# Intertextual Masculinities and the Struggle for Self-Reflexivity: A Quixotic Investigation of the Novels of J. M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, Philip Roth and Mario Vargas Llosa

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‘I, Stefano Rossoni, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.'

**ABSTRACT**

**Intertextual Masculinities and the Struggle for Self-Reflexivity: A Quixotic Investigation of the Novels of J. M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, Philip Roth and Mario Vargas Llosa**

My thesis studies the struggle for self-discovery of heterosexual masculinities in the self-reflexive novels of J. M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, Philip Roth and Mario Vargas Llosa. The theoretical context is provided by the literary studies of Middleton (1992) and Schwenger (1984), who emphasise men's difficulties in writing self-consciously about their gender, and the lack of language for such a reflection. Interpreting the textual practices that Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa adopt as a (direct or indirect) response to the legacy of *Don Quixote*, I argue that their intratextual interplay and intertextual references convert the traditions of the self-reflexive novel into a space through which to express the limits of male self-reflexivity and men's struggle with emotion.

Chapter One focuses on Coetzee's *Disgrace* and its protagonist, Lurie, a delusional seducer inspired by Byron's life. I discuss how Lurie is defined by an inability to read his of emotion, and examine his opera, *Byron in Italy*, as an attempt to overcome the opacity of his desire. Chapter Two examines the coming of age in Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere* and Roth's *The Professor of Desire* in the light of Gombrowicz and his notions of form and immaturity. Chapter Three investigates heterosexual masculinity as an attempt to claim authorship in Kundera's *Slowness*, Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and Roth's *My Life as a Man*. Chapter Four addresses how the affective crises of JC and Rigoberto, the ageing protagonists of Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* and Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, inform their essayistic writing and its hybrid relation to fiction.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Timothy Mathews, for his guidance during the past four years. He did not only encourage and support my PhD study, but also my other research activities.

My sincere thanks also go to Prof. Stephen Hart, my secondary supervisor at UCL, and Prof Margaret Homans, my supervisor during my time as a Visitant Assistant at Yale University, for their crucial feedback at different stages of my work.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father.

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviation appears parenthetically in the text to identify references respectively to the following novels. The exact number of page is indicated after each quote.

Coetzee's Works:

D *Disgrace*

DBY *Diary of a Bad Year*

Kundera's works:

LE *Life is Elsewhere*

S *Slowness*

Roth's works:

MLM *My Life as a Man*

PD *Professor of Desire*

Vargas Llosa's works:

AJS *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*

NDR *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*

## NOTE ON THE TEXT

The words ‘Quixotic’ and ‘Troubadours’ appear with a capital letter except when they are quoted from other works which use the lower case.

American English forms have been left as they appear in the primary texts or in their translations.

*How do I ever get to be*

*what is described in the literature*

*as a man?*

Philip Roth

## Introduction

*Virility has now become self-conscious*
Virginia Woolf

The aim of this study is to investigate the representations of heterosexual masculinity and the male struggle for self-discovery in the novels of J. M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, Philip Roth and Mario Vargas Llosa. Interpreting the textual practices that these authors adopt as a (direct or indirect) response to the legacy of *Don Quixote*, I argue that their intratextual interplay and intertextual references convert the traditions of the self-reflexive novel into a space through which to express men's struggle with emotion and the limits of male self-reflexivity.

Early examples of studies of male relationships in literature can be tracked back to Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1965), which describes the impossibility of adult heterosexual love for male characters, a theme that contributes to shaping the canon of the American novel; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), which focuses on male homosocial relationships and the structures of patriarchy. The literary focus on masculinity has gained much impetus from sociological studies of masculinity in response to the intellectual challenges of feminism.[1] In *The Making of Masculinities* (1987) Harry Brod underlines that "[w]hile women have been obscured from our vision by being too much in the background, men have been obscured by being too much in the foreground".[2] The unmarked quality of the ethnic and gendered specificity of white men has conflated with normativity.[3] Raewyn Connell introduces the concept of hegemonic masculinity and describes it as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy".[4] Sociological studies have stressed that masculinity is not an expression of anatomical or biological features, but "a set of fluid social and cultural performances".[5]

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1 For a review of the critical contributions to the study of masculinity see Alex Hobbs, "Masculinity Studies and Literature", *Literature Compass* 10/4 (2013), pp. 383-395.

2 Harry Brod, *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, Boston, Allen & Unwin, 1987, pp. 40-41.

3 Sally Robinson, *Marked Men. White Masculinity in Crisis*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000.

4 R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995, p. 77.

5 Stephen Whitehead, Frank Barrett, "The Sociology of Masculinity", in *The Masculinities Reader*, eds. Stephen Whitehead, Frank Barrett, Cambridge, Polity, 2001, p. 16.

Literary investigations have focused specifically on these performative and cultural dimensions of masculinity. For instance, Natalya Lusty describes "masculinity as an unstable horizon of gendered ideologies, subjectivities and representational practices".[6] Literary studies explore the ways in which engendering processes generate fictions of femininity and masculinity ("masculinity, like femininity, is a fictional construction"),[7] and set the "dominant fiction" – in the words of Kaja Silverman – of heteronormative masculinity in contradistinction to femininity and "subversive" masculinities.[8] My interest lies in a segment of this "dominant" form of masculinity embodied by white heterosexual male intellectuals and writers who hold a hegemonic position in their gendered relationships, and whose self-reflectivity alienates them from that hegemonic discourse without necessarily detaching them from it.[9]

In *The Dialectic of Sex* (1972), Shulamith Firestone discusses the narratives of Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer, among others, who "consciously present a 'male' reality" as "[t]he New Virility School in twentieth-century literature".[10] According to Firestone, their works feature "'tough'" guys who re-claim their manhood in response to "the growing threat to male supremacy".[11] A more developed insight into representations of masculinity in twentieth-century literature is offered by Peter Schwenger in *Phallic Critiques* (1984). Schwenger describes the ambivalence towards the traditional masculine role – "its sense of archetypal fulfilment, but also its limitations, its self-deceptions, its destructiveness" – in the works of several writers including, among others, Mailer, Hemingway, Yukio Mishima, Roth, Alberto

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6 Natalya Lusty, "Introduction", in *Modernism and Masculinity*, eds. Natalya Lusty, Julian Murphet, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 1.

7 Peter Murphy, "Introduction: Literature and Masculinity", in *Fictions of Masculinity. Crossing Cultures, Crossing Sexualities*, ed. Peter Murphy, New York and London, New York University Press, 1994, p. 1.

8 Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, New York and London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 15-51. For a discussion of forms of masculinity alternative to hegemonic discourse, see Russell West, Frank Lay eds., *Subverting Masculinity. Hegemonic and Alternative Versions of Masculinity in Contemporary Culture*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1994.

9 Ben Knights underlines the ambivalence towards the figure of the male as artist. Admired for his creativity, the male artist is despised "as not altogether a man" due to his narcissistic, self-absorbed attitude. Being aligned with the "feminine" because of their creativity, male artists tend "to play up patriarchal attributes". See "The Portrait of the Artist as a Man", in *Writing Masculinities. Male Narratives in Twentieth Century*, Houndsmill and London, Macmillan Press, 1999, pp. 50-51.

10 Shulamith Firestone, "(Male) Culture", in *The Dialectic of Sex. The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Paladin, London, 1972, p. 152.

11 Ibid.

Moravia.[12] In examining the troubled sense of masculinity emerging from their narratives, Schwenger argues that self-consciousness, "a pervasive trait of the twentieth century", has disconcerting effects on masculinity: "To be self-conscious is to stand off from the self, to be alienated enough from it to observe its arbitrariness and artifice."[13] Drawing on modernist works, comics, and contemporary debates about reflexivity, desire and modernity, Peter Middleton investigates men's self-consciousness in *The Inward Gaze* (1992), in which he examines the difficulties for men in writing self-consciously (and self-critically) about their gender, and "the lack of a language for such a reflection."[14] Building on the contribution of Schwenger and Middleton, I intend to address the masculine struggle for self-reflexivity as explored by Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa. My proposition is that these authors enquire into masculinity by exploiting the self-reflexive forms of the novel: displaying their male protagonists' practices of reading and writing, the metaliterary devices of these writers are especially suited to an exploration of white heterosexual masculinity (reverberating with my own self-conscious, critical engagement as a white straight male reader).[15] My investigation of literary masculinities involves a comparative exploration of responses by all my chosen writers to the forms of self-reflexivity developed by the novel genre as a whole, and in particular the legacy of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605-1615).

The comparative nature of my project and my understanding of the novel genre are partly rooted in Kundera's theory of the novel. In *The Art of The Novel* (1988) Kundera describes the novel as a product of European culture that took shape with *Don Quixote*.[16] Not geographically limited to Europe, the novel's tradition has been enriched by non-European writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes. Inspired by Hermann Broch who conceives of the novel as a means to achieve knowledge,

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12 Peter Schwenger, *Phallic Critiques. Masculinity and Twentieth-Century Literature*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 14.

13 Ibid., p. 9.

14 Peter Middleton, *The Inward Gaze. Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 3.

15 Roth's protagonists are Jewish, and thus belong to a religious minority in the United States. Nevertheless, in *Marked Men* Robinson considers Roth's characters as an expression of white hegemonic discourse at large. As I shall discuss in Chapter Three, Roth's Jewish men are given the same symbolic power as the one projected onto white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men by the discourse of white hegemonic masculinity. More importantly still, Roth's female characters expect his Jewish protagonists to satisfy those same expectations.

16 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher, London, Faber and Faber, 1988, pp. 4-5. In his essays Kundera identifies both Cervantes and Rabelais as the initiator of the novel: in *Art of the Novel* he focuses on Cervantes, while in *Testaments Betrayed* on Rabelais (trans. Linda Asher, London, Faber and Faber, 1996).

Kundera examines the dialogue and continuity between novels from several national traditions. Andrew Gibson argues that Kundera's theory of the novel seems "to point towards a (perhaps more Foucauldian) history of 'the form' than those we have so far had".[17] In *Testaments Betrayed* (1995), Kundera argues that the reflective nature and self-reflexive aesthetic of the novel inaugurated by Cervantes ("with Cervantes, we are in a world created by the magic spells of the storyteller who invents, who exaggerates, and who is carried away by his fantasies"),[18] and continued by Henry Fielding, embodies the authentic essence of the novel. Betrayed by the Realist tradition, this spirit was rediscovered in the twentieth century by modern authors such as Broch, Franz Kafka, Robert Musil and Witold Gombrowicz.[19] In addressing almost exclusively male authors, Kundera's history of the novel is further relevant to my investigation in representing a "masculine" history of the genre.

Several critics have studied the self-reflexive forms of the novel. Robert Alter paints the (masculine) history of the novel as a self-conscious form "that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice".[20] Even though the phenomenon of an artwork mirroring itself can be traced back to the bard within the *Odyssey* or Euripides's parody of tragedy, Alter underlines that among all the forms of art, the novel "raised the fictional self-consciousness to a distinctive generic trend."[21] Cervantes inaugurates this form through a protagonist who wants to be a book. A crucial moment in *Don Quixote* is when the protagonist enters a printing shop and assists in the process of type-setting and the readers "can hardly forget that Don Quixote himself is no more than the product

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17 Andrew Gibson, "Cases for the Defence: Badiou, Rorty, Kundera", in *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1996, p. 194. Similarly, in considering Kundera, Richard Rorty also observes that "the novel does not have *a nature*, but *only* a history" ("Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens", in *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 77).

18 Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, p. 60.

19 André Brink warns us that Kundera's view may mislead the reader into believing in the existence of an "authentic" history of the novel, and denounces his oversimplified interpretation of the realist aesthetic (*The Novel. Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino*, Houndmills, MacMillan, 1998, p. 6), reminiscent of Ian Watt who identifies the novel with the realist movement (*The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1957). Although Kundera praises the discoveries of Flaubert and Balzac, his considerations (knowingly) ignore both the complexity underlying realism and the multiple trajectories opened out by the studies which realist works have inspired, such as Leo Bersani's and Jonathan Culler's readings of *Madame Bovary* or Christopher Prendergast's *The Order of Mimesis*, which looks at realist works as a "'dynamic re-description' of the experience", and engages with socially shared orders of knowledge (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 235).

20 Robert Alter, *Partial Magic. The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*, Berkley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1975, p. x.

21 Ibid., p. xii.

of the very process he observes, a congeries of words set up in type, run off as proof, corrected and rerun, and sold at so many reals a copy."[22] In tracking the history of the self-conscious narrative form from Renaissance Spain to the contemporary United States and France, Alter highlights the continuity between literary works from the past and those belonging to a modern as well as a postmodern aesthetic. André Brink focuses on the different forms that the self-consciousness of language itself can take, and argues that the "exploitation of the storytelling properties of language" which "has so persistently been regarded as the prerogative of the Modernist and Postmodernist novel […], *has in fact been a characteristic of the novel since its inception*," which many argue is *Don Quixote* itself.[23] Even more explicitly, Linda Hutcheon asks: "does one not feel the need to point out the continuity as well between 'postmodernism' and *Don Quijote*?"[24] Hutcheon focuses on a novelistic form that she describes as a self-referring narrative that provides, within itself, a commentary on its own status as fiction and on its own process of production and reception. For Hutcheon, self-consciousness is paradigmatic of most of the cultural forms that Jean-François Lyotard describes as postmodern, but, by emphasising the analogies between postmodernism and *Don Quixote* in particular, she underlines that a postmodernist lens on self-consciousness in fiction is too limiting.[25]

The novels of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth, and Vargas Llosa are considered postmodernist because of these self-reflexive and metaliterary dimensions present in their works.[26] Drawing on the histories of the novel's morphology that Alter and Brink

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22 Ibid., p. 4.

23 Brink, *The Novel*, pp. 6-7.

24 Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative. The Metafictional Paradox*, Waterloo (Ontario), Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980, p. 3.

25 Similarly, in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh observes that "[m]etafiction is a mode of writing within a broader cultural movement often referred to as post-modernism" (London and New York, Routledge, 1984, p. 21).

26 Referring to the particular relationships each of these authors has with postmodernism, I must limit myself to a few references. Derek Attridge underlines that Coetzee is described as a postmodernist by several critics including Hutcheon. Referring to Coetzee's conversation with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 198-201), Attridge regards Coetzee as a late modernist in view of the influence of Samuel Beckett and Kafka on his writing (*Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 1-31). Admitting that Kundera might be considered a postmodern author, Liisa Steinby underlines that he places his oeuvre in the tradition of the "post-Proustian" European novel and suggests considering his work as an expression of "antimodern modernism" (*Kundera and Modernity*, West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2013, p. 20). Vicki Adams also describes Kundera's distance from as well as proximity to postmodernism. Adams explores how Kundera's oeuvre succeeds in representing the beauty and irony of contemporary life despite its rootedness in the postmodern intellectual camp ("The Search for Self in a Post-Modern World", in *Imagination, Emblems and Expressions: Essays on Latin American, Caribbean, and*

draw and responding to Hutcheon's insights, I intend to discuss the works of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth, and Vargas Llosa as a (direct and indirect) response to the aesthetic embodied by *Don Quixote* that prolongs its self-reflexive tradition while at the same time innovating it. In order to clarify my engagement with *Don Quixote*, a wider consideration on the criticism of Cervantes's text is necessary. The emphasis of contemporary critics on the analogies between *Don Quixote* and postmodernism represents the most recent stage in the interpretation of Cervantes's work. Anthony Close describes the evolution of scholarly interpretation of *Don Quixote* from the seventeenth century to the contemporary period and emphasises that "the theory and criticism of *Don Quixote* have interpreted it in the light of the ideology and aesthetic values prevailing at the time of interpretation, including the trends set by contemporary novels."[27] Specifically, Close argues that the understanding of metafictionality in *Don Quixote* depends on the influence of writers who rejected traditional narrative premises, such as André Gide and Miguel de Unamuno who "subjected their own [fiction] to ironic scrutiny as well, by including within their fictional world a writer engaged in writing a novel very much like the one that we read."[28] Acknowledging this influence and the implications of reading *Don Quixote* in the light of contemporary sensibilities and theories, I look at the creative responses to *Don Quixote* and the understanding of the novel involved as a means for self-reflection which critics and writers alike have shaped, inspired by Cervantes, in their exploration of masculinity. In particular, I shall examine the self-reflexive practices Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa and the ways in which they are gendered and in which they re-fashion gender.

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*Continental Culture and Identity*, ed. Helen Ryan-Ranson, Bowling Green (Ohio), Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993, pp. 233-246). The metafictional dimension of Roth's narrative has earned him the definition postmodernist. David Brauner reviews critical contributions dedicated to Roth and postmodernism (46-51) and studies how realism and postmodernism coexist in his fiction ("The 'Credible' Incredible", in *Philip Roth*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007, pp. 46-121). Derek Parker Royal discusses the postmodern aesthetic of *My Life as a Man* and *The Professor of Desire*, the two novels I analyse here ("Roth, Literary Influence, and Postmodernism", in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 22-33). Keith Brooker studies the transition from the modernist aesthetic of Vargas Llosa's first novels to the postmodernism of his works in the 1980s (*Vargas Llosa among the Postmodernists*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1994). Drawing on Brooker, Hedy Habra discusses Vargas Llosa's creation of complex ontologies and subworlds as emblematic of the understanding of postmodernism that Brian McHale outlines in *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York, Routledge, 1987). Habra focuses on the interaction between literature and visual codes and visual art in Vargas Llosa's fiction (*Mundos alternos y artísticos en Vargas Llosa*, Madrid, Iberoamericana, 2012).

[27] Anthony Close, "Don Quixote and the Modern Novel", in *A Companion to Don Quixote*, Woodbridge, Tamesis, 2008, pp. 251-252.

[28] Ibid., p. 248.

*Don Quixote* has been interpreted as displaying a polarity (whether illusion/reality, appearance/reality, ideal/real, life/imagination) which sets an objective reality in dialogue with an abstract sphere made of the desires, ideals and expectations that we try to impose on lived experience.[29] My focus is provided by the "quixotic tension between what is fictional and what is real" as understood by Alter,[30] and be the ways in which the novels of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa transfigure this Quixotic theme into an investigation of the dynamic between fictional expression and male heterosexuality. I argue that the male writers, poets, professors and experts in humanities whom Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa cast as protagonists are Quixotic readers. In the manner of Don Quixote, whose desires are shaped by his literary model Amadís de Gaula, these characters' understanding of masculinity and heterosexual desire stem from the works of male authors ranging from Gustave Flaubert, Byron, Wordsworth, Arthur Rimbaud, Anton Chekhov, Kafka, Ezra Pound, Jorge Luis Borges, Juan Carlos Onetti. My aim is to investigate the mutual influence between the literary representations of masculinity these protagonists read and their heterosexual experience, addressing the ways in which the masculine attempt to develop a language for self-reflexivity reverberates in the metaliterary dimension of the novel. Drawing on Judith Still and Michael Worton, who emphasise the role of theories of textual production and reception in exploring the construction of 'femininity' and 'masculinity',[31] I explore the role of literary intertextuality in the construction of masculinity and its contradictions in the narratives of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa. I have selected these male authors due to the central role that sexuality plays in their narrative; the self-reflexive dimension of their novels; and finally because of their different geographical origins, crucial in investigating a trend in contemporary

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[29] Concerning *Don Quixote*, Friedrich Schelling observes that "[t]he theme on the whole is the struggle between the real and the ideal" (*The Philosophy of Art*, trans. Douglas Stott, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 234). Lionel Trilling writes that the subject that Cervantes has set for the novel is "the problem of appearance and reality" ("Manners, Moral, and the Novel", in *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent: Selected Essays*, ed. Leon Wieseltier, Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 2000, p. 108). Harry Levin interprets the metaliterary interplay at the heart of *Don Quixote* in the light of the opposition between literary illusion and reality (*The Gates of Horn: A Study Of Five French Realists*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1963).

[30] Alter, *Partial Magic*, p. 224. A formulation close to Alter's can be found in Marthe Robert who writes that "Quixotism is a literary matter, an endeavour to portray […] the problematic relationship between books and life" (*The Old and the New: From Quixote to Kafka*, trans. Carol Cosman, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977, p. 50).

[31] Judith Still, Michael Worton, "Introduction", in *Textuality and Sexuality. Reading Theories and Practices*, eds. Judith Still, Michael Worton, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1993, pp. 1-68.

narrative which goes beyond national and linguistic boundaries. These narratives are illuminated by comparing them for several reasons beyond the dialogue which their authors have directly established with each other, and which I shall discuss in the pages to come. The first such reason and perhaps the most evident is the self-reflexive approach of all these writers, expressed in essays as well as narrative. Their respective writings each engage with canonical works of European literature in addition to *Don Quixote*: Coetzee features Dostoevsky as the protagonist of the fictional story narrated in *The Master of Petersburg*, while his work *Foe* is woven around Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; Kundera's *Jacques and his Master* is a "variation" of Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist and his Master*; Roth's *The Breast* is a parodic, surreal novella inspired by Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" and Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose"; Vargas Llosa has adapted the *Odyssey* for the theatre. Each reflects on the creative process and the act of writing itself: Coetzee features the writer Elizabeth Costello in *Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*, and shows his characters' writing in *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country* and *Age of Iron*; Kundera constantly exposes his narrators' thoughts on the nature of fiction; almost all Roth's novels are centered on fictional authors; Vargas Llosa investigates the act of writing in *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*, *The Storyteller*, and *The Bad Girl*.

The self-reflexive attitude of these authors is also evident in their play with autobiographical information, often featuring a character who has the same name as the author, as in the cases of Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Summertime*, Kundera's *Slowness* and *Immortality*, Roth's *Deception: A Novel*, *The Plot Against America* and *Operation Shylock*, and Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *The Storyteller*. This tendency is further and conversely developed in fictional autobiographies such as Coetzee's *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* and *Youth*, Roth's *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* and *Patrimony: A True Story*, and Vargas Llosa's *A Fish in the Water*.

These are only few of the many analogies between the practices of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa, and it is not possible to discuss here all the works in which these authors adopt meta-literary devices. I have selected the novels that engage with straight male sexuality through textual devices which include intertextuality and the intratextual juxtaposition of narrative sequences. This has led me to exclude other authors who engage with heterosexual masculinity, although less pervasively, such as

García Márquez, John Irving or André Brink, whose presence would not significantly vary the macro-geographical dimensions of my discussion.

**Structure and scope**

Chapter One focuses on Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and its protagonist, Lurie, a delusional seducer inspired by Byron's life. Discussing the way in which Lurie is defined by an inability to read his own emotion, reminiscent of the central character in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), I look at his opera, *Byron in Italy*, as an attempt to overcome the opacity of his desire, and as an example of Coetzee's understanding of writing as a dialogic process.

Chapter Two examines the coming of age of Jaromil in Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere* (1973) and Kepesh in Roth's *The Professor of Desire* (1977) in the light of Gombrowicz and his notions of form and immaturity. I explore how Jaromil's poetic creations suppress self-consciousness in relation to his body, offering an illusory fulfilment of his masculinity, and how Kepesh's engagement with literature displays a failure of introspection in dialogue with a formal way of enacting physical desire.

Chapter Three investigates the ways in which heterosexual masculinity emerges as an attempt to claim authorship in Kundera's *Slowness* (1995), Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977) and Roth's *My Life as a Man* (1974). I explore the possibility of shaping a narrative understanding of masculinity, including the Flaubertian ideal of an authorial control able to emancipate both author and reader from emotional manipulation.

Chapter Four addresses the affective crises and essayistic writings of JC and Rigoberto, the mature protagonists of Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) and Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* (1998) respectively, presenting Borges as a key influence on both writers. I discuss the new consonance with emotion that Rigoberto achieves through his metaliterary reflections on Juan Carlos Onetti's *A Brief Life* (1950); and JC's combination of essay and diaristic writing, developed as a response to Pound's reading of the Troubadours.

