General section
Complete peer-reviewed articles in one file for ease of downloading or printing

Christopher Anyokwu, ‘The Essentials of Niyi Osundare's Poetry’

Nathalie Camerlynck, ‘Cat in the Throat: Caroline Bergvall's plurilingual bodies’

Hamza Chafii, ‘A Linguistic Investigation of the Main Concepts of Amazigh Poetry in Morocco and Algeria’


Konstantina Georganta, ‘1950s Athens as Palimpsest: A BBC Radio Play by Louis MacNeice’

Wendy Jones Nakanishi, ‘The ‘Insider Outsider’ in Iris Murdoch’s Bruno’s Dream and Kazuo Ishiguro’s The Remains of the Day’
The Essentials of Niyi Osundare’s Poetry

Christopher Anyokwu

Literary historians in Nigeria are wont to credit Niyi Osundare with being the leading light or champion of a new kind of poetry, a poetry fundamentally different both in thematic concerns and style from that of the preceding generation of the so-called Ibadan-Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry. However, as some critics have argued, every age has a way of producing its own human medium through which it expresses its peculiar socio-cultural spiritus mundi. Accordingly, Osundare arrived on the literary scene at a time which shaped and prepared him for the task of freeing up poetry from the prison-house of obscurity in which the Soyinka generation was said to have put it. The socio-cultural and historical background or context of Osundare’s emergence – family, schooling, village setting, prevailing ideology, et cetera – went a long way in moulding and shaping him for the kind of poetry for which he has come to be known, namely: the poetry of performance. But before we go into details of his unique kind of poetry, it is proper for us to, first and foremost, pause to reflect on the shaping/gestative impact of these features of his development both as a man and, more to our purpose, a poet.

Niyi Osundare was born to Ariyoosu Osundare, poet, singer, drummer, and farmer, and Fasimia, ‘Indigo Fingers/Weaver of fabrics and fables’. Clearly, Osundare has inherited his parents’ artistic predilections and creative nous as it is very easy to make the connection between his own prodigious oeuvre and his parentage. Also, he was born and bred in an Ikere-Ekiti, famed for collectivism or a communitarian ethos, a primal communalism which fertilised his mind to receive the Afrocentric teaching he received at school, notably at the University of Ibadan under the late Professor Oyin Ogunba, who during the heyday of colonial (mis)education swam against the eddies of popular opinion by introducing his charges to the beauties and literary qualities of African oral literature. Thus, as part of the momentous wave of the decolonisation project, Osundare, alongside his fellow post-Civil War poets, embraced the Leninist-Marxist ideology which was sweeping large swathes of the so-called Third World and the rest of the developing world. His ideological affiliation was only deepened by his sojourn in Leeds, UK and York, Toronto (Canada) where he had travelled for further studies. This ideological intercourse between Africa and the West naturally bred in Osundare a good sense of nativism and cosmopolitanism, or, if you please, you may call it internationalism and neo-traditionalism. These aforementioned elements of the poet’s formative years seemed to have predisposed him to reject and revolt against certain aspects of ‘tradition’ as he decided to create his own unique brand of Afro-centric, orally-informed poetry.

What do we mean by ‘Tradition’ in this regard? Simply put, ‘Tradition’ here implies the sum of the pre-existing body of both written and non-written forms of poetry to which the living poet stands as heir or inheritor. Therefore, ‘Tradition’ approximates to both oral and written Yoruba poetry, African poetry in English expression and non-African poetry in English. As part of his

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4 Adagbonyin 84.
own development, Osundare, willy-nilly, must have read and studied these works in order to cut his own teeth, as he has on several occasions confessed. The scenario that is unfolding before us here is an interesting re-dramatisation of T.S. Eliot’s seminal essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. The poet stands on the shoulders of his predecessors the better to fashion out his own work, and what comes through as his claim to originality is a dexterous and deft personalisation of Tradition, i.e., ‘the masterpieces of the past’. It is fairly common that, in order for an emergent poet to acquire distinctiveness or originality, he or she must undergo a sublimated ritual of artistic parricide, an operation analogous to a kind of Oedipal Complex in which the ephēbe or latecomer-poet seeks to ‘decapitate’ or squash the precursor-poet’s testicles. In the wake of the precursor’s (virtual) demise, the ephēbe-poet has ample imaginative space to create his/her work. This Bloomian complex partly accounts for Osundare’s revolt against the ancien régime represented in this case by Soyinka, Clark, Echeruo and Okigbo. According to Biodun Jeyifo, the Ibadan-Nsukka generational cohort ‘deployed diction and a metaphoric, highly allusive universe calculated to exclude all but a small coterie of specialists.’ For his own part, Funso Ayiejina charges this school of Nigerian poetry with ‘an excessive preoccupation with the poet’s private grief and emotions over and above societal tragedies and triumphs’. Aiyejina continues, ‘it was also a poetry distinguished by an undue eurocentrism, deviationism, obscurantism and private esotericism.’ Thus, Jeyifo posits that Osundare inaugurated ‘a revolution in poetry and poetry of revolution’. It is on this score that we may begin to tease out, in line with our topic, ‘the Essentials of Niyi Osundare’s poetry’.

In Songs of the Marketplace, Osundare sets forth the essentials of his poetry, particularly in his manifesto-poem captioned ‘Poetry Is’:

Poetry is
not the esoteric whisper
of an excluding tongue
not a claptrap
for a wondering audience
not a learned quiz
entombed in Grecoroman lore

Poetry is
A lifespring
which gathers timbre
the more throats it plucks
harbinger of action
the more minds it stirs

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6 Adagbonyin 69-75.
12 Ayieji a p 112.
13 Jeyifo ix.
The Essentials of Niyi Osundare's Poetry. Christopher Anyokwu.

Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.

A Wordsworthian reformulation of the definition of poetry, the phrase ‘man/meaning/to/man’ conceives of poetry as a common currency of discourse with ramified implications for language, class and social bonding, for profit and pleasure. This Osundaresque disembourgeoisement or/and demystification of the language of poetry is an oblique broadside against the poetic practice of the Soyinka-Clark-Okigbo coterie, and, more broadly, resurrects the age-old controversy over what really constitutes poetry qua poetry. Is it just a creative transgression of grammatical rules, what the Russian formalists refer to as ‘organised violence committed on language’? or is poetry a verbal or linguistic will-o-the-wisp, a jigsaw-puzzle? Does sound matter any longer in poetry, as Alexander Pope epigrammatically chimes, to wit: ‘sound must echo sense’? As we go along in this excursus we shall attempt to provide answers to these questions. In the meantime, let us draw attention to what I like to call the ‘Democracy of poetry’ which Osundare’s verse, of course, inimitably exemplifies. Very much in the Wordsworthian vein, Osundare also revolted against the cult of ‘poetic diction’ by deploying the colourful patois of city waifs and strays and hobos bereft of material assets but amazingly rich in street wisdom manifested always through what Osundare calls ‘the spontaneous wit of touts’. The people’s poet, as Osundare is fondly

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14 Osundare, Songs of the Marketplace 3-4.
called, uses everyday people and issues as fit and proper subjects of verse making. Topicality and public-mindedness are enhanced in his work through a strong element of ideological vision and clarity of purpose. To be sure, Osundare’s poetry is empowered and driven by the dual propulsive forces of literature, namely: *utile* (utility or social functionality) and *dulce* (aesthetic delight or the sensuous pleasure of art). In this regard, Osundare has been significantly influenced by the famous such as Longinus, Horace, Philip Sidney and Shelley, all of whom recognised the vital importance of art’s hortatory and remedial potentialities as well as its ludic or entertainment value.

Hence, Osundare has shunned ‘the spineless apologia of that superstition called “Pure Poetry” and its escapist post-modernist pretensions.’

Osundare is a socialist-Marxist poet who uses his art to galvanise the lumpen-proletarian productive forces of society to slough off the Blakian ‘mind-forged manacles’ and concrete systemic chains *à la* Jean Jacques Rousseau, and fight for collective self-empowerment. In short, Osundare deploys his poetry to champion and fight for the cause of society’s dispossessed. This class-conscious poetic fundamentally affects his attitude to and handling of such categories as myth, language, nature, society, culture, literature and power-relations. In the main, Osundare’s verse is energised by the revolutionary vision encoded in Karl Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* (11th Thesis), to wit: ‘the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways, the point is to *change it*.’

What Osundare critics have come to describe as his poetry of social criticism and social commentary is principally anchored upon this poetics of change, both in thematic and stylistic terms.

Part of the new spirit and the new agenda of ‘change’ include the following:

i. The conscious and deliberate effort to write poetry of social mobilisation, social conscientisation, a revolutionary aesthetics as against the preceding practice in which poetry was a ‘cultic’ and alienatingly elitist affair;

ii. As a result of the stated functionality of poetry, the language of poetry is deliberately and consciously demystified: it is rendered in largely simple, lucid and accessible terms;

iii. The victim-as-hero replaces the old idolatry of mythical personages (Ogun, Sango, Obatala, Idoto *et al*) because of the thematics of economic survival that supersedes cultural reclamation. Therefore, the ‘common man’ and his struggles against poverty, oppression, dispossession, and social inequities are celebrated as against the lionisation of the heroic feats and the grandiose exploits of legendary figures and mythological idealities;

iv. The ‘alter/native’ tradition (*or change*) creates a poetry of performance that prioritises participation and relevance as against the former ‘Ibadan-Nsukka’ poetry school, forbidden in its complexities. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Osundare returns to his oral culture to borrow their musical instruments such as drums, flutes, native string-and-wind instruments to enhance the popular appreciation of the original and essential place of poetry as tool for *utile* (instruction) and *dulce* (delight or entertainment). Although the practice of the instrumental orchestration of poetry goes back to Biblical times, and has been in use throughout history, the point is that it had never been put to class-conscious,
revolutionary use in the way Osundare and his ilk do. In this light, therefore, change-as-continuum is highlighted;

v. The change in strategies of verse-making aimed at, according to Osundare, ‘wooing and winning’ an audience for poetry is mainly and strategically geared towards the realisation and the fulfilment of Karl Marx’s prediction, namely, that, while philosophers have interpreted the world, the point is to change it. According to Osundare, ‘the world I see is bent. I am mode and medium for its straightening.’ 18 By the same token, therefore, Osundare is championing a new kind of class-conscious, ideologically motivated, revolutionary poetry aimed at bringing about fundamental social change and a clear improvement in the quality of life and the economic emancipation of the lumpen-proletarian elements in society;

vi. The institutionalisation of what Osundare calls the ‘poetry of profit and pleasure’ is a significant aspect of change in the production of poetry in Nigeria and beyond. Prior to Osundare’s emergence on the literary scene in Nigeria, the average student’s fear of poetry was real. The appreciation of poetry proved a living nightmare for students as they laboured to puzzle out the ‘knotty theorem’, ‘the esoteric whisper’ or ‘the learned quiz/entombed in Grecoroman lore’. Osundare, thus, felt the need to re-humanise poetry by using the oral material – proverbs (owe), riddles (aloapamo), folksongs (orin), folktales (itan), panegyrics (oriki), incantations (ofo), etc. – with which the masses are familiar;

vii. To be certain, the strong sense of audience in Osundare’s art is an important dimension to the ‘change’ paradigm. Osundare ostensibly writes for the common people – the poor and barely literate peasants and the wage-earning working class (the déclassé). His desire, it would seem, to write for the common man (‘poetry/is/man/meaning/to/man’) arose partly against the backdrop of the highmindedness of his predecessors;

viii. As part of the ‘return-to-orality’ paradigm, Osundare refurbishes and reformulates native Yoruba poetic modes such as the curse (epe), the lament/dirge, the ode, satire, the ballad, the pastoral and the pastoral elegy (for instance, ‘For The One Who Departed’19), the epic (as deployed in ‘Omoleti’20), the gossip, and even the erotic modes (see Moonsongs, Waiting Laughters and Tender Moments21). However, the proverb, described by Osundare as ‘one huge tome of uncountable wisdom’22 deserves special attention because it occupies a central place in his oeuvre. Evidently, this deliberate and conscious quarrying of the people’s artistic patrimony is a practice Osundare has popularised and given intellectual respectability. His deep respect for his people’s orature was, as earlier hinted, instilled in him by Oyin Ogunba, a professor of oral literature at University of Ibadan;

ix. As a consequence, Osundare, thus, considers ‘Tabloid poetry’ as well as poetry for secondary school students as part of his ‘alter/native’ tradition. Hence, he has championed the publication of mass-oriented verse in widely-read newspapers and magazines in Nigeria and beyond;

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22Osundare, Songs of the Season vi.
Also, as part of the natural fallout of the humanisation of poetry, it has won for itself an ever-growing following, particularly on tertiary institution campuses as poetry clubs have become a frequent aspect of popular culture. It is obvious that Niyi Osundare endeavours in his poetry to re-interpret and synthesise existing traditions to suit his contemporary audience and to respond to the exigencies of changing times. Osundare is not just a product of the intellectual milieu of his era but a creative artist whose work embodied the very time-spirit with the masterly interpenetration of reality and text.

One of the essential qualities of Osundare’s verse is the especial emphasis on sound. It would appear as though some of Osundare’s predecessors seem to have forgotten the original conception of poetry as verbal (oral-aural) art, *speakerly* in realisation such that melody mellows into meaning. In interview after interview, poem after poem, Osundare never tires of calling attention to this crucial and vital element of poetry. Little wonder, then, whether in the brisk, clear and refreshing language of the poems collected in *Songs of the Marketplace, Village Voices, A Nib in the Pond and Random Blues* or the increasingly prismatic idiom of *Waiting Laughters* and *Moonsongs*, Osundare carefully sculpts his language and allows its sounds to semiotise the movement of meaning. It is not hard to see that the lyrical and tuneful deployment of sound symbols and images in Osundare’s verse is part of the overall instrumental orchestration of poetry. The resultant vernacularisation of poetry inheres therefore in the use of musical instruments, Yoruba folksongs and refrains as well as the blended use of Yoruba oralities, for example ofo, owe, and oriki. It is also germane to stress, as Olatunde notes, the alliterative tradition popularised by Osundare even as he deploys the Yoruba oral resources of repetition, parallelism and tonal counterpoint, in bolstering the rhythmic power of his poetry. Hence, in his work, Osundare freely uses alliteration, assonance and consonance in order to achieve a high degree of polyrhythmic affectivity. Says the poet: ‘Rhythm for me is systemic and pervasive, it is secreted in every consonant and every vowel even as both engage in the musical union that begets the syllable’. To demonstrate the meaning – potential of sounds in his poetry, Osundare offers the following excerpt:

Some into *gba*
Some into *gbu*
Some into the *gbaagbuu* Of *Mehunmutapa*.25

The poet illustrates thus:

The interpretation of *gba* and *gbu* must start in the mouth before proceeding to the brain!
The heaviness of the labio-velar plosive /gb/, the contrasting realisation of the open vowel /a/ and the close /u/, the coming together of both syllables and lengthening (through doubling) of both vowels in *gbaagbuu* is all intended to produce an oral-aural bang with a resonance which reaches back to primordial times.26

In Osundare’s poetry, sounds matter, contrary to McLeish’s dictum, namely, that a poem need not ‘mean’ but ‘be’. Osundare’s verse thus rejects this academicist aestheticism and valorises,

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26Osundare, ‘Yoruba Thought’ 15.
The Essentials of Niyi Osundare’s Poetry. Christopher Anyokwu.

Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.

recuperates and celebrates ‘instantaneist’ perfervid, antiphonal performance. Having surveyed the state of Nigerian poetry, Osundare has come up with a typology of poetry, namely: (1) poetry as courtesan, (2) poetry as coquette, and (3) poetry as nun. As for poetry as a courtesan, he has in mind doggerels and what D.I. Nwoga calls ‘versified intelligibilities’. This kind of poetry is not different from normal prose arranged in stanza form in order to acquire the appearance of poetry or verse. This is often the work of poetasters and would-be poets. This kind of ‘poetry’ lacks depth or the mysteries and the painful pleasures of cerebral exertion. The second type is the poetry as a coquette: unlike the courtesan who is ‘cash-and-carry’ or ‘pay-as-you-go’ soul provider, the coquette enjoys the mysteries, the intriguing anticipation of the chase and the longed-for the happy ending. Accordingly, poetry as coquetry parallels the sweet agony of delayed gratification, postponing the longed-for moment of consummation as long as possible but finally yielding to the lover’s insistent entreaties at long last. Poetry in this regard is the type which does not yield all of its meaning at the first time of asking. It demands patient study, reflection and close reading before the reader can prise open its semantic implications. Even so, the teasing-out of its meaning is a continual process, like one going to a river with a receptacle for collecting water, one never exhausts the river. The third type of poetry is ‘poetry as nun’: try as hard as you may, you can never get the nun, sworn as she is to a life of celibacy, to get into bed with you. It is the same with a hermetically-abstruse poetry which simply resists penetration of the enquiring intelligence. Osundare would have nothing to do with the first and the third forms of poetry, being as they are two polar extremes of the aesthetic/stylistic spectrum. A middle-of-the-road poet, Osundare favours poetry which is neither too difficult (i.e., ‘poetry as nun’) nor too lax or loose (i.e., ‘poetry as courtesan’). Although, as we noted earlier, being a socialist-Marxist writer and writing along class lines, Osundare is expected to be an out-and-out and thorough-going progressive. But it is important, however, to stress at this juncture that, for all his apparent progressivism, Osundare, at bottom, is a conservative who relentlessly yearns for the grounded securities, the time-honoured stabilities and the accustomed pieties of the past. There is, in fact, a sense in which his relentless deployment of native Yoruba orality, ancient homespun wisdom couched in proverbial lore and folkways, his abiding and remorseless conservatism as well as his sceptical attitude to modernity combine to portray him as atavistic and a starry-eyed nativist. The seemingly perennially insoluble nature of Nigeria’s, nay, Africa’s problems forces Osundare to produce poetry of social criticism aimed at ‘criminalising’ the complacencies of unconscionable power, on the one hand, and mobilising the lumpen-proletariat for political action, on the other. And, this stance gives his work the imprimatur of revolutionary Marxism. It is this apparent Marxian militancy on the surface of his verse and the undercurrents of traditionalist conservatism that tend to problematise Osundare’s politics.

Osundare’s environmentalism turns largely on the overarching centrality of nature to the mechanics and logistics of his verse-making. Nature is deployed as a leitmotif or an organising principle in his poetry. For a start, Osundare uses it as metaphor for the myth of eternal return. He also deploys nature as metaphor for power relations (or class struggle, a strategy further enhanced by his recourse to the use of folklore). For instance:

Behold, too, these preyers
in the cannibal calvary
of the forest:
the iroko which swallows the shrub

the hyena which harries the hare,
the elephant which tramples the grass
its legs nerveless with the gangrene
of senseless power.  

Symbolically, the forest represents the human society, and predatory beasts such as ‘hyena’ and ‘the elephant’ symbolise the oppressor class in society while ‘the shrub’ ‘the hare’ and ‘the grass’ typify the hapless déclassé, the poor masses, eternal victims of ‘senseless power’. By the same token, Eco-Osundare or what we have termed his environmentalism, may also be located in his well-known concern with conservation and ecological justice (see The Eye of the Earth and City Without People).

In the same connection, the environmentalist-poet (or naturalist a la Seamus Heaney) believes that so long as man shows respect for ‘the earth, our home’, social wellbeing can be guaranteed. Additionally, the environmentally-conscious poet uses nature-flora and fauna-to establish a sense of local habitation to the so-called ‘airy nothings’ that constitute part of the flesh-and-blood of his poetry. In Wordsworthian vein as well, Osundare uses nature as a veritable stimulus to philosophising. In the poem entitled ‘For the One Who Departed’ the poet threnodises the death of his father, using the flora and the sylvan denizens of tropical Africa as tropes of transience, mortality and memory. This poem, which is a classic instance of pastoral elegy recalls John Milton’s Lycidas and it is instructive that both works are used by their authors to meditate on larger existential or cosmic issues such as love, death, ageing, change, transition. In a sense, in much the same manner as Wole Soyinka, Osundare also explores in his poetry the paradoxical world view embodied by nature and dramatised through the plenty-drought continuum in nature. Painful as death is, it is a seed for new life, a fresh beginning and birth itself intimates the waiting sea. Indeed, Osundare’s memorialising temper or his preoccupation with memory is conveyed mainly through an adroit metaphorisation of Nature as in the poem ‘Forest Echoes’ in The Eye of the Earth and Horses of Memory.

As a locally-rooted native son, Osundare finds it convenient and useful to explore his native Yoruba myths, notably Yoruba pantheon of gods and goddesses in his poetry, although as a self-confessed socialist-Marxist writer, Osundare might be expected to see anything that has to do with superstition or religion as ‘false consciousness’. In The Eye of the Earth, for instance, Osundare dramatises the role of rocks and mountains found in his village of Ikere-Ekiti.

In the Preface to the volume, he remarks thus:

The rocks celebrated in this section, Olosunta, Oroole (both wonder siblings of Esidale), occupy a central place in the cosmos consciousness of Ikere people, they are worshipped and frequently appeased with rare gifts, thunderous drumming and dancing.

Also, in Midlife, the poet lyricises and poetiscises Osun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility, a deity who occupies an important place in the poet’s family history as evidenced by the poet’s surname: Osun-dare. The River Osun flows past the backyard and the farm path of the Osundares. The locals venerate and worship the goddess and in return expect her to bless them with fruitfulness and fecundity. Symbolised by the pigeon, Osun’s favourite bird, Osun is celebrated as the essence of purity, blessing and plenty by the poet. In the same vein, the poet

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29Osundare, The Eye of the Earth, xvi.
30Osundare, Horses of Memory 5-17.
31Osundare, The Eye of the Earth, xvi.
also celebrates *Olokun* (Yoruba god of the oceans), Oya (goddess of the River Niger), Ogun (god of iron and war and the deadly hunt) and Sango (god of thunder). These instances of the poet’s veneration of Yoruba mythical beings simply serve to point up a pervasive tendency on Osundare’s part, although, he would have us believe that both the rock-formations and the gods are “dramatized ... as a creative, material essence, as lasting monuments of time and space”.

