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# HERETICAL CAPITAL: WALTER BENJAMIN'S CULT STATUS IN CULTURAL AND THEORETICAL HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

This piece of writing offers a survey angle of vision on the reception of Walter Benjamin by a myriad of European and US scholars of note in order to offer some working hypotheses and evidence for Benjamin's cult status in the world of academe today. Very exactly, certain lines in the spectrum of scholarship on Benjamin by Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Leo Bersani, Susan Buck-Morss, Beatrice Hanssen, Carol Jacobs, Martin Jay, Gregg Lambert, Pierre Missac and Richard Wolin will be engaged. Questions concerning modernism and postmodernism and the commodification of intellectual work in the academy and of their advent in the whole dialectic of the reception of Benjamin are also indirectly and directly broached.

## KEYWORDS

Walter Benjamin; Theodor Adorno; Hannah Arendt; modernism; postmodernism; commodification of art; twentieth-century literary criticism; twentieth-century philosophy

This scholarly essay offers an investigation into and a survey view of the cult status that Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) has come to possess in literary and cultural theory from the mid-twentieth century down to the present. It will look at Benjamin in the context of other figures such as Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt, as well as such later readers as Carol Jacobs (*In the Language of Walter Benjamin*), Beatrice Hanssen (*Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*), Pierre Missac (trans. *Walter Benjamin's Passages*), Susan Buck-Morss (*The Dialectics of Seeing*), Leo Bersani ("Boundaries of Time and Being" from *The Culture of Redemption*), Richard Wolin (*Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*) and Martin Jay (*Refractions of Violence*), all of whom, simply by applying their critical lenses to him, have helped endow Benjamin with the educational and cultural prestige he now has in the academic and cultural social systems. One could have pursued Giorgio Agamben at length (a wonderful reader-commentator of Benjamin, who has done much to spread his work), among others, but the sheer limitations of the space for this article necessitated the restricted number of figures that are cited.

The theoretical orientation of the essay will draw inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu's writings on different forms of capital, including cultural capital, and also, more distantly and subterraneously, Niklas Luhmann's writings on aesthetics and on systems theory. Questions of Benjamin's critical work

and conceptual persona in the formation of the canon of cultural and literary theory will thus be brought to the fore by adducing a history of some of the aforementioned reactions to Benjamin for a more inclusive trans-disciplinary understanding of Benjamin's reception, which has at times, to say the very least, reached cult heights.

If one were to offer up a hit parade of arguably four of the more influential figures in thought in the western humanities in the twentieth century, one could do worse than adduce Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. And yet, of this quartet, Benjamin was the only one who did not find a place in establishment structures, in Benjamin's case a university or college post (although Wittgenstein, who, incidentally, used to teach at a school in Olomouc, found what he saw as the vanity of academe generally unbearable); therefore the skyrocketing aspect of the meteoric rise in Benjamin's fame was perhaps an historical necessity to make reparations for the profound neglect he received while alive. Benjamin's disciple, Adorno, puts it this way:

The fascination of the person and of his work allowed no alternative other than that of magnetic attraction or horrified rejection. Everything which fell under the scrutiny of his words was transformed, as though it had become radioactive. His capacity for continually bringing out new aspects, not by exploding conventions through criticism, but rather by organizing himself so as to be able to relate to his subject-matter in a way that seemed beyond all convention—this capacity can hardly be adequately described by the concept of 'originality'. . . Benjamin, who as subject actually lived all the 'originary' experiences that official contemporary philosophy merely talks about, seemed at the same time utterly detached from them.<sup>1</sup>

The last point gives Benjamin a certain capital form of dignity, for he "actually lived all the 'originary' experiences that official contemporary philosophy merely talks about," thereby, in a Luhmannian spirit (Luhmann has talked of the importance of "testing texts with contexts"), contesting his ideas with experiential information or perhaps equally engendering ideas precisely through the filter of experience.

The dream of happiness for Adorno, too, underwrites Benjamin's cult-like literary integrity when he composes of:

a quality which intellectual departmentalization otherwise reserves for art, but which sheds all semblance when transposed into the realm of theory and assumes incomparable dignity—the promise of happiness . . . In his philosophical topography, renunciation is totally repudiated. Anyone who was drawn to him was bound to feel like the child who catches a glimpse of the lighted Christmas tree through a crack in the closed door . . . Benjamin's thought . . . had the generosity of abundance; it sought to make good everything, all the pleasure prohibited by adjustment and self-preservation, pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual.<sup>2</sup>

This speaks volumes about the excellent effects of Benjamin's creative oeuvre, and signals again how he got the best out of Adorno, his only true pupil.

1. Theodor W. Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 229.

2. Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," 230.

That Benjamin sought “the promise of happiness” echoes Benjamin’s own famous thoughts on the French novelist Marcel Proust’s similar quest. Adorno explicitly draws a comparison between Benjamin and Heidegger when he writes “that an essay on the Paris arcades is of greater interest philosophically than are ponderous observations on the Being of beings is more attuned to the meaning of his work than the quest for that unchanging, self-identical conceptual skeleton which he relegated to the dustbin.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, compared with Heidegger’s influential philosophy of Being in *Being and Time*, reveals itself for Adorno as being rather more relevant to objective reality and to objective truth. Benjamin, too, was simply uncategorizable with regard to his own particular areas of inquiry. Hence, too, his malignant neglect by the academies of central Europe, from whom, notoriously, he failed to secure an academic post commensurate with his capacities. As concerns the flexibility and wide-ranging nature of Benjamin’s investigations, Adorno suggests that it was precisely the maltreatment his imaginative teacher received from the universities that forged his interdisciplinary critical bite, for Benjamin earned “his living as an essayist, on his own and unprotected. That greatly developed the agility of his profound mind. He learned how to convict the prodigious and ponderous claims of the *prima philosophia* of their hollowness, with a silent chuckle.”<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, in a special word, had the intelligence to see through the sometimes overly self-congratulatory and well-nigh, if not out-and-out, fraudulent quality of the rather overblown claims of some schools of thought, such as certain spirits of Heideggerianism. Benjamin’s very isolation probably contributed to this ability to de-mythologize the dominant academic mythmakers of his era. And as for Benjamin’s legacy as an essayist, Adorno writes:

The essay as form consists in the ability to regard historical moments, manifestations of the objective spirit, ‘culture’, as though they were natural. Benjamin could do this as no one else . . . He was drawn to the petrified, frozen or obsolete elements of civilization, to everything in it devoid of domestic vitality no less irresistibly than is the collector to fossiles (*sic*) or to the plant in the herbarium. Small glass balls containing a landscape upon which snow fell when shook (*sic*) were among his favourite objects . . .<sup>5</sup>

Adorno’s words, “Small glass balls containing a landscape upon which snow fell when shook” remind one of the cinematic extract of Charles Foster Kane’s towering rage at the end of the 1941 film *Citizen Kane*, in which, after he tears up his wife Susan’s apartment because she had left him, he clutches just such a glass sphere.

Furthermore, for Adorno in this key essay on his teacher:

Benjamin overexposes the objects for the sake of the hidden contours which one day, in the state of reconciliation, will become evident, but in so doing he reveals the chasm

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3. Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” 232.

4. Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” 232.

5. Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” 233.

separating that day and life as it is. The price of hope is life . . . and happiness, according to a late fragment which risks everything, is its 'intrinsic rhythm'. Hence the core of Benjamin's philosophy is the idea of the salvation of the dead as the restitution of distorted life through the consummation of its own reification down to the inorganic level . . . In the paradox of the impossible possibility, mysticism and enlightenment are joined for the last time in him.<sup>6</sup>

That "the price of hope is life" taps into the revolutionary aesthetic energies of a kind of theological cast of mind that was Benjamin's own. Additionally, that "happiness according to a late fragment which risks everything, is its 'intrinsic rhythm'" hints at what is among the most profound of Benjamin's critical legacies. Therefore, Adorno's pinpointing that "the core of Benjamin's philosophy is the idea of the salvation of the dead as the restitution of distorted life through the consummation of its own reification down to the inorganic level" cuts to the chase of what is of high creative value for his intellectual master and for the aesthetic, cultural, political and social effects of the cult value of Benjamin.

Another notable figure of twentieth-century thought, Hannah Arendt, writes of Benjamin's delayed acknowledgment:

Posthumous fame is too odd a thing to be blamed upon the blindness of the world or the corruption of a literary milieu. Nor can it be said that it is the bitter reward of those who were ahead of their time—as though history were a race track on which some contenders run so swiftly that they simply disappear from the spectator's range of vision. On the contrary, posthumous fame is usually preceded by the highest recognition among one's peers.<sup>7</sup>

Such was the case with Benjamin, at least as regards the members of the Institute of Social Research in New York City, which underwrote Benjamin's precarious material situation in the last years of his existence. Arendt here touches upon something we noted that Adorno hinted at above, which is that it was Benjamin's creative particularity and vocational singularity that was not taken on board by academic, social and economic reality:

The trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it always turned out to be *sui generis*.

Posthumous fame seems, then, to be the lot of the unclassifiable ones . . . those whose work neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification.<sup>8</sup>

So, in this framework Benjamin would be considered brilliant, though he just did not fit into the existing academic and literary structures: an understandable fate given how structured mental experience and activity are in the control-oriented late modern era, including the businesses of thinking and of writing. Benjamin's mode of thinking and writing caused too much classificatory interference for his own lifetime success in an academic

6. Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," 241.

7. Hannah Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940," in *Illuminations*, by Walter Benjamin (London: Pimlico, 1999), 8.

8. Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940," 9.

social system that could not help but be inherently hostile to his cosmic properties. Yet Arendt underpins the aforementioned with another overall aspect attached to Benjamin, “It is the element of bad luck, and this factor, very prominent in Benjamin’s life, cannot be ignored here because he himself, who probably never thought or dreamed about posthumous fame, was so extraordinarily aware of it.”<sup>9</sup> Another key quality of the cultural effect of Benjamin’s cult status derives from what Arendt thinks here about Benjamin being the last in a longstanding line of eminent “men of letters”:

[I]n Benjamin the element of culture combined in such a unique way with the element of the revolutionary and rebellious. It was as though shortly before its disappearance the figure of the *homme de lettres* was destined to show itself once more in the fullness of its possibilities, although—or, possibly, because—it had lost its material basis in such a catastrophic way, so that the purely intellectual passion which makes this figure so lovable might unfold in all its most telling and impressive possibilities.<sup>10</sup>

So it is that with the *facta bruta* of the onslaught of advanced capitalism the traditional man of letters of independent means would become an anachronism with Benjamin’s passing. Arendt argues, too, with regard to the cult, that “the fetish character which Benjamin explicitly claimed for the collector as well as for the market determined by him has replaced the ‘cult value’ and is its secularization.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore in this schema one may speak of various fetishizations of Benjamin, instead of various Benjamin cults (in the same way that New Testament scholars today speak of various competing Christ-cults in the first century of our era after the death of Jesus of Nazareth).

To shift registers here, in one of the most outstanding books on Benjamin published in English, Susan Buck-Morss’s *The Dialectics of Seeing*, she notes:

After the initial, politically charged reception that greeted the first volumes of Benjamin’s complete works in the early 1970s, he has quite rapidly gained respectability within universities . . . where he has been inserted into the developmental histories of the disciplines and bent to fit existing course progressions.<sup>12</sup>

This objective situation is partly because the humanities have become more flexible in their own self-understandings, self-descriptions and self-presentations in advanced commodity society. In a way one may argue that Benjamin’s critical reception has benefited from the cross-fertilization of disciplines of the last forty years. Of Benjamin’s particular form of

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9. Arendt, “Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940,” 11. It is perhaps worthy of note that for some researchers even just working on Benjamin may augur bad luck, for the present writer had his own research notes on Benjamin for the present prose piece lost in one check-in piece of luggage that remains missing from a flight on 31 May 2005 from Paris to Prague; nevertheless, the requisite re-reading and re-note-taking accomplished in the intervening time has no doubt brought the present research somewhat closer to Benjamin’s cult status.

10. Arendt, “Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940,” 33.

11. Arendt, “Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940,” 47.

12. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 222.

philosophical sanity Buck-Morss remarks that “if Benjamin threw the traditional language of Western metaphysics into the junkroom, it was to rescue the metaphysical experience of the objective world, not to see philosophy dissolve into the play of language itself.”<sup>13</sup> Hence a certain sort of philosophical and literary play Benjamin’s thought would denude as part of a narcissistic intellectual western culture and occidental world.

Buck-Morss also espouses Benjamin’s own vocation with these words (a line of business that could only intensify his being a counter-agent of counter-culture and thus heretical or counter-capital in the Pierre Bourdieu-inspired notion of the stock exchange of cultural capital):

Benjamin’s comments on the figure of the flâneur, the nineteenth-century stroller on the city streets . . . the ‘ur-form’ of the modern intellectual [whose] object of inquiry is modernity itself [who] he walks the streets and ‘studies’ the crowd . . . his economic base shifts . . . no longer protected by the academic’s mandarin status . . . Baudelaire embodies the qualities of the flâneur . . . his acute awareness of his highly ambivalent situation—at once socially rebellious bohemian and producer of commodities for the literary market— . . . accounts for Baudelaire’s ability to “teach” Benjamin’s generation of intellectual producers about their own objective circumstances, in which their interests in fact converge with those of the proletariat.<sup>14</sup>

Benjamin’s publishing activities and work, then, dovetail with those that are more to do with working class forms of presentation and expression. The same may be said today of certain agents of counter-capital within proletarianized quarters of academia.

Regarding the slide the Jewish Benjamin took downhill into his appalling physical obliteration, which was ostensibly due (although it has never been properly corroborated, it has to be said) to suicide through fear of Nazi power and a need to flee from where it might find and thus incinerate him, Buck-Morss recounts an eyewitness:

I noticed that Benjamin was carrying a large black briefcase . . . It looked heavy and I offered to help him carry it. “This is my new manuscript,” he explained. “But why did you take it for this walk?” “You must understand that this briefcase is the most important thing to me,” he said. “I cannot risk losing it. It is the manuscript that must be saved. It is more important than I am.”<sup>15</sup>

This would seem a kind of archetypal sacrificial gesture on the part of Benjamin that could only help to service the moral effects of his cult status for future generations to come. Further, we read:

Now back to the steep vineyard . . . Here for the first and only time Benjamin faltered. More precisely, he tried, failed, and then gave formal notice that this climb was beyond his capability. José and I took him between us, with his arms on our shoulders we dragged him and the bag up the hill. He breathed heavily, yet he made no complaint, not even a sigh. He only kept squinting in the direction of the black bag.<sup>16</sup>

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13. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 223.

14. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 304.

15. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 332.

16. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 332.

With this rather poignant retelling, Buck-Morss underwrites what could only contribute to Benjamin as a kind of heroic cult figure deserving of every single iota of such social, cultural and philosophical capital that would, in turn, service the ethical and moral effects of the cult quality of his conceptual persona and of his creative work. Nevertheless, we read the following disclaimer about Benjamin's fate:

In October 1940, Horkheimer requested detailed information from the Spanish border police. He was told Benjamin's death was "not suicide but from natural causes," . . . and that his personal effects taken into custody consisted of . . . a leather briefcase of the type used by businessmen, a man's watch, a pipe, six photographs, an X-ray photograph (radiografía), glasses, various letters, periodicals and a few other papers, the contents of which are not noted, as well as some money . . . No mention of a "heavy" manuscript. The "few other papers" have not been preserved. Nor was his grave marked or tended.<sup>17</sup>

So, perhaps we shall never know what happened to Benjamin's long script on that mountain, or if there even was one, and how it was that he checked out, i.e., died. The mystery instead multiplies geometrically.

Furthermore, Buck-Morss makes a political point when she warns those who work in the wake of Benjamin that they may well ignore and betray his true motivations:

Benjamin's dialectical images are neither aesthetic nor arbitrary. He understood historical "perspective" as a focus on the past that made the present, as revolutionary "now-time," its vanishing point. He kept his eyes on this beacon, and his interpreters would do well to follow suit. Without its constant beam, they risk becoming starry-eyed by the flashes of brilliance in Benjamin's writings (or in their own), and blinded to the point.<sup>18</sup>

This sort of forceful, poetic and metaphorical cultural criticism seems goaded on by Benjamin's own form of being (and not only his mode of writing) and, for many other thinking beings even now, Benjamin as a conductor of non-organic energies (that is, as a dead human being but a living creating and thinking being who spurs others on), and Buck-Morss is scarcely alone in offering up this kind of criticism of Benjamin among our adduced scholar-critics. Even more importantly for us here, Buck-Morss implies an undeniable danger that middle-class teachers and students hijacked by advanced capitalism would forget that the impetus for Benjamin's investigations was profound social change rather than flashy post-modern, post-structuralist or post-literary features.

In a nice twist to the cult function that Benjamin ostensibly has, Buck-Morss writes incisively that

"One should never trust what an author himself says about his work," wrote Benjamin. Nor can we, because if Benjamin is correct, the truth content of a literary work is released only after the fact, and is a function of what happens in that reality which becomes the medium for its survival.<sup>19</sup>

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17. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 334.

18. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 339.

19. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 339.

A creative and participatory sort of cultural criticism is therefore required. Buck-Morss adds that, “In the flâneur, concretely, we recognize our own consumerist mode of being-in-the-world. (The same can be argued for all of Benjamin’s historical figures. In commodity society all of us are prostitutes, selling ourselves to strangers; all of us are collectors of things.)”<sup>20</sup> We also read,

The *Passagen-Werk* suggests that it makes no sense to divide the era of capitalism into formalist “modernism” and historically eclectic “post-modernism,” as these tendencies have been there from the start of industrial culture. The paradoxical dynamics of novelty and repetition simply repeat themselves anew.

Modernism and postmodernism are . . . political positions in the century-long struggle between art and technology. If modernism expresses utopian longing by anticipating the reconciliation of social function and aesthetic form, postmodernism acknowledges their nonidentity and keeps fantasy alive. Each position thus represents a partial truth; each will recur “anew,” so long as the contradictions of commodity society are not overcome.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond the din of voices that argue for one or the other of the two positions of modernism and of postmodernism, Buck-Morss here lucidly articulates with such a conceptual cartography a more dialectical approach to the question, including, of course, Benjamin’s own objective intellectual and life situation.

In yet another instance of Benjamin’s ability to live on as a living, thinking being if not as a human being, Martin Jay declares in his *Refractions of Violence*:

Benjamin’s intransigent resistance to symbolic healing and positive commemoration merits continued respect . . . he gave the lie to the assumption that the victims of the war—or more profoundly, of the society ruled by myth and injustice that could have allowed it to happen—could be best understood as heroic warriors who died for a noble cause. This is a lesson that ironically can be learned as well from the fate Benjamin himself suffered on the eve of the Second World War. For his suicide on the French/Spanish border also defied symbolic closure.<sup>22</sup>

This extract highlights Benjamin’s rare power to defetishize and demystify the social, adding yet more to his credibility as a genuine cult figure and to its specifically social and moral effects. Jay may also help us to further our argument by offering another example; since it makes the blanket assumption that Benjamin’s suffering did not contribute to his profundity in some fashion, Jay here states in a way that resonates with a certain spirit of American positivity of

a plaintive letter Walter Benjamin sent to Gershom Scholem from Berlin in 1931, almost a full decade before he ended his life fleeing fascism on the French-Spanish border. “I have reached an extreme,” he wrote, “Someone shipwrecked, who climbs the crumbling mast of his boat’s wreckage.” And then he added with desperate hope: “But he has the

20. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 345.

21. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 359.

22. Martin Jay, *Refractions of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2003), 24.

chance from there to signal for his rescue.” Benjamin’s signals were, as we know, not heard . . .<sup>23</sup>

However harsh such a macro-level diagnosis of Jay’s North American positivism as argued above may seem, one may simply believe that to nuance his assertion a little bit would be a good thing for it may after all be precisely the fact that Benjamin was in such a “shipwreck” that gave him the purchasing power to obtain a special insight.

In a certain kind of deflation of Benjamin’s intellectual currency, we read from Beatrice Hanssen’s hand: “If Gershom Scholem was one of Benjamin’s early companions in his study of the cabala, he also often turned into one of his harshest critics, chiding his friend for engaging in a dialogue with conservative or protofascist authors whose politics defied redemption.”<sup>24</sup> Further than this, in a radical remark meant to put Benjamin’s real subversive and heretical value as a thinker on center stage, Hanssen writes:

Invoking phenomenological data about the perception of the insane and so-called primitive, preanimistic peoples, Benjamin boldly subverted philosophical tradition when he suggested that Kant’s cognitive, empirical consciousness was itself no more than “a type of insane consciousness.” . . . In so doing, he not only turned the Kantian tradition inside out but in fact meant to expand the notion of experience to include religious experience and the phenomenon of madness.<sup>25</sup>

For Hanssen,

the iconoclastic potential of Benjamin’s notions of allegory and the fragment has been well established . . . But less attention has been devoted to the way in which the categories of decay and transience, at the center of the *Trauerspiel* study, anticipate the later materialistic theory of the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction . . . Benjamin’s preoccupation with transience was not simply motivated by the baroque’s obsession with things in decay but equally concerned the temporal, historical, and process-like nature of modern art.<sup>26</sup>

The three lattermost aspects of the work of art cited here for Benjamin remain topical and up-to-the-minute for current critical and academic debates.

As for the powerful specter of yet another cult figure, Nietzsche himself, we read from Hanssen:

Benjamin carefully distinguished the *Unmensch* from the hedonism of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, who was to overcome the “Krankheit Mensch” (the illness of being human) . . . Instead of celebrating Nietzsche, Benjamin saw his own theory of the *Unmensch*, which he claimed to have taken from Salomo Friedländer, as a corrective to the overman. . . . Benjamin’s desire to expel the specter of Nietzschean politics can also be gleaned from one of the notes to a draft version of the Kraus essay, which stated,

23. Jay, *Refractions of Violence*, 116. The quotation is from “Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, April 17, 1931,” in *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), 2:532.

24. Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 6.

25. Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History*, 29. The quotation is from Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy.”

26. Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History*, 66.

“deepest opposition to Nietzsche: the relation of the inhuman to the over-man” . . . . Perhaps Benjamin aspired to hold the disturbing shadow of Nietzsche’s over-man at bay by means of the category of sobriety, which was to dispel the irrationalism of Nietzschean intoxication.<sup>27</sup>

Let it not remain unremarked that Hanssen’s fine book particularly adds to the aesthetic and intellectual effects of Benjamin’s cult status.

In another well-tuned study of Benjamin, by Carol Jacobs, we read, “In a sense, reading Benjamin is inevitably an attempt to redeem him—though, certainly, to rearticulate his work does not mean “to recognize ‘it as it really was.’” Much in Benjamin speaks to the contrary.”<sup>28</sup> This sort of critical motivation of Jacobs, of course, reminds one of Kafka’s famous injunction, which Gregg Lambert spotlights:

The categorical imperative of modernity’s unfinished project can be found in a formula that Benjamin first ascribes to Kafka: ‘Act in such a manner that you give the gods something to do.’ The principal reference here is to a passage from the *Phenomenology of Mind*, where Hegel describes the function of the Epic narrative as the invocation, or call, through the mimesis of the ‘voice of the dead’ (*mnemosyne*, memory), that cuts a ‘ditch’ in the earth, a rift or crack in time, through which the dead return to seek revenge on the living. Consequently, it is only in such moments that the gods have ‘something to do’—to provide a measure of justice, victory and *kudos*—that there is the chance of sealing or closing up the ditch in memory and restoring order to time.<sup>29</sup>

Jacobs notes of the status of memories in Benjamin’s *Berlin Chronicle* that they form “a medium in which debris and buried ruins are reinterred as one probes, a digging in which no thing is brought to the surface. And yet Benjamin hardly bemoans a loss of treasure, but celebrates, rather, the dark good fortune of the digging itself and even the failure to find.”<sup>30</sup> Here it is the subjective creative journey and the process of memory that count and not the end-point. Further, Jacobs underscores again why Benjamin failed to receive his just desserts institutionally with respect to academic structures: “Benjamin, like others before him, dissolves an old genre (literary criticism) in order to found a new genre that combines fiction and commentary in one.”<sup>31</sup> This is precisely the point and what ultimately will prove Benjamin’s most valuable intellectual contribution and legacy. For his cult status as a writer of interdisciplinary work now legitimates new cultural effects such as the disciplines of contemporary literary and cultural theory and inter-cultural studies, which, when operating at their best, are on the side of that which

27. Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History*, 123.

28. Carol Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 3. The quotation is from Benjamin’s essay “Ober den Begriff der Geschichte,” translated by Jacobs as “On the Concept of History.” Under the title “Theses on the Philosophy of History” it was published in Zorn’s translation in *Illuminations*, 253–64. There it is translated as “to recognize it ‘the way it really was’” (255).

29. Gregg Lambert, *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (London: Continuum, 2004), 70.

30. Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin*, 11.

31. Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin*, 40.

can contest the abuse of forms of social power that unfortunately have co-opted critical academic thought.

In yet another critical study of Benjamin, composed by Pierre Missac across some five decades (he was introduced to Benjamin by Georges Bataille), we note Benjamin's enforced peripatetic existence, which fueled his trans-disciplinary investigations, for his wings, after all, were tied down neither to any particular department nor to any geographical, institutional or ideological school:

it is clear that material circumstances cannot be ignored . . . This is particularly true for Benjamin . . . leading him to take refuge in the suspended temporality of travel, forcing him to move ceaselessly from one place to another, or preventing him from doing so—making, in short, a passant, a transient, of this man who was born to be a flâneur, and making of the transient a fugitive.<sup>32</sup>

The real material brutality visited on Benjamin teaches one to think of the very ignorance of what underwrote that dominant day-to-day reality. Missac writes here with some passion:

Benjamin's fate can be defined as extending 'from one suicide to the other,' the phrase 'from one war to another' is just as accurate . . . war would have its revenge, making the machinations of the Little Hunchback, whose worst exploits were no more than adolescent pranks, seem ridiculous . . . Benjamin, who would not be its last victim, had foreseen it. His body, which, despite what some have said, did indeed exist, disappeared after his death. We have nothing but one more death without burial among so many others; no name on a common grave, even for someone who, while alive, provided a name for the nameless . . .<sup>33</sup>

That Benjamin endured "one suicide after another" perhaps also encouraged him to commit a kind of interpretive and egoistical suicide in his intellectual investigations, thereby adding to his depth, insight, and, most of all, true authority of what we may call, for lack of a better term, impersonality (Benjamin, after all, had no official post that gave him redoubtable cultural or academic authority). This also probably helped Benjamin to forge new compositional genres for which there is as yet no name, except perhaps creative criticism. In a word, we need new categories to capture the reality of Benjamin's emancipatory work.

Let us now turn our attention to Richard Wolin's outstanding introductory book on Benjamin, in which he writes of "Benjamin's profound identification with the 'destructive character' who appreciates 'how immensely the world is simplified when tested for its worthiness for destruction.' The destructive character is anything but goal-oriented and devoid of an overarching vision of the way the world should be." Wolin continues by quoting Benjamin: "He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed." It was in the same spirit that he enthusiastically cited a remark of Adolf Loos: 'If human work consists only of destruction, it is truly human,

32. Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 2.

33. Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, 10.

natural, noble work."<sup>34</sup> Here what Wolin suggests is a kind of conceptual persona of Benjamin as a saboteur or even Nietzsche-like agent of the false, the falsifier of established truths. Furthermore, Wolin notes:

For Benjamin, the more manifestly historical life appears destitute of salvation, the more inexorably it presents itself as a ruin, the more it refers to that sphere *beyond* historical life where redemption lies in store. This sphere can only be reached through the utter *devaluation and mortification of all worldly values*. Just as the critical mortification of works of art points the way to their ultimate salvation, so, too, the *mortification of historical life serves as the negative indication of the path to redeemed life*.<sup>35</sup>

The same may be said of Benjamin's own life narrative and life's work, of course, in how in ironical fashion the authentically academic or academistic may be said very precisely in due course to prove to be Benjamin's anti-academic enforced status and mode of operation as an ephemeral human-being-in-the-world. Wolin also offers up a very pointed statement about Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht when he considers:

Originally, both men . . . were inspired by the possibility of transforming art itself from within, and thus preventing it from degenerating to the level of mere consolation. Both men . . . realize[d] the inherent foolhardiness of attempting to reach the masses directly; instead, they sought to influence other left-leaning intellectuals of similar backgrounds.<sup>36</sup>

So here at least Benjamin and the subsequent specter of his cult status would seem to want to affect the propensities and proclivities of, above all, other academic- and thinking-being leftists. To try and exercise any interventionary force on the multitude would, for them, be dewy-eyed and inefficacious. Given their own particularities, this need not sound, with respect to the general reader, as if Benjamin and Brecht are throwing in the towel with respect to contesting abusive power and injustice. Quite the opposite. What Wolin writes about Adorno on music might also enrich our present considerations:

there is the growing cult of musical 'stars,' the beneficiaries of a totally artificial and contrived buildup on the part of the industry. The result is that the specific quality of this or that individual song ceases to matter . . . and it is purchased merely for the sake of the *name* of the artist. Art thereby regresses to *cult* in the full-fledged totemic sense of the word. It becomes nothing more than a *fetish*, part of the logic of commodification or the 'fetishism of commodities' in Marx's sense.<sup>37</sup>

Here cult status would be a bad, repressive and deceptive thing, more to do with a name brand that spoils one's taste and not a good, authentic or genuine thing more to do with revolutionary insight and energies that promote emotional, imaginative, intellectual and perceptual development. Crucially, for Benjamin, as Wolin notes:

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34. Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xv.

35. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 59. Wolin's italics.

36. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 159.

37. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 195.

The foremost danger of modernity is that its radical disrespect for tradition runs the grave risk of totally eradicating our links with the past, thus squandering that invaluable ‘temporal index of redemption’ which tradition contains. An *authentic* sublation of the past would necessarily *preserve* the promise of redemption that has been sedimented in the artifacts and ruins of traditional life.<sup>38</sup>

This also reveals some cultural and historical effects of Benjamin’s insightfulness and cult status over and against the trendoids that go in for the latest item on the menu of intellectual commodities for scholarly consumption.

Our last adduced critical scholar of Benjamin, Leo Bersani, writes in a highly critical way that

The disease of modernity (more profoundly, of history) that Benjamin analyzes is first of all . . . the disease of his perception of modernity. The redemptive need in Benjamin’s critique of the modern condemns that critique to a kind of mystified morbidity; it always has to be a question of ‘truth’ breaking in upon, or being made to emerge from, degraded phenomena—degraded by virtue of their very phenomenality. It is tempting to see Benjamin’s great popularity today as a sign of our complicity in such mystifications. It is perhaps, more pointedly, a sign of the extraordinary hold on our thought of the culture of redemption. For in Benjamin we find the traits that are most deeply characteristic of this culture: the scrupulous registering of experience in order to annihilate it, and the magical and nihilistic belief that immersion in the most minute details of a material content will not only reduce that content but simultaneously unveil its hidden redemptive double.<sup>39</sup>

This is dense material that provokes one to think of Benjamin afresh amidst the wildly enthusiastic chorus of applause that he is now wont to receive in moderately self-selective quarters. Yet the remark that “It is tempting to see Benjamin’s great popularity today as a sign of our complicity in such mystifications. It is perhaps, more pointedly, a sign of the extraordinary hold on our thought of the culture of redemption” misses the point that the sort of redemption Bersani critiques in his *The Culture of Redemption* has rather more to do with American positivity and the cultural politics of William J. Bennett and cultural conservatives than with Walter Benjamin; in a word, Bersani essays rather too hard to pigeonhole Benjamin for the sake of his overall argument, although a scholar as extremely subtle and forceful as Bersani would not typically be likely to do so. Still, some contours of this criticism by Bersani of Benjamin remain to be thought of again and again as a sort of vigilant safeguarding of Benjamin’s legacy, which is, after all, on balance, a good form of cult status instead of a rather retrograde version in which one may find more to do with the name of the figure being adduced than with the qualities of the work produced.

In the final tally, given the foregoing explosion of discourses (many of them book-length) regarding Benjamin within academia in just the past few decades, it would seem that the true social, political, aesthetic, moral/ethical and cultural effects of Benjamin’s status have only just begun to be filtered

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38. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 217–18.

39. Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 54.

and registered, even as the wind in Benjamin's sails continues to gain in magical force.

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# TO STATE THE PROBLEM CORRECTLY: FACING THE BLACK TICKETS IN JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS'S *MACHINE DREAMS*

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## ABSTRACT

Jayne Anne Phillips's novel *Machine Dreams*, a family saga strongly grounded in its southern sense of place, intimately interrogates why the trauma of the Vietnam War was so devastating to America and why it ravaged, on many levels, the potent modernist dreams of this country. She wrote this novel—which is fraught with loss, mourning, and remembering—to counter the cultural and historical amnesia that she often found in America; to examine once again the “machine in the garden” theme that has so often energized American writing; to examine how the Vietnam War challenged the confidence of the “The Greatest Generation” that had endured the Depression and won World War II; and to recover, through her writing, some kind of faith out of this historical wreckage.

## KEYWORDS

Jayne Anne Phillips; *Machine Dreams*; “The Greatest Generation”; Vietnam War; World War II; twentieth-century American literature; twentieth-century Southern literature; memory in American literature; trauma in American literature; violence in American literature; West Virginia

Jayne Anne Phillips, one of the most underappreciated southern writers, could be writing about herself when she talks about Chekhov in her essay “Violence in American Myth, Imagination & Lit”:

Chekhov once replied to an irate reader by asserting that it was the writer's responsibility not to see a problem, but to state the problem correctly. That is our responsibility. It is our concern that Americans have little understanding of their own history, that Americans don't read by and large American literature, or feel they need to, that Americans are preternaturally isolated on an assaltive sea of information.<sup>1</sup>

With her deep faith in literature and in the writer's important ethical role in society, with her skill in fusing realism, modernism, and postmodernism within her rich literary imagination, and with her persistent recognition of the possibilities of redemption, Phillips has always been an astute examiner of contemporary American culture. Her first three novels, *Machine Dreams* (1984), *Shelter* (1994), and *Motherkind* (2000), especially fulfill Phillips's vision of the writer, for they create time-ridden, weary, and dangerous worlds, taking the reader into what Stendhal calls “the dark fissures” of life where in

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1. Jayne Anne Phillips, “Violence in American Myth, Imagination & Lit,” in *Jayne Anne Phillips: American Writer*, 2000, <http://www.jayneannephillips.com/esviolence.htm>.

intense flashes, Phillips reveals the terror latent, and too often erupting, at the heart of the human condition. She invites her audience not to turn away from the darkness, but to fill in and connect the threatening silences and gaps within her narratives, for only then can one discover if any hope exists in her fictional world. As Phillips stresses, “I work inside silence; every writer does.”<sup>2</sup> This working inside, in fact, defines her richly etched, intimate portrayals of daily life “afflicted with extraordinary pressures.”<sup>3</sup>

*Machine Dreams* is perhaps Phillips’s best-known novel: a family saga, deeply grounded in its West Virginia sense of place that intimately conveys why the trauma of the Vietnam War was so devastating to this area and why this war ravaged the potent modernist dreams of post-World War II America—turning these dreams inside out and exposing with a cruel clarity what was false, weak, and dark within them. Phillips wrote it to counteract “a country awash in amnesia and ignorance, a country in the habit of distancing itself from its own history or context as quickly as possible.”<sup>4</sup> Phillips wanted to historicize the rootless postmodernism she felt around her, which she had objectified so fully in her early short story collections. This novel, therefore, was her effort to look back at “what engendered [the 1970s]; so it was a larger world view [than in her stories], and probably a more compassionate, or a more forgiving one.”<sup>5</sup> Phillips wanted not only to recover the past but to meditate on it, to re-dream it; as a result, she begins *Machine Dreams*—which is filled with loss, mourning, and remembering—with the provocatively simple sentence, “It’s strange what you don’t forget.”<sup>6</sup> As Sarah Robertson rightly notes, this is what Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt term *counterhistory*. The novel takes the reader into what has been lost within traditional historicism, finds again what has been forgotten or displaced, focuses on longings and possibilities not realized.<sup>7</sup> Memory, probably a more potent force in southern literature than in any other American literature during the 20th century, is the hinge that allows this novel, as few other novels do, to get at the full cultural catastrophe of the Vietnam War. It helps Phillips achieve the authenticity that she praises in the writings of Raymond Carver: “What we know and feel, how things fall apart, and what is left when they do, what holds in the purity of emptiness—these mysteries are Carver’s

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2. Jayne Anne Phillips, “An Interview with Jayne Anne Phillips,” by Sarah Robertson, *European Journal of American Culture* (2001): 72.

3. Paul Gray, “Matters of Life and Death.” *Time*, May 15, 2000: 84.

4. Jayne Anne Phillips, “Violence in American Myth, Imagination & Lit,” in *Jayne Anne Phillips: American Writer*, 2000, <http://www.jayneannephillips.com/esviolence.htm>.

5. Jayne Anne Phillips, “An Interview with Jayne Anne Phillips,” by David M. Stanton, *Croton Review* 9 (Spring–Summer 1986): 42.

6. Jayne Anne Phillips, *Machine Dreams* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984), 3. Hereafter cited in text as *MD*.

7. See Sarah Robertson, *The Secret Country: Decoding Jayne Anne Phillips’ Cryptic Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 91.

concerns, and he takes the reader into them.”<sup>8</sup> Phillips, like Carver, takes the reader into some tough spaces in *Machine Dreams* as she contemplates the possibility that there is no sanctuary for her characters (a constant theme within her writing).

Ranging from the 1920s through the 1970s, *Machine Dreams* is built around Phillips’s description of how she writes a novel: “I tell them it’s like serial dreaming. . . . Those layered distortions of recent or long-ago realities can be startling or nearly magical; still, something stays true.”<sup>9</sup> Phillips’s serial dreaming in this novel circles around “the machine in the garden” theme that has energized so much of America’s lasting literature—or more specifically around how three generations of the Hampson family have been damaged by the increasingly mechanized violence of the 20th century. The Hampsons try to survive in a landscape that seems like a war zone at times: it is scarred by alienation, endangered families, gutted traditions, daily miscommunication, and the costs of a distant war.

The novel opens with the alternating voices of Jean and Mitch Hampson, the primary father and mother figures of the novel, their perspectives emerging out of growing up amidst the traumas of the Great Depression and the Second World War. They are products of a generation that actively, from the 1930s through the mid-1960s, embraced the machine dreams of modernism. Males especially believed in them—before these dreams disintegrated into the nightmares of economic dislocation and domestic/foreign violence in the late 1960s and the 1970s.

To put it another way, Jean and Mitch are part of what former American news anchor Tom Brokaw has praised as “The Greatest Generation” in his bestselling non-fiction book by that name. As he wrote, and as many of his readers enthusiastically accepted as the unadulterated truth, “It may be historically premature to judge the greatness of a whole generation, but indisputably, there are common traits that cannot be denied. It is a generation that, by and large, made no demands of homage from those who followed and prospered economically, politically, and culturally because of its sacrifices. It is a generation of towering achievement and modest demeanor . . . .”<sup>10</sup> Brokaw pays honor to this generation by reverently letting his subjects “modestly” speak about how they held fast and how they lived decent, moral lives while and after they fought the “good wars” against the Depression and the Axis Powers. Indeed, there is much to admire in their stories, and many baby boomer readers recognize this generation’s quiet, conservative endurance in their own parents.

At the same time, Brokaw sometimes respects his subjects’ habitual silences about the dark spaces in their lives too carefully; his narrative usually

8. Jayne Anne Phillips, “The Secret Places of the Heart,” *New York Magazine*, April 20, 1981: 77–78.

9. Jayne Anne Phillips, “Dreaming of Beauty,” in *Jayne Anne Phillips: American Writer*, 2000, <http://www.jayneannephillips.com/esdream>.

10. Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), 11.

rides the surface as it nurtures its pervasive celebratory tone. For many who grew up with the respectable but repressed representatives of this generation, there is often too much left unsaid in *The Greatest Generation*. It slides over the dark realities that undeniably were tangled within this generation's real strengths.

Phillips's *Machine Dreams* is not so reticent about her characters' "black tickets" (the title of one of her short story collections), as she portrays the "fractured nature of the blood-knowledge that passes from generation to generation" in the Hampson family.<sup>11</sup> It would be wrong to say that Phillips does not respect this generation with its "get on with life," pragmatic, often non-introspective approach to problems. Certainly, like the Hampsons' daughter Danner, Phillips sees much that is admirable in Jean's no-nonsense response to the dark spots in her family's past and to her children's desperate experience-seeking during the 1960s and 1970s:

We had the Depression and then the war; we didn't have to go looking for something to happen. And the things that happened were so big; no one could question or see an end to them. People died in the war and they died at home, of real causes, not what they brought on themselves. Living with that was enough. (*MD* 14)

In this novel of many competing voices, Phillips is trying to be faithful to the frustration and bewilderment that this "greatest" generation felt toward the social rebellions of their children.

That one must try to live with fortitude, without complaint, at least publically, are the values objectified in Jean and Mitch's "respectable" but thoroughly mismatched marriage. The couple does everything possible to mask the reality of their deep troubles with one another. The habitually angry Mitch never speaks about the bitter experiences of his poor childhood or the unspeakable things he endured in the Pacific during WWII or the breakdown of his business. That is not what a man who believes in "machine dreams" does. At the same time, this endangered couple tries to find protection for themselves—and especially for their children—by doing what their generation relentlessly did. They put the past away, or at least try to, as something not important, even if it is clearly impinging on their present lives. They do this while diving deep into the prosperous world of post-war America. As Jean remembers during the 1970s, now with the insight of tragedy informing her vision:

People had lost whatever was taken in those years [the WWII years] and survived, and a lot of them married, had children quickly. It was denying what had happened in a way, saying that life had started again and you could trust it. . . . People were relieved. There were jobs and money and no more catastrophes. (*MD* 19)

The Hampsons could buy a lovely home, send the children to good schools, make sure the kids had positive summer activities, drive a comfortable car, and be certain that the husband could find a good job that allowed the

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11. Robertson, *The Secret Country*, 42.

wife to stay at home. One knew that the children were clean, well-fed, and secure. The Hampsons truly believed that they lived in a safe West Virginia town—away from the turmoil of the world—where everyone would find a sense of community. It was a place where one could maintain a trust in the future, in progress, and in one's good character, although this sense of safety often depended on a denial of the pressures roiling under the placid surface.

In *Billy Budd*, Herman Melville calls his novella the “inside narrative” of a tragedy that happened aboard a warship during the Napoleonic Wars. He stresses that it will resist the instant surface descriptions and analyses of newspapers. In the same way, in her fictional world of ambivalence and violence, Phillips's inside narrative, in contrast to the celebrations of this generation, takes the reader into the often repressed spaces of Mitch and Jean's generation to show why the chaos of the 1960s and the Vietnam War consume their values and their sense of safety.

When their son Billy dies in the war, nothing holds for the family, and everything that has been tenuously repressed floods them with terror, failure, and insight. As Jean tells her daughter after this loss, “I only kept going [in her marriage to Mitch] to make you safe. It turned out I couldn't keep anyone safe. Not you. Not Billy” (*MD* 22). Jean's hard-edged awareness is, according to Danner, like an excavation, as if her mother is finally digging up all that has been hidden and needing exposure; Jean is facing the “subterranean dominance of pipes [in their house], their silent twists and turns in the dark . . .” (*MD* 299). This questioning of the past, with its recognition that the present has been built upon many false or rotting planks, reveals why this “salt of the earth” family is so vulnerable. They have made everyday endurance an end in itself, stunting and denying too many other things in the name of order, decorum, and safety. The grieving Jean, therefore, must eventually question this way of life: “still, she didn't see much to admire as she got older. Pointless, really, a lot of what happened. Didn't people have to do more than just endure? Didn't they have to be smart, as well, and know what things meant?” (*MD* 112). This contrasts with her earlier assertion that one should live without questioning things, especially after having children. Here is one of Phillips's essential themes: that generations must be self-interrogating; if not, they will not be able to pass down to our children the tough truths about life that they need to live fully and even survive.

On one hand, Mitch does pass along his love for the machine to Billy: his love for well-built cars, his fascination with airplanes, his proud ownership of the trucks at the concrete plant. It is part of his passing down the masculine ethic of the novel's locale and of his generation.<sup>12</sup> But Mitch cannot pass along the darker knowledge entangled within his machine dreams because he is unable to ask, much less face, the tough questions arising out of

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12. See Karen Wilkes Gainey, “Jayne Anne Phillips's *Machine Dreams*: Leo Marx, Technology, and Landscape,” *Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas* 21 (October 1990): 80–81.

his own war experiences, for example. How could anyone's romance with the machine remain the same in the light of Mitch's experience with its destructive potential during World War II? What might have happened to Billy's persistently romantic view of war and of the machine if he had been told about Mitch's nightmare memory of using the machines to bury "mashed," "rotting," shit-smelling dead soldiers on New Guinea—soldiers killed by human beings' persistent use of machines to kill? What if Billy knew of this memory that causes Mitch to wake with his fists clenched beside his jaw, which in part rests behind his drinking problem and his abiding fear of the indeterminate?

Too little is passed down to all the Hampson children. But it is Billy who is most susceptible to the embracing and ethically flawed masculine dreams of America that have invaded his little community. For he grows up believing in the war romances of John Wayne and in television shows such as *Twelve O'Clock High* and *Combat*; as a result, there is little in his training that keeps him from drifting thoughtlessly into the Vietnam War, even though his sister argues against it. His parents' silent fortitude—which Phillips also suggests comes from their mountain insularity and determinism—does not protect Billy, but propels him toward a disastrous, machine-driven fatalism. As Billy says to Danner, "Bad things can happen anywhere! You don't reason through these things. The best way to be lucky is to take what comes and not be a coward" (*MD* 267). And if a bad thing comes, he just wants to be flying in a machine, not on the ground: "I want to be up, moving over it with my own gun in front of me. If I get hit I want to get hit with plenty around me . . . there is no way to play it safe . . . I'm scared as shit of lying in some jungle all fucked up . . ." (*MD* 286). In the end, Billy is shot down, probably survives the crash, and then ironically dies in just the situation that has always frightened him so much.

As the Hampsons face their son's death, Phillips recovers the uneasiness that the Vietnam War brought to American life—the moral queasiness that no amount of political sloganeering or revisionism or economic prosperity or new warring has been able to put totally at rest. Danner especially verbalizes this awareness as she questions an America that she sees as ill, as wallowing in Bad Faith. She agrees with a character in Phillips's short story "El Paso," who harshly says that the world is "One Goddamn big lie," where people are like "a squirrel on a wheel" underneath a sky that "opens like a hole."<sup>13</sup> No one is safe, and the traumatic rhythms of Danner's life are caught in the dissonance of Jimi Hendrix's version of *The Star-Spangled Banner*: "She shut her eyes and heard the loud song: a translation into a language deciphered in darkness. How could anyone play an instrument like that? Even the silences between the notes were full" (*MD* 239). Danner is now staring at the gaps that her parents refused to face for so long.

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13. Jayne Anne Phillips, "El Paso," in *Black Tickets* (New York: Delta, 1989), 85, 95.

At the same time, the ambivalence in Danner's question, while appreciating Hendrix's courage, also sees the risk in confronting the void. This explains her uncertainty over her mother's sudden, very personal remembering/storytelling. She wonders how her mother can face the silences of the past now. For Jean, while still yearning for the simpler times of World War II (a yearning that Ronald Reagan, for instance, played upon so successfully during his presidency), is compelled after Billy's death to examine her life story ruthlessly, complete with its long repressed dark spaces. There is no more leaving out things to protect the children. No one can be protected anyhow. She must tell the truth, face everything if she is to save the future for her despairing daughter. In this torturous interaction between mother, daughter, and their familial past, Phillips meditates on the problems of memory and history, with the complexity that so many southern writers have brought to these themes. The Hampson women, so burdened by the past, now remember their men's wars not as romantic and patriotic journeys, but as horrible wastes. As they dream with increasing desperation about any kind of redemption for their men, for their family, and for their country, they wonder if they have enough faith or energy to escape the general emotional/spiritual/ethical paralysis of their culture. Danner especially wonders if facing the past will finally hamstring her and Jean too much, leaving them too much baggage to carry, with too little hope that anything can be salvaged. Still, she must go on talking with her mother, who is relentlessly questioning everything, so she can understand and reconcile herself with the present.

Their act of memory is essential to the stubborn search for human connection that tenuously counterpoints all the sadness of *Machine Dreams*. For Phillips, connection is nourished through the power of memory and storytelling, through the ability of serious fiction to rescue and hold experiences long enough, so that we can process them again. This, according to Phillips, is a

recovery of what was lost—by making it up. Fictional territory can't be considered real, and is certainly not history, yet certain places or geographical features are etched in light. Place, within a novel as in real life, is far more than what can be described or astutely observed: is atmosphere itself, absorbed by (spiritual) osmosis and somehow rendered whole.<sup>14</sup>

Jean and Danner, therefore, persistently try to stitch together their memories of Billy, to link the scattered past and present parts of their torn domestic world, and to try to find some kind of coherence within their war-stunned country. In short, they demonstrate repeatedly how "it's strange what you don't forget" (*MD* 3).

In their refusal to look away, the Hampson women are a reminder of the chance America lost in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the aftermath of the Vietnam War, in its humbling of American pride, led to a time of

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14. Phillips, "Dreaming of Beauty."

self-criticism and reevaluation in general. There was a new uncertainty and sense of limitation; people like Jean and Danner were thinking about the validity and worth of their cultural dreams. Some saw this as a time of drifting, a betrayal of America, a defeatist aberration, a pathetic hangover or malaise. They welcomed the conservative geniality and optimism of Reagan, even if it sometimes sounded anachronistic and hollow. Jean and Donner's acts of memory, however, suggest the time held the potential for an alternative vision, for America achieving a more mature national sense of itself grounded on something like Jean's desperate faith that when "suffering seems reasonless, people come together and want to understand" (*MD* 100). This is the faith that keeps Jean and Danner *aware*—even when any kind of illumination or reconciliation with the past seems, at best, a flickering response to all they have lost. Danner's final fantasy of Billy somehow falling forever in his airplane, heading toward a crash but never crashing, may seem like such a reconciliation to her. But she needs to move beyond it, too, to move to a more healthy and fuller awareness of what all the machine dreams have done to her family. As Richard Godden rightly notes, "Billy, according to the dream, is not lost: he falls without falling and dies without dying. In effect, Danner mourns but cannot complete her mourning."<sup>15</sup> In other words, Danner must still risk more in the present by facing the terror embedded in her dream vision of the past. Only then can she find some kind of future.

Americans, as Phillips stresses, too often lack or shy away from such risk-taking because they are not interested in the past, but only in mobility, possibility, and individualism.<sup>16</sup> But Phillips is a Southerner, with a keen sense of history, which shapes her writing as it works against any reduction of culture, any kind of convenient, expedient escape that can romanticize, simplify, or remove her culture from historical responsibility.<sup>17</sup> Thus, at the novel's end, as Danner walks into the future, remembering Billy's childish machine dreams of the past, while creating her own new "machine dream" of Billy's suspended death, Phillips commingles different shades of time. It is here that, as Owen W. Gilman, Jr., writes,

Vietnam joins history—history with a long sweep—just what one would expect from a writer with a South . . . . As the Vietnam War figures in *Machine Dreams*, it is not an anomaly. Instead, it connects naturally with an enduring impulse by men to rise over the earth, a quest with dramatic linkage to the South, given the flights of Orville and Wilbur Wright at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina . . .<sup>18</sup>

Phillips makes these connections without sentimentality because she persistently interrogates this impulse for the machine and for transcendence

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15. Richard Godden, "No End to the Work? Jayne Anne Phillips and the Exquisite Corpse of Southern Labor," *Journal of American Studies* 36, no. 2 (2002): 258.

16. See Phillips, "Violence."

17. See Phillips, "Violence."

18. Owen W. Gilman, Jr., *Vietnam and the Southern Imagination* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 69.

—a yearning so linked to America’s ever-popular dreams of technology and power. It is also an impulse that remains profoundly attractive, even though it is so often predatory and doomed, because Danner knows, even as she dreams about slowing time, that inevitably her brother will someday crash because of her awareness.

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# IDEAL CARER: THE CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN WHITE ELITE MATRON IN PETER TAYLOR'S SHORT STORIES

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## ABSTRACT

In the Old South, the white matron from the slaveholding elites—the domestic angel, the caring mother, wife and lady—was perceived as the only female fulfilling the ideal of the “true woman.” As such, she was also predisposed to becoming the “ideal carer” of the old southern culture. This translated itself into the care of the white elite matron to be also identified with the slavery principle. The article attempts to demonstrate that the old southern role of the white elite matron can be productive in the contemporary, democratic southern context, too. The analysis of selected short stories by Peter Taylor shows that the above-mentioned role can be treated by all southerners as a springboard to a more flexible and diversified identity, be it individually, or with regard to any broader southern scope. As such, the role of the white elite southern matron becomes a fine tool helping understand that the South—the Old and the New alike—is first and foremost a performance to enjoy.

## KEYWORDS

Peter Taylor; twentieth-century Southern literature; twentieth-century American short story; southern matrons; true womanhood; ethics of care; identity as performance

In response to the enormous socio-economic transformations which the Industrial Revolution brought about, the 19th century created the ideal of True Womanhood interpreted in the American South as “weakness, dependency, illogicality, and purity.”<sup>1</sup> This ideal was meant to be realized within the bounds of the domestic sphere free from the influences of the outside world, a condition which in turn determined the class and race-oriented character of the southern version of the phenomenon of True Womanhood.<sup>2</sup> Owing to its “home-bound” conditioning, the model in question came to be identified in the antebellum South with the role of the white elite matron. By the term “white elite matron” I understand two things: one pertains to the fact of such a woman representing the old southern plantation

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1. For the extension of the characteristics see Virginia Kent Anderson Leslie, “A Myth of the Southern Lady: Antebellum Proslavery Rhetoric and the Proper Place of Women,” in *Southern Women*, ed. Caroline Matheny Dillman (New York: Hemisphere Publishing, 1989), 19–33.

2. Outside the slaveholding class, women and men were less likely to occupy separate spheres of activity, and, consequently, the roles they acquired proved more flexible. See Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 37–42.

aristocracy, i.e., families in possession of more than fifty bondsmen<sup>3</sup>; whereas another pertains to her being a married woman. This is because only a married woman, who was already acquainted with sexual intimacy and its consequences (childbearing), could be considered “true,” for she had “suffered and [had] grown strong.”<sup>4</sup> In effect, the realization of the ideal of True Womanhood in the South exacted one to performing the three fixed roles of Mother, Wife and Lady.

Contemporarily, the concept of the white elite southern matron has only a limited scope.<sup>5</sup> The existing scholarly sources which discuss the role of women in the South after WWII unanimously discard the white elite southern matron as a positive female model. Instead, they give the crown of the “positive heroine” of the southern culture to the present-day southern black, Appalachian, or working-class woman, that is, the female whose life as a subject of scholarly studies was ignored prior to the 1940s.

It seems to be a different story, though, when it comes to the picture of the white elite southern matron in southern literature after 1945; one of those in whose works southern matrons play a distinctive role is Peter Taylor. Taylor, a Tennessean short story writer and novelist, was himself a descendant by birth of the southern aristocratic tradition. As a writer, he has been acclaimed for his woman-centered vision of the South to the degree that his focus on the contemporary southern upper middle class women has earned him the label of an “effeminate” writer.<sup>6</sup> This label has secured Taylor a special position among other contemporary southern male writers. He himself justifies his interpretation of southern social reality from the female point of view as follows: “You try to understand how the world is from other points of view. . . . I did write a lot about women, and in a way it was trying to understand them and trying to take the opposite view from the one I would naturally hold”<sup>7</sup>—it is obvious that Taylor assumed the position of this reality’s emphatic, understanding participant rather than its sole “owner.”