In my conclusion, I argue that readership and authorship emerge as gendered and gendering practices; and I propose that in these self-reflexive novels the novelistic tradition embodied by Cervantes and Flaubert corroborates the opacity of male emotion.

## Chapter One

### Masculine Striving for Self-Consciousness: Mediated Desire and Creative Impulse in Coetzee's *Disgrace*

*And be the singing-masters of my soul.*
*Consume my heart away; sick with desire*
*And fastened to a dying animal*
W. B. Yeats

In this chapter I inaugurate my investigation of heterosexual masculinity and its literary forms in the frame of the Quixotic tension between fiction and experience. My starting focus is Coetzee's reading of Cervantes and of Kundera's response to Cervantes's novel. I argue that in *Disgrace*, despite his scepticism towards the European novel as a way of engaging with South African reality, Coetzee adopts the model of the Cervantine novel to explore the influence of Romantic poets, Byron in particular, on the protagonist Lurie, and particularly on his understanding of male heterosexual desire and the potential involved for the reification of women. I go on to discuss the parallel the novel develops between Lurie and Emma Bovary and which expresses the opacity of Lurie's emotional life and his understanding of it. Finally, I examine Lurie's opera *Byron in Italy* as an attempt to discover an understanding of his masculinity and empathy with women.

#### 1. *Disgrace*

#### (i) "Where does the play of *writing* start?"

Since the publication in 2013 of *The Childhood of Jesus*, which explicitly refers to *Don Quixote*, Cervantes's influence on Coetzee has been widely discussed.[1] In her essay on the subject, María López traces its origin to the acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize which Coetzee gave in 1987.[2] Coetzee uses the very words Kundera had used two years before when he was awarded the same prize.[3] In his own speech, Coetzee reads *Don Quixote* as an interplay between imagination and reality and states that he would

[1] Coetzee's most recent novel, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), makes reference to *Don Quixote* as well.

[2] María J. López, "Miguel de Cervantes and J.M. Coetzee: An Unacknowledged Paternity", *Journal of Literary Studies*, 29:4, pp. 80-97.

[3] Kundera's speech is collected in *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1988, pp. 155-165.

like to join Kundera in paying tribute to the legacy of Cervantes, but feels that as a South African novelist *Don Quixote* cannot match his own experience:

> The *crudity* of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and rages, its greed and its lies, make it as irresistible as it is unlovable. The story of Alonso Quixano or Don Quixote – though not, I add, Cervantes' subtle and enigmatic book – ends with the capitulation of the imagination to reality, with a return to La Mancha and death. We have art, said Nietzsche, so that we shall not die of the truth. In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination.[4]

According to Coetzee, South Africa's "crudity" cannot be explored through an act of imagination. Commenting on this speech, Patrick Hayes reads these words a statement that the aesthetic and ethical potential of the European novel are inadequate tools for the tasks facing a South-African writer:

> [I]n South Africa, the type of truths the novel might be able to tell are as old-fashioned and irrelevant as the chivalric romance was in the days of Alonso Quixano. For a South African writer to embrace the novel as a serious alternative to 'history' is just as fantastical and doomed to ignominious failure as Alonso's embrace of the chivalric romance.[5]

Describing history as an alternative to the novel, Hayes seems to allude to Coetzee's 1988 article, "The Novel Today". In this text, Coetzee considers a "variation" of the Quixotic theme – the relationship between literary and historical discourses, and regards Cervantes's work as a privileged standpoint through which to look at this relationship. Adopting a Derridian term, Coetzee observes that in South Africa novels are increasingly used to "supplement" historical interpretations and denounces "the colonisation of the novel by the discourse of history."[6] Coetzee makes claims for the novel's autonomy and independence from history: novel and history are different kinds of discourse, and neither should be privileged over the other. He praises *Don Quixote* for suggesting that "the authority of history lies simply in the consensus it commands."[7] While historical discourse aims to forge a view of the past which can be shared by a

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4 J. M. Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech", in *Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 99.

5 Patrick Hayes, *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel. Writing and Politics After Beckett*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 135.

6 J. M. Coetzee, "The Novel Today", *Upstream*, 1988, Vol. 6, p. 3.

7 Ibid., p. 4.

community, "a novel […] evolves its own paradigms and myths."[8] Don Quixote's chivalric fantasies display the potentialities of a discourse which is "other" to the hegemonic discourse of history. Quoting Coetzee's words in a more recent essay on Gabriel García Márquez, *Don Quixote* teaches the reader "to cultivate in oneself a capacity for dissociation."[9] Praising Don Quixote's ability to distance himself from the dominant worldview and to imagine alternatives to it, Coetzee's view is reminiscent of Kundera's understanding of the novel as a genre through which to engage with the ambiguity and the contradictions of human experience.[10]

Nevertheless, in one of the interviews with David Atwell collected in the 1992-volume *Doubling the Point*, scepticism towards the novel seems to have increased in Coetzee's thought. Coetzee refers again to Kundera's acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize and his notion of the novel form as being in opposition to the univocal truth of totalitarianism, making this literary genre a suitable frame through which to engage with Czech history and the political situation of the time. Referring to Kundera's praise of Cervantes's legacy, Coetzee writes: "I would like to be able to say that proof of their deep social and historical responsibility lies in the penetration with which, in their different ways and to their different degrees, they [Cervantes and Kundera] reflect on the nature and crisis of fiction, of fictionalizing, in their respective ages."[11] Coetzee still believes that the understanding provided by the European novel cannot satisfy the social and historical responsibility required by South Africa. Even though the potential of the novel depends on its power of reflection with regard to the nature of fiction itself, the case of South Africa poses a different question:

> In Africa the only address one can imagine is brutally direct one, a sort of pure, unmediated representation; what short-circuits the imagination, what forces one's face into the thing itself, is what I am here calling history. "The only address one can imagine" – an admission of defeat. *Therefore*, the task of imagining this unimaginable, imagining a form of address that permits the play of *writing* to start taking place.[12]

In this fragment the notions of history and the real converge under the definition of "unmediated representation". Borrowing Jonathan Culler's words in his reflections on

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8 Ibid.

9 J. M. Coetzee, "García Márquez, *Memories of my Melancholy Whores*", in *Inner Workings. Essays 2000-2005*, London, Random House, 2008, p. 266.

10 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher, London, Faber and Faber, 1988.

11 J. M. Coetzee, "Interview [The Poetics of Reciprocity]", in *Doubling the Point*, pp. 66-67.

12 Ibid., pp. 67-68.

*Madame Bovary* and Roland Barthes, Coetzee seems to wonder how the novel can confront the South African *effet de réel*, "the facticity of a world that is just there, resistant to signification."[13] The crudity and brutality of his country represent the primordial character of experience, recalcitrant to the meaning human representations try to project onto it.

So how does the novelist Coetzee reconcile himself with the novel as a form? In the next pages, I will argue that Coetzee does not merely adopt the European novel, but embraces a specifically Cervantean model as a form through which to address the South African experience. I would like to begin with a simpler question derived from the last line quoted above: where does the "play of *writing*" start? For a first, partial answer to this question, we should go back to Coetzee's acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize: "What prevents him [the South-African writer] is what prevents Don Quixote himself: the *power* of the world his body lives in to impose itself on him and ultimately on his imagination, which, whether he liked it or not, has its residence in his body."[14] The body is presented as our interface with the world: it is the receptor of the physical sensations and emotions generated by contact with the surrounding environment and the faculty of abstraction is generated there.[15] In the next section, focusing on *Disgrace*, the work that I regard as the most Quixotic in Coetzee's narrative corpus, I shall consider how the emphasis on the body is used to engage with the Quixotic opposition between reality and imagination, transfiguring it into a tension between male heterosexual experience and fiction.

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13 Jonathan Culler, "The Realism of *Madame Bovary*", *MLN*, Vol. 122, No. 4, September 2007, p. 694. In *Flaubert. The Uses of Uncertainty* Culler studies how Flaubert's texts expose the processes through which the reader constructs meaning as "factitious and distorting" (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 86).

14 Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech", p. 99.

15 An indirect indication of the centrality of the body in investigating the influence of Cervantes on Coetzee is provided by Hayes's and López's analyses. Comparing *Age of Iron* with the genre of the epistolary novel (represented by Richardson's *Pamela*), Hayes outlines that Coetzee's protagonist Elizabeth "is not only a mother, but is possessed of a decaying and disease-ridden body" and he emphasis that her "cancer-ridden old body is as undesirable as Pamela's beautiful young body" (142). Similarly, commenting on *Slowman* López notices that in the case of the protagonist Rayment the "onslaught of reality […] is manifested at a more physical level" (93). López sees the loss of his leg caused by the bicycle accident that opens the novel as a reminder of Don Quixote's innumerable falls from Rocinante.

**(ii) Knights and seducers**

The protagonist of *Disgrace* is David Lurie,[16] a professor of literature interested in the Romantic period, who teaches at the Cape Technical University in Cape Town. The novel focuses on the period of his life when Lurie is losing his magnetism to women because of his age:

> With his height, his good bones, his olive skin, his flowing hair, he could always count on a degree of magnetism. […] That was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life.
>
> […] Without warning his powers fled. Glances that would once have responded to his slid over, past, through him. Overnight he became a ghost. If he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often, in one way or another, to buy her (D 7).[17]

Physical change is not only a material modification but one that affects his relationship with women. Lurie's sense of himself emerges as gendered and "inherently relational".[18] *Disgrace* draws the "process of 'othering'" through which Lurie has shaped his masculinity since his early years in contrast to women:[19] "His childhood was spent in a family of women. As mother, aunts, sisters fell away, they were replaced in due course by mistresses, wives, a daughter. The company of women made of him a lover of women and, to an extent, a womanizer" (D 7). Even the women of his family are perceived primarily in terms of gender opposition. The anxiety brought into the protagonist's life by his ageing body sharpens his condition and pushes him to exist "in an anxious flurry of promiscuity" having sex with the wives of his colleagues, random tourists and prostitutes (D 7). His dissolute lifestyle as a sexual predator finds a literary correspondence in Lord Byron, the Romantic poet who has been at the centre of his academic interest.[20]

Lurie believes that his own attitude as a womanizer has defined his existence: "His temperament is fixed, set. The skull, followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body. Follow your temperament. […] It is a rule, like the Rule of St

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16 Hereafter David Lurie referred to by his surname to avoid confusion with David Kepesh, the protagonist of Philip Roth's *The Professor of Desire*, which is analysed in Chapter Two.

17 J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1999; in London, Vintage, 2000.

18 R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995, p. 68.

19 Stephen Whitehead, Frank Barrett, "The Sociology of Masculinity", in *The Masculinities Reader*, eds. Stephen Whitehead, Frank Barrett, Cambridge, Polity, 2001, p. 22.

20 Kai Easton outlines that "Byron is considered a 'Romantic' today, but this designation was only applied to him after his death, as it was not until the late nineteenth century that Romanticism actually became a School" ("Coetzee's *Disgrace*: Byron in Italy and the Eastern Cape c. 1820", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 42 (2007), p. 123).

Benedict" (D 2). The reference to the monastic Benedictine rules emphasises Lurie's adherence to the image of himself as a seducer. Despite losing his charm, he still feels the urge to enact his masculine desire. Thanks to a prostitute called Soraya, he temporarily solves his personal crisis. Recalling Charles Baudelaire's poem "L'Invitation au voyage", he regards the weekly meetings with her as "an oasis *of luxe et volupté*" (D 1), while to describe her, he borrows the words pronounced by the womanizing Duke of Mantua from the opera *Rigoletto* (1851) by Giuseppe Verdi: "*la donna è mobile*" (D 3), literally "woman is fickle." Throughout the novel Lurie's literary references witness the way in which he is profoundly affected by his readings. This influence is such that Lurie acts as a Romantic seducer in the contemporary era, losing contact with the outside world: as Gary Hawkins observes, Lurie is "a professor of Romantic literature marooned in a post-Romantic age."[21] Where Don Quixote models himself on Amadis de Gaula and interprets the world and his love for Dulcinea according to chivalric romances, Lurie is inspired by the Romantic poets and Byron in particular.

Nonetheless Lurie's sexual life is the field where Coetzee develops him into a particularly Quixotic figure. When Soraya suddenly retires, Lurie faces the "problem of sex" again (D 1). His attention focuses on Melanie Isaac, an attractive student on his course. After inviting her for dinner in his place, Lurie quotes from Shakespeare's "Sonnet I" in order to seduce her. On the one hand, the quotation alienates her from him: "The pentameter, whose cadence once served so well to oil the serpent's words, now only estranges. He has become a teacher again, man of the book, guardian of the culture-hoard" (D 16). Like Quixote with chivalric romances, Lurie appears to be the holder of a literary tradition which does not match the world in which he lives. On the other, in reciting these seductive sentences, Lurie feels he can give them life – "Smooth words, as old as seduction itself. Yet at this moment he believes in them" (D 16). With insistence, Lurie satisfies his sexual appetite even though he is aware that Melanie is unwilling.[22]

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[21] Gary Hawkins, "Clerk in a Post-Religious Age: Reading Lurie's Remnant Romantic Temperament in *Disgrace*", in *Encountering 'Disgrace'. Reading and Teaching Coetzee's Novel*, ed. Bill McDonald, Rochester and New York, Camden House, 2009, p. 149.

[22] The question of whether Lurie's behaviour should be considered an abuse or a rape has been widely discussed. Lucy Valerie Graham is categorical in writing that "the act he commits is rape" ("Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, *Journal of Southern Africa*, No. 2 (June 2003), p. 438), while Gillian Dooley observes that after their first intercourse, she seeks refuge with him and has sex one more time; Dooley argues that "[i]t is hard to ignore the evidence that Melanie has far more ambivalent feelings towards David [Lurie] than Lucy has to her attackers" (*J. M. Coetzee and the*

Coetzee not only exposes the influence of these texts on his character's life but establishes a relation between *Disgrace*, the novel itself, and the literary traditions to which Lurie refers. This emerges clearly through the literature course that Lurie teaches. As Pamela Cooper notices, "Coetzee's self-conscious involvement with this [Anglo-European] tradition is underscored by Lurie's profession as a literary scholar."[23] His lectures create a particular dialogue between *Don Quixote* and the Romantic tradition. In a lecture dedicated to William Wordsworth, Lurie reads a fragment from *The Prelude* to his students:

> [W]e also first beheld
> Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved
> To have a soulless image on the eye
> That had usurped upon a living thought
> That never more could be (D 21).

These verses describe the incapacity of the human eye to capture the image of the unveiled summit of Mont Blanc. In his comments Lurie focuses on the verb 'usurp upon' and the distortion of pure ideas provoked by the sensorial experience: "Wordsworth is writing about the limits of sense-perception", he tells his students. Referring to the "the visual image burned on the retina", he stresses the materiality of sense perception in the human experience of the world (D 22). Moreover, he sets the poem in a Platonic frame:

> 'The great archetypes of the mind, pure ideas, find themselves usurped by mere sense-images.'
> 'Yet we cannot live our daily lives in a realm of pure ideas, cocooned from sense-experience. The question is not, How can we keep the imagination pure, protected from the onslaughts of reality? The question has to be, Can we find a way for the two to coexist?' (D 22).

Adopting concepts such as archetypes in addition to the realm of pure ideas, Lurie expresses a Platonic variation of the dual, antagonistic worldview characteristic of *Don Quixote*. By incorporating fragments from *The Prelude*, Coetzee evokes the concept of intertextuality developed by Julia Kristeva following Bakhtin, which suggests that any text presents itself as an "intersection of textual surfaces" and "is the absorption and

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*Power of Narrative*, Amherst (New York), Cambria Press, 2010, p. 132). Nonetheless, the reader should keep in mind that Melanie's contradictory feelings do not justify Lurie's misdeeds.

[23] Pamela Cooper, "Metamorphosis and Sexuality: Reading the Strange Passions of *Disgrace*", *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Winter 2005, pp. 23-24.

transformation of another."[24] *Disgrace* does not only engage with *The Prelude*, but also places Wordsworth's poem in dialogue with other texts. On the one hand, the tension generated by the parallel between Lurie and Don Quixote illuminates one of the variations of the Quixotic theme, the conflict between real and ideal, in *The Prelude*; on the other, Wordsworth's poem is used to read the Quixotic dynamic between reality and imagination in the light of the materiality of the body, emphasising the role that the human senses play in our perception of the material as well as the historical world.

The questions Lurie asks his students resonate with Coetzee's words about *Don Quixote*, a novel which begins as a parody of chivalric romances but turns into "an exploration of the mysterious power of the ideal to resist disillusioning confrontation with the real."[25] Likewise, *Disgrace* as a whole investigates the tension between ideal and real that runs on the tracks of the love experience. Facing his students' silence and in order to clarify the meaning of the poem, Lurie compares the conflict between real and ideal expressed by Wordsworth to the experience of being in love: "'do you truly wish to see the beloved in the cold clarity of the visual apparatus? It may be in your better interest to throw a veil over the gaze, so as to keep her alive in her archetypal, goddesslike form'" (D 22). This Platonic interpretation of love is crucial in Coetzee's reading of Cervantes included in his essay on García Márquez's *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. Commenting on García Márquez's novel, Coetzee sees an analogy between the aged protagonist's "insistence that his beloved adhere to the form in which he has idealised her" and Don Quixote's idealization of Dulcinea.[26] In *Disgrace*, Lurie idealizes Melanie as well, but this leads him to conceive of her as impotent and defenceless: "[s]he is too innocent," he thinks, "too ignorant of her power" (D 39). The young woman is not the beloved to be praised, but the perfect pray for Lurie's womanising ambitions. The description of their intercourse casts his behaviour in a negative light: "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (D 25). López points out the different outcomes that literary influence has on Don Quixote and Lurie:

> Don Quixote dedicates himself "to a life of service" (2007b: 266), including the service of Dulcinea, Lurie's literary models seem to have led him to a selfish life

[24] Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel", in *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1980, pp. 65-66.

[25] Coetzee, "García Márquez, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*", p. 265.

[26] Ibid.

> centred on his own ego and disregard of the feelings and necessities of others. His "aestheticisation of desire" (Attwell 2001: 865) from a dubious conception of Romantic love proves to be disastrous and unethical in so far as it blinds him to Melanie's feelings and makes him commit an abuse of power, thus placing him on the same level as Lucy's rapists […].[27]

The quotation anticipates the parallel dominating the second part of the novel between the abuse committed by Lurie and the violence his daughter Lucy suffers afterwards. Despite resulting in an act of violence on his beloved, Lurie's infatuation with Melanie conforms to the fundamental dynamic of Don Quixote's desire, the idealization of the beloved. Such Quixotic traits also create the novelistic premise on which to explore Lurie's struggle to read South African reality through literary frames.

**(iii) Don Quixote in South Africa: a novelistic antithesis**

After *The Prelude*, Lurie reads verses from Byron's poem "Lara" to his students: "He stood a stranger in this breathing world / An erring spirit from another hurled" (D 32).[28] The fragment involves a comparison between the Count Lara and Lucifer. Lurie observes that Lucifer does not need to breathe till "he finds himself cast out into this strange 'breathing world' of ours" (D 32). Breathing is used to represent the human world. Once again, a text incorporated into *Disgrace* validates a dualistic worldview, in which an ideal world, in this case the heaven from which Lucifer falls, is opposed to a "real" breathing world. This dualism anticipates what awaits Lurie next, beyond the deteriorated, but still protective shield of academia, where abstractions and literary erudition still help to avoid facing the intensity of an experience unmediated by literary frames.

The evocation of Lucifer's fall from grace prefigures Lurie's disgrace and makes of his lecture the stage on which to display the tension between his lived experience and his experience of literary texts – "[t]here is no way in which he can evade the poem", as the narrator informs us (D 32). As a result of his relationship with Melanie, Lurie faces a committee charged with evaluating his behaviour. Looking upon the committee's investigation as a trial against the "rights of desire" (D 89), Lurie declines to resolve the issue diplomatically, such as acknowledging his fault publicly, and refuses counselling.

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[27] López, "Miguel de Cervantes and J.M. Coetzee", p. 91.

[28] George Gordon Byron, "Lara", in *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, London, John Murray, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 1976, pp. 324-340.

López suggests that Lurie's inflexibility is "a quixotic trait" of his personality.[29] The comparison between Quixote's stubborn, irrational behaviour and Lurie's is explicitly stated by one of the members of the committee in the novel, who asks "'This is all very quixotic, Professor Lurie, but can you afford it?'" (D 49). Similarly, his daughter Lucy warns him that "[i]t isn't heroic to be unbending" (D 66). Like the Spanish knight, apparently unaware of the risks he is running, Lurie does not change his attitude, forcing other characters to take care of him. "'David, I can't go on protecting you from yourself'" (D 58), the chair of the committee says to him. As he explains afterwards to his daughter, Lurie refuses to undergo any form of re-education because he feels this would amount to a "[r]eformation of the character" (D 66). These words may refer not only to his personality, but also the Romantic character Lurie is interpreting. In this regard, he enacts the definition of an erring spirit that he gives his students as "a being who chooses his own path, who lives dangerously, even creating danger for himself" (D 32).

After the committee's investigation, Lurie leaves Cape Town to stay with his daughter Lucy, who lives in a farm near Salem in Eastern Cape, and there he learns he has lost his job. In the South African countryside, he and Lucy are assaulted and Lucy is raped. Aware that the police cannot do anything to help her, she does not report the crime. Like Melanie, she opts for silence. Her rape is described as Lurie's "disgrace" (D 109). His fall from grace forces him to face the crudity of South Africa. Petrus is behind this aggression towards them, he is Lucy's neighbour who aims to expand his assets and take over her property. Understanding that she is defenceless, Lucy accepts to become one of the wives of the man who has ordered her rape, despite Lurie's attempt to persuade her to move.

The brutality of events such as these in *Disgrace* shows what Coetzee has in mind in discussing the incapacity of the European novel to represent South Africa. This incapacity is translated as a linguistic conflict between African languages and the European languages that Lurie speaks, which are an expression of the intimate connection that the cultural elite of the country has kept with Europe. When Lucy is raped the narrator signals that "[Lurie] speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa" (D 95). The climax of this opposition is expressed in Lurie's desire to hear Petrus's story:

[29] Ibid., p. 93.

> But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus's story would come out arthritic, bygone (D 117).

The stress on language addresses the possibility of shaping an act of narrative imagination adequate to the task of engaging with events in South Africa. For Lurie, English can only fail in attempting to come to terms with a man like Petrus. More than illuminating their different ethnic and social backgrounds, this linguistic distance exposes the limits set by white masculinity.[30]

Linguistic conflict coupled with the analogy with Don Quixote highlights the ambiguity of Coetzee's approach to the European novel and the legacy of Cervantes in particular. Looking at *Don Quixote*'s influence on Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, Hayes refers to Stephen Gilman's *The Novel according to Cervantes*:[31]

> Gilman emphasizes the ways in which *Don Quixote* invites a metafictional reading as a 'collision of genres' between the Quixotic idealism of the old romance form, and the cruder, more prosaic realism of the new picaresque, which the deluded and hapless Alonso repeatedly encounters, and which defeats him every time.[32]

According to Hayes, the collision between the romance and the picaresque staged in *Don Quixote* resonates with the tension in Coetzee's 1990 novel *Age of Iron* between the epistolary novel, evoked by the protagonist Elizabeth through her letters, and a "realist" narration more suitable to describe the events known as "history". Although there is no similar interplay of genres in *Disgrace*, Lopéz sees Cervantes's influence on this novel. Quoting from Andrew Gibson's *Reading Narrative Discourse*, Lopéz shifts the focus from a meta-literary conflict between genres to the "contrast […] between the

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30 As in the cases of Soraya and Melanie, *Disgrace* suggests that Petrus and Lucy's aggressors are black without expressing it explicitly. For a discussion of race-evasiveness in the novel, see: Susan Arndt, "Whiteness as a Category of Literary Analysis. Racializing Markers and Race-Evasiveness in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*", *Cross/Cultures*, 2009, Issue 116, pp. 167-189.