Coming to the defense of Osundare’s valorisation of the Yoruba animist metaphysics, Funso Aiyejina notes:

> The animistic energy with which the volume (*The Eye of the Earth*) is charged does not originate from the poet as an individual but rather as the sensitive heir to, and interpreter of, a tradition and a collective philosophy.

Harry Garuba also goes to great lengths to rationalise Osundare’s dabbling in ‘false consciousness’. In a paper entitled ‘Explorations in Animist-Materialism and a Reading of the poetry of Niyi Osundare’, Garuba endorses his former teacher’s method as ‘animist materialism’. It is indeed, strange to see a critic seek to yoke together two irreconcilable categories: materialism suggests what is concrete or corporeal while ‘animism’ is an attitude, a religious mindset. Osundare yields further to this religious philosophy, particularly the Judeo-Christian creed which records in the Book of Genesis that God created the world. Osundare, however, stands this Biblical myth on its head by reversing the order thus: ‘In the Word was the Beginning’, thereby giving primacy, agency and precedence to man over God. Accordingly, in the epic poem-sequence ‘Omoleti’, the poet enthuses:

> In the Word was the beginning  
> In the spoken Clay before the First Fire  
> When the Wind, tremulous around the Void,  
> Bided the lettered lore of the primal Tree  
> Footless echoes spelt the blank  
> The Universe loomed in myth and matter,  
> Waiting for a Name.

The poet, then, goes on to narrate and recount how ‘Silence’ and ‘Darkness’ were routed by the Word, and with the cooperation of the Four Elements: Wind, Fire, Earth and Water – the World as we know it was birthed into existence. Hence, the poet tells us that: ‘The Word named God’. As Wole Ogundele correctly observes, ‘Omoleti’ is Osundare’s anti-creationist rebuttal and/or evolutionist attempt at re-imagining Genesis. Thus, while, on the one hand, Osundare engages in mythoclastic criticism of the Christian myth, he indulges in mythopoeia, on the other. But it is salutary to note that the nature-poet or the environmentally-conscious bard deploys nature, notably the sylvan universe, to reinforce and re-emphasise the popular myth of Eternal Return, a patently sanguine myth which periscopes the socialist myth or dream of a future El-Dorado, the communist paradise. Thus, the myth of Eternal Return which focuses on the birth-death-rebirth

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33 Osundare, *The Eye of the Earth* xv.  
34 Aiyejina 112.  
cyclic progression and continuity constitutes a crucial lodestone of Osundare’s poetic vision. Be that as it may, the interaction between animism and materialism in Osundare’s verse comes across as aporetic ambivalence of vision, a sticking point which some Osundare critics find difficult to rationalise.

In terms of voice, the poet who loves to pride himself as a peopled-persona almost always presents a public ‘I’ which metamorphoses into ‘we’. This Whitmanesque sense of peopled-persona runs through Osundare’s poetry, right from Songs of The Marketplace, through A Nib in the Pond to Days and City without People. The character, Sule in ‘Sule, Chase’ for instance, might be interpreted as Everyman or, more directly, the ‘common man’ who indulges his anti-social instincts for self-preservation in the face of irresponsible and unresponsive power. To be sure, the archetypal image of man that comes through in Osundare’s poetry is that of a homo viator, the acting man unfazed by insuperable odds. As a stylistician, the poet does not always make clear the characters who animate the lines of his verses, and, as he himself confesses, he relies upon the use of multiple masks, profiles, voices embedded within the nuanced armature of song-poems made discernible through syntactic change of gears.

Osundare’s poetry is empowered by revolutionary optimism derived from the socialist-Marxist idea of plurimental heroism. Besides, this sense of optimism in the face of life’s vicissitudes in part derives from the traditional Yoruba optimistic cast of mind. Furthermore, Osundare’s craftsmanship is aided and enhanced in no small measure by his professional training as a stylistician, and this manifests in the ‘tricks of print’ which he uses to transfer otherwise performable/oral features of poetry onto the ‘cold impersonality of the page’ (to borrow Isidore Okpewho’s phrase).

As Sunnie Adagbonyin inimitably demonstrates, Osundare liberally makes use of neologism, experimenting with verse forms in the manner of e.e. cummings, Ezra Pound and Liyong. Additionally, he uses structuro-morphological strategies of lexical cramping pictographs and other cognate forms of lexical innovation such as affixation, compounding, functional conversation, puns, blends and sound symbols-idiophones, onomatopoeia and heteronyms.

Osundare’s method seems to consists in the interfusion of oriki, ijala, ofo, owe, aloapamo andadan-inspired satire rendered in English in what the poet himself calls ‘interface language’, that is, a variety of Nigerian English suffused with the rhetorical properties of ethnic Yoruba. A poem is mostly a blend of two or more of the native Yoruba oral poetic sub-genres built around the deployment of tropical flora and fauna as the abiding metaphorisation of quotidian experience. Disclosing the most important source of his poetic afflatus, Osundare submits:

My poetry is strongly influenced by Yoruba poetics. Mine is the figured fancy. Metaphor, simile, hyperbole, metonymy and other figures of speech populate the lines as fishes do a fertile river.

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38Osundare, Songs of the Marketplace 16-19.
39Adagbonyin 101.
40Adagbonyin 101.
42Osundare, ‘Yoruba Thought, English Words’ 28.
To conclude, as Biodun Jeyifo remarks, ‘The dispossession of the majority of our people, and more specifically of the rural producers, may in fact be said to be the grand theme of Osundare’s poetry’. We might as well simply add that, apart from this theme, the ultimate theme of his poetry is class struggle of the poor masses in order to, in the distant future, establish the hoped-for classless communist society. And, finally, what are the features which characterize Osundare’s poetry? They are the following: limpidity of diction, multivalence of form, the intermingling of man and nature, animist materialism, adroit deployment of stylistic ‘tricks of print’, neologism, wordplay, lexico-morphological innovation, sound semiotics, sprung rhythm, riddling vision, the memorial temper, innuendo, joie de vivre, cultivation of collectivism, an unbending commitment to revolutionary ideals and the passionate pursuit of freedom.

Works by Niyi Osundare


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**Christopher Anyokwu**, Senior Lecturer (Ph.D) teaches Literature-in-English at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. His areas of research interest include African poetry and African literature, English Romantic poetry, literary theory and popular culture. A creative writer, Anyokwu has published at least 13 books of fiction and drama. He is also widely published in both national and international university-based journals and books.

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Cat in the Throat: Caroline Bergvall’s Plurilingual Bodies

Nathalie Camerlynck

Caroline Bergvall’s poetic practice incorporates foreign elements to create a distorted and disarticulated English. Challenging national language and monolingual culture, her plurilingual texts emphasise the impossibility of a single cultural origin. Of French and Norwegian background, she adopted English as an adult. Bergvall defines plurilingual poetics as a ‘writing that takes place across and between languages.’ Marjorie Perloff describes her as an ‘exophonic poet,’ whose practice is ‘the processing and absorption of the “foreign” itself.’ The absorption of language through the body, the ways in which language defines bodily experience, is a central concern in Bergvall’s œuvre, a collection of which appears in Meddle English: New and Selected Texts. The works collected in Meddle English focus on multilingualism in its relation to queer sexuality and the role of feminism in experimental poetics; Bergvall describes her feminist politics as ‘embedded’ in her work around bilingualism. As an interdisciplinary artist, elements of performance, audio and visual art are engaged with in her writing. The written text, in English, is constantly breaking out of itself, attempting to cross the borders of language and medium. This double crossing (of both language and genre) also serves to ‘double-cross’ the reader, forcing them to actively engage.

The term ‘Meddle’ used in Meddle English evolved from the ideas present in an installation entitled ‘Middling English’ at the John Hansard gallery in 2010, where language was imagined as ‘a series of intersecting lines or tissues of lines.’ The meddle is both an else-where and a process of ‘denaturalization of one’s own personal and cultural premise.’ Bergvall’s ‘meddle’ English can be thought of in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of a minor literature operating through deterritorialisation. Bergvall’s plurilingual idiolect, a ‘collective assemblage of enunciation,’ is writing ‘finding its own patois.’

A cross-genre collection, Meddle English gathers texts spanning over ten years, many of which have been adapted from audiovisual and performance pieces. The texts invite readers to engage differently with the printed page through typographic experimentation and visual collage. Aspects of spoken language and other bodily sounds are explored. References range from

5 In collaboration with DvsNarchitectural duo, musicians Adam Parkinson, Zahra Mani, designer Alex Prokop. Ran from 6 Sept. to 23 Oct. 2010 at John Hansard Gallery, Southampton.
6 ‘Middling English’, ME. 5.
7 ‘Middling English’, ME. 19.
8 In her scholarly article ‘Writing at the Crossroads of Languages’, Bergvall explores ‘the poetic and cultural significance of thinking about language in this Deleuze-Guattarian “minor” scale.’
10 Deleuze and Guattari 18.
canonical literary works, academic scholarship, contemporary art and popular music. In each case Bergvall transforms and incorporates – (mis)appropriates, digests – other material into her own work. Bergvall’s embodied plurilingual identity is expressed as a source of friction and resistance: ‘To make and irritate English at its epiderm, and at my own’.

This idea of ‘irritation’ is developed in a piece entitled ‘Cat in the Throat.’ In French ‘one needs to spit out a cat in order to clear one’s throat.’ In English, one would need to spit out a frog. With both languages inhabiting the body, ‘fighting off one language with another language’ becomes an apt description of the act of writing. The French cat, chat(te), is also slang for ‘one’s pussycat.’

To ‘write with a cat in one’s throat,’ is to engage with sexuality and conflicting cultural and linguistic influences.

Bergvall speaks of her poetic practice as a ‘traffic’ between languages. A traffic implies a constant coming and going, a chaotic circulation. It also evokes the traffic jam as traffic can get backed up, blocked (like a blocked throat). One can also speak of data traffic, signals between communication systems. ‘Traffic’ also means an illegitimate activity, one that undermines authority. Trafficking perverts the course of the exchange of values, of legitimate transactions. Identifying as queer, multinational and a non-native speaker of English, Bergvall explores the potential for the construction of a minor literature: ‘A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language, it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.’

Engaging with feminist issues within post-modern poetics, Bergvall belongs to a group of women poets whose approach (both feminist and experimental) places them ‘out of everywhere’ and who claim this displacement as the very position of poetry. By locating her practice ‘else-where’ and focusing on sites of untranslatability, Bergvall proceeds through Deleuze-Guattarian deteritorialisiation; ‘a movement out of the territory, away from the place of habit, of recognition and of safety.’

Moving out of the territory, of the place of habit, also means moving into the foreign, adopting and accepting foreign elements. Bergvall evokes Edouard Glissant’s notion of creolisation, and his insistence on the build-up of sediment in the creation of identity. This metaphor is taken up in ‘Middling English’ to explore the materiality and ‘rot,’ the role of decomposition and accumulation in linguistic and cultural history. Bergvall interprets the ‘creolization’ of English as a vital and dynamic force, insisting on the creative possibilities of creolisation and métissage.

Writing is imagined as a digging through various layers of

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11 ‘Middling English,’ ME. 18.
13 ME: 156.
14 ME: 156.
16 Deleuze and Guattari 16.
18 Rosemarie Waldrop, in response to an audience member’s remark that being a woman writing experimental poetry, she is ‘out of everywhere’: ‘I take that as a compliment. I’ve more or less claimed this is the position of poetry.’ Quoted in Maggie O’Sullivan’s introduction to Out of Everywhere.
19 Bergvall, ‘Writing at the Crossroads’ 221.
21 Bergvall, ‘Middling English’, ME.
linguistic sedimentation - like Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘rat digging its burrow,’ burrowing through historical layers to arrive at a levelling, middling and meddling of English.

In ‘Short Chaucer Tales,’ Bergvall is digging through language, ‘meddling’ with Middle English, riddling it with contemporary slang and references. The insistence here is on recreating the chaotic vitality and dynamism of Middle English, by exploring current trends, variations and creolisations:

The dispersed, intensely regional transformations of English active in the Middle English of Chaucer’s days are again to be found in the inventive and adaptive, dispersed, diversely anglo-mixed, anglophonic, anglo-foamic languages practiced around the world today, as they follow or emerge from the grooves of military, commercial, cultural transport and trafficking.

‘Short Chaucer Tales’ critiques ideological violence inscribed in the language of authority and privilege. Subjects range from the market economy to the Catholic Church. A section entitled ‘London Zoo’ pays homage to a Dubstep album released by The Bug in 2008. By mixing lyrics from ‘London Zoo’ with Chaucerian influences, Bergvall operates a kind of cultural levelling that insists on the necessity of destabilising hegemonic language:

Like fistfuls of hair puld out of social fabrik
Like disregarded chicken bones litting the streets
SO MANY THINGS IT GET ME ANGRY
SO MANY THINGS IT MAKE ME MAD
I GOTTA SAY AY

The chorus of The Bug’s ‘Too much pain’, its volume and force indicated by capitalisation, rips through the metaphoric passage on social catastrophe. Bergvall’s insistence on the physicality of language responds to Bernstein’s notion of sound ‘as language’s flesh.’ In the plurilingual body, it is the clearing of the (cat in the) throat, where ‘the spittle can be resistant.’ This ‘friction inside the speaker’s mouth ... brings awareness of connection and obstruction.’ Bergvall’s goal is ‘to show the sounds of language as explicitly composed of the body’s

23 Deleuze and Guattari 18.
24 ME 21-38.
26 The Bug, London Zoo, Ninja Tune, July 2008. CD.
27 Bergvall’s appropriation of various Afro-Caribbean and black London dialects could raise some interesting questions, especially when placed in the shadow cast by Gertrude Stein’s use of African American English in ‘Melanctha’ and the uncomfortable questions it raised. The political nature of Bass Music, its anti-capitalist narrative, is inflected with issues of race and social justice. Bergvall’s involvement with Bass culture is long-standing, and in 2009 she collaborated with DJ /Rupture on ‘More Pets’ (Solar Life Raft). How do Bass Music politics relate to those of the anti-capitalist and largely white Language poets?
30 ‘Cat in the Throat’, ME. 156.
31 ‘Cat in the Throat’, ME. 158.
mechanics.’ 32 This body is also culturally and historically defined, compressed and oppressed by competing authorities.

The submission of the female body to cultural discourse is illustrated in ‘Goan Atom.’ 33 The sounds of clichéd parlance and childish phrases are reinterpreted in an exploration of the disarticulated female body. The text proceeds by accumulation, creating associations through plurilingual puns and portmanteaus, which are then torn away, ‘expectorated,’ spat out in contractions and monosyllabic sounds. The text is strewn with ‘stubborn chunks’ 34 of untranslatability. Repetition and fragmentation recreate ‘an act of stuttering that valorizes and enables the manifestation of the inherent plurilingualism contained within any living language.’ 35 Clichéd formulations are subverted through a kind of dismemberment; Vincent Broqua aptly describes this as deconstructing clichés through ‘an anatomisation of language.’ 36

‘Goan Atom’ takes as its starting point the photographs of disarticulated mannequins by artist Hans Bellmer 37 and their dialogue with Urica Zürn’s anagrams. 38 The muddled letters of each four-letter word recreate beastly, vulgar sounds; unwanted emissions that a civilising language attempts to hide. 39 They’re also, before each section, variously taken away and reassembled – disarticulated letters mirroring the disarticulated bodies of Hans Bellmer’s mannequins. The ‘s’ sound at the end of cogs, gas, fats is isolated and repeated over several pages, towards the end of the section entitled ‘Gas.’ In the audiotext version, the ‘s’ consonant is repeated over approximately fifteen seconds, sounding something like gas escaping. 40 This serves to remind us that ‘the body speaks in mysterious ways and from unexpected orifices.’ 41

As body and words are disassembled and disarticulated, they literally start falling apart - as both the sounds (in performance) and the words themselves separate:

Woo pops
er
body portion
to the flo
ring the morning
it’s never matt
ers what goes back
ow w 42

32 ‘Cat in the Throat’, ME. 158.
34 Homi Bhabha’s term in The Location of Culture: ‘Hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable element – the stubborn chunks – as the basis of cultural identification.’ (London: Routledge, 1994) 219. See Bergvall’s use of ‘stubborn chunks’ in ‘Writing at the Crossroads of Languages.’
35 Bergvall’s reading of Deleuze-Guattarian ‘stuttering’ in ‘Writing at the Crossroads of Languages’: 209.
37 La Poupée. 1935-36.
38 ‘her anagrams, which are about language-constraint and fit, and his grammar of the body, which is based on anagrammatic imagination.’ Caroline Bergvall in Linda A. Kannahan, ‘An Interview with Caroline Bergvall. Contemporary Women’s Writing 5.3 (2011) 248-9.
42 Bergvall, ‘Goan Atom’, ME. 76.
Who, or more aptly what, is speaking in ‘Goan Atom’? Language’s (violent) inscription in the body is played out as the female body itself speaks, a ‘poupée de cuir, poupée de con’.

This a more aggressive variation of Gainsbourg’s title lyrics *Poupée de cire poupée de son,* deepening the pun to expose the underlying violence. The sexual violence suggested in the song (and its performance by an ingénue France Gall) is crudely materialised in the print version of ‘Goan Atom.’ The simple replacement of ‘son’ with ‘çon’, the presence of the ‘c’ (con/cunt), startles the French reader for whom the phrase resonates with the Yé-Yé music of the mid-sixties. The doll-body is broken and dismembered, spread and exploded - like Gainsbourg’s *poupée de son,* broken into a million pieces of sound (*brisée en mille éclats de voix*). The other voice, that was also present in Short Chaucer Tales, is that of the patriarchal law, the ‘EVERYHOST’:

Abodys a corps
Abody sa corps is cur bed
lie in it

says the EVERY HOST
For whom still sleeps encore in bod
in your bed Y vient in corps
Make fl
esh sometimes much agreed
encore encore
in corps accord
mate loot with loot

The phonetic spelling of ‘Abodys’ recalls the pastoral American ‘a body’ to mean a person. The contraction is graphically ‘keeping body and soul together.’ It seems to be a sort of translation – a ‘body’ in English is indeed a ‘corps’ in French – but far from being equivalent, it evokes the sinister ‘corpsé’ in English or even ‘corps,’ as in bureaucratic or military. But ‘Abodys’ corps (or a person’s body) is also a ‘cur’ – a mongrel dog. A mongrel in bed – cur. bed. – or also a body that’s *curbed* – a body that’s been curbed, restrained – in French *courbé,* a body or a back *courbé* is bending under a weight, a strain or an oppression. The EVERY HOST – the religious and patriarchal law – says ‘lie in it’ - from the English expression ‘you made your bed, now lie in it.’ The every host, as you sleep, ‘Y vient’ (in French) to ‘make flesh’ but in doing so is tearing the ‘fl/esh’ apart.

As the reference to Gainsbourg’s song suggests, ‘every mouth is ador.’

The ‘çon’/con/cunt is the source of irrational discourse, of idiocy (*connerie*) and of the *idiolect* – idiosyncratic speech. ‘Goan Atom’ gives voice to the *con(s)* as embodied yet dislocated female voice(s). The ‘pussycat’ speaks; the cat/cunt’s discourse is irrational, does not belong to human, articulated

44 Literal translation ‘doll (made of) wax, doll (made of) sound’. Serge Gainsbourg, *France Gall, Poupée de cire, Poupée de son.* Philips, 1965. LP.
47 George Steiner develops the notion of ‘idiolect’ as a language or ‘parlance’ that contains ‘privacies of reference singular to the speaker or writer,’ and which could only ever partially translate in *Errata: An Examined Life* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998) 94.
language. The poet Anne Carson examines this notion in her essay ‘The Gender of Sound,’ as she explores the Greek and Latin consensus of the female body having two mouths, which are linked and must both be locked, for ‘when it is not locked the mouth may gape open and utter unspeakable things.’\(^{48}\) It is not civilised language, but uncontrollable emissions, spontaneous secretions that proceed from the second mouth and therefore must be controlled:

\[
\begin{array}{l}
\text{NO} \\
\text{workable pussy} \\
\text{ever was su} \\
\text{posed to discharge at will} \\
\text{all over the factory} \\
\text{scramation mark}\end{array}
\]

Fragmentation and lack of self-possession caused by language violence is also explored in ‘Cropper,’ where Bergvall begins by asking: ‘How does one keep ones body as ones own, what does this mean but the relative safety of boundaries.’\(^{50}\) ‘Cropper’ includes passages that at first glance seem to be translated, only the translations don’t quite correspond.\(^{51}\) As they are not wholly equivalent in content, the phrases also dialogue with each other. In the first half, all the English phrases begin with ‘Some’ and all the Norwegian phrases with the homophonic ‘som’ which means ‘as’ or ‘like.’ The French phrases begin with ‘ceux’ – those. The three initial words interact with each other as some/like/these. As the first half progresses, so the translations correspond less and less to the initial English phrase. In the middle of the text, the French and Norwegian disappear and are replaced by two lone English phrases: ‘Some bodies are forgotten in the language compounds/ Some immense pressure is applied on to the forgetting of the ecosystems some escape from.’ These two phrases draw the thematic chiasmus, situated at the midpoint of text. As the text progresses, the translations become increasingly equivalent, to end with the phrase: ‘Some that arise in some of us arrive in each of us’, followed by roughly equivalent translations in Norwegian and French.\(^{52}\) This concession to translation is used to explore the fact that, ‘for an overwhelming number of persons,’ the violence contained within language prevents one from keeping ‘ones body as ones own.’ Bergvall’s own experience is of being ‘torn to pieces’\(^{53}\) in the passage between languages, of being silenced by the voices of the ‘law.’