The role of the white elite matron is one of the most frequent female roles Taylor depicts in his writings, which might suggest that he does not consider

3. See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 7. For a more detailed definition of the slaveholding class in general see James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (London: Norton, 1998), 37–68.

4. See Nell Irvin Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 68.

5. Of all the sources that I managed to consult in this respect, only *Southern Women* (1989), edited by Caroline Matheny Dillman, David Goldfield’s *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), and Tara McPherson’s *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) touch upon the question of the contemporary southern lady, and even their books mention the issue only in passing.

6. J. William Broadway, “A Conversation with Peter Taylor,” in *Conversations with Peter Taylor*, ed. Hubert H. McAlexander (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 78.

7. Qtd. in Broadway, “A Conversation with Peter Taylor,” 79.

its essence as written in stone, as southern culture has taught us to perceive it. Therefore, contrary to what the above-mentioned scholarly sources suggest, this role and its realization as the Ideal Carer in the southern culture would be one that cannot be preserved, destroyed, delegated, or superseded. Rather, depending on the point of view, it would prove to be constantly created and recreated—performed really—and the actual meaning of such a performance would depend entirely on our own current potential to (im)mobilize cultural phenomena which resonate with our identities.

The matrons whose literary lives and feelings I intend to analyze are the protagonists of Peter Taylor's short stories "A Long Fourth" (1946), "Guests" (1959), and "The Elect" (1968): Harriet Wilson, Henrietta Harper, and Nell Larwell respectively. All of these women are first and foremost presented to the reader, in bodily terms, as pretty, petite, and gracious. This suggests that, when it comes to the question of physical appearance, they still represent the typical old southern female ideal of the True Woman, which entails an implication of purity and goodness and are thus perceived by onlookers. For example, when observing his wife at breakfast, Edmund Harper, the narrator of "Guests," admires the "graceful curve of Henrietta's wrist as she pour[s] coffee. . . ,"<sup>8</sup> as well as the "soft arrangement of her hair and the extraordinary freshness of her complexion" (G 185) and thinks that she is a "beautiful woman in every sense" (G 185). Thus, Taylor implies, a woman's individual physical traits (which contribute to southern matronhood) are nevertheless culturally interpreted as sex/gender-marking (that is, in opposition to maleness). As such, they still serve primarily to determine whether a woman is "true" enough to play the gendered role of the matron.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the physical characteristics that suggest female chastity and therefore outstanding moral power, all of Taylor's matrons are passionate

8. Peter Taylor, "Guests," in *Happy Families Are All Alike* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959), 184. Hereafter cited in text as G.

9. This interpretation coincides with the "essentialist" biological perspective that gender (cultural) feminists hold with regard to the sources of femininity. According to them, the female body (and its "motherly" function) constitutes the main source of women's power, for it entails the "constitutional" presence in females of such psychological values as, e.g., modesty, empathy, sympathy, tenderness, care, intuition, sensitivity, and lack of egoism. These qualities are considered morally more valuable than those that are traditionally ascribed to men (i.e., will power, ambition, courage, independence, and low emotionality). For a definitive list of psychological features that are considered typically female see Mary Vetterling-Braggin, ed., *"Femininity," "Masculinity," and "Androgyny": A Modern Philosophical Discussion* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 5–6. On the other hand, southern patriarchal culture at the same time identifies these innate female qualities with sexual suppression (a "good" woman is an asexual woman), ergo, it endows the woman with a gender identity only when she subordinates her biological potential to male requirements, thereby becoming a slave to male sexuality. This indicates that biology, as radical-cultural feminists claim, is more a source of female oppression than of power, for it creates a double sexual standard and makes it a paradigm of all subsequent power relations. That is how the "private" becomes the "political." For a discussion of this problem see, e.g., Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970).

about cleanliness. This only reinforces their “idealness” and makes it appear all the more convincing. Harriet Wilson, the main character of “A Long Fourth” describes herself as having a “tendency to care more for the cleanliness and order”<sup>10</sup> than her idealized Mama. Also, Henrietta Harper of “Guests” aims at keeping “commodious, well staffed, elegantly appointed house” (G 181). Additionally, all the three matrons under analysis are well-mannered women who always rise to the occasion, offering their tactfulness, good will, emotional support, or consolation to the needy. This can be read as these women’s ability both to creatively organize their life space, and hence to introduce changes in the existing order, and at the same time to preserve this order, which would suggest the contemporary southern matron’s fear of change in general.

Gender feminists are of the opinion that by developing their uniquely feminine characteristics which, apart from personal power, give them an exceptional ability to create bonds (including intergenerational bonds) with others and consequently, to pass this power on and share it, women thus initiate a higher moral order based on what Carol Gilligan refers to as the “ethics of care.” The ethics of care is seen as constituting a better ideological foundation for the world’s functioning because, contrary to the traditional male “ethics of justice” (morality as a set of rules and principles of behavior artificially imposed upon humans), the ethics of care grows out of people’s natural impulses to help others.<sup>11</sup>

If southern patriarchal culture identifies the ethics of care only with women, then their care might prove unrequited in male-female relations. What crops up instead is, as radical-cultural feminists claim, a collective act of female allegiance to men as well as a confirmation of the male and a greater significance of the masculine ethics. In this way the “ethics of care” becomes a silent homage paid by women to male gender, social and racial divisions that patriarchy imposes upon its followers.<sup>12</sup>

None of Taylor’s caring matrons soils her hands with work, and neither are they worried about the fact of their financial dispossession, for they all consider money matters a male business.<sup>13</sup> However, even if the matrons depend financially upon their husbands and accept this fact as natural (which is the case with all the female protagonists in question), this does not seem to

10. Peter Taylor, “A Long Fourth,” in *A Long Fourth, and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 134. Hereafter cited in text as LF.

11. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

12. See, e.g., Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

13. This confirms the opinion of radical cultural feminists that, under patriarchy, the ethics of care understood as an exclusively female domain can also be used by women themselves as a sexist way of taking advantage of male cultural resources. As such, it would assume the status of a defence strategy against the ideology that ignores the female need of “financial justice.” See Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 167.

guarantee them the marital happiness they expect in exchange for sacrificing their economic autonomy. This is because the financial reliance upon the spouse seems to also entail subservience when it comes to general decision-making, which, in the case of these women, deprives them of the possibility to exert influence even upon those matters that concern the domestic sphere, one with which they are usually identified and which is supposed to constitute their sphere of authority.

One good example of this is the conduct of Sweetheart, the doctor husband of Harriet Wilson of "A Long Fourth," a story set in Nashville during World War II. When, nagged for five years by his wife to send BT, their black male servant and Sweetheart's personal favorite, away, Sweetheart, the only breadwinner in the Wilson family, always refuses to do so, though not overtly. Whenever Harriet "mention[s] the business about BT or any other business" (LF 130), Sweetheart simply replies, "I declare you get prettier by the year" (LF 130), thus completely ignoring Harriet's wishes. When she retorts, angry, that he never says she grows wiser by the year, Sweetheart replies, "laughing, that it certainly [does] seem she [will] never be a judge of niggers" (LF 130). In this way, by trivializing both Harriet's feelings and her intellectual powers, Sweetheart manipulates his wife out of control over the domestic sphere and into believing that it is the man who pulls all the strings.

As long as such a game serves marriage, in the sense that it allows for learning about another person and thus for consciously creating conditions for giving and taking love, there is nothing wrong with playing it. However, the matron's inability to perceive marriage as a game forces her to resort to *licentia poetica* with regard to the character of her marital relations. By this I mean a situation in which a woman in the contemporary South feels that something is wrong with her marriage and yet she ignores this feeling, choosing to delude herself as to the nature of the forces governing the relations with her husband. For example, in Harriet's case the male manipulation succeeds due to Sweetheart's skillful playing on his wife's culturally imprinted vanity and inferiority complex. Harriet always succumbs to it, demonstrating that, when it comes to her marriage, she hears and sees only what she chooses to. She also avoids open confrontations with her husband: "[S]he had quickly turned her back to him (which was the severest rebuke she was ever known to give her husband)" (LF 130), a practice which only reinforces his positive self-image. Additionally, Harriet deceives herself about her own mental picture: "[S]he had always considered that she was nobody's fool and that she certainly was not merely a vain little woman ruled by a husband's flattery" (LF 130). Such deception allows Harriet to suppress her own "ugly" feelings and sustain her self-image as a person capable of loving unconditionally: "[W]hen he is so sweet to me I realize what a blessing that is and how unimportant other things are" (LF 130). By making Sweetheart the determinant of her own self-esteem, Harriet denies what for readers is already self-evident: that the institution of marriage, with its concept of love which is there to "sweeten the woman's

heart,” as Sweetheart’s name suggests, rather than to care for this heart’s “well-being”, might be oppressive, too.<sup>14</sup>

A similar denial pushes Henrietta Harper, the protagonist of “Guests,” into manipulating her husband’s self-worth in order to uphold her own ideal image. Henrietta, a middle-aged woman and wife of Edmund, a successful Nashville lawyer, seems more independent than Harriet Wilson. She construes her image not only around her home life, which is Harriet’s sole occupation, but also around her social work: she busies herself preserving Nashville landmarks, erecting monuments and caring for the downtrodden. Also, she fosters her social contacts by joining clubs and circles and she cultivates family relations by hosting with great zeal her innumerable country relatives. All these activities constitute what Henrietta refers to as her “good works,” that is, projects whose underlying aim is to help others. This is how Edmund, Henrietta’s husband and focalizer of the story, perceives her, too, which pushes him to support his wife in her enterprises.

Although he does his best to assist Henrietta in what he calls her “projects,” he is not satisfied with the outcome of his efforts, for he realizes that they hardly benefit any of their recipients. Yet Edmund never questions Henrietta’s goodness. It is himself whom he considers a failure and continues, even though reluctantly, to participate in his wife’s “good works.” The desire to be seen, too, as a good person incapacitates Edmund to speak openly about it with Henrietta, the more so since he realizes that if he expressed his true feelings he would be accused of “not seeing [Henrietta] through” (G 171). Edmund’s inability to solve this problem to the genuine advantage of both parties therefore makes him feel trapped in the situation which in turn results in his conviction that, as the only good person in their tandem, Henrietta should be the chief provider of their joint goodness. In effect, every time she acts or behaves in a way that is less than “good,” Edmund manipulates her sense of self-worth. Thus Henrietta’s need to be perceived as good turns against her.

The process presented above results from Henrietta’s disappointment with herself. As the story develops, the reader learns that Henrietta would never have left Ewingsburg, the county seat where she and Edmund grew up and got married and with which they identified, if, after the five years of their marriage, she had not “learned pretty definitely that there would never be

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14. According to Nel Noddings, a gender feminist, women are more predisposed than men to oppose and eliminate evil. Contrary to men who define evil as rule breaking, women see evil as a situation in which a person is hurt, emotionally or otherwise. Analogically, women do not insist on punishing “sinners” but rather on reducing the “evil” feelings of pain, separation and helplessness. See Nel Noddings, *Women and Evil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 91. Yet, in so doing, as Sandra Bartky, a radical-cultural feminist claims, women keep affirming male morality, even if its values hurt them. Remaining silent in the face of evil and hoping that such conduct will help them salvage their own moral goodness, women become entrapped in their own “ethics of care.” See Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 118.

any children" (G 190).<sup>15</sup> It is only then that Henrietta, hitherto satisfied with their country existence, begins to urge Edmund to leave it for a Nashville career, for she suspects him of "being bored with his life" (G 190). She thereby projects onto her husband her own feeling of failure in the role of the Mother and makes him responsible for the shape of her femininity. Analogously, after becoming a Nashville dweller actively involved in the city's manifold social works, Henrietta is "never satisfied until she had tried to draw Edmund into each activity, and, since she always fails, she is seldom satisfied with the activity afterward" (G 190)—she cannot see as her personal fulfillment anything that has not been overtly "blessed" by the person she has nominated her ultimate authority—her husband. Worse still, Henrietta is hardly satisfied with Edmund's being "entirely sympathetic" (G 190) towards her "good deeds," for her notion of being appreciated as a woman and person embraces male participation in her own projects. In other words, Henrietta is convinced that her self-satisfaction exacts to experiencing the sense of togetherness and unity with the male in every possible walk of life and if she fails to attain it, she also loses her sense of self-worth.

The desire to continually experience the state of symbiosis with her husband also explains why Henrietta eventually gives up her social work only to become a compulsive hostess to her and Edmund's numerous country relatives. This activity guarantees her husband's participation, for she knows that, for him, family is the walk of life from which "there [is] no getting around—not in Edmund's mind" (G 191). This suggests that, first, Henrietta is aware of Edmund's guilty feeling about having failed as a family man, and, second, that she manipulates his sense of guilt and self-worth to compensate for her own "familial" dissatisfactions.<sup>16</sup> As a result, Henrietta, struggling for the "productive" status of her marriage, makes her "goodness" towards her family one more marital power game. This struggle's aim is to deny the reality of her, Edmund's, and their married life's "barrenness." Such an approach confirms that Henrietta actually prefers feeling unhappy, or helpless without a man to feel strong and potent on her own—that is why she puts her fate in Edmund's hands, which, ironically, "reproduces" the model of the subservient femininity characteristic for the Old South. It is therefore obvious why Henrietta is not productive (or else, why, despite her efforts, she does not feel fulfilled as a woman) in the postbellum context which critics of the South customarily refer to as the *new* South.<sup>17</sup>

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15. We can therefore assume that Henrietta also feels unable to cultivate the ethics of care conveyed to her by her own mother. She is "barren" in the sense of being deprived of an object of care to which she could be a moral authority and which would reciprocate her own care, thus confirming her biological and cultural value as a woman.

16. Having failed as a subjective authority, Henrietta connects herself to someone who will not threaten her sense of constituting a symbol of morality, and, according to her standards, Edmund is the person. He additionally represents objective power, connecting to which will secure Henrietta this power's reciprocation.

17. According to Bartky, this is what happens when, under patriarchy, the woman invests her emotional care in a man who, as a representative of the "ethics of justice," cannot or will not

The same romantic conviction that the relation to the man must be symbiotic also seems to govern the conduct of Nell Larwell, the protagonist of "The Elect," who, accompanying her husband in his election campaign despite the fact that she hates it, climbs on the platform and announces: "Whither he goes, there I shall go also. His people shall be my people."<sup>18</sup> Herself a daughter of a politician, Nell clearly realizes that the role of the wife of a governor-elect requires constant "adjustments" on the part of the woman. She has already "adjusted" to taking over the "business" content of her husband's political campaign: she loves writing cheques, paying monthly bills, and answering formal and informal letters. The management of Judge Larwell's political career is really a pleasure for Nell, for it does not require of her to leave her beloved house. What Nell does object to, however, is her adjustment both to living "like show people" (E 392) for the sake of supporting her husband, and to "intrusions of television and the pressures from PR men" (E 392) in her private life. She also hates when in public she is referred to as Nell Larwell instead of Mrs. Larwell. She dreads the end of the campaign and Judge Larwell's inevitable words of gratitude for her participation in it. As the "show's" final act, these words would reduce her love for her husband (whom Nell supports in virtually every enterprise he ventures) to the role of one more instrument of his political game.<sup>19</sup>

This is because in the course of the campaign Nell begins to see that as long as it suits him, Judge Larwell accepts the "domestic" way in which his wife expresses her emotional support for him: ironing his shirts, arranging for his meals when he feels hungry, or else providing him with her company when he feels like it. However, as soon as Nell's devotion to these affairs clashes with her husband's current needs—such as the necessity to present himself in the campaign as a happy family man in order to win public support, which requires Nell's presence at his side also in public—Judge Larwell accuses her of trying to avoid him and suggests that she should find someone else to do what she considers a proof of her love for him: "It's time consuming . . . that sort of little job is. One has to learn to delegate such work" (E 399). This careless attitude of her husband evokes in Nell a "silly, silly sense of being

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reciprocate it. By connecting to his objective power, which does not guarantee reciprocation, the woman begins to feel subjectively unwell and, in order to make up for this deficiency, she resorts again to her "ethics of care." She then recommences giving more to a man so as to reinforce her sense of self-worth and ends up looking at the world through male eyes. In effect she loses not only her self-worth but also her sense of autonomy, which ultimately deprives her of the belief in the advisability of her own view of reality. See Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 109.

18. Peter Taylor, "The Elect," in *The Collected Stories of Peter Taylor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 391. Hereafter cited in text as E.

19. Thus, emotional work that woman followers of the ethics of care perform turns out androcentric again and hence unproductive for women themselves. Perceived as "natural," the female care of other people only solidifies the view that women should always act according to it regardless of personal costs that they have to bear. This makes women, also in their own eyes, mere instruments of care and consequently, of male power. See Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 165.

superseded" (E 401, Taylor's italics). She is thinking about the reality of their mutual love and begins to suspect Judge Larwell of manifesting towards her the same "professional cordiality" (E 405) as he does towards his voters. Such "love" would end as soon as Judge Larwell's wife refused to cooperate with her husband.

This is why, when Judge Larwell ultimately expresses his gratitude for his wife's active support during the campaign, Nell bursts into tears. Her worst nightmares have come true—her husband does not love her, he just limits himself in their relationship to an empty, political gesture aimed at further using her feelings to his own benefit. She "remembered his saying to Joseph at some point in the campaign, 'Do only small favors for others on the ticket, and ask only large ones'" (E 406). However, Nell never reveals that the actual reason for her tears are her hurt feelings. Instead, she tries to rationalize her suffering by referring to the power of her own love for Judge Larwell:

She hated him—but only for the one moment. She loved him; he was her life. But her life would be changed now. The world was changed now, however, and it was only that she must change with it. Everybody had to change with the times. And it was her duty to him to change. . . . Somehow, she would learn. (E 406)

For a transitory (one line long) moment, Nell lets her "ugly" feelings prevail over the overwhelming (three lines out of the four quoted) feelings of loyalty and duty she has for her husband and calls love. It is significant that Nell does not struggle for keeping her emotions in balance. As the proportion of the "good" and the "bad" feelings suggests, Nell is too "love"-overwhelmed to let herself feel "hate," the reverse of love, without which one cannot experience love again when it returns. This in turn suggests that Nell herself is not particularly interested in experiencing marital love, whereas she is very much interested in being perceived as the "one who loves." It allows her to delude herself as to her exceptionality, a feeling which, after she dries away the tears, she formulates as follows: "Many are called but few are chosen" (E 406).

The same quotation has also been used as a slogan in her husband's political campaign. Nell demonstrates clearly that, like Judge Larwell, she perceives marital relations as a "political" struggle of two opponents. As a result, Nell, ironically, also condemns herself (and her husband) to continually play in their marriage the hated role of the elect. This in turn deprives her of a possibility to balance in her private life the role of "Nell Larwell," which she identifies with the lack of dignity, with the role of Mrs. Larwell, which could allow her to gain distance towards herself, her husband, their relationship, or the institution of marriage in general. In effect, Nell does live "like show people," performing for others but never receiving in return what she gave to people during her husband's campaign, that is, "waving, smiling . . . victory signs" (E 391), and thus always confirming others, and not herself first.

That such an attitude can prove destructive, not only for the woman herself but also for the "others" whom she confirms, can be proved best with a reference to Harriet Wilson, the female protagonist of "A Long Fourth." The

title of the story pertains to a holiday weekend at the beginning of World War II occasioned by the visit of Harriet's beloved Son who is returning from his job at a New York publishing firm for a final stay at home before his enlistment into the army. For Harriet, herself a true child of her own mother (now dead for thirty years)—even at present, as a woman of fifty, she lives by her mother's teachings—Son's visit is a momentous event. This is because Harriet "had been worrying for weeks" (LF 132) that her son does not live his life according to her teachings. She knows her son is "not like other men, more sensitive and [with] advanced ideas and . . . so intolerant of inefficiency and old-fashioned things" (LF 132). At the same time Harriet is aware that he can act as a "model son" (LF 141) if need be: he always does so when in Nashville on a visit. Then, Son is always "careful never to offend or embarrass his family with the peculiar, radical ideas which he would naturally have" (LF 141). Thus, Harriet impatiently awaits Son's visit because she wants to find out which is his real self; she also hopes that Son's "home-made" demeanor does not result from mere courtesy but is a guise for his care and love for her.<sup>20</sup>

Harriet's susceptibility to the slightest sign of Son's devotion to the "domestic philosophy" becomes even more obvious if we realize how strongly she is disturbed by the message that her son is bringing a woman friend, Ann Prewitt, with him. Harriet is afraid not because she is jealous of Ann; she was informed beforehand by her daughter that Son and Miss Prewitt are not in love. Besides, she is certain that Son and Miss Prewitt are not lovers, for although "Son did not believe in marriage" (LF 136), she trusts that he "certainly would not subject his family and the people of Nashville to the sort of thing he did believe in" (LF 136). She is agitated because Son is bringing home to introduce to his parents a woman who is "merely one of the people he knew in his publishing business" (LF 136). This might mean that she worries either because he breaks the southern convention according to which a man brings home to the family only a woman that he wants to marry, or because she secretly suspects his son of being gay. At least this is one of the ways in which we can decode Harriet's present train of thoughts: "[i]n her girlhood people would have called [this kind of relationship] Platonic, but then they would have laughed about it. Mama had always said there could be no such relationship between young men and young women" (LF 143–44). Therefore Harriet is afraid that Ann's visit, by undermining Son's masculinity, will also question the nature of his relation with his mother, a revelation which would lead to subverting Harriet's value system as well.

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20. This may suggest that Harriet is in fact afraid that, joining the Army, her Son is turning into a "warrior," which eventually will destroy their bonds. Son's going to the war thus belies the validity of her following of the "ethics of care" as an autonomous moral pattern, for it seems just a guise: in fact it is servile to the war-oriented "ethics of justice." If so, then Harriet's fear for Son would be a projection of her own fear of losing the position of superior moral authority. This clearly indicates that Harriet herself is already at war with the system, thus contributing to both the objective and subjective atrocities that the war brings about.

It is no wonder, then, that, on seeing her Son in gentlemanly attire displaying impeccable manners and accompanied by a very ladylike-looking woman “as an example of his taste” (LF 142), Harriet feels so relieved from her doubts that she bursts into tears and cannot stop crying. When she eventually joins the young people in the parlor she finds out that Ann actually is not accompanying Son on his visit in Nashville; she is only stopping off at Harriet’s house on her own way home. This knowledge, tantamount to the awareness that she is deceiving herself about Son, starts “that train of thought in [Harriet’s] mind” (LF 144) anew as well as it leaves her “trembling again and . . . unable to follow the conversation” (LF 144). From this moment on, Harriet’s identity crisis begins, which compels her to confront the fact that her “true” womanhood is only an illusion. The first such confrontation occurs when Harriet inadvertently eavesdrops on Son’s conversations with Ann about his mother’s tears: “I can’t imagine what it is. Something seems to have come over her. But there’s no visible change. She hasn’t aged any. I looked for it in her hair and in her skin about her neck and in her figure” (LF 145). The cold, analytical tone which Son employs to talk with a stranger about his mother’s body and psyche makes Harriet feel “alienated from all around her” (LF 145). This is because she is beginning to lose the sense of security which she identified with herself representing a “true woman,” or else with the commitment to the role of mother.

Harriet’s uncertainty as to her own womanhood intensifies when she directly confronts Son, who brings her a drink before a party given in his honor as she sits at her dressing table. Then, Harriet hopes for Son to reveal to her “what is in his heart” (LF 160). However, without one good word for her, Son quickly withdraws from the room, leaving Harriet “completely without human emotion of any sort” (LF 160) and thus, in a state of utter shock: for the second time within the same day she experienced Son’s gentlemanly demeanour not as a sign of loving regard for her but rather as a mark of his own emotionless aloofness. The full realization of this fact, however, is virtually forced upon Harriet by Ann after the party. It is then that the young woman suddenly reveals that she is in love with Son. Yet she is perfectly aware, she says, that hers is a hopeless love: Son is incapable of loving another person because he only cares for himself and his public image:

He always thinks a person behaves badly who doesn’t amuse him. He cares nothing for anything I say except when I’m talking theory of some kind. He was very willing to bring me here before your friends to express all manner of opinion which they and you find disagreeable while he behaves with conventional good taste. He even discouraged my bringing the proper clothes to make any sort of agreeable appearance. . . . He has shown a marvelous respect for my intelligence and my virtue. And I, alas, have been so vulgar as to fall in love with him. (LF 162)

Ann finally puts into words what Harriet has long felt but what she was afraid to admit: that she has invested much of her emotional life in a person whose empty civility she took for a genuine feeling for her. This suggests in turn Harriet’s own poor “emotional intelligence,” and consequently, her

questionable status as a “true” woman (and mother) as southern standards define it. On the other hand, the very same emotional poverty makes Harriet (and her Son) the “true” child of her own mother who used to teach her daughter that “[t]he main thing is comfort, dearest” (LF 134). Therefore it is the desire to experience, broadly understood, comfort instead of emotions which, handed down from one generation to the next, becomes the South’s “true” curse—but also heritage. Ironically, this makes Harriet the “true woman”—did she not bring up her babe in the spirit of what the region had culturally most precious to offer?

Apart from the chilling alienation and communication breakdown inside the family, another result of propounding cultural conformism is, as Ann’s revelation suggests, the conformist’s inability to create deep emotional bonds with representatives of the outside world. In the case of a female conformist, as Taylor implies in practically all of his stories, such an inability provokes a woman’s desire to be perceived as an ideal female, particularly in the situations discerned as threatening for the comfort of one being placed on a pedestal (and in the role of the mother).

How fundamental a meaning this role has for a contemporary southern white elite matron can be demonstrated best if we scrutinize what happens if a black woman, too, claims her right to the role of the mother, as is the case with Mattie, Harriet Wilson’s black cook. Although childless, Mattie brought up her nephew BT, a servant at the Wilson house. For Harriet, BT is only a nuisance who, although he works “hard and long and efficiently” (LF 138), has “neither good manners nor the affectionate nature nor the appealing humor that so many niggers have” (LF 139). Harriet accepts black people as long as they fit the stereotype of contented, dependent, childlike servants; only then she feels that she can trust them sufficiently to let them near her. This is the way in which she sees Mattie as well. It is suggested in a scene in which Harriet asks her husband to dismiss BT. When he denies, saying that Mattie loves her nephew and that she “would leave us in a minute if we let BT go” (LF 132), Harriet protests strongly, “Not a bit of it” (LF 132). Thus she also expresses her deep conviction about Mattie’s emotional dependence upon her employers and consequently negates her right and ability to have a life of her own. For Harriet, Mattie exists only as white people’s Mammy.