31 The interplay between different narrative modalities and genres in *Don Quixote* is a *topos* in Cervantes studies. Claudio Guillén focuses on "the dialectic between genre and countergenre" expressed by the dialogue between Don Quixote and Ginés de Pasamonte ("Genre and Countengere: The Discovery of the Picaresque", in *Literature as a System. Essays Towards the Theory of Literary History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 155). Similarly, Walter Reed underlines Cervantes's awareness of literary genres in *An Exemplary History of the Novel. The Quixotic versus the Picaresque* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

32 Hayes, *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel*, p. 135.

logic of the dominant narrative and the logic of the protagonist."[33] The opposition Gibson identifies lies in the discrepancy between the narrator's and Don Quixote's points of view. Correspondingly, in *Disgrace* this "contrast between two distinct modes of thought and perception" is displayed through the opposition between Lurie's European literary attitude and the dominant worldview of the South African countryside.[34]

This antagonism emerges in the arguments between the protagonist and his daughter. When Lurie learns that Lucy's neighbours are going to slaughter animals at home for a Saturday party, he reflects on the animals' destiny in relation to Descartes's philosophy and complains about it with his daughter, who answers "'Wake up, David. This is the country. This is Africa'" (D 124). After Lucy has been assaulted, Lurie tries to convince her to give the farm over to Petrus and to "return to civilization" (D 151). Finally, when Lurie leaves Salem after an argument with Lucy, he thinks "[n]o country, this, for old men" (D 190), alluding to the first line of W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium". Concerned with the struggles of ageing, in this poem Yeats imagines a spiritual journey to the holy city of Byzantium where the sages would lead the poetic voice outside the bodily dimension of human existence. Quoting this poem in relation to Salem, Lurie presents the South African countryside as a land pervaded by the brutal materiality of human existence (the "breathing world"), and impervious to human wisdom.

It is symptomatic that Lurie's distance from rural South Africa is expressed through a literary reference: "The truth is, he has never had much of an eye for rural life, despite all his reading in Wordsworth" (D 218). Like Don Quixote who sees giants in windmills, Lurie pathologically reads his experience and the outside world according to literary frames, even in moments where he senses the inadequacy of that approach.[35] For instance, when he discusses his relationship with his daughter with a friend of hers, Bev Shaw, his sense of guilt is shaped by his literary culture: "[a]n image comes to him from the *Inferno*: the great marsh of Styx, with souls boiling up in it like mushrooms. *Vedi l'anime di color cui vinse l'ira*. Souls overcome with anger, gnawing at each other. A punishment fitted to the crime" (D 209-10). Lurie's tendency to interpret human

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33 Andrew Gibson, "*Don Quixote*", in *Reading Narrative Discourse. Studies in the Novel from Cervantes to Beckett*, Houndmills, Macmillan, 1990, p. 28.

34 Ibid.

35 Lopéz undelines that "David Lurie, however, is unable to deal with reality without turning to literature" (92).

behaviour in the light of religious concepts turned literary, such as salvation and expiation, is denounced by Lucy:

> '[…] Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?'
> 'No. You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can't help you' (D 112).

The word 'misreading' is revealing. Lucy suggests that her father merely uses "abstractions", pure ideas which are unable to engage with her concrete situation. The relationship between Lucy and Lurie is evocative of the interplay between the "realist" Sancho Panza and the "idealist" Don Quixote. The underlying Quixotic pattern of *Disgrace* confirms the power of Cervantes's work as a model through which to articulate the interaction between different narrative orders such as the realist vein of picaresque and the fantasy of chivalric romances in *Don Quixote*. As Harry Levin argues, Cervantes broadened "the province of prose fiction by bringing both realms together, not in a synthesis perhaps, but in the most durable antithesis that literature has known; by opening a colloquy between the romance and the picaresque".[36] The need for a form capable of bringing together the crudity dominating South Africa and "literary" Europe seems to be at the basis of Coetzee's adoption of this model, despite the scepticism he expressed in his articles. Paradoxically, Coetzee has found in the meta-literary dialogue displayed by *Don Quixote* a way to expose the inadequacy of European imagination in representing South Africa. Specifically, *Disgrace* engages with the self-reflexive dimension embodied by *Don Quixote*: like Cervantes, Coetzee adopts the representation of readership as a meta-literary device through which to reflect on the nature of fiction and its influence on Lurie's life and his masculinity. The self-reflexivity in the composition of *Disgrace* clearly emerges when Lucy criticizes her father's tendency to look at the episodes of his life as the events in a plot:

> '[…] You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor' (D 198).

[36] Harry Levin, "The Example of Cervantes", in *Context of Criticism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1957, p. 87.

Relegating his daughter to the position of a secondary character, Lurie exhibits an egocentrism that is consistent with his attitude as a seducer and his unawareness of the ethical implications of his abuse of Melanie. By developing the Quixotic dimension of Lurie in the field of sexuality, Coetzee interrogates the colonial distance between European and South African through the medium of the novelistic discourse, the issue he addressed in his acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize. And yet in so doing, *Disgrace* establishes a dialogue between these apparently antithetical cultural models. In the next section I shall discuss how the novel reveals elements of cultural as well as sexual continuity in its exploration of the relationship between men and women.

**(iv) Rapes and archetypes**

Impervious to the ethical implications of his conduct with Melanie, Lurie cannot be reconciled to the idea that what he considers the act of a seducer may be compared to the violence inflicted on his daughter: an analogy that the novel proffers and questions at the same time. Lurie finds himself thinking about the rape of Sabine women:

> In an art-book in the library there was a painting called *The Rape of the Sabine Women*: men on horseback in skimpy Roman armour, women in gauze veils flinging their arms in the air and wailing. What had all this attitudinizing to do with what he suspected rape to be: the man lying on top of the woman and pushing himself into her?
>
> He thinks of Byron. Among the legions of countesses and kitchenmaids Byron pushed himself into there were no doubt those who called it rape. But none surely had cause to fear that the session would end with her throat being slit. From where he stands, from where Lucy stands, Byron looks very old-fashioned indeed (D 160).

This fragment unveils the affective relationship between Lurie and the painting which has left sediments in his memory.[37] The allusion to this myth suggests that, acting as a womanizer, he propagates the reification of women carried out by Lucy's rapists. The European literary imagination underlying Lurie's interpretation of reality converges with the violence of South Africa through the dominance men impose on women. In *Disgrace* women are presented as the irreducible "Other".[38] When Bev tells Lurie that

[37] The myth of the rape of the Sabine women has inspired many paintings. Lurie's description suggests that he is looking at *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1637-38) by Nicolas Poussin. Poussin dedicated another work to the same subject entitled *Abduction of the Sabine Women* (1633-34), but it features only one man on horseback.

[38] The Otherness of Lurie's lovers has been emphasised by Dooley, who observes that "Soraya is certainly colored […] and a Muslim" (*J. M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative*, p. 129), and John Douthwaite, who contends that "Melanie […] is female, young, a student of his, and coloured. In other words, Melanie is defenceless Otherness taken to extremes" ("Melanie: Voice and its Suppression in J.

he cannot understand what his daughter has undergone, Lurie feels "outraged at being treated like an outsider" and asks himself, "do they think that, where rape is concerned, no man can be where the woman is?" (D 140-1). Although he believes he can understand her trauma, Lurie feels so alien from his daughter that he thinks it would be easier for him to understand her if she were like her rapist: "He loves his daughter, but there are times when he wishes she were a simpler being: simpler, neater. The man who raped her, the leader of the gang, was like that. Like a blade cutting the wind" (D 170-1). Lurie's affinity with the men who assaulted his daughter is based on the gendered identity they share. Returning to Bev's comment, Lurie thinks "he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself" (D 160). Expressing his proximity to Lucy's rapist and aggressors, Lurie seems to conceive of rape as a basic expression of manhood, and to project it beyond the boundaries of the brutality of South Africa that concerns Coetzee.

This merging of mediation through European literary imagination and an unmediated representation of South African violence is embodied by Lucy's young rapist Pollux. Conceived during the rape (or seduction, according to the different versions) that Zeus, in the form of a swan carried on Lena, in Greek mythology Pollux (or Polydeuces) is one of the Argonauts who participated in abducting the daughters of Leucippus. Playing on this myth *Disgrace* suggests that the violence on women is at the root of Western culture. The novel draws the image of "a time consecrated to men and their pleasures" (D 75); Lucy points out that rape is not the end of male violence to women:

> 'Hatred . . . When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange - when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?' (D 158).

She regards as inherently violent all the sexual acts that men perpetrate upon women. The myth of Sabine women comes to express the irreducible opposition between the sexes depicted in the novel. In her reading of *Disgrace*, Cooper describes this mythological narrative as the "primal scene of violation in the Western imagination."[39]

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M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*", *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2001), p. 136).

[39] Cooper, "Metamorphosis and Sexuality", p. 26.

Recognised as a shared cultural archetype, the rape of the Sabine women represents "the spectre of a spectre – a metaphor dislodged and left to hang in an altogether other universe of signs."[40] The effects of myth and those of intertextuality are intertwining: myth both encloses experience and reverberates within it, just as texts enclose others and reverberate within them as well. I turn now to Coetzee's essay on one of the most debated representations of rape in literature, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*.

Coetzee argues that Clarissa's identity is shaped on "a Christian understanding of virginity."[41] This virginal state, called also *vita angelica* [angelic life], is of a higher than the married state and induces men to "treat her [Clarissa] not as a woman but as an angel, that is to say, a creature marked as of a higher order by its asexuality."[42] Clarissa's conception of herself depends on her virginity in a "hypertrofic reduction of human identity to sexual definition."[43] In *Disgrace,* Lurie practices a similar reduction when he sees his daughter exclusively in the light of her homosexuality: "Raping a lesbian is worse than raping a virgin: more of a blow" (D 105), he thinks. According to Coetzee, attracted by Clarissa's beauty, Lovelace is enraged at her self-enclosure and impenetrability to the point that he violates her. But his anger is not extinguished in his violent crime, indeed his urge to impose the materiality of her own body on Clarissa leads him to imagine fathering children and imposing them on her as well, so as to further inflict the physicality of gestation and motherhood on her.[44]

This reading is reminiscent of André Brink's reading of *Don Quixote.* He suggests that Dulcinea del Toboso should be considered "as a near-empty signifier […] to be filled in the course of the narration."[45] Don Quixote's idealization of Dulcinea is analogous to the elevation of Clarissa to angelic status, which is also enacted in Lovelace's violent imposition of materiality. In their antithetical perspectives, Don Quixote and Lovelace both conceive the female body as an empty signifier. The

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40 Ibid., pp. 26-27.

41 J. M. Coetzee, "Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*", in *Stranger Shores. Literary Essays 1986-1999*, London, Penguin Books, 2001, p. 29.

42 Ibid., p. 26.

43 Nancy Miller, "The Misfortune of Virtue: I *Clarissa*", in *The Heroine's Text*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1980, p. 84. Coetzee himself quotes this sentence in his essay on *Clarissa* ("Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*", p. 30).

44 In this essay dedicated to *Clarissa*, Coetzee refers to the same verse that Lurie recites to Melanie from "Sonnet I", and points out that "Shakespeare took it over from Sidney's *Arcadia*, where it is addressed to a girl who has sworn to lead a virgin's life" (28).

45 André Brink, *The Novel. Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino*, Houndmills, Macmillan, 1998, p. 41.

imposition of physicality on the beloved's body and the denial of the beloved's bodily existence are both attempts to shape the feminine and constrain it to a masculinist understanding.

Coetzee sees in Lovelace's fantasy of dominance as a crucial aspect of Western culture:

> It is because of the conjunction of Lovelace's desire to know with the fantasy of Clarissa as the closed female body that the rape of Clarissa has become such a locus classicus in contemporary critical thought, in its project of uncovering the genealogy of the Western will to know. "She is absolutely impenetrable, least of all by rape," writes Terry Eagleton. The "reality of the woman's body," evinced by Clarissa even after the rape, is that it "resists all representation and remains stubbornly recalcitrant to [the man's] fictions."[46]

In this fragment, the Quixotic opposition between reality and imagination is transfigured into the tension between female body and its representation by men in fiction and philosophy. Expressing the ambition of a whole civilization, Lovelace's desire to know faces the reality of Clarissa's body as a signifier resistant to the meaning he is trying to engrave on her. Imposing representation on the female body makes it knowable only in the sense that it is violently maintained within the boundaries of a masculine comprehension, but nothing is revealed other than that masculinist desire itself. In this regard, Lucy's observations about her rapists – "'I think I am in their territory. They have marked me.'" (D 158) – emphasises their logic of possession. Lurie observes that the masculine incapacity to know the feminine is rooted in the materiality of the female body – "Menstruation, childbirth, violation and its aftermath: blood-matters; a woman's burden, women's preserve" (D 104).[47] Referring again to Culler, the facticity of the female body resistant to signification joins the representation of South Africa's brutality as an expression of the *effet de réel*, casting a spotlight on the landscape of Lurie's worldview and the literature which fuels it. My next step is to examine Lurie's awareness of the influence of literature on his desire.

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[46] Coetzee, "Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*", pp. 32-33.

[47] In "Metamorphosis and Sexuality", Cooper observers that "[i]n Coetzee's fiction, the potency of women is often bound up with their mysteriousness; their strength depends on their unreadability – a skeptical, evasive play with reason and signification" (27).

**(v) Mediation and incestuous desire: the limits of self-reflexivity**

*Disgrace* suggests that the masculine quest for knowledge aims at the Otherness embodied in the female. In addition, Lurie's relations with women is unique to him and his own experience, his own alienation from sexuality:

> In the field of sex his temperament, though intense, has never been passionate. Were he to choose a totem, it would be the snake. Intercourse between Soraya and himself must be, he imagines, rather like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest.
> Is Soraya's totem the snake too? (D 2-3)

Lurie depicts his estrangement from both himself and Soraya in terms of animality.[48] When questioned by the committee about Melanie, Lurie replies:

> '[…] Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which, not being a poet, I will not try to describe. Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same.'
> […]
> 'I was not myself I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorce at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros' (D 52).

Lurie describes in literary terms the verbal exchange he had with Melanie as the origin of their desire, but words fail him when he has to recount what has happened between them since: he is not a poet, he explains. On reflection, Lurie realises that his answers were vain and empty: "*I was a servant of Eros:* that is what he wants to say, but does he have the effrontery? *It was a god who acted through me.* What vanity! Yet not a lie, not entirely" (D 89). Through his readings of Romantic poets, Lurie has created an idealised image of himself as a seducer moved by the spirit of Eros. I want now to suggest that the dynamics of eroticism and reading in *Disgrace* are informed intertextually by *Madame Bovary*. The dialogue between Lurie and the members of the commission stages the comment made about Emma and Léon in *Madame Bovary*: "They were both imagining an ideal self, and refashioning the past to fit it. Besides, speech, […] invariably enlarges and extends the emotions."[49] Like them, Lurie re-shapes his past according to an ideal image of himself and, relating his encounter with Melanie, he

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[48] The expression of the estrangement from sexuality by reference to animality is not new in Coetzee. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), the protagonist argues: "Sometimes my sex seemed to me another being entirely, a stupid animal living parasitically upon me, swelling and dwindling according to autonomous appetites, anchored to my flesh with claws I could not detach" (New York, Penguin Books, 1999, pp. 62-63).

[49] Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary. Provincial Manners*, trans. Margaret Mauldon, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 208.

exaggerates the intensity of the emotions he experienced. *Madame Bovary* and *Disgrace* show the difficulty of verbally articulating sensations and emotions. Leo Bersani observes that "language itself, for Flaubert, may separate us from both nature (or the external world) *and* the self."[50] In the same way, *Disgrace* engages with emotional alienation in language and in particular by a bombastic style derived from the Western poetic tradition. Both *Madame Bovary* and *Disgrace* address the irony (as well as the humanity) underlying the paradox of the Romantic rhetoric, presenting itself as the privileged language of love, but expressing love in the necessary artifice and conventionality of linguistic form.

Lurie makes explicit references to Flaubert's novel. After having sex with Bev, a married woman, Lurie imagines her acting like Emma after her adulteries:

> He pushes the blanket aside and gets up, making no effort to hide himself. Let her gaze her fill on her Romeo, he thinks, on his bowed shoulders and skinny shanks.
>
> It is indeed late. On the horizon lies a last crimson glow; the moon looms overhead; smoke hangs in the air; across a strip of waste land, from the first rows of shacks, comes a hubbub of voices. At the door Bev presses herself against him a last time, rests her head on his chest. He lets her do it, as he has let her do everything she has felt a need to do. His thoughts go to Emma Bovary strutting before the mirror after her first big afternoon. *I have a lover! I have a lover!* sings Emma to herself. Well, let poor Bev Shaw go home and do some singing too. And let him stop calling her poor Bev Shaw. If she is poor, he is bankrupt (D 150).

Lurie reads Bev's behaviour according to literary frames and imagines her acting as a character. Led by his narcissism, itself driven by his reading, he thinks of himself as her Romeo and acts like the protagonist in (what he believes to be) Bev's fantasies. The relation to *Madame Bovary* is dual. By using expressions such as "horizon lies", "crimson glow", "the moons loom", Coetzee seems to mimic the suggestive writing of Flaubert and his exploration of the influence of romances on Emma's imagination. Yet the Romantic landscapes and exotic scenes Emma fantasizes about are replaced here by "a stripe of waste land", marking the distance of *Disgrace* from the European novel as well as its proximity.

The interaction of *Disgrace* with *Madame Bovary* informs Lurie's experience of pleasure and the way it is written. As Bersani argues, in *Madame Bovary* the characteristic detachment of the narrator allows for ecstatic descriptions that symbolize her pleasure:

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[50] Leo Bersani, "Flaubert and the Threat of Imagination", in *Balzac to Beckett. Centre and Circumference in French Fiction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 175.

> Such privileged moments naturally depend on Emma's receptiveness to sensations: only the strongest sensual stimulations deaden the mind and allow Flaubert, as it were, to fill in Emma's mental blankness with a rhetoric which authenticates rather than deflates her illusions about life's possibilities.[51]

Poetic effects express the intensity of Emma's flux of sensations and articulates the feverishness she experiences. In *Disgrace*, Lurie is never left to the stream of sensual and luxurious images and lyricism does not corroborate his sensations. The descriptions of the moments when he lives intense physical sensation are rather detached. For example, when Lurie has sex with Melanie, "she hooks a leg behind his buttocks to draw him in closer: as the tendon of her inner thigh tightens against him, he feels a surge of joy and desire" (D 29). Borrowing Bersani's expression, in *Disgrace* what "authenticates" Lurie's sensations, as distinct from Emma, lies in the interaction between desire and quotations from other texts. Even though, as a reader, Lurie resembles Emma in that they both struggle to find in their sexual experiences the bliss narrated in novels and poems, Lurie compulsively returns to the texts that have shaped his desire and meditates by explicit reference to them on the experience he has lived:

> He thinks of Emma Bovary, coming home sated, glazen-eyed, from an afternoon of reckless fucking. *So this is bliss!*, says Emma, marvelling at herself in the mirror. *So this is the bliss the poets speak of!* Well, if poor ghostly Emma were ever to find her way to Cape Town, he would bring her along one Thursday afternoon to show her what bliss can be: a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss (D 5-6).

Lurie displays a more explicitly reflective attitude than Emma: but it is within the limits of his self-reflection that I look for an insight into his desire. With its own focus on sexuality and the parallels he draws between Don Quixote and Emma Bovary, René Girard's notion of mediated desire is a suitable perspective in which to examine Lurie's sexual experience.

In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard studies the relation of the subject and object of desire as represented in literature. Regarding *Don Quixote* as an archetypal novel, he argues that the ideal existence of knight-errant that Don Quixote pursues is not the expression of a spontaneous desire. Don Quixote has surrendered the choice of object of desire to the choice of model: Amadís de Gaula. Taking into account the works of Stendhal, Proust and Dostoevsky as well as Flaubert, Girard argues that the subject is incapable of choosing the object of his own desire and borrows it from a third subject, a mediator. Girard proposes a triangular model of intersubjectivity to explain

[51] Bersani, "Flaubert and the Threat of Imagination", pp. 177-178.

the dynamics of desire, and its representation in literature.[52] In *Doubling the Point* Coetzee states that he read *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* "with a sense that something important was being said not only about the working of fiction but about the effect of fiction on the lives of the readers."[53] This reflection is developed in his essay entitled "Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising", where Coetzee writes of Don Quixote and Emma: "[n]ot only [do they] imitate the outward of behaviour of models they find in books, but they freely allow their desires to be defined for them by these models."[54] Even though the parallel between Emma and Lurie suggests that the mediation of desire is a universal condition, its effects are gendered and shed light on Lurie's actions as a seducer and a father. Looking at *Disgrace* in the light of Girard's starting notion, López suggests that Lurie "is, hence, another example of Girard's mediated desire, as in the question of desire he follows his literary masters, especially, the Romantic poets."[55] Particularly, Lurie's attitude as a womanizer is in part inspired by Byron: teasing her father Lucy calls him by the expression used by Lady Caroline Lamb to describe Byron: "Mad, bad, and dangerous to know" (D 77).[56] Lurie is working on the English poet, "reading all he can find on the wider Byron circle" (D 11), and he is particularly interested in Byron's *Letters* from 1820 concerning "the tragedy of the fleeting nature of passion."[57] Margot Beard observes that "Lurie's concern with passion, both his awareness of the waning possibilities of sexual passion or the more aesthetic 'literary passions' […], is a deeply Byronic concern."[58] The "mediated" nature of Lurie's desire is mirrored in and embodied by Byron's hero Don Juan, as Girard observes "[t]he real Don Juan is not autonomous; on the contrary, he is incapable of doing without others".[59]

Although Lurie allows himself to be led by the spirit of Eros when courting Melanie, this adhesion to a literary model is not wholly blinding. Lurie is lucid enough

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52 René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Ivonne Freccero, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965, p. 2.

53 Coetzee, "Interview [Popular Culture]", in *Doubling the Point*, p. 104.

54 J. M. Coetzee, "Triangular Structure of Desire in Advertising (1980)", in *Doubling the Point*, p. 130.

55 López, "Miguel de Cervantes and J.M. Coetzee", p. 90.

56 In her memoirs Lady Morgarn records the words Caroline Lamb used to describe her first impression of Byron. Sydney Owenson Morgan, *Lady. Lady Morgan's Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries, and Correspondence*, ed. W. Hepworth Dixon, London, William H. Allen & Co., 1863, Vol. 2, p. 200.

57 Margot Beard, "Lessons from the Dead Masters: Wordsworth and Byron in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*", *English in Africa*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (May, 2007), p. 63.

58 Ibid.

59 Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, p. 51.

to recognize that the physical impulse he felt while courting Melanie was not so overwhelming as to prevent him resisting it: "'As for the impulse, it was far from ungovernable. I have denied similar impulses many times in the past, I am ashamed to say'" (D 52). Despite his sense of shame, he regrets not having experienced ungovernable impulses. Lurie himself offers a literary frame to explain his interest in young women: "Half of literature is about it: young women struggling to escape from under the weight of old men" (D 190). But his fascination with women seems to be more complex than this observation suggests. Through the intertextual web of references through which Lurie considers his life, Coetzee produces a meta-literary representation of readership which offers the actual reader the opportunity to question Lurie's lucidity and the efficacy of his self-reflection; and not only to address that his desire is shaped by his readings, but to wonder whether lucidity of the kind displayed by Lurie has the capacity to re-shape it.