This experience is recounted in ‘Croup.’ Croup is a respiratory condition common in children, triggered by an acute viral infection that impedes breathing and is marked by a barking cough. The piece begins with a seemingly straightforward narration, recounting the difficulty Bergvall experiences after being asked to compose a text in Norwegian. What follows is a lyrical account of origins, as she is ‘lifted up from childhood lipsings,’ ‘sudnly awake in ones own language’ and in one’s own sexuality. Language and sexual awakening coincide in a syncretic exploration of sight and touch:

\(^{50}\) ME 147.
\(^{51}\) ME 147-151.
\(^{52}\) ‘Some that arise in some of us arrive in each of us/ noen some reiser seg i noen av oss kommer frem i hver av oss/ qui se levant en nous se relèvent de chacun de nous.’ ME 151.
\(^{53}\) ‘To flesh out in one lettre and be torn to pieces by the next.’ ‘Croup’, ME. 141.
Words r vibrations pattrens of activity, units prefigurd that steep us into prefab. Colour a reminder that beings n objects r vibrations in the end but vibration. Depth of contrast, intense attraction spred across our volumes.54

‘Croup’ is characterised by a proliferation of plurilingual puns and homophonic evocations, as well as a symbolic duality of light and darkness, voice and silence. The first language, French, is ripped out and replaced by the language of the law. French is presented as feminine, a sensual presence of light and vowel-rich melody, to be destroyed by approaching darkness and heaviness:

She appeard to me frankly. Lifted me up from childhood lipsings, showd me the field the dawn aurora thru the bursting green of the French valléy, all around the arbouring trees blind us with shards of verre in the light mounting silver birds slivering past. Voila she led me to the river, eau eau pressed me down lifted my long brass towards the seal of the summer sky, up-chemised my shirt peléd layers of cloth and peeling skin, couchd me safely profoundly on this earth.

The child is then given language, an ‘exacting luminescence’, by ‘She,’ the embodiment of the French language, placing a lump of saliva on her tongue. Her ‘lipsings’ evoce ‘lisping’ which, like stuttering, is a speech impediment. But lip-sing also evokes a sensual idea of sound coming from lips, a reminder that language is spoken through the mouth. The birth into language is associated with light, with the melodious vowel rich French described as ‘its crucial tra la la’. This language will be torn out violently in the passage to Norwegian, encroaching darkness like the encroaching consonants. The ‘law’ will intervene, the first, oral language – located in the body, in the mouth is replaced by the language of a choral consensus:

Nonono came the voices choral came the law. Loud verbal hindrances, they tear through my mystries. Nono no body be language sexd in this way, a crowd moves in, anuls this ovr-exposure to light. Tear down subsequent years, reorganise my orgns. I lose my one, corps deserted, first language beatn out of it. How will I speak. 55

A hindrance, an impediment to speech (perhaps a cat, or a frog) must be cleared before the second language can be spoken. Loss of voice is also caused by disease (the croup), by rot or decomposition.

Disease and decomposition can affect the voice, the source of spoken language, but can also attack the written text. This is explored by Bergvall through her discussion of the holes in Sapphic manuscripts. In ‘Material Compounds’ she reflects on Anne Carson’s translations of Sappho.56 She responds, in a personal and poetic manner, to some of the concepts explicated in Carson’s introduction to her translations.57 Bergvall notes the use of brackets and ellipsis58 to represent elements of the text that have been lost, disintegrated and erased over time and accident:

54 ‘Croup’, ME. 143.
55 ‘Croup’, ME. 141-2.
56 ‘Material compounds.’ ME. 130-32.
58 Three years previously Josephine Balmer published ‘bracketed translations’ of Sappho under the title Poems & Fragments (Bloodaxe Books, 1992), and has published her own verse intermingled with her translations of Catullus in Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations and Transgressions (Bloodaxe Books, 2004). Edith Hall describes feminist and subversive classicists such as Balmer as ‘transvestite translators’ whose works re-examine the role of translator as companion subject (‘Subjects, Selves and Survivors’, Helios 34:2, 2007.135.).
Anne Carson’s bilingual and bracketed translations of Sappho’s lyric ardour makes it a poetics for our time, a language of the erased, of the stranger, of the visual stutter and hyphenated or elliptical being. Of the co-existence of written and erased.  

Carson explains her use of brackets as follows:

Brackets are an aesthetic *gesture* toward the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it ... I emphasize the distinction between brackets and no brackets because it will affect your reading experience, if you allow it. Brackets are exciting. Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss *the drama of trying to read* a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp - brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure.

The ‘papyrological event’ is not so much the degradation, but the drama of trying to make sense, to fill the gaps - giving free reign to the imagination, but not focusing on the gaps themselves as equal in meaning. The ‘imaginal adventure’ Carson allows the reader is reinterpreted by Bergvall in a literal manner:

She uses brackets to stage a connection between text and ‘papyrus dust.’ The brackets want us to imagine the corrosive dust, the holes, the rot, the degradation of the text’s material support.

Bergvall muses on Carson’s decision not to include *all* the gaps as brackets:

The text’s material history is allowed to resonate at the heart of the poetic work but as she comments, ‘to represent all the erasures would riddle the pages with brackets.’ One wishes she had. Why put some in and not the rest?

Bergvall’s aim, as a translator, is to let another speak: ‘I like to think that, the more I stand out of the way, the more Sappho shows through. This is an amiable fantasy (transparency of self) within which most translators labor.’ The goal remains to make Sappho, or rather Sappho’s text, ‘sing and speak.’ Representing all erasures would make it unreadable, truly a ‘language of the erased.’ Bergvall is not focused on the Sapphic text but on ‘Sappho-compost.’ This insistence on materiality is perhaps the source of another critique of Carson’s approach:

Carson, in her introduction to *If Not, Winter* writes: ‘It seems that she knew and loved women as deeply as she did music. Can we leave the matter there?’ Sure. But leave what matter where?

Carson dismisses the question of Sappho’s lesbianism somewhat flippantly: ‘Controversies about her personal ethics and way of life have taken up a lot of people’s time throughout the history of Sapphic scholarship.’ She refuses to engage with the ‘matter’ – the matter of Sappho’s lesbianism, and the matter of Sappho’s body. Her equation of women with music, the

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59 Bergvall, ‘Material Compounds’, *ME* 130-1.
60 Carson, ‘On marks and lacks’, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, xi. (Italics mine)
61 Bergvall, ‘Material Compounds’, *ME* 130.
62 Bergvall, ‘Material Compounds’, *ME* 130.
64 See Federman on experimental writing and unreadability, footnote 17.
65 Bergvall, ‘Material Compounds’, *ME* 131.

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most ethereal of arts, enforces this refusal. On the other hand, Bergvall asserts that ‘Forever the rot will cohabit with the readable. The ruin with the erudition. The love with what’s left.’ The love does and must cohabit with the ‘matter.’ The love is the matter.

Elsewhere, Carson notes that it is woman who exposes what should be kept in ‘by projections and leakages of all kinds,’ and that the task of patriarchal culture is the censorship of such projections. Just as the female body leaks out and projects, resists totality, so too does the plurilingual experience escape neat categorisation. A return to materiality, to the corporeality of sound, allows for spontaneous, uncontrolled projections. ‘Cat in the Throat’ is a reminder of the fact that articulated language is what separates the human from ‘asocial groaning.’ ‘articulated language is all that becomes possible once the cat, the animal, the pure physiology of sound, has been successfully removed from my throat.’ Choosing to speak with a cat in one’s throat is a return to the pre-linguistic, a refusal of articulated language and of civilising (patriarchal) authority. The female voice is the animality of speech, or perhaps what Deleuze and Guattari describe as those ‘qualities of underdevelopment’ that a language tries to hide: ‘the barking of the dog, the cough of the ape, and the bustling of the beetle.’ The cat’s patois.

Nathalie Camerlynck is a PhD scholar at the University of Sydney, working on self-translation and plurilingual poetics. She holds a Masters in Comparative Literature from Paris IV Sorbonne.

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68 Bergvall, ‘Material Compounds’, ME 131. (Italics mine)
A Linguistic Investigation of the Main Concepts of Amazigh Poetry in Morocco and Algeria

Hamza Chafii

In this paper, I undertake a linguistic investigation of the main concepts used for poetry in Tamazight in Morocco and Algeria. My choice of this topic emanates from the growing mutations to which the Amazigh language is subject and the emerging problem of terminology this language is facing owing to the lack of the exact terms for different literary forms especially after the introduction of this language into education, academia and scholarly research. As will be noticed, both Tamazight and the Amazigh language will be used interchangeably in this paper. Furthermore, Tamazight designates the Amazigh language in its general sense which encompasses all the linguistic varieties spoken in North Africa (Tamazgha). However, one should bear in mind that Tamazight refers also to a specific linguistic variety spoken in the Middle and High Atlas, and in the South East region of Morocco. The word Amazigh is used instead of Berber (adjective) and Tamazight instead of Berber (noun) because Berber is considered by Imazighen (Berbers) to be offensive, derogative and foreign (not local).

This paper is divided into six parts. The first part introduces Amazigh literature and gives an idea of its present state, its main characteristics and some challenges it faces. The second part tackles the question of orality in Amazigh literature since oral tradition stands as a major source of its diverse literary expressions. These literary expressions of Amazigh literature basically include poetry, proverbs, folktales, riddles and myths. Recently, Amazigh literature has witnessed the emergence of some written literary forms like novel, novella and play with the advent of cultural associations especially Morocco and Algeria paving the ground thus for this literature to be written as well. In the third and fourth parts, I give a working definition of Amazigh poetry and demarcate its sub-genres namely in the Moroccan regions like Souss, the Riff, Middle and High Atlas, and the South East. In the two final parts, I dwell on a linguistic study of three most common concepts used to designate poetry in Tamazight in Morocco and Algeria (Kabylia and Aures in particular) and argue that tamdyazt is a linguistically appropriate concept that can be applied as a universal literary term for Amazigh poetry.

It should be noted that, in addition to amarg, asefru and tamdyazt, there are other terms that refer to poetry in other Amazigh areas though they are less common or too specific. Having such a variety of terms designating poetry reflects the lexical richness of the Amazigh language:

A. Lavnuj is used in Riff (North of Morocco) and is less common and region-bound.

B. Izli (pl. Izlan) is sometimes used to designate poetry in the High and Middle Atlas, and in the South East region of Morocco. Hence, people when describing a person who produces or recites poetry say ‘bu-izlan’ (a poet). The term izli also refers to a very specific sub-genre of the Amazigh poetry.

Amazigh Literature

According to Amar Laoufi, Amazigh literature, which designates all the literatures of the Amazighophone areas and countries, has recently been subject to unusual amount of reflection.
and mutation. This is made easier since the Amazigh people ‘have always a very vigorous and diversified literary tradition: poetry, tales, [proverbs], legends, riddles and puzzles’. The diversity of Amazigh literary tradition and the manifest interest shown by a great number of researchers and writers in reviving and rethinking such a vigorous literary tradition have undoubtedly led to a remarkable literary renewal of Tamazight.

The literary renewal of Amazigh literature is clearly seen from the ample, diversified and salient body of creative work and research recently done on it either by individually motivated scholars, researchers and poets or by research groups formed, directed and sponsored by governmental institutes like the Royal Institute of the Amazigh Culture in Morocco (known as IRCAM in French), and non-governmental organizations and associations such as the Moroccan Association for Research and Cultural Exchange (known as AMREC in French) starting from the colonial period up to the present time. In this regard, Chaker explains that:

> It was thus necessary to wait for the colonial period and the significant influence of school and the French culture to see a substantial written literary production in the Berber language. This Berber literary production was still tentative and developed unequally across different regions. As in most of the other aspects, the Kabylia (Algeria) made a great advancement; it was followed by Chleuh region (South of Morocco) which also experienced remarkable written literary development followed by considerable activity in the Nigero-Malian Touareg region and finally, though very limited, by the Mzab.

In spite of its richness in terms of literary tradition, Tamazight still lacks in universal concepts that can be used consensually by scholars and researchers to designate its diverse literary forms. Poetry, as one of the most important forms in Amazigh literature, is designated by different terms across various Amazigh regions within Morocco and Algeria. This raises debate on the linguistically appropriate concept that can be applied as a universal literary term for Amazigh poetry. In this paper, my intention is to linguistically investigate only three main concepts which refer to poetry in both Morocco and Algeria. Yet, the Amazigh people may use other names for poetry other than the ones I have investigated in this paper and that there might be other unknown appellations especially if we take into consideration the richness of Tamazight in terms of its linguistic varieties (Tachlhiyt, Tamazight, Tachawiyt, Taqbayliyt, Tarifiyt, Tasiwiyt etc) and the very great geographical extension of Amazigh areas and regions (Siwa in the West of Egypt, Canarias, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria).

The focus concepts of this study which etymologically differ one from the other are: *amarg*, *asefru* and *tamdyazt*. My linguistic investigation of these concepts is based on already existing literature on the etymology of the word *amarg* and on some personal propositions concerning *asefru*, *tamdyazt* and *amarg* as well. These personal propositions on the etymology of these concepts constitute the original part of the present study. My final thesis is that the concept *tamdyazt* is linguistically appropriate and thus it can be used as a universal literary term to designate poetry in Tamazight. As will be shown in the section on *tamdyazt*, this concept, apart

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1 Amar Laoufi, ‘Récriture, Traduction, et Adaptation en Littérature Kabyle: Cas de Si Leelu de Mohia,’ diss., University of Mouloud Mammeri, Tizi-Ouzou, 11, 20 May 2012


3 Chaker.
from its clear cut meaning and its widespread usage across various Amazigh areas, exhibits linguistic features from which all the basic derivatives can pertinently be obtained. However, a number of derivatives may also be obtained from both amarg and asefru but seem, etymologically speaking, vague, debatable, less inclusive and thus inappropriate.

The Question of Orality in Amazigh Literature

A great number of researchers, sociologists, folklorists, ethnographers and linguists agree that Amazigh literature is mainly based on an oral tradition. The rich oral tradition of Amazigh literature makes it very dynamic, animated and intact. First, such outstanding characteristics result from the fact that the Amazigh oral tradition dates back to ancient times. This quality has paved the way for successive generations to enrich this literature as it was in a direct contact with a number of the world’s ancient and prominent civilizations such as the Roman, Phoenician and Arabo-Islamic, and with the French and Spanish civilizations during the colonial period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the colonial period, Morocco was subject to colonization in the early twentieth century by both France and Spain. The first colonial power dominated the middle of the country while the second took control of the North and the South of the country. Secondly, Algeria was colonized by the French powers in the thirties of the nineteenth century up to the beginnings of the sixties of the twentieth century.

Second, this literature is drawn from its direct origins mainly from rituals and local celebrations making of it, consequently, a very rich one. In Souss and the South East regions of Morocco for instance, there are tens of such local celebrations which take the form of open festivals that may last for more than four days as is the case with the festival of Sidi Hmad Oumoussa in Tazrwalt (South of Morocco). These festivals are called ilmuggarn (singular: almuggar) in Souss and igdudn (singular: agdud) in the South East of Morocco. Both the two words suggest social and cultural events in which traditional music (known as apwach or apidous) and poetry recitation constitute important aspects.

In fact, the richness of Amazigh literature reflects the richness of its various expressions along with the diversity of its culture and geographical extension, and the multiplicity of its literary forms and genres. Though most of Amazigh literature is based on orality as it draws heavily from oral tradition, this literature should not entirely be associated with orality. The fact that the Amazigh people possess their own alphabetic scripts called Tifinagh which date back to the ancient times and are still in use up to the present mainly in Morocco and Algeria, and by the Touareg people (or Imuhagh) stands as evidence that Amazigh literature has also been written though most of the written documents have not reached us due to loss and negligence.

On account of different cultural associations aiming at revitalising and promoting Tamazight mainly in Algeria and Morocco, a very important body of written literature in this language has been taking shape and a great number of writers especially poets and novelists start publishing their works. These writers include among others the following: Mouloud Mammeri, Mouloud Feraouni, Mouhamed Akoundad, Ali Sedki-Azayku, Mohamed Moustaoui, Omar Derwich, Ayad Alhyan etc.


Moreover, with the emergence of a considerable body of written works in Tamazight including mainly: poetry (prevalent), tales, fables, novels, plays and novellas (limited) starting from the twentieth century, one can say that Amazigh literature is now living through a critical transitional phase as it is moving from orality to literacy. In this sense, Literacy stands for the state of writing that Amazigh literature starts to embrace after long periods of orality and of writing in the languages of the dominant people by the Amazighophone writers. These languages are specifically Arabic and French. Most of these written works are basically concerned with the issues of identity, culture, land, immigration, belonging, history, activism and nostalgia for the ancestral traditions and past.

**Defining Amazigh Poetry**

Poetry is one of most ancient and important literary forms in Amazigh literature. It also constitutes one of the most widespread means of recreation, instruction and daily life expression for the Amazigh community. That is why it is enormously prevalent across most of the North African countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Libya, etc. The fact that poetry is widely memorized, produced, recited and highly valued throughout these countries has made it possible for the Amazigh people to possess a significantly large repertoire of poetic productions. This large repertoire has evidently made of poetry a significant and an indispensable literary form in Amazigh literature although most of its classical genres are still oral which may lead to the loss of a considerable part of it if it is not preserved by writing.

Generally speaking, Amazigh poetry is divided into classical poetry and modern poetry. The first is considered as classical or traditional as it respects certain rhythmic patterns and qualities. TimnaĀïn (in the South East of Morocco) is a clear illustration of this category. Modern Amazigh poetry is a kind of free verse that does not comply with the rhythmic patterns followed in the classical Amazigh poetry. Modern poetry is almost produced by intellectuals unlike the traditional one which remains popular, spontaneous, proverbial and handed down orally from generation to generation and most of the time, the poet remains unknown. Modern poetry deals with modern issues and reacts to its current events using a simple language and sometimes mixes more than one Amazigh linguistic variety and it may contain cross and intercultural elements since it is produced very often by intellectuals. Another characteristic of modern poetry is that it is composed and published in chapbooks and poetry collections using a particular diction to be read by individuals while classical poetry is produced orally and it is performed spontaneously in cultural and social festivals.

**Sub-Genre of Amazigh Poetry**

Before tackling the different concepts assigned to poetry in Tamazight and the problem of not having a unified and universal literary term for poetry in this language, I shall list some important sub-genres of Amazigh poetry mainly those that are found in different Amazigh regions of Morocco such as Souss, the Riff, the Middle and High Atlas, and the South East. According to Omar Amarir, *Amarg* which encompasses all the different sub-genres generally refers to poetry in Souss region. *Amarg* may be divided into the following five major poetic sub-genres: *asalaw*, *tamazvit*, *tamarirt*, *aqAiÂ* and *anoibar*.

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6Centre of Artistic Studies, Literary Expressions and Audiovisual Production 73.
In the Riff region, poetry has many appellations and appears in various poetic forms. *Lavnuj* is considered as the equivalent term for poetry in this region.\(^9\) The poetic heritage in the Riff is characterized by the existence of various poetic types that differ from one another in terms of their aesthetic and artistic aspects along with their functions and purposes. The poetic types that are found in the Riff region are mainly: *izran, tiqsisin, tamdyazt* (as a sub-genre not as a concept) and *izran n rbyuz*.\(^10\)

In the Moroccan Middle and High Atlas, Amazigh poetry takes form of diverse poetic sub-genres that are remarkably various and rich in cultural aspects. Generally speaking, each of these poetic sub-genres which basically include *tamawayt, izli, tayffart* and *tivuniwin* has many distinctive characteristics depending on the situation it emerges from.\(^11\)

In the South East region of Morocco, poetry appears in various sub-genres whose usage differs from one social and cultural context to another. It is worth noting that this region consists basically of five major tribal units or confederations which are Ait Atta, Ait Yafelman, Ait Tdght, Ait Sddrat, and Imghran. These confederations are:

A. *Ait Atta* is the largest tribal confederation or alliance of the South eastern Morocco. This tribal alliance is formed by the following tribes: Ait Ouallal, Ait Ouahlim, Ait Isfoul, Ait Yazza and Ait Ounbgi.

B. *Ait Yafelman* as a confederation or tribal alliance consists of four tribes: Ait Merghad, Ait Haddidou, Ait Izdeg and Ait Yahia. This tribal confederation is located in eastern High Atlas of Morocco.

C. *Ait Tdght* tribal alliance is located exclusively in Todra Valley which is the actual city of Tinghir. The population of Todra Valley speaks an Amazigh linguistic variety close to the central Tamazight of the High and Middle Atlas which constitutes together with Tachlhiyt and Tarifiyt spoken in the South West and in the North of Morocco successively the major linguistic varieties of Tamazight in Morocco. Ait Tdght as a tribal alliance is divided into two further sub-alliances: *Ait Salh* and *Ait Gmat*. The first sub-alliance is supported by Ait Yafelman confederation in times of wars and tribal conflicts while Ait Gmat sub-alliance is supported by the confederation of *Ait Atta*. This division (*Ait Salh* and *Ait Gmat*) is basically taken from Afanour tribe which is one of the oldest tribes that settled in Todra valley (Tinghir) and applied to the whole city of Tinghir as a means of protection from continuous foreign raids by *Ait Atta* and *Ait Yafelman*.

