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# *Littera Aperta*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Articles

- Μελιττῶν ἀγρίων (Phot. *Bibl.* 94.3): ¿Abejas o avispas en  
*Babiloniácas* de Jámblico?  
*Miriam Librán Moreno* 5-17
- Impermanence / Mutability: Reading Percy Bysshe Shelley's Poetry  
through Buddha  
*Leila Hajjari, Zahra Soltani Sarvestani* 19-37
- El manuscrito 287 de la Biblioteca Menéndez Pelayo y su copista  
*Ángel Jacinto Traver Vera* 39-54
- Reconsidering White Liberals in *Native Son*  
*Abdul-Razzak Al-Barhow* 55-71
- Cultural Alienation and Language Discontinuity in *La Mémoire*  
*Tattouée*  
*Rahmoun Miloud* 73-83

### Interview

- Entretien avec Jean-Pierre Brouillaud sur *Ma vie avec Contumace*  
(2018)  
*Elisabeth Doustin* 85-92

### Book Reviews

- Martin M. Winkler (ed.) (2015). *Return to Troy: New Essays on the*  
*Hollywood Epic*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.  
*Fernando Lillo Redonet* 93-98



Μελιπτῶν ἀγρίων (PHOT. *BIBL.* 94.3):  
BEES OR WASPS IN IAMBlichUS'S  
*BABYLONIAN STORIES*?

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**Abstract**

The nature and diet of the apiform insects in Iamblichus's novel *Babylonian Stories* (Phot. *Bibl.* 94.3) are unclear. The present paper concludes that they are an entomologically non-realistic, literary mixture of bees and wasps, perhaps patterned after the τεθρηδών, with which Iamblichus's insects share the name ἀγρία μέλισσα. Iamblichus may have been inspired by the description of the ferocious Hyrcanian τεθρηδόνες in Clitarchus's *History of Alexander*. There is no need to emend the text of fr. 14 B. (=16 H.) from Iamblichus's *Babylonian Stories*.

**Keywords:** Iamblichus the novelist, *Babylonian Stories*, bees, wasps, honey, τεθρηδών

Μελιπτῶν ἀγρίων (PHOT. *BIBL.* 94.3):  
¿ABEJAS O AVISPAS EN *BABILONÍACAS* DE  
JÁMBLICO?

**Resumen**

Estudio de la naturaleza y la dieta de los insectos apiformes que aparecen en la novela *Babilóníacas* de Jámblico (Phot. *Bibl.* 94.3). Estos presentan una mezcla entomológicamente no realista de características de abejas y avispa, que podrían reflejar rasgos de la τεθρηδών, un himenóptero con el que los insectos de Jámblico comparten el nombre de ἀγρία μέλισσα. En ellos puede haber influido la descripción de las feroces τεθρηδόνες hircanas recogidas en la *Historia de Alejandro* de Clitarco. No es necesario modificar el texto de fr. 14 B. (16 H.) de *Babilóníacas* de Jámblico.

**Palabras clave:** Jámblico el novelista, *Babiloníacas*, abejas, avispas, miel, τενοθηδών

# Μελιπτῶν ἀγρίων (PHOT. *BIBL.* 94.3): ¿ABEJAS O AVISPAS EN *BABILONÍACAS* DE JÁMBLICO?\*

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## 1. La dieta de los insectos de Jámblico

*Babiloníacas* del autor sirio Jámblico (ca. 160-180 d.C.) es una novela que ha llegado hasta nuestros días de forma fragmentaria a través de un largo resumen de la *Biblioteca* de Focio (cod. 94), unos cien fragmentos transmitidos en el Suda y nueve fragmentos de cierta extensión conservados en manuscritos<sup>1</sup>.

La novela está protagonizada por una pareja de jóvenes babilonios, Ródanes y Sinónide, que huyen de la persecución de Garmo, tiránico rey babilonio que desea desposar a Sinónide. Para escapar de los soldados enviados en su búsqueda, los jóvenes se adentran en una gruta. Un enjambre de insectos se había guarecido a la salida de la caverna, desde donde destila miel sobre las cabezas de los presentes. Irritados por la presencia humana, los insectos atacan a los soldados, a los que matan o mutilan tanto con sus aguijones como con la miel venenosa que ha goteado sobre sus cabezas (Connors 2018: 44). Por su parte, Ródanes y Sinónide, hambrientos, comen de esa miel. Pero la miel resulta ser tóxica y los jóvenes, envenenados, caen al lado del camino como si estuvieran muertos (Phot. *Bibl.* 94.3).

La razón por la que esta miel tiene un efecto tan drástico está abierta a debate, ya que el texto del resumen de *Babiloníacas* de Focio se presta a dos posibles interpretaciones:

Καὶ μελιπτῶν ἀγρίων σμήνη ἐκεῖθεν ἐπὶ τοὺς ὀρύσσοντας τρέπεται, καταρρεῖ δὲ τοῦ μέλιτος καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς φεύγοντας· αἱ δὲ μέλισσαι καὶ τὸ μέλι ἐξ ἔρπετῶν πεφαρμακευμένα τροφῆς, αἱ μὲν κρούσασαι τοὺς ἐπὶ τὸ ὄρυγμα ἠκρωτηρίαζον, οὗς δὲ καὶ ἀπέκτειναν (Phot. *Bibl.* 94.3)

“Un enjambre de abejas silvestres acomete desde allí a los que estaban horadando la cueva, y una corriente de miel baja también contra los fugitivos. Las avispas y la miel, como estaban llenas de ponzoña por alimentarse

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\* Deseo agradecer a Manuel Sanz Morales sus consejos y sugerencias.

<sup>1</sup> Barbero 2015: 7-18. Cito los fragmentos de *Babiloníacas* según la numeración de esta edición y la de Habricht 1960.

aquellas de reptiles, cuando picaron a los que se dirigían a la galería, los mutilaron, y a algunos incluso llegaron a matarlos” (trad. E. Crespo 1982).

(a) Algunos estudiosos sostienen que el texto de Focio debe interpretarse en el siguiente sentido: “Las abejas y la miel estaban envenenadas a base del alimento de las serpientes”<sup>2</sup>, esto es, la razón por la que tanto las abejas como su miel resultaban venenosas es la dieta de los insectos, que generan el veneno tanto de sus aguijones como de su miel a partir del mismo tipo de alimento que hace ponzoñosas a las serpientes (ἔξ ἑρπετῶν ... τροφῆς).

(b) Otros, en cambio, entienden lo siguiente: “las abejas y la miel estaban envenenadas por alimentarse a base de serpientes”<sup>3</sup>, esto es, las abejas se volvían venenosas al ingerir carne de serpiente, y por tanto el veneno que contienen estos animales.

Ambos sentidos son sintácticamente posibles. Quienes se decantan por la interpretación (a) lo hacen por tres motivos: en primer lugar, las abejas evidentemente no son carnívoras, por lo que difícilmente podrían alimentarse de serpientes (Roscher 1895: 331). En segundo lugar, en cuanto al alimento propio de las serpientes, se pensaba que estos reptiles generaban su veneno gracias a la ingesta de insectos (Arist. fr. 372 R.) y hierbas y raíces venenosas<sup>4</sup>, por lo que sería lógico que, si las abejas liban del mismo tipo de plantas que ayudaban a las serpientes a producir su ponzoña, tanto los mismos insectos como su miel resultarían tan venenosos como ellas (Roscher 1895: 329-332). En tercer lugar, Jámblico aludiría a la famosa miel tóxica (*mel maenomenon*, Plin. *Nat.* 21.77), producida principalmente a lo largo de la costa del Mar Negro, atestiguada por primera vez en Xen. *An.* 4.8.20-21. Esta miel, elaborada a partir de plantas como la adelfa (νήριον, *Nerium Oleander*, Diosc. *Περὶ ἀπλῶν φαρμάκων* 4.81.1-2, Plin. *Nat.* 21.77), el boj (πύξος, *Buxus sempervirens*, Arist. *Mirab. Ausc.* 831B 22-24) y el ojaranzo (αἰγόλεθρον, *Rhododendron ponticum*, Plin. *Nat.* 21.74) (Mayor 1995: 33-34, 40), resultaba tóxica para la ingesta de humanos y animales en ciertas condiciones debido a la concentración de grayanotoxinas (Mayor 1995: 35, 37; 2009: 146-147).

Sin embargo, creo que, pese a estos tres motivos, la interpretación correcta es la (b). En primer lugar, la propia construcción sintáctica de la frase de Focio (αἱ δὲ μέλισσαι καὶ τὸ μέλι ἐξ ἑρπετῶν πεφαρμακευμένα τροφῆς) favorece la interpretación “las abejas y la miel estaban envenenadas por

<sup>2</sup> Roscher 1895: 329-332, Borgogno 1975: 122, Stephens-Winkler 1995: 191, Sevieri 2017: 29.

<sup>3</sup> Rohde 1914<sup>2</sup>: 395, Henry 1960: 36, Crespo 1982: 401, Barbero 2015: 45

<sup>4</sup> Hom. *Il.* 22.93-94, Ael. *NA* 6.4, Virg. *Aen.* 2.472, Paus. 9.28.2. Véase Mayor 2009: 64.



alimentarse a base de serpientes”, según el paralelo ofrecido por el propio Focio (*Bibl.* 276.514b τὰ μυρία γένη τῶν ζῴων μάτην, οὔτε τροφῆς ἔξ αὐτῶν οὔτε θεραπείας ἄλλης τῷ σώματι χορηγούμενης, “en vano existen las innumerables especies de animales, si no suministran ni alimento a base de ellas ni ningún otro tratamiento para el cuerpo”). En segundo lugar, hemos tenido la fortuna de que la *Suda* α 836 haya conservado un fragmento del propio texto de *Babiloníacas* referido a esta misma peripecia, lo que nos permitirá comprobar el sentido correcto:

Iambl. fr. 14 B. (=16 H.) τὸ δὲ μέλι, ἅτε οὐκ ἀκέραιον οὔτε ἀπὸ ἀκάνθων, ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ ἐρπετῶν συμπεπορισμένον, ἀνέστρεφε τὰ σπλάγγνα.  
 “La miel, como no estaba exenta de contaminación ni hecha de acantos porque se la habían procurado alimentándose de reptiles, revolvía las tripas” (trad. E. Crespo).

Como puede comprobarse, Jámblico afirma inequívocamente que la miel era perjudicial porque no era pura ni elaborada a base de acanto<sup>5</sup>, sino a partir de reptiles. Por tanto, quienes sostienen la opinión (a) se ven obligados a enmendar el texto de Jámblico<sup>6</sup>, que, debemos insistir, se ha transmitido sin variantes y da buen sentido<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Objeciones a la identificación de μελιττῶν ἄγριων con una especie de avispa

Es cierto que cabe hacer dos objeciones que podríamos llamar naturalistas a la interpretación (b), que tienen su importancia.

(1) La primera de ellas es que todas las especies de abejas europeas se alimentan de plantas, no de carne<sup>8</sup>. Si bien existen tres especies de abejas carnívoras en Sudamérica del género *trigona*, es imposible que griegos o

<sup>5</sup> El acanto (*acanthus mollis*) era una de las plantas favoritas de las abejas, según Colum. 9.4.4.

<sup>6</sup> Basándose en la interpretación (a) del texto de Focio, Roscher 1895: 332 propuso como suplemento νομῆς, φορβῆς, τροφῆς ο ῥιζῶν tras ἐρπετῶν en el texto de Iambl. fr. 14 B. Habrich 1960 (su fr. 16) edita ἀπὸ ἐρπετῶν(τροφῆς) συμπεπορισμένον. Por su parte, Borgogno 1975: 122 postulaba ἀπὸ ἐρπετῶν συμπεπορισμένον <τροφῆς>.

<sup>7</sup> Véase Adler 1928: 78 *ad loc.*

<sup>8</sup> Roscher 1895: 330-331, Connors 2018: 45: “snakes do not eat plants and bees do not eat snakes”. Arist. *HA* 554b 3-4 y Plin. *Nat.* 11.16 aclaran que las abejas pueden devorar los cadáveres de sus propias larvas cuando estas pierden la cabeza, pero de este detalle no se puede deducir que los griegos consideraran que las abejas podían tener una dieta carnívora.

romanos supieran de su existencia, y de hecho su extraña dieta a base de proteína animal no se describió hasta 1982 (Mateus – Noll 2004: 94-96).

Quiero destacar, sin embargo, que un insecto perteneciente, como las abejas, al género de los himenópteros, algunas de cuyas especies los griegos confundían con las abejas (Keller 1913: 435), sí se alimenta de carne: las avispas (Beavis 1988: 192-193). Precisamente el término que emplea Focio en su resumen para designar a los animales que elaboran esta miel tóxica, μελιττῶν ἀγρίων (véase *supra*), denomina a un tipo de avispa<sup>9</sup>. Súmese además que la creencia popular grecolatina postulaba que las avispas adquirirían su veneno alimentándose de cadáveres de serpientes<sup>10</sup>, como hacen los insectos de Jámblico:

1- Arist. *De mir.* 844b 32-35

Τοὺς ἐν Νάξῳ σφηκᾶς φασιν, ὅταν φάγωσι τοῦ ἔχεως (προσφιλῆς δ' αὐτοῖς ἢ σάρξ, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἐστίν), ἐπειδάν τινα κεντήσωσι, περιωδύνουσι οὕτω ποιεῖν ὥστε χαλεπωτέραν φαίνεσθαι τῆς πληγῆς τῶν ἔχεων.

“Dicen que las avispas de Naxos, cuando comen carne de víbora (la carne, por lo que parece, les gusta), cada vez que clavan el aguijón a una persona, le hacen padecer un dolor tan grande que parece más doloroso que la mordedura de las víboras”.

2- Ael. *NA* 5.16

Λέγονται δὲ οἱ τῶν σφηκῶν κεκεντρωμένοι καὶ ἐκεῖνο δρᾶν. ὅταν θεάσωνται νεκρὰν ἔχιδναν, οἱ δὲ ἐμπίπτουσι καὶ φαρμάττουσι τὸ κέντρον.

“Dicen que las avispas provistas de aguijón también hacen eso. Cada vez que ven el cadáver de una víbora, caen sobre ella y untan de veneno su aguijón”.

3- Ael. *NA* 9.15

ὁ γοῦν σφήξ γευσάμενος ὄφεως χαλεπώτερός ἐστι τὴν πληγὴν.

“Efectivamente la picadura de una avispa, cuando come carne de ofidio, es más dolorosa”.

<sup>9</sup> Hdn. *Partitiones* p. 129 Πλὴν τοῦ σφήξ, ἢ ἀγρία μέλισσα, Hsch. τ 478, Sophr. Alex. *Excerpta ex Joannis Characis commentariis in Theodosii Alexandrini canones* p. 399 σφήξ σφηκός (), *Gloss.* 3.319.ἀγριομέλισσα45, 507.5 ἀγρία μέλισσα· vespa, 3.436.13 ἀγριομέλιττα· vespa. Véase Keller 1913: 435, Gil 1959: 160, Beavis 1988: 188. Crespo 1982: 401-402 traduce “abejas silvestres” y “avispas” en el resumen de Focio.

<sup>10</sup> Beavis 1988: 192-193, Mayor 2009: 64.

4- Plin. *Nat.* 11.281

*vespae serpente avidae vescuntur, quo alimento mortiferos ictus faciunt.*

“Las avispas se alimentan ávidamente de carne de serpiente; con este alimento hacen sus picaduras mortales”.

Como hemos visto, Focio y Jámblico afirman que tanto los insectos como la miel que producen están emponzoñados (*πεφαρμακευμένα*, compárese con *φαρμάττουσι* en Ael. *NA.* 5.16 *supra*) por alimentarse de serpientes. La extrema agresividad de los insectos al atacar a los soldados que se acercan a su nido, así como su capacidad para mutilar y matar con su aguijón, se explica mejor si entendemos que son avispas: tradicionalmente consideradas animales irascibles y agresivos, son capaces de atacar a la mínima provocación (Beavis 1988: 193) y su veneno, después de comer carne de serpiente, se creía inmensamente doloroso y aun mortal.

(2) Una segunda objeción naturalista a la interpretación (b) es que las avispas del Viejo Mundo no elaboran miel<sup>11</sup>. Jámblico parece haber mezclado dos tipos de himenópteros en su narración: por un lado, las avispas, que se alimentan de carne (fr. 14 B., véase *supra*) y son sumamente feroces y agresivas en la defensa de su nido y sus crías; por el otro, las abejas, que elaboran miel<sup>12</sup> y anidan en cavidades de roca<sup>13</sup> (fr. 15 B. *αἱ δὲ μέλιτται ἐμπεφωλεύκεισαν ὥσπερ ἐν κυψέλῃ τῷ φωλεῷ· τὸ μέλι δὲ ἐλείβετο κατὰ τῶν κεφαλῶν*, “Las abejas habitaban en su cubil como en una colmena, y la miel que se vertía iba cayendo por sus cabezas”, trad. E. Crespo).

<sup>11</sup> La avispa mejicana de la miel (*brachygastra mellifica*), especie de Centroamérica y la parte meridional de Norteamérica, elabora un sirope parecido a la miel (Sugden - Lowrey McAllen 1994: 141-155), pero ninguna especie de avispa europea o asiática muestra este comportamiento.

<sup>12</sup> En Ar. *Vesp.* 1114-1116 el coro de avispas se queja de que ellas también tienen zánganos que se comen su miel (*ἀλλὰ γὰρ κηφῆνες ἡμῖν εἰσιν ἐγκαθήμενοι / οὐκ ἔχοντες κέντρον, οἱ μένοντες ἡμῶν τοῦ φόρου / τὸν γόνον κατεσθίουσιν οὐ τάλαιπωροῦμενοι*) (Beavis 1988: 188); Ael. *NA* 4.39 y Philostr. *Imag.* 13 parecen dar por sentado que los avisperos contienen miel (Beavis 1988: 188). Arist. *HA* 555a 6-8 sostiene que en algunos avisperos se podían encontrar a veces gotas de miel como alimento de las larvas y había recogido la noticia de que las avispas construían panales de miel (*HA* 554b 22). Aunque las avispas no guardan miel sistemáticamente, en ocasiones la avispa europea (*vespula germanica*) acumula pequeñas cantidades de miel en sus celdas, robada de colmenas (Pusceddu *et al.* 2018: 2), lo cual podría sugerir la idea errónea de que las avispas podían elaborar miel.

<sup>13</sup> Los griegos sabían, correctamente, que las avispas anidan o bien bajo tierra o bien en las ramas de árboles, mientras que las abejas silvestres anidaban en rocas huecas, hendiduras y troncos huecos (Cook 1895: 17).

### 3. La τεθρηδών, entre abeja y avispa

Quizá sea necesario partir de esta mezcla de las características de estos animales para interpretar el episodio resumido por Focio. Dejando de lado la tradicional confusión entre las numerosas especies de abejas, avispas, avispones y abejorros (Keller 1913: 435; Kitchell 2014: 16, 192), que aquejaba a los antiguos griegos tanto como a los modernos europeos, ya hemos visto que Focio denominaba a los insectos descritos por Jámblico μελιττῶν ἀγρίων. Pues bien, ἀγρία μέλισσα, “abeja salvaje”, era el nombre que tenía un tipo de insecto dotado de aguijón, muy parecido a una avispa, conocido también como τεθρηδών (Hsch. τ 478 τεθρηδών· ζῶον τῶν ἐντόμων καὶ κεντροφόρων παραπλήσιον σφηκί. ἔνιοι ἀγρίαν μέλισσαν, “animal perteneciente a la clase de los insectos dotados de aguijón, parecido a una avispa. Algunos lo llaman ‘abeja salvaje’”). Aristóteles (HA 623b7) lo clasificaba entre los insectos κηριοποιοί (constructores de panales) y afirmaba que era muy semejante a la especie de avispa o avispon llamada ἀνθρήνη (HA 629b31-35)<sup>14</sup>. Además, sostenía el Estagirita que la τεθρηδών se alimentaba de proteína animal y que le gustaba especialmente el pescado (HA 629a34-36).

Por tanto, tenemos aquí un insecto, la τεθρηδών, denominado “abeja salvaje”, semejante a una avispa, que construye panales como una abeja y come proteína animal como una avispa, lo cual coincide en sustancia con los insectos de Jámblico.