Lurie's highest moments of excitement are marked by references to his daughter. With regard to Soraya, the narrator informs us that "[t]echnically he is old enough to be her father" (D 1). This applies even more to Melanie, to whom he makes love "on the bed in his daughter's room" (D 29). Describing fatherhood to Lucy, Lurie tells her that "being a father is a rather abstract business" using the same adjective he uses to describe his sexuality and his intercourses with Soraya (D 63). More than directed towards his daughter, whose breast and hips Lurie twice describes as "ample" (D 59, 65), sexual tension is raised in Lurie by the memory of her body when she was young: "Without warning a memory of the girl comes back: of her neat little breasts with their upstanding nipples, of her smooth flat belly. A ripple of desire passes through him. Evidently whatever it was is not over yet" (D 65). Even if the identity of this girl is not clear, this fragment is embedded between thoughts about Lucy, while Melanie, who might be a more obvious reference, is not mentioned here. Borrowing the words that Lurie pronounces during his lecture on Wordsworth, his desire seems to answer to a "sense-image, […] the idea that lies buried more deeply in the soil of memory'" (D 22). Furthermore in talking to Lucy Lurie excludes the idea of marrying a woman of his own generation and quotes a verse from the *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* about forbidden desires: "'Do you remember Blake?' he says. 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires'?" (D 69), suggesting his own desires are still unfulfilled.

As a surrogate of his daughter, Melanie embodies the repression which produces Lurie's incestuous urge:

> She [Lucy] teases him as her mother used to tease him. Her wit, if anything, sharper. He has always been drawn to women of wit. Wit and beauty. With the best will in the world he could not find wit in Melanie. But plenty of beauty.
>
> Again it runs through him: a light shudder of voluptuousness. He is aware of Lucy observing him. He does not appear to be able to conceal it. Interesting (D 78).

His desire is structured by the semantic antithesis of the women's names: Lucy derives from the Latin word for 'light', Melanie from the Greek word for 'dark'.[60] The connection between them, both victims of men's violence, can also be seen in the bitter irony with which Lurie addresses the man who commissioned the rape of his daughter: "'Fatherly Petrus'" (D 162).

This incestuous tension seems to provoke hyper-excitement in Lurie when he is invited by Melanie's father for a dinner in his house when Melanie herself is absent. The event retrospectively provides Lurie with the concrete scenario for the incestuous phantasy he has lived out with Melanie. Moreover he is overtaken by a frenzy of desire when he meets Melanie's younger sister, arousing intense sensations which have left sediments in his memory:

> He remembers Melanie, on the first evening of their closer acquaintance, sitting beside him on the sofa drinking the coffee with the shot-glass of whisky in it that was intended to – the word comes up reluctantly – *lubricate* her. Her trim little body; her sexy clothes; her eyes gleaming with excitement. Stepping out in the forest where the wild wolf prowls (D 168).

Projected onto Melanie's and her sister's bodies, this incestuous longing is lodged in the mediation of desire at the hands of Western literature. Moreover, his incestuous desires strengthen Lurie's identification with Byron, who was forced to leave England because of his affair with his half-sister Augusta. Lurie is vague about the reasons that obliged the poet to leave and symptomatically omits any reference to incest – "He went to Italy to escape a scandal, and settled there" (D 15) – as if he were trying to hide from himself what lies behind his own desire.

Nonetheless Lurie cannot evade Byron's poem "Lara". The fragment he reads to his students anticipates his own disgrace, focusing on the effects of the imagination has on Count Lara, the protagonist of the poem: "A thing of dark imaginings, that shaped /

[60] For an analysis of the names of the characters see: Douthwaite, "Melanie: Voice and its suppression in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*".

By choice the perils he by chance escaped" (D 32). Just as Lara's dark fantasies have exposed him to danger, Byron's life and works affect Lurie's desire in ways that make him vulnerable. The continuation of the poem foreshadows the crime he commits against Melanie:

> He could
> At times resign his own for others' good,
> But not in pity, not because he ought,
> But in some strange perversity of thought,
> […]
> And this same impulse would in tempting time
> Mislead his spirit equally to crime (D 33).

The "perversity of thought" Byron evokes recalls Lurie's incestuous impulses. Commenting on the protagonist of the poem, Lurie points out that "the source of his impulses is dark to him" (D 33). In giving Lurie's observation on a poem which symbolises his own condition, Coetzee is exposing the limits of his protagonist's self-reflexivity. Lurie is unable, it seems, to see the incestuous pattern underlying his conduct: his reading of "Lara" fails to create a moment of recognition, but simply prefigures the consequences of his behaviour. In this regard, *Disgrace* resonates with the unknowability of desire addressed by Coetzee in an interview: "the heart of our desire is unknown to us and, perhaps even further, that it's in the nature of human desire not to know itself fully, to have some kind of kernel of the unknowable in it. That, perhaps, is what animates desire, namely that it is unknowable to itself."[61] While in his interviews and essays Coetzee emphasises the limits of the human understanding of desire, in *Disgrace* he specifically addresses the opacity of Lurie's own masculine impulses to himself. In the next section, I shall discuss how *Disgrace* shows Lurie's quest for an understanding of his own masculine sexuality through an exploration of his creative processes.

### (vi) *Byron in Italy*: self-consciousness and writing

Before losing his job as a professor Lurie feels a growing dissatisfaction with the rigid forms of academic writing: "What he wants to write is music: *Byron in Italy,* a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera" (D 4). Lurie needs a freer form than academic writing through which to explore love, and he opts for

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[61] J. M. Coetzee, "The Sympathetic Imagination: A Conversation with J. M. Coetzee", *Brick 67* (2001), p. 45. As quoted in Bill McDonald, "'Is it too late to educate the eye?' David Lurie, Richard of St. Victor, and 'visions as eros' in *Disgrace*", *Encountering 'Disgrace',* p. 76.

composing an opera. At its centre are Byron and Teresa Guiccioli, his married lover in Ravenna. Lurie combines words and music, and believes "that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul" (D 4). Lurie shares with Girard sense of the constitutive incompleteness of the subject, and his assumption of a human ontological lack,[62] which is also one of the main assumptions of post-structuralism.[63] Nevertheless, by emphasising the urge to fill human emptiness through singing and speech, Lurie seems to suggest that, besides developing a desire from a mediator, there is another way of temporarily filling this ontological lack: imposing a form on this lack through a creative act. This power Lurie now attributes to creative acts informs his composition of *Byron in Italy*, which emerges as a process through which to explore his experience of gender and sexual desire in terms of an ontological lack; but also to shape an understanding of his own masculinity.

But Lurie's academic critical publications remain crucial to an understanding of his cultural background. The narrator comments briefly on the three books Lurie has published: "the first on opera (*Boito and the Faust Legend: The Genesis of Mefistofele*), the second on vision as eros (*The Vision of Richard of St Victor*), the third on Wordsworth and history (*Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past*)" (D 4). Mentioned at the very beginning of the novel, they introduce themes which are developed in *Byron in Italy* suggesting that Lurie is not simply a passive vehicle of the mediated desire, but that these cultural influences are absorbed in the fabric of his creative process. I will return to the references to Boito and Richard and explore their implications in the next pages, but as a starting point, I would like to look at Lurie's work on Wordsworth which is the least extravagant of his critical responses.

In considering *Disgrace*, critics mainly set Wordsworth in opposition to Byron and describe them as "two antithetical Romantic poets."[64] On an initial level, Lurie's

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62 In "Triangular Structure of Desire in Advertising", Coetzee highlights that, according to Girard's theory of the mediated desire, "the subject becomes aware of itself as the locus of a lack, a desire" (131). This awareness is also expressed in Coetzee's 1977 novel *In the Heart of Country*, whose protagonist feels "[l]ike a great emptiness, an emptiness filled with a great absence, an absence which is desire to be fulfilled. Yet at the same time I know that nothing will fill me, because it is the first condition of life forever to desire, otherwise life would cease. It is a principle of life forever to be unfulfilled. Fulfilment does not fulfil" (London, Vintage, 2004, pp. 124-125).

63 Jacques Lacan's assumption that lack of being is the irreducible condition of subjectivity is at the basis of the investigation of masculinity carried out by Kaja Silverman (*Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, New York, Routledge, 1992, pp. 3-4).

64 Beard, "Lessons from the Dead Masters", p. 70. According to Hawkins, Lurie "cannot survive the parallel with Wordsworth," ("Reading Lurie's Remnant Romantic Temperament in *Disgrace*", p.

intellectual interest in his version of Wordsworth contrasts with his behaviour modelled on Byron and his seductions. The engagement with the field of desire represented by Byron's poetry would prevent Lurie from reaching the horizon of self-mastery and harmony which Wordsworth inspires. The metaphor of disgrace that links Lurie's exile to Byron's is opposed to the concept of grace "is essential in Wordsworth's thinking."[65] Lurie describes himself as a "disgraced disciple" of Wordsworth" (D 46). Although Coetzee plays with the conventional opposition between these poets, I would not dismiss the presence of Wordsworth in *Disgrace* as a mere counterpart to Byron. The crucial role in *Disgrace* of each one is shown in the light they shed on each other. As the narrator underlines, "[f]or as long as he [Lurie] can remember, the harmonies of *The Prelude* have echoed within him" (D 13). Moreover, describing the way poetry affects a reader's life, Lurie explains to Melanie that there is "'[a] flash of revelation and a flash of response'" (D 13). I would like to argue that Lurie's response to Wordsworth can be seen as an inflection of the influence that *The Prelude* has on *Byron in Italy*.

Taking into account *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, another of Coetzee's works which refers to Wordsworth, Pieter Vermeulen writes "that *The Prelude* is, among other things, a particularly strong instance of a literary work that double-times as the story of the genesis of its own poetical achievement".[66] In *Disgrace*, as Cooper observes, Lurie is "a figure within the diegesis of the writer/artist."[67] This representation of authorship also suggests an investigation of readership, and stresses the metafictional dimension of the novel, by which Lurie's life is an echo of *Byron in Italy*. This meta-literary structure induces the reader to look in Lurie's experience for traces that may explain the formation of his opera.

With a relationship between a young woman and an older man at its centre, *Byron in Italy* is rooted in Lurie's life. Conceived as a meditation on love, sex and the relationship between men and women, the opera reveals Lurie's intellectual investment

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156). For a general description of the relationship between Byron and Wordsworth outside Coetzee studies see: Jerome McGann, "Byron and Wordsworth", in *Byron and Romanticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 173-201.

65 Beard, "Lessons from the Dead Masters", p. 63. A similar remark is made by Easton who writes that "David Lurie calls himself a disciple of Wordsworth, but he is ironically more of a counterpart to the legendary Lord Byron […], […] his 'state of disgrace' […] epitomises what has been termed the 'Byronic'" (123).

66 Pieter Vermeulen, "Wordsworth and the Recollection of South Africa", in *J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*, eds. Elleke Boehmer, Robert Eaglestone and Katy Iddiols, London, Continuum, 2009, p. 50.

67 Cooper, "Metamorphosis and Sexuality", p. 24.

in the erotic. In Salem, experiencing isolation and seclusion, Lurie alludes to the poem "So, we'll go no more a roving" that Byron wrote inspired by the exhaustion of ageing, and prompted by the Carnival celebrations. Evoking this poem, which contemplates a pause from desire ("And the heart must pause to breathe, / And Love itself have rest"),[68] Lurie feels like giving up passion altogether: "The end of roving. […] Who would have thought it would come to an end so soon and so suddenly: the roving, the loving!" (D 120). This withdrawal from desire reverberates in *Byron in Italy*, which becomes "a chamber-play about love and death, with a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than passionate older man" (D 180). Including death as one of its main themes, the opera shows Lurie's increasing anxiety provoked by his ageing body.

The composition of *Byron in Italy* is a painful process; Lurie's efforts with the opera dominate the second part of the novel. This can be read as a further analogy with Wordsworth's work. As Timothy Clark notices, *The Prelude* "presents itself as growing out of what has become one of the famous instances of the writer block."[69] While Wordsworth's exposition of the writing block is aimed "to present the text as enacting the space of composition itself,"[70] in *Disgrace* Lurie's struggle displays his creative process as an interaction of different elements that cause the plot to change suddenly and new characters to pop out from the dark. Soon Lurie realises that the initial project "has failed to engage the core of him" and can no longer express his feelings (D 181). He starts writing a new version in which Byron is long dead, focusing on Teresa as a widow in her middle age, on her loneliness and her "claim to immortality" (D 181). The death of Byron gives Teresa the central role in the opera. Besides stressing Lurie's concerns with death and vanishing desire – "Will an older Teresa engage his heart as his heart is now?" (D 181) – this change suggests a parallel with another event in his life. Indeed, after being told by Bev that he cannot understand Lucy's trauma, Lurie starts feeling an increasingly anxious need to establish empathy with women: "The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?" (D 160). The question evokes the relation

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68 George Gordon Byron, "So, we'll go no more a roving", in *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, London, John Murray, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 1976, p. 534, vv. 6-7.

69 Timothy Clark, "The Fantasy Crowd I: 'Power' in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*", in *The Theory of Inspiration. Composition as a crisis of subjectivity in Romantic and post-Romantic writing*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 92.

70 Ibid.

between Flaubert and his own celebrated relation with his heroine Emma Bovary.[71] *Disgrace* casts doubt on what Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist of Coetzee's eponymous novel, calls sympathetic imagination, the capacity through which "we can think ourselves into the being of another."[72] Being sure he can comprehend Lucy, Lurie forgets the warning he has given to his students, according to which "there is a limit to sympathy" (D 33). He writes a letter to his daughter, but cannot establish any real contact with her. This frustrated urge to connect is diverted and channelled in his work.

But Lurie loses control of his work at this point. The composition of the opera is centred on Teresa and yet suddenly a new character spontaneously appears that he had not planned:

> Teresa leads; page after page he follows. Then one day there emerges from the dark another voice, one he has not heard before, has not counted on hearing. From the words he knows it belongs to Byron's daughter Allegra; […] *Why have you left me? Come and fetch me!* calls Allegra. *So hot, so hot, so hot!* she complains in a rhythm of her own that cuts insistently across the voices of the lovers.
>
> To the call of the inconvenient five-year-old there comes no answer. Unlovely, unloved, neglected by her famous father, she has been passed from hand to hand and finally given to the nuns to look after. *So hot, so hot!* she whines from the bed in the convent where she is dying of *la malaria*. *Why have you forgotten me?* (D 186).

The appearance of Byron's neglected daughter, Allegra, exposes Lurie's sense of guilt and his inability to cope with Lucy's trauma. Lurie's creative act gives voice to his suffocated emotions. In particular, Allegra's crying in *Byron in Italy* resonates with the request for help that Lurie hears from his daughter during a hallucination – "He has had a vision: Lucy has spoken to him; her words – 'Come to me, save me!'" (D 103). The presence of visionary experience emphasises the associative quality of the creative process. The selection of the banjo as an instrument for the music of *Byron in Italy* is connected to Lurie's experience as a witness to the violence his daughter has suffered. After her rape, Lurie suddenly remembers the country song *Seven Old Ladies Locked in the Lavatory*. Recalling the lyric of the song, he feels mortified for allowing her aggressors to lock him in the lavatory while they abuse her. The evocation of this song which is performed on a banjo seems to be at the heart of his unconscious decision to

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71 In addition to the statement "Madame Bovary c'est moi", Flaubert's letters also focus on the question of literary impersonation. Flaubert felt he could impersonate not only the other sex, but also any other living being (*The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830-1857*, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller, London and Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1980, p. 203).

72 J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, London, Vintage, 2004, p. 80.

use this instrument to engage with "his disgrace" (D 109). This musical medium is crucial to the development of his opera:

> [H]e marvels at what the little banjo is teaching him. […] It is not the erotic that is calling to him after all, nor the elegiac, but the comic. He is in the opera neither as Teresa nor as Byron nor even as some blending of the two: he is held in the music itself, in the flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings, the voice that strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back, like a fish on a line.
>
> So this is art, he thinks, and this is how it does its work! How strange! How fascinating! (D 184-5).

Lurie learns the real tone of *Byron in Italy* from this musical instrument, and that it truly belongs to the comic genre. The passage from the elegiac to the comic marks the entrance of the opera into the universe of *Don Quixote*, which was born as a parody of the chivalric romances. In both *Don Quixote* and *Disgrace*, metafictional discourse gives rise to parody. The parodic dimension of *Disgrace* finds an intertext in Lurie's critical work, *Boito and the Faust Legend: The Genesis of Mefistofele*. The allusion to Arrigo Boito (1842-1918), whose *Mefistofele* "makes fun of the bombast of a grand opera in the middle of a grand opera,"[73] anticipates the (self-)mocking outcome of Lurie's creative work inspired by Byron, which itself mirrors the parodic nature of Byron's own *Don Juan*.

Let me refer to Charles Donelan's reading of *Don Juan*. He argues that "in his cultural inversion of the Spanish myth Byron invests the hero with the feminine attributes of a passive sentimentalist".[74] In Byron's poem Juan is being seduced rather seducing, and the most compelling figures are female characters. Donelan underlines the pervasive irony of the poem which opens with the invocation of a hero, Don Juan, who turns out to be "little more than an excuse for the narrator to produce an international gallery of intriguing women."[75] While Byron's *Don Juan* gives life to a "satire of masculinity",[76] what is mocked in *Byron in Italy* is Lurie's ambition to achieve self-knowledge and to understand the feminine. Its irony is expressed in the

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73 Patricia Casey Sutcliffe, "Saying it Right in *Disgrace*: David Lurie, *Faust*, and the Romantic Conception of Language", in *Encountering 'Disgrace'*, p. 174.

74 Charles Donelan, *Romanticism and Male Fantasy in Byron's 'Don Juan'. A Marketable Vice*, New York, MacMillan Press, 2000, p. 18. In her study of Byron's *Don Juan*, Moyra Haslett underlines that while contemporary critics see Byron's Don Juan as naïve, vulnerable to women' seductions, and subverting the traditional version of the myth, Byron's work was received by his contemporaries as a continuation of the Don Juan legend ("Byron's Don Juan", in *Byron's 'Don Juan' and the Don Juan legend*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 75-132).

75 Donelan, *Romanticism and Male Fantasy in Byron's 'Don Juan'*, p. 173.

76 Ibid.

onomatopoeic representation of the sound of the banjo that intersperses the dialogue between Byron and Teresa:

> *Out of the poets I learned to love*, chants Byron in his cracked monotone, nine syllables on C natural; *but life, I found* (descending chromatically to F), *is another story*. *Plink-plunk-plonk* go the strings of the banjo. *Why, O why do you speak like that?* sings Teresa in a long reproachful arc. *Plunk-plink-plonk* go the strings (D 185).

The words of Lurie's Byron are taken from Madame de Staël's *Corinne, ou L'Italie*. Iris Origo tells us that the actual Byron sent the novel to Teresa with some passages marked, including this one.[77] In his parody of the Romantic aesthetic, Lurie's Byron summarises the life of his author: Lurie has shaped his notion of love according to his favourite poet, but then he has had to face contemporary South African society. The parodic effect created by the contraposition of solemn words and the banjo evokes Cervantes's aesthetic, which was praised by Byron himself in *Don Juan*: "Cervantes smiled Spain's Chivalry away".[78]

In the final section, I want to investigate further Lurie's attempt to find self-consciousness through writing *Byron in Italy* by introducing the notion of dialogism.

### (vii) *Byron in Italy:* the creative impulse and dialogism

Lurie has many hallucinations which turn the reader's mind to his critical work *The Vision of Richard of St Victor*. The reference to the ascetic Scottish mystic, who died in 1173, may sound surprising in view of Lurie's rakish life. But eroticism is central to Richard's writing. Bill McDonald comments that "the fundamental feature of Richard's inquiry into contemplation" lies in "the reservoirs of erotic metaphors and allegories that charge and enliven his work."[79] McDonald reads *Disgrace* in the light of Richard's conception of shame as a feeling which derives from the awareness of one's own sin which leads the sinner to virtue. According to this view, in giving voice to the interplay between love and the visionary, *Byron in Italy* would lead Lurie to a more comprehensive vision of love, respectful of his objects of desire. Although I differ from

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77 Iris Origo, *The Last Attachment*, London, Jonathan Cape & John Murray, 1949, p. 113.

78 George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto XIII, st. 11, v. 81, eds. T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan, W. W. Pratt, London, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 445. Although discussing the nature of Byron's engagement with Cervantes is beyond the scope of my project, I would like to underline its complexity by quoting Donelan again: "[g]iven the extraordinary claims made for the social impact of *Don Quixote* in *Don Juan*, it is difficult to say whether Byron courted or avoided the effect he claimed for Cervantes" (19).

79 McDonald, "David Lurie, Richard of St. Victor, and 'visions as eros' in *Disgrace*", p. 70.

McDonald when he argues in favour of the ethical value of *Byron in Italy*, his analysis nonetheless offers a way into the mystical dimension of desire in *Disgrace*.

The appearance of the visionary precedes the composition of *Byron in Italy*. Talking with Lucy about the reason why he had to leave his job, Lurie has a vision: "He sees himself in the girl's flat, in her bedroom, with the rain pouring down outside and the heater in the corner giving off a smell of paraffin, kneeling over her, peeling off her clothes, while her arms flop like the arms of a dead person" (D 89). The mention of the flat suggests that the young woman whom Lurie dreams of is Melanie. This vision links sexual desire to death. Lurie also makes allusion to Origen: "At what age, he wonders, did Origen castrate himself?" (D 9). In view of his lack of any religious faith, it seems that these references to theology represent a frame through which to display Lurie's search for a form of transcendence. Gillian Dooley comments that "[i]n general, Coetzee's young male characters, then, tend not to be ruled by sexual desire, even though they might wish to be."[80] Lurie's own sexual urge is intensified by ageing. Even though his longing is not as intense as he wishes, or perhaps because of that, Lurie anxiously looks to transcend desire or to conferring a mystical dimension on it.

As the composition of *Byron in Italy* advances, instead of producing an understanding of his daughter's pain, Lurie's creative act expresses his own sexual concerns:

> *My love*, sings Teresa, swelling out the fat English monosyllable she learned in the poet's bed. *Plink*, echo the strings. A woman in love, wallowing in love; a cat on a roof, howling; complex proteins swirling in the blood, distending the sexual organs, making the palms sweat and voice thicken as the soul hurls its longings to the skies. That is what Soraya and the others were for: to suck the complex proteins out of his blood like snake-venom, leaving him clear-headed and dry. Teresa in her father's house in Ravenna, to her misfortune, has no one to suck the venom from her. *Come to me, mio Byron*, she cries: *come to me, love me!* And Byron, exiled from life, pale as a ghost, echoes her derisively: *Leave me, leave me, leave me be!* (D 185).[81]

Focusing on the relationship between Teresa's singing and her sexual desire, Lurie compares her to a cat in love and emphasises the biological aspect of sexual arousal. He suggests that the source of her lyrical impulse lies in her unsatisfied desire, which

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[80] Dooley, *J. M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative*, p. 139.