D. *Ait Sddrat* as a tribal unit or alliance is located in the southern slopes of the High Atlas in the South East of Morocco. This confederation consists of four large tribes: Ait Zouli, Ait Mahlli, Ait Mlwan and Ait Toukhsin.

E. *Imghran* is an alliance that consists of the following tribes: Ikman, Ait Affan, Kantoula, Ait Okrour, Ghessat and Imi n Wassif.

The most important sub-genres of poetry found in this region, though some of them have already begun to disappear, are: *izli, amoiyaÊ/aoayÊ, aznzy, tasudut, waru, timmaÄin, abavuÊ, baybi* and *taskrawt*.

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\(^10\) Hamzaoui 24-28.

\(^11\) Hamzaoui 33.
Main Concepts of Amazigh Poetry in Morocco and Algeria

Poetry in Tamazight is designated by several concepts. Such a variety of concepts poses a genuine problem as to the most appropriate concept that can be applied as a universal literary term for Amazigh poetry by researchers in Tamazight. In fact, concepts that are used for poetry in Tamazight differ from one Amazigh region to another. Put otherwise, even within the same country as is the case with Morocco, names designating poetry are not the same and sometimes have different meanings in a given Amazigh region (amarg for example). This originates basically from dialectical and linguistic variations that each region is characterized with. My purpose here is to study three major concepts designating Amazigh poetry and which are widely used by Imazighen particularly in Morocco and Algeria. For Algeria, my study concerns only Kabylia and Aures. Thus, this study does not include the names that other Amazigh linguistic groups in this country like Touaregs of the South Algeria use for poetry. As stated earlier, the focus concepts to be investigated are asefri, amarg and tamdyazt. My ultimate objective here is to attempt to solve the problem of the linguistically appropriate concept that can be applied as a universal term for Amazigh poetry by researcher in Tamazight and to enrich the debate on the literary terminology of the Amazigh language as well.

1. In Morocco

Amarg

Amarir advocates that amarg, which encompasses further poetic sub-genres, is the most widely agreed upon term for poetry in Souss region; a large Amazighophone area in the South West of Morocco where Tachlhiyt (a variety of Tamazight language) is spoken. Amarg refers to the talent one may have for poetic creativity and production. The plural of the word ‘amarg’ is ‘imurag’, which refers to poetry. It also carries further meanings such love, excessive longing and nostalgia as in the following expression ‘yav i umarg nnk kigan’ translated as ‘I miss you so much’.12 As will be shown in the following section, the use of the term amarg, despite the significance of Amrir’s proposition, is unconvincing and unable to definitely settle the problem of the most appropriate concept that can be applied as a universal term for poetry in Tamazight.

Tamdyazt

It is my contention that tamdyazt derives from two basic consonantal roots.13 The first proposition is that tamdyazt derives from the consonantal root ‘mdz’. ‘Mdz’, here, refers to the activity of producing, reciting and repeating poems that the Amazigh poet (amdyaz) is expected to perform within the Amazigh community. We can say for instance: ‘A amdyaz, mdz av d yuwt tmdyazt iddzan’ meaning ‘Oh poet, recite, produce, repeat or write a very expressive and refined poem for us.’ In Tamazight, a person who produces, recites or memorizes tamdyazt (poetry) is called amdyaz. Morphologically speaking, Amdyaz, which is an Amazigh noun, is a bi-morphemic word. The first morpheme constituting this word is ‘am’ which is generally added to verbs in Tamazight to form the ‘agent’; the doer or the producer of something (poetry for example). Therefore, ‘am’ + ‘dz’ (morpHEME of agency + root) forms the ‘agent’ (amdyaz).14

12Amarir 86.
13This is my own assumption and proposition. No one else as far as I know has ever studied or suggested this in a written document.
The second proposition concerning the etymology of the concept *tamdyazt* is that *tamdyazt* derives from the monosyllabic root ‘*dz*’ or ‘*ddz*’. Both ‘*dz*’ and ‘*ddz*’ constitute two variants of the same consonantal root from which the concept ‘*tamdyazt*’ derives. ‘*Ddz*’ in which the sound ‘*d*’ is geminated is used especially in Tinghir (South East of Morocco) and within the same region, ‘*dz*’ as variant of the word ‘*ddz*’ is also used for example in Tighremt n lngourn, Dades and Tazarin. Both ‘*dz*’ and ‘*ddz*’ literally mean ‘to grind, to crush and to hit’ and when used metaphorically, they both refer to speech which is highly refined, carefully pronounced, concise and pertinent. Of course, a speech with such characteristics is simply poetry.15

Therefore, *tamdyazt* which derives from the two suggested roots ‘*mdz*’ and ‘*dz*’ with its variant ‘*ddz*’ may be considered as the most linguistically (etymologically) appropriate concept for poetry in Tamazight. The significance of this suggestion lies in coining two verbs for Amazigh poetry that are directly derived from their original root. The following diagram sets out some basic derivatives of the concept of *tamdyazt* (poetry):

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15Chafii 77.

2. In Algeria

*Asefru*:

In Algeria mainly in Kabylia and Aures, people use *asefru* to designate poetry. The plural form of *asefru* in Tamazight is *isefra*. Etymologically speaking, firstly, *asefru* derives from the verb ‘*fru*’ which is, in turn, derived from the consonantal root ‘*fr*’. ‘*Fru*’ as a verb literally means ‘to pay back one’s taxes, debts etc’. When used figuratively, I think that it may refer to poetry if we take into consideration the very competitive and artistic atmosphere in which the Amazigh poets in different cultural festivals and social celebrations compete with one another to show their creativity and talent to the audience and to artistically prevail over one another through an exciting exchange of verses. Put simply, in festivals involving poetry recitation, each poet should wait for their turn to convincingly and amusingly react in verses and thus ‘*riposte*’ (*fru* in Tamazight) for what the previous poet has said. In other words, in social and cultural Amazigh
festivals (ilmuggarn/ ilmuqqarn or igdudn), poets find themselves in an environment that requires cleverness, dynamism and high competitiveness to prevail over one another by verse (tamdyazt). However, the first assumption on the etymology of the concept asefru still needs further investigation and elaboration to be more convincing.

Secondly, people in Kabylia use the verb ‘issefruy’ which means ‘to explain, to make something more explicit, to render something more intelligible and to unravel its enigma.’ The different connotation carried by the verb ‘issefruy’ is related to the activity and the role of the Kabylian poet in particular and of the Amazigh one in general within the Amazigh society. Amazigh poets, through poetry, introduce their experiences and speculations on the world endeavoring to render them simple and comprehensible via language.

Likewise, elderly people in Tinghir specifically in Afanour tribe also use the causative verb ‘ssefru’ which has almost the same meaning as the verb ‘issefruy’ used in Kabylia as in the expression ‘ssefru asn awal’ translated as ‘make your speech clear to them’. Here, ‘ssefru’ means ‘to make, render and turn clear, refined and balanced, and to be to the point, precise, concise and convincing as well’. It becomes clear that the second etymological suggestion in its relation with the term asefru (meaning poetry) seems contradictory as it does not reflect the qualities of Amazigh poetry such as the use of figurative language and symbolism even if it makes use of simple vocabulary and concise linguistic constructions. To conclude, both the two previous propositions on the etymology of the term ‘asefru’ remain questionable but are of great significance and hence worthy of further investigation.

**Why Opting for Tamdyazt?**

On the basis of the previous linguistic (etymological) investigation of the three major concepts referring to Amazigh poetry and regarding the debate on the most linguistically appropriate concept that can be applied as universal literary term for Amazigh poetry, I see that the concept tamdyazt stands as an inclusive concept for poetry in Tamazight. First, amarg as a concept designating Amazigh poetry that Amarir proposes in his important book titled *The symbols of Amazigh Poetry and Islam’s Influence on them* is only limited to Souss region. According to him, the concept amarg is a bi-morphemic noun formed by the morpheme ‘ama’ which joins the verb ‘arg’ meaning ‘to bless’. Both the morpheme ‘ama’ and the verb ‘arg’ form the noun amarg which refers to Amazigh poetry. However, it is difficult to find a linguistic and a semantic relationship between the act of ‘blessing’ and the term poetry in Tamazight as advocated by Amarir.

Furthermore, the word amarg has other meanings such as nostalgia, longing and love and thus remains a broad term and hence less suitable to be used for poetry in Tamazight. In other words, the etymological proposition of the term amarg that Amarir puts forth seems linguistically questionable and semantically inappropriate to designate Amazigh poetry because, as Paulette Galand-Pernet argues, the very etymology of the word amarg is very problematic and hard to define.
For the etymology of the term *amarg*, I add that it is mainly formed by two morphemes. The first morpheme is ‘*am*’ when added to the verb ‘*arg*’ that is derived from the consonantal root ‘*rg*’ refers to the act of irrigation and watering of the fields. Hence, the word ‘*tarāa*’ meaning ‘a valley’ and ‘water channel’ in Souss and the South East region (Morocco) in this sense stands as a nominal stem derived from the root ‘*rg*’. I thus propose that the term *amarg* can also be used to designate ‘a person who does the activity of irrigation of fields and farms’ in Tamazight and metaphorically to refer to ‘poets who quench the thirst of members of the Amazigh society through art and poetry’; a significant proposition that Amarir did not include in his study regarding the etymology of the word ‘*amarg*’ to support his assumption concerning the appropriate term designating Amazigh poetry.

In an attempt to settle the issue of the most linguistically appropriate concept for poetry in Tamazight, I would therefore suggest the term *tamdyazt* for the following reasons. Firstly, *tamdyazt* as a concept is largely used by people in more than one Amazigh region and country unlike the terms *amarg* and *asefru* which are limited only to Souss and Kabylia/Aures where they refer to poetry successively. Put otherwise, people in Algeria (Kabylia and Aures) and in the Moroccan Riff use the term *tamdyazt*. *Tamdyazt* is also used in most of the remaining Moroccan regions such as the Middle and the High Atlas, and the South East region. Moreover, it is even used in Souss region particularly by some modern Amazigh writers, poets, and intellectuals.

It becomes clear that the etymological analysis of the concept *amarg* advocated by Amarir to designate poetry in Souss (Morocco) is broader, more complex, incomplete and, as Paulette Galand-Pernet believes, hard to define. Furthermore, the previously discussed etymological assumptions of the concept *asefru* referring to poetry in Kabylia and Aures (Algeria) still need further study and elaboration to be convincing. Therefore, the etymological contention regarding the concept *tamdyazt* that this paper puts forward can, evidently, enrich and why not settle the debate on the most appropriate, pertinent and universal term for poetry in Tamazight thanks to the linguistic (etymological) derivational properties of the concept *tamdyazt*.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued, from a linguistic/etymological perspective, that the concept *tamdyazt* can be used as a universal literary term for poetry in Tamazight. This study will, no doubt, contribute to settle the debate on the problem of the most linguistically appropriate concept for poetry in the Amazigh language. My final conclusion in this paper is the outcome of a linguistic (etymological) investigation of three major concepts designating poetry in Tamazight namely in Morocco and Algeria. These three concepts, as the study shows, are *amarg*, *asefru* and *tamdyazt*.

Hamza Chafii is a Moroccan middle school teacher of English. He obtained his BA degree in English (2007) and a Master in Comparative Studies (2012) from Ibn Zohr University. In 2015, He won Tin-Hinan Prize for Amazigh Poetry and published his first poetry collection in Tamazight entitled The Endless Struggle.

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20Amarir 86.
Always Elsewhere: On Longing and Palermo

Amaryllis Gacioppo

In July of 2013, mother, father, brother, and I were on the traghetto which crosses regularly from Reggio Calabria on Italy’s peninsula to Messina, a Sicilian port city situated where (as my father used to say) the tip of the soccer ball almost meets the boot. Over the past couple of days we’d driven down the Reggio Calabria autostrada from Rome, swerved our rented Fiat 500 around sharp ridges along the thin ribbon of highway, which overlooked stomach-dropping heights to the coastline that runs along southern Italy’s edge.

Born in 1947, my father migrated to Australia from a Sicilian village in 1965 in search of better opportunities. My mother was born in 1957, the third in a line of well-travelled, university-educated women in privileged Sicilian and Piedmontese families. She came to Australia at the age of 28 seeking only a two-month adventure and escape from a European winter. Instead, she met my father and decided to settle in Australia. I make this point to emphasise that while my mother is often assumed to be a migrant, her experience and perception was more aligned with that of the mobile expatriate. She would become an Australian citizen in 1997, with my younger brother and me in attendance at the citizenship ceremony. My parents lived in Sydney until they moved to the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales in 1993 when I was aged three. My mother enlisted my brother and me as Italian citizens at birth. The ever-present background of Italy in my life, facilitated by travel and the fact that the majority of my extended family still resided there, perhaps exacerbated the duality of my cultural experience. Perhaps only now, at 25, am I reconciling my concept of past homes to delineate a potential future.

As the traghetto inched closer to Messina my brother and I peeled our noses off the floor-to-ceiling glass of the passenger area and bounded down to the base of the boat. We clung onto the rusty railing as we inched closer and closer to the island where our parents were born. Our car was docked down here, along with 50 other passenger’s vehicles and the air stank of fish and petrol. From here it would be a two-and-a-half hour drive along Sicily’s coastline to my mother’s home city of Palermo.

Weeks before on the train to Italy, I’d relished the vision of my visit. Nobody would stumble over my name or comment that I looked exotic. I would order wine with every meal, smoking cigarettes in cafes without the worry of upsetting fellow diners. I’d float on my back over the gentle ripples of the Tyrrhenian sea. I’d finally speak my mother tongue to people who were not my mother and I would walk down cobblestone streets with history at my heels and in my veins, humbling reminders of the thousands of years of my ancestors before me, stalwart barricades to any notions that I might be out of place here. I’d be home.

But what exactly did I mean by home? In one sense I knew what I was looking for, and in another I had no idea, but I’d know when I found it. This preoccupation with the imagined home is not unique in literary nonfiction. In Sidewalks, a collection of psychogeographical lyric essays by South African-born, Mexican writer Valeria Luiselli, she states that despite her childhood in South Africa, she never questioned her identity as Mexican. So much so that, in her essay ‘Manifesto a Velo’, in which Luiselli expounds upon the melancholia that pervaded her youth, she recounts a period in her childhood in which she dug a deep hole in her backyard, convinced...
that it might lead her to Mexico City. In ‘Parallax’, an essay in which Andre Aciman meditates on the way in which a city embodies the self, he recalls his childhood conviction that he would one day ‘return’ to Paris. While ‘not a single ounce of [him] is French’, he describes as his lifelong ‘soul home, [his] imaginary home.’ In ‘That’s You: An Interview – Of Sorts – With Thomas Wild’, German-American writer Brittani Sonnenberg returns to her birthplace of Hamburg hoping for a feeling of uncanny belonging and a unified sense of self, stating that: ‘it’s what I crave more than anything: to finally be some decided nationality. To receive a nod that is not a raised eyebrow.’ What manifests is the suggestion that perhaps these quests for an idealised home have more to do with the search for an alternate self, the unity of a self, for a sense of belonging that isn’t provisional, for an identity that is uncontested. Of the three, Luiselli is the only one to permanently ‘return’ to Mexico City: Aciman finds that he prefers Paris at a nostalgic remove from New York, and Sonnenberg settles in Berlin, where, as she notes the cacophony of language on the subway and the bullet-holed buildings: ‘You too can be broken here, it seemed to say, and take your time to heal with the rest of us.’ In these cases, the concept of home is used as allegory – as if in reaching these promised lands, some insufficiency within the self will be fulfilled.

My family’s last return to Sicily occurred when I was eleven. My recollection of this trip is dreamlike, blurred – brief scenes blare from a tiny projector in my mind: eating pizzas at a restaurant with my cousins, petting the family of cats which congregated at my aunt and uncle’s home, waking up in the middle of the night to find my mother and aunt still up at the kitchen table, smoking and gossiping in hushed whispers, strolling to the piazza for warm mozzarella panini. I wondered how accurate these scenes of my mind were, whether Palermo would be recognisable. In philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s exploration of the phenomenology of place, The Poetics of Space, first published in French in 1958, he proposes that memory is a combination of recollection, imagination and perception. The images of our past are created ‘through co-operation between real and unreal’, a mixture of ‘our own personal history and an indefinite pre-history.’ Memories of childhood often retain the qualities of dreams, consisting of images, sensations and feelings. The dreamy quality of these brief memories is no different to the rest of the recollections in my childhood catalogue, though I suppose my experience of Sicily at eleven was more pure than anything I could experience now – without expectation, I was all absorption. Or, more accurately, with my disgruntlement that we wouldn’t be seeing the Leaning Tower of Pisa, my expectations were shot. Now, I am much more conscious of the fleeting nature of time and memory, and I find myself scrambling to both recall past memories and store new ones. Just as my memory isn’t linear, my feelings during these trips were constantly at odds with one another. On the one hand I finally feel that certainty people must feel when they’re aware that the ground their standing on holds some kind of inherited depth. On the other, I feel the same friction I feel when I’m in Australia – I don’t understand why certain things have to be certain ways, I find myself disgruntled by traits and customs which don’t come naturally to me. My mother likes to say that in Australia I’m Italian and in Italy I’m invariably Australian, that

4 Sonnenberg, 101.
this is a construct contributed to by both myself and others. I’ve never liked her saying this because it invariably renders me foreign, no matter where I am.

If you squint, Sicily’s landscape could fool you for parts of Australia. Rugged, red mountains emerge from the coast like broken teeth. However, from the tops of these mountains sprout medieval villages, the height so extreme that they look like miniatures. Shivers of awe overcome me and it all felt simultaneously familiar and alien, but I questioned whether my uncanny propensity for this island was innate or just willed. Can memory ingrain itself through DNA? Was I truly experiencing a thrilling psychosomatic return to an ancestral homeland, or was the familiarity I felt simply due to similarities between landscapes? In his collection of essays, False Papers (2000), US-based writer André Aciman, explores displacement and longing for lost homelands, particularly in relation to his exile from his birthplace of Egypt. In ‘Alexandria: Capital of Memory’, Aciman describes the Portuguese word: *retornados*, whose meaning relates to the descendants of Portuguese settlers in colonised Africa returning to their homeland in Europe. Aciman writes that invariably they return to Africa as tourists, vacillating between estrangement and familiarity in both their former home and their ancestral one, ‘not knowing ... why this city that feels like home and which they can almost touch at every bend of the street can be as foreign as those places they’ve never seen before but studied in travel books.’

The concept of *retornados* encapsulates the dichotomous sensation of returning to a place that feels both familiar and foreign.

My relationship with Australia has always been complex. Like an adoptive parent, I, like so many others, can claim no blood-ties to my birthplace. Growing up in regional NSW, I counted a total of two cousins on my father’s side who resided in Sydney, while the rest of my family was scattered over the US and Europe. At school I was reminded daily that I was not from here, that I was new, that my ‘Australian’ title was a lucky courtesy granted rather than a birth-rite. Driving along that scenic Sicilian coastline, I felt both an overwhelming sense of returning to a previous home, and an intangible longing. I knew that entering Sicily marked the beginning of the end of the trip, and I already missed it. Could I even be nostalgic for a life I had never, could never experience, especially considering that had my father not migrated to Australia at 18 and had my mother not acted on a compulsion to travel here 18 years later, they never would have met, and I never would have been born? Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as ‘a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.’

This suggests that the loss which defines nostalgia is as much predicated on sensorial imagination than actuality.

Where had this inherent nostalgia originated? Joan Didion examines her own inclination for nostalgia in the 1968 essay ‘Notes from a Native Daughter’, detailing her childhood ties to her family city of Sacramento, California. In it, she explores a childhood on the cusp of the city’s renewal into a cosmopolitan urban centre. She describes life as lazy, microcosmic, and nostalgic for a remembered golden age of gold rushes and pioneering. I grew up hearing stories of my maternal family’s grandeur, a long line of ancient fortune which was lost due to circumstances in WWII and my estranged grandfather’s numerous vices. His children, my mother included, subsequently scattered across continents, leaving us descendants with only anecdotes and relics of a more fruitful time in our genealogy. The underlying aphorism of my childhood: that the golden age was long gone, buried in family mausoleums and enclaves in Palermo and Alimena, the latter being a town which once bore my mother’s surname on street signs and official buildings. I remember a distinct longing to return to this fabled time as a child fascinated with

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her grandmother’s stories. Returns to Palermo were spent in the homes of family and old friends who’d been more fortunate and whose sprawling apartments and elegant beach houses gave me a taste of what had once been. While I realise the situations are worlds apart – Didion’s ancestral home of Sacramento, my upbringing in ahistorical surrounds – there is still the essence of wistful reminiscence for a golden age permeating both accounts. How does this manifest itself? Didion argues that ‘such a view of history casts a certain melancholia over those who participate in it; my own childhood was suffused with the conviction that we had long outlived our finest hour.’

This suggests that a childhood saturated by an irretrievable past encourages a tendency for longing.

However, Didion’s nostalgia for Sacramento’s lost age is supplanted by the fact that she is still able to pronounce the Californian city her home. I still wonder whether my nostalgia is something innate, or purely a mental construction, grasping for roots which reached deeper than the circumstances of my birth. In Edward Said’s essay ‘Reflections on Exile’, he quotes Simone Weil when discussing the dilemma of the exile, which always makes me think of the generational migrant experience as it pertains to the issue of belonging: ‘To be rooted ... is perhaps the most important and least recognised need for the human soul.’ Growing up, my sole connections to my own history were through stories and family photo albums. Through the photos of my mother’s youth I saw a different world, entirely unconnected to my own, while my father scarcely spoke about his childhood. But our home was filled with talismans of my genealogy: Northern Italian furniture, Sicilian paintings, Arabic silver work, a century-old antique clock hanging in the foyer, and glass cabinets filled with blown-glass figurines and gold skeleton leaves. For me, the past was entirely locked up in unknown landscapes. How to reconcile these images with the present reality?