Harriet learns—unexpectedly—about the superficiality of this identification at the moment in which she confronts the strength of Mattie’s own maternal feelings. This happens when Harriet learns from the grief-stricken Mattie that BT must leave the Wilson household to work in an aircraft factory. Although this message comes at a bad time, for BT was needed during the weekend, Harriet nevertheless tries to console Mattie-Mammy—identified with the role of mother, she knows precisely how, when, and to whom to offer her sympathy and care. Her performance is so convincing that it puts Mattie’s racial and social vigilance to sleep in the effect of which the black woman allows herself to reciprocate Harriet’s feelings and says: “[I]t’s like you losin’ Mr. Son. BT is gwine too” (LF 139). Yet this remark does not push

Harriet to sympathize with Mattie; on the contrary, it causes Harriet to utterly reject her “old friend”:

The small white woman abruptly withdrew her arms from about her servant. The movement was made in one fearful gesture which included the sudden contraction of her lips and the widening of her bright eyes. “Mattie!” she declaimed. “How dare you? That will be just exactly enough from you!” And now her eyes moved swiftly downward and to the porch steps. Without another glance at the woman she had been holding to her bosom she went up on the porch and, avoiding the kitchen where the girls were, she went along the porch up into the U of the house and entered the dark dining room. (LF 139)

The fact that Harriet reacts to Mattie’s appeal with fear, revulsion and anger, that, later on, she pictures Mattie “being tied and flogged” (LF 140), and that, when imagining her vengeance, she recalls “Achilles’ indignation” (LF 140), plainly indicates that she considers the mother role to be the most important, if not the sole attribute of white womanhood only. The acceptance of the fact that this attribute might become also Mattie’s (and hence characterize black womanhood as well) is therefore impossible for Harriet; this would translate primarily into her psychic disintegration. In order to survive, Harriet projects her too complex feelings onto “that Ethiopian woman” (LF 140), thereby symbolically moving them away from her into the sphere of darkness. Consequently, with the reference to herself (the “mother” of the white community), she deploys Mattie (the black womanhood) as her emotional “Mammy.”

However, objectifying Mattie as “Mammy” to white people’s “ugly” feelings<sup>21</sup> confines Harriet herself into the parallel process of objectification as a noble, always loving “mother.” This knowledge dawns on Harriet when she confronts the truth about her long-awaited Son. We have already pointed out that, as his visit proceeds, Harriet notices that despite the love she has prepared for her idealized Son, he remains indifferent to her affection and seems detached. This falls short of what Harriet would consider an emotional bond, as well as it deeply injures and disappoints her, although she never voices these feelings. When Ann, Son’s female companion for the weekend, finally puts into words what Harriet has long tried to conceal from herself, namely, that there is nothing noble in Son’s emotional relations with the women of his life, Harriet must face the fact that her saintly role of the mother (the one which, in her opinion, elevated her over Mattie) is merely an empty form. It thus serves to objectify the idea of non-existent love, the love that is far from real.

Harriet is nevertheless going to stick to such an idea. She was taught, within the bounds of the patriarchal system that she represents, that only the noble, “good” love of the mother, the love, let us repeat, which is too ideal to be true, is, paradoxically, all she has. This becomes clear when, after the scene with Ann, Harriet, indifferent now to everything, withdraws to

21. This is visible in the fact that from this moment on Harriet perceives Mattie exclusively in “dark” colors: “[s]he was not wearing her white cap or white serving apron, so there was absolutely no relief to her black dress and her head of black hair” (LF 148).

her bedroom and tries to find solace in repeating, with her eyes closed, the Lord's Prayer. Thus she returns to square one, which she so wanted to avoid. Namely, she begins the search for a support (which only a close person can give her) by addressing God—a source of ideal and, consequently, unattainable (in human terms) support. What is more, as a male symbol God represents the support (or love) understood as an adaptation to the existing rules. Ergo, in order to receive God's love, Harriet must first and foremost subordinate herself to abstract, objective, and "patriarchal" norms in accordance with which "her" system has been construed. Harriet's behavior is typical for a woman resorting to the image of mother, and the "heaven-imposed" standard of "Our Father." As a result, Harriet will become the "true woman," the woman who will devote her human right to autonomy and natural care for the sake of becoming an Ideal Carer, a humble assistant of the patriarchal order. In return she will receive in the emotional sense, when she eventually opens her eyes, "the dark" and "chill of autumn night" (LF 166).<sup>22</sup>

It is the striking contrast between Harriet as a personification of the idea of Mother in the scene analyzed above (lost, lonely, despaired, and entrusting her despair not in another human being but in an abstract representation of both love and power), and Harriet as one of the three pretty, vivacious, gracious and orderly family women whose collective portrait provides for the best answer to the question whether and how the idea of the white elite matron as the Ideal Carer of southern culture is realized by contemporary southern women. The presented contrast seems to suggest that, first, the idea in question is indeed realized, as Tara McPherson puts it, as the masquerade of womanhood,<sup>23</sup> or else a convoluted way of discovering how the system works as a whole—a performance then. This in turn implies that one effect of contemporary southern matrons' identification with the idea of Ideal Carer is the "awakening" of the subjective "I"—this most autonomous and hence creative part of woman's identity—to recognize that their once sainted image is in fact an image of the "other" in the contemporary southern culture.

As the example of Harriet suggests, the matron's recognition of herself as her culture's "other" is at first perceived by her as disadvantageous. This is because she does not consider the status of the other as a culturally approved way to propagate openness or diversity, or else allowing for unveiling the

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22. As such, the role of matron in the contemporary American South can be seen as tantamount to what Simone de Beauvoir called *la Mystique*, that is, a woman whose underlying longing is to be the highest object assigned to the highest subject and who, therefore, often confuses the male with God and vice versa. The matron would be therefore a narcissistic person, for she does not seek for transcendence in God's "love" for her but rather wants to be utterly possessed by Him as His one and only woman. She thus is longing for God's—or male—glorification of her sex and hence, her basically sexual nature. This also means that the devout woman (or very pious woman, as the southern matron was supposed to be) is also the reverse of an erotomaniac. For details see Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 709–17.

23. See McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 21.

existing double standards of the patriarchal culture. Instead, the matron equals otherness to victimization, the state of being a person silently bearing her “cross,” or one who openly and unendingly rebels against it. Both only deepen the matron’s sense of being marginalized by the system. Yet, after a direct confrontation with the so far negated otherness the woman eventually finds out that defining it is useless. As Simone de Beauvoir in her *Second Sex* puts it, the only thing otherness has in common with identity or truth is that it exists close to these notions, in a border experience. As such it is often identified with emptiness, and in consequence perceived as a fearful, painful experience. No wonder then that, having recognized themselves as “other,” contemporary southern matrons from the white elites, as the above analysis of Taylor’s stories suggests, resolve to “take good care” of themselves. This does not mean, however, that all of them understand their role of the Ideal Carer in the same way as before the anagnorisis.

To my mind, in the Taylor’s three stories, the re-identification of the contemporary southern matrons with the role of the Ideal Carer translates itself, in opposition to the old southern models, into adapting this role for a woman’s own purposes. This means that in agreeing, as their culture obliges them to do, to perform as the “Mother, Wife and Lady” within the “ethics of care,” contemporary southern matrons understand this care as, primarily, a personal performance. In so doing the contemporary southern matrons of the white elites also manage to forge their culturally “immobile” status of “patriarchy’s slaves” into a symbol of the “new” in general—both in enslavement and emancipation terms. This is because following, as their grandmothers did, also contemporarily the ethics of care as an option rather than the only choice they have, matrons seem to be suggesting that the vision need not be identified solely with oppression, for it could be used for democratic purposes, too. Making such an ideological somersault, which makes the hair of both feminists and patriarchs stand on end, these women thus cunningly create the region they represent as neither “Old,” nor “New,” but rather as one that we might call the “New” Old South.

Taylor juxtaposes the “new” and the “old” Souths in the characters of his protagonists, allows both to interplay, and suggests both structures to be able to communicate and hence act for the sake of a mutual (dis)advantage. This is best visible in that Taylor presents his women—Henrietta, Nell, and Harriet—as (un)able to connect the private and public spheres. It also implies that Taylor perceives white matrons from the South of the 1940s–1960s as ambassadors of the cultures considered entirely incompatible. This latter role gives these matrons a possibility of both interpreting difference as versions of equality, and of choosing the one which guarantees them at a given moment bigger security, comfort, or power without the necessity to overburden themselves. On the other hand, however, via the matron’s care and, in effect, her emotional connection to each of the represented cultures, the role of a cultural ambassador can make a woman the “carer” of illusions

as regards both her own significance and the significance of the cultures she represents.

Taylor does not condemn the white elite southern matrons *en masse*. On the contrary, the way he presents these women suggests that it is precisely the “creators,” or “carers” of illusion that one should understand and empathize with—is it not that Art begins from illusions? Therefore the work of Peter Taylor—the work of a man—would be a suggestion how the ethics of care, the ethics which both men and women have considered women’s “fate,” must be “performed” so as it proves to be, like the motherhood/wifehood/ladyhood of the old days, maximally “productive.”<sup>24</sup>

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PETER ACKROYD'S *FIRST LIGHT*:  
NOT ALTOGETHER BARREN ANCESTRY

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with Peter Ackroyd's idea of national history as it is conveyed in his novel *First Light*. Ackroyd creates a hypertextual novel with one hypotext, Thomas Hardy's *Two on a Tower*, and several grafted texts, J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Finest Story in the World," William Blake's *Europe*, and one of Oscar Wilde's aphorisms. The hypotext and the grafted texts are transformed by Ackroyd's hypertext so that they emphasize his theory of history as a unity of time and place. Ackroyd's history is a combination of genealogical continuity and the spirit of the territory which assumes the image of a spiral—it is repetitive yet progressive.

KEYWORDS

Peter Ackroyd; *First Light*; Thomas Hardy; hypertextuality; national history; twentieth-century English literature

In his essay "No End of History," Del Ivan Janik claims that both Ackroyd's *English Music* and *First Light*, and also other contemporary English novels, "are characterized by a foregrounding of the historical consciousness, most often through a dual or even multiple focus on the fictional present and one or more crucial 'pasts'. Their narrators or protagonists are for the most part explorers of history (in the broadest sense) by profession or avocation."<sup>1</sup> The exploration of history, not only of the national type but, primarily, the principles by which it operates and influences human lives, is the theme of *First Light*. In order to portray his view of history Ackroyd creates a novel primarily constructed with the help of intertextuality and orchestrating a large number of assorted sources. Ackroyd carefully handles all these pretexts so that they are finally arranged into an examination of history—history in the sense of a theory of time and place constructed by human beings in order to give identity and meaning to their individual lives. As such, Ackroyd's examination of history is preoccupied with the exploration of one's ancestry, by which each human being is identified and by which people of a certain ancestry form smaller or larger coherent groups—from a family to a nation.

Ackroyd's use of intertextual references encourages the rethinking of intertextuality and, particularly, hypertextuality theory. Ackroyd's novel

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1. Del Ivan Janik, "No End of History: Evidence from the Contemporary English Novel," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 41, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 161.

refers to many different kinds of pre-texts. I understand a pre-text, in contrast to the poststructuralist theories, as a materially existent work, or source, to which the text of the novel refers and which is constitutive of the novel's meaning. The authors use their pre-texts self-consciously. They carefully select and acknowledge them and thus construct the meanings of their texts with a rhetorical goal in their minds. In *First Light* Ackroyd creates a hypertextual novel in Gérard Genette's sense. He conducts a hypertextual dialogue between the text of his novel, which works as the hypertext, and Thomas Hardy's *Two on a Tower*, as the hypotext.

In his *Palimpsests* Genette defines hypertextuality as "any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted."<sup>2</sup> The hypertext is a text in the second degree, i.e., a non-original rewriting of a text that already exists. The hypotext is definitely the most important pre-text constitutive of the hypertext's meaning as these two texts engage in a continuous dialogue. They are parallel to each other as they run side by side throughout the whole length of the novel and thus create the image of the palimpsest: "on the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through."<sup>3</sup> However, *Two on a Tower* is not the only pre-text that Ackroyd uses in his novel. There are other pre-texts that are not parallel to the novel but only intersect with its text at various points. In the epigraphs of the novel's individual parts, Ackroyd acknowledges not only Hardy's novel but also J. G. Frazer's anthropological study *The Golden Bough*, one of Oscar Wilde's aphorisms, Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Finest Story in the World," and one of William Blake's prophetic works, *Europe*.<sup>4</sup> I call these pre-texts grafted texts. The grafted text is not rewritten and recreated by the hypertext in its entirety like the hypotext is. The hypertext does not transform or imitate the grafted text, in Genette's sense, like the hypotext and this is the reason why the grafted text is not continuously present in the reader's mind and throughout the whole process of reading. The hypertext only draws on the grafted text by *selectively* choosing and picking particular elements or premises from it which the hypertext appropriates into its overall meaning. The grafted text has a function that is supplementary to the main role of the hypotext. All the texts discussed here—hypertext, hypotext, and grafted text—are constitutive of the notion of literary hypertextuality.

I will thus conduct a literary analysis in which I will compare Ackroyd's hypertext with its hypotext and each of its grafted texts. All the above defined texts are used by Peter Ackroyd in his *First Light* in order to argue for his

2. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5.

3. Genette, *Palimpsests*, 398–99.

4. Peter Ackroyd's *First Light* also refers to other pre-texts. However, for the sake of clarity and the transparency of my argument, I will pay attention only to the most important of them, from which the epigraphs of the novel's individual parts are taken.

view of English history. Ackroyd's history is a unity of time and place—a sequence of generations tied to their native land. Later, in *Albion*, Ackroyd stresses the primary role of the spirit of the land as opposed to genealogy. The English land emanates a “territorial imperative by means of which a local area can influence or guide all those who inhabit it.”<sup>5</sup> However, in *First Light* the genealogical part of the history of the nation plays at least as important a part as the territory. Ackroyd's notion of history is the continuity of the generations living in England. It assumes an image of a spiral. Each new generation progresses but at a certain point it comes back to rediscover its roots and find a connection to its ancestors, only to brush against the past and start progressing again.

Peter Ackroyd's *First Light* takes place in the Pilgrim Valley, with the village of Colcorum, which is situated in Hardy's country, on the border of Dorset and Devon, near Lyme Regis. Mark Clare is the leader of a group of anthropologists who, during the excavation of a Neolithic tumulus, discover the casket of, supposedly, an ancient astronomer with the words “Old Barren One” inscribed on it. “Old Barren One” is Ackroyd's word play on the name of the star Aldebaran, with which the ancient burial site is aligned, and which is, incidentally, being studied by Damian Fall, an astronomer in a nearby observatory. The village of Colcorum is the seat of the Mint and Trout family tribe. It is not surprising that the Mints, the father and son who are also local farmers, turn out to have known about the tumulus and the buried Neolithic man all this time and actually to be his guardians, as Old Barren One is their first and most ancient ancestor. In an attempt to save their ancestor from the nosy scientists, the Mints steal the casket from the tumulus and hide it with a newcomer into the family, Joey Hanover, a retired cabaret comedian who had set out for this part of the country to discover his parents' identity and found out that Father Mint is actually his cousin. The story also includes two personal tragedies—Damian Fall and Mark's wife Kathleen commit suicide.

I argue that Ackroyd rewrites Hardy's *Two on a Tower* so that he completely inverts Hardy's message. Both novels work with the dyad of the smallness and concreteness of individual human lives in everyday reality and the removed abstract theories of science, particularly astronomy. Whereas Hardy puts these two elements in utter contrast, in which the pursuit of science may seem mere theorizing, not only unimportant but also alien to the down-to-earth reality, Ackroyd approves of the pursuit of science and constructing grand theories, no matter whether scientific or lay, because only these theories give meaning to human lives—individuals have a meaning only as part of a larger picture, while alone they are doomed to annihilation. Most of *First Light's* characters are concerned with constructing theories, or we can even say “grand narratives,” in the frame of which their lives are meant to be parts of a larger pattern. The grand theories, no matter whether based

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5. Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), 448.

on science, common sense, or even superstition, are important as they are points of reference towards which individuals are oriented. For Ackroyd, it is of hardly any importance whether a theory is grounded in truthful facts or only illusions of facts; a much more significant feature is that it assigns meaning to its individual components (people), who, by relating to it, are able to discover their own meaning. For Ackroyd, as well as for his characters, the “grand theory” is always a theory of history. In *First Light* history is identified as Hardy’s universe and the unity of time and place. Unlike *Albion*, Ackroyd’s *First Light* primarily investigates the temporal axis of his notion of history. Place, Hardy’s country, also plays a significant role but this novel is unique as far as the theme of ancestry, and, thus, the temporal element of Ackroyd’s national history is concerned. Since Ackroyd does not pay as much attention to the ancestral part of national history in his later writings, I find *First Light* rather illuminative. Ackroyd’s view of history assumes the image of a spiral. Individuals cannot exist outside their relationships to both the previous and forthcoming generations. Moreover, in each new generation some features of older generations are present. In such a way the extremities of the past and the present become united. History is not, however, a circular motion of fruitless repetition or stagnation. It also includes change. Each new generation necessarily advances.

In *First Light* Ackroyd inverts the message of his hypotext—Thomas Hardy’s *Two on a Tower*. Whereas Hardy emphasizes the importance of the relatively small lives of his two heroes, whose fates matter more than the abstract constructions of astronomy and the crushing vastness of the universe, Ackroyd makes the abstract theoretical constructions of the spatial and temporal continuity of the universe the more important element in the dyad. Individual lives are meaningful only under the condition that they are parts of the much larger process of history, only if they are part of communities and only if they have historical continuity in the sense of traceable ancestry. In the preface to the 1895 edition Thomas Hardy defends his novel against accusations of immorality and of satirizing the Church of England. However, at the beginning of his short defence he introduces his novel in this way: “This slightly-built romance was the outcome of a wish to set the emotional history of two infinitesimal lives against the stupendous background of the stellar universe, and to impart to readers the sentiment that of these contrasting magnitudes the smaller might be the greater to them as men.”<sup>6</sup> Ackroyd, on the other hand, bends the thematic concerns of Hardy’s novel in his own direction. As Bruce Bawer confirms in his review of *First Light*, “while Hardy, with relative constraint, chose in his 1882 novel to focus upon the ‘infinitesimal lives’ of his hero and heroine, Mr. Ackroyd . . . devotes at least as much attention to ‘the stellar universe’ as to any given character.”<sup>7</sup>

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6. Thomas Hardy, *Two on a Tower* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1905), v.

7. Bruce Bawer, “Stars Flicker Weakly Over Dorset Dig,” review of *First Light*, by Peter Ackroyd, *Wall Street Journal*, September 18, 1989, Eastern edition, Leisure & Arts 1.

The universe, the history, the grand theories of time, place, and the meaning of human lives seem to be of more importance to Ackroyd than the petty twists and turns of individual fates.

The most prominent points of connection between *Two on a Tower* and *First Light* are the setting of the novels and their major characters. The setting and characters in both novels express a sense of isolation that sets the small lives of the novels' heroes against the vastness of the universe. In both novels we find the tower from the title of Hardy's novel, or rather a column, as both novels call it. It is from the top of this column that Swithin St. Clare, a youth of about 20 years of age and an astronomer, and Viviette, the wife of a local aristocrat, Sir Blount Constantine, make their astronomical observations, and it is also this column from which Kathleen Clare flings herself down in her final despair. In both novels the column is an abandoned site on top of a hill in the middle of fields and forests, set apart from human settlement, visited by hardly anybody except for the novels' heroes. Both settings convey the same sense of loneliness, waste, and disintegration over time. In order to emphasize the continuation and importance of Hardy's novel in *First Light* even further, Ackroyd makes Kathleen and Mark find a page torn from *Two on a Tower* on the steps of the column. The only readable line on the page is ". . . has beyond it ghastliness," which is actually taken from Hardy's novel and is also a part of one of the epigraphs that Ackroyd places at the beginnings of the parts of his book.<sup>8</sup>

Hardy's lovers, Swithin and Viviette, who vainly struggle to make their love legitimate and to overcome the increasing distance that Swithin's pursuit of science makes between them, are paralleled in Ackroyd's Mark and Kathleen Clare. Although Ackroyd reverses the age difference between the lovers—whereas Viviette is older by some eight or nine years than Swithin, Mark is Kathleen's much older husband—it is the men in both the couples who pursue their careers in science and leave their women in despair as far as their relationship is concerned and thus cause their deaths. Viviette's isolation is both internal and external. While her husband pursues adventures in Africa, she lives alone in Welland House, hardly encountering anybody from the nearby village except for her servants and thus "the void in her outer life continued, and with it the void in her life within."<sup>9</sup> Her isolation, both social and emotional, is interrupted by meeting the young astronomer on the top of the column. The prospect of studying astronomy with Swithin, spending time in the company of somebody who she fancies, arouses "an attractive little intervention between herself and despair."<sup>10</sup> This happy intervention is not, however, supposed to last long. Even though Viviette and Swithin fall in love and legitimize their relationship in a secret wedding, she always seems the second among Swithin's interests after his astronomy. After it is revealed that

8. Peter Ackroyd, *First Light* (London: Hamilton, 1989), 207.

9. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 52.

10. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 55.

Sir Blount actually died only about six weeks after Swithin and Viviette's wedding, thus making their marriage invalid, Swithin takes up his great uncle's inheritance money and leaves for several years to study the Transit of Venus all over the world. As Swithin's great uncle's condition is that Swithin only gets an annuity if he stays single until the age of 25, it is actually Viviette who lets him go and who feels the inevitability of her sacrifice. The reason for her sacrifice is an utterly unselfish one—it is her love for Swithin:

Ought a possibly large number, Swithin included, to remain unbenefited because the one individual to whom his release would be an injury chanced to be herself? Love between man and woman, which in Homer, Moses, and other early exhibitors of life, is mere desire, had for centuries past so far broadened as to include sympathy and friendship; surely it should in this advanced stage of the world include benevolence also. If so, it was her duty to set her young man free.<sup>11</sup>

By setting Swithin free, Viviette also seals her unfortunate destiny. She makes her fatal decision before realizing that she is pregnant with his child. Under such circumstances she is forced to marry one of her suitors, old Bishop Helmsdale. During their next, and last, encounter on the column several years later, Viviette's heavily tried heart does not endure the shock of Swithin's resolution, even though it is only formal and not emotional, to marry her again and to take care of their son, and dies of a heart attack right there in Swithin's arms on the top of the fatal column.

Kathleen Clare is Viviette's fitting unfortunate and desperate counterpart. Her isolation is, first of all, caused by her disability. Her crippled leg made her a lonely child always "left behind on the shore" while other children played with a ball on the beach.<sup>12</sup> Isolation has marked her whole life. Her marriage to Mark consists of long days spent in the confinement of their flat, her only company being their dog Jude. Her longing to put an end to her isolation is expressed by her wish to adopt a child, as she cannot have one of her own because of her disability, and which she is denied by the authorities exactly because of her impairment. Like Viviette, Kathleen "had always felt destined to suffer."<sup>13</sup> Unlike Viviette, she voluntarily puts an end to her life. She cannot bear her own crippled existence, so much so that she thinks that after her death "in the passage of time she could be blotted out, utterly forgotten."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, both women suppress their own presence in order to make way for their partners' career growth; they both set them free. When Mark contemplated Kathleen's death "he realised how, in that instant, he had felt free. This was the choice which Kathleen had exercised, and he felt a certain exhilaration. If she had made her own choice, then there was no need to pity or to mourn her."<sup>15</sup> Kathleen, like Viviette, feels she is a hindrance to Mark's

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11. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 270.

12. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 29.

13. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 30.

14. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 242.

15. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 258.

scientific pursuits. One sleepless night she sends Mark to the excavation site, where he finally advances in his research and discovers the tumulus of Old Barren One. This is also the night when Kathleen takes her life by jumping from Swithin's column.

The isolation and subsequent deaths of these two women are in large measure caused by their partners' scientific pursuits, which result in their neglect of their partners. As compared to the grand pursuit of science, two small female lives mean nothing. Swithin St. Cleeve is a prototypical scientist of nineteenth century literature. In his article on the representation of scientists in nineteenth century English fiction Milton Millhauser emphasizes the disparity between fact and fiction. Even though Britain had many prominent scientists in the nineteenth century, the characters of scientists in the fiction of the period are presented with contempt as "faintly comic, often alien, often somehow 'unsound,' and frequently positively evil."<sup>16</sup> Swithin is indeed perceived by the local people, who live by physical labour, as detached and not practical: "[H]e's good for nothing . . . . He mopes about—sometimes here, and sometimes there."<sup>17</sup> Millhauser examines the character of Swithin and comes to the conclusion that Hardy presents him as a scientist only to make him alien to the local community, that he does not treat Swithin as a serious scientist but "downgrades" his role to a lover.<sup>18</sup> It is true that readers do not get to know many details of Swithin's astronomical theories, but still, Swithin is not only a lover. His pursuit of astronomy and study of abstract theories is contrasted with his and Viviette's everyday struggle. From the point of view of down-to-earth reality, especially if it is as dramatic as Viviette's, what happens in the sky is so unimportant. Swithin, on the other hand, even in Viviette's company, is mentally inaccessible and barely notices his beautiful companion:

There lay, in the shape of an Antinous, no *amoroso*, no gallant, but a guileless philosopher. His parted lips were lips which spoke, not of love, but of millions of miles; those were eyes which habitually gazed, not into the depths of other eyes, but into other worlds. Within his temples dwelt thoughts, not of woman's looks, but of stellar aspects and the configuration of constellations. . . . His heaven at present was truly in the skies, and not in that only other place where they say it can be found, in the eyes of some daughter of Eve.<sup>19</sup>

This "guileless philosopher" can never understand that his astronomical theories are of no concern when it comes to human misfortune on earth. It is this guilelessness, due to which Swithin rather chooses to live in the skies than to have his feet set firmly on the ground, that brings about Viviette's bleak future.

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16. Milton Millhauser, "Dr. Newton and Mr. Hyde: Scientists in Fiction from Swift to Stevenson," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28, no. 3 (1973): 288.

17. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 12.

18. Millhauser, "Dr. Newton and Mr. Hyde," 295–96.

19. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 47.

The character of Swithin is the point where Ackroyd starts diverging from Hardy's novel. It is true that Swithin finds his counterpart in Mark Clare, who fails as a partner to Kathleen in the same way as Swithin fails Viviette. Mark, too, pursues his scientific career and leaves his wife to struggle with her own despair, which results in her suicide. However, I argue that Hardy's Swithin is split into two characters—that of a failed partner but successful scientist, which Ackroyd transforms into the character of Mark Clare, and that of a detached astronomer who lives in his vain theorizing, which Ackroyd transforms into Damian Fall. There is also another point where Ackroyd diverges from Hardy. Whereas Hardy emphasizes the pointlessness of abstract theories as compared to small individual lives, Ackroyd emphasizes the importance of theory which gives individual human lives meaning. Whereas Mark, as a scientist, constructs his theories about the tumulus and its importance, Damian is at the point of distrusting theories and particularly their constructedness, which is one of the reasons why he commits suicide. Damian is very much the alienated scientist in the tradition of the nineteenth century that Millhouser discusses. All his life he has pursued astronomy and its abstract theories but now his career is going downhill as he is ceasing to believe in scientific constructs. He realizes that all his theories are constructions which may not be grounded in the facts of life, the world, or the universe. While studying Aldebaran, he is becoming convinced that its representations in engravings, astronomical maps, and telescopes may only be human constructions, and thus mere illusions that could hardly matter for people on earth as they may not deal with objects that actually exist: "[W]hat if the pictures of Aldebaran were simply constructions with no reality beyond this particular time and place, this particular observer who now looked up at the sky from the dark observatory, looked up at the vast emptiness?"<sup>20</sup> Further on, Damian elaborates on his theoretical pessimism, arguing that the objects these theories deal with come into existence only in the form of human wishes. The objects are created by people only because people need to construct their theories with them. As a proof of his persuasion Damian contemplates the engravings of Ptolemy, Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton:

Their own theories and inventions had lasted only for the briefest of periods but, if all knowledge was a story, what did it really signify? Perhaps there were no stars and no planets, no nebulae and no constellations; perhaps they merely came into existence in recognition of our wishes and demands. And if there came a moment when no one on earth was studying the heavens . . . what then? Was it possible that the heavens would then disappear? What if there is a void above us, like the void within me now?<sup>21</sup>

Damian's nihilism finally drives him to suicide. Mark, on the other hand, is a scientist faithful to his theorizing. Although he shares with Damian, and all other scientists for that matter, the fear of constructing a theory and only

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20. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 134.

21. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 102.

then realizing that the objects studied do not confirm it, that they do not follow the exact pattern aligned in his theory, he, nevertheless, does not lose faith in scientific pursuit, theory making, and the intellectual constructions interpreting the discovery of the skeleton in the tumulus:

And so he dreaded that inevitable moment when an unexpected discovery was made, a discovery which undermined the construction placed upon previous finds. For, when the theory fell apart, the evidence went with it. All the objects were still there, but as soon as they lost their coherence they lost their identity; they returned at once to that disassembled and dishevelled state in which they had first been found.<sup>22</sup>

Mark is well aware of the artificial constructedness of his theories. He, however, never doubts the existence of evidence like Damian does. Moreover, he feels the necessity to arrange objects in meaningful patterns, i.e., theories. Without such patterns things are in a state of chaos and disintegration. In Ackroyd's novel constructing theories out of chaotic objects is a primary human activity by which people ascribe meaning not only to their surroundings but also to themselves. This is the point of difference between Hardy and Ackroyd. Whereas Swithin brings on Viviette's misfortune by his pursuit of science and his neglect of earthly affairs, Mark as a scientist survives and prospers because he finds meaning in theory but Damian loses because his faith in constructing abstract intellectual patterns is gone.

It is systems theory, in the sense of establishing relationships between objects, that is particularly important for the reading of *First Light*. Although both for Ackroyd and for Hardy the isolation of their characters is caused by their inability to form relationships, Ackroyd assigns a much more important role to human relationships. Without forming relationships, especially within the family, an individual is an isolated object who does not fit into any pattern, who cannot trace their continuity through time. Even though Hardy's heroes fail to connect at the beginning of the novel and to reconnect at its end after their separation, it is only because of Swithin's preoccupation with astronomy. He, at first, does not notice the beauty and love of his female companion; he is "quite unconscious of his terrestrial neighbourings, and of herself [Viviette] as one of them."<sup>23</sup> At the end of the novel, because of his lightness of heart when traveling abroad and studying both the southern and northern skies, Swithin seems to forget completely that, just like he has, Viviette has aged. Moreover, being older than him, she looks quite unlike when he left her. His surprise is an unpleasant one but, only to keep his word as a gentleman, he is still ready to marry her. Hardy's concern is thus purely with the alienation of science from everyday reality. Swithin, carried away by abstract science, disregards such ordinary facts of life as aging. Ackroyd, on the other hand, ascribes much more meaning to scientific theory and patterns. Even though they are ordinary patterns of human family relationships, they still form systems that give meaning to individuals and without which individuals are

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22. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 240.

23. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 70.

bound to perish, just like Kathleen and Damian. Mark does not understand systems theory as an exact, objective, and precise science but as a set of relationships.<sup>24</sup> In his professional life he arranges archeological finds in a certain fashion so that they form connections and relationships with one another and yield a pattern, a theory of what ancient people's activities were. In his family life, however, he fails to connect with Kathleen and form a functioning family, which is also a system, with her. When contemplating the possibility of adopting a child with Kathleen, he is well aware of the fact that this means creating relationships which endure and which will assure his and Kathleen's continuity: "It all begins now. From this time a set of relationships will be established which may endure for ever, passing down echoes of Kathleen and myself from generation to generation."<sup>25</sup> Through their child they would pass on to the future and form a tentative relationship with future generations; they would make their family system grow and expand. This never happens, not only because the authorities will not allow Kathleen to adopt a child, but also because of Mark's inability to connect with his wife. Both Mark and Kathleen remember one moment in their lives when they met before they got to know each other. Kathleen was at the beach with her parents—a lonely child left out of the game other children were playing. Kathleen remembers a man and a woman walking by and noticing her. She never gets to know who the man was. It was, of course, Mark, but he never revealed his identity to Kathleen. This example of miscommunication is the doom of their marriage. Whereas Mark still has his science, where he can create systems and patterns, and, finally, at the end of the book, understand the interrelatedness of all things and his position in such a system, Kathleen has no such goal to pursue. She is aware of the fact that, not being able to relate, she does not fit into any pattern, she is the odd one out.

The main characters' isolation and their inability to relate and to form meaningful family units are balanced by the local farmers—Father and Boy Mint. The Mints have a display of family photos on the wall of their cottage: "In fact these pictures and photographs, which seemed to mark a continuous line of at least three centuries, displayed a succession of faces which bore a striking resemblance to those of the present Mints."<sup>26</sup> Their family is a set of relationships that have run unbroken for centuries and in which both Father and Boy Mint have their place. Even Joey's elderly life, after the discovery of his parents' identity, ceases to be contained in itself and is now related to the Mints. He has found other elements he can relate to or against and thus finalize his identity.

For Hardy and his heroes ancestry hardly matters in any other way than that it defines their social position. The most important setting of the novel, the column, is of hardly any concern to the people of the community. There

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24. See Ackroyd, *First Light*, 37.

25. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 34.

26. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 58.

are only a few who still remember that it was built in commemoration of Sir Blount's great grandfather who died in the American War of Independence. There are still fewer who know that the column was built on a hill which is said to hide the remains of a Roman camp, an old British castle, or a Saxon field.<sup>27</sup> The Romans, Britons, or Saxons, in history far more distant ancestors than Sir Blount's great grandfather, matter even less. They are totally removed from the lives of the nineteenth century heroes, which is demonstrated on an early October morning when Swithin is in his column getting ready to depart to get secretly married to Viviette:

It was a strange place for a bridegroom to perform his toilet in, but, considering the unconventional nature of the marriage, a not inappropriate one. What events had been enacted in that earthen camp since it was first thrown up, nobody could say; but the primitive simplicity of the young man's preparations accorded well with the prehistoric spot on which they were made. Embedded under his feet were possibly even now rude trinkets that had been worn at bridal ceremonies of the early inhabitants. Little signified those ceremonies to-day, or the happiness or otherwise of the contracting parties.<sup>28</sup>

Even though the primitiveness of the place is appropriate for Swithin's simple toilet, no more significance may be read into this passage. The dead do not care for the living and the living are hardly of any concern to the dead. Hardy is concerned with the lives of individuals and does not care to find any ancestry or historical continuity to give his heroes identity or meaning. Ackroyd's heroes, on the contrary, gain their identity exactly by finding their place in a family unit that extends to long-dead ancestors on the one hand and the prospect of new upcoming generations on the other hand. Colcorum turns out to be the seat of a family tribe—it is the Mints and the Trouts who make up the major part of the village's population. On welcoming Joey into the family, there is a festive dinner during which a ritual is performed. Joey has to wear antlers on his head. In ancient cultures, the Celtic one included, antlers were considered a sign of virility and fertility.<sup>29</sup> Considering Joey's much-advanced age, the antlers are not meant to signify his virility or fertility but to identify him as a newcomer into the family by whose arrival the family clan expands. To emphasize the tribe's connectedness with its most ancient ancestor, Ackroyd makes Old Barren One's burial site, which Mark studies in aerial photographs, so large as to include the whole of the community of Pilgrim Valley: "[I]t [the tumulus] resembled a single eye staring up at the heavens. . . . With his finger he traced a line of darker soil which extended around the mound; it took not the form of a circle but that of an ellipse, and it extended into the field beyond Pilgrim Valley itself."<sup>30</sup> Not only does Old Barren One encircle the whole community of his descendants but his casket is in the middle of the mound in a stone circle that looks like an eye.

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27. See Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 3.

28. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 137.

29. See Sabine Heinz, "Deer," in *Symbols of the Celts* (New York: Sterling, 1999), 47–51.

30. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 13.

Underground passages run out from the centre of the mound, just as Old Barren One's descendants spring out away from him.

In Hardy's *Two on a Tower* the universe is a source of annihilation; it is not friendly to poor human lives: "[W]hatever the stars were made for, they were not made to please our eyes. It is just the same in everything; nothing is made for man."<sup>31</sup> The universe exists independently of the people on the earth and constructing theories about the course of the stars is of little concern to everyday peripeties. Ackroyd's Old Barren One, the ancient astronomer, on the other hand, is directly represented and identified as the burning star of Aldebaran that has watched over his earthly descendents throughout the centuries. By being everlastingly represented in the sky, the ancient ancestor gets reunited with his descendants to form an unbroken continuity of generations. For Hardy the sky is a sight of horror filled with impersonal monsters, immensities, and voids in which something as small as a human life can get lost with no consequence to the course of the universe. Even Swithin is well aware of the terrifying immensities of the skies:

'I often experience a kind of fear of the sky after sitting in the observing-chair a long time,' he answered. 'And when I walk home afterwards I also fear it, for what I know is there, but cannot see, as one naturally fears the presence of a vast formless something that only reveals a very little of itself. That's partly what I meant by saying that magnitude, which up to a certain point has grandeur, has beyond it ghastliness.'<sup>32</sup>

Swithin, however, pursues the horror of the skies with fascination and naivety, totally unaware of how the universe is building up a wall between him and Viviette. Compared to the vastness of the universe, a human life is of as much importance as is a grain of sand at the bottom of the ocean:

They more and more felt the contrast between their own tiny magnitudes and those among which they had recklessly plunged, till they were oppressed with the presence of a vastness they could not cope with even as an idea, and which hung about them like a nightmare.<sup>33</sup>

The two quotations above are used by Ackroyd as the epigraphs of two of the parts of his book. Ackroyd, however, does not use these quotations to emphasize the terrifying vastness of the universe in which a person gets totally lost. Quite the contrary. Ackroyd's sky, no matter how immense or horrific, gives people meaning as it has existed at least as long as the earth has and thus has been a witness to the history of the earth, of which humanity is an essential part. Each human being forms relationships with other human beings and also with the things that surround him/her. These relationships, when infinitely extended, form a vast system that makes up the whole universe.

This is the message that the readers get at the end of *First Light*, when the Trouts and Mints steal Old Barren One from the tumulus to save him

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31. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 33.

32. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 69.

33. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 70.

from the interfering scientists and hide him in the house of the youngest member of the tribe—Joey Hanover. When the archeologists invade Joey's house, instead of giving Old Barren One up, he rather burns him in his garden shed. Not only do the present and past get united in such an act, the oldest side by side with the youngest, but in the act of setting fire to the casket Joey's consciousness gets fused with all his ancestors that are contained in the body of the oldest of them. Joey travels through time in his mind and hears the voices of his ancestors who form one unbroken line and who get united in Joey's mind. Mark, even though not of the local family clan, finally understands this interconnectedness too. "Everything is part of the pattern," as he says.<sup>34</sup> It is not *a* pattern but *the* pattern. As Alec explains to Mark, "even our bodies are built with the fossilised debris of dead stars. . . . All the materials of life come from the cosmic trace elements. . . . You have a universe inside you, my friend."<sup>35</sup> One can fully understand this pattern of interconnectedness only if one is outside of it, but then one is an outsider with no basis for existence and thus ceases to exist, like Kathleen and Damian. The pattern is a spiral; "nothing is destroyed. Things just change their form, and take up another place in the pattern. No one really dies."<sup>36</sup> But it is not only Joey's consciousness that is united with Old Barren One. Damian experiences several of these occasions. He is not, however, part of the pattern as he refuses to believe in it. His refusal to cope with the constructedness of science and the facts behind it results in his inability to believe in his own existence as a basic element in the pattern of the universe. This mental annihilation and fusion of consciousness with the ancient corpse finally persuades Damian that he is insane and drives him to suicide, disregarding the fact that Old Barren One tries to reveal the functioning of the historical and universal pattern to him:

Everything is touching everything else, expanding outwards but still mingled together. If a leaf were miraculously to disappear from a single tree the whole universe would be destroyed, because at that instant the balance of forces would be disturbed. . . . And I, too, am an aspect of that order, a relic of earliest creation which space and time have now woven together: nothing can happen to me without subtly altering the shape of the visible universe.<sup>37</sup>

For Ackroyd the whole universe is a set of relationships in which each element, no matter how seemingly unimportant, is connected to every other element. It is these relationships that define a human being as a brick in the vast construction of the universe, of time and place and of history. The universe is an efficient system that forms an image of a spiral—nothing gets lost, everything is "recycled." Hardy would hardly understand this view of the world. For him the universe is an independent entity. It is strange, alien, or even unfriendly, and its pursuit is at best a fruitless hobby and at worst a destructive activity.

34. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 264.

35. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 263.

36. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 264.

37. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 156.

People have always constructed their views of the universe and of the time and place in which they live. Even though these theories may change, for very often they do, and none of them may be described as *the one* that survives the centuries, they are still meaningful to the people of a particular period and a particular place. For this reason, by using the four grafted texts in the epigraphs of the parts of the book, even Peter Ackroyd in *First Light* presents his readers with his theory of time and place, i.e., of the progress of history in England. Ackroyd first uses Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as support for his own theory. In Ackroyd's novel scientific theory and the worldview of ordinary people untrained in exact research, such as the Mints, and probably himself too, are equal. They are only two alternative ways of interpreting history, and the only criterion of their usefulness and validity is the man who chooses which alternative to follow. Ackroyd's view of history starts with the individual human being, whose life, however, does not exist in isolation; nor is it a self-contained entity, as Oscar Wilde's aphorism seems to proclaim. An individual human life exists in relation to, and thus is also defined by, that human's ancestors and descendants, by the preceding and forthcoming generations. One's position in the flow of generations assigns the person identity. Each new generation carries in itself, quite unconsciously, traces of the preceding generations. By using Kipling's short story "The Finest Story in the World," Ackroyd stresses the idea that certain qualities of the past remain permanent and are passed on and get accumulated in every new generation. This connection of the past and the present makes it possible for Ackroyd to present his spiral view of history. Ackroyd quotes from William Blake's *Europe* to stress the cyclical movement of history, which, however, also makes place for progress and change. Ackroyd's history forms a spiral in which each new generation progresses but, at the same time, continually explores its roots.

Scientific theories in *First Light* are tainted with a stigma of not being as exact as science is usually thought to be, of not being based on unshakeable facts. They have a stigma of being constructed by the human mind and thus necessarily subjective. As John Crowley admits, *First Light* explores the dilemma of "the hubris of modern science when faced with the dark and backward" such as Old Barren One, which means that the attainability of objective interpretation and comprehensive explanation, "goals that few real archeologists can have ever held . . . are to be baffled."<sup>38</sup> First, Ackroyd portrays scientific theory as necessarily subjective and thus not much different from superstition and ritual, i.e., the forms of magic performed by the inhabitants of Colcorum, the Mints in particular, who retain their trust in their oldest ancestor. Subsequently, science and magic are only two alternatives in interpreting history—they are both equal and valid. The criterion of the validity of each of them is man—scientists follow science and

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38. John Crowley, "Something Vengeful and Ancient," review of *First Light*, by Peter Ackroyd, *New York Times*, September 17, 1989, late edition, East Coast, A15.

ordinary people follow their lay ideas, which may not be dissimilar to magic. For the purpose of illustrating the difference between, and, particularly, the similarity of scientific and superstitious interpretations of history, Ackroyd uses as an epigraph a quotation from Frazer's *The Golden Bough*: "It is therefore a truism, almost a tautology, to say that magic is necessarily false or barren; for were it ever to become true and fruitful, it would no longer be magic but science."<sup>39</sup> According to Frazer the conception of science and magic is identical—they are both grounded in a firm belief in the uniformity and order of nature, in a belief that the laws of nature, as conceived by the scientist or the magician, are immutable, that the same cause will always have the same effect and each operation may be foreseen and calculated.<sup>40</sup> The differences between science and magic, according to Frazer, are only two. First, and quite apparently, magic relies on a misconception of nature and its laws. Magic consists of mistaken applications of the laws of association by similarity and contiguity. If these two laws are applied legitimately, they yield science. The second difference is that whereas in magic the belief in these laws of association, by which the course of nature runs, is implicit, in science it is explicitly spelt out. What unites science and magic, however, is that both are constructions of the human mind by which people create order in the otherwise chaotic natural world. They construct laws and patterns that yield a certain meaning and allow them to predict the future and thus adjust their behaviour.<sup>41</sup>

In *First Light* it is the character of Damian, the doubting scientist, who spells out the assumption that science may not be exact as it is constructed by human beings and, as such, it is at least partially subjective. Damian doubts the usefulness of various astronomical theories because they change throughout history. He even doubts the reality behind astronomical theories exactly because of their subjectivity caused by the human mind. He compares the constructedness of science to fiction, whose features are totally contrary to it—a lack of exact data and an abundance of subjective perception:

Science is like fiction, you see. We make up stories, we sketch out narratives, we try to find some pattern beneath events. We are interested observers. . . . We know now that the scientist is actually controlling the reality while he observes it. The spin of a sub-atomic particle, for example, always does what the physicist expects. It always follows his random choice.<sup>42</sup>

Ackroyd does not seem to ascribe much value to the exactness of science; to him it does not matter whether a particular theory is precise or not. His only criterion is the theory's applicability—if a theory presents a meaningful pattern that gives its builders a place in this world and an identity, it is

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39. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abr. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1960), 64–65.

40. See Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 64.

41. See Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 67.

42. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 159–60.

useful. This criterion is, however, also met by magic. Father and Boy Mint are the very opposite of Damian or Mark. They resemble magicians or pagan priests that guard an ancient temple. Their view of the world has nothing to do with precise explanation or comprehensive interpretation of facts or evidence found in nature. The Mints “perpetuate a pattern of mystery and ritual that stretches back to the paleolithic era. Their veneration of the body of an ancient ancestor . . . forms the centerpiece of a survival of belief, superstition, and ritual that presents another alternative history of the Pilgrim Valley.”<sup>43</sup> The Mints’ alternative history revolves around Old Barren One, who acts as a totem and a protector of their identity. Long before Mark, the Mints formed their own theory about the skeleton in the tumulus; they formed a pattern in which they have their own place and which is meaningful to them and only them. It does not matter whether other people or scientists agree with the Mints on the function of Old Barren One or not, since their theory is utterly subjective, constructed by them and also useful to them only. For Ackroyd both scientific explanations and local superstitions and rituals may be considered valid explanations as they both create alternative theories; they are two different interpretations of history.

History, defined as a human construction and very close to fiction in its nature, is Ackroyd’s excuse for presenting his readers with his own view of history, the world, and, by extension, the universe, which may not be particularly scientific but it has been tested by generations before him and relies on others of his kind, i.e., authors of fiction. Ackroyd’s view of history, which is primarily based on relationships, starts with its smallest element—a human being. One of *First Light*’s chapters is introduced by Oscar Wilde’s aphorism: “*Creation began when you were born. It will end on the day you die.*”<sup>44</sup> As irony is characteristic of Wilde’s work in general and his witty remarks in particular, we can conclude that the above quotation is supposed to mean exactly the opposite of what it says. A human being is not a self contained element unrelated to anything else. Quite the contrary, a human life finds its “extensions” in the generations before and after it. Joey Hanover, the newcomer into the Mint family, realizes that his own small life has been extended into the past as well as into the future:

[T]he discovery of his family had allowed him to see his life as part of some larger continuity and, just as he could now look backward with more confidence, so also could he look forward. The world, before, had been merely an index of his own ageing; but now it seemed to him to contain the possibility of change, to be always capable of renewal.<sup>45</sup>

His life, advanced in years, has ceased to be contained in itself. It is the act of positioning oneself in between one’s relatives that gives one identity and meaning. Without such positioning, one’s isolation is also one’s doom. Without

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43. Janik, “No End of History,” 175.

44. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 61. Ackroyd’s italics.

45. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 222–23.

relationships to the past and to the future, one is erased from the earth's surface.

The continuity of generations or of time and place is not linear. The line which starts with family and ancestry and extends to a nation or even possibly humanity forms a spiral in which the present, although different from the past, is inspired by the past, imitates it, and thus gets reunited with it. The present is never totally new or disconnected from the past; it incorporates certain traits of the past. Certain qualities do not vanish with the age they primarily belong to but they stay for good and get accumulated in new generations. To illustrate his point, Ackroyd uses as a grafted text Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Finest Story in the World."

The narrator of Kipling's story is a writer with writer's block who meets a bank clerk, Charlie Mears, who is, although ignorant of literary history, able to tell the most exciting stories, which he dreams about. With the prospect of writing a story that has never been written before, the writer buys Charlie's tales and writes them up. With this money Charlie buys books of fiction and poetry and, incidentally, the more books he reads, the less his dreams seem original and the more they resemble stories written long before. The narrator's explanation of Charlie's ability is metempsychosis<sup>46</sup>—reincarnation of the soul and remembering one's past lives. Charlie's vivid imagination, and any writer's for that matter, is only a half remembrance of what had happened to him in his previous lives. However, the narrator is unable to explain Charlie's inability to "dream up" interesting stories after he has begun reading literature. If writers' imagination is only the remembrance of their past lives, what had happened to a person centuries ago was not very probably extraordinary in that given time period but, carried in the memory through the centuries all the way to the nineteenth century, is most exciting, such as the tale of a Greek slave galley in Kipling's story. Thus, when Charlie reads other writers' books he is reminded, if only unconsciously, of what happened to him long ago. The act of being reminded of the past shuts Charlie's door to it. Charlie cannot be made to speak again because his vision of the present and of his own life would then crumble into pieces: "But *if* he spoke it would mean that it would end now—*instanto*—fall down on your head. These things are not allowed, you know. As I said, the door is shut."<sup>47</sup> The door of memory that shuts after each of a person's lives is a safety mechanism. People cannot explicitly remember

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46. Metempsychosis is defined as the "passing of soul, spirit, or personality upon death into another body, whether of the same or of a different species. A cardinal feature of many forms of Indian philosophy; . . . Hinduism, Jainism, Mahayana Buddhism. Also a part of the Pythagorean . . . philosophy, and present in the writings of Plato . . . Finally, the doctrine is to be found in the Jewish Cabala." William L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980), s.v. "Metempsychosis."

47. Rudyard Kipling, "The Finest Story in the World," in *Many Inventions* (London: Macmillan, 1920), 122.

what happened centuries ago even though those memories are contained in them because they are “repressed.” Sometimes the door opens a crack and then our imagination comes to life and starts rambling through the long-gone ages.

Ackroyd uses the above quotation from Kipling’s story to illustrate that the past still exists and survives in the present. To elaborate on this idea he uses, very much in the fashion of his previous novel *Hawksmoor*, a fusion of consciousness. Damian’s sensitive consciousness, which has always been affected and determined by the essence of his surroundings, is invaded by Old Barren One. His receptiveness and instinctive detection of the traits of the past is immense, just like Charlie’s. However, unlike Charlie, Damian is aware of his ability, which is not completely ordinary, and which finally makes him think he is insane. He is not capable of admitting that the past may still live and that the dead may not be completely dead. However, in his madness he puts his finger on one important thing—that his consciousness includes pictures of the past, or, as he says, “primeval images”:

And even as I suffered these things it occurred to me that insanity was simply the re-emergence of primeval images. . . . I had become a primitive again. One of my own ancestors. This was madness. And I realised how easy it is to slip into it, how close it always is. It was as if the oldest fantasies of fear and dissolution lay just beneath the surface, waiting to be brought forth. Waiting to be excavated.<sup>48</sup>

Just as Damian refuses to believe in a theory based on the relationships between finds, he does not have any relations either. For him the voice of Old Barren One is a sign of madness; he cannot even think of the idea that he might be one of those who instinctively detect the past and for whom “the door is not shut.” Another person whose consciousness gets fused with that of Old Barren One is Joey. He is receptive to whatever elements of his past he can find in. Without knowing who his parents were he had no past, or it was very limited. When he comes down to Colcorum to look for his parents, he somehow knows that he belongs there. When his suspicion is confirmed, he realizes why, even without knowing who his parents were, he instinctively felt he belonged to Colcorum. He realizes that he remembers his parents’ house from when he was a baby, that he feels the presence of the past in it. Now that he has found his family, he understands that in all human beings some traits of the past are reborn, even though they may not be aware of it.

The fusion of present and past consciousnesses and the connection of the oldest and the youngest members are near-circular movements, or rather spiral movements, as stagnation is undesirable, and such is also Ackroyd’s view of history, which he shares with William Blake. Ackroyd uses two lines from Blake’s *Europe* to illustrate the revolving motion of the generations and of history: “Then was the Serpent temple form’d, image of Infinite / Shut

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48. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 177–78.

up in finite revolutions, . . .”<sup>49</sup> The serpent temple in the quotation is very probably the one in Avebury in North Wiltshire,<sup>50</sup> the description of which resembles the circular shape of Old Barren One’s tumulus. Moreover, Blake’s engraving of the title page of *Europe* presents “the Serpent of Materialism, whose circular folds suggest the Everlasting of Nature.”<sup>51</sup> The symbol of the snake swallowing its tail representing history with its extremities united is an old one, but it was not sufficient for Blake. For him only a circle and nothing else was the dullness of repetition and contradictory to progress. This is also why in *Europe* the serpent temple is a seat of Urizen, a negative character and an embodiment of conventional reason and law, who rises to assume his power over the earth. Urizen first establishes the ancient system of the Druid religion, according to Blake a materialistic religion of unredeemed people, in the serpent temple. Blake perceives a snake or a circle as an old and false idea of eternity which he adjusts to include the progress of humanity. In his 257th illustration to Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* “he carefully distinguishes his conception from the early one: above the everlasting circle of Nature stands Man, a straight line pointing upward.”<sup>52</sup> Blake considers both directions, the enclosed circular and progressing linear, important as they make up the course of history. His interest in the past and primarily in gothic art represents his return to past generations, the reunification of the past and the present. The circular motion of history, however, has to make room for change. This is exactly how Ackroyd understands Blake’s view of history:

[Blake] experienced an intense collaboration with mortality, and with the remnants of the past, because in the chapels and cloisters of the Abbey he saw the legendary history of Britain revealed. For him it was as much a spiritual as a national or antiquarian revelation; he entered a communion with the dead, with the passage of the generations, and thereby was granted a vision of the world that never left him. It was a vision, in his own words, of ‘the characters which compose all ages and nations: as one age falls, another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same; for we see the same characters repeated again and again, in animals, vegetables, minerals, and in men; nothing new appears in identical existence; Accident ever varies, Substance can never suffer change or decay.’<sup>53</sup>

This is not only Ackroyd’s interpretation of Blake’s view of history but also his own. People tend to behave in the same way; they carry in them, very probably unconsciously, some traits that are permanently present in a relatively fixed

49. William Blake, *Europe: A Prophecy*, in *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, ed. John Sampson (London: Oxford University Press, 1908), 308.

50. In his commentary to Blake’s *Europe* Damon identifies the serpent temple as Avebury in North Wiltshire. S. Foster Damon, “Commentary to *Europe: A Prophecy*,” in *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (London: Constable, 1924), 344. Avebury is a stone monument erected in about 2,000 BC. A pathway in the shape of a serpent cuts across a large circular temple of the sun. For more information see Gardiner and Osborn’s description at the *New Age Travel* website.

51. Damon, “Commentary,” 348.

52. Damon, “Commentary,” 345.

53. Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London: Minerva, 1996), 46–47.

community of people like a family or a nation. However, as time advances, people do not stay the same. They differ, grow older, die and are replaced by other human beings and this is the potential for change. Ackroyd's description of archeologists searching the site in *First Light* includes both:

They are searching for traces of their ancestors, who had once walked with the same posture. Heads bowed. Looking for seeds and roots. And, if it was the same posture, was it not also with the same sense of the world and of the sky above it? . . . Others had walked this way before them, and now they too are changing the surface, eroding it, leaving their own traces which in turn will be found. And this was why the walkers resembled dancers, when the dance is always the same while the dancers change and change about.<sup>54</sup>

Ackroyd's metaphor of a dance is precise—its movements and steps are always the same and are recognizable to everyone, but individual dancers bring some improvisation to it, they dance in their own style. For Ackroyd national history appropriates its past. The present keeps returning to the past but the circle is not completed as history must also progress, not stagnate.