[81] The dialogues between Teresa and the dead Byron in *Byron in Italy* might ironically refer to the séances that Teresa holds trying to recall the spirit of Byron. An account of these séances, along with an analysis of her idealising work dedicated to Byron, is offered by James Soderholm, "Unwriting His Body: Teresa Guiccioli's Transubstantiation of Byron", in *Fantasy, Forgery, and the Byron Legend*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1996, pp. 103-130.

configures the lyrical impulse as a biological one which can only be temporarily satisfied. Far from establishing any empathy with the other sex, Teresa's singing addresses the opacity of Lurie's masculine desire and the sense of alienation he experiences in relation to his own sexual urges. *Byron in Italy* recalls the notion of writing as a whole expressed by Coetzee:

> Writing is not free expression. There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer's seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those countervoices in himself […].[82]

Describing the act of writing, Coetzee's remarks are reminiscent of Bakhtin's notion of "dialogism" which is at the root of the novel's power to absorb the inherent duplicity of language, and which is also at the heart of Kristeva's concept of intertextuality. My analysis of intertextual dimensions has offered me a perspective through which to address the self-reflexivity of Lurie's readings. Similarly, looking at *Byron in Italy*, I shall use the notion of dialogism to explore how, through writing, Lurie engages with the feeling of estrangement he experiences in sex.

In composing his opera Lurie allows for the appearance of Allegra's voice, and wonders "but from where inside him does it come?" (D 186). *Byron in Italy* evokes something unknown inside him. Let me recall Michael Holquist who, commenting on Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, observes: "[i]n dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness. […] [I]n dialogism consciousness is otherness."[83] The understanding of Lurie's sexual desire that *Byron in Italy* shapes lies in this dialogic dimension. The interplay of Teresa's and Byron's voices becomes the irradiating core of the opera: "That is how it must be from here on: Teresa giving voice to her lover, and he, the man in the ransacked house, giving voice to Teresa" (D 183). Speaking out one for the other, the lovers enact their respective desires. Making this dynamic into a compositional principle, the self-consciousness Lurie tries to achieve is presented as an awareness of the otherness within himself. The space of composition enacted by his opera develops as a space into which Lurie is able to project himself. He believes that "his own ghostly place in *Byron in Italy* would be somewhere between Teresa's and Byron's: between a yearning to prolong the summer of the passionate body

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[82] Coetzee, "Interview [The Poetics of Reciprocity]", p. 65.

[83] Michael Holquist, *Dialogism. Bakhtin and his World*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 17.

and a reluctant recall from the long sleep of oblivion" (D 184). Lurie does not search for a synthesis of his own opposing impulses, expressed in the voices of Byron and Teresa, on the contrary he displays his subjectivity and its maleness as the tension generated between them. Thus *Byron in Italy* follows the same tracks of *The Prelude*, described by Clark as "an exercise in self-definition".[84] Rather than creating an illusory stable self, in articulating Lurie's erotic enquiry *Byron in Italy* develops a form of awareness of the otherness that he experiences in sex.

The dialogical dimension of *Disgrace* is developed through the intertextual absorption of other texts besides the ones I have discussed. In addition to incorporating the fragment from de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy*, into his opera, Lurie considers borrowing words from other works: "*Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt*: those will be Byron's words, he is sure of it" (D 162). These Latin words from Virgil's *Aeneid*, which David West translates as "there are tears for suffering and men's hearts are touched by what man has to bear",[85] are uttered by Aeneas when he sees a mural depicting the Trojan war and the death of his countrymen. Later, Lurie imagines Teresa reciting verses from Giacomo Leopardi's "Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd of Asia": "'*Che vuol dir*,' she sings, her voice barely above a whisper – *'Che vuol dir questa solitudine immensa? Ed io,'* she sings – *'che sono?'*" (D 213). Teresa echoes the shepherd who, overwhelmed by solitude, enquires desperately about the meaning of his life: "Whatever is the meaning / Of this great solitude? And what am I?"[86] Through the incorporation of fragments from these further works, Lurie uses the despair of Aeneas and the shepherd to give form to his own estrangement, evoking the countervoices within him. Kristeva understands dialogism as an interplay between the acts of reading and writing:

> Bakhtin […] does not see dialogue only as language assumed by a subject; he sees it, rather, as a *writing* where one reads the *other* (with no allusion to Freud). Bakhtinian dialogism identifies writing as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality. Confronted with this dialogism, the notion of a "person-subject of writing" becomes blurred, yielding to that of "ambivalence of writing."[87]

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84 Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, p. 92.

85 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. David West, London, Penguin Books, 2003, p. 16, v. 462.

86 Giacomo Leopardi, "Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd of Asia", in *Canti*, trans. J. G. Nicholas, Richmond, Oneworld Classics, 2008, p. 155, vv. 88-9.

87 Kristeva, "World, Dialogue, and Novel", p. 66.

The composition of *Byron in Italy* configures reading as a process of assimilation. By writing, Lurie subsumes the texts he reads in his life and work. By incorporating other texts, on the one hand Lurie gives form to his characters' (counter)voices, getting closer to an understanding of his emotions; on the other, as his engagement with *Madame Bovary* suggests, once verbally articulated, emotions seem not to belong to us any longer. Like Kristeva, Coetzee argues that "textualization brings the elusiveness into the being."[88] As a metaliterary device, *Byron in Italy* shows Lurie's oscillation between the urge to place himself in relation to other texts (intersubjectivity), and his attempt to find self-consciousness in the dialogical interplay of countervoices within himself (intrasubjectivity). The Quixotic interplay between lived experience and texts becomes in *Byron in Italy* an enduring osmotic movement, which characterises the way the masculine subject "reads" the feminine/other and the outside world, and the inner dynamics of male subjectivity itself.

At the conclusion of *Disgrace* Lurie realises his project will never see the light: "the truth is that *Byron in Italy* is going nowhere. […] The lyric impulse in him may not be dead, but after decades of starvation it can crawl forth from its cave only pinched, stunted, deformed" (D 214). Like his magnetism he once exercised on women, his lyrical impulse has decayed. His voice is disembodied like "his" Byron's. Sexual desire and lyrical impulse are both constrained to the materiality of his ageing body. Still far from the conclusion of his opera, he wishes he had composed at least "a single authentic note of immortal longing" (D 214). Lurie's anxiety links his desire to its expression in art. In giving a sexual connotation to lyricism, the very words "lyrical impulse" outline the fundamental role that form plays in the definition of masculinity. Envisaging man as a desiring subject, Lurie's opera reveals the continuity between creative acts and heterosexual desire, and the desire to shape his masculinity by imposing a form on the human ontological lack explored by Girard and others. In the next chapters I shall explore further the textual approaches through which Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa show characters seeking to understand their masculinity through creative practice.

[88] J. M. Coetzee, "Interview [Kafka]", in *Doubling the Point*, p. 204.

## Chapter Two

## The Limits of Masculine Introspection: Intertextual Desires and the Urge for Form in Kundera and Roth

*...our lives and reading led us towards*
*a hybrid aesthetic, something impure*
Robert Glück

In this chapter I investigate the role of literary mediation in the formation of young male subjectivities. In the first part, I explore the gendered implications of the estrangement from the body through the creative practices of the protagonist of Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*, Jaromil. I examine how Jaromil's self-consciousness in relation to body creates obstacles to his masculine desire. By investigating how this estrangement reverberates in Jaromil's poetry, I propose the notion of form developed by the Polish writer Gombrowicz as a frame through which to examine the interconnectedness of creative practices and masculinity. In the second part, I focus on the way in which these dynamics characterise the intertextual desires of Kepesh, the protagonist of Roth's *The Professor of Desire*. Finally, I enquire into the limits of Kepesh's self-reflectivity and that of these other male characters in reading the 'Other' and themselves.

### 1. *Life is Elsewhere*

#### (i) Gendered inflections of estrangement from the body

*Life is Elsewhere* focuses on the life of the poet Jaromil from his conception until his death.[1] Like Coetzee's *Disgrace*, *Life is Elsewhere* displays a feeling of alienation from the body. While *Disgrace* enquires into this estrangement exclusively within Lurie's masculine experience, in *Life is Elsewhere* this feeling is described in its different gendered implications through the lives of Jaromil and his mother, Mama.

Mama's first name is never mentioned, which is the case for all the other characters in the novel except for Jaromil, his alter-ego Xavier, and the maid Magda. For Mama, the alienation from her own body is rooted in her childhood. Since childhood she has always been "conscious of her unobtrusiveness" (LE 7). Mama

[1] Originally written in Czech, *Life is Elsewhere* was first published in France in 1973. My analysis is based on the French version of the novel, which Kundera has personally revised and considers "equal in authenticity to the Czech text" (*Life is Elsewhere*, London, Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 263). The quotations included here are from the latest English edition of the novel, which has been translated from this revised French version by Aaron Asher in collaboration with Kundera. A previous English edition of *Life is Elsewhere* translated from the Czech by Peter Kussi was published in 1986.

evades this dissatisfying reality and, as a form of resistance, she learns to love the emotional gravity of books. In taking refuge in the hypertrophic emotions narrated in novels Mama is reminiscent of Emma Bovary. This parallel grows stronger as Mama feels she cannot experience "the great shared love she believed she had a full right to" (LE 4).

Kundera presents Mama's body as the grammatical subject of her actions, emphasising the hiatus between subject and body. Her body is presented as something lying within and beyond her identity at the same time. This rhetorical device is pervasive and hints at the dichotomy body/soul – "the soul very quickly […] rushed to the body's aid" (LE 10), as in this fragment focusing on Mama and the engineer, the future father of Jaromil:

> And because this time the body was greatly (and to its great surprise) satisfied […]: it gladly agreed with the engineer's ideas […], she wanted to identify herself with the engineer's qualities, because in contact with them her sadly modest body ceased to doubt and, to its own astonishment, began to enjoy itself (LE 10).

Feeling amorphous and devoid of any quality of her own, Mama models herself on the engineer's features. As a result her corporality is no longer a foreign shield for her and she can enjoy her body: "She handed her body over to the mercy of another's eyes […] her body finally lived as a body" (LE 7). As in *Disgrace, Life is Elsewhere* casts desire in a Hegelian dynamic in which Mama can experience her identity only through her lover's gaze.[2]

Kundera also investigates this process outside the relationship between lovers. Even though Mama's hopes for her marriage are to be frustrated (like Emma Bovary's), she finds in her pregnancy a more fulfilling experience than romantic love. Mama, who has always felt ashamed of her nakedness and has been afraid of letting her body go entirely even while making love, finds a new harmony with her body:

> Mama's body […] entered a new phase of its history: ceasing to be a body for the eyes of others, it became a body for someone who could not yet see. Its outer surface was no longer so important; the body was touching another body by means of an internal membrane no one had ever seen. […] [T]he body had finally attained total independence and autonomy […] (LE 8).

[2] Commenting on Mama's sexual life, John O'Brien observes that a woman's sexual opportunities, freedom and self-definition are "necessarily associated with her being a man's sexual object" (*Milan Kundera & Feminism. Dangerous Intersections*, London, MacMillan, 1995, p. 60).

Through her pregnancy, Mama senses a complete self-sufficiency. She emancipates herself from the dynamics of desire in which she struggled for recognition. After the delivery, Mama experiences the sensations associated with the intimacy of a lover in the physical relation with her baby, who fulfils her needs with a tenderness she has never felt before: "When she first felt the groping mouth of her son sucking at her breast, a sweet shiver radiated from her chest through her entire body; it was similar to her lover's caress, but it had something more: a great peaceful bliss, a great happy tranquillity" (LE 8). Breast-feeding is the climax of their relation: Mama imagines that, "along with her milk, her son was drinking her thoughts, her fantasies, and her dreams" (LE 9). This description of the bond between mother and son seems to translate into narrative Melanie Klein's understanding of epistemophilic impulse, which concerns the child's desire to know by appropriating the contents of the mother's body.[3] *Life is Elsewhere* suggests that this transmission of knowledge is mutual. Thanks to her son's physicality, Mama finally overcomes the repugnance for her own body that made her consider even empting her bowels as degrading. She reaches what Kundera describes as "an *Edenic* state", a new awareness in which her body is freed from mortifying superstructures (LE 9). *Life is Elsewhere* intensifies the patriarchal logic which defines motherhood as the most essential experience for a woman in order to stress the influence of the bond between mother and baby on the life of a poet. By relating Mama's life, Kundera introduces a set of themes involving the estrangement from the body and the influence of literature in shaping heterosexual desire, which are then explored from the masculine narrative perspective of Jaromil.

Mama's fantasy that Jaromil was not conceived with her husband, but had a divine father, the god of music and poetry Apollo, prefigures Jaromil's sense of himself in the future as a poet. The account of Jaromil's childhood gives prominence to his artistic attitude: Mama shows Jaromil's drawings representing human bodies with dog heads to a painter, who gets interested in the inner world Jaromil's drawings display and accepts him as one of his students. Jaromil shows the painter his secret sketchbook. After the initial pages featuring female nudes based on the photographs of statues Jaromil has seen in his grandfather's illustrated books, the painter notices something more significant:

[3] Melanie Klein, *Contributions to Psycho-analysis, 1921-1945*, London, Hogarth Press, 1948, p. 204.

> [A] drawing of a headless woman; better still: the paper had been slit at the level of her neck, so that it looked as if the woman's head had been chopped off and that the paper still bore the mark of an imaginary axe. The slit in the paper had been made by Jaromil's pocketknife; there was a girl in his class he liked very much, and he often gazed at her, wishing to see her naked. To fulfil this wish he obtained a photograph of her and cut the head out; he inserted it into the slit.
>
> That is why all the women in the following drawings were also decapitated and bore the same mark of an imaginary axe; some of them were in very strange positions – for example, in a squatting posture depicting urination; at a flaming stake, like Joan of Arc; that execution scene, which I could explain (and perhaps excuse) as a historical reference, inaugurated a long series: sketches of a headless woman impaled on a sharpened pole, a headless woman with a leg cut off, a woman with an amputated arm, and other situations it is better to be silent about (LE 29-30).

Jaromil's sexual curiosity about the scatological functions of the female body is shaped by scenarios of violence. John O'Brien describes Jaromil's sketchbook as "a subtext that directly critiques the representation of women by men": this foregrounding misrepresentation of women "exposes rather than affirms the misrepresentations presented (in this case, by Jaromil)".[4] Jaromil's female nudes seem to respond unconsciously to the model of male violence towards women which *Disgrace* also addresses. This intersection between visual representation and violence towards women prefigures the conflictual relationship with the materiality of the female body that Jaromil displays in his poetic practices, driven by his sense of self-estrangement as I shall discuss in the next pages.

Despite his training as a painter, drawing later no longer conveys Jaromil's increasing desire. Staring with longing at the maid Magda, Jaromil finds in the poems of the French Surrealist poet Paul Éluard a more fitting way to conceive of her:

> He again leafed through the book the painter had lent him, reading and endlessly rereading Éluard's poems and falling under the spell of certain lines: "She has in the tranquillity of her body / A small snowball the color of an eye"; […] and: "Good morning, sadness / You're inscribed on the eyes I love." Éluard had become the poet of Magda's calm body and of her eyes bathed by a sea of tears; her entire life seemed to him to be contained in a single line: "Sadness-beautiful face." Yes, that was Magda: sadness-beautiful face (LE 45-6).

The passage from the visual to the textual marks Jaromil's artistic career. In reading Magda's body through the verses from "L'Unique" ["The Only One"] and "À peine défigurée" ["Barely Disfigured"], Jaromil feels he can understand the essence of her

[4] O'Brien, *Milan Kundera & Feminism,* pp. 90-91. While O'Brien offers a feminist reading of Kundera's mis/representations of women, I go on to examine the ways in which literary practices affect the formation of masculinity and its performances in Kundera's narrative.

life.[5] He becomes obsessed with Magda and he spies on her in the bathtub through the keyhole. He is tempted to enter the bathroom and see her completely naked, and to pretend he did not know she was there, but he cannot find the courage. Jaromil becomes aware of his timidity and is revolted by it. In search of relief he opens his book of poems but cannot concentrate:

> Jaromil was overcome by a languorous desire and closed the book. He picked up a piece of paper and a pencil and began to write – in the manner of Éluard, Nezval, Biebl, and Desnos – short lines, one under the other, without rhythm or rhyme. It was a variation on what he had read, but the variation contained what he had just experienced: there was the "sadness" that "begins to melt and turns into water," there was the "green water" whose surface "rises and rises until it reaches my eyes," there was the body, "the sad body," the body in the water "that I pursue, I pursue through endless water." He read these lines aloud several times in a melodious, pathetic voice, and he was enthusiastic. At the core of the poem was Magda in the bathtub and he with his face pressed against the door […] (LE 49).

The eroticised context from which Jaromil's poems emerge recalls the "lyrical impulse" which inspires Lurie in the composition of *Byron in Italy*. But Jaromil's perception of Magda's corporality is not entirely mediated by his readings, even though it is expressed by reference to Éluard's free verse. Reading the poems through his own experience, his compositions display his urge to play a more active role in the articulation of his sensations and his desire to be the poet of Magda's body, and interrupting his feeling of self-estrangement. Jaromil's process of self-affirmation depends on his ability to master the representation of her body. Even if his attitude is not as violent as the cultural landscape he depicted in his childhood drawing, the female emerges from his poems as an object to be shaped by masculine fantasy.

In rehearsing the role that form plays in shaping sexual desire, *Life is Elsewhere* explores the way the texts inspired by Jaromil's desire affect then his experience: "he was no longer subordinate to his experience, his experience was subordinate to what he had written" (LE 49). The episode concerning Magda's body is decisive because when Jaromil typewrites his poem, he realises that written words acquire durability and autonomy while spoken words perish as soon as they are uttered:

> What Jaromil had experienced the day before was expressed in the poem, but at the same time the experience slowly died there […]; the poem he had written was absolutely autonomous, independent, and incomprehensible as reality itself, which

[5] Paul Éluard, "L'Unique", in "*Répétition* (1922)", in *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Marcelle Dumas, Lucien Scheller, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p. 110); "À Peine défigurée", in "*La vie immédiate* (1932)", in *Œuvres Complètes*, pp. 365-366.

> is no one's ally and content simply to be; the poem's autonomy provided Jaromil a splendid refuge, the ideal possibility of a second life […] (LE 50).

The union between experience and verses lasts merely for the moment of the poetic composition. When the contingent situation which has inspired them expires, the verses are no longer subordinated to the experience which prompted them: they become verbal sediments which can evoke new meanings. For Jaromil this creates the possibility of imagining a life beyond his actual existence. The turn to poetry strengthens the bond Jaromil has with his mother; indeed Mama tells him that only her marriage prevented her from devoting herself entirely to literature.[6] By becoming a poet, Jaromil realises one of the dreams Mama hoped to transmit to him through breast-feeding: his desire to "open his imagination to undreamed-of horizons" addresses the imaginary of romance-like and fulfilling fantasies dreamt of by Emma Bovary and for which his mother also longed (LE 83). While Mama's deferral of her literary vein results from her position within a marriage, her son can display his creativity thanks to his privileged position as a young male. In the next section, I shall address the way in which Jaromil articulates through his poems the self-estrangement Mama has lived in an entirely private (bodily) dimension, specifically in her sexuality and pregnancy. From there I go on to study how, drawing on Jaromil's lyrical compositions, Kundera examines the elements involved in the search for masculinity.

**(ii) Masculine anxiety and the denial of the female body in poetry**

Kundera regards *Life is Elsewhere* as a phenomenological description of what he thinks of as the lyrical attitude.[7] The negative approach to poetry that *Life is Elsewhere* conveys has often been seen in relation to Kundera's stated abandonment of lyricism.

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[6] Mama's abandonment of literature strengthens further the comparison with Emma Bovary. Observing how Emma is excluded from literature because of her sex, Naomi Schor describes her as the portrait of "the *artist as a young woman*" and underlines that "what she lacks for writing is neither words nor pen but the phallus" ("Pour une thématique restreinte: Écriture, parole et différence dans *Madame Bovary*", *Littérature*, No. 22 (May 1976), pp. 38-39).

[7] I refer here to Kundera's interview with Normand Biron ("Entretien avec Milan Kundera", *Liberté*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1979, pp. 17-33). This understanding of the novel is substantially shared by critics. Kvetoslav Chvatik describes *Life is Elsewhere* "a systematic 'anti-bildungsroman'" in the light of its analysis of poetic creation, the role of narcissism in the lyrical attitude and its negative consequences (*Le Monde romanesque de Milan Kundera*, trans. from German by Bernard Lortholary, Paris, Gallimard, 1995, p. 98). Similarly, Maria Němcová Banerjee argues that in *Life is Elsewhere*, "Kundera is taking off from […] the Bildungsroman" and the story of Jaromil's success as a poet is "counter-pointed by a dubious quest for sexual manhood" ("A Review of *Life is Elsewhere* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*", in *Critical Essays on Milan Kundera*, ed. Peter Petro, New York, G. K. Hall & Co., 1999, p. 16).

Kundera denies that the novel is inspired by his own biographical experience. Nonetheless, *Life is Elsewhere* is symptomatic of his understanding of the novel genre as a means of investigation and of poetry not simply as a literary genre, but as a worldview.[8] *Life is Elsewhere* is significant in Kundera's novelistic output because it marks the adoption of one of the most distinctive features of his fiction – the "authorial narrator": the narrator as a standpoint through which to articulate an inquiry.[9] Kundera explains, "it is me who is telling my novels, not a 'narrator', that anonymous ghost from literary theory. It is me with my whims, my moods, my jokes, and (exceptionally) even my memories".[10] In claiming that the notion of the narrator as distinct from the real author is an abstraction produced by literary theory, Kundera places himself at the centre of the narration and hints at his fallibility, or rather his impulsiveness and unreliability.

Regarding *Life is Elsewhere* Kundera clarifies: "I don't show you what happens inside Jaromil's head; rather, I show what happens inside my own: I observe my Jaromil for a long while, and I try, step by step, to get to the heart of his attitude, in order to understand it, name it, grasp it."[11] Although Kundera's understanding of the narrator may not be valid for other authors, his claim for the speculation conveyed by *Life is Elsewhere* cannot be ignored. Furthermore, in my analysis I rely on another aspect of Kundera's theory of the novel: his understanding of the character as an "experimental self" through which to explore existential themes novelistically. [12] Reminiscent of Musil who looks at the novel as a laboratory to examine experience, Kundera uses Jaromil's life as a tool to investigate the lyrical attitude.

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8 Biron, "Entretien avec Milan Kundera", p. 17,

9 Chvatik describes Kundera's notion of the authorial narrator (55). The question of whether the narrator should or should not be distinguished from the real author is also discussed by Liisa Steinby (*Kundera and Modernity*, West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2013, p. 48). Bertrand Vibert focuses on the authorial narrator by considering Kundera's essayistic novel ("Milan Kundera. La fiction pensive", *Temps modernes*, 629, 2004-2005, pp. 109-133). Velichka Ivanova compares Kundera's adoption of an authorial narrator in his novels (including *Life is Elsewhere*) to Roth's use of a fictional novelist as an intradiegetic narrator (*Fiction, utopie, histoire. Essai sur Philip Roth et Milan Kundera*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2010, pp. 205-211).

10 My translation. The original French reads: "c'est moi qui raconte mes romans, et non pas un « narrateur », ce fantôme anonyme de la théorie littéraire ; c'est moi avec mes caprices, mes humeurs, mes blagues, et même (exceptionellement) mes souvenirs." Milan Kundera, *Dix-Neuf/Vingt*, No. 1, 1996, p. 148. As quoted in Bertrand Vibert, "Milan Kundera. La fiction pensive", p. 111.

11 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher, London, Faber and Faber, 1988, pp. 30-31.