Los términos τεθρηδών o ἀγρία μέλισσα denominan también a un insecto asiático, lo cual no puede dejar de resultar interesante para una novela ambientada en Próximo Oriente como *Babiloniacas* y que incluye otros animales asiáticos como camellas (Phot. *Bibl.* 94.11) y perros hircanos (Phot. *Bibl.* 94.18). Según la *Historia de Alejandro* de Clitarco, los soldados de Alejandro se encontraron en Hircania (mod. Gorgan, en Irán, junto al mar Caspio) con un insecto apiforme, muy agresivo y peligroso, capaz de causar gran devastación en las zonas montañosas (FGrH 137 F 14 Jacoby = Dem. *De elocut.* 304 καθάπερ ὁ Κλείταρχος περὶ τῆς τεθρηδόνος λέγων, ζώου

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<sup>14</sup> Véase Gil 1959: 73. No está clara qué especie exacta de avispa designaba el nombre τεθρηδών (Beavis 1988: 195-196), cosa no extraña ya que sólo de avispas eusociales hay en torno a 5000 especies en el mundo. Es, según Arist. HA 623b 6-12, un tipo de avispa eusocial que debe diferenciarse de la abeja melífera (μέλιττα), de las especies de avispas pertenecientes a las familias *Eumenidae*, *Pompilidae* y *Sphécidae* (σφήξ) y de los avispones o las especies de avispas del género *Polistes* (ἀνθρήνη) (Beavis 1988: 187, 195-196). En todo caso, en opinión de Beavis 1988: 195 n. 42 “There is certainly strong evidence for regarding ἀνθρήνη, -ηδών, τεθρηδών, -ηδών, and πεμφρηδών as essentially synonymous”.

μελίση ἑοικότος· κατανέμεται μὲν, φησί, τὴν ὄρεινὴν, εἰσίσταται δὲ εἰς τὰς κοίλας δρυῶν, “como dice Clitarco sobre el *tenthredon*, un animal semejante a una abeja: devasta, dice, el territorio montañoso y se entra en el hueco de las encinas”<sup>15</sup>. Este insecto, a juicio de *sch. Nic. Alex.* 183, era parecido a una avispa (ζῷον ἔστι τῶν σφηκωδῶν) (Jacoby 1993: 491). Según Diodoro de Sicilia (17.75.7), que en este punto tomaba la información de Clitarco aunque con adornos y modificaciones propias<sup>16</sup>, este tipo de insecto precisamente construía su nido, hecho de celdas de cera, en el interior de las rocas y en huecos de árboles y destilaba un tipo de fluido muy dulce, superior incluso a la miel que conocían los griegos:

ἔστι δὲ καὶ ζῷον κατὰ τὴν χώραν ἐπτερωμένον, ὃ καλεῖται μὲν ἀνθηρῶν, λειπόμενον δὲ μεγέθει μελίττης μεγίστην ἔχει τὴν ἐπιφάνειαν· ἐπινεμόμενον γὰρ τὴν ὄρεινὴν ἄνθη παντοῖα δρέπεται καὶ ταῖς κοιλάσι πέτραις καὶ τοῖς κεραυνοβόλοις τῶν δένδρων ἐνδιατρίβον κηροπλαστεῖ καὶ κατασκευάζει χύμα διάφορον τῇ γλυκύτητι, τοῦ παρ’ ἡμῖν μέλιτος οὐ πολὺ λειπόμενον (D.S. 17.75.7).

“Hay también un animal local provisto de alas, al que llaman *anthredon*; aunque es más pequeño de tamaño que una abeja, su aparición tiene un efecto inmenso: pues pastando por los territorios de montaña liba de todo tipo de flores. Anida en rocas huecas y en árboles alcanzados por un rayo y allí construye su panal y elabora un fluido de suma dulzura, que no se queda muy atrás con respecto a nuestra miel”.

Pues bien, este insecto apiforme hircano, descrito a veces como avispa, a veces como abeja (Gil 1959, 74), y que comparte el nombre de ἀγρία μέλισσα con los insectos descritos por Focio, se ajusta bastante bien a los datos aportados tanto por el resumen del Patriarca como por los fragmentos de la novela de Jámblico: tenía un nombre reservado en griego para las avispas, era agresivo y peligroso como estas, pero por el otro lado construía colmenas en la roca y elaboraba miel, como las abejas. Estos fabulosos y feroces insectos orientales, cuyo efecto Clitarco describía en términos que cuadrarían mejor a un monstruo mitológico<sup>17</sup>, no desentonarían en *Babiloniacas*: una novela ambientada en Oriente Próximo (particularmente, el curso bajo del Eufrates)

<sup>15</sup> Podría tratarse, en opinión de Beavis 1988: 196, de la abeja asiática grande o abeja gigante (*apis dorsata*), una abeja muy agresiva y territorial.

<sup>16</sup> Tarn 1948: 89-90. ἀνθηρῶν es simplemente una variante propia (o quizá una invención de Diodoro) de su nombre más común, τεθηρῶν (Tarn 1948: 89, Jacoby 1993: 491), cf. Hsch. α 5155 ἀνθηρῶν· ἢ τεθηρῶν y *LSJ* s.v. πεμφρηδῶν.

<sup>17</sup> Dem. *De elocut.* 304 y Tz. *Chil.* 7.100 afean a Clitarco que describa la ferocidad de la τεθηρῶν hircana, al fin y al cabo un bichejo (ζῷον), como si fuera el Jabalí de Erimanto, el León de Nemea o el Toro de Creta.

(Crespo 1982: 390), basada, según el testimonio del propio Jámblico (*sch. in mg. cod.* Phot. A = Iambl. test. II B.), en historias de origen babilonio y persa<sup>18</sup> y que incluye, entre sus episodios más destacados, la actuación de un perro procedente de Hircania (Phot. *Bibl.* 94.18). Dado que estos insectos asiáticos fueron conocidos en Grecia gracias a los relatos de los soldados que acompañaron a Alejandro (Beavis 1988: 196), es fácil suponer que estos habrían padecido sus terribles agujonazos, lo que sería otro paralelo con respecto a los insectos de Jámblico, que también atacan a los soldados de Damas.

Así pues, los exóticos himenópteros orientales del episodio de la caverna de *Babilóniacas* no responden exactamente a la realidad entomológica, cosa que no extrañará a ningún lector de la novela griega, sino que Jámblico los recrea a partir de la imagen popular de varios insectos apiformes: son carnívoros y agresivos, como las especies de avispas europeas, pero también anidan en rocas y son melíferas, como las abejas europeas. Si el empleo de *μελιττῶν ἀγρίων* en el resumen de Focio los identificara con las *τενθηρῶνες* hircanas, aportarían además coloración orientalizable y un *frisson* de horror rocambolesco y exagerado a una novela que destaca por tales características<sup>19</sup>. Jámblico le da una vuelta de tuerca a la célebre miel de los países ribereños del Mar Negro: si esa miel podía resultar ponzoñosa al alimentarse las abejas locales de plantas venenosas, la miel de los fantásticos insectos de *Babilóniacas* es incluso más nociva por su dieta a base de reptiles venenosos. Este sobrepujamiento del motivo popular de los insectos asesinos y la miel tóxica por parte de Jámblico casa bien en esta novela, pródiga en invenciones truculentas y extravagantes situadas en un ambiente orientalizable (Braccini 2015: xv-xix).

#### 4. Conclusiones

Por tanto, cabe extraer dos conclusiones: (a) los insectos que protagonizan el episodio de la cueva de *Babilóniacas* resumido por Phot. *Bibl.* 94.3 no son abejas melíferas (*apis mellifera*), sino una mezcla literaria, no entomológicamente realista, de abejas y avispas que refleja las características de las *τενθηρῶνες* (consideradas por los griegos avispas con ciertos rasgos de abejas), con las cuales comparten estos insectos el nombre de *ἀγρία μέλισσα*. Más específicamente, quizá estén inspirados en las *τενθηρῶνες* hircanas que hizo famosas la *Historia de Alejandro* de Clitarco; (b) la razón de la potencia del veneno de estos insectos, y por extensión de la toxicidad

<sup>18</sup> Crespo 1982: 388, Braccini 2015: viii-x, Dowden 2018: 152-153, 154-160. Del resumen de Focio podemos colegir que en *Babilóniacas* tenía un gran peso el cuento popular y maravilloso de origen oriental (Rohde 1914<sup>2</sup>: 407, Braccini 2015: x-xii).

<sup>19</sup> Braccini 2015: xvii-xix, Sevieri 2017: 12, Kanavou 2019: 120-121.

de su miel, estriba en que se alimentaban de reptiles venenosos. Por tanto, no hay necesidad de enmendar el texto del fr. 14 B. (=16 H.) de *Babiloníacas* de Jámblico.

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IMPERMANENCE / MUTABILITY:  
READING PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY'S POETRY  
THROUGH BUDDHA

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**Abstract**

As an ongoing phenomenon, the impermanence of the world has been observed by many people, both in ancient and modern times, in the East and in the West. Two of these authors are Gautama Buddha (an ancient, eastern philosopher from the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (a modern Western poet: 1792-1822). The aim of this paper is to examine in the light of Buddhist philosophy what impermanence means or looks in a selection of Shelley's poems, after considering that this philosophy was not alien to the Europeans of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Buddhism, seeing impermanence (*anicca*) as the foundation of the world, both acquiesces to it and urges the individuals to sway with its ebb and flow. Shelley mainly falters in the incorporation of the phenomenon into his mindset and his poems. However, he often shows a casual acceptance of it; and even, in a few cases, he presents it with a positive assessment.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Shelley, impermanence, mutability, transience, *anicca*

## TRANSITORIEDAD / MUTABILIDAD: LECTURA DE LA POESÍA DE PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY A TRAVÉS DE BUDA

### Resumen

La transitoriedad del mundo ha sido considerada un concepto relevante por muchos autores antiguos y modernos, tanto en el este como en el oeste. Dos de estos autores son Gautama Buda (ss. VI-V a.C.) y Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), el primero perteneciente a la cultura oriental antigua y el segundo a la cultura occidental moderna. El propósito de este estudio es examinar, a la luz de la filosofía budista, qué significa y cómo se manifiesta el motivo de la transitoriedad en la poesía de Shelley, partiendo del hecho de que la filosofía del budismo se difundió en la Europa de los siglos XVIII y XIX. El budismo, considerando que la “impermanencia” o transitoriedad (*anicca*) es una de las tres marcas de la existencia, invita al individuo a aceptar y convivir con esa inestabilidad. Por su parte, Shelley adopta normalmente una actitud dudosa respecto a la incorporación de este fenómeno en su ideario y en su poesía. Se detecta, sin embargo, que a menudo muestra una aceptación casual del concepto. En unos pocos casos, incluso presenta una visión positiva del mismo.

**Palabras clave:** budismo, Shelley, cambio, mutabilidad, transitoriedad, *anicca*

# IMPERMANENCE / MUTABILITY: READING PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY'S POETRY THROUGH BUDDHA\*

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## 1. Introduction

Why do we have many words for the quality of being short-lived? Adjectives such as *impermanent*, «**temporary**, non-permanent, [...] transient, transitory, passing, fleeting, momentary, ephemeral, fugitive, fading, **short-lived**, short-term, short, brief, [...] *literary evanescent*, fugacious» (*Oxford Living Dictionaries* 2018) denote a consciousness about change, deterioration, and/or destruction in all natural beings. Experienced at each single moment though not always consciously known, *transience* or *impermanence* is lived by every individual. It determines the conditions of life; in other words, life is always at the mercy of both time and change, to the extent that one may just identify life with transience/impermanence.\*

Impermanence is so intricately inherent in every act, in every being, in every emotion, and in every mentality that it becomes transparent and not seen any longer. Nonetheless, one knows at the back of his mind that impermanence is latent in all and every abstraction of the mind and in all and every concretization of the world. Being also a concern for scientists, transitoriness is found to be the very nature of the world since there is nothing substantial and solid in it. No single thing is what it was a moment ago because of the change in its vortex of energy; each moment we have a new world created (Dhammanada 2002: 126-129). That is probably why thinkers from the East and West, from the ancient India or Greece to the modern England, have pondered on this phenomenon. As Heraclitus states, "No man ever steps into the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man" (Watson 2010: 303).

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Quite interestingly, philosophers from opposite sides of the globe, ancient or modern, have deeply thought about transience. Heraclitus was one among many who saw an ever-present change as the fundamental feature of the world; the idea of change: “Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis” (Times change and we change with them) (Munitz 1990: 33). This Latin sentence, inspired in Ovid and attributed to John Owen (Adeleye et al. 1999: 378), reverberates in every written work inspired by those great thinkers. Roman Stoics, as the emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius, considered the impermanence as a core trait of Universe (Stephens 2012: 121-124). In the later Renaissance England, people believed that, in the Great Chain of Being, anything under the moon was considered to be mutable (Hicks 1967: 12). The same concept found its way into the works of Romantic poets like Wordsworth (Hicks 1967: 14). Great Persian poets like Rumi and Umar Khayyam also observed this immanent actuality (Vaziri and Margrieter 2015), to the extent that paradoxically it has culminated in either mysticism (as in the case of Rumi) or nihilism (as in the case of Khayyam). The nihilism of Khayyam, however, has been the topic of serious debate among the Persian scholars (Aminrazavi 2008). A Japanese aesthetic world view called Wabi Sabi is also centered on the melancholic beauty of the evanescence of the cosmos (Juniper 2003: 1).

There are numerous available sources that offer interesting material for the study of impermanence. The impermanence (*anicca*) is one of the three marks of universe in Buddhist thought (Nyanaponika 2008). At such, it has been examined in specialized monographs (Mookerjee 1935, Stambaugh 1990), but specially in dedicated chapters, included in companions and encyclopedias on Buddhism (Laumakis 2008: 125-148, Edelglass and Garfield 2009: 26-27 and *passim*, Emmanuel 2013: 34-37). The reception of Buddhism in the Europe of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been thoroughly surveyed by Lussier (2011). Lastly, the motif of mutability in Shelley has been studied in several papers (Hick 1967, Johnson 1996, Magarian 2013, and Harding 2016).

## **2. Buddhist Philosophy of Impermanence**

This ephemeral essence of existence, working in a cyclical process, rushing towards cadence is called impermanence in Buddhist philosophy. Impermanence is so deeply contemplated in Buddhism that one Buddhist thinker, Dogen, claimed that impermanence is in fact Buddhism’s nature (Stambaugh 1990: 1-2). According to Buddhism, impermanence is the outcome of the cosmic law of conditionality that keeps all elements work

harmoniously together in order to produce one phenomenon as a result (somehow like the phenomenon we know as the butterfly effect). This order enforces its might on all conditioned existence which are brought about and dependent on other processes and conditions. The law-governed universe of evanescence is nevertheless far from chaos and is morally ordered (Gowans 2003: 29). All these processes are fabricated, compounded and interdependent, which is in contrast to the unconditioned, uncompounded state of Nirvana (Gnanarama 2000: 26, Gowans 2003: 52-58, Irons 2008: 270, Runehov and Oviedo 2013: 691). This cause-and-effect order is experienced by all of the natural elements including human beings; consequently, according to the doctrine of Buddhism, three statements can be made as valid for all the animate creatures (made up of mind and matter), the first and the last of which also ascribable to the inanimate world (made up of matter only): Impermanence, Suffering or Unsatisfactoriness, and Not-self (Emmanuel 2000: 21, Irons 2008: XVI). To fully apprehend the notion of impermanence, a grasp of the two later notions is also necessary.

Impermanence denotes that all conditioned beings are in constant flux and whatever happens or is, as a matter of fact, is nothing more than fluctuating states which were conditioned by the aggregate of previous states. Nature works systematically in a way that all phenomenal existence arises because of a previous one and then give way to the following; hence, "whatever is subject to origination is subject to cessation" (Keown and Prebish 2007: 272). The speedy succession of brief states obscures a clear discernment of psychophysical states as unstable. Although impermanence applies to all conditioned things, the Enlightened One or Buddha is more concerned with the animate than the inanimate. He categorized the so-called being into five ever changing aggregates, namely, material form or body, feeling or sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness (Gnanarama 2000: 44). Material world pertains to the physical nature as perceived by the five senses. Feeling or sensation, originated from either mind or body, pertains to the quality we ascribe to things as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Perceptions have to do with our judgements of things. Formations deal with whatever that drive us forth, things like desires and wishes. Eventually, consciousness concerns our awareness of the world and the other aggregates (Gowans 2003: 80). Presenting a simile for each aggregate, he compares

material form to a lump of foam, feeling to a bubble, perception to a mirage, mental formations to a plantain trunk (which is pitless,

without heartwood), and consciousness to an illusion, and asks: "What essence, monks, could there be in a lump of foam, in a bubble, in a mirage, in a plantain trunk, in an illusion? Whatever material form there be: whether past, future, or present; internal or external; gross or subtle; low or lofty; far or near; that material form the monk sees, meditates upon, examines with systematic attention, he thus seeing, meditating upon, and examining with systematic attention, would find it empty of permanent traits, he would find it insubstantial and without essence. (Gowans 2003: 26)

The five aggregates being subject to causation go through the cycle of existence. It is a cycle of production and consumption which can leave effects depending on how one deals with them (Gowans 2003: 98). In so explaining, Buddha gives way to the other two basic marks of existence, which are Unsatisfactoriness and Not-self.

Lack of stability in the world brings about a feeling of un-ease to one who clings to things as if they were perpetual. No matter how much happiness a thing generates, if it is not lasting, it is not true happiness. In the entry "Anatta" (Not-self) of the *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, it is stated that what is impermanent might be agreeable for a time, but the ineluctable change brings about lack of satisfaction (Runehov and Oviedo 2013: 96). Whether one regards the fleetingness and yet attempts in vain to clutch fast at it or simply does not regard it, he or she is subject to suffering and dissatisfaction. Mike Siderits asserts that this suffering is an existential one; it is the frustration, the alienation and the despair one feels from the realization of one's own mortality (1946: 19). In the ultimate sense, as there is no such thing as lasting or even temporary ego-entity among the states, there is no such thing as ego or identity and thus everything is Not-self or impersonal. In other words, since all things arise from interdependently changing causes and conditions, there is no substantial existence for any object or phenomenon (Laumakis 2008: 45). The illusion of the self being shattered, the person is redeemed from serving it and providing for its behalf (Gnanarama 2013: 7). The fact that ego does not really exist unchains one from his/her painful bonds and devotions. Besides, it should be noted that Buddhism avoids the extremes of "everything is" and "everything is not" and embraces the moderate middle ground of "everything becomes" (Nyanaponika Thera 2008: 26).

In its teaching, Buddhism offers a solution to suffering caused by the transient nature of the world: knowledge of the order of cosmos is the key to



emancipation (Burton 2004: 1). Attentive awareness of and meditation on the world as inconstant while observing its individual signs liberates one from attachment to it and nails home the idea that it cannot be the basis for a permanent happiness. This seems to imply that there is the possibility of the *unchanging self* in the form of happiness: though physically bound to change, the human mind/soul can be consistently in the state of happiness. But suffering is not inherent to the world: on the contrary, holding unto it, desiring it and ignoring its holy laws is what causes frustration and despair (Irons 2008: 7). The key is not to break away and become dispassionate about material forms, feelings, perception, mental formations, and consciousness; to let them fleet smoothly before and within you.

This kind of self-consciousness about the nature of the world and human experience, thus, assists mental and spiritual detachment from the material forms, and detachment brings about a liberation that is called the Great Happiness (Xing 2005: 90), the only happiness resistant to the natural order of things. This kind of Great Happiness can be achieved when one stops holding unto the world to desire anything and when one is finally able to say: "Destroyed is birth, lived is the life of purity, done is what was to be done, there is no more of this to come" (Nyanaponika Thera 2008: 7).

### 3. Shelley and Buddhism

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) deals with the concept of mutability both in his letters to friends (Hicks 1967: 1) and in his poetry. In this paper, however, attention will be paid to a selection of his poems, leaving apart his letters for the sake of brevity and focus. The reading deploys Buddhist philosophy for the analysis of Shelley's poetry, with the aim to examine Shelley in the light of Buddhist philosophy, but not intending to trace the influence of the former on the latter. Buddhism, despite being temporally and geographically aloof from Shelley's time, is not alien to the Europeans of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Lussier 2011).