My brother and I were the lone ‘ethnics’, or bilingual kids, at our primary school, and our tenuous links to the culture around us were regularly noted both by our peers on the playground and by teachers in class. My home life and culture was presumed mysterious and definitely backward. Rosemary Malangoly George states that home’s ‘importance lies in the fact that it is not equally available to all. Home is the desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few.’ Concepts of home rely on exclusion in order to establish cultural values and borders and I found myself exiled in the social sphere. Said’s definition of exile is perhaps the most extreme and prevalent: one who has been pushed out of his or her ‘true home’. Exiles lead wretched existences, relegated to alien status, pining for a place they can never return to, forced out of their native lands by war, famine and politics. While I can’t call myself exile in this sense, there are many variants to its connotative meaning. Penrod, in her paper on Hélène Cixous’s ‘My Algeriance’, cites Susan Rubin Suleiman’s universal definition of the term ‘exile’ as ‘a state of being “not home” (or of being “everywhere at home,” the flip side of the same coin), which means ... at a distance from one’s own native tongue’. What is my native tongue? The Australian English of my birth country? The Italian of Sicily’s colonisers? Or a dialect which neither I nor my mother speak?

Could I feel exiled even though I was born in Australia? While not a political exile, I use this term to denote the ethereal sensation of exclusion when one feels alien in one’s birthplace and home. While I don’t pretend to carry the trauma of the political exile, ‘exilic’ was how it felt

11Mullen 137.
during those moments throughout my childhood where I was reminded that my links to Australia were tenuous, when other children in school and the occasional adult in the street would direct my mother and me to ‘go back to our own country’. While both cosmopolitan and regional Australia have evolved, especially with the proliferation of ethnic culinary and fashion culture, I believe this concept of multiculturalism is problematised when it comes to concepts of ownership and degrees of ‘whiteness’ to denote class. Perhaps the best example is how my brother and I were referred to by others: in primary school, a teacher pointed out in class that I likely had an arranged marriage awaiting me back home in ‘the village’. On each of our high school graduations, the school principal didn’t bother attempting to pronounce our last name, his silence garnering a chorus of laughter. Instead, nicknames included ‘The Mexican’ and ‘FOB’. These memories are difficult to navigate, and I am aware that what were throwaway moments for the others involved have become significant markers of my childhood that I wish I could forget.

Even indulging in nostalgia for an idealised homeland, or attempting to justify feelings of exclusion from a birth country may invite the perception that one is ‘ungrateful’. In poet Danijela Kambaskovic’s essay ‘Breaching the Social Contract’, she writes of the complexities of writing under the dual weights of migrant trauma and traditional immigrant narratives. She asks how it is possible to write of this trauma with ‘the awareness that one has moved into a much “better” society and ought to be “grateful.”’ The result of expressing these conflicted feelings may result in an audience who is ‘baffled, even confronted, by the uneasy conjunction of praise and criticism of their own society, which may make the migrant writer seem negative and ungrateful.’

The implication that one should be grateful or else ‘return to their own country’ not only implies that one has a ‘true’ country to go back to, but it re-emphasises degrees of legitimacy, where the real ‘owners’ are demarcated by the freedom to frame their own narrative. Daniel Francis states that ‘in an age of anxiety, it is not surprising to find nostalgia flourishing.’ When I had been told to return to where I came from in the past, resentment and the pain of unbelonging was transplanted into the idea that this was a possibility. As I grew older, I reasoned that there was no reason to participate in the constant struggle for legitimacy. I could transfer my idea of home to a faraway homeland, where my belonging was not provisional. My ache could be perceived as a longing for something more legitimate, uncontested, concrete. Perhaps it was in confrontation with the physical embodiment of this fantasy in Palermo that I realised all home could be was just that: a fantasy, fragile as a card house. Could this nostalgia be symptomatic of the struggle with an imposed narrative which is no longer relevant? In the essay, ‘A poetics of (un)becoming hybridity’, Adam Aitken posits that rather than privileging the host country or the homeland, the space of the ‘in-between’ should be regarded as active rather than absent. He goes on to argue that cultural hybridity is a mode of subjectivity in flux rather than stasis, stating that ‘hybridity is more than identity: it is a poetics of Being with no dominant template.’

In Amanda Mullen’s essay on Italian-Canadian writer Nino Ricci’s trilogy, she argues that his fiction expresses a nostalgic desire for origins in Canada. Despite his Canadian birth, Ricci writes of feeling foreign in his own country, stating that,

When I started school ... a lot of what we did suddenly began to seem not so normal. ... It was as if I, too, had set out on a ship and arrived in another country where people did things differently, so that suddenly everything about my own little domain, the closed,
autonomous world I’d been raised in until them, seemed makeshift and shabby and low. This, then, perhaps, was my true passage to Canada, out of the innocence and sameness into difference.\textsuperscript{16}

However, just as Ricci realises his alienation in his birth country, neither can he claim Italy as his ‘true home’. Like most second-generation children, Ricci’s experience of Italy is secondhand, made up of memories passed down through oral history, songs, photos and relics which inspire imagination rather than recollection, conjuring an unknown mythic past. Judging Ricci’s and my experiences, the second-generation child faces the dual frictions of incomplete homes: born in a separate country to their parents and growing up in a different culture, inheriting both traits of the parent culture and the adoptive one. The child is cognisant of a rupture in their heritage and must learn to navigate each culture, fully belonging to neither. Sonnenberg adds that this knowledge can cause a desperate hunger to belong, as ‘sometimes the ache of un-belonging feels like a stitch I’ve had in my side for as long as I can remember, and it would be nice to walk around without it.’\textsuperscript{17}

Arrival into Palermo was an immersion in alienation. Although it was only a year ago, I’m not sure whether the haze which blankets our arrival into Palermo is a product of shock or rampant pollution by the perpetual frenzied gridlock of automobiles which defines the city’s motorways. What I remember is grime-stained buildings soaking in the dusk (I’m not sure whether this is a fault of memory, but it is sunset during my entire recollection of that day), around which cars, Vespas, and motorbikes wound and swerved. If there were any lanes, they were purely for decoration as motorists squeezed into the slightest gap in traffic, resting one hand on car horns, the other alternating between manoeuvring cigarettes, gesturing wildly out the window, and steering. Never had I felt more Australian as in the midst of that chaos, fingers crossed against collision, wondering why these lunatics couldn’t just follow a few simple rules. I suppose this moment had been foreshadowed years earlier when my uncle came to visit my family, and who, rejecting the concept of the roundabout, drove straight over it. Internally I was somersaulting, turning the idea over in my mind that I’d been deluding myself into thinking I could ever have a direct lineage to this place, fearing that I’d lost all remaining vestiges of cultural ties. At that moment, being jerked and swung around the backseat of the little Fiat with the bleat of car horns and directives to \textit{vaffanculo} surrounding me, I was overcome with a state of empty loss and abandonment which I can only describe as exile. This was the city I’d been waiting for, but my initial encounter was nothing like the welcome I’d imagined and it felt like a betrayal. In her essay, ‘The Geography of Melancholy’, Tara Isabella Burton explores the melancholy that pervades writing of the city. Literature that penetrates the urban space so often embodies ‘the experience of longing, of nostalgia, of alienation, and of loss. For such writers, the city is not merely setting but allegory: a physical embodiment of the irrepeatability of experience and the inevitability of decay.’\textsuperscript{18} The city landscape is underwritten with the personal histories of an entire population, both past and present, and in its inescapable yet intangible history, we are forced to confront our own myths. Like the bygone relics in the family home, ruins are reminders of an idealised past glory that escapes tangibility. In returning to Palermo following a decade-long absence, the objects that had populated my childhood home – the Murano blown-glass, the imposing grandfather clock, the seventeenth-century furniture, the gilt-framed artwork,

\textsuperscript{16}Mullen 32-3.

the silver tea service – revealed themselves not as portals to an alternate life, but as tools of projected myth-making.

Our first week in Palermo marked the differences in what I hadn’t seen the first time around. Growing up, I had imagined my veins to be power-lines stretched taut across oceans. In Palermo, my intrinsic desire was to experience the city that had lain dormant within me unfurl out from my chest like a flower in bloom. One of my clearest memories of Palermo from our previous trip had been the beach at Mondello. As I’d recalled, the strip of sand was white and infinite, the rippling sea an impossible shade of translucent azure and warm as a bath. A brightly-coloured rainbow of cabana huts lined the beach. However, twelve years later I was shocked with the insufficiency of my recollection. How had I not seen that the sand was made up of cigarette butts or the plastic bags rolling over the lazy waves? My memory of the beach had been a silent film, but now hawkers shilled beach balls, beaded jewellery, beers, clothing, and buttered corn on the cob. A beachside bar blasted club beats. In the Poetics of Space, Bachelard points out the inescapable tendency of recollection and imagination to coalesce in nostalgic memory: ‘Have facts really the value that memory gives them? Distant memory only recalls them by giving them a value, a halo, of happiness. But let this value be effaced, and the facts cease to exist. Did they ever exist?’ Within these confrontations with flawed memory lies the sinking realisation that our past selves are lost. The sense of nostalgia that had pervaded me directly before and during our stay was of a different nature from the one that I had felt for years in Australia. I suspected that what I was mourning for was my idealised fantasy of the city. Before, I was free to cherish my memories, whereas now my image of Palermo was inevitably being torn apart and infiltrated by reality. Everything was double as I compared it with my memory, so that now my memory of Mondello plays like a suffused image as ‘the past interferes and contaminates the present, while the present looks back and distorts the past’.

Of course, my surprise at fantasy breeding disappointment was naive. In ‘That’s You’, Sonnenberg footnotes Wild’s responses with her own in order to analyse her youth as a self-professed ‘Third Culture Kid’. She describes this disaffection when visiting her first home in Hamburg after a lifetime of romanticising: ‘A simple whitewashed building by a river, and that was all. There was little to see, and still less to feel. ... All my life I’d announced Hamburg as my birthplace, my original.’ However, I was still upset by the changes of the beach, regardless of whether they were simply markers of time or reality confronting imagination. I was overwhelmed with longing for the Mondello of my memory and suspicious that something had changed. Aciman suggests that this distrust of change exposes a fear of rootlessness. He describes this feeling as if one has ‘docked ... a few minutes ahead or a few minutes behind Earth time, any change [a reminder] of how imperfectly I’ve connected to it. ... In the disappearance of small things, I read the tokens of my own dislocation, of my own transiency.’ My discomfort could be read as a reaction to this reminder that my sense of belonging, like my memory, was frail, imagined. In the introduction to Imagined States, Del Giudice and Porter argue that the the human mind constructs and imagines geographical place in order to situate itself within the world. They state that ‘imagined states are both constructed and within the symbolic order’. The function of my nostalgia for an idealised Palermo, in the construction of my cultural identity, can therefore be seen as largely symbolic. In order to reconcile the exiles

19Bachelard 58.
20Aciman, Alibis 190.
21Sonnenberg 99.
22Aciman, False Papers 39.
and dualities of my identity within the accepted framework of cultural selfhood, I had constructed a version of my mother’s city as my home town. Would it have been any different, had she been from any other city?

This feeling was temporary however. The drive to my Zia’s home in the mountain region of Monreale wound up a serpentine stretch of road, motorcyclists and other motorists speeding down past us, household trash heaps dotting the rocky escarpment at intervals. Houses here were literally built into the hillside, jutting out over the cliff. From her balcony we were afforded a panoramic view of the entire valley, from its two mountain boundaries out to the sea. Every morning I would stand out there and envision the citrus groves that the Arabs had planted centuries earlier which had once blossomed out over the valley, earning the city the nickname of la conca d’oro (the golden shell). Palermo is a sprawling labyrinth of a city, and is difficult to describe in any singular manner. To assume it as typical of an Italian city would be a mistake. The Sicilian capital boasts a history of over 2,500 years, and due to its strategic location in the Mediterranean, has been a constant site of conquest by empires. Its frenetic patchwork of architecture, ruins, cuisine, and language, is evidence of a culture which is a vestigial testimonial to its numerous occupations by powers such as the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Saracen Arabs, the Normans, the French and the Spanish Bourbons. From its Moorish domes to its Baroque palaces to its loud and steamy food markets lining the greasy, smoggy streets; this city is untameable. Its recent history has been no less tumultuous – a history which lives on in palazzi still pockmarked by shell casings from WWII, rampant poverty and crime and the plague of bureaucracy, direct results of both abuse by the mainland and Mafia corruption. It’s a city still living in the aftermath of its Golden Age, in no way familiar with gentrification. I’d been well-versed in this history growing up, and as I gazed out over this urban wilderness I wondered at how my dreamy mother had ever traversed it.

I realised then that I was gazing down at a city not only rich in European history, but my own history. I imagined my teenaged mother, traipsing around the city, clutching the hands of old lovers and friends. Her entire life before me was contained within the boundaries of these mountains, and if I could just squint hard enough, it was all here: a living shrine. Here I was grasping again in the very city I’d been yearning after – geography seemingly insufficient in curing my nostalgia. So what was I so nostalgic for? The term ‘nostalgia’, coined in the late seventeenth century by Swiss scholar Johannes Hofer, derives from the Greek nosto, meaning ‘return to the native land’, and algos, meaning pain. Up until the early twentieth century, ‘nostalgia’ was interchangeable with ‘homesickness’. However in her paper ‘You Can’t Go Home Again’, tracing the history of homesickness and nostalgia in the US, Susan Matt marks a shift in the meaning of nostalgia. In the twentieth century, nostalgia went from being a curable emotion to a more permanent state of mind which Matt describes as, ‘a bittersweet yearning for a lost time’. While ‘homesickness’ assumes that there is a home to go back to, the longing unique to nostalgia is in search of that which is unattainable – lost times, places, loves. What is behind our predisposition to these emotional states? While it could simply be an innate dislike of change, Matt proposes that nostalgia suggests a yearning for a past self rather than a place as we attempt ‘to establish continuity with past selves. Longings for lost places, peoples, and times represent a desire to bridge past experience and present conditions.’

26 Matt 470-1.

Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
Over the next few weeks we made numerous meandering trips through the city. Hot steam billowed from store fronts and street grates, the ancient buildings were dirty, scuffed black and grey. On childhood visits, I’d be reminded that jewellery went unworn in the streets, and could be retrieved from pockets only at the door of our destination, while in restaurants handbags and valuables were to be planted firmly between one’s thighs. Sly hands tearing the gold hoops from women’s earlobes and yanking pearl strands from exposed necks were the bogeymen of my Sicilian summers. Men crouched in boxes bleating, ‘Please give, I have no legs’ haunted every street corner. The unbridled grit of this metropolis was both thrilling and confronting. Like Didion in ‘Native Daughter’, who had mixed feelings of returning home on a comfortable flight as it suggested she could not have borne the trip by wagon as her forebears had done, I had the sinking suspicion that regardless of the blood my father made so much of I was all talk: I had neither the tools nor the stomach to brave this city on my own, if I so chose. However, there was a certain borrowed sense of familiarity that came over me. Now I thought: here was where my mother lived her entire life before me.

On one of our excursions, we came upon an elegant patisserie displaying sandwiches, pastas, and sweets behind gold-rimmed glass counters. My mother, in both awe and excitement exclaimed over how little had changed since she and her school friends had whiled away days here. I scanned the white leather booths lining the walls and imagined she and her friends inhabiting that one, in the corner on the left under the window. Through smoke smog they laughed, riotous, one hand spilled coffee and another mopped it up. I longed to travel back in time 40 years. Aciman writes that this preoccupation with perceiving place through the lens of nostalgia reveals a deep-seated displacement of identity within the perceiver. This is because, ‘place, in this very peculiar context, means something only if it is tied to its own displacement. ... Everything becomes a mirror image of itself and of something else. ... I am, for all I know, a hall of mirrors.’

Winding down narrow streets hedged by Sicilian Baroque palazzi, I wondered what happened to my teenaged mother, and I heard the echo of Cixous’s questioning in my mind: ‘And how many coffins have taken the place of a body for you during how many years of your existence? In how many frozen bodies has your soul shrivelled up?’ If I craned my neck into alleys, turned a squinted gaze over awnings I saw these hauntings: one combed hip-length hair in beat-up blue jeans, another’s head was shaved, donning the monkish robes which had been bridesmaid dress at a sister’s wedding. I had the uncanny sense that rather than imagining, I was remembering a past that in reality I had at best experienced secondhand. I imagined her driving that fabled car of hers with the Flintstone-esque hole in the driver’s floor or strolling down streets, holding the hands of ex-lovers, protesting in parks. Hunks of my family history emerged around every street corner and block like ancient ruins. In her old high school and the crumbling bars my mother frequented I saw coliseums. In my search of this lost figure who I knew so well and yet could never know, I desired a suspension of time in my surroundings. If I could, I would ask my mother to make a map of her youth, to take me to each and every cafe and bar and school and park, to every exact spot on the beach where she sunbathed, the exact table in the exact restaurant on every date she went on, where I would eat the exact meal she’d ordered. Aciman suggests that place preserves the past, and that it is possible to delve into this petrified history, like the remains of Troy. He states that ‘cities ... do not simply have to watch themselves go but strive to remember, because in the wish to remember lies the wish to restore, to stay alive, to

27Aciman, False Papers 138.
continue to be.’ Aciman argues that these states of displacement reveal more than just a predisposition for nostalgia. Rather, they speak to a duality within the self, as ‘it is a fundamental misalignment between who we are, might have been, could still be, can’t accept we’ve become, or may never be.’

Initially, I thought it was my mother’s past which bared the agency, begging to be uncovered, but was it my own history that I sought to preserve? Was I the ‘being who does not want to melt away, and who, ever in the past, when he sets out in search of things past, wants time to “suspend” its flight’? Maybe it’s that I thought the unearthing of my mother’s ghost would legitimise my being here. And isn’t that what we mean when we talk about belonging – legitimacy? In his essay ‘On Not Going Home’, when James Wood discusses Said’s exile to analyse his feeling of homelessness, he acknowledges that while his own desire for home is privileged, it is not uncommon. He states that ‘the desire to return, after so long away, is gladly irrational, and is perhaps premised on the loss of the original home. ... Home swells as a sentiment because it has disappeared as an achievable reality.’

While conscious of the fact that my life undoubtedly hinges on the geography of my birth, the irrational sense that I’d somehow been cheated out of the opportunity to know my heritage by living within it gnawed at me. Perhaps I also suspected that to have been born in an uncontested home would, in some way, have been a relief. Arguably, there is a greater pressure on migrants and their children to succeed in the new country – automatically there is more at stake in order to atone for the sacrifice that has been made to provide a better life. In order to illustrate the irrational desire to be at home, Wood quotes the heroine in Russian writer’s Sergei Dovlatov’s book A Foreign Woman. When deciding to return to Russia from New York, the writer appears in the narrative and attempts to dissuade her: ‘You’ve just forgotten what life is like there, he says: “The rudeness, the lies.” She replies: “If people are rude in Moscow, at least it’s in Russian.”’

It seemed to me that my fruitless grasping for an irretrievable past played in the shadow cast by my longing for Palermo. What was Palermo? Origin, roots, legitimacy, relief: coming home. These tarp-bottomed balconies of palazzi, and buildings reduced to rubble, were manifestations of a past I could never really know. They seemed like clues to my own history. Confrontation with its effects only proved history’s total annihilation, and yet I had never been closer. The evidence was there, and yet the more real the once-mythic past became the more I realised how lost it was. Aciman argues that confrontations with an unknown past remind the individual of their own homelessness: ‘because of this mnemonic parallax, of this shadow partner distorting everything, we’re reminded of how we are torn in two. Torn from our past, from a home, from ourselves.’

In Palermo, history’s effects were inescapable. Time concertinaed in the tiny bars doing business out of dilapidated buildings, their disintegration caused by either Allied bombings or plain old ageing. My cousins and I drank home-made spirits while sitting at a table with Coca Cola emblazoned across it in a cobblestone piazza filled with other tiny haphazard bars and

29Aciman, False Papers 119-20.
30Aciman, Alibis 189.
31Bachelard 8.
33Wood 2014.
34Aciman, Alibis 191.
watching pale Irish university students stumble and slur. The blown-out second stories of these buildings were like crumbling dioramas. Some still contained dusty greyed furniture—a couch facing a busted old television, the remains of a Formica table amongst three overturned chairs. Others were canvas to elaborate murals. As Aciman observes that he cannot truly appreciate a street parade in Brooklyn without reflecting on Portofino, I can’t imagine the gritty streets of inner city Palermo without my mother’s ghost trailing up ahead.\textsuperscript{35} Without these imagined memories, this city would not come alive for me—to be within the present, I had to enter into a perceived past. However, was this nostalgia for my mother’s lost youth distorting my experience? Aciman proposes that the idea of solely perceiving the present moment is impossible, as ‘we exist on so many tenses … we are constantly shifting like tectonic plates between one tense and another, which is why I think we have a hard time living.’\textsuperscript{36} We are constantly perceiving the present through the veil of remembrance and speculation.