12 Ibid., pp. 31-34.

In this novel, Kundera's analysis of the lyrical attitude is based on the proposition that a poet is raised in a female environment from which he desperately tries to turn away in search for his masculinity:

> Poets come from homes where women rule: the sister of Trakl and those of Yesenin and Mayakovsky, the aunts of Blok, the grandmother of Hölderlin and that of Lermontov, the nurse of Pushkin, and above all of course, the mothers, the poets' mothers, behind whom the fathers' shadows pale. Lady Wilde and Frau Rilke dressed their sons like little girls. Are you wondering why the child looked so anxiously at himself in the mirror? "It is time to become a man," Jiri Orten wrote in his diary. During his entire life the poet searches for masculinity in the features of his face (LE 82).

The narration of Jaromil's life is juxtaposed with references to similar episodes from actual male poets' lives and quotations from their poems or diaries; but no reference to any female poet which could support or disprove his proposition is made. This juxtaposition generates an interplay between the lives of these poets and Jaromil's fictional experience. In this way, Kundera seems to provide an anthropological portrait of the figure of the poet,[13] based on his study of their biographies and works.[14] By analysing the cultural references and the ideal of poetry through which Jaromil is shaping his masculinity, Kundera investigates whether or not the proposition is disproved. As I shall argue, the apparent "anthropological" depth offered by Kundera's authorial narrator seems only to provide an increasing sense of uncertainty about Jaromil's masculinity.

Concerned with the "childish femininity" of his face, Jaromil stares at his image reflected in the mirror and searches for a mark of masculinity (LE 83). He perceives his body as an external entity in a manner reminiscent of Mama, but unlike her he believes it holds the secrets of his future. Fearing that the insignificance of his face may reveal the insignificance of his life, Jaromil hopes that the receding chin he has in common with the Austrian poet Rilke may be a sign of predestination. The anxiety that pervades Jaromil's search for his masculinity is reminiscent of the disquiet Lurie feels the first signs of ageing in *Disgrace*. The recurrence of this feeling in different stages of these

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[13] Steinby emphasises Kundera's search for "anthropological understanding of the essence of humankind" (54).

[14] Robert Porter highlights the depth of the study driving *Life is Elsewhere*: "Clearly *Life is Elsewhere* stems from a study of the lives of many poets, Czech and otherwise. Lermontov provided much material, as did indeed the inter-war proletarian poets, Orten and Wolker. The greatest single inspiration for the novel was Wolker's mother's memoirs. Moreover, all the major events in Jaromil's life find a factual basis in the lives of the great poets" (*Milan Kundera: A Voice from Central Europe*, Aarhus, Arkona Press, 1981, p. 58).

men's lives reinforces the sense that anxiety permeates the search of a masculine identity. As in Lurie's case, the anxiety about his body induces Jaromil to assert his masculinity through his relationship with the other sex. The stress on the ambiguous nature of Jaromil's enterprise alerts readers to its alarming implications and prospects. His rare dates leave him with a feeling of failure. During one of them, Jaromil becomes aroused when a girl puts her head on his shoulder. Even if Jaromil is not indifferent to her body, he "didn't long for the nakedness of a girl's body; he longed for a girl's face lighted by the nakedness of her body" (LE 93). Kundera suggests that Jaromil is attracted by the face of a woman but cannot conceive of the body's covered parts:

> That body was beyond the limits of his experience, and precisely for this reason he devoted countless poems to it. How many times did the female genitals figure in his poems of that time? But through a miraculous effect of poetic magic (the magic of inexperience), Jaromil made of these copulatory and reproductive organs a chimerical object and a theme of playful dreams.
>
> […] in one poem he wrote about […] her groin as the "home of invisible creatures." […]
>
> It was so beautiful to wander over a female body, an unknown, unseen, unreal body, a body with no odor, no blackheads, no small flaws or illnesses, an imaginary body, a body that was the playground of his dreams! (LE 93-4).

Like the poem he wrote inspired by Magda's body, the poems Jaromil dedicates to female beauty during his puberty predictably expose his ignorance of the female body. For Jaromil writing poems does not articulate lived experience, but, quite the opposite, expresses his distance from it. His poems confine the body to an imaginary dimension that excludes physicality: "he fled from the tangibility of the body […]; he deprived the body of its reality" (LE 116). This inexperience is pivotal in Kundera's narrative.

Kundera originally intended to entitle his most well-known novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of the Being*, *The Plant of Inexperience*.[15] He uses these very words in *The Art of the Novel* to describe the human condition: "We leave childhood without knowing what youth is, we marry without knowing what it is to be married, and even when we enter old age, we don't know what it is we are heading for: the old are innocent children of their old age. In that sense, man's world is the planet of inexperience."[16] In *Life is Elsewhere*, by linking the notion of inexperience to poetry, Kundera proposes that lyricism is a protective screen through which the poet preserves his innocence: the infantile tenderness and the fairy-tale tone of Jaromil's poems

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15 Steinby, *Kundera and Modernity*, p. 156.

16 Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, pp. 132-133.

express his "fear of the physical consequences of love" and his attempt "to take love out of the world of adults ([…] with flesh and responsibility)" (LE 94). The bond between poetry and childhood is strengthened still further by that way the young Jaromil resembles Rimbaud, as a friend of the painter underlines. Rimbaud, the author of poems dedicated to a child's mentality such as "Le Bateau ivre" ["The Drunken Boat] and "Les Poètes de sept ans" [Seven-year-old poets], is a key figure in *Life is Elsewhere*. Robert Porter writers that the novel "is haunted by the figure of Arthur Rimbaud above all other poets. In biographical and philosophical terms he […] is at the back of the novel."[17] I shall return to the presence of Rimbaud in *Life is Elsewhere* in the next pages, but for the moment I would like to argue that the emphasis on the connection between childhood and poetry forms the basis of Kundera's inquiry into the lyric attitude, which stems from his notion of inexperience and which he regards as a defining characteristic of the human condition. For Kundera, we all inhabit the planet of inexperience whether we are poets or not. While seeming to criticize lyric poetry as a metonym for the abstract narcissism and infantilism of all poetry, Kundera is also finding a form for the incapacity to see past the anthropological forms of our own (in)experience. I believe that this incapacity permeates the novel since neither Jaromil nor the authorial narrator analysing Jaromil's behaviour and poetry show secure recognition of the influence and the cultural environment that have led Jaromil to focus on women's scatological functions since his childhood drawings, or his depiction of them as beheaded, mutilated, and impaled. Or perhaps the aim of the investigation in *Life is Elsewhere* contrasts with the claim to subjectivity of the authorial narrator, who makes his unwillingness to discuss the content of Jaromil's drawings evident, just as he does before referring to scenes of violence against women as "other situations it is better to be silent about" (LE 30). But even though the authorial narrator does not discuss them, Jaromil's attempt to avoid contact with female corporality seems to display an inability to engage with the female body in forms which are not violent or exclusively sexual. Even if Jaromil's experience is not as overtly mediated as Lurie's, it shows the effects of reducing women to the materiality of their bodies, and the violent shaping of a young male psyche involved. Kundera's sense of inexperience as central to the human condition emerges through Jaromil's own (in)experience gendered in the masculine.

Despite his ambition to lose his virginity and to affirm his masculinity, in his poems Jaromil avoids confronting the corporality of sexual experience. This constant

[17] Porter, *Milan Kundera*, p. 58.

disembodiment through poetry discloses Jaromil's struggles with eroticism, evident when he meets a young woman who is attracted by him. Faced with the possibility of having sex Jaromil is afraid of appearing inadequate. His ignorance is not limited to the female body, but involves his own body. Jaromil decides to explore his pleasure and masturbates for the first time. Surprised by the brief, moderate pleasure he experiences he deludes himself that he is ready to make love to her. But when the moment comes, and he moves toward her undressed body, Jaromil is filled with anxiety – "he desired this body and he was afraid of it" (LE 116) – his arousal vanishes, and faced with "the immensely real body of an adult woman", Jaromil cannot regain his lost excitement (LE 117). Jaromil's body is foreign to his desires and the process of self-discovery that begins with his first act of masturbation is at its earliest stage. To avoid the humiliation of sexual failure, Jaromil lets the young woman believe that he is not attracted by her. At their next meeting they sit together and Jaromil gets aroused by her head resting on his shoulder, as it happened with the girl from his dancing class. But this time he is rejected. Tormented by this arousal, Jaromil feels "that creature between his legs" is "a prancing buffoon, a clown, an enemy making fun of him" (LE 121). Jaromil's consciousness of his body and awareness of the expectations that hegemonic masculinity imposes on him create an obstacle to his masculine sexual pleasure and performance. As Peter Schwenger observes, "[t]o think about masculinity is to become less masculine oneself. […] Self-consciousness is a crack in the wholeness of his nature."[18] In the next section I shall discuss how Jaromil changes his experience of poetry and finds a revolutionary a way to interrupt his self-consciousness and enact his masculine desire.

**(iii) Interrupting self-consciousness: the interaction of ideology and poetry**

In investigating the role of poetry in Jaromil's understanding of the female body and his search for masculinity, *Life is Elsewhere* provokes certain analogies between lyricism and the Communist revolutionary ideology. The title of the novel is a quotation from Rimbaud with which André Breton ends his *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), and, at the same time, a piece of graffiti from the 1968 student riots in Paris. *Life is Elsewhere* engages with political ideology further through the incident where Jaromil listens with his family to the Czechoslovak Prime Minister Klement Gottwald's call on the crowd to set up new, revolutionary organs of power under the leadership of the Communist Party.

[18] Peter Schwenger, "The Masculine Mode", *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1979), pp. 631-632.

Jaromil argues with his uncle and defends the values of the revolution. Kundera writes that "Jaromil abandoned his language and chose to be a medium for someone else […] he did it with a feeling of intense pleasure; it seemed to him that he was part of a thousand-headed crowd, […] and he found that glorious" (LE 108). Jaromil already experienced a similar feeling during a discussion about art: he realised that he was not merely repeating his friend the painter's ideas, but that "the voice coming from his mouth resembled the painter's, and that this voice also induced his hands to make the painter's gestures" (LE 97). In hiding behind the protective mask of the painter, Jaromil stops "feeling shy and self-conscious" (LE 97).[19] The imitation through which Jaromil has developed his poems is presented here as a phenomenon which goes beyond the dynamics of his creative process. By creating this interruption of self-consciousness, Kundera proposes an analogy between the poet and the revolutionary and a co-dependency of poetry and political ideology in the shape of Jaromil's masculinity.

During another discussion with the painter and his friends, Jaromil adopts Rimbaud's pronouncement often quoted by his master the painter, "It is necessary to be absolutely modern"; but he interprets it in new terms. For Jaromil the absolutely modern is not expressed by Surrealism itself, but depends on responding to Surrealism's revolutionary zeal, its desire to advance revolution through poetry by creating a new art in the image of ongoing revolution. One of the painter's friends claims that Jaromil's poems would never be published under this regime. Even though Jaromil agrees with her, he argues that this was not an argument against revolution: his adhesion to the imperative of the absolutely modern is total.[20] In renouncing his poetry in the name of the revolution, Jaromil feels he is ultimately acquiring the manliness for which he has been longing for years.

Jaromil's feeling of firming up his masculinity prompts Kundera's scepticism. Indeed, Jaromil's farewell to poetry is temporary: once again sexuality is the motor of

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[19] Trevor Cribben Merrill argues that Kundera deliberately places "imitation and rivalry at the heart of his novels" (*The Book of Imitation and Desire. Reading Milan Kundera with René Girard*, New York and London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 6). Responding to Kundera's comment in *Testaments Betrayed* (1995), which describes René Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* as "the best book I have ever read on the art of the novel" (trans. Linda Asher, London, Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 184), Merrill examines Kundera's narrative in the light of Girard's theory of triangular desire. Merrill's study embraces the several forms of mediation Kundera explores, while I investigate literary mediation in particular and its role in the construction of masculinity.

[20] In his 1991 novel *Immortality* Kundera observes that the character of Paul is reminiscent of Jaromil and returns to the notion of the absolutely modern: "to be *absolutely* modern means: never to question the content of modernity and to serve it as ones serves the absolute, that is, without hesitation" (trans. Peter Kussi, London, Faber and Faber, 1992, p. 218).

his creativity. Seduced by the redheaded young woman, Jaromil experiences a wild joy when his body reacts positively to hers. Jaromil feels that she has brought him into adulthood. His sense of achievement is reinforced by the parallel that Kundera depicts between him and the lives of Percy Shelley and Rimbaud, poets who like Jaromil had a childish face and run away from home to find themselves. "Again he slid out of the girl's body, and as he lay stretched out beside her, it seemed to him that he was […] resting […] after months of running" (LE 154). Full of enthusiasm, Jaromil would like to recite one of his poems to the girl, but realises that she would not like any of them since a "girl of the crowd" could understand as poetry only a poem which rhymed. Suddenly, Jaromil understands that he does not need to abandon poetry to join the revolution, but to reject the free verse he has adopted from Éluard and other surrealists, which in an ironic reversal he sees as a product of bourgeois culture, and to write poems in rhymed form that can be appreciated by everybody, "poems that were absolutely modern" (LE 163). Jaromil's sense of modernity now resembles the seductive but reductionist meaning of revolutionary slogans.

For Jaromil poetry becomes a means to merge with the crowd: "Now that he had landed on the shore of real life (by "real life" he was referring to the density created by the fusion of the crowd, physical love, and revolutionary slogans), all he had to do was give himself up entirely to this life and become its violin" (LE 163). By modelling his poetry on the vibrations of the crowd, Jaromil is not so much driven by an altruistic will to give voice to an unvoiced mass, but by "desire for a *boundless embrace*" (LE 165). Jaromil looks at the revolution as a substitute for the maternal universe and its unconditional love. Kundera develops his notion of the intimate connection between poets and their mothers by bringing in Jiri Orten's poem about a child who experiences his birth as an awful death, and who wants "to go back, back inside its mother, back 'into the very sweet fragrance'" (LE 186). For Kundera the poem is emblematic of the immaturity of the poet, who during all his life feels a long for the unity and safety he has experienced in the mother's womb, a protective shield which excludes the otherness of the relativized adult world. The sense of the initial stress on motherhood in *Life is Elsewhere* is linked to this "anthropological" hypothesis Kundera tries to probe in the novel, even though Kundera's approach to the relationship between poet and mother might seem more psychoanalytic than anthropological.

As a poet and a revolutionary Jaromil aims for the idyll that his mother found in her pregnancy. The exposure of the infant and mother also emerges from the poetry of

Rimbaud, whose presence is pervasive in *Life is Elsewhere*. The most obvious instance is the poem "Enfance" ["Childhood"] from Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, a poem which focuses on an infant and infancy. The dominant presence of female figures in the poem is reminiscent of the way in which Kundera figures Jaromil's childhood:

> Dames qui tournoient sur les terrasses voisines de la mer; enfantes et géantes, superbes noires dans la mousse vert-de-gris, bijoux debout sur le sol gras des bosquets et des jardinets dégelés, - jeunes mères et grandes sœurs aux regards pleins de pèlerinages, sultanes, princesses de démarche et de costumes tyranniques, petites étrangères et personnes doucement malheureuses.
>
> [Ladies promenading on terraces by the sea; toddlers and giants, gorgeous black women garbed in gray moss-green, jewels set just so into the rich ground of the groves, the unfrozen gardens-young mothers and elder sisters, faces flushed with pilgrimage, sultanas, princesses pacing in lordly gowns, girls from abroad, and sweetly melancholy souls.][21]

In his analysis of the first verses of the poem, Charles Minahen comments on the proliferation of female figures. He observes that the enfant lives in a prelinguistic imaginary in which its gender is not determined and its identity is presented "as an extension of the mother's body".[22] This approach to the bond between mother and infant echoes in Kundera's account of the corporeal communion between Mama and her son. The allusion to "Enfance" grows ever stronger since, as Minahen observes, the poem "traces the passage from a fabulous state of infant, selfless absorption in the world to a feeling of loss, lack, and disillusionment as the child's self-consciousness develops and matures."[23] Minahen reads this process in the light of the theory of the mirror stage proposed by Lacan, as developed by Julia Kristeva. Even though Kundera does not himself draw on psychoanalysis, Minahen's psychoanalytical insight into the poem supports Kundera's account of male infant subjectivity as a space of indeterminacy, prior to becoming a self-conscious bodily being separated from the mother. Exploring the dynamics characteristic of the formation of male subjectivity, *Life is Elsewhere* examines Jaromil's oscillation between the desire to return to the infant's pre-linguistic and totalising condition, and his paradoxical desire to assert his masculinity through the very lyrical impulse that is keeping him removed from sexual experience.

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21 Arthur Rimbaud, "Enfance", in *Illuminations*, Paris, Arléa, 1997, 13; "Childhood", in *Rimbaud Complete*, ed. and trans. Wyatt Mason, New York, Modern Library, 2002, p. 224.

22 Charles Minahen, "Specular Reflections: Rimbaud (Lacan, Kristeva) and 'Le Stade du miroir' in 'Enfance'", *Neophilologus* (2005) 89, p. 222.

23 Ibid., p. 224.

Jaromil feels that redheaded woman's "body had finally linked him in a completely physical way to the crowd" (LE 154). He deflects the materiality of the female body by making of it a symbolic bridge to reach the crowd from which he desires total acceptance. When Jaromil learns that redheaded woman has had another lover before him, he starts feeling increasingly jealous and tells her that he is disgusted by her body touched by other men. Like Lurie, Jaromil constantly reduces the female body to the sphere of sexuality, as flesh to be marked through sex with men. *Life is Elsewhere* addresses this phallocentric logic by through verses which seem to emerge from Kundera's own memory as author-narrator:

> "You must be mine to die upon the rack if I want you!" John Keats's cry resounds through the centuries. Why should Jaromil be jealous? The redhead is his now, she belongs to him more than ever: her destiny is his creation; it is his eye that watches her urinate into the bucket; […] she is his victim, she is his creation, she is his, his, his (LE 179).

Only when he looks at her relieving herself does Jaromil have the sense that the redheaded woman belongs to him. The reduction of her identity to her corporal functions sharpens Jaromil's desire for possession, which is expressed through the obsessive repetition of the possessive pronoun "his". Jaromil feels he can accept her "only under one condition: […] that she be entirely submerged below the surface of Jaromil's words and thoughts" (LE 178). The desire to shape her identity expresses the fear of not finding unconditional acceptance from her. In exploring the lyrical attitude further, Kundera links Jaromil's narcissism to the desire for glory he finds in poems by Victor Hugo, Jiri Orten, and Jiri Walker. Jaromil's urge to be admired echoes in his dream in which his alter ego Xavier is pleased by the suicide of a young woman desperate for his love. These self-centred fantasies gravitate towards the ideal of masculinity Jaromil draws from his poetry: "he is looking for a form for himself; he wants the photographic chemical of his poems to firm up the design of his features" (LE 180). In the next section I shall examine Jaromil's struggle at the core of all his creative practices for a form able to eliminate narcissistic doubt and satisfy narcissistic desire.

**(iv) To be absolutely modern, to be absolutely pure: the urge for form**

In *The Art of the Novel* Kundera writes that "[t]he desire to be modern is an archetype, that is, an irrational imperative, anchored deeply within us, a persistent form whose content is changeable and indeterminate: what is modern is what declares itself modern

and is accepted as such."[24] In underlining the absolute adherence that it seems to demand, Kundera describes the ideal of modernity as an urge impressed in our unconscious and manifesting itself as a drive for constantly renewed forms. This pursuit offers a different perspective on Jaromil's response to Rimbaud's imperative. As Porter underlines, "the seminal work […] from which Kundera takes his epigram, *Une Saison en enfer* is a violent and at times self-contradictory work."[25] The need for a reduction of Rimbaud's complex statement to a slogan and an imperative is further addressed by Kundera in his essay *The Curtain*. In this work, Kundera reads Rimbaud's motto in dialogue with the narrative of the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz: "'ONE Must BE ABSOLUTELY MODERN,' wrote Arthur Rimbaud. Some sixty years later Gombrowicz was not so sure" (upper case and lower case as in the original).[26] Here Kundera refers to Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke*. Accused of immaturity, Joey, the thirty-year old protagonist, is forced to go to school again and to live with Zuta, a schoolgirl "absolutely modern in her modernity", and her modern family.[27] *Ferdydurke* reveals that the ideals of modernity and maturity, as well as any other defining ideal, expose people to the risk of feeling estrangement: "We will soon fear our persons and our personalities, because it will become apparent that they are by no means truly our own".[28] By opposition, Gombrowicz praises the potential of immaturity to resist the crystallization of the personality in alienating forms.

Several critics have considered the influence of Gombrowicz on Kundera. Liisa Steinby argues that Kundera is indebted to Gombrowicz for the concepts of immaturity and the absolutely modern.[29] Eva Le Grand reads *Life is Elsewhere* "as a variation-homage" to Gombrowicz and underlines that in *Ferdydurke* lyricism is the main target of his "satire on immaturity, on youth and its modernist imperative."[30] In considering Kundera's engagement with lyricism, Le Grand also refers to François Ricard who writes that "with *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*, *Life is Elsewhere* is perhaps the

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24 Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 141.

25 Porter, *Milan Kundera*, p. 61.

26 Milan Kundera, *The Curtain*, trans. Linda Asher, London, Faber and Faber, 2007, p. 55.

27 Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Danuta Borchardt, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 105.

28 Ibid., p. 85.

29 Steinby, *Kundera and Modernity*, p. 70.

30 Eva Le Grand, *Kundera, or The Memory of Desire*, trans. Lin Burman, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999, pp. 52-53.

harshest work ever written against poetry: Poetry as the privileged space of affirmation, intoxication and 'authenticity'."[31] Similarly, Le Grand connects Kundera's depiction of poetry to *Madame Bovary* and *Ferdydurke*, and presents *Life is Elsewhere* as "the most devastating criticism of a certain poetry which sets up all feeling (loving, revolutionary, religious) as an absolute value."[32] However I suggest that what is being explored in these texts is not precisely a criticism of a certain type of poetry, but the way in which lyricism affects and forms our emotions and desires. These novels explore the way lyricism does in the end give form to our affective impulses, whether we might approve of that or not, or think impulses can be subject to our control. My next step is to sharpen the comparison between *Ferdydurke* and *Life is Elsewhere*, as I believe Gombrowicz's novel offers a crucial insight not only into Jaromil's attempt to shape his masculinity through poetry, but the conscious quality of his attempt and its limits.

I refer in particular to one of the two digressions interrupting the main plot about Joey. It is entitled "Preface to 'The Child Runs Deep in Filidor'", and Gombrowicz addresses the question of form:

> Certainly art is the perfecting of form. But you seem to think – and here is another of your cardinal mistakes – that art consists of creating works perfect in their form; you reduce this all-encompassing, omni-human process of creating form to the turning out of poems and symphonies; and you've never been able to truly experience nor explain to others what an enormous role form plays in our lives.[33]

Gombrowicz underlines how the pursuit of form does not only characterise creative practices, but involves all aspects of human experience. Steinby argues that in Gombrowicz's narrative the counter-concept of immaturity "is not maturity but 'form'."[34] For Gombrowicz the search for form is not limited to the spheres of art and literature but represents a basic urge governing human experience:

> And just as beetles, insects chase after food all day, so do we tirelessly pursue form, we hassle other people with our style, our manners while riding in a streetcar, while eating or enjoying ourselves, while resting or attending to our business – we always, unceasingly, seek form, and we delight in it or suffer by it, and we conform to it or we violate and demolish it, or we let it create us, amen.[35]

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31 François Ricard, "Satan's Point of View: Towards a Reading of *Life is Elsewhere*", in *Critical Essays on Milan Kundera*, p. 197.

32 Le Grand, *Kundera, or The Memory of Desire*, p. 53.

33 Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, pp. 79-80.

34 Steinby, *Kundera and Modernity*, p. 70.

35 Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, p. 80.