In *First Light* Peter Ackroyd forms a hypertextual relationship with the hypotext of Thomas Hardy's novel *Two on a Tower* in order to draw a contrast between his and Hardy's conception of the dyad of an individual human life versus the vastness of the universe. Whereas for Hardy these two are contradictory to each other, the universe is an independent force that has hardly any dealings with the everyday reality of human existence and whose scientific pursuit is at least of no consequence to that existence, if not actually harmful to it, for Ackroyd the universe is an all embracing entity which incorporates in itself all existence, including human existence. We can say that Hardy is primarily concerned with "connectedness" or rather the failure of it. His two lovers fail to form a lasting and firm emotional relationship, mainly due to Swithin's fruitless pursuit of astronomy and his abandonment of Viviette. Ackroyd, on the other hand, is concerned with "interconnectedness," which is the point where he significantly departs from Hardy's novel. Ackroyd's characters, like Damian or Kathleen, are not only isolated because they are unable to form relationships with their significant others; they are isolated, and thus doomed to annihilation, because they do not seem to have any relationships that tie them to the course of history, they do not seem to have any ancestors or descendants, and Damian does not even understand the significance of these relationships. They are isolated items that do not fit into the set of relationships that make up the whole system of the universe. In order to elaborate on his system of time and place, Ackroyd uses four grafted texts in *First Light*. Ackroyd deals with Frazer's *The Golden Bough* to emphasize the constructedness of various theories of history that give meaning to human existence. The fact that theories of the course of human history, no matter whether scientific or other, are constructed by human beings and thus necessarily subjective does not prevent them from being functional. Different theories describe different alternative ways of

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54. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 41.

looking at history. Ackroyd thus presents his readers with his own theory of history, which is grounded in the relationships of all individuals and their previous and subsequent generations. Following the irony of Oscar Wilde's aphorism, a human life is not a self-contained entity. It is positioned in a flow of generations that give the people their identities. Each new generation carries in itself traces of previous generations and even though people may not be aware of them, like Kipling's Charlie Mears, those traces affect their behaviour. In his study of the English imagination, *Albion*, Ackroyd stresses that the "power of the past lies beneath consciousness itself, and is so strong that the most invasive forces of destruction cannot necessarily efface it."<sup>55</sup> The system of relationships is not, however, limited to one's own family. Ackroyd is primarily concerned with larger units, varying from local communities to the nation. The unconscious traces of the past are identified by Ackroyd as "communal memory."<sup>56</sup> In the communal memory the past and the present of a particular community are united. History is thus a circular movement which, however, allows for change, just like in William Blake's view. History, as described by Ackroyd himself in his *Albion*, "takes the form of an endless enchanted circle, or shining ring, moving backwards as well as forwards."<sup>57</sup> I personally think that the image of a spiral is more explanatory, as the circle as described above may be mistaken for fruitless repetition. Each new generation progresses and thus moves away from its ancestors. However, there comes a moment when the development of each new generation reaches its summit and starts coming back to rediscover its roots and to become aware of those qualities that they share with others before them, now long gone and dead. Nevertheless, the circle is not fully completed but at its other extreme starts progressing again. The history of the nation thus forms a "spring" in which, when compressed like in Ackroyd's *Albion*, each revolution, standing for each generation, touches the one before and the one after it, and yet no full circles are made.

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55. Ackroyd, *Albion*, 246.

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# THE MYTH OF KING ARTHUR AND ITS CZECH RECEPTION

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## ABSTRACT

The article outlines the growth of the myth of King Arthur in old British chronicles and examines the reception of the myth in Czech literature. The myth of King Arthur began with the historian Nennius in the late 8th century and developed through the Middle Ages to the Modern Age, with increasing embellishment and ramifications of the story. The myth of King Arthur has been present in Czech literature since 1319. The essay lists and analyzes the brief and rather marginal references and allusions to it. Closer attention is paid to an original drama adaptation of the King Arthur myth by Jaroslav Vrchlický, one of the major 19th-century Czech poets.

## KEYWORDS

King Arthur; Merlin; Arthurian myth in Czech literature; Badon Hill; Jaroslav Vrchlický

The purpose of this article is to examine the development of the myth of King Arthur and to outline the perception of King Arthur in Czech literature. Arthur gradually became a point of departure for a string of other stories, with characters linked in some way to him as the central figure, but in this essay the Knights of the Round Table and the complex ramifications of their adventures will be left aside and the focus will be only on Arthur and Merlin the prophet and magician.

Those who are interested in the whole range of the Arthurian tradition are referred to *The Arthurian Annals: The Tradition in English from 1250 to 2000* (2004), a definitive bibliography of over 600 years of Arthurian literature and related material in English.<sup>1</sup> The book covers over 11,000 works in all media: fiction, poetry, drama; editions and translations of medieval works; children's literature; history and folklore; Arthurian art, music, films, television, and comics.

## I. THE MYTH OF KING ARTHUR IN BRITAIN

King Arthur is largely a creation of romance but historians believe there is a hard core of fact in it. In the conflict between the Romano-Celts and the Germanic invaders, which culminated between 450 and 500, it is very likely that the former, when faced by the imminent danger of Germanic subjugation, made a unified effort at resistance and forgot about their tribal enmities.

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1. See Daniel P. Nastali and Phillip C. Boardman, *The Arthurian Annals: The Tradition in English from 1250 to 2000*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

A leader was chosen to lead the Celts at the battle of Mount Badon. This event is a historical fact, reported in the oldest Welsh chronicle dating back to the 540s and written by Gildas, a British monk born c. 500. The Latin text of *De Excidio Britanniae* (The Ruin of Britain) presents the story of Britons losing their rule over the British island.<sup>2</sup> The author believes that they brought disaster on themselves by their sins. He was not a historian but due to his good education was familiar with much of Roman and post-Roman Britain. In spite of numerous blunders in the chronology of events, his version of events is generally correct. In his allusion to the battle of Badon Hill (its place in the south of Britain has not been identified yet), he does not name the military commander—as a matter of fact, he is generally reluctant to name specific persons. Among the exceptions are the Saxon chieftain Vortigern and the organizer of the Celtic resistance, Ambrosius Aurelianus—the latter is the only Briton he names.<sup>3</sup> So the *dux*—this is the term Gildas used for the warrior leader at Badon Hill (Mons Badonicus)—may have been Arthur, but his name was left out, either because he did not fit Gildas's monastic ideal, or Arthur may have been a local chief who was linked with the battle only later and whose role was exaggerated. Ambrosius Aurelianus is presented as a Roman, the son of parents who were killed by the Saxons, but he is not named as the commander at Badon Hill.<sup>4</sup> His name entered Welsh culture—changed into Emrys<sup>5</sup> it became a frequent first name for Welshmen.

It is said that Badon Hill meant a decisive victory over the Saxon invaders.<sup>6</sup> But this armed conflict actually had the character of a siege and sorties, rather than full-scale fighting in the field. It started as a Celtic counterattack against the Saxons, and the outcome could not have put a long-term stop to the expansion of the Saxon population. The word “mons” in the Latin text probably refers to a hill fort rather than a mountain and there are several candidates for that place because the element “bad-” may have originated from the name of a Celtic deity or a folk hero called Badda and associated with hill forts. The date of the battle was identified fairly closely by Gildas—he says it took place in the year of his birth and that nearly forty-four years had passed since.<sup>7</sup> The findings of archeology also agree with Gildas, who claims that afterwards a quiet period followed, with few skirmishes.<sup>8</sup>

Arthur is presented for the first time as the victor at Mount Badon by a monk in the north of Wales, Nennius, known as the compiler of *Historia*

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2. See Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae / The Ruin of Britain*, in *Gildas De Excidio Britanniae, Fragmenta, Liber de Paenitentia, Accedit et Lorica Gildae / Gildas: The Ruin of Britain, Fragments from Lost Letters, The Penitential, together with The Lorica of Gildas*, ed. Hugh Williams (London: David Nutt, 1899), 1–252.

3. See Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 61.

4. See Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 61.

5. See Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 60.

6. See Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 62–63.

7. See Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 63.

8. See Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The Arthurian Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1986), 38.

*Brittonum* (History of the Britons), written in the late 8th century and based on a work a century older, but surviving in an early 12th-century copy.<sup>9</sup> His history starts with the legend of a party of Trojans coming, after the defeat of Troy, to Britain. He mentions a few Roman emperors who were concerned with the island—among them Maximus, proclaimed Emperor in Britain in 383. Nennius says that Britons killed several Roman commanders and thus became independent, until in the 5th century Horsa and Hengist and their Saxons entered the island and later took hold of it.<sup>10</sup> Nennius names twelve victories won by Arthur—the “dux bellorum” (leader in battles)—the last one being at Badon Hill (“the hill of Badon”), where Arthur “personally killed 960 of the enemy.”<sup>11</sup> Most of the other place-names are obscure and cover a large region, including southern Scotland and Chester.

Nothing suggests that the military leader was also a political leader. The mention of southern Scotland implies that Arthur fought Saxons in the south and Picts in the north. Arthur’s single-handed performance at Badon Hill shows that the Arthurian legend is already growing. The name of Ambrosius appears in Nennius too, but in a somewhat different context than in Gildas, namely that Vortigern gave him the overlordship of western Britain; by this he probably means Wales.<sup>12</sup> The date appears to be the 430s, which implies that at the time of Badon Ambrosius would have been too old to fight or even to be alive. So that settles the Ambrosius–Arthur competition. Unfortunately, there is no historical evidence of Ambrosius having had such an important position.

As for the etymology of Arthur, it is the Welsh form of the Roman name Artorius—in the 5th century Britons often gave children Roman names. A revival of the name in the late 6th century suggests that perhaps another Arthur became a national hero.<sup>13</sup> Scholars agree that Arthur was a real person, not a myth—a British god would not be given a Roman name.<sup>14</sup>

The next chronicle with reference to Arthur is that by Geoffrey of Monmouth (in Latin Galfridus Monumetensis; he died in 1154 or 1155), author of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain). It really put Arthur on the scene and became the basis for the Arthurian romance. The town of Monmouth is on the Welsh border, and the name of Geoffrey’s father is said to have been Arthur. Geoffrey started as a minor cleric at Oxford, and later he got an appointment in London and became bishop of the Welsh see of St. Asaph. Historians say that Welshmen were not normally

9. See Nennius’s *History of the Britons*, in *Six Old English Chronicles*, ed. John Allen Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), 381–416.

10. See Nennius’s *History of the Britons*, 395–96.

11. Nennius’s *History of the Britons*, 407–9.

12. See Nennius’s *History of the Britons*, 403–4.

13. See Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland, 1997), 29.

14. See Lacy and Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook*, 32–33; Lacy, *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, 24.

made bishops, so originally he may have come from Brittany. His first work was *Prophetiae Merlini* (Prophecies of Merlin), a series of prophecies of Merlin (or rather Myrddin in the Welsh language; Merlin is a Cornish variant), which were later incorporated as Chapter 7 in a much larger work, the *Historia*, completed about 1136. Geoffrey, like Nennius, starts with the Trojans, who founded a New Troy (later renamed London) on the River Thames—the basis of the legend and the name of the British Troy may have been the Celtic tribe the Trinovantes, residing north of the Thames. Geoffrey's account of the early history of Britain has no relevance to our theme. On the other hand, one should point out the author's high degree of patriotism; he refuses to admit a full conquest of Britain by ancient Rome and therefore he never mentions the heroic leaders of anti-Rome resistance, the chieftains Caratacus and Boudicca. We hear more about Vortigern, Arthur, and Merlin.<sup>15</sup>

Vortigern, a British overlord, invited the heathen Saxons to settle in Britain as his mercenaries and even married the daughter of Hengist, the Saxon chieftain. After Hengist arranged a massacre of British noblemen, Vortigern was rejected by the Britons, fled to Snowdonia, and tried to build a fortress there. It kept collapsing and the magician Merlin (here conflated with Ambrosius<sup>16</sup>) told him why: in the ground beneath it there was a pool with two sleeping dragons, one red, the other white, who, when the underground pool was drained, woke up and began a fight. They represented the Britons and Saxons. He foretold that the rightful prince Uther would soon return to Britain from his exile and Vortigern's reign would be over.<sup>17</sup> And really the usurper Vortigern got killed and the new king, Uther, called Pendragon, with the assistance of Merlin's magic begot a son, Arthur. While still in his teens, Arthur became king and, armed with his sword Excalibur, he defeated the Saxons, though he was unable to drive them out completely. His decisive victory was at Bath (Geoffrey's equivalent of Badon). Much of this is already familiar to 20th-century readers and film-goers. When peace was brought to Britain, Arthur held court at Caerleon (i.e., "fort" + "legion")—Geoffrey's description of this place became the basis for the fabulous residence of Camelot.

Geoffrey, besides presenting a well-developed story with Arthur as a major character, introduced Merlin (Myrddin), the prophet and magician. Some inspiration was obtained from local traditions. Geoffrey's Merlin was born to a nun, daughter of the king of Demetia, who in her sleep had intercourse with a beautiful demon, an incubus. That made him half-human, half-supernatural. His name comes from a toponym, Caermyrddin ("Myrddin's town"), which is a Welsh form of the city of Carmarthen, where Merlin was born. Geoffrey,

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15. See Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Aaron Thompson, rev. J. A. Giles (Cambridge, ON: Medieval Latin Series, 1999).

16. Geoffrey of Monmouth refers to Merlin: "Merlin, who was also called Ambrose." *History of the Kings of Britain*, 110.

17. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 110–11.

besides “collecting” Merlin’s prophesies, wrote one work devoted completely to him, *Vita Merlini* (c.1150). Geoffrey’s authority explains why Merlin soon became accepted as a prophet in western Christendom, particularly in France—see, e.g., the Old French poem *Merlin* (c.1200) by Robert de Boron, who was heavily indebted to Geoffrey. The legend was also well known from the French version named *Le Roman de Brut*, by Wace. Thus in the 12th century writers in England were already trying to embellish their historical accounts with stories.

William of Malmesbury (c.1095–1143), a monk in the abbey of Malmesbury, wrote the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, in which he said that Arthur should be commemorated for his achievements in authentic history and not in romances. But he only mentions Arthur twice: as the man who helped Ambrosius Aurelianus to hold back the Saxon barbarians, and who at the battle of Badon defeated, single-handed, nine hundred of the enemy, partly because of the image of the Virgin Mary on his armor.<sup>18</sup>

Wace’s *Le Roman de Brut* (c.1155) has 15,000 verses, of which nearly one third is about Arthur, a paraphrase of the history by Geoffrey. Wace, however, enriched the legend with new elements in the Round Table. He became the source for the *Brut*, a composition by a patriotic village priest, known as Layamon, from west-central England.

Next, an English translation of Wace’s *Le Roman de Brut* was made by Robert Manning, as part of his verse chronicle *The Story of England* (1338), where the legends of King Arthur and Merlin occupy some 7,000 lines. In all these romances Merlin not only predicts events but through his magical powers changes history. Merlin is also behind the installation of the Round Table. Between the second half of the 13th century and 1471, when Thomas Malory, author of *Le Morte d’Arthur*, died, there were three other English tales with Merlin, including a long poem (*Arthour and Merlin*) and one prose work. In the 19th century Merlin stops being a prophet and functions only as a magician (wizard).

In addition to the association of Merlin with Arthur (Merlin takes care of Arthur’s education, reveals his royal parentage to him, and points to Excalibur stuck in the stone), new links are formed between Merlin and the Lady of the Lake, who also bears the name Viviane or Niviene or Nimue. She received Arthur’s sword Excalibur back after he died in the battle of Camlann, while fighting his treacherous nephew Mordred. In another variant of the story, Arthur was not killed, only seriously wounded, and was carried away by the Lady of the Lake in a boat to the island of Avalon (Insulla Avallonis), Avallach in Welsh.

Arthur also appears in Welsh texts but the account of medieval English authors who introduced King Arthur and Merlin may end with Thomas

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18. See William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Lacy, *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, 630.

Malory (c. 1408–71). His *Morte d'Arthur* was completed in 1469—the title was devised by Caxton, who printed the book in 1485. This cycle of eight prose legends on such themes as love, honor, courage and faithfulness is linked with the character of Arthur and his knights and makes a coherent account. The king's death and the fall of the Round Table is a symbol of the disappearance of the chivalric epoch. What the modern reader finds strange about the story is that it describes Arthur's victories in Italy and his crowning in Rome as Emperor, a complete fantasy, but nothing at all about his victorious battles against the Anglo-Saxons, the historical basis of the legend.<sup>19</sup>

One major stimulus for the survival and spreading of the Arthurian legend must have been the discovery of his reputed tomb at Glastonbury, a place identified with Avalon. In 1191 the monks exhumed "Arthur's remains" in Glastonbury Abbey's graveyard, between two memorial pillars. Gerald of Wales offers the following account:

. . . his body was discovered at Glastonbury, in our own times, hidden very deep in the earth in an oak-hollow, between two stone pyramids that were erected long ago in that holy place. The tomb was sealed up with astonishing tokens, like some sort of miracle. . . . A lead cross was placed under the stone, not above as is usual in our times, but instead fastened to the underside. I have seen this cross, and have traced the engraved letters—not visible and facing outward, but rather turned inwardly toward the stone. It read: "Here lies entombed King Arthur, with Guenevere his second wife, on the Isle of Avalon."

Gerald states that the bones were enormous,

the skull was broad and huge, as if he were a monster or prodigy, to the extent that the space between the eyebrows and the eye-sockets amply encompassed the breadth of one's palm. Moreover, ten or more wounds were visible on that skull, all of which had healed into scars except one, greater than the rest, which had made a large cleft—this seems to have been the lethal one.<sup>20</sup>

The tomb did not survive the vandalism accompanying the dissolution of the monasteries (the last abbot was hanged on Glastonbury Tor). Historians no longer deny that the monks found a grave, but do not know whose grave it was. Some speculate that a proof that Arthur, the Celtic champion, was dead, weakened Welsh resistance and thus served the English king.<sup>21</sup> As regards the inscription, it might be a 12th-century forgery but for the fact that "Arturius" on the cross is a very early form of the name, found in the

19. See Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, ed. Janet Cowen, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

20. Gerald of Wales, "The Tomb of King Arthur: Gerald of Wales on the Finding of King Arthur's Tomb," trans. John William Sutton, in *The Camelot Project at the University of Rochester: Arthurian Texts, Images, Bibliographies and Basic Information* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester, 2010), <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/gerald.htm>; see also Charles T. Wood, "At the Tomb of King Arthur," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 8 (1991): 1–14.

21. See John William Sutton, introduction to "The Tomb of King Arthur: Gerald of Wales on the Finding of King Arthur's Tomb," by Gerald of Wales.

7th century (in the *Life of St Columba* it refers to Prince Arthur of Argyll), whereas in the 12th century (e.g., in Geoffrey) it appears as “Arturus.”<sup>22</sup>

The strength of the Arthurian myth is manifested by the existence of the Round Table in Winchester (in Geoffrey of Monmouth Arthur fights Mordred at Winchester and Aurelius Ambrosianus is said to have died there). It was probably Edward I who had it made—he was enthusiastic about Arthur and was fond of aristocratic festivals known as Round Tables. He attended five of them, and organized one himself in 1299 to celebrate his second marriage. Nobles banqueted and competed in jousts.

The Arthurian enthusiasm of King Edward has a continuation in Tudor days (Henry VII gave his eldest son the name Arthur). In Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590–96) Prince Arthur symbolizes the virtue of “magnificence,” by which is meant magnanimity and gentlemanliness. After his vision of Queene Gloriana he seeks her and thus gets involved in various adventures of the knights. In the twelve poems of *Idylls of the King* (1891), by Alfred Tennyson, King Arthur is one of the main protagonists, e.g., in “The Coming of Arthur” and “The Passing of Arthur.” Arthurian legends undergo a revival in the Pre-Raphaelite movement of the late 19th century and in literary retellings of the Arthurian story and in Arthurian film romances in the 20th century. That the name of Arthur still has some magic is shown by the fact that one of the four “first” names of both Prince Charles and his son Prince William is Arthur.

## II. HISTORY OF THE PERCEPTION OF KING ARTHUR IN CZECH LITERATURE

The first mention of King Arthur in Czech literature is found in *Zbraslavská kronika* (The Chronicle of Zbraslav) in an entry relating to the year 1319:

In that year King John of Luxembourg was visited by several young men, sons of noblemen, who, light-minded rather than brave, said to him: “Your Majesty, with tournaments and jousting and other knightly exercises your glory will spread and your name will be admired in the whole country. Will you proclaim a “Round Table,” that is King Arthur’s court, and it will gain you notable unceasing fame . . .” Therefore in the game park near Prague, Přemysl Otakar II had a wooden structure built, which was suitable for holding public games. And so the day of St John the Baptist arrived, which was set for this great festivity. But no foreign noblemen arrived.<sup>23</sup>

The Czech medieval poem of nearly 9,000 verses, *Tristram a Izalda* (Tristan and Iseult), based on German models, is close to the Arthurian cycle.

The next reference to King Arthur is also medieval. In a chivalric story entitled *Tandariáš a Floribella* (Tandariáš and Floribella)—the full title is *Řeč velmi pěkná o králi Artušovi a Tandariášovi* (A Very Nice Speech on King Arthur and Tandariáš)—a rhymed tale of the 14th century, we read (rendered in prose English):

22. See Lacy, *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, 241.

23. *Zbraslavská kronika: Chronicon Aulae Regiae*, trans. František Heřmanský and Rudolf Mertlík (Prague: Svoboda, 1976), 321. Translated into English by Jaroslav Peprník.

There was a king, whose name was Arthur, and everyone liked to listen to him. He was so good and so powerful, and ready to deal justice to one and all. It was his custom to hold court once a year. This large assembly always started at Whitsuntide and went on for two weeks. . . . He was also accustomed to abstaining from food each day until he was told some news.<sup>24</sup>

It is worth pointing out that medieval Czech writers were more inspired by Alexander the Great from the 4th century BC than by King Arthur, nearly one thousand years later. The Czech composition of c. 1300, *Alexandreida* (Alexandreis), originally had some 8,500 verses but now only two fifths are known. Alexander became an ideal sovereign for the Czechs—like Arthur for the British people. His greater appeal may be due to the fact that Czechs in those days needed a strong king—and Arthur was not exactly a strong ruler; moreover, he did not set out on the quest himself but delegated his best men, whereas Alexander was always found in the thick of the battle, and was not aided by magic. The general European interest in Alexander must also have been stimulated by the contemporary interest in the Orient, which resulted from the Crusades that had been undertaken since the 11th century.

After an interval of several centuries, Arthur's name reappears in various contexts in the middle of the 19th century, but mostly in marginal references. An ironic allusion is found in the novel *Pekla zplozenci* (Offspring of Hell, 1853, 1862) by Josef Jiří Kolár (1812–96).<sup>25</sup> In this sensational and melodramatic novel a group of friends meet regularly in a restaurant and always sit at the same table—they call it Arthur's table—and no one else is allowed to sit there. In the same tale, a man with a long gray beard is given the nickname King Arthur.<sup>26</sup> The Arthurian motif is not further elaborated there.

The poet and playwright Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853–1912) wrote one play, *Král a ptáčník* (The King and the Fowler, 1898), on the Arthurian theme. Acts 1 and 3 are set in the Broceliand Forest, Act 2 in Artuš's castle. The story goes like this: Artuš confides to Merlin that his nephew Mordred is courting Queen Ginevra (Guinevere). In the next scene Mordred, accompanying the Queen, kisses her in a deserted fowler's hut. Fowler Perper surprises the couple and is given a purse by Mordred and a bracelet by the Queen to buy his silence about what he saw. In Act Two, Merlin brings Viviana (Viviane), the Lady of the Lake, into the castle. At the round table are seated Artuš (Arthur), Ginevra (Guinevere), Mordred, Lancelot, Elaine, Gavein (Gawain), Ereik, and Parcifal (Percival). The King sends knights to keep watch over the Queen and to prevent Mordred from being with her. Soon afterwards, the fowler brings quails to the castle and, when he is searched, the money and the bracelet are found on him. He refuses to say where they come from and is put into jail.

24. *Rytířské srdce majíce: česká rytířská epika 14. století* (Having a Chivalrous Heart: Czech Knightly Epic Poetry of the 14th century), ed. Eduard Petruš and Dagmar Marečková (Prague: Odeon, 1984), 259. Translated into English by Jaroslav Peprník.

25. Josef Jiří Kolár, *Pekla zplozenci* (Prague: I. L. Kober, 1890), 108.

26. See Kolár, *Pekla zplozenci*, 109.

Ginevra disappears when Lancelot leaves his sentry post in order to meet his beloved Elaine. Artuš receives an intercepted message in which Mordred asks Ginevra to abscond with him. The King now understands that the valuables found on the fowler were a bribe for his silence. Mordred gets killed in an attempt to flee from the castle. Viviana disappears too and Merlin believes that she has deserted him and left with Lancelot. The deserted Artuš comes to see the deserted Merlin and the following dialogue ensues:

King: Give me your hand for I have no other faithful friend.

Merlin: My unfortunate king, we are so small, so small when we face women.<sup>27</sup>

In the end, however, it comes out that neither woman had lost her virtue and Artuš says to Merlin: “Viviana was not unfaithful to you and my Ginevra did not betray me either.” The penitent Ginevra explains to the king what happened at the meeting with Mordred:

I said no but he—oh, how ashamed I am—took a kiss from my lips and before I could prevent it he took another two or three. That is my whole guilt.<sup>28</sup>

The deeply tragic Arthurian plot of failing ideals and clashing values is remade by Vrchlický into a sentimental comedy with a single, not very competent villain.

Elsewhere in Czech literature there are scattered brief references to King Arthur but there are not so many as one might assume, given the general knowledge of King Arthur in the Czech lands. In the memoirs of Edmund Konrád (1889–1957), a young writer on a visit to two grand persons of Czech literature, the critic F. X. Šalda and the woman writer Růžena Svobodová (1868–1920), compares his position to that of a page at King Arthur’s round table.<sup>29</sup> The feat of Arthur pulling out the sword Excalibur from the rock is referred to in a simile by Daniela Hodrová, a writer of the second half of the 20th century.<sup>30</sup>

These brief references show that King Arthur and his knights are alive in contemporary Czech culture but rather on the margins. The medieval story is being passed on to modern generations by Jan Caha’s translation of Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* (1960, though translated during World War II—Vilém Mathesius, the founder of academic English Studies at the university in Prague in 1912, wrote a preface to the edition as early as in 1944),<sup>31</sup> by translations of British books on the Arthurian theme (Mary Stewart, T. H. White), the film versions (*Camelot*, 1967; *Monty Python and*

27. Jaroslav Vrchlický, *Král a ptáčník* (Prague: F. Šimáček, 1898), 77. Translated into English by Jaroslav Peprník.

28. Vrchlický, *Král a ptáčník*, 108.

29. See Edmund Konrád, *Nač vzpomenu* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1957), 102.

30. See Daniela Hodrová, *Théta* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1992), 12.

31. A new translation by Ivory Rodriguez appeared in 1997. See Thomas Malory, *Artušova smrt*, trans. Ivory Rodriguez, 3 vols. (Brno: Jota, 1997).

*the Holy Grail*, 1975; *Excalibur*, 1981; *King Arthur*, 2004), and the retelling of the stories for young readers.<sup>32</sup> There is even a modern Czech opera, *Lancelot*, by Luboš Fišer (b. 1935).

Recently the King Arthur imagery became popular in Czech genre fiction. Some references or retakes could surely be found among Czech fantasy and sci-fi writers, for instance in the science fiction tetralogy, *Divocí a zlí* (The Wild and Cruel, 1999–2000), written in a style close to splatter punk by Jiří Kulhánek, where Merlin, as an alien, plays an important role, but this genre was not included in this study. Michal Lázňovský has written several radio plays on King Arthur's cycle, but his plays have not been published yet.

