not to work effectively for the present time as well.

The orientation towards social realism as the designated national genre, with its narrowness of scope, its focus on minimal aspects of everyday life and its predominant attention to clear narrative progression and characterisation, caused the majority of critics, readers, writers and academics to repudiate any form of invasive experimentalism. To the eyes of the literary Establishment, which also guided and shaped the public taste and choices, an excessive attention to form invariably meant a lamentable abstraction and distance from present-day reality, an irresponsible rejection of social and political engagement, or, in the best of cases, a merely derivative legacy of the Modernist obsession with extravagances, mostly carried out for their own sake.

The cultural climate was thus profoundly antagonistic to writers such as B.S. Johnson, Eva Figes, Ann Quin, Alan Burns or Christine Brooke-Rose, who represented an apparently anachronistic persistence of the experimental novel in a period totally averse to any form of experimentalism. In

the programmatic mission which informed the literary market of the Sixties – the mission, that is, to re-establish a genre which was seen as the quintessence of English literary identity –, there was naturally little patience and comprehension for texts endorsing ideals recognised as un-English, as the expression of an internationalistic avant-garde spirit for which there was very little sympathy. This general attitude has caused a perhaps too partial assessment, and too quick a dismissal, of certain novels and authors who had in fact much to say and contribute to the advancement of English letters. The fact that these texts were largely overlooked at the time has given for a long time the wrong impression of the Sixties as a regressive period of literary stagnation, in which little or no novelty of consequence was produced as far as fiction was concerned.

On the contrary, the writers considered in this thesis, as well as others operating within the same loose group, demonstrate that the lesson of Modernism, far from having evaporated into nothingness without leaving any trace, was being absorbed and brought forward by a new generation of young innovators, who had remained faithful to the same ideals and principles. The re-evaluation over the past two decades of writers such as B.S. Johnson and Ann Quin is presently beginning to fill in a lamentable gap in the literary history of the second half of the past century, providing strong proofs of a continuity linking the experiences of Modernism, Post-Modernism and of any other subsequent expression of avant-garde literature in Britain and in Europe.

With their unique and composite backgrounds, these writers also played a crucial role in the reintroduction of those international literary influences which had grown feebler than ever in the climate of cultural insularity dominating the country in the post-War decades. Each one with their own individual tastes and formation, they set out to pump new life into English letters by renovating ancient literary connections, for example with France, or bringing in new impulses from other countries and cultures, such as Germany or the United States, also incorporating into their literature the lessons and technical possibilities suggested by other media, such as painting and cinema.

Considered collectively, their work is clearly conversant with the writings of Samuel Beckett, the prototype of literary innovation who left a profound mark in the immediate post-War period. These authors absorbed his influence and adapted it to their own individual experiences and the challenges deriving from their specific context. Owing to their interest in the literary developments taking place on the Continent, moreover, this was also the first generation of English writers who formulated a response to the French experimentations of the *nouveau roman*: sometimes their re-elaborations of these new impulses were articulated in continuity with authors such as Robbe-Grillet, Duras and Sarraute, while some others it took divergent ways, always demonstrating, however, a strong awareness and a keen interest in the path that avant-garde literature was taking outside of Britain.

Apart from these collective influences, each of them certainly had their own individual masters to look back on, which enabled them to bring contributions of different flavours, always establishing fruitful connections which had the potential to renovate and expand the resonance of their literature outside the narrow geographical and historical confines of their context. While Johnson was deeply bound to writers of the Irish tradition such as Joyce or Sterne, Figes granted a new life to the stylistic explorations of Kafka and Woolf, showing also traces of more contemporary contaminations, such as those deriving from her closeness to the German *Gruppe 47*, in particular Günter Grass. Ann Quin, on the other hand, with her somehow irreverent and untamed eclecticism, absorbed a range of international and multimedia influences, from contemporary English and American painting to jazz, from Italian and French cinema to the American poetry of the Black Mountain Group, also accommodating into her writing all the impressions of exotic otherness she encountered in the course of her travels.

B.S. Johnson made it his point to create a literature which could convey the truth of himself and of his own existence, placing himself directly inside the work of art and disintegrating the partitions which divide the novelistic world from the tangible dimension of reality. In the process, he also explored the artistic potentialities of the book as an object, drawing attention to elements such as the texture of the page, the disposition of the text on its surface, or the succession of the chapters in a bound or unbound volume. In doing this, he has shown how every single element of which a novel is composed, both virtually and materially, can be exploited to convey a message, pointing, in this way, also to the continuity between text and outside world.