Any human action is inscribed in a form and enters into relation with other forms. In his study of the subversion of form in Gombrowicz, Michael Goddard describes *Ferdydurke* as his "most vitriolic account of his conception of form."[36] He argues that "form is a tendency, a process, but one that comes from the outside and affects every aspect of life."[37] I want to draw on this understanding of form to examine the interaction between sexual experience, poetic composition and revolutionary ideology in *Life is Elsewhere*; and the interaction of these elements in Jaromil's own urge for form.

In emphasising the continuity between literary form and political ideology, *Life is Elsewhere* draws a parallel between the revolutionary and the poet based on their common pursuit of what Kundera describes as a lyrical form:

> "Join me in delirium!" Vitezslav Nezval cried out to his reader, and Baudelaire wrote: "One must always be drunk ... on wine, on poetry, or on virtue, as you wish. ..." Lyricism is intoxication, and man drinks in order to merge more easily with the world. Revolution has no desire to be examined or analyzed, it only desires that the people merge with it; in this sense it is lyrical and in need of lyricism (LE 163-64).

The search for lyricism responds to the male poet's and the male revolutionary's need to lose himself in his own feelings and ideals. In order to give themselves completely to their aesthetic imperatives and political ideas, the poet and the revolutionary have to banish the shadow of doubt. In a way that calls Schwenger to mind, in the suspension of their self-reflexivity poet and revolutionary each find a path along which to enact their masculinity. In placing the notion of intoxication at the heart of his understanding of the lyrical attitude, Kundera configures poetry and revolution together as antithetical to his view of the novel as a genre devoted to pursue knowledge through the creation of forms that convey the ambiguity of human experience.

In Chapter One, I compared the ways Lurie and Emma Bovary exaggerate the intensity of their emotions, and I argued that *Disgrace* and *Madame Bovary* reveal the paradoxical role of Romantic rhetoric and the Western poetic tradition more generally: although Romantic poetics express love in artificial and conventional forms, these forms offer a unique voice for the intensity of these feelings. For Lurie, lyricism fails to corroborate his sensations. Jaromil's case is closer to Emma's: he sees the "impurity" he believes previous lovers have cut into the redheaded woman's body as an opportunity to prove the intensity of his feelings. He writes in his poem: "there is nothing in her soul,

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[36] Michael Goddard, *Gombrowicz, Polish Modernism, and the Subversion of Form*, West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2010, p. 25.

[37] Ibid., p. 26.

in her body / not even the putridity of her old lovers / that I will not drink to intoxication" (LE 177). The intoxication of feeling Jaromil expresses in poetry involves an imitation of those intense feelings that inhabit lyrical poetry. By dramatizing his feelings, Jaromil aims to anesthetize his fears and his sense of inadequacy. This confusion of authenticity and imitation is pivotal in the meta-narrative discourse of *Life is Elsewhere*. The way Kundera engages with the question of the authenticity of feeling calls André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* to mind. Where *Life is Elsewhere* displays Jaromil's creative process, *The Counterfeiters* includes the journal of one of the characters, Édouard, who reflects on the very form of the novel the reader is reading, and on his own emotional life in the period of its composition. He writes:

> I see it clearly in the case of my love for Laura: between loving her and imagining I love her – between imagining I love her less and loving her less – what God could tell the difference? In the domain of feeling, what is real is indistinguishable from what is imaginary. And if it is sufficient to imagine one loves, in order to love, so it is sufficient to say to oneself that when one loves one imagines one love.[38]

In the manner of *Life is Elsewhere*, in *The Counterfeiters* no difference is discernible between the actual feeling of love and the idea of love, between feeling love and imagining being in love. Both novels address the confusion of authenticity and imitation. *Life is Elsewhere* offers the disquieting scenario by which beyond what men believe to be their deepest feelings there may be no authentic core. Conversely, what defines them is precisely their ability or inability to inhabit emotions and feelings they have learnt to feel, and to model their affective responses in terms of emotional frames through which feelings have been socially codified.

In *Life is Elsewhere* the stress on feelings and emotions is seen in opposition to other narrative representations of sexuality. When the older poet encourages him to sleep with another woman, Jaromil explains that the redheaded woman is his unique great love:

> Jaromil replied that in his opinion a single great love to which we devote everything we have within us is worth more than a thousand fleeting affairs; that having his girlfriend was having all women; that his girlfriend was so protean, her love so infinite, that he could experience with her more unexpected adventures than a Don Juan with his 1,003 women (LE 204).

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[38] André Gide, *The Counterfeiters*, trans. Dorothy Bussy, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1975, pp. 68-69.

The opposition between Don Juan and the ideal of a single love represents one of the most salient themes in Kundera's narrative. I shall engage with this dichotomy in a more comprehensive way in the next pages, but for the moment I want to focus on the ideal of a unique great love, referring to another formulation of this idea which Kundera offers in *Immortality*:

> *Homo sentimentalis* […] a man who has raised feelings to a category of value. As soon as feelings are seen as a value, everyone wants to feel; and because we all like to pride ourselves on our values, we have a tendency to show off our feelings.
> […]
> No one revealed *homo sentimentalis* as lucidly as Cervantes. Don Quixote decides to love a certain lady named Dulcinea, in spite of the fact that he hardly knows her […].[39]

Similarly to Coetzee, who regards Don Quixote as an embodiment of the idealised lover, Kundera sees in Cervantes's work the clearest analysis of the elevation of feelings as the principle guiding human action. Kundera's response to *Don Quixote* in this short passage from *Immortality* combines the theory of form conveyed in *The Art of the Novel* with the practice of form he carries out in the novels themselves. Just as in *Don Quixote*, feelings are raised to the category of value in themselves, a response that corresponds to Jaromil's creative practice. Kundera writes:

> The poet has no need to prove anything; the only proof lies in the intensity of his emotion.
> The genius of lyricism is the genius of inexperience. The poet knows little about the world, but the words that burst forth from him form beautiful patterns that are as definitive as crystal; the poet is immature, yet his verse has the finality of a prophecy by which he himself is dumbfounded (LE 180).

The meta-literary discourse of *Life is Elsewhere* presents the urge for lyrical form as stemming from a hiatus between feeling and experience. Kundera's continues the exploration of the unconscious complexity of emotion characteristic of *Madame Bovary*. He shows that the intensity of feelings may not originate from the relationship with the loved one, but may derive from the pursuit of an emotional form itself. In Kundera's narrative the Quixotic idealisation of the beloved reverberates with Gombrowicz's investigation of form, and the way the search for form transcends artistic practice and pervades every aspect of life, emotion and sexuality in particular. In the next pages, by focusing on Roth's *The Professor of Desire*, I go on to examine the

[39] Kundera, *Immortality*, p. 218.

pervasive role of form in the intertextual nature of Kepesh's heterosexual desires, and the way his understanding of his own masculinity matures.

## 2. *The Professor of Desire*

### (i) Immaturity and donjuanism

In the manner of *Life is Elsewhere The Professor of Desire* addresses the role of literary models in shaping a young male subjectivity. Roth focuses on David Kepesh, the protagonist, his childhood and his relation to Herbie Bratasky, a comedian who entertains the guests at the hotel owned by Kepesh's family.[40] Herbie performs private shows for Kepesh and displays a surprising ability to reproduce the sounds of human scatological functions. As he grows older, Kepesh loses interest in comedy and imitation and he finds a new passion in acting, but he soon realises that his acting is driven by vanity. Ashamed of that vanity, Kepesh longs for a definite identity. It is a longing which echoes Jaromil's desire for manhood:

> At twenty I must stop impersonating others and Become Myself, or at least begin to impersonate the self I believe I ought now to be.
>
> He – the next me – turns out to be a sober, solitary rather refined young man devoted to European literature and languages. […] taking with me as companions those great writers whom I choose to call, as an undergraduate, "the architects of my mind." […] but above all it is that I am an absolutist – a *young* absolutist – and know no way to shed a skin other than inserting a scalpel and lacerating myself from end to end. I am one thing or I am the other. Thus, at twenty, do I set out to undo the contradictions and overleap the uncertainties (PD 9-10).[41]

Configuring his identity as an attempt to reach and be reached, Kepesh wants to turn into a new version of himself woven out of his passion for European literature. He can be imagined as one of the young people whom Kundera describes in *Life is Elsewhere* as the "emissaries of the absolute" (LE 186), who adhere to their ideals and denying the slightest possibility of self-contradiction, such as the figure of the poet and the revolutionary embodied together in Jaromil. I aim to argue that Kepesh's masculinity, like Jaromil's, is inscribed in the dynamics of form developed in the works Gombrowicz.[42]

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[40] Kepesh appears in two other works of Roth, *The Breast* (1972) and *The Dying Animal* (2001).

[41] Philip Roth, *The Professor of Desire*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977; in New York, Bantam Book, 1978.

[42] In comparing Roth's narrative to Kundera's, I should mention David James's *Modernist Futures* which examines the incorporation and innovation of modernist aesthetics in the narrative of Kundera and Roth ("'Advancing along the inherited path': Making it Traditionally New in Milan Kundera and Philip

Roth is clearly familiar with Gombrowicz's narrative. From 1974 to 1989 he worked as a General Editor for Penguin Books and oversaw the publication of a paperback series entitled *Writers from the Other Europe* dedicated to Eastern European novelists, including Gombrowicz and Kundera.[43] In *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity*, Ross Posnock suggests that it is Gombrowicz's concern with immaturity that emerges and is developed in Roth's fiction.[44] Posnock argues that Gombrowicz's characters embody two different trends: "mature immaturity", modelled on scepticism, relativism, and anti-foundationalism, and "immature maturity", based on abstraction, rationalism, and absolutism. He refers to *Life is Elsewhere* as "a vivid depiction of 'immature maturity'".[45] I regard Kepesh's desire for an absolute identity as emblematic of the condition of "immature maturity", even though Posnock does not mention this novel. Both novels engage with the influence of literature on their protagonists' masculinity, and do so respectively through two literary models which Kundera describes as antithetical to each other. Jaromil is driven by the idealisation of the lover, emblematic of *Don Quixote* according to Kundera, while Kepesh follows the path of donjuanism. As Roth writes:

> Not that, for all my reading, underlining, and note-taking, I become *entirely* selfless. A dictum attributed to no less notable an egoist than Lord Byron impresses me its mellifluous wisdom […]. "Studious by day… dissolute by night." For dissolute I soon find it best to substitute "desirous" – I am not in a palazzo in Venice, after all, but in upstate New York, […]. Reading Macaulay for English 203, I came upon his description of Addison's collaborator of Steele […]. "A rake among scholars, a scholar among rakes." Perfect! I take it to my bulletin board, along with the line from Byron, and directly above the names of the girls whom I have my mind to *seduce*, a word whose deepest resonances come to me, neither from pornography nor pulp magazines, but from my agonized reading in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (PD 14).

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Roth", in *Modernist Futures. Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 43-64); and Velichka Ivanova's *Fiction, utopie, histoire* which studies the way in which Kundera's and Roth's novels engage with historical discourse.

[43] Roth briefly refers to Gombrowicz's *Pornografia* in his interview with Hermione Lee ("Interview with *The Paris Review*", *Paris Review*, No. 93, Fall 1984, in *Reading Myself and Others*, New York, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 146).

[44] In addition to Posnock, Marek Parys offers a comparative analysis of the linguistic performances of the narrators in Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* and Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* as a form of resistance to cultural determinism ("'My Whole World Shrank': Encapsulated Selves in Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*", in *Philip Roth and World Literature*, ed. Velichka Ivanova, Amhrest and New York, Cambria Press, 2014, pp. 159-174).

[45] Ross Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 61.

By reference to Venice and Giacomo Casanova's erotic adventures Kepesh tracks his adhesion to the ideal of seduction. Though the practices of textuality (reading, underlining and note-taking), Kepesh shapes his identity on Byron's words in the manner of Lurie in *Disgrace*.

Thanks to a Fulbright scholarship, Kepesh spends a year in Europe and turns his visiting fellowship into "erotic daredevilry" (PD 39), and has sex with prostitutes in Soho despite being scared of dying of a venereal disease like Maupassant. Excited by European women whom he considers more sexually available than Americans, Kepesh tries to probe the mythology of the Swedish women's sexual freedom and starts a *ménage a trois* with two Swedish women, Birgitta and Elisabeth. In this respect, Kepesh's journey to Europe evokes "the longing for Europe as an unworthy impulse to adultery" which Leslie Fiedler recognises in the 1920s US novels that relate their protagonists' experiences in the Old Continent.[46] In their sexual role-playing, Kepesh plays the dominant role and fulfils his fantasies as a libertine seducer in relation to what he acts out as Birgitta's submissiveness: "With what self-possession does she submit" (PD 37). But along with pleasure, Kepesh starts feeling a sense of increasing estrangement from his body:

> When, depleted, we lay together on the threadbare rug – for it was the floor, not the bed, we used mostly as our sacrificial altar – when we would be lying there, dead limbs amid the little undergarments, groggy, sated, and confused […]. My arms, my hands, my words didn't seem to be of any use to anyone at that point. The way it worked, my arms, hands, words meant everything – until I came (PD 31).

Reminiscent of Georges Bataille, Kepesh thinks of intercourse as a sacrificial act. Still anesthetized by pleasure, he feels that body and language are equally meaningless. Kepesh cannot find a sense for his body outside his sexuality, which is not only totalizing but annihilating. Any act which is not inscribed into a sexual dynamic, such as Birgitta's gestures of affection towards Elisabeth who struggles the guilt provoked by their erotic practices, is incomprehensible to him. Kepesh searches for a literary frame: "I am trying with what wisdom – and what prose resources and literary models – is mine to understand if in fact I have been what the Christians call wicked and what I would call inhuman" (PD 33). Sexuality emphasises the extent to which Kepesh is unaffected by Elisabeth's emotions. His lack of empathy for Elisabeth arises from the alienation from his own body and the opacity of his desires.

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[46] Leslie Fiedler, *Waiting for the End. The American Literary Scene from Hemingway to Baldwin*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1965, p. 24.

On the other hand, as Kepesh observes, for Birgitta "flesh was very much there to be investigated for every last thrill" (PD 51). Her desire to explore her body and sensations evokes the search for the bodily knowledge Peter Brooks discusses in *Body Work*. Brooks claims that in modern narrative the body becomes "a source and a locus of meanings", thus stories "cannot be told without making the body a prime vehicle of narrative significations."[47] Taking Klein's notion of an epistemophilic impulse as a starting point, Brooks observes that in many modern novels the body does not only appear as a means to reach pleasure, but also to acquire knowledge. Birgitta's willingness to play passive roles in their sexual interplay is not a sign of weakness, but reflects "the erotic investment in the desire to know,"[48] the strength of her will to explore all her pleasures including submission. The comparison with Birgitta sheds light on Kepesh's own immaturity: when Kepesh tells her he has decided to go back to the US, Birgitta merely replies that he is a boy and leaves. Kepesh regretfully admits: "Not the masterful young master of mistresses and whores, […] merely 'a boy'" (PD 45). Kepesh has been acting as though the only way to express his masculinity is to embody the womanizer. Let me return to the opposition Posnock derives from Gombrowicz. The relationship with Birgitta shows that Kepesh has been acting with "immature maturity": moved by the urge for form, he has imitated the seducers who populate his literary imaginary, laying on an artificial image of himself as a seducer, and unlike Birgitta he has failed to engage with his own sensations or to find any self-knowledge.

Symbolically, Kepesh leaves Europe after having visited La Bastille where the Marquis de Sade, who fascinates Kepesh, was imprisoned. Kepesh is unable to live up to these libertine fantasies and to be the "shameless carnal force" he wishes he were (PD 45). Despite conceiving of the sexual drive as an impulse devoid of moral implications, he cannot tolerate the burden of sexual transgression and its emotional consequences. In the next section, I shall describe how Kepesh's failure to define his personality through *libertinage* leads to an attempt to reshape his desire and to emancipate himself from the epistemological lure of his literary models.

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47 Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. xii.

48 Ibid., p. 112.

**(ii) Contrasting fantasies: "unmediated desire" and the Chekhovian dimension**

Having returned to the US, Kepesh finishes his studies successfully and becomes a lecturer at Stanford University. His life proceeds without trouble until he meets his future wife, the twenty-six year old Helen Baird. At nineteen Helen had run off to Hong Kong with a journalist twice her age, who was already living there with a wife and three children, and then spent eight years following her lovers through Asian countries and escaping from them. Kepesh sees in her stories the rhetoric of screen romance: "Instantly I am ready to attribute her 'candor' to a popular-magazine mentality" (PD 48). Two year older than he is, Helen is different from all Kepesh's previous university student partners. He responds to her as a modern Emma Bovary whose fantasies have been shaped by screen romance and popular magazines. Struggling to believe in her adventures in exotic locations he has read about in Conrad's novels, Kepesh has contrasting feelings for her:

> but by Helen I am not only intrigued and aroused, I am also alarmed, and made deeply, deeply uncertain …yet as suspicious as I can be of the prerogatives, of the *place*, thereby bestowed upon her in her own imagination. Hers seems to me sometimes such a banalized conception of self and experience, and yet, all the same, enthralling and full of fascination (PD 52).

More than by the doubt that Helen's accounts might be infected by her imagination, Kepesh is alarmed by his fascination with her (allegedly banal) conception of experience. The self-confidence Helen derives from her appearance intrigues Kepesh, who himself feels imprisoned in a body unproblematic to him only in sensual thrill. Nonetheless, he seems unable to appreciate Helen's beauty without projecting symbolic meaning on to her: "All that marvelous hair – closest in shading to the Irish setter – seems to be in the nature of a crown, or a spire, or a halo. There not simply to adorn or embellish but to express, to symbolize" (PD 52). Ironic, but insightful, Roth's narrative displays a paradoxical Kepesh who praises Helen for the sense self-worth she derives from the materiality of her body, but cannot conceive of it without symbolism.

Helen senses immediately the influence that literature has had on his life and exhorts him to stop reading and to "'[d]ip a foot back into the stuff itself'" (PD 54). But in response Kepesh repeatedly returns to literature and describes Henry James's *The Ambassadors* as an exemplum of the direct engagement with life Helen has proposed. She emphasises the negative effects of reading: "I hate books […] they tend to turn everything about life into something slightly other than it is – 'slightly' at best. It's those poor innocent theoretical bookworms who do the teaching who turn it all into

something worse. Something ghastly" (PD 54). Helen argues that literature fails to reproduce human experience and converts it into something different. Kepesh emerges as a modern Don Quixote, in the manner of Lurie in *Disgrace*, in the way that he approaches his own experience. The dialogues between Helen and Kepesh are reminiscent of the exchanges between Lurie and his daughter Lucy: Helen urges Kepesh not to underestimate her, "Oh, don't simplify me *too* much. And don't romanticize my 'nerve' either – okay?" (PD 55), and warns him about the risk of living according to his literary fantasies, "You're misusing yourself, David. You're hopelessly intent on being what you're not. I get the sense that you may riding for a very bad fall" (PD 55). Similarly to Lurie, Kepesh is destined to confront a world and a sexual life which do not conform to his literature-fuelled fantasies. In addition, as a woman's critique of a man's literary pretension, I suggest that Helen's words may be also be in dialogue with Kundera, in the passages where he evokes Jaromil's distance from his experience and his fear of women's bodies: as if one of the women in Kundera's novel were speaking back to Jaromil.

Kepesh compares his past with Birgitta to his current life:

> Looking back to Birgitta, it seems to me, from my new vantage point, that we were, among other things, helping each other at age twenty-two to turn into something faintly corrupt, each the other's slave and slaveholder, […] we had created a richly hypnotic atmosphere, but one which permeated the inexperienced *mind* first of all: I was intrigued and exhilarated as much by the idea of what we were engaged in as by the sensations, what I felt and what I saw. Not so with Helen […] but soon, as understanding grows, […] I begin at last […] to see these passionate performances as arising out of the very fearlessness that so draws me to her, out of that determined abandon with which she will give herself to whatever strongly beckons, and regardless of how likely it is so to bring in the end as much pain as pleasure. I have been dead wrong, I tell myself, trying to dismiss hers as a corny and banalized mentality deriving from Screen Romance – rather, she is *without* fantasy, there is no *room* for fantasy, so total is her concentration, and the ingenuity with which she sounds her desire (PD 56).

Kepesh realises himself that he has been superficial in reading Helen as a screen romance character. The expression Roth uses, "inexperienced *mind*", evokes Kundera's own notion of inexperience. In reading his past in the light of Helen's observations, Kepesh imagines that he and Birgitta were more excited by the literary idea of what they were doing than their physical sensations. As in the case of Jaromil, Kepesh's immaturity takes the form of an inability to consider his lover's perspective or her own pursuit of self-knowledge. He begins to praise Helen for her desire, so alien to any

fantasy. Kepesh's sense of her "unmediated" sexual experience begins to inform his, or his fantasy of a purely physical dimension to sexuality devoid of any cultural element.

Although Kepesh feels he is approaching a more direct contact with his pleasure, he begins to struggle after they are married and his attachment to literary paradigms grows still stronger. This is expressed in the self-referential attitude towards literature which emerges during his lectures: "when we study Chekhov's stories, [...] every sentence seems to me to allude to my own plight above all" (PD 66). Kepesh finds in Chekhov's narrative a literary correspondence with his own suffering. The protagonist reads quotations from "About Love", a tale from Chekhov's late work, which is part of a trilogy which includes "Man in a Shell" and "Gooseberries" and features two travellers, Burkin and Ivan Iványč.[49] In "About Love" the travellers visit their friend Alëkin who shares his reflection on love with them. For Alëkin Russians tend to make love poetic and to endow it with existential questions: "when you love you must either, in your reasoning about that love, start from what is higher, more important than happiness or unhappiness, […] or you must not reason at all" (PD 66-7). This tendency seems to contaminate Kepesh as well. Like *Disgrace* and *Life is Elsewhere*, *The Professor of Desire* uses quotation to display the interaction between the protagonist's masculine struggles and his literary reading. In *Life is Elsewhere*, the intertextual web of references strengthens the correspondences between the experiences of Jaromil and the poets Kundera quotes.[50] As Le Grand observes, "Jaromil is Lermontov, but he is also Pushkin, Byron, Shelley, Rimbaud, Mayakovsky, Wolker, or Halas all at once."[51] By opposition, in *The Professor of Desire* the gravity of Chekhov's tales is juxtaposed with Kepesh's quotidian misery and the problems generated by his wife's alcohol abuse. The reference to Chekhov's text exacerbates the alienation Kepesh feels within his marriage. As in *Disgrace*, the situation of a series of lectures becomes a stage to read quotations comment on them:

> I speak of the amount of human history that Chekhov can incorporate in fifteen pages, of how ridicule and irony gradually give way, even within so short a space, to sorrow and pathos, of his feel for the disillusioning moment and for those

[49] The English translations of the titles from Russian vary: Anthon Chekhov, "Concerning Love (1898)", in *The Oxford Chekhov. Volume IX: Stories 1898-1904*, ed. and trans. Ronald Hingley, London, Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 39-48; "A Hard Case (1898)", in *The Oxford Chekhov. Volume IX: Stories 1898-1904*, pp. 13-26; "Gooseberries (1898)", in *The Oxford Chekhov. Volume IX: Stories 1898-1904*, pp. 27-38.

[50] Steinby also underlines the "transparency between Jaromil and other poets" (90).

[51] Le Grand, *Kundera, or The Memory of Desire*, p. 80.

> processes wherein actually seemingly pounces upon even our most harmless illusions, not to mention the grand dreams of fulfillment and adventure (PD 68).