The subjects of transience and decadence pervade Shelley's poems. Therefore, the aim should be to assess if Shelley's approach to impermanence is similar to that in Buddhism. To answer this question, one must probably also look for an answer to a broader question: did Buddhism reach Europe and more specifically England at Shelley's time to make him somehow conscious about the intricacies of the concept of impermanence? Mark Lussier's humorous way of putting it does better justice to the question: "'I wonder what's going on with Buddhism in Romantic Studies?' As it turns out, 'everything' was the answer" (Lussier 2011: xiv). Lussier

argues that the translation of major texts generated at early Romantic age made this era the climax of Buddhist epistemology in Europe (2011: 2). He continues to say that “Buddhism emerged because Eighteenth Century’s intellectual background was obsessed with the enlightenment principles that this Oriental philosophy presented” (2011: 6).

Shelley was very much aware of impermanence, but it is hard to admit that his approach to it is devotional or synchronic, as it is in Buddhism. When studying his biography, one notices that his personal life is replete with catastrophes which permanently reminded him of the transitory nature of beings: the loss of dear children caused him a real heartache. Buddha would prescribe to his pupils to shake the sorrow or angst of existence off the soul, realizing the not-self, that is “uncovered through the practice of nonattachment, establishing impermanence or emptiness as the fundamental state of all existence” (Lussier 2011: 86). This is Buddha’s recommended disposition in face of impermanence: “do not weep and wail! Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other [...], all conditioned things are of a nature to decay—strive on untiringly)?” (Lussier 2011: 154). Now the question must be repeated: does Shelley in the same manner accept the calamities of life as natural? Is he able to suppress the feelings of sorrow and despiration which are usually caused by the tragic events in one’s personal life, such as the loss of health or loss of two of his children in one year?

Shelley’s observation of the ephemeral nature of all things and beings on the world is manifest in most of his poems in which something is fled, decayed, dead, gone, faded, changed, departed, or lost. He observes the very evanescent nature of every natural being. The influence on his poetry from varied philosophical resources added to the deepness of his approach. To assess Shelley’s varied inceptions of the concept of impermanence, poems such as “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty”, “Ode to the West Wind”, “Mont Blanc”, “Time Long Past”, “Ozymandias”, “A Lament”, “The Past” and “To-oh—there are spirits of the air” along with the two “Mutability” poems, one written in 1816 and the other in 1824, have been analyzed.

#### **4. Transience in Shelley’s poetry**

In “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” (1817), the speaker addresses and worships the Spirit of Intellectual Beauty which invisibly touches upon but stands apart from the physical world and human’s heart. This spirit of

Intellectual Beauty is an inconstant visitor that brings vanishing moments of inspiration. This inconstancy is represented by similes of natural beauty:

Like hues and harmonies of evening,  
Like clouds in starlight widely spread,  
Like memory of music fled,  
Like aught that for its grace may be  
Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery. (ll. 8-12 in Shelley 2000: 73)

Having touched upon human thought and form, the spirit is gone and what is left is a vacant, desolate state. By the passing away of the spirit, the speaker is left reflecting on the reason for this departure and on transience. In response to his own question, the poet yet asks more questions of the same nature:

Ask why the sunlight not for ever  
Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain-river,  
Why aught should fail and fade that once is shown,  
Why fear and dream and death and birth  
Cast on the daylight of this earth  
Such gloom, why man has such a scope  
For love and hate, despondency and hope? (ll. 18-24 in Shelley  
2000: 73)

The poetic persona maintains that these questions have not ever answered, and that doubt, chance, and mutability are overcast in all we hear and all we see. If the Intellectual Beauty lingered firmly in human heart, he believes, he would be immortal and omnipotent and would escape the dark reality of decadence. Associating the spirit with all the goodness left for humanity, the speaker implores it to stay. Another manifestation of mutability of the natural world is given in the last stanza, in which things change in a way that their previous state is faded from the memory.

The poet is contemplating the transitoriness and vagueness of the natural sublime that once visited him as a child. He still sees and praises the traces of this sublimity in the five aggregates of material forms, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness. Aiming at the law of impermanence, he questions its essence and laments why it must be so. However, because of the beauty he sees therein, he cannot willingly relinquish the five aggregates, so this attachment leaves him disconsolate.

In “Ode to the West Wind” (1820), the speaker addresses the West Wind, which is associated with moving onwards, revolution, and causing change in the world. The change that the West Wind brings about is not only of decay and withering but also, by spreading seeds, of growth. The speaker admires the wind for its wildness, uncontrollability, freedom, and its dual might for destruction and regeneration. The West Wind is the harbinger of change, as his sister, the spring wind, is a factor of birth and youth. They are described as two complementary forces which engender the cyclical transformation of the world:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
 Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing, [...]

Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
 Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow  
 Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill  
 (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
 With living hues and odours plain and hill (ll. 1-3, 8-12 in Shelley 1872: 3)

The poetic persona, believing that both winds are swift, proud, and untamable, and he is subject to time and to the thorns of life, wishes to be empowered with the West Wind. He wants his thoughts and words, that will rejuvenate and cause change, to be carried across the world (Kapstein 1936: 1070). He wants the wind to prophecy that resurrection of nature, or, taken metaphorically, of the thoughts of people, is upcoming: “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (l. 70, in Shelley 1872: 5). In this ode, unlike the previous one, the cyclical process of change is praised and embraced. Far from his usual melancholic feeling about change, Shelley is now seeing through the cycle and observing the whole interconnected rejuvenating system, disentangling himself from the desire for stasis and thus a step closer to the belief that characterizes Buddhism. He is reassuring himself that change does not mean extinction, since regeneration follows destruction (Hicks 1967: 5).

In his ode “Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni” (1817), the mountain is characterized by the restless movement, turbulence and contending forces embodied in the images of water, fast flowing rivers, stormy seas, and whirlpools (Harding 2016: 623). Mont Blanc and nature are a mysterious and powerful force that interacts with the observer's mind;

he regards the natural sublimity of the landscape as the evidence of a systematic natural process (Duffy 2005: 9). Listening to the mysterious voice of the wilderness, one who is wise, great, and good can interpret that destruction and creation of the nature are representative of the mighty rule of impermanence. Endurance of this power that governs the fleeting nature of all beings is presented in the fourth stanza:

The works and ways of man, their death and birth,  
 And that of him and all that his may be;  
 All things that move and breathe with toil and sound  
 Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell.  
 Power dwells apart in its tranquility,  
 Remote, serene, and inaccessible. (ll. 91-96 in Shelley 2000: 85)

Contemplating the nature of mind, of knowledge, of reality, and of the relation of human mind to universe, Shelley manifests contradictory response to the “works and ways of man” (l. 91), simultaneously accepting and rejecting man’s ability to reach tranquility; he first implies a disbelief in the substantial existence of the material universe by asserting his freedom of mind and active creation of its knowledge, but, at the same time, he admits that his thought is governed by “the secret Strength of things” (l. 139) which is the mighty rule of impermanence. Up to nearly the end of the poem, his attitude is of awe and praise of the remote amoral power of Necessity, eternally ruling the impermanent universe of the five aggregates symbolized by the river Arve. However, in the last three lines, an explicit reluctance to accept this rule is manifested by his change of attitude from worship to defiance, bringing his poem into an anti-climax (Kapstein 1947: 1046-1048).

Shelley longs for the things that have vanished long ago, yet he knows he cannot recover them. He feels melancholic for having forever lost the sweetness, and disappointed for not having seized it. This vision of unalterable and inevitable fugitiveness of life is portrayed in the last part of “Time Long Past” (1870):

'Tis like a child's belovèd corpse  
 A father watches, till at last  
 Beauty is like remembrance, cast  
 From Time long past. (Shelley 1872: 96, ll. 15-18)

The tone, the hope, the love, and the sweet dream now long past do only induce pain, due to miscomprehension of their fleeting nature, whereas what we expect from a poet who holds unto the Buddhist doctrine is to forget, without any kind of devotion to the self or entanglement in the dolorous and melancholic status.

The sonnet “Ozymandias” (1818) deals with the notion of decadence and transience of human endeavor. The lyric speaker recounts what a traveler observed in an antique land. He saw the remnants of the statue of Ramses II, famous for erecting magnificent constructions. The “sneer of cold command” (l. 5 in Shelley 1872: 25) and pride detected in the eroded visage of the sculpture, as well as the self-conceited words that appear on the pedestal, are mocked with irony. Emphasizing the desolation of the surrounding area with alliteration, ‘boundless and bare, / the lone and level sands stretch far away” (ll. 13-14 in Shelley 1872: 26), the poet creates a contrast with the boast of the king, who claims to have erected an enduring work. The devastating power of nature and time deconstructs the king’s statement, by destroying the splendor that he vaunted about.

It is true that the speaker of this poem is neither melancholic nor indignant about decadence (an effect of impermanence). Mocking the vanity of the petty mankind, he regards the decadence as the natural humbling force of the universe, in a way that no human grandeur is capable to withstand it. History is a testimony to the feebleness of any kind of force against the basic order. Civilizations and kingdoms spring, flourish, and fade away as if none ever existed.

In two short stanzas of “A Lament”, the poetic persona of the poem wistfully grieves for his inability to grab and, when lost, recreate the prime of life, world, and time. The mutability of his state is evident in the third line: “Trembling at that where I had stood before” (l. 3). He has reluctantly accepted that the vanished glory of his early days will never again be relived and the refrain “No more -Oh, never more!” (ll. 5 and 10 in Shelley 1872: 101) enforces the implication of regret and nostalgia. The disinclination to acquiesce to the fugitiveness of life renders the speaker doleful again.

“The Past” is a poem that revolves around the evanescence of joy and how woe begotten one embraces bygone time. Although the sweetness of the idealized past has faded away, it is cherished in the memory like blossoms that once existed, fruited, and then withered, as well as the leaves of hope which are yet to blossom. Anything dead should get corrupted and be moldering, but an exception to this rule is gaiety of the days past, held

dear in memory. Even if attempted to forget, one will not be triumphant, because there are reminiscences of the apparitional past that haunt the mind, as shown in the poem by a metaphor: "Forget the dead, the past? Oh, yet / There are ghosts that may take revenge for it" (ll. 7-8 in Shelley 1846: 186). The memories of the lost joys and the accompanying regrets unpleasantly heaped up in the heart and soul will cause agony. As the poet writes: "joy, once lost, is pain" (l. 12 in Shelley 1846: 186).

Something that is very significant in "To-oh—there are spirits of the air" is the presence of a distinct self for whose sake the persona is struggling and demands the emotional accompaniment of others. Let down by the exterior provisions for the self, he eventually moans of their insubstantiality, "Ah! Wherefore didst thou build thine hope / On the false earth's inconstancy?" (ll. 19-20 ; Shelley 1846: 66). Criticizing himself for trusting others' wiles, he retreats to his own soul. By mistreatment, the soul has turned unpleasantly fiendish albeit still artless and sincere. He prohibits himself from chasing the demands of this soul, fearing that it may bring him more pain. At last, he decides not to ruffle the stasis of his predetermined dark fate. Throughout the poem, it seems that Shelley acknowledges the asserted edges for impermanence in Buddhism: "Whatever is stored up is bound to run out. Whatever rises up is bound to fall down. Whatever comes together is bound to fall apart. Whatever is born is impermanent and is bound to die" (Rinpoche and Lama 1998: 46). Despite Shelley's profound observance of the mutable world inside and outside him, he is not able to liberate himself from the pangs that he has so far suffered pursuing for the sake of self. He lacks the true insight to keep his satisfaction beyond the alternating ups and downs of the world.

The two Mutability poems represent the poet's conflicting perspectives. The problematic areas causing this conflict are necessity, free will, reason, perception, and perfection (Hicks 1967: 3). In his pictorial lyric poem, "Mutability" (1816), which is exclusively dedicated to the theme of our concern, Shelley employs similes to represent the inconstancy of all dimensions of human life, or, to put it in the Buddhist terminology, the five aggregates. In the first quatrain, the night is taken as a metaphor for death, and the moon then is a symbol of permanence, which constitutes a contrast to the passing clouds which resemble humanity in their fleetingness. Restlessly speeding toward their death, their natural delight inevitably vanishes in the darkness of the night or death (West 2007: 51).

Another simile is created in the second stanza, this time between a lyre with dissonant strings that are played by every passing wind gust and the

lives that are susceptible to transform with the change of circumstances. Both eventually will drown in Lethe.

In the third stanza, rest and wakefulness are declared to be inconsistent in that there is always something to interrupt their course, being a disturbing dream or a digressive thought. The change is not essentially good or bad as expressed in this section, and the aggregates of sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness are added to the previously appeared material forms.

The poem closes by the casual assertion that we have no control over joy or sorrow or other emotional states we choose to have, because they are consigned to the law of mutability that constrict us; thus, change is relative to matter, to systems of thought, and to emotion (Hicks 1967: 3):

It is the same!—For, be it joy or sorrow,  
The path of its departure still is free;  
Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;  
Nought may endure but Mutability (ll. 13-16 in Shelley 1864: 61)

The one and only deviator from the flow of constant change is mutability itself. The Enlightened One also believed that the only constant features of the world are the laws that govern it, impermanence being one among them (Gowans 2003: 35).

"Mutability" is the ultimate epitome of how Shelley regarded mutability and how he accepted this ever-pervasive regularity. It gives the exact same picture that the doctrine of impermanence offers, while lacking its amendments of suffering. Since asserted in a casual way, there is no clue for attachment and its ensuing pain; yet there is no mindfulness of it, either. On the other hand, the third sign of existence, impersonality, seems partially to veil itself in the adjective "we" and the ever-present manifestations of impermanence.

The second Mutability poem is also entitled "The Flower That Smiles Today" (1824). The text asserts that "nothing gold can stay", as in the famous poem by Robert Frost (1964: 272), so it urges to enjoy the sparkle before it switches place with darkness. The analogy of the flower conveys the beauty that Shelley sees in its short-term life; and the lightning too reveals his admiration for its bright and beautiful defiance against the empty night. Besides this admiration, a gloomy tone can also be detected.

Even the most precious bestowals of life, which are virtue, friendship, and love, ultimately submit to the mighty rule of transience. The joys and



the so-called possessions in our lives pass and perish; we proceed through dream-like life, while the "skies are blue and bright" (l. 15 in Shelley 1864: 258), "flowers are gay" (l. 16) and "yet the calm hours creep" (l. 19). So, the poem invites the readers to seize the day and to enjoy the dream, because we are destined to futilely "wake to weep" (l. 21). The reactions to the motivating result of necessity and show the inability to deal with the complex forces of life as well as with one's intense desires (Hicks 1967: 5).

The temptation for desirable things mentioned in the first stanza is the vacuous promise of a world with a fleeting nature which only leaves one with agony of its loss. The mention of our survival in "all which ours we call" (l. 14 in Shelley 1864: 258) implies that they are not really for us to claim possession. The rationalization that, since they are ephemeral, they cannot be called property, can be seen as partially compatible with the third Buddhist sign: according to this, since all phenomena are in a state of flux, they are empty of any intrinsic self. This notion can be applied to both the things we consider as ours and what we call as self.

## 5. Conclusions

Percy Shelley carefully observed the phenomenon of impermanence in all aspects of human life and nature, but acquiesced conflictingly to the might with defiance, dislike, and melancholy. In some cases, he reacted with casual acceptance or praise. Buddhism takes impermanence as the basic sign of the universe, which entails suffering and propagates impersonality. Deep insight into the phenomena, Buddha believed that impermanence helps us to appreciate the intensity of our experiences (without painfully clinging to them) and to welcome the ensuing. Thus, it is feasible to gain a total liberation from suffering and achieve Nirvana (the Great Happiness). The rise and fall, the gain and loss, and the creation and extinction, incessantly happening about and within us, are inevitable: therefore, the only escape from this fickleness is its acceptance. The successive waves of life need be surfed on, unless one is drowned deep with the first fall. The recommended approach to this system is not to avoid it but to accept and incorporate it. Transience can also be relieving at the time of despair for its promise of an ensuing rise. With this regard, Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic but realistic, whereas Shelley, under the sway of the very natural law, fluctuates between pessimism and realism, even though in few cases such as "Ode to the West Wind" a kind of optimistic glorification is present. Why is he different in his approach to

impermanence in comparison to Buddhism, despite the possible familiarity to and influence from Buddhism, must be the subject for another study.

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# THE MANUSCRIPT 287 FROM MENÉNDEZ PELAYO'S LIBRARY AND ITS COPYIST

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## Abstract

This article studies the manuscript 287 from Menéndez Pelayo's Library (Santander), which contains a translation into Spanish of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, dated in 1791. Although the "Abate Marchena" has been regarded as the author of this first Spanish translation in verse, new arguments are provided in support that the priest Matías Sánchez was the author of the translation. The original, autograph manuscript is custodied today in the Royal Palace Library (Madrid) with catalogue number II 646. The manuscript 287 would be an apograph, copied by Ramón M<sup>a</sup>. Estabiel, archivist of the Greek-Latin Academy. The known handwritings of both Matías Sánchez and Ramón M<sup>a</sup>. Estabiel help to identify the first as author and the second as copyist of the translation.

**Keywords:** *De rerum natura*, Lucretius, Matías Sánchez, Ramón M<sup>a</sup>. Estabiel, Greek-Latin Academy

# EL MANUSCRITO 287 DE LA BIBLIOTECA MENÉNDEZ PELAYO Y SU COPISTA

## Resumen

Este artículo estudia el manuscrito 287 de la Biblioteca Menéndez Pelayo (Santander), que contiene una traducción española del *De rerum natura* de Lucrecio fechada en 1791. Aunque ha sido considerada la primera en verso castellano y obra del Abate Marchena, el artículo aporta nuevos datos que prueban que fue realizada, en realidad, por el sacerdote Matías Sánchez, cuyo manuscrito autógrafo se custodia hoy en la Biblioteca del Palacio Real (Madrid) con la signatura II 646. El manuscrito 287 es posiblemente una copia, ejecutada por el archivero de la Academia Greco-Latina Ramón M<sup>a</sup>.

Estabiel. Las letras de Matías Sánchez y de Ramón M<sup>a</sup>. Estabiel, conocidas por otros documentos, confirman la identificación del primero como autor de la traducción en verso y del segundo como copista.

**Palabras clave:** *De rerum natura*, Lucrecio, Matías Sánchez, Ramón M<sup>a</sup>. Estabiel, Academia Greco-Latina



# EL MANUSCRITO 287 DE LA BIBLIOTECA MENÉNDEZ PELAYO Y SU COPISTA\*

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## 1. *Habent sua fata libelli*: la historia del manuscrito

El ms. 287, de título *De rerum natura*, está manido, numerado y puntuado desde la portada al colofón por el erudito y polígrafo Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo (1856-1912). No es extraño conociendo su admiración y, al tiempo, recelo tanto por Lucrecio, cuyo himno a Venus tradujo en elegantes versos (Sánchez Reyes, 1951: 96-99), como por el Abate Marchena (1768-1821), el supuesto traductor del poema lucreciano. A este insigne utrerano dedicó (1881: 369-403) un amplio capítulo en su seminal e inspiradora<sup>1</sup> *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles* y, más tarde, editó (1892-1896) su obra completa, incluyendo una sabrosa biografía y la versión castellana en endecasílabos sueltos del *De rerum natura*.

El ms. llegó a sus manos en torno a 1875, como regalo de parte de su pariente y amigo Damián Menéndez Rayón<sup>2</sup>, quien por casualidad lo había encontrado en un puesto de libros. Intrigado por su autor, Menéndez Pelayo, el mayor experto en los herejes hispanos, llegó a la conclusión de que el traductor del impío Lucrecio debía de ser José Marchena Ruiz y Cueto, popularmente conocido con el mote del “Abate Marchena”, en mofa por su fallida carrera eclesiástica y posterior deriva anticlerical. Su conjetura era la más plausible, si se conjugaban el año (1791) y las siglas “J. R. M. C.” del colofón<sup>3</sup>, aunque el orden de estas últimas no casara del todo con el nombre José Marchena Ruiz y Cueto.

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\* Agradezco a los bibliotecarios de la Biblioteca del Palacio Real y de la Biblioteca Menéndez Pelayo su inestimable colaboración y a los dos evaluadores de *Littera Aperta*, sus atinadas sugerencias críticas. Este artículo es continuación de Traver (2019: 291-312).