Ann Quin has placed herself with her whole body and mind in her novels, creating a unique style that could give voice to her experiences of otherness, her existential and artistic evasions beyond the limits of the possible, or her explorations of conditions of limbo and liminality. She has created texts of great density and sensuality, in which everything is corporeal and tangibly experienceable through the five senses, and, at the same time, quintessentially mental, stretching the limits of the mind beyond itself and the realm of the conceivable. She has started from the minimal realities of life and taken flights into the unknown, extending the ordinariness of existence into the extraordinary quality of augmented and transfigured visions of the world, risking her own self to bring back the wonders and the horrors she found in the innermost recess of her own mind.

Eva Figes has experimented with an astonishing variety of forms, registers, styles and subject matters, appropriating the body and the mind of a vast array of characters, from men to women, from old to young, from illustrious figures to destitute wretches. She has sung the fragmentation and the chaos of the post-War, post-Holocaust world, and found new connections and ways of working through the trauma of her and of Europe’s collective experiences. She has found suitable voices and styles to narrate the unspeakable horrors of a troubled epoch, as well as the gentle lightness of the

smallest things in the intimate life of common individuals. She has found the courage to articulate in her fiction the unique experience of being a woman, and the daily struggle of women in a society built and governed by men.

The literature produced by these three authors is thus profoundly diverse in tone, style, themes strategies and kinds of experimentations, so that bringing them together under one single homogenising discourse would mean committing a violence against the unicity of each single voice, which is best appreciated in its own inimitable characteristics. If one were to find a *trait d'union* across their respective bodies of work, however, one could certainly point to a common determination to stretch the limits of the novel both in terms of its technical possibilities and the areas of experience which it can explore. This is done both in a spirit of innovation and rupture, with respect to the allegedly exhausted forms of the past, no longer capable of conveying the truth of the present, but also with a genuine willingness to position one's work within a precise tradition of literary subversion, stretching back to the Modernist authors of the first half of the century, or, for that matter, any other previous experience of deviation from the norm.

Another common characteristic one could point out is a renovated and refreshing emphasis on corporeality and materiality, which is possibly a sign of metabolisation of the example of the *nouveau roman*, especially of its aspect of *chosisme*. In the majority of these writers' works, objects and especially bodies come prominently to the fore, activating sensorial dynamics which profoundly alter the experience of reading, and changing the quintessentially Modernist tendency to abstraction into something more tangible. Unlike the experience of the *nouveau roman*, however, and more in continuity with the Modernist novel, the emphasis continues to be mainly on individualism and subjective experiences of the world – sometimes, as in the case of Johnson, in a concretely literal sense.

If the literary worth and the intrinsic interest of these authors' novels is beyond dispute, it is rather hard to assess the impact that their experimentations have had on the field of English letters. The neglect they have largely suffered, both in life and in the decades subsequent to their – sometimes untimely – death, has perhaps not allowed them to leave a recognisable and immediate trace on the literature of their time. The timid revival that these authors have undergone from the beginning of this century, however, seems to suggest that a possible, albeit belated, assimilation of their message could provide a more complete vision of the evolution of the experimental novel in the second half of the Twentieth century, possibly offering new examples and models for new generations of innovative writers to rely on.

A group of contemporary authors, some of which already established, others still belonging to the literary underground, have indeed begun to acknowledge, if not a direct influence, at least an awareness of the existence of the writers of the so-called circle of B.S. Johnson, drawing attention to

the importance and value of their texts, and, in some cases, contributing actively to their acknowledgment. The words of appreciation expressed by writers such as Ian McEwan, Tom McCarthy, Jonathan Coe, Deborah Levy, Stewart Home and Lee Rourke perhaps represent only the first tangible signs of recognition of this so far unjustly overlooked phase of British literary history. Only time will determine the true impact of their work on their contemporary and future generations.

What is certain, in any case, is that the re-discovery of their texts allows us to fill in a gap in the recent evolution of the novel, pointing to some overlooked connections and demonstrating how the tradition of experimental literature actually flourished, albeit unnoticedly, in an apparently sterile period as the British Sixties. There is evidence that these authors' voices, unheeded for so long, are now belatedly resounding, and will hopefully continue to resound with a renovated force, as is inevitable, in the long run, with any writing that has truly something meaningful to convey, any writing that, as Johnson would have it, has been "meant to matter".

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