What I realise now is that the ghost I was chasing wasn’t of my mother at all, but my own dispersed self. Aciman states that:

\begin{quote}
   it is not cities that beckon us, nor is it even the time spent in those cities that we long for; rather it is the imagined, unlived life we’ve projected onto these cities that summons us and exerts its strong pull. The city itself is just a costume, a screen wall, or, as the painter Claude Monet said, an empty envelope. What counts and what never dies is the remembrance of the imagined life we’d once hoped to live.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

This girl-ghost was a phantom limb, my imagined life, the what-if in my endless ponderings, comparisons and daydreams that are the throughline of my consciousness. I tried to implant myself in these images, made mental lists of the differences and similarities between this imagined self and the ‘I’ I’d been dealt. I guess what I was really asking myself was whether I could cut it, whether growing up here would have resulted in a self which was either more or less true. Rather than physically manifest an imagined home, geography had not released me from my home within memory and imagination. Aciman uses the metaphor of home to delineate the vacillation between memory and anticipation, stating that ‘there are essentially two hypothetical homes, neither of which is the real home, but because the real inhabited space has literally become the street between them.’\textsuperscript{38} My perception was refracted between points: on the one hand I was looking as my eleven-year-old self, on the other as my young mother, another as my potential self had we returned, another as my present self storing memories and information for future returns. I realise now I was inventing entire histories, memories, associations, not for my mother but for an unrealised self. Maybe this is a self that has always been within me (along with all the others), and my longing for Palermo is actually a longing for it. Haven’t I been doing this my whole life? Comparing, wondering, dreaming.

For me, the place that best captures Palermo’s varied culture and history is the Duomo di Monreale. Built during the Norman occupation of Sicily, the cathedral itself is a splendour, combining Eastern Rite and Roman Catholic arrangement and featuring Italian and Eastern architecture. The inner-walls are plastered with intricate Byzantine mosaics. Confronted by this meld of culture, I reflected that place and home are never settled. A few years ago, I’d have much rather identified as an island unto myself, but now the sites of my genealogical history seem to be rumbling within me: Palermo’s writing and rewriting of itself and by others, its

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{35} Aciman, \textit{Alibis} 192.
\bibitem{36} Iris Moulton, ‘Hamburger, Succulent, Grapes, Ketchup: An Interview with André Aciman’, \textit{Gigantic} (accessed 7 February 2014) \url{http://thegiganticmag.com/magazine/articleDetail.php?p=articleDetail&id=194}.
\bibitem{37} Aciman, \textit{Alibis} 194.
\bibitem{38} Aciman, \textit{Alibis} 197.
\end{thebibliography}
accumulation of cultures and contradictions. Palermo is an enjambment in every sense, overrun with feral cats, dirty, and crumbling yet also boasting some of the world’s most beautiful conserved architecture, landscape and food. Asian-Canadian writer Madeleine Thien writes how home is a site of constant flux, a concept which is negotiated and renegotiated in continuation. She states that she

think[s] of home as a verb, something we keep re-creating. A person who has lived on the same streets for 80 years can also come to moment when the streets don’t feel like home; and a person who has suddenly arrived in another place might feel suddenly, inexplicably at home. This open-endedness is in keeping with the human condition. Human beings have always kept pushing into unfamiliar territory.\(^{39}\)

In spite of all my romanticising, there was never any fantasy in my mind of permanently returning home. Other cities called me, Berlin, New York, cities where everyone is from somewhere else, and has the desire to start fresh, unencumbered by history or ethnicity or birth rites. Which I realise is telling of a subconscious need not to uncover a home, but a sense of belonging in the void between two homes. It was enough that Palermo was a place to call origin. The absent presence of a certain homeland manifested itself into an attachment for the conjuring of this imagined homeland. Aciman uses the French moralist term renversement continuels to delineate the ongoing palintropic traffic of nostalgia. Nostalgia lives not in place, but in the loop of traffic between two places, therefore: ‘displacement, as an abstract concept, becomes the tangible home.’\(^{40}\) Rather than in place, home lies in the longing for place itself.

Our escape route was an overnight naval ship from the Gulf of Palermo to Naples. Once on board, we deposited our luggage in our cabins and went out to the top of the ship, where many other passengers braved the wind and engine fumes to get their last glimpses of Palermo. Seeing the city from this vantage point, the valley was majestic, resting amidst its crown of mountain range. As the ship moved further away, I asked myself: What is a past? What is a home? Can I really claim any more connection to my ancestors and their land than DNA and chance? Is it possible that at heart I have no homeland, that by nature I am alien rather than native? I reason that I belong here as much as I belong anywhere. Perhaps as Aciman suggests, that the constant here isn’t place, but me – with place and identity used constantly as metaphors for one another, ‘I am two points caught in different spots.’\(^{41}\) What is our connection to our bloodlines: do they truly reside, dormant within us, or is ancestry mere myth we pass down through generation in order to insert our lone lives into some larger narrative? When visiting the family mausoleum at age eleven, I stood amongst stone boxes, my breathing hollow amidst all that marble and I asked myself whether my remains would find their way back here among my ancestors. Is the homeland of my mind mere figment of an innate propensity towards nostalgia? Boym states that ‘the nostalgic is never a native, but rather a displaced person who mediates between the local and the universal.’\(^{42}\) Have my nostalgic tendencies germinated from a sense of dispossession? If ‘the site of nostalgia is nostalgia itself’,\(^{43}\) then the true home of the nostalgic is the act of longing for home. And it is true that I never felt more at home than when I was sailing away from Palermo, pining after it. My mother and I watched Palermo, smog-hazy in its shell, become smaller and smaller as dusk set in and hot smoke billowed from the ship’s ducts. The sun finally

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\(^{39}\)Sonnenberg, ‘Home as a Verb’ 2014.
\(^{40}\)Aciman, *False Papers* 139-40.
\(^{41}\)Aciman, *False Papers* 138.
\(^{42}\)Boym 12.
\(^{43}\)Aciman, *False Papers* 142.
began to sink while the electric orange sky gave way to blue. We watched until Palermo disappeared from view, remembering and imagining.

Amaryllis Gacioppo is a PhD candidate in Literary and Cultural Studies at Monash University and the University of Bologna. Currently she is working on her creative thesis – a series of psychogeographical lyric essays following her ‘return’ to the sites of her matrilineal heritage: Palermo, Rome, Piedmont, and Libya.
1950s Athens as Palimpsest: A BBC Radio Play by Louis MacNeice

Konstantina Georganta

The problem of Athens: ‘The most famous and one of the oldest cities in Europe, but it’s hard to think of it as alive.’¹ For the most part, Athens was presented as a city whose past was superimposed upon the present making the present – along with all its varied layers – non visible. That was the case in the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century when poet and radio practitioner Louis MacNeice wrote a 60-minute radio play for the BBC Home Service on Athens. At the time, the city was in the process of becoming the stage where a new war would take place as it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the Cold War started in the Greek capital.² In a letter he wrote whilst in Athens, MacNeice noted that since the war he had been ‘a staunch upholder ... of the principle that Europeans must try (however desperate the attempt!) to escape both the Russian brand of communism and Americanisation’:

Western Europe & certain other countries ... should try hard to retain their right to independent opinions, e.g. should not let American big business impose its will on them regardless. The raison d’être of such an independent group would not be to stay out of war if it came ... but would be to prevent it coming.³

Portrait of Athens was aired by the BBC Home Service on 18 November 1951 and this article explores how in this, previously undocumented, play MacNeice placed Athens in the map of cities that had witnessed severe traumas, which the play unveils in a representation of the city in the form of a palimpsest. In the Portrait, we find William Gladstone’s marble statue in the centre of the city, right in front of the National Library and right across from the centre of the ECA (Economic Cooperation Administration), half way between Constitution Square and Concord Square – ‘Constitution square ... where the troubles started ... in 1944 after the liberation’ and Concord Square, ‘the front line between the Reds and the British’ – while the people have to walk through the ghosts of SS officers to get to their jobs for a pound a day attending to the ‘bobbins in the spinning mill, factories of whirling bobbins stilted like kk guns’ (PA). The blend of history with the people’s everyday realities made 1950s Athens not only a symbol of the past but a new idiom speaking of the necessity for an increasing awareness of history to complement one’s consciousness of individuality. As John Berger wrote in 1972, ‘every image embodies a way of seeing’ and, even though images were first made ‘to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent,’ later the vision of the image-maker was also recognized as part of the record: ‘An image became a record of how X had seen Y. This was the result of an

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¹ Louis MacNeice, Portrait of Athens, BBC Home Service, UK, 18 November 1951. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text as marked PA.
² See also Foivos Oikonomides, «Ο Ψυχρός Πόλεμος ξεκίνησε από την Αθήνα» (‘The Cold War started from Athens’), Eleftherotypia (1 December 2013) www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=401348 [Accessed 23 December 2014]

increasing consciousness of individuality, accompanying an increasing awareness of history.”

‘Ladies and Gentlemen, bookworms and globetrotters, this is Athens. Look at her now!’ (PA).

**Greece in the BBC**

In January 1950, MacNeice went to Greece to take up his post as the Director to the British Council in Athens. During his stay, for an eventual period of eighteen months, he produced three radio plays set in Greece – among them *In Search of Anoyia* (11 December 1951, 45 minutes, BBC Third Programme) and *The Centre of the World: Delphi* (28 January 1952, 60 minutes, BBC Third Programme) – and started writing his poetry collection *Ten Burnt Offerings* (also aired even though not especially written for the BBC), which was eventually published in 1952. These three plays can be placed in a series of other features on Greece written and often produced by MacNeice since the 1940s. Yet, at the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century and just after the Second World War and the Civil War that ensued in Greece, the time was opportune for new appendices to old idioms as a new era was starting in which Europe was rebuilding itself.

Athens in the 1950s was the capital of a country under wide reconstruction much needed after the city had suffered ‘greater destruction by war than any other country in Europe ‘with damages equal to ‘the country’s national income for two years.’ The Marshall Plan or European Recovery Program (1947) aided the ‘Greek Constructive Effort’ and led to a rise in industry ‘at about 85 per cent. of the 1939 level’ by August 1949. The Marshall Plan was followed by the Economic Cooperation Administration signed by President Truman in 1948, which was created to establish, as Mogens Pelt notes, ‘an international economic regime of trade and finance dominated by the values of the United States, by the ideology of the mutual benefits of a world market,’ the ideological uppinings of which were rooted in the belief that 1930s depression and despair had bred ‘totalitarianism and militarism.’ At the same time, the end of the Second World War found Greece immersed in a Civil War that lasted at least until 1949. In post-war Greece, Silvio Pons reminds us, ‘the limits of Moscow’s control were made clear;’ ‘The Greek Communist Party [...] took up arms in response to the alliance between London and the monarchy in a country assigned to Great Britain by the agreements between Stalin and Churchill. In December 1944, the partisan movement led by the communists launched a mass mobilization that transformed rapidly into an armed uprising in Athens.’

It is telling that, when poet and publisher John Lehmann found himself in Athens in 1946, he noted how his first impression of the city – its orderly streets, kiosks selling papers of every political leaning, eager small boys with their shoe-shine apparatus prodding passers-by, people discussing openly at their café-tables and washing down their meals with *retsina* – was soon overcome by the smell of the ‘police state’ creeping under the door. ‘Greece had simply become,’ he wrote some years later, ‘one of the chief battlegrounds for the new war that had supplanted the old, the war for world power between the Soviets and the west.’

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MacNeice was a member of the BBC’s Drama and Features Department since 1941 and during the war he wrote wartime features on Greece, such as *The Glory that is Greece* (28 October 1941), *Salutation to Greece* (22 March 1942), *Salute to Greece* (25 October 1942) and *Long Live Greece* (25 March 1943). At that time, Barbara Coulton notes, ‘wartime features, presenting civilized values, attacking the threat of tyranny and oppression, celebrating the victories of allies, alternated with plays on historical or literary themes.’ The *Glory that Is Greece*, for example, made connections between ancient and contemporary Greece depicting the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism as the fight of modern Greek soldiers against the Nazis, or the ancient Greeks opposing the Persians.

April 20th: Our Allies are holding Thermopylae.

April 25th: We have had to withdraw from Thermopylae.
April 25th: The Germans have occupied the island of Lemnos. The small Greek garrison fought for over four hours.

April 26th: The last British troops are evacuating Greece. At the request of our Government. The Greek population is steeled for the worst.

‘In their long history, which had been a constant fight for liberty,’ a 1940 article in *The Times* read, ‘the Greeks had known many enemies, but had been able to survive and “will survive.”’

By 1942, Greece was still ‘Unconquered’ and an ‘Example to the World,’ with the Greeks having lost ‘all but honour’ and on 26 March an article reported statements made by various government representatives ‘gathered in the midst of the second Greek War of Independence to celebrate the first’:

Instead of saying ‘The Glory that was Greece ‘ we could sing ‘The Glory that is Greece. ‘ Greece made possible the modern development of our history by the action she took on a September day at the Battle of Marathon. Last year the tide of Nazi burning lava met its first impediments in the old mountains of Macedonia. [...] It was good for us in these dark days to remember Byron’s great courage, and to reflect how the Greek people plucked the flower of victory from the ashes of despair. They were suffering today as they suffered in 1827, from a cruel occupation: but once again they had aroused not merely the admiration but also the conscience of the West.

When the Greeks halted the Italian advance, they became the heroes of the day. By the mid-forties, Avin Sharon notes, the adoration of the Parthenon had given way to a ‘new passion for

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13 *The Glory that is Greece*, BBC Home Service, UK, Tuesday 28 October 1941.
14 ‘Guarantors of Liberty,’ *The Times* 31 October 1940, 2.
an encounter with living Greece’ but, we could note here, this passion was still wanting as the country was constructed as too strong a symbol of the past.

In the radio travelogue, A Journey in Greece, for example, which was produced by the Head of the Features Department at the BBC, Laurence Gilliam, and aired by the BBC Home Service in the same month as Portrait of Athens on 6 November 1951, we find a portrayal of Greece aligned with the BBC representations that far. The aim of Gilliam’s feature - as he wrote in ‘Greece: A Country with a Living Tradition,’ the Radio Times article which introduced his six week journey in the country – was to show how the country was facing ‘the problems of reconstruction after ten years of invasion, occupation and civil war,’ with the writer noting that ‘the struggle for Greece is the struggle for Europe in miniature.’

A journey in Greece, Gilliam suggested, is a journey ‘in time as well as in space, a journey to the very edge and beginning of Europe, a return to the youth and to the limits of the West ‘and, even though he went to Greece ‘to look for the life of Greeks today,’ he found that one day in Athens was enough to prove to him ‘how unreal any such division must be.’ He found Athens confusing yet ‘gay, luxurious, expensive and well-dressed, a modern capital ‘and, drawn by the Parthenon, he only commented on the Athenians as ‘vivid, fast-talking, fast-moving individualists’ who ‘overshadow’ but also ‘ignore’ their past ‘except for the purpose of tourism.’ Behind the clichéd unreality of division between past and present, one notices that ‘the life of Greeks today’ is ignored and devalued, them being the only ones described as ignorant of their past despite being the living inhabitants of a city marking the ‘very edge and beginning of Europe,’ the youth and limits of the West. Consequently, the country is depicted as a precious fossil to be rescued and preserved in an important struggle for Europe. The terms ‘West’ and ‘Europe’ are placed amongst talk about the efforts to save the people of Greece from what is implied as an invasion from the East, which the people themselves, engrossed in the lures of profiteering, Gilliam seems to suggest, are either incapable of apprehending or irrelevant to. In Gilliam’s narrative the people of Athens ‘kept getting in the way’ and to understand them he felt he needed to get away from the capital and visit as many parts of Greece outside of Athens as he could. Despite his efforts to find modern Greece, however, his narrative reveals a persistence to discover relics of either the West, as in Corfu which he described as ‘closest to the West in spirit,’ or of the ancient past, as in Rhodes where he found the ‘ancient pattern’ reasserting itself in a village Panygeri. Gilliam’s travelogue and MacNeice’s play show two different approaches to the representation of Athens in the beginning of the 1950s. On the one hand, it is a city that needs to be saved by the West, building on the concept of Greece as connected to a western past, and, on the other, an old stage for a new war, which would soon engulf the rest of Europe.

17 A Journey in Greece, BBC Home Service, UK, 5-6 November 1951.
19 Gilliam 5-6.
20 Gilliam 5-6.
21 Gilliam 5-6.
22 Gilliam 5-6.

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Portrait of Athens

After the mid-1940s the status of radio drama (a relatively recent phenomenon developed after the establishment of the BBC in 1922) was changing. Even though the key to radio drama was initially considered to be simplicity and an avoidance of too much action so as not to confuse the audience, by 1930, when nine out of ten homes in Britain had a wireless set, a new type of listener capable to create illusions was envisaged. With the first impression of Athens in the play as that of ‘a nagging bell and a glaring sky,’ ‘a box on the ear, a smack in the eye,’ MacNeice created the desired ‘necessary contrast’ and prepared the audience’s senses to view a city which rattled the senses: ‘[T]his is Athens. Look at her now!’ (PA).

Transposing twenty-four centuries to twenty-four hours and squeezing twenty-four hours into the space of one, Portrait of Athens can be considered a piece of radio cinematography aspiring to create a fluidity of images succeeding one another so as to produce the illusion of a single moving scene whilst mimicking a modernist narrative temporality which annihilated space through time. The different layers stay visible throughout.

Extraordinary colour the Parthenon is. Quite golden. But what’s coming over the Parthenon? Why that’s a roof coming over it. A red roof swarming all round it. And it’s growing a spike, a tall thin spike, a minaret. [...] Now the minarets dwindled away again. Turks must have gone or perhaps they’ve not come yet. But why all these priests? These can’t be orthodox priests, they’ve on wrong sort of hats, no beards and they’re talking Italian. [...] Silence again. The West undresses and western armour vanish. [...] Priests reappear but everything seems in decay. [...] No, but look, that decay, that sickness is gone! Or has it not come yet? Quite a small town, provincial town, but alive! The miniature churches multiply, quite modest exteriors still but they are blazing with gold inside. A Greek town again in a more or less Greek empire.

[Byzantine Church music fazes in]. (PA)

Portrait of Athens narrated twenty-four centuries compressed into one day through a visitor’s dream sequences. Depicting the peregrinations of a visitor in 1950s Athens, the city appeared ‘crude as a poster, hard as nails’: Not what I expected. Schools and museums, poets and dons they harp upon Athens, they lead one up the garden. A garden in a dream drowsy with bees, mellowed with marbles, tasteful, reposeful. But here is no garden and this is no dream. The alphabet hasn’t changed since Pericles but what are those words

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23 Coulton 37-41.
24 Louis MacNeice, Christopher Columbus: A Radio Play (London: Faber and Faber, 1944) 17.

up there on the wall, ads for sewing machines and radio sets, political slogans, names from Hollywood. The language is Greek but the echoes are modern.

[...]
Morning in Athens. Dazzle and knockabout. Blocks of ice manhandled with pincers. A priest puffing by in his black flannel hat and his back knot and the long grey smoke up his beard. A brush brushing a concrete doorstep. Radio music sipping through shutters. A distant tram, a distant cock and the ruthless lights scarring the pavements. (PA)

The method of a visitor’s dream sequences allowed MacNeice to present the city’s bones – Athens of Thucydides, Demosthenes, Pericles and Socrates – but also a city with street cries and Asia Minor traditional dance tunes (from recordings made by MacNeice when in Greece). In the play one can indeed find a novel combination of sounds of the cafeneion in Omonoiia Square (‘δεν πειράζει, αμέσως, έφτασε!’) and of the kiosks or the market place (‘New this morning,’ ‘fresh tomatoes!’) as well as a list of popular Greek songs, such as ‘Tampakera,’ ‘Asta ta Mallakia Sou,’ ‘Sunnephiasmene Kyriake,’ ‘Katerina Thessalonikia,’ ‘To Minore Tou Tsitsane’ and ‘Thalassaki.’ Accompanied by the sound of hawkers and a chorus that knows what goes on ‘in prison and parliament,’ a visitor to the capital embarks on a journey where he comes across not only the Pnyx and the Acropolis but also William Gladstone’s statue in central Athens, the centre of the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA), Constitution Square and Concord Square, ‘where the troubles started...in 1944 after the liberation,’ Merlin Street in Kolonaki where the SS had their headquarters, and meets, among others, Socrates who finds the city’s people familiar, still talking about politics, and asks: ‘in the case of this Athens, which once was my home, dare we say that this Athens has kept her identity? I do not know, I am asking (PA).’

The audience was urged to apply themselves to portrait, to form a mental image of the city represented and then play the part of the characters presented so that the portrait itself could become more vivid. The steady recurrence of several figures functioned as reference points, the glue that linked all the episodes together: first, we find the constancy of the visitor, who finds himself in the ‘whirligig of time,’ where various historical and mythical figures, such as Pericles and goddess Athena, parade, and, then, the chorus (acted by Hedli Anderson and Dylan Thomas), which links the various episodes for the sake of the audience and the visitor: ‘The centuries race past, streets become empty spaces and spaces are filled by crusader and Turk and emptied again... and again built over.’

The combination of a modern time visitor with an ancient chorus created a constant dialogue between the two perspectives all the while confusing the dichotomy between present and past and allowing the two to exist in a multi-layered whole.