## CONCLUSION

The history of the Czech reception and adaptations of King Arthur's legends begins surprisingly early, in an entry in *Zbraslavská kronika* (The Chronicle of Zbraslav) in 1309. The familiarity with King Arthur is documented by allusions in Czech literature (scattered references in fiction), one drama by the renowned Czech poet Jaroslav Vrchlický, and an opera by Luboš Fišer. But the main sources of the popularity of the myth of King Arthur are to be found outside Czech literature, in American films, in Czech translations of Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* or of novels by T. H. White or Mary Stuart, and most of all in children's illustrated adaptations and compilations. While in the Middle Ages the reason for this relatively scarce employment of the Arthurian myth in Czech literature is the Czech preference for Alexander the Great, the reasons for the small number of references in modern Czech literature need further investigation, especially in view of its strong presence in the popular imagination.

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32. See Vladimír Hulpach, *Příběhy kruhového stolu* (Prague: Albatros, 1980).

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# QUEERING THE FAMILY: KINSHIP, BLOOD RELATIONS AND MARRIAGE IN SHOWTIME'S *QUEER AS FOLK*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay explores the ways in which the American television series *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) constructs queer families. The show responds to the social and cultural challenges faced by LGBT families and expresses differing attitudes to assimilationism and compulsory heterosexuality. By juxtaposing two traditional, though homosexual, family units with an anti-assimilationist worldview, *Queer as Folk* questions what *family* signifies. The essay analyzes the series' treatment of gay male versus lesbian kinship and sexuality, and its assumptions about gender, through the family as a central trope.

## KEYWORDS

*Queer as Folk* (US); television series; queer studies; family; gay marriage; LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender)

Any discussion in an American context of the notion of “family” will necessarily be complicated by the troublesome relationship between the reality of a heterogeneous population on the one hand, and the desire for homogeneity on the other. In addition, it is impossible to define with any accuracy what a family is or is supposed to be,<sup>1</sup> but as Kath Weston points out, the “privileged construct” appears to be the heteronormative family paradigm.<sup>2</sup> Bernstein and Reimann state that “in 1998, only 6.7 percent of all households [in the US] fit the ‘traditional’ nuclear-family model.”<sup>3</sup> With this statistic, it can seem rather curious that the issue of gay marriage and queer families is such a controversial one. Part of the explanation may lie in the notion of national myths or idealized perceptions of imagined communities. The US imagines itself as a community with a certain set of values rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Bernstein and Reimann further point out, “the privatized-nuclear family holds a sacred place in the American psyche and is embedded in most major social and legal institutions.”<sup>4</sup>

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1. See Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Cheshire Calhoun, “Family Outlaws,” *Philosophical Studies* 85, no. 2–3 (1997): 181–93.

2. See Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 6.

3. Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann, eds., *Queer Families, Queer Politics: Challenging Culture and the State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 14.

4. Bernstein and Reimann, *Queer Families, Queer Politics*, 2.

The American TV series *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000–2005) portrays queer families as anything but homogenous. By responding to the social and cultural challenges faced by LGBT families in the early (G. W.) Bush era with humorous allegory, the show promotes a multiple definition of what constitutes a family based on extended kinship and a redefinition of “blood relatives.” By situating the characters in what Rebecca Beirne calls a “homonormative environment,”<sup>5</sup> the show constructs its lesbian and gay characters as the norm, while queering the heterosexual world. While the show does not represent all queer families as the same, the tendency towards representing one segment of the homosexual characters as assimilationist, adopting a “traditional” definition of the family, produces a certain homogeneity, which constructs the queer family as normative. In this way the show expresses a difference in queerness based on gender. Although the show attempts to stress inclusiveness and multiplicity, its treatment of lesbians is based on sexist notions about women. Although the two married couples—Melanie (Michelle Clunie) and Lindsay (Thea Gill), and Michael (Hal Sparks) and Ben (Robert Gant)—function as the most obvious comments on heteronormativity, the anti-heterosexual, defiantly queer Brian (Gale Harold) represents the anti-assimilationist point of view.

#### THE “HETEROS”

Even though the show purports to be realistic, it does in many ways, to borrow Cindy Patton’s words,<sup>6</sup> construct the family unit in a parodic and campy way to reverse the roles of “queers” and “heteros.” Even if it portrays virtually no straight characters, the show constantly comments on the heterosexual world, and when straight characters are given time to develop, they are always queered—the gay characters often refer to them condescendingly as “breeders”—or they are presented as villains or failed couples, thus turning the stereotype of the “perverted” or dysfunctional homosexual on its head. Michael’s mother Debbie, the only non-queer character to appear in every episode, is a kitschy reversal of the typical, flamboyant, comic-relief gay character. The only other recurring straight character is Jennifer Taylor (Sherry Miller), the straight mother of Brian’s lover Justin. Jennifer, who dates a man half her age, represents the good but somewhat tragic straight woman, recently divorced and on Prozac. Together, these mothers are used as somewhat obvious juxtapositions to the more successful lesbian household, with “two dotting mothers” (Michael, 5.1) in a committed relationship.

5. Rebecca Beirne, “Mapping Lesbian Sexuality on *Queer as Folk*,” in *Televising Queer Women: A Reader*, edited by Rebecca Beirne (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 99.

6. Cindy Patton, “Tremble, Hetero Swine!” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 143–77.

## THE QUEERS

One of the show's biggest accomplishments is its contribution to the naturalization of homosexuality. However, the portrayal of "The Lesbians" as somehow separate from the "queer"—that is the gay male—realm is significant. *Queer as Folk*, not unlike other popular cultural artifacts, is a product of discourses. While it supposedly provides "an unvarnished treatment of gay life,"<sup>7</sup> it remains a relatively partial treatment in that, as Rebecca Beirne states, it "enacts [a] heteronormative patriarchal discourse even as it queers it, by maintaining gender distinctions that privilege male narratives and sexuality over female ones."<sup>8</sup> The portrayal of male homosexuals, although somewhat unrealistic, presents idiosyncratic and rounded characters, whereas the main lesbian characters are encoded as butches and femmes.<sup>9</sup> In the first two seasons, Melanie and Lindsay are encoded almost exclusively as a butch/femme couple, with the traditional dichotomy of blond/brunette and passive/active, represented here as the femme, blonde, stay-at-home mom, Lindsay, and the butch, brunette, high-powered lawyer, Melanie.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the lesbians function mainly to illustrate to a straight audience that homosexuals are just like heterosexuals. As opposed to the five gay protagonists, the lesbians are almost exclusively portrayed in domestic or "traditionally" female cultural spaces. The first two seasons picture Lindsay almost entirely as a mother. Other than taking care of the son Gus and keeping a tidy home, Lindsay seems not to have a function or purpose in the story. Thus, as Beirne further explains, Melanie and Lindsay perform the role of "*oppositional force* against which gay male culture, posited by the series as queer culture, is constructed and celebrated."<sup>11</sup> The lesbian couple is represented as conforming to societal norms of women on the one hand and the two-parent home on the other, while the gay male characters inhabit a sexy and exciting queer world.

The feminine as "other" is further represented in the series in depictions of the lesbians as somehow naturally domestic and happily domesticated. With only a few exceptions, in the first three seasons, the couple exclusively inhabit the home sphere, situated in the living room, bedroom, or kitchen,

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7. Rodger Streitmatter, *From "Perverts" to "Fab Five": The Media's Changing Depiction of Gay Men and Lesbians* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 127.

8. Beirne, "Mapping Lesbian Sexuality," 99.

9. "Butches" refers to women who are categorized as adhering to societal standards of gender behavior usually attributed to men, and so are perceived to be un-feminine or man-like. "Femmes" refers to lesbians who seem to conform to society's standards of feminine behavior. This classification is, of course, highly problematic as it assumes that there are neat categories of femininity and masculinity, but also because the terms reinforce assumptions about lesbians being either "the man" or "the woman" in the relationship, thus indirectly privileging the heterosexual pattern of couples.

10. See Rebecca Beirne, *Lesbians in Television and Text after the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 90–93.

11. Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 63. Emphasis in original.

preparing a meal, consuming a meal, cleaning, or discussing child rearing or whether to have another baby. In episode 3.9, even as they discuss the politics of lesbian motherhood as opposed to straight motherhood, the couple move through the house from the living room toward the bathroom. A scene like this displays stereotypical assumptions on two levels. On the explicit level, the lesbians' dialogue centers on why lesbian mothers need to be better than, not just as good as, straight mothers. This underlines the show's portrayal of the lesbians as conforming to societal norms of family units and also comments on assumptions about queer families as somehow inferior. On the implicit level, the lesbians are situated in a highly quotidian setting: folding laundry and taking care of a child. While the gay males are mostly portrayed in the bar Woodie's or the club Babylon, the lesbians only visit such establishments a few times; one "dyke-night," a couple of bachelor parties, including their own, and fundraisers for LGBT causes. As women, Melanie and Lindsay are coded as outside the queer—gay male—community, even while they often have superficial roles to play in direct community actions, such as benefits and the Liberty Ride fundraiser. As lesbians, they are coded as assimilationist, conforming to the hegemonic white, middle-class suburban family paradigm.

Furthermore, throughout the show, the lesbians "are peripheral to the major story lines . . . have little screen time, have less prominent sex lives than other characters and are often the subject of ridicule both on and off screen."<sup>12</sup> Especially the gay male characters often belittle and deprecate the lesbians either by calling them names or by expressing exaggerated disgust with lesbian sexual acts. For instance, on more than one occasion, Emmet and Ted make gagging noises and screwed-up faces on hearing the word "cunnilingus" (3.1), Michael shivers at the thought of lesbian sex (3.1), and his mother Debbie says with enormous dread, "I can't even imagine diving into a muff!" (5.5). By contrast, the depiction of gay male sex and sexuality is purposely alluring,<sup>13</sup> while lesbian sexuality is relegated to the realm of the unacceptable and odd, which maintains the notion of lesbian sexuality as dangerous *feminine* desire.<sup>14</sup>

#### "BLOOD RELATIVES"

*Queer as Folk* pokes fun at and redefines in its own way the way the term 'blood relative' is to be understood. While the lesbians are deciding whether or not to have another child, their main concern is the biological father's identity. On the one hand, Lindsay wants both children to have the same father, i.e. to be related in the traditional sense, in case something happens to their mothers, while Melanie refuses to use the sperm of their son's biological father (3.3). The conflict between the two mothers' ideas about the father is further

12. Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 61.

13. Michael Ausiello, "Queer Execs to Critics: *Folk* Off!" *TV Guide Online*, January 4, 2002, <http://www.tvguide.com/newsgossip/insider/020104a.asp>.

14. Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 69–75.

complicated by the show's focus on what Beirne calls "the primacy of the father."<sup>15</sup> The pilot (and first episode) of the show introduces the five gay male protagonists and especially the buddies Michael and Brian as central to the show. In this episode, Lindsay gives birth to Gus, fathered by Brian. During a scene at the hospital, the two biological parents share an intimate and not entirely platonic moment.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the birth of their first child does not construct Melanie and Lindsay as a queer family; the scene rather works to construct Brian as a father. The focus quickly shifts from the newborn and the happy mothers to Brian's realization that his life is forever changed. In fact, Melanie is temporarily excluded from the family, as the framing of the scene produces Lindsay and Brian as "[an] archetypal nuclear family unit."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, as a comic reversal in the next season, Lindsay asks Brian to pose as her husband in order to get Gus into a good preschool, assuming that he was excluded from their first choice because of discrimination. The second preschool also turns down Gus, but this time in favor of a child with same-sex parents. Lindsay regrets not taking Melanie to the interview and says, "It should have been you and me in there . . . first thing tomorrow, we're gonna look for another school. And this time, Gus' parents—Lindsay and Melanie—will go to the interview" (2.13). Lindsay's revelation about their family, therefore, critiques the notion of compulsory heterosexuality. This incident propels the story of Melanie and Lindsay as the real family seen throughout the rest of the show, thus deconstructing the notion of "family" as a biological entity.

This privileging of the biological, seen in the early episodes, is further deconstructed later in the show when Melanie (in cooperation with Lindsay) chooses Brian's best friend Michael as the father of *her* child. In this way, the show relies on an idea of "family" in broad terms of non-biological kinship and not in genetic terms. The constructed nature of "family" as "chosen families,"<sup>18</sup> which is portrayed in this show, is, moreover, explained in almost every other scene involving families and blood relations. The "folk" of *Queer as Folk* are not just friends, but frequently refer to each other as family and biological family members are very rarely even known, much less presented as important in their lives. Biological fathers, particularly, are either represented as absent, abusive, or actively objecting to the role of family man. The three fathers, other than Brian, that have minor roles to play fall neatly into these categories. Therefore, chosen family—the people whom you choose and who choose you—becomes more important than genetic family, which is portrayed as accidental and, in many ways, inconsequential. For instance, it turns out in episode 2.13 that Michael's mother Debbie has been lying to him about his real father all his life, but even after he finds out his

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15. Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 63.

16. See Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 76–77.

17. Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 76.

18. See Kath Weston, *Families We Choose*, 109–11.

real father is a drag queen Debbie knew in high school, Michael accepts the story of his fake father, the fallen Vietnam war hero, as true because it is the family image Debbie has chosen. Likewise, the lesbians choose to construct their version of the middle-class two-parent two-kids family without regard for genetic connections.

When Melanie and Lindsay temporarily “dissolve” as a couple in the last season (5.3), the issue of child custody rears its ugly head. As the biological parents of the daughter JR, Michael and Melanie hire lawyers to settle the dispute. Lindsay is initially left out of the matter, but later comes to play a prominent role. The key conflict emerges when Michael expresses misogynist attitudes stating that a child is better off with two dads than a single mother, prompting his own single mom, Debbie, to set him straight, in a characteristic sarcastic rant, “I was a single mother and—guess what? You still had the sense to come in out of the rain . . . You think that just ‘cause there are two of you, you’re better equipped to raise a kid . . . Let me tell you two ‘experts’ something: Not everyone is fortunate to have a partner and enough money to stay home and raise their kid . . . So if you think you can do better, all I can say is: good for you” (5.2). Finally, the issue is resolved when, fearing she will be excluded as the non-birth-mother with no legal claims to the baby, Lindsay hires her own lawyer and the three of them end up sharing custody equally. The lawyer at one point states that, “It used to be the definition of mother was simple. It was the dear lady who gave birth to you” (5.3). This simple biological definition is further deconstructed throughout the rest of the season, especially when Lindsay proves in true King Solomon fashion (1 Kings 3:16–28) that she, unlike Michael and Melanie, who bicker over whose turn it is to “have the baby,” puts the baby’s welfare above her own (5.5).

In similar fashion, in the Michael and Ben family, the idea of blood relatives takes on a weightier and somewhat more sinister meaning. That Ben is HIV positive and Michael is not is the main cause of conflict in their relationship, which is further complicated when Melanie and Lindsay choose Michael to father their second child—something Ben will never be able to do. When the teenage hustler and HIV positive Hunter squeezes his way into their lives and makes an impression on Ben, Michael wonders out loud why a stranger can inspire such affectionate feelings in Ben. Ben, who has already decided to offer Hunter a place to live, asks, “Am I supposed to let him sleep on the street on one of the coldest nights of the year?” and Michael responds, “You hardly know him!” Ben dryly but poignantly responds: “Well, actually we’re related—by blood” (3.11). This redefinition of blood relative is elaborated when Hunter’s abusive mother resurfaces and threatens to break up the family (3.14). Michael and Ben emerge as Hunter’s true parents after his mother rejects him upon discovering his HIV positive status, and they later officially adopt him. HIV not only functions as a metaphorical blood tie, it also becomes a mark of separation as the plot unfolds. By privileging alternative forms of non-biological kinship the show offers an anti-assimilationist stance to the heteronormative surrounding society.

## THE MARRIAGE ISSUE

One way to gain legitimacy as a family is by way of marriage. Both the wedding ceremony and the institution symbolize to the world a lasting commitment, but more importantly marriage confers numerous rights and offers certain benefits with regard to taxes, health insurance and family planning, and many other matters.<sup>19</sup> In far from subtle comments on political issues such as the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and California's Proposition 22, *Queer as Folk* offers several comments on and critiques of the restrictive laws of the US and the apparent attitudes of the public. Most evident are the two central couples' marriages and the season five plotline (5.7–5.13) concerning "Proposition 14," a bigoted initiative proposed by the conservative "Family America" organization. The proposition, in somewhat hyperbolic fashion, would strip queer families of *all* rights by "dissolv[ing] a broad range of contracts between same-sex couples" (5.7), such as the right to second-parent adoption, marriage, and health benefits. This storyline comments very directly on the early Bush-era attempts to amend the constitution with the Federal Marriage Amendment defining the notion of marriage as exclusively a union between one man and one woman, as well as the Proposition 22 referendum, passed during the show's first season.<sup>20</sup>

With the marriage theme, the "othering" of the lesbians is again significant. Although both of the couples get married in one way or another, the lesbians in particular are encoded as "embrac[ing] white, middle-class, straight, suburban American norms."<sup>21</sup> Even though Melanie initially takes a more anti-assimilationist, feminist stance, calling marriages "antiquated rituals for heterosexuals" (2.1), Melanie and Lindsay hold a civil union ceremony, which at the same time both mocks and conforms to heteronormative standards. By donning the almost clichéd white gown and tuxedo, Lindsay and Melanie, respectively, seem to parody the heterosexual ritual. Furthermore, the plotline dealing with their commitment ceremony takes half a season to develop and includes several bouts of neuroses, cold feet and ruined expectations, whereas Michael and Ben's road to marriage—and significantly *legal* marriage—unfolds over one episode. This difference in time can be ascribed to the show's privileging of the male over the female. Ben and Michael's union is seen as an expression of love, whereas the lesbians' union symbolizes bureaucracy and domestic entanglements—represented by various scenes depicting the signing of contracts (2.4) and struggling

19. See Andrew J. Cherlin, "The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66 (2004): 848–61; Debra L. DeLaet and Rachel Paine Caufield, "Gay Marriage as a Religious Right: Reframing the Legal Debate over Gay Marriage in the United States," *Polity* 40, no. 3 (2008): 297–320.

20. The Federal Marriage Amendment bill was defeated in Congress in 2004. Many scholars and critics have seen the proposed amendment as an indication that conservatives are unhappy with DOMA. See Edward Ashbee, *The Bush Administration, Sex and the Moral Agenda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 86–95.

21. Bernstein and Reimann, *Queer Families, Queer Politics*, 5.

for acceptance from Lindsay's parents (2.7). The lesbians' struggle is thus juxtaposed with the guys' spur-of-the-moment, romantic decision<sup>22</sup>; that is, Ben proposes and they get married on a charity bike ride to Toronto, where gay marriage is legal.

In a somewhat more militant manner, the anti-conformist character, Brian Kinney, advocates complete separatism and promotes truly Queer (family) values. In many ways his attitude towards the straight world is reminiscent of Queer Nationalists' semi-separatist ideology.<sup>23</sup> Allowing his on-and-off-again lover Justin to move in, Brian states, "don't get the idea we're some kind of married couple. We're not like fucking straight people. . . . We're queers, . . . we're together . . . because we wanna be" (2.6). After they break up and when Michael and Ben buy a house together, Justin moves in with them temporarily. In a drunken rant, Brian attacks Michael verbally, calling their marriage "a farce" and claims that they are deluding themselves into thinking the straight world will ever accept them on an equal footing (5.7). This scene is neither the first nor the last in which Brian raves about the "heteros," a term he always uses with a certain sneering and sarcastic tone. The most oft-repeated line of the show—"We're queer"—belongs to Brian and it becomes a type of chorus or slogan separating him and the other truly "queer" characters from, especially, the domesticated, assimilationist "ladies who munch" (Leda, 2.7). Throughout the series, Brian and Michael are juxtaposed as two ways to lead queer lives and two views on the issue of LGBT rights. Michael seeks acceptance and integration, while Brian deliberately battles it. Michael wants a home and a family, while Brian refers to marriage as "suicide pacts" (4.13). One of the show's clearest examples occurs in episode 4.13, where the two friends argue over gay rights and, specifically, Michael and Ben getting married. When Michael expresses apprehension about marrying Ben, Brian asks, "What's stopping you? Besides the fact it's the most pathetic idea I've ever heard . . . . Since when do you have the least interest in getting married?" He continues, "We're queer! We don't need marriage; we don't need the sanction of dick-less politicians and pederast priests. We fuck who we want to when we want to. It's our God-given right" (4.13). In a later episode, Brian refers to marriage as tying a "noose around [ones'] necks" (5.7). Michael, on the other hand, admits he always wanted to get married but never thought he could. He defends his stance by saying that gay people "deserve every bit the same rights as straight people, because [they]'re every bit as human . . ." and "it's also our God-given right to have everything straight people have!" (4.13). However absurdly corny the comment might be, the whole exchange neatly sums up the show's often ambivalent stance on the gay rights issue, as both a quest for equality and a struggle for separatism. As Kath Weston points out,

22. See Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 84.

23. Rebecca Beirne, "Embattled Sex: Rise of the Right and Victory of the Queer in *Queer as Folk*," in *The New Queer Aesthetic on Television: Essays on Recent Programming*, ed. James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 43–58.

the alternative families can “be read simultaneously as radically innovative and thoroughly assimilationist. In the end, they are intrinsically neither.”<sup>24</sup>

In season three (2003), a more antagonistic and political storyline develops which exposes anti-gay political ideology and provokes reassessments of dangerous notions of compulsory heterosexuality. In Pittsburgh’s mayoral election, the favorite is a police chief by the name of Jim Stockwell, whose platform focuses on “family values” and “cleaning up Pittsburgh” to make it a safe place, in what Glyn Davis calls “an echo of Rudy Giuliani’s efforts to Disneyfy Times Square in New York.”<sup>25</sup> True to his usual form, Brian exploits the situation and becomes the bigoted chief’s ad-man. Stockwell and his people do not directly attack the gay community as immoral, but initiate a process of “cleaning up” the gay neighborhood around Liberty Avenue to promote “wholesome values” (3.8) by closing bathhouses and bars for minor offenses. In the final episode of the season, Brian laments, “It used to be such a magical kingdom full of sprites and fairies” (3.14)—a queer haven that he sets out to restore. Brian thus emerges at the end of the season as the victorious, allegorical Everyman, saving the queer community from an evil politician out to infringe on personal liberties, a story that functions as an extended metaphor for the anti-gay sentiments and legislation of the early Bush years, possibly commenting on the proposed Marriage Amendment, which was finally defeated in 2004.<sup>26</sup> By utilizing this secondary plot, the show, “hail[s] the viewer to identify with the [queer] characters and dissociate from the homophobic characters,”<sup>27</sup> in an effort to promote greater acceptance. In addition, the show illustrates that it leans more toward a pluralist—or queer—stance towards identity politics, even though it may on the surface appear to be assimilationist with its focus on its “ersatz heterosexual” couples (5.3).

Finally, this insistence on inclusiveness and pluralism of attitudes is further illustrated in the final episodes of season five (2005). At a political benefit to promote gay marriage and protest against discrimination, an anti-gay terrorist attack nearly kills Michael, after which he is invited to speak at a press conference organized by anti-Proposition-14 activists. Michael foils the organizers’ plan to exhibit Ben, Hunter, and him as an example of upstanding heteronormative queer families by veering away from the prepared speech. When he becomes aware that his mother and colorful, flamboyant friends have been asked to sit in the back in order to make room for more normative gay families in the front—a show for the cameras—Michael decides to speak out. In the unscripted part of the speech, he states, “Being different is what makes

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24. Kath Weston, *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 64.

25. Glyn Davis, *Queer as Folk* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 122.

26. See Ashbee, *The Bush Administration*, 86–95.

27. Rebecca Beirne, introduction to *Televising Queer Women: A Reader*, ed. Rebecca Beirne (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 10.

us all the same, what makes us family” (5.13), referring to the assorted queer characters he associates with on a daily basis. The message is heavy-handed and clumsy. However, in the political climate of 2005—after the previous decade’s constant attempts to amend the constitution barring gays from marrying, the desexualized queers presented in television’s “representational arena,”<sup>28</sup> and continued widespread homophobia—it seems justified to use inelegant and unambiguous phrases.

#### CONCLUSION

“Marriage—straight people deserve it,” Leda, the lesbian ex-girlfriend of Melanie observes at Lindsay and Melanie’s bachelorette party, after witnessing a spat between the soon-to-be “married munchers.” Her comment functions first and foremost as comic relief, but it also illustrates how the show remains fairly divided in its attitude towards the institution of marriage. Leda functions as a counter to Melanie and Lindsay as domesticated women, much as Brian does to Ben and Michael as “ersatz heterosexuals.” Melanie and Lindsay’s union is at once a celebration of their love and a parody of the “nuclear family,” complete with a statistically realistic divorce—or a dissolving, as Melanie calls it.

The inclusiveness the show promotes is illustrated by its use of HIV as a trope of community. By redefining blood relatives to include chosen families based on social stigma and otherness, the series promotes pluralism and the tolerance of disparate values. *Queer as Folk*’s ultimate view on queer families is mainly resistant to dominant discourses, further represented in the series’ finale by Melanie and Lindsay leaving the country for good and Michael and Ben returning to the fabulous decadence of the gay dance club Babylon, to illustrate that queer families are not just homosexual versions of the straight nuclear family model, but a construct of resistance and a symbol of the fallacy of “traditional” paradigms. In short, the show objects to the notion of the family being a compulsory heterosexual entity.

Although the show had a limited audience because of its Sunday night timeslot and the network *Showtime*, its popular culture form provides a powerful weapon as a mediator. As Nancy Naples points out, because “destabilizing the powerful hegemony of heteronormativity involves daily negotiations, strategic choices, and a commitment to challenging heterosexual privilege in everyday life,”<sup>29</sup> the show’s portrayals of a multiplicity of queer identities and family patterns add to the current debate about LGBT rights.

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28. Giovanni Porfido, “*Queer as Folk* and the Spectacularization of Gay Identity,” in *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television*, ed. Thomas Peele (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 59.

29. Nancy A. Naples, “Queer Parenting in the New Millennium,” *Gender & Society* 18, no. 6 (2004): 683.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*A Historical Guide to James Fenimore Cooper*, edited by Leland S. Person.  
New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 249 p. ISBN 978-0-19-517313-0.

So James Fenimore Cooper has finally been admitted to the Oxford club. *Oxford Historical Guides* is a series that offers an alternative to the famous Cambridge Companions to individual writers, with the ambition to be “an interdisciplinary, historically sensitive series” with a special focus on authors “with a strong sense of time, place, and history,” as we read on the back cover. After Hemingway, Whitman, Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Twain, Wharton, Hughes, Dickinson, Ellison, Fitzgerald, and Melville comes Cooper’s turn. This is a fair deal, as his cultural influence reaches further than even many readers familiar with Cooper are ready to imagine.

Leland S. Person, an author of several essays on Cooper (though his main field seems to be Hawthorne, Melville, and James) wrote the introduction. Wayne Franklin, one of the renowned Cooper scholars, contributed a biography. The body of the volume consists of essays by John McWilliams, J. Gerald Kennedy, Dana D. Nelson, Barbara Alice Mann, and the final, bibliographical essay is the work of Jeffrey Walker. Out of those, only McWilliams and Walker could be regarded as unquestionably Cooper scholars. Kennedy is mainly a Poe scholar, Mann a Native American history specialist, and Nelson is an expert in the field of race studies. All in all, Cooper scholars are a minority here. Let us see if it works for the better.

It is to be understood that the book is aimed at a wider audience than Cooper scholars and readers. This is also evident from the reduced number of citations and notes. In addition, books like this one serve to promote writers rather than to compromise them, even though the publishing house requires a balanced view. Person’s introduction does not do a disservice to Cooper, as it courageously addresses the progressive features of Cooper’s very prolific literary career, although at the same time he does not hide the off-putting, conservative facets of Cooper’s thought, which are hard to reconcile with the current discourse on democratic plurality, equality, gender, and race. In his opinion, it is sad that Cooper continues to disappear from academic syllabi, falling victim to “laudable efforts to expand the nineteenth-century American literary canon” (4). Let us hope that Cooper will at least survive in Europe, because Europe has always been responsive to the myth-making ability of America and its spirit of adventure, its ability to explore the extremes. Since the aim of the book is to bring Fenimore Cooper to wider audiences, we should examine the strategies the critics use to make Cooper modern and attractive—through gender, race, postcolonialist, and even transnationalist discourse.