<sup>1</sup> Hay constancia de que su lectura inspiró el tema de la última y apreciada novela de Míguel Delibes, *El hereje* (Barcelona: Destino, 1998). Cf. Documentos Radio Nacional (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Artigas y Sánchez Reyes (1956: 101) transcriben la siguiente anotación: “(fol. 1 v.) Es propiedad de D. Menéndez Rayón, quien lo regala a su querido amigo y pariente D. Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo 1878”. Damián Menéndez Rayón fue archivero del Ministerio de Hacienda en Madrid (Canella Secádes 1903-1904, 763).

<sup>3</sup> “*Finis in totum | et | Canticorum.* | Año de 1791, en Valmojado | por Dn. J. R. M. C.” (Artigas y Sánchez Reyes 1956: 101).

En carta de 1875, dirigida a su amigo, el profesor Gumersindo Laverde (1835-1890), expresa claramente estas dudas, cuando no conocía aún el nombre completo del Abate (Revuelta Sañudo 2008: 160-64, nº I 212):

Santander, 1 julio 1875

Mi queridísimo amigo: Ayer tarde llegué á esta su casa, con objeto de pasar en ella las vacaciones...

He llegado á sospechar si será trabajo de Marchena la traducción de Lucrecio, que dejé casi enteramente revisada. He hecho varias combinaciones con las iniciales, y toda la dificultad estriba en una *R.* que acaso sea su segundo nombre ó primer apellido, porque está entre la *J* y la *M.* Para salir de dudas, será conveniente buscar en Utrera su partida de bautismo. El que la traducción sea en muchas partes descuidada y floja, lo cual contrasta con el esmero que en obras de este género empleaba Marchena, nada prueba porque semejante trabajo aparece hecho en 1791, época en que ya era él enciclopedista hasta los huesos, pero todavía no se había dado á conocer como escritor. Acaso sea un ensayo de sus mocedades. En la fecha citada pienso que todavía estaba en España, de donde á mi entender emigró en 1792, á consecuencia no solamente de su *Carta contra el celibato eclesiástico* que cita D. Leopoldo, sino como gravemente complicado en una conspiración *republicana*, á cuyo frente estaban un brigadier de marina, cuyo nombre no recuerdo, y el P. Manuel Gil, de los clérigos menores, que, á mi entender, fué el que calentó la cabeza á Marchena. De nada de esto han hablado nuestros historiadores, pero el proceso original existía en poder del paleógrafo Tró y Ortolano muerto hace pocos meses. Hoy ignoro el paradero del ms.

Es de vd. apasionado amigo:

Marcelino

A comienzos del año siguiente, le escribe de nuevo, cuando ya ha despejado la duda de la *R* gracias a una reseña biográfica de Gaspar Bono Serrano aparecida en la antología *Poetas líricos del siglo XVIII* de Leopoldo Augusto de Cueto (1875: 615)<sup>4</sup>. Dice así la posdata de su carta, fechada en Santander el 20 de enero de 1876 (Revuelta Sañudo 2008: 318, nº I 290):

P.D. Acabo de descubrir (si no me equivoco) el nombre del traductor de Lucrecio. Fue, en mi sentir, el abate Marchena. Según las noticias que de él inserta D. Leopoldo llamóse D. José Marchena Ruíz de Cueto, y las iniciales del anónimo intérprete son D. J. M. R. C. Quizá me engañe, pero la presunción es muy fuerte.

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<sup>4</sup> Dice así: “Don José Marchena nació en Utrera, el 18 de Noviembre de 1768. Era hijo de don Antonio y doña Josefa María Ruíz y Cueto, que le dieron una educación muy cristiana, destinándole al estado eclesiástico...”

Gumersindo Laverde responde a su misiva cuatro días después secundando la hipótesis de esta guisa (Revuelta Sañudo 2008: 318, nº I 291):

La conjetura de V. respecto á ser Marchena el traductor de Lucrecio me parece tan fundada que, en mi sentir, debe tenerse por cierta mientras no se pruebe lo contrario.

El polígrafo santanderino le comentó su conjetura también a Menéndez Rayón por carta y este le respondió el 10 de febrero de 1876, elogiando sus desvelos y progresos, al tiempo que refiriendo en los siguientes términos detalles relevantes sobre el momento del hallazgo del ms. 287 (Revuelta Sañudo, 2008: nº 302):

La noticia que me dá V. del incógnito traductor de Lucrecio me ha sorprendido sobre manera, puesto que esta rodeada de una muy fuerte verosimilitud. La noticia me llenó de gozo y aplaudo su actividad y desvelos sobre este asunto. La copia es posible se haya hecho en Valmojado ó también que él lo haya puesto en limpio en aquel punto, y que posteriormente haya caído en manos de un curioso que sacó la copia *ad litteram* salvo aquel añadido de *finis in totum* que tanto le sorprendió á V<sup>5</sup>. – De todos modos creo que la copia se ha hecho en Madrid por algun escribiente á quien se le mandó hacerla. Tengo dos razones para creerlo; la primera, que es letra muy tendida y suelta, cosa poco comun en los escritores. La segunda, la clase de tinta, igual á la muchedumbre de escritos que diariamente estoy viendo aqui. Yo creo que este escrito se ha hecho aqui y debió hacerse del 30 al 40, poco mas o menos, por el original; primero porque la letra tomó ese caracter oficinesco por ese tiempo y segundo porque cuando lo compré tenia muchos polvos pegados á las letras, lo cual en un libro usado no es fácil, y tercero porque recuerdo que cuando lo adquirí era la encuadernación bastante reciente. Lo que habria que averiguar era donde para el original, y si yo tuviera tiempo daria algunos pasos en este sentido; pero lo que importa y V. ha conseguido, como creo, es saber el autor que puede poner en camino de averiguar lo que resta.

Ni Damián, muerto pocos años después (en 1883), ni Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo supieron con absoluta certeza quién fue el amanuense. El manuscrito terminó engrosando los riquísimos fondos de la Biblioteca Menéndez Pelayo hasta hoy, donde se custodia. Nadie había dudado de la autoría de José Marchena de esta segunda versión castellana<sup>6</sup> y primera en

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<sup>5</sup> Solía ser *Finis* o *Finis. Laus Deo*. Cf. Artigas y Sánchez Reyes (1957, 30, nº 17; 225, nº 112, ó 315, nº 183, 20).

<sup>6</sup> La primera traducción, fechada en 1785 y en prosa (BN ms. 5828), se debió al latinista y bibliófilo Santiago Sáiz (Menéndez Pelayo 1896: IX, n. 2).

verso del *De rerum natura*, hasta que Pablo Asencio (2013: 419-22) llamó la atención sobre el orden anómalo de las siglas y la distinta caligrafía del ms. y de Marchena. De hecho, numerosas ediciones se han reimpresso desde la primera del santanderino en 1896, llegando a ser la más popular en las estanterías de España<sup>7</sup>. Agustín García Calvo, el gran lucrecianista, la publicó muchas veces en colaboración con Domingo Plácido para la popular colección “Letras Universales” (nº 4) de la Editorial Cátedra, siguiendo la *editio princeps* de Menéndez Pelayo, quien había retocado el texto original del “Abate”, con la excusa de “remediar algunos de los innumerables lunares de estilo y versificación que le afean” (Menéndez Pelayo 1896: XVI, n. 1).

## 2. La traducción del sacerdote Matías Sanchez (*fl. ca. 1832*)

En los años convulsos de la “Década Ominosa” (1823-1833), un presbítero<sup>8</sup>, profesor de Latinidad en Madrid y miembro numerario de la Real Academia Greco-Latina<sup>9</sup>, presentó en 1832<sup>10</sup> a esta institución una versión también en endecasílabos sueltos del *De rerum natura* para su publicación. Pero la Academia le negó el permiso con el siguiente informe<sup>11</sup>:

Don José M<sup>a</sup>. Cambronero, Doctor en leyes por la R. Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, Abogado de los R. Consejos, y Secretario de la R. Academia Greco-Latina:

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<sup>7</sup> En mi tesis registré un número importante de ediciones de la traducción marcheniana (2009: 563-67).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Nifo (1835: 112, y 1837: 69). Entre los listados de cargos, miembros numerarios y supernumerarios de la Academia Greco-Latina que este vademécum proporciona, está citado así: «Sr. D. Matías Sánchez, *presbítero*».

<sup>9</sup> Sobre la historia de esta institución y los documentos administrativos que de ella han pervivido, cf. los artículos fundamentales de Hualde Pascual y García Jurado (2004 y 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Ese año (Nifo 1932: 71-72) los cargos de la Academia eran ostentados por José María Puig y Semper (Director), Francisco Antonio González (Vice-director), José Gómez de la Cortina (Secretario), Agapito García de García (Censor), Francisco María Cárdenas (Revisor), José María Cambronero (Bibliotecario), Ramón Estabiel (Archivero) y José Pavón (Tesorero). Con todo, al final de año cambiaron algunos cargos, entre ellos, el de secretario que pasó a manos de José María Cambronero. El cargo de Revisor, “cuya atribución era juzgar el mérito de las composiciones literarias” (Hualde Pascual y García Jurado 2004: 187), estaba en manos, como anotamos arriba, de Francisco María Cárdenas, esculpicio secularizado y catedrático de Latín (Hualde Pascual 2006: 574).

<sup>11</sup> Se conserva adjunto en el ms. II 646 de la Biblioteca del Palacio Real. Reproduzco la transcripción de Molina Sánchez (2018: 347-48), pero leo “versificada” en lugar de “verificada”.

Certifico: Que habiéndose presentado à esta R. Academia por su digno individuo D. Matías Sánchez una traducción del Lucrecio, poeta latino, para que se imprimiese, la ha reconocido prolijamente y admirando el esmero con que está versificada por la inmensa dificultad que opone la irregularidad del texto y la oscuridad de algunos conceptos, por lo que no pudo menos de alabar la laboriosidad y diligencia del traductor; pero reflexionando que si se publicase del modo literal con que ha sido concebida se haría demasiado vulgar, cayendo en manos inespertas y poco preparadas para resistir a los principios arriesgados que sienta el autor, acordó esta R. Academia que se devolviese la obra con este elogio y observaciones à quien la había presentado ya para su satisfacción, ya también para que hiciese de ella el uso más conveniente. Madrid veinte y nueve de Diciembre de mil ochocientos treinta y dos. José M<sup>a</sup>. Cambrero.

Y esta resolución era previsible, si tenemos en cuenta que Lucrecio en romance estaba expresamente prohibido en el *Index*<sup>12</sup> y que, como establecimiento literario, la Academia tenía encomendada la censura de libros de humanidades (“Real Orden de 30 de Octubre de 1830”), para “el desempeño de este grave encargo en que tanto interesa la certeza y unidad de las sanas doctrinas, el exterminio de las erróneas o perjudiciales, la propiedad del lenguaje... que puede contribuir en gran manera a la mejora de las costumbres y a la felicidad del Estado” (Hualde Pascual y García Jurado, 2004: 194).

Debió de volver Matías Sánchez a su casa con el manuscrito bajo el brazo y con un sentimiento agrídulce, derivado de una censura muy elogiosa pero la negación del *nihil obstat*. El manuscrito autógrafo sería adquirido en 1871 por la Biblioteca del Palacio Real (ms. II 646), informe incluido, por el precio de 150 pesetas<sup>13</sup>.

### **3. El original de Matías Sánchez y el apógrafo de Ramón María Estabiel (fl. ca. 1828)**

Al año siguiente, el 10 de marzo de 1833, Matías Sánchez opositó para cubrir una plaza vacante de Supernumerario dentro de la Academia Greco-Latina. Le tocó en suerte el tema “Sobre cuál será el método más acertado para enseñar los rudimentos de la lengua latina comparada con la castellana”, que debía desarrollar en dos discursos, en castellano y en latín, y que debió

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<sup>12</sup> El *Índice último de Rubin de Cevallos* (1790: 165) prohibía la traducción italiana de Marchetti aduciendo esa razón: «Lucretio Caro (Tito). *Della natura delle cose*. Libri 6 tradotti del latino, &c Da Alexandro Marchetti. Amsterd. 1754. 2 tom. Edicto de 20 de Jun. de 1779: por estar en vulgar, y por sus laminas obscenas»

<sup>13</sup> Según consta en el oficio definitivo del Mayordomo Mayor interino don José Rossell (Biblioteca del Palacio Real ARB/10, CARP/4, doc. 203).

de escribirlos en poco tiempo, seguramente durante la encerrona de la oposición. Y la ganó, según se desprende de la *Guía de litigantes y pretendientes para el año de 1835* (Nifo 1835: 112), pues aparece listado entre los “Supernumerarios”.

El ms. de los discursos se conserva en la Biblioteca Histórica “Marqués de Valdecilla” de la Universidad Complutense con la signatura MSS. 530(10)<sup>14</sup>. Al cotejarlo con el ms. II 646 de la Biblioteca del Palacio Real, se aprecia el parecido del *ductus* de sus letras cursivas (*vid.* láminas 1 y 2). Por esta razón sospechamos que el ms. II 646 *Sobre la naturaleza de las cosas* es original autógrafo del sacerdote Matías Sánchez.

Entre los fondos que también se custodian en la Biblioteca Histórica “Marqués de Valdecilla”, procedentes de los fondos de la Academia Greco-Latina, se encuentra un grupo de cuarenta y una censuras [MSS. 531(11)] que comprenden el período entre octubre de 1830 y septiembre de 1833 (Hualde Pascual y García Jurado 2004: 195)<sup>15</sup>. Entre ellas no se halla la del Lucrecio de Matías Sánchez. Sin embargo, entre los dictámenes nos interesa la censura n° 10 (ff. 110-19, de 6 de marzo de 1831) que el archivero y censor Ramón María Estabiel<sup>16</sup> hizo a la *Colección de poesías varias* de Diego Colón, pues su letra bastardilla tiene gran parecido con la del ms. 287, que Damián Menéndez Rayón regaló al polígrafo santanderino en torno a 1875 (*vid.* láminas 3 y 4).

El ms. II 646 de la Biblioteca Real de Palacio contiene el mismo texto que el ms. 287 de la Biblioteca Menéndez Pelayo (Molina Sánchez 2018: 349-52), con la excepción de que este último presenta al menos dos lagunas y varias omisiones que suman veintiún versos (Traver Vera 2019: 302). Está, por ello, el ms. 287 incompleto y además no contiene las notas al comienzo y los comentarios al final de cada uno de los seis libros lucrecianos que el ms. II 646.

Todo permite concluir que el ms. II 646 era el autógrafo original, obra de Matías Sánchez, compuesto en 1832 o poco antes, y destinado a la imprenta, previa censura. En cambio, parece muy probable que el ms. 287, considerado

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<sup>14</sup> Es visitable en la siguiente dirección electrónica: <https://patrimoniodigital.ucm.es/r/item/5328548836>. Último acceso: 15 febrero 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Es visitable en la siguiente dirección electrónica: <https://patrimoniodigital.ucm.es/s/patrimonio/item/164610>. Último acceso: 15 febrero 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Catedrático de Latinidad, domiciliado en Madrid, en la calle del Mesón de Paños 36 (Nifo, 1828: 24), y archivero varios años de la Academia (Nifo, 1835: 111). Ejercía como tal en 1832 (Nifo, 1832: 72). Realizó también la censura n° 28 (ff. 299-306) de la obra *Elementos de gramática general* y la 37 (ff. 403-7) del libro *Nuevos elementos de conservación*.

apógrafo del original de José Marchena y fuente de numerosas reediciones de la traducción española del *De rerum natura* desde 1896, sea en realidad la copia que el archivero de la Real Academia Greco-Latina Ramón María Estabiel hizo del original de Matías Sánchez, “sin prólogo, advertencia ni nota alguna” (Menéndez Pelayo 1896: XI), a efectos de archivo en la Academia o para uso particular. El archivero pudo transcribirlo mientras el ms. estuvo en la Academia, en espera de que la comisión resolviese si merecía el *imprimatur*, o simplemente porque su autor y colega, Matías Sánchez, se lo prestase temporalmente.

Y, de ser así, las suposiciones de Damián Menéndez Rayón, transcritas arriba, eran correctas y destacan por su perspicacia: que la copia fue hecha en Madrid, entre los años 1830-1840, por parte de un escribano profesional y de manera rápida.

#### 4. Conclusión

La cursiva del ms. II 646 y de los “Discursos” presenta un *ductus* muy similar (*cf.* fr. 1) y tiene estilemas comunes, muy concretos, como la cedilla de la ñ (*cf.* fr. 2), lo que nos lleva a pensar que los dos son autógrafos del sacerdote Matías Sánchez, y vendría a confirmar que el ms. II 646 es el original autógrafo de la primera traducción en verso castellano del *De rerum natura* de Lucrecio.

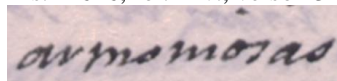
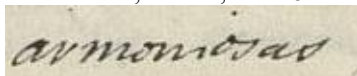
La bastardilla tanto de la censura nº 10, debida a Ramón M<sup>a</sup>. Estabiel, como la del ms. 287, de un “amanuense descuidado, aunque no del todo imperito” (Menéndez Pelayo, 1896: XI), presenta gran inclinación. Tiene también un *ductus* similar (*cf.* fr. 3) y las diferencias en letras como la “p”, pueden deberse a la premura con que la copia fue hecha, pues en el manuscrito es posible hallar “pes” tan caligráficas como las de la censura, que fue escrita, a diferencia del texto lucreciano, con gran esmero (*cf.* fr. 4).

En conclusión, la hipótesis de Damián Menéndez Rayón se confirmaría de ser definitivas las similitudes que ahora, en un primer acercamiento, notamos. El ms. 287 habría sido transcrito del original ms. II 646 entre los años de 1830-1840, en Madrid y con esa letra de carácter oficinesco, propia de un organismo, como la Academia Greco-Latina, dedicado por entonces a la censura de libros.

**Fr. 1: ductus**

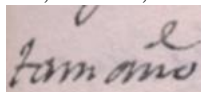
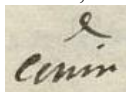
“Discursos”, fol. 2r., línea 6

Ms. II 646, fol. 41v., verso 23

**Fr. 2: estilema concreto, la ñ**

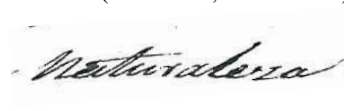
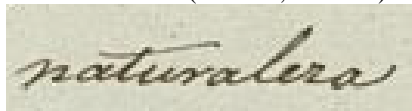
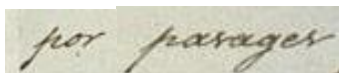
“Discursos”, fol. 2r., línea 17.

Ms. II 646, fol. 68r., línea 2

**Fr. 3: ductus**

Censura nº 10 (fol. 117, línea 17)

Ms. 287 (fol. 206v., verso 1969)

**Fr. 4: detalles de “pes”**Censura nº 10 (fol. 117, línea 15 y fol.  
118, línea 38)Ms. 287 (fols. 48v., versos 465  
y 467)



Creyendo Epicuro que el sol, la luna, y estrellas son del tamaño que ofrecen ala vista, debia inferir que estos vapores inflamados, que vemos caer por la noche, son verdaderas estrellas. <sup>68</sup>

Incertis que locis spatio decedere partium: Los contrarios de Epicuro han atacado esta leve de inclinacion de los atomos, que establece el Filósofo griego en su sistema como necesaria para explicar la formacion de los cuerpos. Pero el tambien destruye asimismo la tendencia hacia un centro comun, que suponian en los cuerpos. Si se les hubiera obligado a estos filosofos a explicar esta tendencia y este centro, se hubieran visto tan perplexos como Epicuro para dar razon de su de inclinacion.