26 The statue of Gladstone by Gregorios Vitalis was put up in front of the University of Athens in 1886, the only foreigner, Michael Llewellyn Smith notes, to have won a place in this ‘national ideological space’ with statues including those of Plato, Socrates, Korais, the scholar of the Enlightenment, and Capodistria, the first president of the Greek State. See Michael Llewellyn Smith, Athens: A Cultural and Literary History (Oxford: Signal Books Limited, 2004) 150.
27 The list of actors for Portrait of Athens included: Charles Leno (Crier, Corporal), Hedli Anderson (Female Chorus, Greek Voice, Guest), Laidman Browne (Sausage-seller, Clergyman, King Ludwig, Pericles), Guy Kingsley Poynter (American), Vrassidas Capernaros (Crier, Greek), Dylan Thomas (Male Chorus), John Turnbull (Plato, Uncle), Roger Delgado (Butcher, Nephew, Italian Priest), Malcolm Hayes (Man Customer, Demosthenes, German Waiter, Nut Seller, King Otto), Grizelda Hervey (Woman Customer, Athena, Greek girl), Allan McClelland (Visitor), Duncan McIntyre (Socrates), John Veinoglou (News Reader).
This becomes more evident in a discussion the visitor holds with Socrates in the middle of the play:

Visitor: The Parthenon? That’s it there!
Socrates: Excuse me but it is not. I can see through that object.
Visitor: Yes, but it’s ruins you see.
Socrates: A ruin young man is a ruin. It is no longer and should not be described as that building of which it is a ruin. A temple or house of a god is like an ordinary house, it is something built to be used. But that cluster of columns up there it is no more than a skeleton and one at that with a lot of its bones missing. I am right in assuming it is now not used for anything?
Visitor: No, but people look at it.
Socrates: That is not the function of a temple. I trust they still use the agora.
Visitor: The agora? Oh the agora?
Socrates: The market-place. Very handy spot for conversation.
Visitor: Oh, the Americans have excavated that.
Socrates: Excavated?
Visitor: Excavation is digging up ruins and things.
Socrates: So my market-place too was ruined. Including my favourite colonnade?
Visitor: Yes, completely. Ruined and buried.
Socrates: Then why did they...what did you call them? ... dig it up?
Visitor: Because we all want to know what used to be there.
Socrates: Why? Have you nothing better to do?
Visitor: Well, everyone wants to know what ancient Athens was like.
Visitor: No, because then it was the Athens of your own day.
Socrates: You misunderstand me. The Athens of my own day I cared about and the Athens of today, if only I were here, the Athens of today I should care about too. I dare say it hasn’t changed much.
Visitor: You dare say? ... But can’t you see how it’s changed?
Socrates: Oh, you mean these buildings? They do not, I confess, appeal to me. Too big, too high, not really suited to the climate. But the buildings are not the city. A city consists of the men in it and the men, in spite of their dress, which does not, I confess, appeal to me, the men seem really quite familiar and sound even more familiar. I heard them just now talking politics, in somewhat barbarous Greek, still it was certainly politics. But I noticed they have some new oaths. What are these gods that they swear by? (PA)

Socrates is here used to oppose the ‘cultural mystification’ of the past as MacNeice both favours an excavation of it and teases the reification of ruins. At the same time, MacNeice uses Socrates not only as a voice resurfacing in modern Athens but as a medium representing the writer’s fears about the outcomes of the post-war reconstructive period. Much like the other two

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28 See John Berger, Ways of Seeing: ‘The past is not for living in; it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act. Cultural mystification of the past entails a double loss. Works of art are made unnecessarily remote’, 11.

radio plays MacNeice produced in the same period, the message, in the words of the main character from In Search of Anoyia, is that

nothing we’ve had or we’ve been should ever seem long ago – and nothing we’ve known or we’ve seen should ever seem far away. We should cling to the ball of thread that connects the strange and the usual, the past and the present, ourselves and the others.29

Athens is used to question the notion of identity, itself problematic because the minute we start assigning an identity to an entity we render this entity static. Athens is symbolic of this process as a city whose present disappoints because it is forever codified as a ruin. ‘I am a foreigner and I want to see Athens,’ MacNeice’s visitor says in the play, “Where can I buy some dark glasses?” “Nice dark glasses? Almost anywhere! Best dark glasses are sold in Paris! But you won’t see Athens, you’ll see something else. Pinks and mauves, half-tones, half-truths” (PA).

In the numerous regional clusters comprising the city MacNeice found that the unit remained the individual and in his Portrait he denied his visitor the luxury of ‘half-tones’ and ‘half-truths,’ favouring an increasing awareness of history to complement a consciousness of individuality (PA). Throughout the play, the ‘listeners in words’ can become the visitor invited as they are to look at the city, usually taking their directions from the Acropolis, the highest central point of the city together with Hymettus behind where the sun is about to once again ‘open fire’ at the end of the play, and listen to the perspective of each of the figures appearing (PA). The variety of voices populating the Portrait becomes thus an integral part of its central theme since, as MacNeice had previously suggested, the treatment of a theme chosen for a radio play must be dramatic in the Aristotelian sense that a central event or theme will be central and all else, including characters, subordinate.30 As regards Portrait of Athens, it is Socrates ‘words that reverberate throughout the play for this reader – ‘dare we say that this Athens has kept her identity?’ – a question not approached through a piling up of shards and broken fragments but through constant links and threads leading to the city’s present.

Predisposed to expect a depiction of ruins, with the Parthenon as the centerpiece, the audience of Portrait of Athens was now presented with the connection between the burnt houses thirty years earlier in Asia Minor and the New Smyrna settlements on the outskirts of 1950s Athens. MacNeice linked the present of the city to its not so distant past so that modern Athens could be seen as a result of both its modern and ancient history.

Male Chorus: On the outskirts of Athens, far from the luxury flats, where the pavements have turned into dust cracks, are pockets of regional life.
Female Chorus: Where poor folks from islands and highlands have made their own outposts [...]
Male Chorus: Refugees from starvation or war.
Female Chorus: From the war with Mussolini and Hitler, from wars with the Turks thirty years ago. (PA)

29 Louis MacNeice, In Search of Anoyia, BBC Third Programme, UK, 11 December 1951.
30 MacNeice, Christopher Columbus 14.
‘Water?,’ we hear in the Portrait, ‘But darling of course! The flat’s in Kolonaki not in New Smyrna, Cherie!’ ‘Νερό, I said love, νερό! Water, wa-ter. Oh, so you’re short. You forgot to queue at the pump today?’, we hear a few lines later as traditional Asia Minor dance tunes fade in.

Water was a telling symbol in 1950s Greece as water shortage was a practical concern. The Athens correspondent of The Times reported in 1950 that never had Athens, ‘plagued by a dry climate and an unfavourable terrain,’ had sufficient water ‘since the time of Christ.' The water rationing enforced since 1943 was addressed in 1950 with the construction of a ‘15-mile-long system of tunnels and aqueducts from the Kakosalessi Torrent to the Marathon reservoir lying in a bowl in the mountains to the north of Athens.’ Water had a symbolic significance for MacNeice too. Three years prior to his encounter with Greece, he had travelled to India. MacNeice’s India, Jon Stallworthy comments, was ‘richly polyphonic’ and embodied the ‘opposing principles that had long dominated his imagination: water and rock, flux and stasis.’ Water was essential in his poetry about Ireland, portrayed as the alternative to a world ‘moving towards universal dryness of spirit,’ an ‘imaginative alternative,’ Terence Brown has suggested, ‘to the increasingly homogeneous culture of a mass society.’ ‘[F]or men dying,’ MacNeice writes in the poem ‘Our Sister Water’ from Ten Burnt Offerings, which he wrote while in Greece, ‘water is all / To be wished. Is also the wish to live.’ Most of the people roaming the streets of Athens in the Portrait are lucky to have jobs:

A pound a day for most of you, but even so you’ll stop down there at the kiosk and spend sixpence on a daily paper and a little further on you’ll spend nine pence on a coffee and while you have your coffee you’ll spend nine pence on a shoe shine. [...] And those of you who have no jobs, and you seem to be many, you’ll still need your paper at the kiosk, you can read it all morning at the coffee shop.

Some come ‘from burnt dark villages on the borders of Albania and Bulgaria, and that was perhaps three years back’ and others ‘from burnt out homes in Asia Minor, and that was nearly thirty years back,’ all going out from their ‘hovels’ to live ‘by their wits and their guts’ (PA). Water signifies in the Portrait the individual’s persistence to survive which is combined with Socrates’ uncompromising nature, exhibited in his speech to his accusers before they condemned him to death (which we hear in the Portrait):

‘This is my teaching Athenians and if this is the doctrine which corrupts the youth, I am a mischievous person to either acquit me or not but, whichever you do, understand that I shall never alter my ways not even if you force me to die many times for it.’

In ‘Athens – City of Contrasts,’ the Radio Times article that introduced the play, MacNeice suggested that he wanted to present a ‘panorama’ of the city’s present and past to suggest its

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32 ‘Athens Water Supplies,’ 3.
continuity. ‘We in England,’ he wrote, ‘having all had the name of Athens rammed into our ears since our childhood, have naturally several preconceptions about it – most of which are misconceptions.’ Challenging these misconceptions, MacNeice presented instead a modern capital dating only from A.D. 1834, which saw the removal of Turkish minarets and the rapid urban expansion brought by the new King Otto, which in its turn gave way to blocks of luxury flats while streets beneath still kept ‘something of the village with the braying of donkeys and the haunting quasi-Byzantine street-cries of barefooted hawkers.’ The city today, MacNeice reported, has spread towards the mountains with the new refugees ‘from World War II and from the later troubles with the Communists,’ joining the older refugees driven out of Turkey in 1923. The author of Portrait of Athens wanted his audience to find an element of the present within the representation of the past and, in David Harvey’s terms, we could say that this was interpreted in the play as a focus on things not as things per se but as things as the products of processes. The forms and structures we see in the city, Harvey tells us, reflect ‘social processes at work in particular times and places. The result is an urban environment constituted as a palimpsest, a series of layers constituted and constructed at different historical moments all superimposed upon each other.’ This is why, he continues, ‘if we are going to get to the heart of what the city is about,’ we need to focus on ‘processes rather than things and we should think of things as products of processes.’ MacNeice’s ‘panorama’ is, in this sense, not an unbroken portrait of the city but a layering of historical eras under which earlier eras are still visible, albeit often fragmented, part hidden, sometimes ignored.

The city’s identity was presented in MacNeice’s Portrait as something imposed by the outside whereas the constant look back and forth to the city’s past and present created a fluidity of images that in turn formed an ever-changing image of an ever-changing city where the past was not solely the past and the present not solely the present. Athens was becoming Athens. When in the play Socrates asks about the city’s identity, he suggests that he ‘never cared about ancient Athens’ (PA). Additionally, the Portrait’s timeframe, when new dualities were being imposed (east versus west), made this negation of categorisation even more poignant, raising a question about the politics of identity. Since Athens, as the chorus of the Portrait says, ‘leaves no one alone,’ (PA) the politics of identity are expanded to include not only Athens but ‘western Europe & certain other countries’ as well.

Now, men of Athens, if it is possible for our city to remain at peace, assuming that the decision rested with us, then I say we ought to remain at peace, but if a foreign ruler with a sword in his hand and a large army at his back offers you the name of peace while his acts are acts of war, what road remains for us but the road of resistance? [...] Visitor: That sounds very familiar, I must have read it at school. Male Chorus: At School or in your London papers?

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37 MacNeice, Athens 5.  
38 MacNeice, Athens 5.  
39 MacNeice, Athens 5.  
41 Harvey, 22.  
42 Allison, Letters of Louis MacNeice, 536.
Visitor: It was a speech in the Pnyks when Athens was up against Philip.
Male Chorus: Or was it in the House of Commons when England was up against Hitler?
(PA)

As the play ended just before dawn, marking the ‘spiritual curfew’ of Socrates’ death and the time when the Athenians voted to march to Marathon, a space familiar to a 1940s audience, the city’s present pointed once again to the root of ‘the modern development of our history,’ focusing on the debt owed to those long gone and those who recently perished (PA):

Male Chorus: The dancers thin out and the black turns grey. Soon it will all start again. This is the time before dawn when they voted to march to Marathon, five for and five against but luckily there was a casting vote.
Visitor: Luckily?
Male Chorus: Yes, luckily.
Crier: Come on there, come on! Wake up if you’re not going to sleep. The wheel has come round, the whole thing starting again. Yes, look, look over there to the east. Already the sun is hulled down behind Hymettus, soon he will open fire.
[Thalassaki fading in and out]
Socrates: Creto, we owe a cock to Asclepius, pay it, don’t forget. (PA)

MacNeice had seen the foundation of the BBC Third Programme in 1946 as the first to assume that its audience was ‘going to work at its listening.’ As a result, in the parable play The Dark Tower (1946), Angela Frattarola observes, he refused to ‘pacify the readers with any answers’ explaining that the play was not meant to teach a lesson but was instead concerned with exploring the psychology of the main protagonist as he debated with himself his meaning and purpose: ‘like James Joyce’s allusions to the Odyssey in Ulysses or Eliot’s reliance on the story of the Holy Grail in The Waste Land, MacNeice plays with the mythic form of the quest, while insisting, ‘do not ask me what Ism it illustrates or what Solution it offers.’ Similarly, in Portrait of Athens MacNeice foregrounded Socrates as the desired portrait of the post-war individual who struggles to safekeep a sense of identity against the ruins of war and, following his example, he does not provide us with a clear cut answer of what ‘this Athens’ is but rather urges us to ask what we make of it as individuals. The meaning of Athens is deferred down an endless chain of signification and the city becomes in this way in MacNeice’s Portrait a text that remains new, as it is always ascribed with new meaning, while bearing the traces of old narratives, fuelled by the perception people have of it but also of the historical details the Portrait brings to the fore. The Portrait’s visitor is a reader and writer at the same time, since it is through his peregrinations, dialogues, and imagination that we get evidence of the history of Athens within the modern city he comes across. At the same time, the story unfolded is itself palimpsestic as the visitor’s preconceptions are exposed when they are set against the places he or she visits and the people of the past and present that he or she meets. The individual’s responsibility to narrative construction, whether historical or political (which is, more often than not, one and the same thing) is also present here as the visitor’s initial reluctance to see Athens


(‘I am a foreigner and I want to see Athens. Where can I buy some dark glasses?’) is not for lack of evidence.

Crier: This way, this way your Plato’s Academy, in the buoyant morning of western thought!
Male Chorus: When they believed that thinking could solve things.
Plato: But this is what I must insist on. Until the philosophers are kings or until the kings and rulers of this world require the spirit and drive of philosophy, until political power is combined with wisdom, not before then will our cities be rid of their troubles. No, nor the whole of mankind. Then and then only will our ideal state have a chance to live, a place in the sun.
Female Chorus: A chance to live.
Male Chorus: A place in the sun.
Male Chorus: Hear the echoes then? (PA)

Athens was introduced in the beginning of the play as a city whose history is ‘full of gaps and silences’: ‘To portray such a city needs a certain sleight of hand and the program which follows is a short of token patchwork’ (PA). The Portrait centred around two questions: the one involved the constancy of the city’s identity and the other addressed the audience and the reasons behind their inability to think of the city as alive (indeed the play is rife with questions). Athens was approached as a place usually imagined in the past and so a place which the audience usually viewed from a distance. The audience was in turn presented with a story told not in a linear fashion but with continuous leaps in the past and the present, a technique which echoes Brecht’s method of presenting events as the result of a series of alternative courses of action and characters as ‘alterable beings,’ the products of social forces. It is via the alterable beings that the gaps and silences in the history of the city were rendered meaningful. Athenians were still discussing politics but their terms had changed since Socrates’ time. Their identity could not have remained the same and, with them, or, rather, as the city itself changed, so had they. What MacNeice did was fill the void created by various gaps and silences with a visitor’s peregrinations through a city that bore the traumas of recent wars and was not the product of a seamless continuum between past and present, suggesting perhaps that what the audience listened to was a reflection of their own situation.

Plato: But this is what I must insist on. Until the philosophers are kings or until the kings and rulers of this world require the spirit and drive of philosophy, until political power is combined with wisdom, not before then will our cities be rid of their troubles. No, nor the whole of mankind. Then and then only will our ideal state have a chance to live, a place in the sun.
Female Chorus: A chance to live.
Male Chorus: A place in the sun.
Male Chorus: Hear the echoes then? (PA)

It is interesting to note here that George Seferis, a Greek poet revered by MacNeice, had also used Socrates in his 1946 poem ‘The Thrush’ not only because the Apology was one of the books that had influenced him in his life, but also because he felt that his generation had grown


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up and lived in an ‘age of injustice.’ In addition, it was in Seferis’ images of voyage, and in particular in his *Mythistorema* (1935), that MacNeice later found something which ‘might make sense of both our past and future and so redeem our present’ when he reviewed Seferis’ *Poems* in 1960: ‘Seferis can create a house from a roaring ship or a ruin and in every case can people it. With the people for whom he has compassion. The heroes. The lost. The anonymous.’

Similarly, MacNeice presented the city of Athens as a palimpsest upon which new layers of memory and identity were inscribed. These were the products of political events, such as the Second World War, the Civil War and the emerging Cold War, as they were gradually inscribed upon collective memory, itself influenced by the lived and remembered traumas of past and present refugees (the building block of cultural trauma). MacNeice viewed Athens as emblematic of this process of memory construction, which is why his *Portrait* is filled with episodes from the past that echo in the present moment, and he peopled the city with the ones who were creating the city’s collective memory and collective identity while remaining anonymous. In a pre-emptive strike in the first years of the Cold War, MacNeice placed Athens in the map of cities that had confronted and would still have to confront major political traumas imagining the future in the past.

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Konstantina Georganta is an alumna of the Universities of Athens and Glasgow and the author of *Conversing Identities: Encounters Between British, Irish and Greek Poetry, 1922-1952* (Rodopi, 2012). She is the administrator of www.athensinapoem.com, is currently working on her second book on Three Long Poems in Athens and 2015 saw the publication of her first poetry collection, Ρακοσυλλέκτης χρόνος (Panoptikon).

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This paper proposes to compare and contrast two novels that take as their theme the reflections and regrets of a lonely male protagonist. In the case of *Bruno’s Dream* (1969), the main character is Bruno, a sick old man nearing death. In *The Remains of the Day* (1990), it is the butler Stevens who, preoccupied with his work, has always kept to himself and now discovers a longing to establish human contact with others. Bruno and Stevens are depicted as essentially alone. In the drama of life they are spectators rather than actors. They are ‘insider outsiders.’ Bruno inhabits a large household in London and Stevens heads the staff of an English country house, but both hold themselves aloof or apart from those around them. That the sense of alienation Bruno and Stevens experience is so acutely described may be attributed in part to the fact that they are the creation of authors who have acknowledged feelings of being ‘insider outsiders’ themselves: inhabiting England but not native to it. Iris Murdoch was born in Ireland and taken to England as a baby. Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Japan but has lived in Britain since he was six years old.

Whether or not they influenced each other as writers or on a more personal level, Murdoch and Ishiguro knew and respected each other’s work. In an interview published in the *Paris Review* in the summer of 1990, Murdoch observed that she rarely read contemporary novelists but that she had enjoyed Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of Hills*.1 Ishiguro, on the other hand, has claimed in a recent interview that as a budding novelist, he aspired to emulate Ian McEwan, with Murdoch along with William Golding and Doris Lessing representing ‘the Establishment’.2 In another interview, he described her as one of a tiny respected elite of writers that he hoped he might one day join.3

*Bruno’s Dream* is set in mid-century London and in a particular area of the city: the dwellings inhabited by the ill and dying Bruno and the other characters in the novel are located in a specific area bounded by Brompton Road cemetery and the Lots Road power station, with the former symbolising death and the latter, love, regarded by the writer as a form of energy.4 The first section of *The Remains of the Day* is set in the summer of 1956 as Stevens, the butler at Darlington Hall, a country house near Oxford, embarks on a six-day journey to Weymouth. It is framed as an autobiographical memoir composed by Stevens. In retailing the first-hand memories of this elderly servant, the action of Ishiguro’s novel stretches back over four decades, with Stevens’s reminiscences of his first beginning work at the Hall and incidents he witnessed and participated in there.

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Again, Stevens and Bruno are both ‘insider outsiders’ like the authors who created them. Stevens is the butler at a large country estate. He is part of the household but not, of course, a member of the Darlington family. He discharges his duties at others’ direction. He is the head of a large network of servants but is at pains to keep his relationship with them always at an impersonal level. He is essentially an observer although one busily preoccupied with ensuring the smooth running of a large house. Similarly, through old age and infirmity, which have incapacitated and isolated him, Bruno is consigned to a peripheral role in his own house. Bruno’s world has dwindled to the compass of a small, dirty and smelly bedroom in an old house in south London. He is very old and has become like a baby again, completely dependent on the ministrations of the fellow inhabitants of his household. Immobile and infirm, he must rely on Danby, his son-in-law who is a hedonistic and happy-go-lucky soul, on Danby’s secret lover Adelaide, the slatternly housekeeper, and on Nigel, Adelaide’s cousin, who acts as Bruno’s nurse and spiritual guide. They occasionally visit him; they often talk about him; but he is essentially alone apart from the companionship offered by the spiders in his bedroom. A thwarted arachnologist, Bruno derives a curious amusement from the fact that he has come to resemble the spiders that have formed the subject of a lifetime’s passionate research. His head has become grotesquely large and wrinkled while his trunk and legs are shrivelled and wasted. Scarcely able to get out of bed, he is reduced in old age to a smelly, ugly and inert mass of flesh. Bruno thinks of his body as a kind of ugly tomb.

Ishiguro and Murdoch are able to offer a particularly convincing portrayal of the ‘insider outsider’ because of personal acquaintance with this condition in their adopted country: England. On a number of occasions Ishiguro has admitted impatience with critics who try to identify him as a Japanese writer simply because he was born in Japan. At the same time, he has claimed that in The Remains of the Day he could write as an author ‘more English than English,’ able to produce a pastiche portrait of a ‘mythical England’ because of the ‘ironic distance’ he knew existed between him and native Englishmen. Although Ishiguro was thoroughly immersed in English culture outside the family home from an early age, within it he was raised as a Japanese by parents who intended one day to return to their home country. This situation led to a sense of conflicted identity and provided Ishiguro a sense of detachment from both Japanese and English culture that would prove invaluable to him as a novelist.