Cooper is reread as a postcolonial writer, which may be surprising for those who labeled him as a critical exponent of American expansionism and of the march of civilization. Even more interesting is Person’s very poignant

argument that Cooper's work played an important role in the history of American criticism, in its efforts to overcome the British cultural hegemony. Person points out that at least "Leatherstocking Tales" certainly became a hallmark for American myth criticism, which was so prominent in the post-World War II decades and so instrumental in liberating American literature and American studies from their colonization by English literature" (7).

It is clear, however, that this merit can hardly save Cooper for 21st-century readers, something which Person apologetically admits, because the myth that Cooper embodied is now considered as "male-centered, racist, and imperialistic" (8), even though it does not mean that Cooper's writing is really of such a kind. Person praises especially the strong visual aspect of Cooper's writing, which is a good move because our culture has become increasingly image-oriented. Person argues that "Cooper had a brilliant, scenic imagination," and points to the criticism of the period that did not fail to notice and appreciate this quality as early as 1822. There can be no doubt that Cooper was able to create unforgettable scenes, which both have magic and are charged with symbolism.

Another important argument that can save Cooper for modern readers is his acute sense of place, which Person links with the concept of "situated identity" (9). Cooper's sense of place is also connected to another very topical theme of the day, the environment and ecology. Cooper, as it is correctly pointed out, was, especially in his early works, concerned with the devastating impact of man upon his environment, and he did not mean only nature but also the city habitat.

Several pages of the essay are devoted to addressing some of the controversial issues, and it is necessary to applaud the efforts to do justice to Cooper's complex critical reflection of the social and political fallacies of both America and Europe. Person tackles Cooper's very complicated concept of democracy and its limits, his fears and anxieties about populism and other abuses of democracy, his relatively stiff gender and class perspective, and his very complicated views on slavery and race. For an uninitiated reader, this part may be rather too confusing because the complexity and paradoxes of Cooper's attitudes are difficult to resolve without a context.

Fortunately, the brief biography by Wayne Franklin is not, as is the custom of this series, so brief. Franklin, the author of a remarkable Cooper monograph *The New World of James Fenimore Cooper* and a recent monumental Cooper biography (as well as the editor of *New Essays on The Last of the Mohicans*), packs more than thirty pages with various aspects of Cooper's life and his writing and publishing career. How does he try to make Cooper come alive for contemporary readers?

Unlike many previous authors, Franklin emphasizes Cooper's first-hand experience with his materials—while many authors argue that Cooper's Indians are mythic creations, a discursive construct of savagism, Franklin points out that Cooper knew "some of the 'last' of New York's native inhabitants" personally. When Franklin writes that Cooper viewed

“the frontier from both sides, and therefore imagining possession and dispossession as linked truths” (28), he implies his sense of fair play and concern for justice.

Like Person, Franklin brings forward Cooper’s theme of the consequences of the inevitable march of civilization and articulates it in a green environmental mantle. I think that this view is somewhat too green to be fully true—as it is obvious from many examples, Cooper could appreciate a sensitive blend of the natural and artificial. True to the anti-intellectual tradition in American society and literature, Franklin does not neglect to mention that Cooper, though the son of a congressman, was a university dropout (expelled for his pranks with gunpowder) who began his first job as an ordinary seaman at the age of sixteen.

In Franklin’s biography Cooper appears as the first successful American literary entrepreneur who introduced new marketing methods to the book industry—he was the first fully professional American writer, he made his living by writing and selling his own books, and he also devised a new strategy for combating pirate editions of his books in Europe and thus minimized his losses.

What I find important is Franklin’s reconceptualization of Cooper’s employment of nature as the environment. While Person raised the ecological aspect of the treatment of nature, Franklin uses the environment in the phenomenological sense as “a complex, ever-changing milieu capable of shaping and coloring human experience” (45), and it is evident that the sense of place affects not only the characters but also Cooper’s plots and themes. Franklin also showed Cooper as a writer who did not end up replaying worn formulas but kept on trying new techniques and new forms; for instance, he introduced first-person narrative in two of his novel series of the 1840s, and he also experimented with the genres of dystopia, the Antarctic tale, and the court drama.

The second essay in the main section is by John McWilliams, the author of several Cooper-related monographs and of an invaluable study of *The Last of the Mohicans*, which at many universities throughout the world is worn thin by the students who every term choose to write a class essay on *The Last of the Mohicans* for a 19th-century American literature course.

His article is revisionist because its aim is to rehabilitate Cooper’s young heroines, whom Cooper’s contemporaries admired but frequently criticized for being stock, lifeless characters. McWilliams picks as a motto a quotation from a famous satirical poem by James Russell Lowell, who laughed at Cooper that his women are “all sappy as maples and flat as a prairie” (61). Recently, several critics have stood up in defense of Cooper’s ladies, for example Signe O. Wegener in her monograph *James Fenimore Cooper versus the Cult of Domesticity* (2005). McWilliams adroitly focuses on active young female Shakespearean patriots, who do not avoid political discussion and become very vocal in formulating political principles or pronouncing criticism of the abuse of political principles or laws in the new republic. McWilliams

argues Cooper filled a certain vacuum: the less authoritative voices of women were employed to express “subversive political ideas more safely” than their male counterparts (62). McWilliams provides a very penetrating and balanced analysis and reveals a fascinating discrepancy between the role of women in his fiction and his essays, where he sounds much more in accord with the present-day discourse on the role and place of women (62). McWilliams also elaborates on the influence of Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814) on Cooper’s young female characters, arguing that Cooper, contrary to the solution in *The Last of the Mohicans*, later reversed the cultural hierarchy in favor of the active dark-haired outspoken heroine. I especially appreciate McWilliams’s analysis of a witty exchange between the three Wharton siblings from *The Spy*, revealing amazing underlying complexities of politics and gender (72–73).

Perhaps the most interesting point McWilliams makes is that the origin of women’s faith in freedom is not explained and seems to have no particular source, which serves both as “the commendable mark and the eventual limitation of woman’s political power” (88). The women characters do not seem to have read John Locke, or the history of Rome, nor do they have oppressive fathers. While one can hardly disagree with McWilliams in these respects, he nevertheless displaces the major ethical frame that shapes women’s decisions, the New Testament Christian ethics; since women in Cooper’s world are not pressed by practical considerations to establish a social order and economic prosperity they can idealistically insist on principles, regardless of the costs.

McWilliams’s chapter pairs nicely with one section of another essay on Cooper’s women characters by Dana D. Nelson. Although her cultural and social conclusions are somewhat weakened, as she narrows her focus on “Leatherstocking Tales” only, her chapter compensates for this lack by a very solid grounding of the discussion of gender and male friendship in the historical context of the period, as well as in contemporary criticism. She makes very clear one issue that is often treated as a paradox, even by McWilliams in his chapter: how to reconcile the ideal of active, clever, educated women with the gender norms of what I would call domestic sleeping beauties. Nelson demonstrates with references to historical studies that in the first decades of the 19th century, because of a number of economic and social factors, there was a gradual shift of the paradigm from the republican ideal of politically and socially engaged women to passive homemakers, and Cooper’s fiction was caught somewhere in the middle.

The section titled “The Weakness of the Female” grounds the debate of gender in a historical context. In her discussion of Cora, the woman of color from *The Last of the Mohicans*, Nelson brings forward one important point that is usually left out in criticism. In her opinion, in her indiscriminate judgment of the Huron villain Magua Cora is “flatly *wrong*” (130). On the other hand, Cora’s purely white sister Alice is treated by Nelson as a flat type and a model of the new submissive, weak womanhood, defined here, in reference to Linda Kerber’s *Women of the Republic* (1980), in terms of spiritual

piety, moral purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (127). Such a reduction tends to disregard Alice's moments of courage, as well as other little details through which Cooper strives to give greater complexity to his characters. Nelson suggests an interesting conceptualization of the gender issue: "Cooper seems to counter, if not repudiate, True Womanhood with an alternative feminine ideal, Real Womanhood, which insisted that women should cultivate intelligence, physical fitness, and economic self-sufficiency, and certainly *not* passivity and submission" (132).

I especially appreciate that Nelson opens one of the fascinating questions of Cooper criticism. Most critics take it for granted that resolutions of the plot have serious thematic implications and spell out solutions to cultural dilemmas. It is generally argued that the marriage of the purely white Alice and the Virginian gentleman planter Duncan Heyward represent the future white Anglo-Saxon America. Nelson does not openly challenge this possibility but succinctly proves that later novels do not repeat the same formula and, as regards gender, offer other types of American heroes and heroines than an upper-class gentleman and golden-haired submissive Alice. A similar approach is used to resolve the issue of race. The deaths of Uncas, Cora, and Magua are generally believed to spell out the doom of people of color. To counter the effects of the tragic climax Nelson correctly stresses the power of cross-cultural and inter-racial sympathy, embodied in the friendship of Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, the last Mohican.

The chapter by J. Gerald Kennedy, primarily a Poe scholar, provides a close reading of Cooper's travel books from the 1830s. Kennedy's way of "modernizing" Cooper is to present his travel books as an early example of comparative transnational studies. Kennedy's sensitive reading reveals the reason for the relatively low popularity of these books—Cooper managed, somewhat insensitively, to offend everybody with his critical comments, and nor did he spare his American readers. One cannot but admire Cooper for the courage with which he carried out his plan to educate the American public, running the risk of losing his readership as a result of his cutting remarks. The concise summary of Cooper's political views can be of interest to any serious readers of Cooper who need some background on his political thought. Kennedy argues, and I agree with him, that Cooper's social and political analysis of American society is still pertinent.

The last essay in the central part of the book is a passionate defense of Cooper by Barbara Alice Mann, titled "Race Traitor: Cooper, His Critics, and Nineteenth-Century Literary Politics." Mann, a Native American scholar of the Seneca tribe, makes Cooper a victim of "a large-scale, organized political assault" on those who dared to challenge the myth of racial supremacy (157). Mann has a simple, original point with a wonderful cutting edge: she has remade Natty from an Indian by heart into an Indian by blood. She argues that Natty is a cross-breed and his obsessive exclamations "I am a man of no cross" are nothing but a performative gesture of "a mixed-blood man desperately passing for white" (157). Even though we may not be completely

convinced by this argument and may not find her evidence conclusive, we will be more inclined to accept her argument that this was the way in which race-sensitive readers of the 19th century perceived Natty. In my opinion, Mann's main contribution rests in her exploration of the political, social and economic motivation of Cooper's critical enemies. In order to understand the literary wars among the critics, it is important to know their affiliations and social connections.

Coming from the country of origin of the Moravian Church (Moravia, the eastern part of the Czech Republic), I also welcome the vindication of John Gottlieb Heckewelder, Cooper's most important source on Native Americans.

As an appendix there is a useful illustrated chronology providing a selective comparative context for Cooper's life and work. The volume is rounded off by a brief bibliographical essay by Jeffrey Walker, which also contains comments on some of the important monographs.

I found just two mistakes in the volume, both in one chapter. Old Natty does not adopt Mahtoree, the vile chief of the Sioux Indians, and the reference to the year 1842 on page 142 is confusing; if it refers to the year of publication of *The Deerslayer*, it should be 1841.

This guide offers a good insight into the thematic richness of Cooper's writing, makes readers more intimately acquainted with the historical context, and, what is most important, manages to make Cooper look more up-to-date.

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*Edgar G. Ulmer: Essays on the King of the B's*, edited by Bernd Herzogenrath.  
Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009. 287 p. ISBN 978-0-7864-3700-9.

One of the many nicknames that have been given to director Edgar Georg Ulmer is the "Ulysses of the cinema." Just like Ulysses, he was almost forgotten by his motherland, the world of film. In one of his last conversations with his daughter he expressed a fear that his entire life's work would disappear from the face of the earth. Fortunately for us, he was rediscovered by film enthusiasts and became an inspiration for several generations of filmmakers; his admirers include François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich and Wim Wenders, among others. Four of his films became classics of Yiddish cinema, *The Black Cat*, bringing together Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff, holds a special place in the dark hearts of horror fans, and *Detour* belongs among the cult gems of *film noir*.

The essays included in *Edgar G. Ulmer: Essays on the King of the B's* explore all aspects of the Ulmer persona. They range from analyses of particular movies to studies of the peculiarities of Ulmer's *oeuvre*. Bernd Herzogenrath, the editor, has managed to bring together a unique and comprehensive group of authors—film scholars, literary scholars, film critics, and filmmakers. Important contributions to this mixture are from Stefan Grisseman, the author of Edgar G. Ulmer's biography, entitled *Mann im Schatten* (2003), and, most importantly, Ulmer's daughter Arianné, who wrote the foreword and became the godmother of the book. Herzogenrath himself provides an introduction to this volume, in which he creates a portrait of Ulmer the man. He talks about the director's beginnings as a filmmaker and gives us the biographical information needed to fully understand Ulmer's complicated character.

We learn about Ulmer's ambiguous relationship to his real birthplace; even though in Hollywood the director claimed he was born in Vienna, the Mecca of culture, Herzogenrath made a discovery that is gratifying for all proud Czech patriots. He located the house where Ulmer was really born—in Olomouc, then in Czechoslovakia. He further mentions his dream of bringing Ulmer back home by means of an "Ulmerfest," which was eventually held in Olomouc in 2006. The topics discussed during the conference became a basis for the present volume and a commemorative plaque honoring the director was unveiled on the building where he was born in 1904.

Ulmer's voyage into the heart of Hollywood began in the 1920s in Germany, where he started working with the legendary Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau and, according to the Ulmerian legend, contributed to the birth of such classics of German expressionist cinema as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* or Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Murnau brought Ulmer to Hollywood, where the young director became an employee of Universal Studios. He was later forced to leave after falling in love with Shirley Alexander, who was then married to the nephew of Carl Laemmle, the founder of Universal. Ulmer married Alexander and became a director with PRC, a small B-picture studio, where some of his best movies first saw the light of day. He soon earned a reputation as a director who could make movies for a negligible amount of money in little time. They were not the best pictures ever to come out of Hollywood, but one has to admire Ulmer's creative ideas and incredible ability to make art out of virtually nothing.

This skill helped him gain cult status in the eyes of film fans and scholars alike. In the first essay in the collection, Bernd Herzogenrath explores the connection between cult and culture, so important for Ulmer's work. Ulmer had always been proud of his knowledge of European culture and even though he found a new home in the United States, he stayed deeply anchored in the European cultural heritage. For a large portion of his life he commuted between the continents and he never gave up his cultural roots. Herzogenrath argues that it is the planting of European high culture into American trash cinema that makes his movies unique. According to the author, Ulmer revives

culture by “linking it with cult, with the unorthodox, the trashy—and thus graces the unorthodox, the trashy.” In other words, culture cannot survive without cult; cult becomes its vital drive.

Stefan Grisseman’s essay concentrates on the so-called “moments of broken economy” in Edgar G. Ulmer’s movies, i.e., on his efforts to make the most out of limited resources, to turn deficiency into art, to make his visions work. Grisseman points out three aspects of Ulmer’s cinema: the potential for surprising visual and narrative solutions, the strange documentary value in many of his films, and the sometimes breathtaking minimalism of his *mise-en-scène*. Grisseman’s essay captures the true substance of Edgar G. Ulmer’s cult status. Even though his movies can be tiresome and sometimes even—Ulmer buffs will, it is hoped, forgive this blasphemy—bad, they always have an unexpected surprise up their sleeve, a breathless moment which wins the viewer’s heart with its economy and minimalism. One of the best examples is probably the frequently quoted scene from *Detour* where one of the main characters, Vera, is accidentally strangled with a telephone cord. This talent of Ulmer’s is arguably the main reason why he has become such a great inspiration for independent filmmakers—he was the master of improvisation, the magician who could pull a perfectly alive rabbit out of an empty (and worn-out) hat.

A similar topic is explored in the essay by Ekkehard Knörer. He introduces a new term for Ulmer’s movies—“the not-quite movie.” He talks about the strange pleasure we get from watching movies that are not quite perfect, not quite whole, and, in fact, are more falling apart than holding together. “The not-quite movie” is not a complete disaster, which, in Knörer’s opinion, is the difference between Ulmer’s movies and those of Ed Wood, the American cult filmmaker labeled by some as “the world’s worst director”; it is not trash cinema in the true sense of the term. It is a cinema of great visions and ideas but unfortunately no money. Knörer’s essay is an interesting contribution in this age of film buffs who have sold their souls to the B devil.

Stephanie Diekmann’s essay focusses on three issues that are problematic in the context of Ulmer’s work: authorship, signature, and the body of work. Ulmer’s authorship is often questionable—the director was a great mythmaker and there is no proof that he was really involved, for example, in the production of the German expressionist classics mentioned at the beginning of this review. His movies are mostly products of circumstances; he did not have the proper background to be called an *auteur* in the new wave sense of the word. The Ulmer signature is therefore not only the signature he himself wanted to imprint on his movies but more the signature of circumstances, which are the burden of every talented but poor artist. In the section dedicated to Ulmer’s body of work, Diekmann points out that the early research into Ulmer’s films had to consist primarily of the recovery and restoration of the individual movies—a process in which Arianné Ulmer Cipes played a vital part. Diekmann further argues that Ulmer’s movies also have a fragmented nature. She is of the same opinion as

Grisseman and Knörer, saying they are mostly second-rate cinematography with occasional breathtaking scenes. She agrees with Knörer who proposes that a “best of Ulmer” DVD would, amusingly enough, create the impression of an outstanding director.

Herzogenrath’s book also includes analyses of the most famous Ulmer movies—*The Black Cat* by the famous horror movie scholar Gregory William Mank and *Detour* by the New York University cinema studies professor Dana Polan—as well as films that are more on the obscure side—e.g., *Ruthless*, *The Strange Woman*, *The Naked Dawn*, and the rather depressing *The Man from Planet X*. Ulmer’s ethnic movies are also present—Sharon Pucker Rivo, the director of the National Center for Jewish Film, writes about his Yiddish films, whereas Frank Mehring analyzes the first all-black cast movie in history, Ulmer’s *Moon over Harlem*. Marcel Arbeit’s essay explores the director’s educational movies, namely his anti-syphilis *Damaged Lives* and its history. Herbert Schwaab chose *Babes in Bagdad* as a stepping stone for a discussion of the relations between camp, art film, and classic Hollywood cinema. Michal Peprník’s essay on *Daughter of Dr. Jekyll* and the effects of the displacement of home gives us a new perspective on Ulmer’s denial of his place of birth.

All in all, Bernd Herzogenrath’s effort to compile a representative volume which would be a dignified homage to “the King of the B’s” was not in vain. Despite the fragmented character of Ulmer’s work, the book holds together very well (is this not against the Ulmerian spirit, I dare ask?). The authors represented constitute a pleasantly diversified group from both Europe and America, just like Ulmer himself. The range of topics discussed is exhaustive. Moreover, the book is not only about movies; the reader is also given a unique insight into Ulmer’s life and his character and Arianné Ulmer’s consecration helps make it an essential handbook for every fan of this exceptional filmmaker, whose work still has the power to fascinate and inspire. However, the greatest asset of this book is its overall tone. From Herzogenrath’s honest and warm-hearted introduction we get the impression that this is not a work of obligation but a work of love. The volume tastefully combines the personal and the academic and therefore it can be enjoyed not only by scholars but also by film lovers, to whom Ulmer belongs in the first place. It is gratifying that this book was conceived in Olomouc, of all places; with it, Ulmer-Ulysses has come home and is finally given the recognition he deserves, Bernd Herzogenrath being the Penelope who never gave up on him. Let us hope that this book is the first “light ahead” and that more books and/or DVD editions of restored movies will follow.

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*The Return of Král Majáles: Prague's International Literary Renaissance 1990–2010; An Anthology*, edited by Louis Armand. Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2010. 938 p. ISBN 978-80-7308-302-1.

*The Return of Král Majáles* was recently published to coincide with Majáles (student May Day) celebrations in Prague and the 20th anniversary of Allen Ginsberg's return to Prague; the book's title is taken from the poem Ginsberg wrote to commemorate both his own return and the return of free speech to Czech society.

While Ginsberg's influence on Czech writers and intellectuals is discussed in the introduction, and some of the foreign writers in the anthology were influenced by Ginsberg personally, the book is not about Allen Ginsberg, despite its title and cover. Nor are the works collected in this anthology particularly *Ginsbergian* in the sense of satori or manifesto. Instead the anthology attempts to map the territory of what the English-language literary scene in Prague between 1990 and 2010 entailed. A number of writers writing in Czech are also included in English translation.

The anthology weighs in at nearly 1000 pages, which reflects current anthology philosophy on being "inclusive"—representing the work of ninety four (count 'em!) writers in the twenty years of its scope. It follows on the tradition of Milan Kozelka's Czech anthologies of the literary and artistic scenes of Olomouc, Ostrava, and Northern Bohemia in the 1990s. The editor, Louis Armand—an Australian poet and teacher at Charles University who came to Prague in 1994—set out to document the myriad poetry and fiction readings, theatrical performances, and the broadsides, chapbooks, novels and translations published in one of Europe's great cities in the period right after the opening of the Iron Curtain.

Armand himself was part of this literary scene, hosting a regular reading performance series called "Beef Stew"—and his anthology reflects the same kind of throw-it-all-into-the-pot, "open mic" approach. "I became a little alarmed," said Armand in a recent interview in *The Prague Post* (April 28, 2010) to mark the book's publication, "you start to look for a record of these things, and it is not there." In his book's lengthy introduction, he does a solid names-and-dates job of telling the history of not only the literary scene, but also the story of a community within a community, where Czech culture (mostly counter-culture) met foreign cultures, and how they were mutually influenced.

Allen Ginsberg's return to Prague in 1990 was a symbolic revisiting of one of the key moments in his life: his crowning as Prague's King of May and subsequent deportation in 1965. It was really a celebration of Czechs' return to a period of normalcy after the long period of anything-but-normal "Normalization." It was one of many such visits by Western cultural icons such as Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Ed Sanders, Joan Baez (as well as the real return of Czech artists who had been in exile, like Vratislav Brabenec, Jaroslav Hutka and Karel Kryl). At Bob Dylan's

first Prague concerts (he played three days in a row), it was as if you were at a combination PEN club congress and underground happening—it seemed like every Czech and foreign intellectual and writer was in attendance. The symbolism of the concerts by these “1960s” artists in 1990s Prague was lost on nobody. Let the good times roll—again—finally!

The Prague scene in the 1990s *was* special. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of the Iron Curtain and lifting of strict visa requirements, the long European dichotomy of East–West was broken, and a new era of Central Europe had begun—one in which cheap rents (\$20 per month in Prague in 1990) and cheap jet fuel attracted not only Europeans but people from all over the world. Many of these were artists.

Václav Havel, dissident-writer-as-president of the new republic, attracted those artists who felt under-appreciated. “Second Chance City” is one of Alan Levy’s monikers for Prague (Levy was an American journalist who was in Prague in the 1960s, was in “exile” in Vienna in the 1970s and 1980s and who also returned to Prague in the 1990s, seeing himself as a sort of icon of the English-speaking Prager). Freedom for Havel meant freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom from hassles by the police. For artists, the incredibly relaxed atmosphere of this atheistic, low-rent, low-crime country was akin to paradise. They came to Prague in droves.

And why not? It was the time of a renaissance in every sense of the word: a half-century of forbidden books were being published, a half-century of dilapidated buildings were being repaired, where there had been no telephones there was now internet. Armand’s introduction does a good job of recounting the beginning of the story—the reasons are obvious (freedom and economics), and he mentions how Czechs were helpful, welcoming and instructive to non-Czechs. Most of those non-Czechs are gone, and the reasons for leaving are various, but not mentioned—the loss of some freedoms, Prague’s commercialization, higher rents and not-great salaries. Changes in visa and residency laws after the entry of the Czech Republic to the EU have dramatically changed the dynamics of the foreigners living there over longer periods, thus also changing the idea of a foreign “community” in Prague.

Every anthology is criticized for its inclusions and omissions; editorial decisions are what make anthologies unique. One of the things I feel the introduction is missing is a rationale (for the inclusion of certain texts or exclusion of certain texts—often this is due to copyright reasons or royalty payments, but it should be mentioned). Any reviewer can quibble with content choices; two Czech writers who are found in the book, Jáchym Topol and Jaroslav Rudiš, have written excellent examples on the theme of Paradise Lost, Prague under the bad influence of outside cultures (“the Kingdom of May is too beautiful to last more than a month”)—not told in the introduction: Topol’s *Výlet k nádražní hale* (A Trip to the Train Station, 1995) and Rudiš’s *Potichu* (Quietly, 2007).

Also on the minus side, I feel the introduction is amiss in not mentioning the role of the American Embassy and the British Council on the literary

scene—not only in Prague, but throughout the Czech Republic. Czechs as well as non-Czechs working in those organizations brought so many writers (numbering in the hundreds!) on both sides together to discuss disparate pasts, common presents and uncertain futures—and made a concerned effort to include Czech and Slovak university students in these discussions. These meetings and readings had a profound influence on not only the writers, translators and students from both sides, but also in fostering a real international intellectual community.

The anthology's major bonus to scholars is its 45-page bibliography of Prague books and literary journals in English—including cover art, which is a glimpse at another facet of book production in Prague during the past twenty years: the visual art/book art which went hand-in-glove with much of the literary output. This is sure to be a gold mine for future literary scholars. Nevertheless, the bibliography has some mistakes: books published in the Moravian city of Olomouc should not be included under the rubric of “Prague Publications,” and even though Prague is a major city as well as a capital city, the inclusion of authors who are identified strongly with other Czech cities and regions (an obvious example is Martin Reiner from Brno) as “Prague” authors is wrong. One omission here, at least to me, is the American Jon Davis, who has published two books in his “own” Czech, which should surely be mentioned somewhere in an anthology that attempts to be definitive.

But in the end it all comes down to the poetics: is the *Lion* for real? I can make a few generalizations: the non-Czech writers tend to be more experimental in form, while the Czech writing is more focused—this contradicts the oft-repeated cliché that compared to the samizdat writers, the post-1989 Czech generation found themselves with “nothing to say.” Overall I think the book would be much the weaker without the Czech authors found there, and for non-Czech readers who do not know Czech writers, this might be a good place to start. One non-Czech writer who does have something to say is Justin Quinn, the Irish poet, translator, and editor, who in tone and content I believe has really become a Prague poet. There are also some good finds among the English-language writers here: Jane Kirwan (England) and John McKeown (Ireland) are two fine poets, and from what few pages are here Myla Goldberg (USA) seems a very interesting novelist (the excerpt is from her novel *Cirkus*, about a multi-generation Czech circus family). There are bound to be more.

Most of the interesting writers are connected to Howard Sidenberg's Twisted Spoon Press—an English-language literary publisher in Prague which by now has not only a long tradition but a long shelf of quality literature under its imprint. Litteraria Pragensia as an English-language academic publisher in Prague looks as if it too is developing an international reputation.

However, this is not a purely academic book—the bulk of the material is fiction, poetry and drama, with each author receiving one to twenty pages, usually five or six. Many have the feel of written texts for what were originally spoken word performances; the heavy weight of the book makes it too big to

take to the beach on holiday, but the short length of the individual texts makes the tome an ideal companion for that most intimate of reading chambers.

The anthology's 1000 pages are a slap-in-the-face answer to allegations that there was no Prague literary scene after 1990: if anyone says so, throw the book at them. Hemingway called Paris in the 1920s "a moveable feast" and we can't help but recall Jonathan Swift's lines (a translation) about a famous Irish feast held after a long battle. If you substitute "Prague" for "O'Rourke" you get a fitting epitaph for Prague as a writers' feast in the period from 1990–2010:

*Prague's noble fare  
Will n'er be forgot—  
By those who were there,  
Or those who were not.*

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