Unde est haec, inquam, fati avolta voluntas: Se quivamente causa admiracion al ver a Epicuro fundar la libertad humana, o el libre albedrío en la de inclinacion de los atomos, cuando supone en su sistema un encadenamiento necesario de causas, que fijos. Epicuro trato de hacer al hombre independiente, y libre del destino, de este ser abstracto, a quien en opinion de Seneca, unas veces tomian por un Dios, y otras por la misma Naturaleza. Para apartar lejos de si las funestas consecuencias de esta fatalidad, inmortalaban victimas, exigian altares,

Lámina 1: fol. 68r del Ms. II 646: Sobre la naturaleza de las cosas. Notas al lib. II

con uno de los mas sabios maestros, y de los  
 mas grandes hombres que ha producido España,  
 nos ha dejado de ello unas raras y buenas indica-  
 ciones. Hablo de nuestro celebre Lini Pico. En  
 su tratado del modo de enseñar las ciencias se  
 corre los elementos del lenguaje latino: que se debe  
 enseñar que es nombre propio, comun, sustantivo,  
 adjetivo; los verbos, participios, pronombres, ad-  
 verbios, y las demas partes de la oracion: que  
 se debe exercitar despues a los discipulos en de-  
 clinar y conjugar; en hacer concordancias de  
 sustantivo y adjetivo, de nombre y verbo;  
 y en conocer por ultimo los generos y pretérios.  
 Hecho esto, se da al discipulo un tra-  
 tado latino en prosa, dicuido, facil, y de  
 una dición pura: empezara a ordenar las  
 palabras, colocando primero el vocativo, des-  
 pues el nominativo, luego el verbo, y las  
 demas partes, lo qual se llama orden; es mas  
 natural, y sencillo, y mas facil de entender

Lámina 2: fol. 2v del MSS. 530(10): Discursos

Estas palabras mal Rey, ó vil valido aunque parecen aqui genericas, pudiesen acaso interpretarse por los menos inteligentes, ó mal intencionados como poco favorables al augusto padre de nuestro Soberano. Expresiones de tal naturaleza abundan en todo el discurso de esta obra, lo que manifiesta la diversidad de circunstancias en que esta Naouon se hallaba quando su autor las escribio.

En quanto al merito literario de estas composiciones, aunque pudiera decir mi dictamen, sin embargo me remito en esta parte al juicio imparcial de nuestra R.<sup>a</sup> Academia, la que en vista de las citas que van á continuacion podrá formar un juicio completo. El autor manifiesta en el todo de la obra mucha erudicion y exquisitas noticias; pero no tan buen gusto en el modo de tratar y manejar los diferentes asuntos de que esta se compone. Su estilo por lo comun demasiado elevado y á veces obscuro desciende repentinamente al lenguaje mas vulgar y comun. Seban pues de prueba los trozos siguientes En el folio 20 Oda á la prediccion de Neptuno linea 3.<sup>a</sup> dice asi:

que á la de perlas adornada alcoba  
 llega do que la Indostana Estér  
 y de Artoz frío á la neuada gruta  
 desde las bellas margenes del Betúr.  
 ¿Quien traba nubamente atroz disjunta

Lámina 3: Fr. fol. 117 del MSS. 531(11): Dictámenes. N.º 10 de Ramón M.<sup>a</sup> Estabiel

a la cultura, para que los prados,  
 los lagos, los arroyos, y los frutos,  
 y las viñas alegres ocupasen,  
 los campos y collados; y el olivo  
 pudiere por el medio derramarse  
 por cerros, y por valles, y por campos  
 en tendidas hileras; como ahora  
 ves la gustosa variedad que ofrecen  
 las campiñas de quieva divididas,  
 ó guarnecidas de árboles frutales.

Mas los claros gorgoros de las aves  
 con la voz se imitaban muchos antes  
 que pudiesen los hombres regalarie  
 los oídos con bertos armoniosos,  
 con los hechizos de la melodía;  
 y el sibido del Tefiro en los huecos  
 de las cañas dió la lección primera  
 de inflar la campeina canareja.

Después por dedos ágiles tocada  
 y acompañada de la voz la flauta

Lámina 4: fol. 207r del Ms. 287. Libro VI, vv. 1986-2005

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# RECONSIDERING WHITE LIBERALS IN *NATIVE SON*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the novel *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright (1908-1960). When the main character, Bigger Thomas, walks out of Chicago's Black Belt to work as a chauffeur for the Daltons, a family of white liberals, and kills their daughter by accident, he interacts with numerous white characters. Bigger's perspective dismisses the Daltons and other white people as particles of a huge mountain of hate. The only exceptions to this are Jan Erlone and Boris Max, the two communist characters who succeed in establishing their humanity to Bigger and win his trust. This article reconsiders white liberals beyond the way they are presented through Bigger's dominant perspective and the way they are generally seen by critics.

**Keywords:** white liberals, Richard Wright, *Native Son*, race relations

# RECONSIDERANDO A LOS BLANCOS LIBERALES EN *NATIVE SON*

## Resumen

Este artículo examina la novela *Native Son* (1940) de Richard Wright (1908-1960). Cuando el protagonista de la novela, Bigger Thomas, traspasa el Cinturón Negro de Chicago para trabajar como chófer para los Dalton, una familia de liberales blancos, y mata a su hija por accidente, interactúa con numerosos personajes blancos. Desde su perspectiva, descalifica a los Dalton y a otros blancos, considerándolos granos de una enorme montaña de odio. Las únicas excepciones a esta visión son Jan Erlone y Boris Max, los dos personajes comunistas que logran transmitir su humanidad a Bigger y ganar su confianza. Este artículo reconsidera a los liberales blancos más allá de cómo los presenta la perspectiva dominante de Bigger y de la forma en que son vistos generalmente por los críticos.

**Palabras clave:** liberales blancos, Richard Wright, *Native Son*, relaciones raciales

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In the novel *Native Son* (1940), written by Richard Wright (1908-1960), Bigger Thomas's "crossing" of the racial divide to work as a chauffeur for the Daltons, a family of white liberals, and his accidental killing of their daughter Mary brings him into contact with a good number of white characters. Most of these white characters, like the state attorney Mr Buckley, the private investigator Mr Britten and the members of the police force are quite familiar with Bigger. Though he meets some of them for the first time, they represent to Bigger particles of a huge mass which he identifies as white people. We are told in Book II that to "Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark" (Wright 2000: 144). At other occasions Bigger identifies white people in similar terms as a "looming mountain of white hate" or as "vast white walls" (Wright 2000: 318, 99). Indeed, the text of *Native Son* abounds with images which group white people as one mass.

Bigger and his kind know only too well the rules of avoiding the threat of this "natural force": "As long as he and his black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that white force" (Wright 2000: 144). These rules explain why Bigger and his gang avoid robbing white people, and why Bigger fights his friend Gus to cover his fear of robbing a white shopkeeper. All gang members contemplate the robbery as "a violation of an ultimate taboo" (Wright 2000: 44). Bigger's mastery of these rules enables him in Book II, when he abides by them to the letter, to fool some of the most racist characters in the book, including Britten. When Britten goes over his checklist of attributes which are associated with the stereotype of Negro behaviour and finds that Bigger's behaviour tallies with it very well, he forms a strong conviction that someone like Bigger cannot be responsible for Mary's disappearance or kidnapping. He immediately directs his accusation towards another group, the communists, who represent to him more credible suspects. Joyce A. Joyce and Valerie Smith read Bigger's manipulation of the Daltons and Britten as a liberating act (Joyce 1991: 44; Smith 1987: 180). This manipulation does not last long, however. Alessandro Portelli rightly explains that though initially fooled by Bigger, whites "have no trouble adjusting to the news of his guilt: the stereotypes which power creates of the



oppressed are always flexible and multiple enough to justify all forms of oppression, from paternalism to the electric chair” (1997: 263). We do not need to see Britten recovering from his shock and reconciling Bigger’s embodiment of what Angela Davis calls “the myth of the black rapist”, which is taken for granted at this stage, to his own stereotype of black behaviour (1981: 172-201).

A small number of white characters, however, shock Bigger with the fact that even though they are elements of this “natural force” they are distinct from it. These white characters include the Dalton family and their servant Peggy, the two members of the communist party Jan Erlone and Boris Max, and an unnamed policeman who speaks kindly to Bigger in prison and gives him his newspaper. Though shocked by their difference from other white people, Bigger never manages to see the Daltons as individuals in the way he comes to regard Jan and Max in Book III. This article examines the factors behind the Daltons’ failure to feature as individuals and separate themselves from the huge mass of white people, at least according to Bigger. Indeed, this failure does not seem to be limited to Bigger’s perspective: rather it extends to the way the Daltons are generally perceived by some critics.

Even though Bigger’s initial reaction unifies this small number of white characters by their deviation from what he has learned to categorize as white people, Mr and Mrs Dalton, their daughter and the two members of the Communist Party do not form a congruous group. Mr and Mrs Dalton, as “Christians”, approach black people to help them, and even though their daughter has been influenced by their approach, she approaches Bigger as more of a sympathizer with the Communist Party. Jan and Max help Bigger as declared members of the Communist Party. It is quite significant that though all these white people declare “helping” black people as their objective, their ideological differences never allow them to collaborate, or even contemplate the possibility of working together. They represent two bitterly opposed groups throughout the text. It is possible to suggest that the usual conflict between white racists and white philanthropists is replaced in *Native Son* by a conflict between two approaches to “helping” black people. Even before Mary is killed, both the Daltons and the communists, represented by Jan, offer their help to Bigger, who does not really consider going back to school or joining the Communist Party. This image of the Daltons as “helpers” changes into people seeking revenge, at least according to Max, as soon as Bigger is captured and prosecuted for killing Mary. Meanwhile Jan and Max are confirmed as offering real help to Bigger. With the relative silence of the Daltons, especially in Book III, and the powerful voice of the communists, Max in particular, the Daltons are aligned to the rest of the

“racist” white world, from which they hoped their contribution to black education would set them apart.

Even though Bigger responds negatively to Jan and Mary’s attempt to reach out to him and deal with him as an equal, the text examines a substantial development on the part of both Bigger and Jan. By contrast, Bigger’s attitude towards the Daltons and their daughter never changes or develops. When Mary assures Bigger that Jan’s offer to shake his hand is genuine, Bigger’s response is described as follows:

He flushed warm with anger. Goddamn her soul to hell! Was she laughing at him? Were they making fun of him? What was it that they wanted? Why didn’t they leave him alone? He was not bothering them. Yes, anything could happen with people like these. His entire mind and body were painfully concentrated into a single sharp point of attention. (Wright 2000: 98)

Bigger reluctantly shakes Jan’s hand, and we observe that Mary touches him intentionally and unintentionally several times. In his study of the function of violence in *Native Son*, Robert Butler observes that “*Native Son* dramatizes a bleak environment in which people touch each other only in violence, almost never in love or friendship” (1986: 15). Touching proves quite deadly for both Mary and Bigger, and it causes Jan enough troubles. Indeed, Jan and Mary’s attempt to overlook racial differences serves only to confirm these differences for Bigger. “He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin” (Wright 2000: 98). If we look at this closely, however, we find that Mary and Jan mean to touch in friendship. It is Bigger’s conditioning which interprets this touching otherwise. Moreover, it is circumstances which change this touch into something deadly for Bigger and Mary. One might add that it is Bigger who touches in violence when he kisses Mary in what might be described as an attempt of rape, which is aborted by the entrance of Mrs Dalton into Mary’s bedroom and the killing of Mary.

Unlike Mary, who initiates the contact with Bigger, Jan is given a chance to realize that his and Mary’s approach to Bigger is blind and inefficient even though it is good-intentioned. Jan’s humiliation through being arrested and accused of Mary’s murder provides him with an experience which enables him to understand the depth of Bigger’s problem and the simplistic approach he and Mary have used to approach Bigger as one of them, ignoring the racial codes which Bigger has been forced to abide by all his life. It is only when Jan realizes the depth of the division between the white and the black worlds that he can talk in a language of common experience which Bigger understands. It is the language of pain and suffering. Mary, of course, suffers

more than all, but her “premature” death prevents her from relating what she has learned from suffering. Even her family, who suffer more than Jan and who are given only a brief space to speak, are presented as incapable of learning from their suffering.

Jan’s visit to Bigger’s cell and the conversation that ensues there convince Bigger to take Jan’s offer of friendship and help as genuine. In the presence of Rev Hammond, Jan explains to Bigger:

I was in jail grieving for Mary and then I thought of all the black men who’ve been killed, the black men who had to grieve when their people were snatched from them in slavery and since slavery. I thought that if they could stand it, then I ought to. (Wright 2000: 318)

His genuine grief works as atonement for his being part of those hundred millions of white people who have exploited black through slavery and racism. The effect of Jan’s words on Bigger is described as that of an operation on Bigger’s eyes.

Jan had spoken a declaration of friendship that would make other white men hate him: a particle of white rock had detached itself from that looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope, stopping still at his feet. (Wright 2000: 319)

We are told that Jan is the first man to become a human being to Bigger. The humanity of Jan will be confirmed for Bigger as Bigger sees Jan go through more troubles in court because of his activism. Most of the questions of the coroner to Jan in court centre upon suggesting that Jan is a “nigger lover” and that he has facilitated a sexual encounter between Bigger and Mary in order to recruit Bigger to the Communist Party. Even after it has been established that Bigger is the one who has killed Mary, the coroner tries to present Jan as a traitor to the white community for failing in his role to protect a white woman from a black man, and, even worse, for surrendering her to him. The text concludes with a message from Bigger to Jan through Max: “Tell.... Tell Mister.... Tell Jan hello....” (Wright 2000: 454).

It is also suggested that Max’s Jewish background and his communist ideology enable him to understand what Bigger has gone through and what has made him carry out the killings of both Mary and his girlfriend Bessie. The mature Max does not repeat Jan and Mary’s mistake. It also helps that Max is introduced by Jan, whom Bigger has already begun to trust. In his professional role as a lawyer, Max is more privileged than Jan: he spends more time with Bigger and manages to win his trust and make him talk freely. Indeed, the way Bigger talks to Max is almost like the way he talks to his

friend Gus early in Book I. The interaction between Bigger and Max is described in terms of electricity. After this conversation, Bigger even contemplates a different set of relationships between white people and black people. "For the first time in his life he had gained a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of" (Wright 2000: 390). The relationship between Bigger and Max develops and exceeds Bigger's relationship to Jan. James Smethurst suggests that *Native Son* is an anti-gothic because of the interaction between Bigger and Max, which enables Bigger to attain "a genuine self-consciousness" (2001: 37). The fact that Max leaves Bigger for the last time incapable of understanding his assertion "what I killed for, I *am*" does not seem to affect the positive description of this relationship between Max and Bigger.

At no point during his life with the Daltons does Bigger contemplate similar feelings toward them or other white people. When he becomes excited about his new job at the Daltons' and his good salary, he does not seem to link this in any way to the kindness or the humanity of the Daltons. Even when he recalls Peggy's observation that the Daltons give millions of dollars to black people, he muses "the old man had given five million dollars to colored people. If a man could give five million dollars away, then millions must be as common to him as nickels" (Wright 2000: 91). Bigger does not recall that Mrs Dalton is the one who is really the biggest contributor. Actually, Bigger never thinks of Mrs Dalton in a positive way. Instead of contemplating the motives of the Daltons, Bigger thinks of their help as a measure of their wealth. More importantly, he hopes that he will learn from the Daltons the secret of making millions, a hope which he puts into use when he writes a kidnap note asking for 10 thousand dollars. The fact that Peggy goes over how nice the Daltons are and how well they have been treating her and how well they have treated the previous chauffeur, Green, and what kind of motives led them to help black people hardly enlists any response from Bigger.

In fact, the Daltons do not only seem to fail to enlist sympathy from Bigger, their presentation in the text in general is negative, and this seems to colour the way in which they are viewed by most critics. Amy E Carreiro, for example, observes that although "the Daltons believe that their desire to improve conditions for African Americans is benevolent, it has harmful repercussion for Bigger", and that often "the social reformers' approaches, like those of Mrs. Dalton, robbed African Americans of their identity and individuality" (1999: 249). Likewise, Sondra Guttman speaks about the

Daltons' participation in the systematic exploitation and destruction of Bigger and his family (2001: 170).<sup>1</sup>

Max sums up the relationship between the Daltons and the Thomas family as “that of renter to landlord, customer to merchant, employee to employer”. He explains the charity of the Daltons by guilt. “The Thomas family got poor and the Dalton family got rich. And Mr. Dalton, a decent man, tried to salve his feelings by giving money” (Wright 2000: 420). Even though Bigger thinks of it briefly on very few occasions, the most powerful justification for this negative presentation is, of course, Mr Dalton’s business in real estate. Bigger’s family rent “one unventilated, rat-infested room in which four people eat and sleep” from the South Side Real Estate Company, in which the Dalton Real Estate Company owns the controlling stock. Like most other real estate companies, the South Side Real Estate Company exploits black people by charging exuberant rent, and more importantly in the context of race relations, it implements residential segregation on racial grounds. According to what Mr Dalton refers to as an “old custom”, black people are allowed to rent in the South Side only. The opening, rat scene in *Native Son*, which shows the terrible living conditions and the lack of privacy with which Bigger and his family live, is recalled, not only by Max, but also by readers and critics as the most defining aspect of the Daltons’ treatment of black people. Mr Dalton’s answers to Max’s questions that underselling his competitors will be “unethical” and that black people are happier when they are living together are, of course, not convincing. It is true that he has not invented the old “custom” of segregation and that he is not expected to end segregation alone, segregation does not seem a problem to him, and he does not seem to think that it requires a solution.

The image of blindness seems a very fitting one in describing the Daltons. It is actually used in relation to all the members of the Dalton family, and in the case of Mrs Dalton, blindness is literal. The Daltons cannot see that a great part of the money they pay to black schools is, in fact, obtained by exploiting these very people through exuberant rent and bad maintenance of the houses which they rent to black people.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Daltons are presented as incapable of learning from their suffering as they lose their daughter and continue doing the same thing. When Mr Dalton explains that his “heart is not bitter” and adds that what Bigger “has done will not influence [his] relations with the Negro people” and that he “sent a dozen ping-pong

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<sup>1</sup> For similar views on the Daltons, see also Mathew Briones (59: 2003) and Valerie Smith (1987: 81).

<sup>2</sup> We know that most of the Daltons’ money was inherited by Mrs Dalton, and there is no evidence that this part of the money was linked to real estate and exploiting black people.

tables to the South Side Boys' Club" today, Max explains that Mr Dalton is continuing in the same direction (Wright 2000: 324). The fact that Mr Dalton allows Mrs Thomas and her family to stay in the flat which he owns after Bigger has killed his daughter does not change the image of the Daltons.

Of course, residential segregation is not the only form of racial segregation. If the Daltons do not oppose residential segregation, their treatment of Bigger, and probably Green before him, subverts almost all other codes of racial segregation as they treat Bigger as a chauffeur regardless of his race. Indeed, the only obvious consideration to race is giving the job to Bigger, which Mr Dalton honestly means as giving a chance a young black man. Carreiro suggests that "Mr Dalton exemplifies the Negrotarian's need for affirmation of his 'good deed.' He boasts to Bigger: 'I want you to know why I'm hiring you. You see Bigger, I'm a supporter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People'" (Wright 2000: 250). I think that this statement can be read as an encouragement and a warning to Bigger, who is introduced to Mr Dalton as a sort of problem boy. Mr Dalton's move to grant a job to a black youth with a criminal history is certainly a brave step when read in context. It is important to add that when Mr Dalton asks Bigger about the rent which Bigger's family pays, he offers Bigger a salary which Bigger and his family, at least, think of as very good.

Having stated the objective reasons behind the negative presentation of the Daltons which are their real estate business and their attitude towards segregation, I would like to add that there are many other factors behind the negative presentation of the Daltons and their daughter which are not based on the Daltons themselves. First of all, Richard Wright wrote *Native Son* with a special focus, which he had already explained in his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1994), three years before the publication of *Native Son*. In this essay, Wright describes Negro writing in the past as being generally confined to

humble novels, poems, and plays, decorous ambassadors who go a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. These were received as poodle dogs who have learned clever tricks. (1994: 97)

Wright goes on to complain that "Negro writing on the whole has been the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America. Rarely has the best of this writing been addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, and aspirations" (1994: 97). It is obvious then that Wright is not preoccupied with proving the humanity of Bigger to white Americans as much as with

presenting a true picture of him. He is addressing his writing to the Negroes themselves and their “sufferings and aspirations”. Cynthia Tolentino suggests that instead of “viewing the moral reform of white Americans as the primary weapon in the fight against racial bigotry, Wright turns attention to the development of political consciousness and agency in black Americans” (2000: 388-9). She also refers to the rejection of liberals and the elevation and communists in *Native Son* (2000: 395-6). Carreiro explains that as “a Book-of-the-Month-Club’s selection and best seller, the novel reached a large audience which provided Wright an opportunity to express his dissatisfaction with the oppressing and dominating role of the white reformers, including the CPUSA, in the struggle for racial equality” (1999: 247). The fact that Wright was writing social protest literature explains how Wright responded to a member of the Book-of-the-Month selection committee Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who urged Wright indirectly to say something good about those white Americans who “have done all they could to lighten the dark stain of racial discrimination in our nation”. Wright could not bring himself to express gratitude to white Americans (Rowley 1999: 632).