In the same way, Peter Conradi, Murdoch’s biographer, has argued that Murdoch also straddled two cultural heritages: ‘The Anglo-Irish are a peculiar people, from whose stock some most gifted writers have come, but also a people with a dual identity, seeing themselves in some sense as both the true Irish and the true English, while being regarded by everyone else as neither, and as outsiders.’ It has often been observed that nationality was a sensitive issue for Murdoch. She set two of her novels of the 1960s in Ireland, The Unicorn and The Red and the Green. She was so proud of her Irish heritage that A.N. Wilson calls a chapter in his memoir ‘Considers herself Irish’ and notes that it was on this very point that their relationship, personal and professional, began to unravel. Murdoch had originally appointed Wilson her official biographer but ended up choosing Peter J. Conradi instead. Wilson observes in his memoir, ‘When I came to attempt my biography of IM, it was over the Irish question that we began to
come unstuck.\textsuperscript{8} Wilson was not alone in his doubts. Many thought Murdoch had no more valid claim to Irish nationality than Americans who had migrated from Ireland centuries earlier. In any case, it is how Murdoch thought of herself that is important: ‘A sense of identity is a psychological fact, irrespective of passports, maternity wards and addresses.’\textsuperscript{9}

Returning to Ishiguro, on the one hand, he didn’t want to be labelled a Japanese writer. On the other, he benefited from his Japanese-ness in his writing, acknowledging that his parents’ insistence on his assimilating Japanese values led to his thinking differently from English compatriots.\textsuperscript{10} Ishiguro came to public recognition and acclaim with his first two novels, both set in Japan, even though he had left the country in 1960 and didn’t return until 1989, nearly thirty years later, on a visit, and he has admitted that his depiction of Japan in these works does not even pretend to be accurate. In an interview conducted in 1987 Ishiguro observed

When I write about Japan I write about it as a kind of imaginary world. It’s suitable for what I want to write about because it has the flexibility of an imaginary world ... There’s a certain kind of freedom you get as a writer by setting things a) in the past and b) in a different country.\textsuperscript{11}

In his two Japanese novels, Ishiguro could present the imagined world of another country (‘b’) and in \textit{The Remains of the Day}, his imagination could be allowed full rein by his setting the novel in the past (‘a’). In the latter work he presents an elaborate portrait of a peculiarly English institution: the country house in its last days of glory before the start of the Second World War would consign such places to the dustbin of history.

While the ageing Stevens is still employed as a butler at a stately home in the period described in the opening of the novel \textit{The Remains of the Day}, his position is greatly different from that he held when he was Lord Darlington’s butler and Darlington Hall was enjoying a heyday of influence and activity between the two world wars. In retrospect, Stevens feels that he achieved the greatest satisfaction of his life from those years of activity and importance, when he could bask in the reflected splendour of being attached to a distinguished household. Following the example of his father, also a professional butler, who always put his work before himself and his family, Stevens had entirely subsumed his personality, concentrating solely on ensuring the smooth running of Darlington Hall. This devotion to his work has come at a cost, but it is one Stevens is never able to acknowledge. He considers himself first and foremost as a professional butler. His work provides his personal sense of identity. It is symptomatic of this fact that we never even learn his first name.

There are curious echoes here of Ishiguro’s own Japanese heritage. Japan’s businessmen and salaried workers are expected to put the company first. They are not encouraged to show personal feelings and rarely are addressed by their given names. Ishiguro himself has drawn a comparison between Stevens’s behaviour and character and the Japanese emphasis on the ‘feeling of dignity, service, life as a kind of performance’.\textsuperscript{12} In Japan, familial relations are often regarded as secondary to work considerations. When Stevens’s father, grown feeble and ailing and no longer able to work as a head butler, joins the staff at Darlington Hall as an employee under his son’s supervision, the two meet and interact only as co-workers. They rarely

\textsuperscript{8} A.N. Wilson, \textit{Iris Murdoch As I Knew Her} (London: Hutchinson, 2003) 31-2, 123.
\textsuperscript{10} Graham Swift, ‘Shorts: Kazuo Ishiguro’ [1989], \textit{Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro} 35.
\textsuperscript{11} David Sexton, ‘Interview: David Sexton meets Kazuo Ishiguro’ [1987], \textit{Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro} 32.
\textsuperscript{12} Graham Swift, ‘Shorts: Kazuo Ishiguro, interviewed by Graham Swift [1989], \textit{Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro} 37.
acknowledge the fact of their blood tie and are impatient when anyone points it out to them. This kind of estrangement between father and son comes to a head in late May 1923. Stevens’s father suffers a series of strokes, but Stevens is so preoccupied with the arrangements for an important conference at the Hall that he feels unable to snatch more than a moment or two to spend at his father’s bedside despite his father’s urgent requests to speak to him. Why is the old man so anxious to see his son? It seems he wants to apologise. As he lies on his deathbed, he says he has been proud of his boy but that he supposes he hasn’t been a good father to him. Lord Darlington notices tears on his butler’s face, but Stevens pretends they are the result of tiredness. Later Stevens claims that he considers his managing to carry on his duties as his father lay dying and then to hide his grief at his death represented one of his greatest achievements and that it was even a kind of triumph.

But it is a hollow victory. The meaninglessness of Stevens’s ambition to be a perfect butler is made apparent from the very beginning of the novel. The war has ended 11 years earlier, Lord Darlington is dead and his memory disgraced, and the Hall is in the possession of an American who has no conception of its former glory nor of the ramifications of the old English tradition of the professional butler. Stevens’s attempt to continue to provide the devoted service that had characterised his relationship with Lord Darlington is not recognised by the new owner, Mr Farraday, who unwittingly insults Stevens by teasing him and by engaging in sexual innuendo. Possessing no awareness of or appreciation for the British class system, Mr Farraday even tries to establish a kind of matey camaraderie with his employee. Mr Farraday is kind but uncomprehending. He offers to lend his own car to Stevens for a week to take a holiday, a favour it is inconceivable to imagine Lord Darlington ever contemplating. In addition to the altered relationship with his employer, Stevens also must reconcile himself to the diminished role of managing a skeletal staff consisting of only a handful of servants. It is a source of keen regret for him that Darlington Hall, once a hub of activity, the focal point of gatherings of influential politicians and aristocrats especially in the 1920s and 1930s, now has few visitors and is even closed for much of the year. A new dispensation obtains. It is the modern age, the postwar world, in which heritage and tradition have lost their former importance and often their very significance. Darlington Hall had been the estate of the Darlington family for two centuries but is now owned by someone who is not even English, who is desirous only of the prestige of owning what he crudely terms a ‘grand old English house’.

The action of the story is prompted by Stevens’s desire to meet the former housekeeper of Darlington Hall, Miss Kenton. Like everything and everyone else in Stevens’s life, she is altered. She left Darlington Hall 20 years earlier and is now a Mrs Benn, resident in Weymouth. Stevens has intuited marital unhappiness in her letters to him, and he wishes to persuade her to return to employment at Darlington Hall.

We learn in the course of reading Stevens’s reminiscences that he has deluded himself all along in his relations with Miss Kenton when she was working at the Hall as its housekeeper. She was attracted to him and he to her but, for Stevens, those emotions could never be acknowledged. They had to be hidden or ridiculed. When they were working together, he allowed himself to consider Miss Kenton only as a valued colleague despite the various bids she made for his sympathy and understanding.

If Stevens has rejected his humanity in favour of the sort of emphasis on robotic perfectionism and obsessiveness about work that we might associate with the Japanese sarariman, Bruno,
the protagonist of Murdoch’s novel, has been too self-indulgent, engaging in love affairs without concern for the hurt they might cause his family. Bruno’s Dream centers on the decaying, decrepit figure of Bruno Greensleaf – bed-ridden, tormented by guilt and fear – as he struggles to come to terms with the fact of his impending death. In both cases – in Stevens’s dedication to his work and in Bruno’s selfish gratification of his own desires – the result has been the same: Stevens and Bruno have isolated themselves from others; they cannot meaningfully connect with anyone around them. In their final years, they are reduced to the role of lonely spectators who observe the full, busy lives of those around them.

In the isolation of old age, Bruno is consumed by regret. It has been argued that Murdoch’s emphasis in Bruno’s Dream on fruitless feelings of remorse was partly inspired by personal circumstances. Carolyn Ste Croix, the daughter of some friends, had committed suicide in January 1964 and Murdoch reportedly was ‘haunted by guilt that she had not paid enough attention to her’. The 1960s were a time when Murdoch was brooding on ‘personal losses’: grieving for friends and acquaintances lost either through estrangement or death, worrying that she had squandered her love on people who did not really care for her, and feeling hurt by those who said her two novels set in Ireland, published in that decade, revealed her lack of understanding of Irish history and culture. Like her protagonist, Bruno, she seems sometimes to have felt herself unwanted and unloved.

Murdoch’s and Ishiguro’s protagonists live only peripherally in the present. Bruno and Stevens are mainly preoccupied with memories of times past and of family and friends who are dead or simply absent. Murdoch and Ishiguro both present life as a dream from which these two protagonists struggle to awaken as they realise they are approaching their end. A.S. Byatt describes the predicament in her study of Murdoch’s novels, Degrees of Freedom,

What [Bruno] meets is the common metaphysical bewilderment we all feel, that life is slipping by, unrealized, like a dream – it is ‘too hard’ to realize, except when confronted by the urgency of imminent death when it is too late.

In this sense, both The Remains of the Day and Bruno’s Dream take as one of their themes the question of what one is to do about the past. Ishiguro uses English historical events as a springboard for reflections on personal and national identity. Murdoch writes a book exemplifying her belief that ordinary private events are more important than political ones. What this translates into in both novels is the prominent role accorded to memory. Just as Stevens endlessly replays events of long ago in which Lord Darlington and Miss Kenton figure large, Bruno is preoccupied by reminiscences of the dead: his mother; Janie, the wife with whom he quarrelled and who cursed him for his infidelity; Maureen, the mistress with whom he found a happiness he could never enjoy with Janie; and Gwen, the daughter who died in her youth trying to save a child she thought was drowning. He also thinks often of his only surviving child, Miles, from whom he has long been estranged. Bruno had deplored Miles’s decision to marry a woman from India, Parvati, who happened to die shortly afterwards in a plane crash.

Because Bruno likens his life to a dream, as an old man in failing health he dreads the night because of the nightmares it may bring. In a lengthy soliloquy Bruno muses on life’s fundamental incomprehensibility:

14 Martin and Rowe 89-91.
15 Martin and Rowe 89-91.
17 Conradi, Saint 182.
18 Martin and Rowe 89.
What had happened to him and what was it all about and did it matter now that it was practically all over, he wondered. It’s all a dream, he thought, one goes through life in a dream, it’s all too hard. Death refutes induction. There is no “it” for it to be all about.

There is just the dream, its texture, its essence, and in our last things we subsist only in the dream of another, a shade within a shade, fading, fading, fading.  

It is not only Bruno whose perception of the world resembles a dreamlike state. As in most Murdoch’s novels, the characters are self-absorbed, so preoccupied with their own thoughts and feelings that they recognise anybody else’s existence only as it impinges directly on their own. Their relations with each other are characterised by secrets and lies, by couplings and uncouplings, by the unexpected and improbable coup de foudre. Adelaide and Danby, for example, are secret lovers, but then Danby embarks on an affair with Diana and subsequently falls for Diana’s sister Lisa. Even when they fall in love, these are individuals who remain fundamentally obsessed with themselves.

The imminence of death has drawn Bruno out of his self-absorption sufficiently that he exerts himself to establish contact with the son he hasn’t met for ten years. The reunion proves disastrous, but he has at least tried. Other characters in the book are granted this release from the prison of egoism through the sudden, passionate and sometimes even violent love affairs that are a common feature of Murdoch’s novels. These are experiences that inflict themselves on her characters ‘like a vision of necessity and meaningful reality’ and serve to awaken them, however temporarily, from their dreams. In other words, it is love, even if it takes the form only of a brief affair, that offers a kind of salvation.

Stevens also want to achieve a kind of reconciliation with an absent loved one, and it goes only marginally more successfully than Bruno’s attempt. Although Stevens is unable to acknowledge he has ever experienced romantic feelings about Miss Kenton, he is aware that he has always liked and admired her. Again, from hints dropped in her letters to him, Stevens surmises that Miss Kenton is unhappy in her marriage, and the plot of The Remains of the Day springs from his urge to meet her again and try to persuade her to return to service in Darlington Hall.

Much of the power and poignancy of The Remains of the Day derives from Stevens’s inability to comprehend Miss Kenton despite their long history of close companionship. He faithfully records past conversations and actions in his memoir while failing to appreciate their significance. Through his descriptions of their encounters and conversations, the reader can trace the trajectory of Miss Kenton’s feelings from admiration to a kind of love. But as Stevens forfeits her respect by his seemingly callous behaviour towards his dying father and his dismissal of the two Jewish maids at Lord Darlington’s request, acceding to the anti-Semitism of his German friends, these emotions are succeeded by anger and then by a weary puzzlement. She gives Stevens one last chance to declare his feelings on informing him of the proposal of marriage she has received. When he characteristically fails to rise to the challenge, she must give up on him and move on. The irony is that we, the readers of the novel, can understand Miss Kenton, but Stevens cannot.

Stevens and Bruno both suffer from a kind of acquired blindness. In the case of Stevens, it is apparent that he is upset when he realises Miss Kenton proposes to leave Darlington Hall and marry. But he cannot admit the true reason for his distress even to himself. He guesses that Miss

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19 Iris Murdoch, Bruno’s Dream (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), 9-10. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text as marked BD.
20 Byatt 265.
Kenton is weeping in her parlour because of his noncommittal reaction to her announcement that she has accepted the marriage proposal, but he busies himself with his professional duties and resists the opportunity to knock on her door and establish relations on a new footing with her himself.

It is coincidentally that same night that Lord Darlington’s godson, Mr Cardinal, accuses Stevens of demonstrating a fatal lack of curiosity in failing to understand that, for the past four or five years, Herr Ribbentrop has been manoeuvring Lord Darlington like a pawn on Hitler’s behalf. Lord Darlington’s friendship with such senior Nazis has been a valuable propaganda weapon for the Germans. But Stevens is oblivious to any such ramifications of the international gatherings his employer has arranged, content in the knowledge that he has been able to offer impeccable service. He exculpates himself with the defence that he was only doing his job:

> How can one possibly be held to blame in any sense because, say, the passage of time has shown that Lord Darlington’s efforts were misguided, even foolish? Throughout the years I served him, it was he and he alone who weighed up the evidence and judged it best to proceed in the way he did, while I simply confined myself, quite properly, to affairs within my own professional realm (RD 201).

Ishiguro may be ironically echoing, in Stevens’s words, the very defence routinely trotted out by rank-and-file Nazis accused of war crimes, that they were only obeying orders. In any case, his novel depicts Lord Darlington and Stevens as perfectly suited. Master and servant in these prewar years each adopt a wilful blindness.

When Stevens finally arrives in Weymouth and meets Miss Kenton again, she confesses that on that dramatic night in May 1923 when Stevens’s father lay dying upstairs and Lord Darlington was hosting his important political conference, she had initially decided to accept Mr Benn’s proposal simply as a ruse to annoy Stevens. We readers intuit her words to mean that she hoped such a drastic step finally would force Stevens to declare his own feelings for her. But he failed to do so, and whether or not Miss Kenton really wanted to leave Stevens and her employment at Darlington Hall, she felt she had no choice.

This admission succeeds in breaking through the armour of Stevens’s self-imposed isolation. He feels his heart is ‘breaking’ as he digests the implications of what she has told him (RD 239). In Ishiguro’s own words, this is the point at which ‘his rigid defence would crack, and a hitherto concealed tragic romanticism would be glimpsed’. But it is too late for him to achieve any sort of meaningful éclaircissement with Miss Kenton. Stevens has held himself aloof from her for too long and lied too successfully to himself as well as to her about his deepest needs. He is not an individual who can cope with too much reality. He can’t bear to think of what he has lost. He manages to conceal his sadness. He only weeps later, during a chance encounter with a stranger, when he finds himself talking about his past. In letting Miss Kenton go, he had lost his only chance of romantic happiness. In trusting so blindly in Lord Darlington, ultimately denounced as a Nazi dupe, his triumphs as a butler at Darlington Hall in the days of its apparent glory have been fatally tainted.

Ishiguro concludes The Remains of the Day on a note of hope. The kind stranger who witnesses Stevens’s tears consoles the ageing butler with these words:

> You’ve got to enjoy yourself. The evening’s the best part of the day. You’ve done your day’s work. Now you can put your feet up and enjoy it (RD 244).

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The reader feels there’s a chance that Stevens may find a kind of peace and happiness in his final years. As he walks along the pier in the early evening, Stevens is able to detach himself from his misery sufficiently to observe passersby and to feel interested in and attracted by them. He has awoken from his self-absorbed dream. Stevens resolves to try harder to master the technique of bantering as a means of establishing human warmth and contact between himself and others. In an interview Ishiguro gave in 1990, the author admitted that this was his intent in describing Stevens’s growing preoccupation with being able successfully to engage in light-hearted raillery:

The role of the butler is to serve inconspicuously while creating the illusion of absence and at the same time being physically on hand to do these things. It seemed to me appropriate to have somebody who wants to be this perfect butler because that seems to be a powerful metaphor for someone who is trying to actually erase the emotional part of him that may be dangerous and that could really hurt him in his professional area. Yet he doesn’t succeed because these kinds of human needs, the longings for warmth and love and friendship, are things that just don’t go away. This is what Stevens probably realizes at the end of the novel when he starts to get an inkling about this question of bantering. He starts to read more and more into why he can’t banter and this is an indication of the fact that he’s somehow cut off from other people. He can’t even make the first steps in forming relationships with people. 22

Bruno comes to recognise he is the prisoner of his own thoughts. On his deathbed, Bruno envisages himself as a spider caught in a web:

I am at the centre of the great orb of my life, thought Bruno, until some blind hand snaps the thread. I have lived for nearly ninety years and I know nothing … The spider spins his web, it can no other. I spin out my consciousness, this compulsive chatterer, this idle rambling voice that will so soon be mute. But it’s all a dream. Reality is too hard. I have lived my life in a dream and now it is too late to wake up (BD 303-4).

Murdoch and Ishiguro accord love the utmost importance as the only means of alleviating the misery that arises from selfish egotism; only love brings clear-sightedness. Stevens is blinded by his obsession with his work and unable to see what is directly in front of him: the deteriorating political situation, his father, Miss Kenton. Similarly, when Bruno agonises that he cannot rewind his past and redeem his mistakes he reflects that they arose primarily from a kind of self-centered blindness:

He had loved only a few people and loved them so badly, so selfishly. He had made a muddle of everything. Was it only in the presence of death that one could see so clearly what love ought to be like? (BD 305)

In The Bell Murdoch observes that all failures are failure of love:

Love, in its many guises, is Murdoch’s major theme. She sees falling in love, although so often powered by fantasy and projection, as revelatory, one of life’s most intense experiences and granting the rare sense of another person’s existence and value.23

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22 Vorda and Herzinger 87.
23 Martin and Rowe 41.

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Bruno’s epiphany at the novel’s close is that his betrayed wife would have wished to forgive rather than curse him. This recognition of the redeeming power of love is a note of hope that finds an echo in the story of Diana, Bruno’s daughter-in-law, who, at the beginning of the novel, is a shallow, self-satisfied individual but goes on to find enlightenment through pain and suffering and self-sacrifice: through having her husband fall in love with her sister and then through nursing the dying old man. In his final moments, she reflects on the insubstantiality of human personality, feeling that the individual self is a kind of myth:

She tried to think about herself but there seemed to be nothing there. Things can’t matter very much, she thought, because one isn’t anything. Yet one loves people, this matters … The helplessness of human stuff in the grip of death was something which Diana now felt in her own body. She lived the reality of death and felt herself made nothing by it and denuded of desire. Yet love still existed and it was the only thing that existed (BD 310-11).

Bruno is consoled in his final days by Diana’s self-sacrificing care, comforted by the knowledge that she genuinely loves him.

In their novels Ishiguro and Murdoch depict lonely male protagonists or ‘insider outsiders’ whose egotism has condemned them to isolation and whose only salvation lies in love. Arguably personal considerations came into play in the composition of these books. Ishiguro has admitted that before writing *The Remains of the Day* he had made a ‘conscious decision to do the next book away from Japan’ because he wanted to be a writer who tackled universal themes, not just Japanese subjects although, ironically, in Stevens he depicts a character who bears many hallmarks of a Japanese.\(^{24}\) When she was writing *Bruno’s Web*, Murdoch was sometimes beset by unhappiness and futile regrets and wished to transcend her own rat-runs of memory by depicting a character saved by love. Murdoch and Ishiguro may have felt real life ‘insider outsiders’ in England, but in two of their most memorable protagonists, Bruno and Stevens, they depict fictional ‘insider outsiders’ capable of being released from the prison of self to the wider community of the world, awakening to life’s potentialities through acceding to the demands of love.

*Wendy Jones Nakanishi, an American, is a Professor of English at Shikoku Gakuin University in Japan, having earned a doctorate in eighteenth-century English literature at Edinburgh University in Scotland. She has published widely on eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first-century English and Japanese literature and, in recent years, has begun writing short stories about her 30 years’ residence in Japan as an academic, the wife of a Japanese farmer, and the mother of three sons. Her first novel, Imperfect Strangers, is to be published by Endeavour Press this year under the pen name of Lea O’Harra.*

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\(^{24}\) Dylan Otto Krider, ‘Rooted in a Small Space: an Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro’ [1998], *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro* 129. In this interview, Ishiguro observes ‘I wanted to see if people could appreciate me purely as a novelist as opposed to a Japanese novelist’.