Wright does not, however, present white America in the same way as Carreiro suggests, for it is obvious that the Daltons are rejected as liberals while Jan and Max are elevated as communists.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the Daltons are judged by the antagonistic view of the defence, which contributes to the negative presentation of the Daltons. It is very important, therefore, to look at the members of the Dalton family beyond the dominant view of the defence and the way they are presented through Bigger’s almost controlling perspective. Of course, Mr Dalton’s contribution to black education is not limited to ping-pong tables, as Max suggests. We know that he has donated five millions to black schools. How these schools receive these millions is only referred to. Mr Dalton’s communication with black schools is not described. It is, of course, wrong to suggest that all black students are like Bigger: not interested in education, and incapable of appreciating support for education.<sup>4</sup> This leaves the door open for another way of viewing the Daltons’

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<sup>3</sup> Despite this elevation of Jan and Max, communists were not quite satisfied with the way they are presented in the book. For more on their response to *Native Son*, see Briones (2003: 56-9).

<sup>4</sup> Critics do not agree on the wider issue of Bigger’s representation of urban black people’s collective psyche. James Baldwin, for example, argues in his study of Bigger Thomas that “a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life” (1995: 35). On the other hand, Aimé J. Ellis suggests that Bigger is representative of those black males Angie Stone refers to as “your down for whatever chilling’ on the corner, brotha”, brothers

contribution to black education even if that way is not described.<sup>5</sup> Mr Dalton's help for black people, which does not provoke racist people directly and does not jeopardize his relationship to the white community, goes against the spirit of *Native Son*, which focuses more on black agency. But even here, the response of the white community at large towards Mr Dalton's help for black people is omitted. Certainly, there are people who are not happy with it. At least Britten makes it clear that black people do not deserve help. When Mr Dalton explains to Britten that he wanted to give Bigger a chance, Britten tells Mr Dalton: they "don't need a chance, if you ask me. They get in enough trouble without it" (Wright 2000: 193).

If the Daltons' contribution to black education does not set them apart from the rest of the white world, which is associated here with racism, then their attitude towards Bigger, especially after they find out that he has killed their daughter, certainly does. Critics often study the occasion of the Daltons' first reception of Bigger and their use of sociological terms to point out that Bigger is dealt with as an experiment. But the response of the Daltons towards Bigger after the disappearance of their daughter and after they find out that it was Bigger who has killed their daughter is hardly examined. The Daltons never rush to accuse Bigger, as Britten does, for example. Mr Dalton defends Bigger against Britten's accusations and accepts his version of the story, which contradicts the story of Jan. There is no evidence at all to suggest that Mr and Mrs Dalton believe in the myth of the black rapist, neither before the killing of their daughter nor after. If they believed the myth, they would not have hired black chauffeurs in the first place.

Addressing *Native Son* to Negroes and their suffering and aspiration by confining it to the perspective of Bigger results in neglecting the suffering and the grief of white liberals. While Bigger's trial is made the subject of Book III, and his family and friends are given a chance to visit him and show their grief for his very likely death sentence, the Daltons' grief for their daughter is largely absent. When the Daltons are desperately looking for their daughter, the focus is on Bigger and how he tries to hide his crime or even plans another one. When Mary is killed, her suffering and pain is largely omitted because she is described as drunk. All we are told about is the response of her body to Bigger's attempt to smother her. The gruesome

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who are "facin' doubt" and desperately trying to "work it out" (2006: 183).

<sup>5</sup> The presentation of the Daltons' contributions to black education is similar to the presentation of Joana Burden's support to black education in William Faulkner's *Light in August* and to that of Linda Kohl Snopes in Faulkner's other work, *The Mansion*. The activism of both women is presented from the perspective of men who think of it as madness. By contrast, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* shows more appreciation of the activism of the Bodwins, a family of white liberals and former abolitionists.



details of burning Mary's body and beheading her also eliminate her suffering as she is dead and the focus is on Bigger and his fear. When the Daltons find out that their daughter is missing and when they think that she is kidnapped, we only catch glimpses of their pain and suffering through the eavesdropping of Bigger, who is collecting information to hide his act and plan for exploiting the Daltons. Bigger never sympathizes with the Daltons, and as readers are persuaded by the perspective of Bigger to focus on Bigger's fears and plans, the readers' sympathy with the Daltons is compromised significantly. Mary is not given a funeral in the text, and all we see of mourning her is the tears of her mother and grandmother in court. The Daltons' grief is compromised further because it is conveyed to the reader, not through her grieving parents, but through the hateful speeches of racist people including the state attorney Mr Buckley and the coroner and through the writings of numerous racist journalists whose articles are read by Bigger. These speeches and writings do not sympathize with Mary and her parents as much as they seize the opportunity to express racist views and use Bigger's acts as evidence. The following paragraph from Mr Buckley's speech in court illustrates this.

While the family was searching heaven and earth for their daughter, this ghoul writes a kidnap note demanding ten thousand dollars for the *safe return* of Miss Dalton! But the discovery of the bones in the furnace put that foul dream to an end! (Wright 2000: 437)

Even though everything about the Daltons is true here, the use of the word "ghoul" foregrounds racism at the expense of the Daltons' pain. Readers, who are repulsed by the loud racism are very likely to reject the Daltons and their grief because Buckley's racist voice declares that it is on the side of the Daltons.

Mary is not to blame for the exploitation of black people by people like her father or for residential segregation. Even though she is brought up as a white liberal and she develops an interest in black people because of her parents' interest in black education, Mary's activism is shaped mainly by her sympathy with the Communist Party. In contrast to her father's pacifistic approach to helping black people, Mary is a revolutionary. Robert Butler suggests that Mary's radical behaviour includes "running away to New York and taking off with Jan and entering a circle of radicals" (1986: 13). I think that Mary's attitude towards segregation and the way she talks to and touches Bigger would seem even more radical to racist whites. On the way to the South Side with Bigger and Jan, she complains "I've been to England, France and Mexico, but I don't know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so *little* about each other. I just want to *see*. I want to *know* these people.

Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home” (Wright 2000: 101).<sup>6</sup> Tolentino finds in Mary’s desire to “see” and “know” a depiction of “the inadequacy of liberal attempts to produce racial knowledge”. She suggests that the novel “shows how liberal attempts to engage with blacks are encoded by the language and the tropes of cultural anthropology and sociology most commonly associated with Mary Dalton’s school, the University of Chicago” (2000: 393). Carreiro reads this curiosity as a sign of white liberals’ ignorance and naivety and suggests that Mary’s commitment to racial relations simplifies African American culture. “Mary believes that by experiencing Bigger’s culture and sharing a barbecue with him she will understand the plight of African Americans” (1999: 250). On the other hand, James Fairfield argues that whereas “Bigger clearly exhibits discomfort in the white realm of Mr. Dalton’s study, Mary and Jan have no problems putting themselves at ease within the confines of Ernie’s Kitchen Shack... Mary and Jan can cross over, at least temporarily, into multiple linguistic communities, whereas Bigger remains trapped in his own” (2007: 75). Even though Bigger misreads Mary’s curiosity, and her desire to know more about black people proves inadequate in approaching Bigger, Mary’s intentions are good. Moreover, Mary’s activism would be inadequate if it is limited to curiosity only. When Jan proposes that she works with him in “the office”, Mary refuses and explains that her approach to helping black people is more direct: “I want to work among Negroes. That’s where people are needed. It seems as though they’ve been pushed out of everything” (Wright 2000: 108). This demonstrates that Mary’s interest in black people is even stronger than that of Jan.

In all her interaction with Bigger, Mary never shows that she regards black people as inferior. When Bigger reflects on their first meeting, he observes she was “an odd girl, all right. He felt something in her over and above the fear she inspired in him. She responded to him as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world as she. And he had never felt that before in a white person” (Wright 2000: 96). It is quite ironic that Bigger describes Mary as odd exactly because she is behaving naturally towards him. Bigger, obviously, defines the natural in relation to white people as synonymous with what he has been conditioned to regard as natural. Mary would have looked natural to him if she had behaved in a racist way like Britten, for example.

Mary has the potential to understand Bigger as much as Jan does, but she is killed “too soon”. She appears in the novel only for one evening. In her

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<sup>6</sup> Becca Gercken links the ability to see to agency in *Native Son*. As he argues, “The individual who owns the gaze occupies the dominant or “male” position and has agency, a power and authority often constructed as the ability to desire” (2011: 634).

approach to Bigger, Mary risks more than Jan, as a declared male member of the Communist Party, does. In contrast to Bessie Mears, who represents the easily accessible symbol of black women, Mary represents the symbol of the desirable but inaccessible white world, and white women in particular.<sup>7</sup> This status of Mary as a symbol of white economic and social power has been observed by numerous critics. Guttman observes that the “newsreel viewed by Bigger and his friend Jack represents Mary as both an object of sexual desire and a symbol of white, capitalist power” (2001: 172). Katherine Fishburn suggests that “Bigger feels as free and powerful as he does following Mary’s murder because he has violated white society’s most potent taboo” (1999: 213).<sup>8</sup> Mary subverts racial segregation and racial codes because she rejects this status of a symbol. Tolentino rightly observes that “Mary rejects the role of an irreducible marker of race” (2000: 386). Mary does not only reject the role of a white lady which is assigned to her, rather she acts against it. This is clearly demonstrated in the way Mary talks to Bigger, and the way she interacts with him physically. While Mrs Dalton is reluctant to discuss Mary’s drunkenness with her husband in the presence of Bigger, Mary does not have a problem in being driven while drunk by Bigger, sitting in the front seat when they are alone in the car, touching Bigger or being carried by him into her bedroom.

There also is the possibility that Mary might be ready to have a sexual relationship with her black chauffeur. No doubt, this would be the ultimate subversion of racial codes. It is Bigger’s certainty that his presence in Mary’s bedroom will be interpreted as rape by white people that compels him to kill Mary. However, it is very difficult to be categorical about Mary’s attitude towards sex with Bigger as she is drunk when he approaches her sexually. The aborted sexual encounter between Mary and Bigger has been viewed in contradictory ways by critics. Hazel Rowley, for example, suggests that Mary uses her drunkenness as a pretext for having sex with Bigger (1999: 631), and that she “desired her black chauffeur every bit as much as he desired her—if not more so” (1999: 629). Guttman, on the other hand, suggests that Bigger “takes advantage of Mary’s state of near-unconsciousness by manipulating her body so that it seems as if she is actively responding to him” (2001: 178). While the text presents enough evidence that Mary has been drinking, it does not tell how drunk Mary is, and to what extent she is interested in having a

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the opposite status of white and black women see Hortense J. Spillers’s essay: “Mama’s Baby, Baba’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.”

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Shultz, who compares *Native Son* to *Moby Dick*, suggests that Mary represents to Bigger what the white whale represents to Ahab. “For Ahab, the agent or principal of that universe is Moby Dick, the White Whale; for Bigger, the agent is Mary Dalton ... the principal is white society itself” (1999: 642).

sexual relationship with Bigger and using her drunkenness as a pretext. Moreover, the encounter is described from Bigger's point of view, and as usual Mary's point of view is not available to us. If the Daltons are not criticised by racists for their contribution to black education, then they will be definitely criticized for their daughter's activism if she goes to work among black people, or if she is rumoured to have a sexual relationship with Bigger. Mary's interest in black people will be definitely branded as "loving Negros.". We do not know whether racist people reconstruct Mary's relationship to Bigger in any other way beside the official version of rape and murder.

If Mary's parents are rejected because they condone segregation and because their approach to race relations is pacifistic, then Mary presents an alternative radical activism, which is in line with Wright's focus. Indeed, developing the relationship between Mary and Bigger can be accommodated within the elevation of the communists. Why Wright does not develop the potential of Mary as he does with Jan and Max is a very interesting point. Guttman explains Mary's death "as a result of her refusal to be the disembodied symbol of white wealth and power. Wright means to show—but not to condone—the dire consequences for white woman of displaying sexual and (therefore) political desire" (2001: 180). I think that if a relationship is allowed to take place between Mary and Bigger or if she is permitted to work among Negros, then the agency would be wholly attributed to Mary. Even though Bigger would be seen as violating the ultimate taboo, and eating what Sherley Anne Williams calls the "American fruit forbidden the black man", the agency would not be his (1995: 66).

Richard Wright became gradually disillusioned with the CPUSA and he left it formally in 1942. In his biography of Richard Wright, Michel Fabre mentions that when Wright's friend Horace Cayton disclosed that "the Communists would withhold their support from any attempt to combat government discrimination, Wright withdrew from the Party without a scandal" (1973: 229). Fabre cites, as a proof of Wright's break with the Party, a letter which Wright sent to Edward Aswell in 1955. In this letter Wright states: "I had intuitively realized much of what is now in the daily press about the Communist Party, including its infiltration by the FBI, agents, etc. ... when I discovered that I was holding a tainted instrument in my hands, I dropped that instrument". Wright also speaks in this letter about other things which bothered him. Those things "stemmed from the ramifications of the racial question in the United States" (Fabre 1973: 230). In his study of Wright's ideological shifts, Mathew Briones refers to Wright's criticism of the Party's theory that "a communist must be portrayed as a hero all the time, disallowing any complexity, if not contradiction, in characters" (2003: 58).

In other words, Wright was dissatisfied with the Communist Party for artistic reasons, too.

If the focus of Wright's writing on Negroes' agency and consciousness continued after the writing of *Native Son*, his elevation of the communists did not. "The ramifications of the racial question" in America, which motivated Wright's break with the Party, are similar to the ramifications which prompted his rejection of white liberals in *Native Son*. Wright's break with the Communist Party raises the question whether the communists Max and Jan would have received the same elevation had Wright's break with the CPUSA come before writing *Native Son*. It is very likely that Wright's disillusionment with both white liberals and communists would have led him to extend black agency beyond Bigger's "liberating" crimes. A greater role for the black community in *Native Son* well beyond Rev Hammond's prayers, would have probably figured out as one of the consequences of the focus on Negroes. Another major consequence of this focus would have probably been a more balanced presentation of white activism, with less distinction between communism and white liberalism. Finally, Mary Dalton's "untimely" killing could have given way to developing the potential of her activism and her sexual/ political desires.

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# CULTURAL ALIENATION AND LANGUAGE DISCONTINUITY IN *LA MÉMOIRE TATTOUÉE*

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## **Abstract**

The question of Alienation is a core subject-matter of human conditioning in the present era. Therefore, it is natural that a controversial issue like alienation should leave such an indelible influence upon contemporary literature. The question of Alienation, in its different manifestations, has been conceptualized and discussed, most importantly, within the existentialistic literary perspective. Due to its historical and socio-cultural conditions, the African as well as the Maghrebian literature could not shy away from the influence of alienation, understood as an identity loss and as a sense of inferiority, experienced either before or after the contact with the Other. The dispossessed personality's search for identity is a commonplace theme in modern fiction. The present paper will discuss the different nuances of the word alienation and analyze this theme in *La Mémoire Tattouée* (1971), a Moroccan literary text written in French by Abdelkebir Khatibi. The aim is to show how language discontinuity stands as a cause that creates a sense of inferiority, subordination, and alienation.

**Key words:** identity, alienation, inferiority, existentialism, *La Mémoire Tatuée*, Abdelkebir Khatibi

## LA ALIENACIÓN CULTURAL Y LA DISCONTINUIDAD LINGÜÍSTICA EN *LA MÉMOIRE TATUÉE*

### Resumen

La Alienación es un tema central de la condición humana en la época actual. Por lo tanto, es natural que un tema controvertido como la alienación deje una impronta marcada en la literatura contemporánea. La cuestión de la alienación, en sus distintas manifestaciones, ha sido conceptualizada y abordada principalmente desde una perspectiva literaria existencialista. Debido a sus condiciones históricas y socioculturales, tanto la literatura africana como la Magrebí no podían evitar la influencia de la alienación, entendida como pérdida de identidad y como sentimiento de inferioridad experimentado antes o después del contacto con el Otro. La búsqueda de identidad de la personalidad desposeída es un argumento frecuente en la ficción moderna. El presente artículo trata sobre los diferentes matices de la palabra alienación y analiza este tema en la novela marroquí *La Mémoire Tatuée* (1971), escrita en francés por Abdelkebir Khatibi. El propósito es examinar cómo la discontinuidad lingüística se erige en un factor de sentimiento de inferioridad, subordinación y alienación.

**Palabras clave:** identidad, alienación, inferioridad, existencialismo, *La Mémoire Tatuée*, Abdelkebir Khatibi

## CULTURAL ALIENATION AND LANGUAGE DISCONTINUITY IN *LA MEMOIRE TATTOUEE*

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Many characters in different literary texts experience a feeling of alienation from their different social institutions. Characters like Jake Barnes in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, feel alienated from their society. Caddy Compson, in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, also went through what can be termed as love and family alienation. Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* got alienated from the religious institutions in which he has been raised. Sometimes this type of alienation extends so far that the character or characters feel alienated from God as a Divine force. Besides, Meursault is another character whom Albert Camus, in *The Stranger*, portrayed one of the most extreme forms of alienation: his feeling of alienation from everything that surrounds him, including his family, his society, and the new modern aspect of life. The proliferation of literary characters who experience alienation is a result of the real-life stress that individuals feel when they are disconnected or shunned by their individual peers and the surrounding societal institutions that contribute to their belonging and being. Therefore, alienation is a powerful force that leads the one towards the negative feeling of self-pity, vulnerability, and violence. It may also result in the positive feeling of deep introspection and intellectual independence. Many writers associate alienation primarily with the 20th century and beyond, and indeed, with the modernist movement, dated roughly between 1890s and 1950s. The latter period is characterized with its increased reliance on science and technology, and the gradual mobility of individuals from rural community into urban centers, where both individuals and society are at odds with one another.

*The Tattooed Memory* (1971) is an autobiographical novel. It is a fictional exposition of the identity of the narrator/writer. The author Abdelkebir Khatibi (1938-2009) has made his novel a place of narration and questioning on an issue that preoccupies him obsessively: the question of identity and difference. The text recounts Khatibi's personal story by returning to his childhood in order to restore the stages of his life according to the space in which he lived. The text also questions the Moroccan society and its

functioning in the aftermath of Independence. Culture, religion, traditions, family relations, the status of women, and modernity are amongst the many questions treated as problematic issues in Khatibi's life. The main concern of the Khatibian writing is an existentialist interpellation of the subject in his relationship with himself and with the other.

Khatibi and his text portray one of those dozen writers and characters whose attempt to define their relationship with society leads them to alienation from their identity. Khatibi, for instance, writes his fiction in French, the language of the superior *Other*, and, as a matter of fact, he remains alienated and exiled in that language. The author of *L'écrivain public* (1983), Taher Ben Jelloune, writes about his sense of alienation when he writes in French:

Ecrire c'est se séparer : quitter le corps de la mère, s'éloigner (un temps) de la terre natale. Ecrire c'est habiter son nom. Moi je l'habite dans une autre langue que celle de la mère. Je suis séparé et non exilé. J'écris dans cette langue rupture. J'éloigne de moi et de ce que j'écris mon visage. Cette brûlure d'absence est passion. Deux maisons. Deux rives. Un même exil. (Ben Jelloun 1985 : 40)

[To write is to separate: to leave the body of the mother, to move away (a native one, to write is to live in one's name, but I live in another language than that of the mother. I am writing in this language of rupture, I am moving away from myself and from writing my face, this burning of absence is passion, two houses, two banks, the same exile.]

Accordingly, the French words are “treacherous travesties, attempting to encompass him and define him while also denying the parts of his identity upon which he is unable to reflect” (Hiddlestone 2005: 120).

In fact, Khatibi's penchant for writing in French is inspired from his early education at Marrakech boarding school, where he studied and tried to master the French literature and gained a comprehensive knowledge of the French culture. The young man later earned his doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris. It is in the Franco-Maghrebian school where Khatibi started to experience alienation and go through various alienated situations, especially with his French teachers and classmates. In so doing, Khatibi, because of his sense of alienation, will do his best to overcome that feeling of inferiority by not only speaking French, but also excelling at it.

The narrator of *The Tattooed Memory* informs us that the father decides to send young Abdelkebir to the Franco-Moroccan school. The narrator

describes the moment the decision is taken when he says “J’arrivais en troisième position: mon père accepta de m’expédier à l’école franco-marocaine, je devins la conscience dégradée, donnée à la mécréance” (Khatibi 1971: 16) [“I came in third place: my father agreed to send me to the Franco-Moroccan school, I became the degraded conscience, given to the disbelief”]. Maybe the father’s decision could be associated, in a way to make an analogy, to a scene in which the narrator describes the day of Abdelkebir’s birth. The scene goes on “un jour qui rappelle cet acte symbolique de la part d’Abraham de vouloir sacrifier son fils pour l’amour de Dieu” [“a day that recalls this symbolic act on the part of Abraham to want to sacrifice his son for God’s sake”] (1971: 39). This means that the father’s choice is a form of sacrifice similar to the one in the previous passage. The father sacrifices his son by sending him to the other side, the father’s intention is that his son can learn French, the language of the enemy, in an attempt to better understand them. The protagonist starts to understand colonization the moment he gets enrolled in the French school; of course, the French language is the most important component of colonialization. For our protagonist, the school provides a space for the full interaction with the French colonialization. As a result, the most important contribution of the French schooling system to the formation of the protagonist is his introduction to French literature and culture.

This introduction to the French culture and language will separate the protagonist from his native culture and language and, therefore, leads him to feel inferior and alienated. In this regard, the narrator says: “A l’école un enseignement laïc imposé à ma religion ; je devins triglotte, lisant le français sans le parler, jouant avec quelques bribes de l’arabe écrit, et parlant le dialecte comme quotidien. Où, dans ce chassé-croisé, la cohérence et la continuité?” [“At school a secular education imposed on my religion; I became a triglotte, reading French without speaking it, playing with some bits of written Arabic, and speaking the dialect as every day. Where is in this crossover, coherence and continuity?”] (1971: 52). The above passage describes the protagonist’s opinion about the school and explains the difference between the protagonist, who still lacks good French linguistic abilities, and his French peers. The protagonist faces a difficulty in coping with the transition; after learning to write and read in a linguistic system, he has to adjust himself to a new linguistic one that operates differently from the one he was acquainted with at the Qur’anic school. The linguistic difficulty is clearly explained in the narrator’s word when he says that the protagonist,

along with reading and writing a little classical Arabic without speaking it, can also read French without speaking it.

As it has mentioned earlier, the skill of reading and writing involves both visual and auditory skills. The protagonist, as he says, becomes tri-lingual and, in a sense, an incomplete polyglot. In addition, the narrator, while experiencing the two languages together, lacks the ability to perform very well. This proves the language discontinuity especially when it comes to learning the language of the other. The learning of the language of the sacred, Arabic, enables the narrator to read, write and make connections between grapheme and phoneme and, therefore, he can use these skills to improve his learning of French. The two language systems play a double-edged role for the protagonist: first, they provide an opportunity to widen his horizons; and second, they also create limitations for him. Colonization is an effort to impose the colonizer's way of life upon the colonized and to erase their way of life, including language. Thus, the only effective way for the colonizer to conduct an erasure is to impose their language as well as their cultural system upon the colonized. This is clearly stated in the text, when the narrator says: "A l'école un enseignement laïc imposé à ma religion" ["At school a secular education imposed on my religion"] (1971: 52).

In Morocco, the colonizer replaced Arabic with French in most institutions. This replacement took place easily, due to the high figures of illiteracy as well as to the difference between the classical Arabic and the widely spoken dialects of Moroccan Arabic. For Khatibi's generation, the introduction to Arabic writing and reading took place only at the Qur'anic schools; but, once they got enrolled in French educational institutions, they shifted to French as a mode of learning and teaching. They had Arabic only as a foreign language course. In a similar discussion, Assia Djebar explains that, during colonization, she had to learn English and Greek before Arabic. She adds that until high school students did not go to study Arabic.

Furthermore, the narrator mentions that he rarely read or wrote Arabic during his days at the French school. Yet, the narrator mentions that he has an affinity to Arabic poetry, especially the pre-Islamic one. In a revealing passage from the autobiography, the protagonist mentions that "La poésie fit le reste. Je l'aimai d'abord bédouine, brûlée dans l'allégorie, celle des bardes préislamiques et surtout Imrou Al Qaïs et sa tendre incantation" ["Poetry did the rest. I loved it first Bedouin, burned in allegory, that of pre-Islamic bards and especially Imrou Al Qais and his tender incantation"] (1971: 78). Later on in the autobiography, the narrator mentions that the protagonist reads some contemporary Arabic literary texts: "Grâce au frère aîné, je bifurquai un

moment vers le roman arabe moderne” [“Thanks to the elder brother, I bifurcated a moment towards the modern Arabic novel”] (1971: 86). In another scene, the narrator mentions “Antar”, “le barde arabe” [“the Arab bard”] (1971: 165), in a context of nomadic travels in the desert. The passages where the main character is presented reading Arabic texts are very rare. Also regarding the protagonist’s relationship to reading and writing Arabic, the narrator talks about a very short-lived experience of him trying to write some Arabic poetry. The move to the French school causes a radical impact on the protagonist’s reading and writing skills; most of his discussions, writings and readings will be related to French and French literature.

The introduction to French, the language of the colonizer, creates a sense of alienation, inferiority, and subordination for the protagonist. This feeling is expressed in some passages. For instance, during one of the protagonist’s composition classes, he felt a difficulty while he was trying to write a passage about winter in France. Another similar scene occurs when the narrator describes his opinion about the colonizer’s division of the year into seasons. The narrator says: “Les hommes qui me colonisaient et leurs enfants semblaient vivre au rythme des saisons, à l’harmonie cosmique cataloguée, retransmise. Jusqu’à dix-sept ans, je n’avais jamais vu ni la neige, ni la forêt, la vraie et la grande” [“The men who colonized me and their children seemed to live according to the rhythm of the seasons, to the cosmic harmony cataloged and transmitted. Until I was seventeen, I had never seen the snow or the forest, the true and the great”] (1971: 20). These types of tasks intensify the feeling of alienation for young Moroccan students. Why to ask them to write about events which they are not directly acquainted with? These methods of teaching at the French schools strengthen the colonizer’s dominance and manipulation of the colonized. These tasks create feelings of shame and place them in an inferior position, in comparison to their French classmates.

More importantly, the narrator talks about a child’s feeling of guilt and shame when facing a teacher who asks him to write a short account in French about winter in France; he also adds that producing such a piece of writing is beyond his conception: “Cela ne changeait rien de notre culpabilité, on se sentait des enfants conçus en dehors des livres, dans un imaginaire anonyme” [“It did not change our guilt, we felt children conceived outside books, in an anonymous imaginary”] (1971: 56). In fact, the colonizer does not only impose his language, but also erases the culture of the native. Frantz Fanon supports the previous argument in *A dying colonialist*. As he argues, “It is not the soil that is occupied. It is not the ports or the airdromes. French

colonialism has settled itself in the very center of the Algerian individual and has undertaken a sustained work of cleanup, of expulsion of self, of rationally pursued mutilation” (Fanon 1967: 65). Taking Fanon’s argument in consideration, the colonizer does not only aim at erasing the native culture, but also at replacing it with colonial cultural system and reference. Fanon refers to this as expulsion of the self and mutilation of itself and its identity (Fanon 1967: 65). In addition, the feeling of alienation grows tense when students read texts about which they have no previous reference or knowledge. Sometimes, the texts they read represent their native country, Morocco, from the colonizer’s perspective. For instance, the narrator provides an example of a text where Morocco is represented to students from a colonial angle:

Certes, le Maroc, dans ces textes, sous la forme d’un joyeux folklore, tuniques blanches, babouches vif écarlate, pastèques ensanglantées, et que dire? Un muezzin mécanique, enfourchant une humanité endormie et qui ne se réveillait que pour se mouiller le bout des doigts, ébauchant quelques génuflexions. La prière, c’était parler au vide. Etonnés par cette image de nous- mêmes, nous gloussions, un peu honteux. (57)

[Certainly, Morocco, in these texts, in the form of a merry folklore, white tunics, bright scarlet slippers, bloody watermelons, and what to say? A mechanical muezzin straddling a sleeping humanity and waking only to wet his fingertips, sketching a few genuflections. Prayer was talking in a vacuum. Surprised by this image of ourselves, we chuckled, a little ashamed.]

The students as well as the protagonist’s reaction to the above passage is, of course, to feel alienated and do their best to hide that part of themselves in which they feel inferior in the eyes of the colonizer. The Moroccan students’ culture undergoes an erasure, and so their sense of the self. Therefore, the sense of alienation the students feel pushes them to look for ways out to be like the Other. One of these ways out is to speak its language, French, and embrace a new identity. Fanon argues that this is the outcome of colonization, to push the colonized, while the colonizer’ sway of life and language are considered better than theirs. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon says “When we consider the efforts made to carry out the cultural estrangement so characteristic of the colonial epoch, we realize that nothing has been left to chance and that the total result looked for by colonial



domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness” (Fanon 1963: 210-211).

The narrator provides further descriptions about the protagonist’s desire to be one of the Other and his attempt to be accepted by the French, especially the French girls who are studying with him:

ces filles que je désirais profondément me caressaient de loin. Elles disaient que je différais de mes compatriotes. On m’acceptait parce que j’étais semblable, annihilant d’avance toute mon enfance, toute ma culture. Devant un tel plaisir complexe, je me mis des moustaches et une cravate de soie ariolée. Le personnage se donnait un certain air dévergondé. J’apprenais aux autres à écrire leur propre langue. (Abdelkebir 1971: 112)

[Those girls that I deeply desired caressed me from afar. They said that I differed from my compatriots. I was accepted because I was alike, annihilating in advance all my childhood, all my culture. In front of such a complex pleasure, I put on mustaches and a motley silk tie. The character gave himself a certain shameless look. I taught others to write their own language.]

In the above passage, the use of the word “personage” is a reference to the past self. For the protagonist, this character is obsolete and unrecognizable. In addition, this reference suggests that this adaptation is like someone playing a temporary role. Any attempt to fit in, to belong or to accommodate with the French will result in a double failure: the protagonist will end up losing himself and not achieving his goal. In another passage, the narrator confirms that he had a dream of being like the Other. He says “J’étais un autre Vivre, le jour et la nuit, de rêves empruntés, était l’image absente d’un corps déréalisé, comme traversé par une simple divagation d’un désir contourné, vibratoire et jamais nommé” [“I was another Living, day and night, borrowed dreams, was the image absent from a derealized body, as if traversed by a simple divagation of a desire bypassed, vibratory and never named”] (1971: 81). This shows how the protagonist’s desire to fit into the colonizer’s way of life and speak their language is stronger.

The narrator continues, as it has just been mentioned, narrating that young Abdelkebir does his best to be amongst the others and even to excel at what is supposed to be theirs. The scene of the protagonist teaching others how to write their own language shows that Abdelkebir reaches a very high level of proficiency in his learning of French. Also, this shows how learning French

has contributed to the development of Khatibi and has paved the way for him to intellectually prosper through reading French books and using French to articulate his ideas. For many colonized intellectuals, learning French serves as a new kind of conquest of the Other. Through mastering the language of the Other, one can taste freedom and no more feel alienated (Rushdie 1991: 17). This desire of mastering the language of the colonizer is common amongst many colonized intellectuals. For instance, Albert Memmi, in his *La Statue de Sel*, tells us about his efforts in giving private lessons in French to help his classmates with their homework (Memmi 1966). Assia Djébar has also spoken about her desire to excel in her class and master the French : “Je me suis dit: «Le français n’est pas ma langue mais je vais être la meilleure. Si je suis la meilleure dans cette langue, ce sera une manière de montrer qu’à travers moi tous les miens sont aussi bons que vous! »” [“I said to myself : « French is not my language, but I am going to be the best. If I am the best in this language, this will be a way to prove that, through me, all my people is so good as you!»”] (Djébar 1996: 82).

The strong motivation to master the language of the Other and excel its native speakers reflects a sense of ambivalence towards the statues of the colonizer’s language. Learning French, though mastering it, produces a sense of inferiority and a feeling of alienation in our protagonist, but it also introduces him to a wide range of French literature to read and write about.

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# ENTRETIEN AVEC JEAN-PIERRE BROUILLAUD SUR *MA VIE AVEC CONTUMACE* (2018)

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## Résumé

Entretien avec l'écrivain français Jean-Pierre Brouillaud, mené par des étudiants du lycée Jean Moulin (Saint-Amand-Montrond), sous la responsabilité d'Elisabeth Doustin, leur professeur de littérature. Après une introduction à l'expérience didactique, à la biographie de Monsieur Brouillaud et à son oeuvre variée, l'auteur est interrogé à propos de son roman *Ma vie avec Contumace* (Buchet-Chastel, 2018) et sur des questions générales d'écriture.

**Mot-clés:** roman, écrivain, français, Jean-Pierre Brouillaud, entretien

# INTERVIEW TO JEAN-PIERRE BROUILLAUD ABOUT *MA VIE AVEC CONTUMACE* (2018)

## Abstract

Interview to French writer Jean-Pierre Brouillaud, carried out by French high school students, under the guide of their Literature professor, Elisabeth Doustin. After an introduction to the didactic experience and to Brouillaud's life and multifarious production, the author is interviewed about his novel *Ma vie avec Contumace* (2018) and general issues of writing.

**Keywords:** novel, writer, French, Jean-Pierre Brouillaud, interview

# ENTRETIEN AVEC JEAN-PAUL BROUILLARD SUR *MA VIE AVEC CONTUMACE* (2018)

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## 1. Introduction

Un écrivain au Lycée : Jean-Pierre Brouillaud

Le 18 mai 2018, Jean-Pierre Brouillaud, écrivain et dramaturge, vient au Lycée Jean Moulin de Saint-Amand-Montrond pour rencontrer ses jeunes lecteurs : élèves de seconde et de première (environ 100 élèves). Chacune des classes a lu et étudié son nouveau roman *Ma vie avec Contumace*, paru aux éditions Buchet-Chastel, le 1er février 2018. Les adolescents sont enthousiastes à l'idée de rencontrer un « écrivain vivant ».

Ils ont réécrit, chacun à sa manière, un chapitre de l'œuvre. Ils ont ainsi substitué au point de vue du narrateur celui de son poisson rouge nommé Contumace ou celui de sa petite amie la fleuriste. Quelques-uns viennent lire leur travail devant l'auteur.

Dans chaque classe, les élèves ont préparé des questions et l'auteur se prête volontiers à leur interview. C'est un moment convivial et l'échange est enrichissant.

L'un des temps forts de ces rencontres est musical : pour faire plaisir à son public, l'auteur interprète, en s'accompagnant à la guitare, l'une de ses dernières chansons, Les Trois Grâces, qui séduit les élèves par son humour et son rythme entraînant.

Les adolescents sont pleins d'admiration pour cet artiste qui « sait tout faire », comme ils disent, et ils se précipitent pour lui faire dédicacer leur exemplaire de *Ma vie avec Contumace*.

## 2. Présentation de Jean-Pierre Brouillaud

A côté de son métier de juriste (Maître de conférences en droit à l'université), Jean-Pierre Brouillaud a toujours développé différentes activités artistiques axées sur l'écriture. Il est l'auteur d'une vingtaine de chansons déposées à la SACEM, et, dans sa jeunesse, a réalisé beaucoup de concerts, en tant qu'auteur-compositeur-interprète, dans des cabarets et cafés-concerts parisiens.

Il a écrit quatre romans, publiés aux éditions Buchet-Chastel, et remarqués par la critique : *Jeu, set et match* en 2009, *Martin Martin* en 2013, *Les petites rébellions* en 2015, et *Ma vie avec Contumace* en 2018.

Il est également l'auteur d'une pièce de théâtre, *J'admire l'aisance avec laquelle tu prends des décisions catastrophiques*, créée au Festival d'Avignon 2017, puis jouée pendant quatre mois à Paris en 2018-2019 au Studio Hébertot. Elle est interprétée par Mathilde Lebrequier et Renaud Danner, et mise en scène par Eric Verdin.

En juin 2020, il publie *Douze*, monologue en alexandrins, aux éditions Antisthène. Le texte devrait être porté sur scène en 2021.

Une autre pièce est en cours de production et un nouveau roman en cours d'écriture.

### 3. Résumé de *Ma vie avec Contumace*

Il est champion de scrabble, s'entraîne et joue chaque jour. Ce qui a un peu déteint sur son cerveau et son rapport aux mots. Il a des parents, respectueux, distants mais légèrement inquiets de la solitude dans laquelle il s'obstine. Il les rassure en affirmant qu'il n'est pas seul puisqu'il vit avec Contumace, un aimable poisson rouge qui tourne dans son bocal à la vitesse précise, harmonieuse et rassurante de dix-sept tours par minute. Un matin, pourtant, un événement étrange va perturber ce petit monde, puisque le narrateur trouve le tableau de la Joconde dans son salon ...

## 4. Questions

### 4.1. Sources d'inspirations

*Quelle a été l'idée à l'origine de Ma Vie avec Contumace ? (Valentin, 1e s 1)*

—Une idée m'est venue un jour à l'esprit : un homme se réveille un matin et trouve le tableau de la Joconde dans son salon. Pourquoi cette idée ? Je n'en sais rien ... Souvent des idées surgissent, qui semblent constituer un point de départ pour un roman, mais il faut se méfier des « fausses bonnes idées » ... La plupart du temps, elles ne mènent à rien. Celle-ci, pourtant, a longtemps trotté dans ma tête, et me plaisait par son aspect totalement saugrenu. J'y ai donc beaucoup réfléchi, j'ai peu à peu tiré les fils qu'il y avait à tirer, et une histoire est née. J'ai surtout voulu, autour de ce point de départ absurde, imaginer un personnage particulier, à qui cette aventure surréaliste pourrait arriver. Je crois que dans tout ce que j'écris, les histoires, les péripéties, les aventures qui étayent le récit ne sont finalement pas l'essentiel : elles ne servent qu'à révéler des personnages.

*Etes-vous champion de scrabble comme votre narrateur ? (Lauriane, Thomas 2nd 3)*

—Je ne suis pas du tout un champion, mais je suis un grand amateur de scrabble, et je me suis donc servi dans le roman de ce centre d'intérêt personnel. J'ai même été inscrit pendant un an dans un club de scrabble, et je me suis inspiré de cette expérience. Dans la construction de ce narrateur si singulier, cela me semblait pertinent. Le narrateur est un personnage hors normes, asocial, en décalage avec la société, et sa passion pour le scrabble contribue à cette singularité, car cela finit par avoir des incidences sur son rapport aux mots, et donc, par voie de conséquence, aux gens autour de lui. Comment avoir avec autrui des relations normales ou des échanges compréhensibles, lorsque l'on est profondément perverti par la passion du scrabble, qui fait que l'on peut réciter tous les mots qui existent, mais sans en connaître forcément la signification ? Car c'est le principe même du scrabble : un champion doit avoir en mémoire les mots, mais le sens de ceux-ci peut lui échapper ! C'est un peu ce qui arrive au narrateur.

*Avez-vous aussi, comme votre narrateur, une phobie de l'avion ? (Hugo, 1e s 1)*

—Oui ! Même si mes romans sont tous des œuvres de fiction, j'y glisse toujours beaucoup d'éléments personnels, qui peuvent être aussi bien des épisodes réellement autobiographiques que des sentiments ou sensations enfouis en moi. En l'occurrence, je partage un certain nombre de caractères avec le narrateur, comme mon intérêt pour le scrabble, une difficulté, peut-être, à trouver parfois sa place dans la société, et, donc, aussi, la peur de l'avion. Être suspendu en l'air pendant des heures me semble hautement inquiétant ... Mais lorsqu'il m'arrive de le prendre, je me comporte tout de même plus discrètement et rationnellement que mon personnage !

#### **4.2. La création : choix romanesques et structure de l'œuvre**

*Pourquoi ne pas avoir donné de prénom à votre narrateur ? (Clément 2nd 4)*

—Lorsque j'écris un roman, il se passe un phénomène étrange. Parfois, un prénom ou un nom surgissent assez vite dans mon esprit pour désigner tel ou tel personnage ; parfois, non ... J'en accepte l'augure. Si aucun nom ne vient spontanément, j'ai tendance à penser qu'il ne faut pas forcer les choses, et que c'est sans doute le signe que ce personnage n'a pas besoin d'être nommé. En l'occurrence, aucun nom ne m'est venu spontanément pour qualifier le



narrateur. Je pense, a posteriori, que l'explication est la suivante : ce personnage est tellement singulier par son tempérament et son caractère qu'il n'a pas besoin d'être identifié par une appellation ; il est déjà suffisamment identifié par lui-même, par sa personnalité insaisissable. Un personnage plus terne, comme le poisson rouge, nécessite sans doute, lui, d'être clairement désigné, par un nom si possible original, afin de le faire sortir de sa banalité : « Contumace » m'est venu rapidement à l'esprit.

*Pourquoi avoir choisi un narrateur autiste ? (Lucas, 2nd 4)*

—Je ne sais pas si le narrateur est véritablement autiste. A aucun moment dans le roman je ne qualifie le mal dont il souffre (à supposer d'ailleurs que ce soit un mal). Il est vrai que beaucoup d'éléments peuvent faire penser à l'autisme, ou à l'image que l'on s'en fait : le côté obsessionnel du personnage, ses phobies, ses difficultés relationnelles, ses dons fulgurants dans certains domaines ... Mais je n'ai pas voulu affirmer les choses, pour ne pas enfermer le personnage dans des limites trop clairement préétablies. Je n'ai d'ailleurs, pour ce roman, réalisé aucune recherche ou étude sur l'autisme, qui est un phénomène que je connais fort mal. Je voulais juste que ce personnage soit original, drôle (même si c'est parfois à ses dépens), et, surtout, attachant, voire poétique. Chacun peut faire sur lui son propre « diagnostic ». La seule certitude, c'est que le narrateur est en effet très spécial ...

*Est-ce ce choix qui engage le roman dans une structure répétitive ? (Amélie, 2nd 3)*

—Dans les traits de caractère étranges du personnage, je me suis plu en effet à imaginer une tendance à l'obsession, à la monomanie, et à la répétition. Cela me semblait logique dans la construction du personnage, qui se rassure, sans doute, par ces répétitions incessantes qui tournent dans sa tête. Sur le plan littéraire, cela permettait aussi de jouer avec les mots, en ressassant les mêmes phrases mais avec toujours une petite nuance, une infime différence, un peu à la façon de Perec-très modestement- dans son petit livre sur l'art de demander une augmentation à son chef de service (un chef d'œuvre) ...

*Pourquoi élire un poisson comme animal de compagnie qui donne la réplique au narrateur ? (Aurélie, 1e s 1, Dorian, 2nd 3)*

—Je souhaitais choisir un animal particulièrement insignifiant, et le poisson rouge me semble être l'animal le plus insignifiant qui soit (je présente mes excuses à tous les admirateurs de cet animal, qui recèle peut-être des trésors cachés que j'ignore ...). Le narrateur parle de son animal, et à son animal,

comme s'il s'agissait d'un être humain. Il le personnifie complètement. Pour que cela crée un décalage, un effet comique ou absurde, pour que cela accentue le grotesque de la situation, il fallait donc que cet animal soit totalement quelconque et effacé. Avec un chien ou un chat, par exemple, je pense que le résultat aurait été moins drôle ou moins dérangeant.

*Pourquoi avoir choisi une fin ouverte ? (Laure, 1e s 1)*

—Le point de départ du roman (un homme trouve un matin la Joconde dans son salon) pourrait laisser penser qu'il s'agit d'une sorte de comédie policière, et que la clé de l'énigme se trouve à la fin de l'histoire. Mais ce n'est pas du tout le cas. Je n'avais absolument pas la volonté d'écrire ce type de livre. Il n'y a dans ce roman rien de rationnel. Je pense que le récit flotte dans une étrange ambiance, légèrement absurde et surréaliste, que crée le personnage central, si particulier dans son rapport à la vie et son compagnonnage avec Contumace. Plus j'avais dans l'histoire, plus les repères rationnels volaient en éclats. Ce n'était pas nécessairement un choix de ma part, mais je crois m'être laissé porter par la douce folie de mon narrateur. Et tout ce cheminement conduit en effet à une fin qui n'explique rien, qui pose sans doute plus de questions qu'elle n'en résout, et qui permet à chaque lecteur d'interpréter les événements -réels ou inventés par le narrateur ?- à sa guise. Je peux imaginer que les amateurs de rationalité en conçoivent une certaine frustration ...

### **4.3. Questions plus personnelles**

*Pour quelle raison avez-vous commencé à écrire ? (Loris, 2<sup>nd</sup> 4)*

—Je crains que ce ne soit une question sans réponse ... Une certitude : on écrit parce qu'on en ressent le besoin. Un mystère : pourquoi en ressent-on le besoin ? Une explication un peu facile, souvent avancée : la douleur de l'écrivain ... L'écrivain écrit parce qu'il souffre, et il souffre en écrivant ... Il y a dans cette théorie un fond de vérité certain : une personne parfaitement heureuse, bien dans sa peau, et dépourvue de toute faille existentielle, ne se lancera sans doute pas dans l'écriture, ou la création artistique en général. Mais il y a aussi beaucoup de gens qui souffrent et n'écrivent pas ! L'explication de la « douleur » me semble donc très réductrice. La douleur fait évidemment partie de l'écriture, elle en est peut-être un fondement et un ressort, mais parmi beaucoup d'autres. Car l'écriture apporte aussi une profonde exaltation et constitue un vrai plaisir. J'écris donc parce que j'en

ressens l'envie et la nécessité. C'est un peu court, comme réponse, j'en ai conscience ...

*Comment se passe le quotidien d'un écrivain ? (Elias, 2<sup>nd</sup> 3)*

—Comme beaucoup d'écrivains (peu vivent de leur plume), j'exerce simultanément un autre métier (je suis enseignant à l'université). Je dois donc « jongler » entre ces deux professions, ce qui est rendu possible par le fait que l'activité universitaire laisse une grande liberté d'organisation personnelle de son temps. Je n'ai donc pas de rythme d'écriture très régulier car je suis tributaire de ces contraintes extérieures, mais dès que j'en ai la possibilité, dès que j'ai quelques heures disponibles devant moi, je me consacre à l'écriture littéraire. Lorsque je suis en train d'écrire un roman, il flotte en permanence dans ma tête, et j'ai toujours hâte de le retrouver sur le papier ...

*Avez-vous une autre passion que l'écriture et le chant ? (Lossa, 2<sup>nd</sup> 4)*

—J'ai toujours écrit, depuis mon plus jeune âge. D'abord des poèmes, puis des chansons, puis sont venus les romans et le théâtre. Même si j'ai d'autres centres d'intérêt (le tennis, notamment !), l'écriture, sous ces différentes formes, est donc ma véritable passion, l'activité qui me fait vibrer (ainsi que la lecture, évidemment, qui est la source de tout). Le tennis a quand même occupé dans ma vie une place si importante que, d'une certaine façon, mon premier roman, « Jeu, set et match », paru en 2009, lui est consacré, puisque l'histoire tourne autour d'un très grand champion de l'histoire tennistique, Guillermo Vilas.

*Quels sont vos projets actuels ? Etes-vous en train d'écrire un livre actuellement ? (Mathilde, 2<sup>nd</sup> 3)*

—Plusieurs projets sont en cours. D'abord, ma première pièce de théâtre, « J'admire l'aisance avec laquelle tu prends des décisions catastrophiques », créée au Festival d'Avignon 2017, va être jouée à Paris, dans le beau Studio Hébertot, à partir du 29 novembre 2018, et j'en suis très heureux. La pièce est interprétée par deux comédiens formidables, Mathilde Lebrequier et Renaud Danner, et mise en scène par l'excellent Éric Verdin. Je suis par ailleurs en train de terminer l'écriture d'une autre pièce de théâtre. Enfin, j'ai l'idée de mon prochain roman, et j'ai déjà pris beaucoup de notes. Je pense en commencer la rédaction très prochainement, et espère pouvoir le terminer fin 2019.

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MARTIN M. WINKLER (ED.) (2015). *RETURN TO TROY: NEW ESSAYS ON THE HOLLYWOOD EPIC*.

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Martin M. Winkler (ed.) (2015). *Return to Troy: New Essays on the Hollywood Epic*. Leiden and Boston: Brill. Pp. x, 284. ISBN 9789004292765.

Cuando en 2004 se estrenó en cines mundialmente la superproducción *Troy*, dirigida por W. Petersen, causó un gran impacto en el público general, pero también en el mundo académico. Aprovechando el éxito de *Gladiator* (R. Scott, 2000), Hollywood consolidaba el renacimiento del cine de romanos y griegos. El mismo año de *Troya* se estrenó *Alexander* (O. Stone), que no tuvo tanto éxito de audiencia al salirse de los cánones del género. La popularidad de *Troy* provocó que las ventas de las traducciones de la *Iliada* se disparasen, pero también creó en el imaginario colectivo, gracias al poder de las imágenes, una serie de iconos, estereotipos e ideas sobre la materia troyana que el público aceptaba como “verdaderos”. Parte del mundo académico juzgó negativamente la película como una desviación casi “herética” de los cánones homéricos, a veces sin valorar que en la propia antigüedad y en la tradición posterior las versiones del mito habían sido variables y muy distintas entre sí. Hubo otros, como M. M. Winkler, que aprovecharon el tirón mediático para editar relativamente pronto una serie de estudios sobre la propia historia de Troya y sus adaptaciones cinematográficas en el volumen colectivo *Troy. From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic* (Blackwell, 2007). El propio Winkler volvió más adelante sobre la misma película en este libro que ahora nos ocupa. En su justificación para “regresar a Troya” cobra gran importancia el hecho de que en 2007 W. Petersen editara en DVD una versión del director con metraje añadido y un nuevo montaje de algunas escenas que variaban y, en cierto modo, completaban el filme original emitido en cines.

Coincido con el planteamiento de Winkler de que la película no debe estudiarse tanto en cuanto se asemeja o no a las fuentes clásicas, sino que constituye en sí misma una nueva interpretación del mito que debe añadirse a las existentes, formando lo que él acertadamente denomina *posthomerica cinematographica* (p. 263). El análisis de la película debería hacerse no solo consignando las desviaciones, sino estudiando por qué se han producido estas, buscando las motivaciones del autor del guion, del director, de la producción e incluso las fuentes que estos han utilizado, tanto literarias como cinematográficas.

Este volumen, a mi juicio, responde en diversa medida a estos interrogantes. Los dos primeros capítulos, dedicados a una entrevista con el director y a reproducir las notas de rodaje de su hijo, contienen sugerente material para indagar en las motivaciones de los creadores de la cinta. Por su parte, la mayoría de los capítulos restantes, con todo el rigor académico posible, coinciden en transmitir que en la película hay mucho más Homero o temas homéricos de lo que podría parecer a simple vista, es decir, defienden que las decisiones de los creadores no han sido tomadas a la ligera, por cuanto muchos indicios demuestran que conocían los datos literarios e iconográficos considerados canónicos. Casi todos los autores del volumen son filólogos, lo que les capacita ampliamente para indagar en las fuentes literarias, pero les impide a veces ponerlas en relación con las características propias del medio cinematográfico. Echo, pues, de menos, si bien es cierto que se apuntan algunos datos en este sentido en ciertas contribuciones, algún capítulo en la línea de los *Classical Reception Studies* que ahondara en las fuentes cinematográficas y sobre todo en los mecanismos de la transmisión de la cultura popular responsable en gran parte de los cambios operados con respecto a la tradición homérica. Hablo de temas como el deseo del público del *happy end* o el trasfondo político y social del momento de producción que pudieron influir en la presentación de determinados temas de la cinta. También habría sido interesante investigar el impacto que la película tuvo en el público como forjadora de estereotipos, ya que para muchos habrá sido el único contacto con el mundo homérico. Por otro lado, como suele suceder en los volúmenes colectivos sobre un mismo tema, se producen repeticiones que se hacen notar sobre todo cuando se lee la obra de forma seguida.

No obstante, estas reflexiones no empañan en absoluto la calidad de los diez trabajos del volumen, cada uno con objetivos y conclusiones bien definidas, que paso a examinar a continuación. El libro comienza con una introducción a cargo del editor titulada “Troy Revisited” (pp. 1-15), en la que expone las razones que le llevaron a coordinar este nuevo volumen, como la

ya aludida de la edición de la versión del director en DVD. El autor ensalza las virtudes de *Troy* frente a otras producciones ambientadas en la Antigüedad que aparecieron tras esta. No comparto la descalificación que se hace del *Alexander* de Stone, que es una de las mejores cintas sobre el mundo griego jamás realizadas, por más que el gran público no la acogiera favorablemente, debido a la complejidad que ofrecía, que sin embargo estaba ya en el propio Alejandro histórico y legendario. Tampoco suscribo sus impresiones negativas sobre *The Passion* de Mel Gibson, que es juzgada a la ligera y no en su contexto cristiano. De igual modo *300* de Zack Snyder, que ciertamente no es una gran película, debe en todo caso ser valorada no por su fidelidad a los hechos narrados por Heródoto, ya ellos mismos una interpretación, sino más bien en su relación con el cómic que la inspiró y en los acontecimientos contemporáneos. Así mismo los recientes estrenos en 2014 de *The Legend of Hercules* (Renny Harlin), *Hercules* (Brett Ratner) y *Pompeii* (Paul W.S. Anderson) tienen que ser juzgados no por su calidad cinematográfica, sino como ejemplos de un intento de renacimiento del espíritu de serie B del género del péplum, consistente en que la aventura y el entretenimiento priman sobre el rigor histórico.

El primer capítulo, “Wolfgang Petersen on Homer and *Troy*” (pp. 16-26), reproduce una entrevista realizada por Winkler al director de la película en el invierno de 2010, que incluye opiniones del creador que clarifican algunas de las elecciones realizadas que han causado controversia. En el capítulo 2, “Live from *Troy*: Embedded in the Trojan War” (pp. 27-47), el hijo del director David Petersen enlaza datos del rodaje y anécdotas personales con un estilo periodístico que contrasta con el tono académico del resto de los trabajos del volumen, pero ofrece curiosidades del momento de producción de la película que interesarán a los cinéfilos. Tras este capítulo se incluyen una serie de fotografías del rodaje cedidas por David (pp. 49-64) que constituyen un documento de primera mano. Lástima que la inclusión de estas fotos haya obligado al editor a prescindir de otras que podrían ilustrar los otros capítulos del libro. No obstante, la amplia divulgación de la película en DVD y televisión suple esta carencia. Muchos lectores tienen en su mente las imágenes de la cinta y pueden recurrir a su memoria o a volver a visionar la película para ilustrar las referencias que se hacen en los diversos trabajos. El tercer capítulo, escrito por Eleonora Cavallini y titulado “In the Footsteps of Homeric Narrative: Anachronisms and Other Supposed Mistakes in *Troy*” (pp. 65-85), defiende la autonomía artística de la película para desviarse del mito canónico, con el argumento de que la propia materia troyana ya tuvo múltiples interpretaciones en la Antigüedad. La misma *Ilíada* era a su vez una

amalgama de mitos y noticias precedentes: esta mezcla se revela, por ejemplo, en las descripciones del armamento, que impiden una reconstrucción exacta. La autora pasa revista a las soluciones de la cinta sobre los aspectos bélicos, la arquitectura palacial y religiosa o la representación de los héroes y heroínas, contrastándolas con la tradición homérica. El capítulo 4, “Petersen’s Epic Technique: *Troy* and Its Homeric Model” (pp. 86-107), escrito por Wolfgang Kofler y Florian Schaffenrath, insiste en la argumentación de que en *Troy* hay mucho más Homero de lo que a simple vista parece: alude a aspectos tales como la ira de Aquiles, la muerte de Patroclo o la transposición cinematográfica del epíteto épico “pies ligeros”, referido a Aquiles, o del “astuto” Odiseo. Su conclusión es que la técnica del director se inspira fuertemente en los recursos literarios de la *Iliada*, aunque realizando su oportuna adaptación al medio cinematográfico. El quinto capítulo, “*Troy* and the Cinematic Afterlife of Homeric Gods”, escrito por el propio Winkler y el más largo de todos (pp. 108-164), ahonda con multitud de ejemplos en la presencia o ausencia de los dioses en las películas de temática mitológica, sobre todo en aquellas que versan de algún modo sobre los contenidos de *Iliada* y *Odisea*.

Los tres siguientes capítulos son análisis detallados y certeros de los principales personajes de la película, puestos en relación con sus antecedentes literarios y filmicos. El capítulo 6, “Achilles and Patroclus in *Troy*” (pp. 165-179), de Horst-Dieter Blume, explica la transformación del valeroso Patroclo homérico en el primo de Aquiles, que necesita ser protegido. En el 7, “Odysseus in *Troy*” (pp. 180-190), a cargo de Bruce Loudon, es el rey de Ítaca el que resulta beneficiado por la versión del director, que lo caracteriza en su doble faceta de hombre astuto e intermediario entre Agamenón y Aquiles, al tiempo que es elegido por Petersen para ser el narrador de la historia. Barbara P. Weinlich en el capítulo 9, “New Briseis in *Troy*” (pp. 191-202), presenta la nueva visión que la versión del director hace de la Briseida homérica, que se convierte en una mujer fuerte, ejemplo de empoderamiento femenino.

Los tres últimos capítulos dejan los análisis particulares para centrarse en la tradición posterior cinematográfica y popular de la *Iliada*. Antonio M. Martín Rodríguez en el capítulo 9, “The Fall of Troy: Intertextual Presences in Wolfgang Petersen’s Film” (pp. 203-223), analiza el momento de la caída de Troya en la película teniendo en cuenta las fuentes literarias, especialmente el libro 2 de la *Eneida*, así como otras producciones cinematográficas anteriores, incluyendo algunas que no están ambientadas en el mundo clásico, como *Salvar al soldado Ryan* o *El Señor de los anillos*. Particularmente interesantes resultan las reflexiones que presenta al comienzo de su estudio



sobre la Tradición Clásica y la cultura popular. Jon Solomon, el pionero en los estudios de la tradición clásica en el cine con su obra fundacional *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, original de 1978 (segunda edición revisada: Solomon & Novak 2001; traducción española: Solomon 2002), escribe “Homer’s *Iliad* in Popular Culture: The Roads to *Troy*” (pp. 234-254), donde recorre la fortuna de la *Iliada* y de la materia troyana en la cultura popular desde finales del siglo XIX hasta nuestros días, incluyendo su presencia en algunas producciones no ambientadas en la Antigüedad. La conclusión es que la *Odisea* ha calado mucho más en el público general por sus peculiares características (un solo personaje principal y episodios fantásticos), frente a la mayor complejidad de la *Iliada*. Las adaptaciones de esta tienden a centrarse en los amores de Paris y Helena como eje narrativo o en el enfrentamiento entre Aquiles y Héctor, sin que falten la caída de Troya y el famoso caballo, ya desde el comienzo del cine mudo. El libro contiene un último estudio a modo de apéndice, “Coda: On Cinematic Tributes to Homer and the *Iliad*” (pp. 255-263), también escrito por Winkler, que incluye varios ejemplos más de la presencia del propio poeta Homero y temas de la *Iliada* en las producciones cinematográficas. El volumen concluye con una amplia bibliografía (pp. 265-277) y dos índices, uno de producciones cinematográficas y televisivas mencionadas (pp. 278-280) y otro de tipo general (pp. 281-284).

Para terminar, suscribo las palabras de Antonio M. Martín Rodríguez (p. 223) que a mi entender resumen a la perfección el espíritu y el objetivo de todo el libro: “*Troy* will leave its imprint on the collective imagination of a whole generation, creating a certain powerful image of its main heroes. Just for that reason, it deserves our admiration, our study, and our respect”.

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