More than incorporating Chekhov's voice, this intertextual dimension expresses Kepesh's desire to be absorbed in Chekhov's literary universe: unable to confront the banality of his everyday unhappiness, Kepesh tries to confer literary dignity and solemnity on his pain.

After Helen has left him, Kepesh is told that she has been arrested in Hong Kong. The story of her arrest is reminiscent of her previous adventures: she was trying to inform the wife of her former lover, Jemmy Metcalf, that he has a plan to kill her. Kepesh flies there to rescue her. Here *The Professor of Desire* displays the conflict between two narrative orders: the Chekhovian inquiry into love and Helen's screen romance adventures:

> On the plane there is time to think […]. It must be that I want her back, that I can't give her up, that I'm in love with her whatever I've known it or not, that she is my destiny –
>
> Not one word of this stuff convinces me. Most are words I despise: Helen's kind of words, Helen's kind of thinking. […] Kid stuff! Movie stuff! *Screen Romance*! (PD 80).

This fragment displays Kepesh's resistance the screen romance's model of love. At the same time, the interplay between Kepesh's experience and Chekhov's texts reaches its climax when, on the flight back, Kepesh reads the essay on Chekhov written by one of his students, Kathie Steiner:

> I cry for myself, I cry for Helen, and finally I seem to cry hardest of all with realization that somehow not every last thing *has* been destroyed, that despite my consuming obsession with my marital unhappiness and my dreamy desire to call out to my young students for their help, I have somehow gotten a sweet, chubby, unharmed and as yet unhorrified daughter of Beverly Hills to end her sophomore year of college by composing the grim and beautiful lament summarizing what she calls "Anthon Chekhov's overall philosophy of life." […] "We are born innocent," the girl has written, "we suffer terrible disillusionment before we can gain knowledge, and then we fear death – and we are granted only fragmentary happiness to offset the pain" (PD 87).

Kepesh reads Kathie's exam as if it were discussing his own life. The description of tragic human destiny is conveyed through the words of a young student, who a few pages before was described eating chocolate and drinking soft drinks. The stress on Kathie's childishness seems to suggest a *spleen* as juvenile as it is conventional. Once more Kepesh's engagement with literature resonates with the notion of immaturity

which *The Professor of Desire* relentlessly connects to his masculinity. Indeed, when they break up, Helen says to him: "Why didn't you take me into your world like a man!" (PD 84-5). Helen's accusation is reminiscent of Birgitta who describes Kepesh as a boy. While Birgitta's words hint at his inability to live out his transgressive erotic fantasies, Helen's frustration addresses Kepesh's emotional immaturity.

As with Birgitta, Kepesh experiences impotence for a second time with Helen. The divorce from Helen marks the climax of Kepesh's alienation from his own pleasure: he feels that his "flesh [is] slowly taking its revenge" and his body is a "benumbed and unsexed carcass" (PD 95, 141). Like Jaromil, his erotic failures interweave with the role that literary texts play in his sexual life: while Jaromil's poems exclude the tangible existence of the female body, Kepesh (mis)reads his desire through ennobling literary frames. Literary mediation is interwoven with immaturity in each case. In *The Professor of Desire*, the superabundance of textual allusion and interpretation enfold Kepesh's sexuality and inform the relation between erotic experience and the narratives of which he is fond. As he says to his therapist, Dr Klinger, his own particular self-reflection is affected by his readings of Chekhov:

> "Dr. Klinger, I assure you that I am sufficiently imbued by now with the Chekhovian bias to suspect as much myself. I know what there is to know from 'The Duel' and other stories about those committed to libidinous fallacy. I too have read and studied the great Western wisdom on the subject. I have even taught it. I have even practiced" (PD 94).

Kepesh does not only read about mistaken beliefs in love, and teach them, but also lives his sexuality according to the "fallacies" of eroticism. In deriving his understanding of affect from literary protagonists Kepesh develops an attitude reminiscent of Kundera's notion of inexperience, revealing the limits of his self-reflexivity evident, for instance, when he examines his lack of empathy for Elizabeth through literary and religious frames.

The interconnectedness of the narratives of Kundera and Roth involves the literary frames through which they conceive of their lovers. During their sessions, Klinger insists Kepesh needs to "demythologise" Helen: "Look, she isn't the Helen born of Leda and Zeus, you know. She's of the earth, Mr. Kepesh – a middle class Gentile girl from Pasadena, California" (PD 90-1). Kepesh's veneration for her, as well as the nostalgia he feels for Elisabeth's tenderness and the regret for the family life he might have had with her, marks his distance from the role of a libertine seducer he played in his youth, but at the same time his continued proximity to a Quixote-like idealisation of

love. Unable now to process the sensations of sex in a libertine erotic frame, in his subsequent marriage Kepesh longs for an emotional intensity and meaning through a different frame, but one which is still eluded by sensation. This turn towards idealization is contrasted with embodiments of pure sensual desire such as the figures of Birgitta and Helen.

To move on with his life, Kepesh accepts the position at the State University of New York his friend Arthur Schonbrunn has offered him. Here Kepesh becomes friends with Ralph Baumgarten, a resident poet who is not to be reappointed because of his "undeferential attitude toward the other gender" (PD 115). Unmarried and lascivious, Baumgarten describes as "vizzied" or "vizz-ridden" the husbands like Arthur "who slavishly conform to standards of propriety and respectability which […] have been laid down by generations of women to disarm men and domesticate men" (PD 115). Baumgarten's male-oriented disdain for the relationship between men and women induces Kepesh to wonder if his bad marital experience is emblematic of all the relations he can establish as a man with women. Because of his manners, Baumgarten has earned the disregard of Arthur's wife Deborah, who describes him as a "murderous, conscienceless womanizer" who "hates women" (PD 117). When she learns about the friendship between Kepesh and Baumgarten, in view of Kepesh's grudge towards Helen, she describes Baumgarten as "Kepesh's 'alter ego,' 'acting out fantasies of aggression against women'" (PD 118). Although he resents Deborah's words, Kepesh senses Baumgarten may well be a reflection of himself:

> Indeed, there are times when, listening to him speak, with such shameless of the wide range of his satisfaction, I feel that I am in the presence of a parodied projection of myself. A parody – a possibility. […] I am a Baumgarten locked in the Big House, caged in cannels, a Baumgarten Klingered and Schonbrunned into submission – while he is a Kepesh, oh, what a Kepesh! with his mouth frothing and his long tongue lolling, leash slipped and running wild (PD 131-32).

Kundera's Jaromil also imagines an alter ego, Xavier, who would be able to live up to his manly desires. Kapesh's and Jaromil's respective fantasies of freedom from social mores and personal limitations suggest what Posnock describes as the abstraction and absolutism characteristic of "immature maturity". Kepesh's and Jaromil's machismo seems to stem from the anxiety they feel in confronting the abstract imperative to be "men".

However Baumgarten is more than a misogynistic projection of Kepesh's narcissism. What strikes Kepesh the most is the fact that Baumgarten has never written

a single line about his tragic childhood or his unhappy family. Contrary to the conception of poetry and lyricism in particular proposed by Kundera in *Life is Elsewhere*, Baumgarten's own poetry does not stem from the inflation of personal feeling. He rejects the emotiveness associated with the subject of the Jewish family and which dominates his personal history. When Kepesh asks him if writing poems about his family might give him access to other emotions, Baumgarten replies: "'Let the other guys have the other feelings, okay? They are used to having them. They *like* having them" (PD 130). The silence Baumgarten imposes on his feelings suggests the emotional closeness between men Schwenger finds expressed in Ernest Hemingway's fiction.[52] But while in Hemingway the masculine emotion reiterates a homosocial code "true" men enact, Baumgarten's suppression of feelings gives rise to a heterosexual tension, and it is this that impresses Kepesh:

> [A]fter a week of Baumgarten as bedtime reading, the interest I have long had in the fittings and fixtures of the other sex seems to me just about sated. Yet, narrow as his subject strikes me – or, rather, his means of exploration – I find in the blend of shameless erotomania, microscopic fetishism, and rather dazzling imperiousness a character at work whose unswerving sense of his own imperatives cannot but arouse my curiosity (PD 128).

In Baumgarten's poems the focus on desire is such that even Kepesh feels a surfeit of it. Baumgarten's devotion to flesh proceeds by delving into sexuality in unrelenting and unrestrained ways, to the point where Deborah says she has never read anything so dehumanised in her life. Resistant to feeling, his poems are restricted to a representation of the materiality of the human body outside any sentimental/emotional frame or cultural/historical perspective, which is what the professor who reviews Baumgarten's second book of poetry in *The Times* denounces. By focusing exclusively on his sexual urge, Baumgarten's poetry destabilises the binary opposition in *The Professor of Desire* as a whole between the notion of desire as culturally embedded, and the fantasy of an unmediated experience of sexuality. The marginal presence of Baumgarten in the novel and the fact the reader has no direct access to his verses, but can only read comments about them, cast uncertainty on his poetry. Whether his lyrics passively respond only to his sexual imperatives or represent an attempt to exorcize them remains unknown.

On the other hand, Kepesh's feelings towards Baumgarten emerge more clearly as he compares him to the panther who replaces the hunger-rtist in Franz Kafka's

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[52] Peter Schwenger, *Phallic Critiques. Masculinity and Twentieth-Century Literature*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, pp. 24-25.

famous tale. This parallel suggests seeing Kepesh as the artist who dies from a starvation so alien to him that he is unable to decide what food he likes. Kepesh translates this alienation into the field of sexuality. The allusion to Kafka's "The Hunger Artist" prefigures a general transition in Kepesh's fantasies from the Chekhovian solemn imaginary to the oppressive and alienating world of Kafka's fiction, and I shall now examine how this new influence on Kepesh exacerbates his struggle for self-reflexivity.

**(iii) Reading Kafka: self-referential masculinity**

Claire Ovington, a 24-year teacher with a background in experimental psychology and pedagogy, manages to "subdue my [Kepesh's] tenacious anxiety and to renew my faith in coupling" (PD 144). Thanks to her, Kepesh finds the stability necessary to continue his book dedicated to "the subject of romantic disillusionment" in Chekhov's narrative (PD 147).[53] In his biography of the Russian author, Philip Callow claims that "romantic disillusionment and the search for intimacy, which is nearly always frustrated," are "[t]wo of his recurrent themes".[54] This sense of disillusion emerges in "Lady with the Dog", a tale relating an extra-marital affair which Kepesh reads to his students.[55] Kepesh concentrates his attention on the lovers' suffering and on the impossibility of their illicit love. Geoffre Borny writes:

> Chekhov's vision of reality which depicts 'life as it is' and implies 'life as it should be' is communicated through the interaction of the text and subtext, the outer and inner lives of his characters. Chekhov systematically creates a gap between his characters' two lives. The gap between the inner world of his characters' private beliefs, aims and hopes, and the outer world of their public actions and relationship with other characters is presented in terms of their failure to realise their aspirations.[56]

Chekhov's narrative evokes *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* which investigate the effect that reading has in shaping a horizon of expectations that are never to be satisfied.

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53 Gustavo Sánchez-Canales examines the emergence of Chekhovian romantic disillusionment in *The Professor of Desire* and in the relation between Kepesh and Claire in particular ("'Within a Year My Passion Will Be Dead'. The Presence of Anton Chekhov's Romantic Disillusionment in Philip Roth's *The Professor of Desire*, in *Philip Roth and World Literature*, pp. 125-140).

54 Philip Callow, *Chekhov, the Hidden Ground: A Biography*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 1998, p. xiii.

55 The English translations of the title from Russian vary slightly: Anton Chekhov, "A Lady with a Dog (1899)", in *The Oxford Chekhov. Volume IX: Stories 1898-1904*, pp. 125-141.

56 Geoffrey Borny, *Interpreting Chekhov*, Camberra, ANU E Press, 2006, p. 79.

In *The Professor of Desire*, Kepesh himself emphasises the analogy between Flaubert and Chekhov:

> I am watching how Chekhov, simply and clearly, though not quite so pitilessly as Flaubert, reveals the humiliations and failures – worst of all, the destructive power of those who seek a way *out* of the shell of restrictions and convention, […] out of the painful marital situations […], into what they take to be a vibrant and desirable life (PD 148).

The contrast between inner and outer lives resonates in the opposition between Kepesh's romantic expectations about love and his everyday life with Helen. The disillusionment of Emma Bovary and Don Quixote stems from the impossibility of living up to the expectations moulded by their reading. By opposition, Kepesh is inspired by Chekhovian characters who directly experience disillusionment, and in fact identifies with them because of their delusion. This identification emerges in *Man in a Shell*, the long-essay Kepesh dedicates to Chekhov and names after the title of Chekhov's tale. Kepesh comments upon "Gooseberries" and its "varieties of pain engendered by spiritual imprisonment" (PD 148), and believes he has lived a self-imposed imprisonment like the protagonist of "Man in a Shell", Belikov, who lives a grey existence shaped by his own inhibitions. In this critical work, Kepesh addresses the question of literary mediation by describing Layevsky, the protagonist of "The Duel", as a "literary-minded seducer" and seems to allude to his own experience (PD 149). Similarly, the account of the romantic misadventure that turns the landowner into a misogynist in "Ariadne" may hint at the disillusionment Kepesh experiences in his marriage and after it.

Having completed his work Kepesh hopes he has come through his personal crisis. He has the feeling that Claire's dedication to ordinary life can protect him from his own imagination – "There's no dreaming going on there – just steady, dedicated *living*" (PD 149). From the standpoint of his new life, Kepesh wonders if his marriage represented the continuation of "a longish and misguided youth" out of which he has finally emerged (PD 151). Kepesh recognises that the long for the solemn notion of a conflicted love Chekhov conveys in "About Love" and "Lady with a Dog" in his marriage was as delusional as the fantasies of seduction he experienced in Europe, and this awareness reinforces the "immature maturity" proposed by Posnock. In the next pages I go on to explore the extent and limits of Kepesh's immature maturity as well as his self-referentiality in addressing the effects of literary mediation.

Kepesh and Claire travel to Europe, starting with "Byron's Italy" (PD 67). At the sight of the places he visited with Birgitta, the memories of her total sexual availability starts to enliven Kepesh's dissatisfaction. In confronting Claire's resistance to certain erotic practices, Kepesh starts feeling what he describes as a "sexual despair" which becomes the inspirational core of his future teaching (PD 162):

> I have with me paperbacks by Mishima, Gombrowicz, and Genet, novels for next year's comparative literature class. I have decided to organize the first semester's reading around the subject of erotic desire, beginning with these disquieting contemporary novels dealing with prurient and iniquitous sexuality […] and ending the term's work with three masterworks concerned with illicit and ungovernable passions, whose assault is made by other means: *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Death in Venice* (PD 169).

Just as Jaromil's urge to define his masculinity is echoed in his creative outputs, Kepesh's academic readings reverberate with his sexual concerns. After the failure of his absolutistic adherence to literary models of seduction, and having realized that his marital unhappiness is not concretized in his sense of Chekhov's romantic disillusionment, Kepesh now sees his desire as generally disquieting. Among the authors he selects for his course, Kepesh finds in Kafka's narrative a literary form through which to explore his sexual despair.[57] Before travelling to Bruges, where Kepesh is going to read a paper about "Kafka's preoccupation with spiritual starvation" (PD 156-7), he and Claire visit Prague. In the city of Kafka, Kepesh talks with Soska, a dissident who lost his job as a professor after the Russian invasion. The ambiguous nature of Kepesh's engagement with Kafka emerges with increasing clarity from their conversations:

> "What I started to say about Kafka, about reading Kafka, is that stories of obstructed, thwarted K.'s banging their heads against invisible walls, well they suddenly had a disturbing new resonance for me. It was all a little less remote, suddenly, than the Kafka I'd read in college. In my own way, you see, I had come to know that sense of having been summoned – or of imagining yourself summoned – to a calling that turns out to be beyond you, yet in the face of every

[57] Several critics have focused on Kafka's influence on Roth. Geoffrey Green argues that for Roth Kafka is a literary father ("Metamorphosing Kafka: The Example of Philip Roth", in *Intertextual Identity. Reflections on Jewish-American Artists*, eds. Franco La Polla, Gabriella Morisco, Bologna, Patron Editore, 1997, pp. 81-90). Morton Levitt takes a different stance and argues that Roth's engagement with Kafka should not be seen as an attempt to establish a Jewish literary genealogy. Although, Kafka makes of Jewish experience in Central Europe a universal symbol, in his narrative the world "Jew" never appears. By opposition, the theme of Jewishness is pervasive in Roth's fiction ("Roth and Kafka: Two Jews", in *Critical Essays on Philip Roth*, ed. Sanford Pinsker, Boston, G. K. Hall & Co., 1982, p. 248). Daniel Medin's *Three Sons* is significant for my project since it identifies in Kafka a common genealogy for Roth and Coetzee, in addition to Sebald (*Three Sons. Franz Kafka and the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee, Philip Roth, and W. G. Seabald*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2010).

> compromising or farcical consequence, being unable to wise up and relinquish the goal […]" (PD 163).

Kepesh's calling may refer to the drive to experience sex with the same intensity it has in literary form, and to embody the literary heterosexual male ideals of seducer/libertine and the romantic lover. In reconsidering his previous sexual relationships, Kepesh now has the sense that his erotic struggles were Kafkaesque, since he reads Kafka exclusively in the light of his own sexual anxieties: "I sometimes wondered if *The Castle* isn't in fact linked to Kafka's own erotic blockage – a book engaged at every level with not reaching a climax" (PD 163). By stressing the protagonist's self-oriented approach to Kafka's narrative, *The Professor of Desire* questions the extent to which this orientation can be avoided.

In order to explore the meaning that Kafka and his narrative assume in *The Professor of Desire*, I want now to examine Roth's engagement with Kafka in a wider narrative context including the 1972 novella *The Breast*, in which the character of Kepesh appears for the first time, and the 1973 experimental essay "'I Always Wanted You to Admire my Fasting'; or Looking at Kafka". Inspired by Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" as well as Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose", *The Breast* is a satire in which Kepesh wakes up finding himself changed into a huge breast. "Looking at Kafka" is composed of an essay reading Kafka's narrative in the light of his male identity and a short tale in which a boy named Philip Roth relates the story of the relationship between his aunt and his teacher whose nickname is "Kafka". Roth focuses on the passages from "Letter to His Father" which express Kafka's aversion to marriage:

> "I am mentally incapable of marrying," he writes his father in the forty-five page letter he gave to his mother to deliver. ". . . the moment I make up my mind to marry I can no longer sleep, my head burns day and night, life can no longer be called life." He explains why. "Marrying is barred to me," he tells his father, "because it is your domain. Sometimes I imagine the map of the world spread out and you stretched diagonally across it. And I feel as if I could consider living in only those regions that are not covered by you or are not within your reach. And in keeping the conception I have of your magnitude, these are not many and not very comforting regions – and marriage is not among them."[58]

By quoting Kafka, Roth underlines that his resistance to marriage derives from the conflictual relationship with his father. Kafka felt that marriage was an extension of his father's will: becoming a "man", by being a husband (and eventually a father), meant

[58] Philip Roth, "'I Always Wanted You to Admire my Fasting'; or Looking at Kafka", *American Review 17*, May 1973 in *Reading Myself and Others*, p. 306.

fulfilling his father's expectations. For Roth this provides a key not only to Kafka's life, but also to his narrative: "We know that the 'illusory emptiness' at which K. gazed, upon first entering the village and looking up through the mist and darkness to the Castle, was no more vast and incomprehensible than the idea of himself as husband and father was to the young Kafka".[59] This analysis anticipates Kepesh's further step connecting Kafka's writing to his sexual struggle. In *The Professor of Desire*, Kepesh focuses on "Letter to His Father" as well, and he remembers the final examination in which he asked a student to comment on it: "What does Kafka mean when he says to his father 'My writing is all about you,' and adds, 'yet it did take its course in the direction determined by me'?" (PD 157). Despite the fact that Kafka feels unable to emancipate himself from his authoritative father, his writing and bachelorhood display his resistance to that paternal influence.[60] Recalling Posnock's distinction, Kafka's recalcitrance to marriage and the conventional male role seems to emerge as an expression of "mature immaturity" of his own. Nonetheless, as Louis Begley's analysis of Kafka's letters to his lovers shows, Kafka's feelings about marriage were more conflictual than Kepesh describes.[61] As in the case of the reading of Rimbaud's motto proposed by Kundera's authorial narrator in *Life is Elsewhere*, I am more interested in the way Roth's insights into Kafka's narrative reverberate in *The Professor of Desire* than discussing the plausibility of this reading itself.

The engagement with Kafka in the novel is further developed through the lectures that Kepesh imagines giving his students. Reminiscent of the ape protagonist of Kafka's "A Report to an Academy", Kepesh addresses his students as "'Honored Members of Literature 341'" (PD 171). He translates the meta-discourse of the ape on his experience as a man into a metaliterary discourse on the best approach to literature. Kepesh invites his students to restrain themselves from using terms such as structure, epiphany and persona: "I suggest this in the hope that if you talk about *Madame Bovary* in more or less the same tongue you use with the grocer, or your lover, you may be placed in a more intimate, a more interesting, in what even be called a more *referential* relationship with Flaubert and his heroine" (PD 173). Kepesh recommends his students to avoid reading *Madame Bovary* and the other texts he has selected for his course using

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59 Ibid., 308.

60 James Hawes questions several myths about Kafka including the authoritativeness of his father (*Excavating Kafka. The Truth Behind the Myth*, London, Quercus, 2008, pp. 132-143).

61 Louis Begley, *The Tremendous World I Have Inside My Head. Franz Kafka: A Biographical Essay*, New York, Atlas, 2008.

a set of critical devices which have the effect of rendering sexual impulse abstract and banal. By insisting on the need for a more referential, unmediated dialogue with literature, Kepesh exhorts his students to "locate these books in the world of experience" and to "learn something of value about life in one of its most puzzling and maddening aspects" (PD 173-74). If *The Professor of Desire* seems to imply that a self-oriented approach to literature is unavoidable, Kepesh's own lecture is more ambitious and perhaps more delusional: it constitutes a meta-literary manifesto and presents self-referentiality as the only productive approach to literature, the only one able to connect immediately and directly with its effects.

The interplay between masculinity and the literary characteristic of Kepesh's and Roth's erotic readings of Kafka reverberates in Kepesh's own life: "What makes it compellingly necessary, or at all appropriate, that I present myself to you young strangers in the guise not of your teacher but as the first of this semester's texts?" (PD 174). His urge to have his life read as a text displays a deeply Quixotic concern. Kepesh does not merely blur the boundaries between what he describes as the "world of experience" and literary texts, but articulates a narrative understanding of experience. As Américo Castro observes about *Don Quixote*, "[t]he written word suggests and sustains the live processes or serves as the expression of life; it […] appears articulated with the very existence of the individuals involved."[62] Despite his need to shape his life as a text, Kepesh tells his students: "I am devoted to fiction, and I assure you that in time I will tell you whatever I may know about it, but in truth nothing lives in me like my life" (PD 175). As opposed to the "magic of inexperience" which inspires Jaromil's poetry, Kepesh still claims to be striving for experience.

Kepesh's longing for authenticity is ambiguously presented through this parallel between himself and Kafka: "Franz Kafka was real, Brod was not making him up. And so am I real, nobody is making me up, other than myself" (PD 188). The reference here is to Max Brod, Kafka's editor and best friend. Roth addresses the way Brod shaped the critical understanding of Kafka and his work. Revisionism about the reception of Kafka has increasingly stressed the intrusive role that Brod played as an editor in creating the figure of Kafka as an artist. In his introduction to a collection of Kafka's stories, the British novelist Adam Thirlwell regards Brod as the most influential interpreter of Kafka, but strongly criticises the reading of Kafka that Brod proposes:

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[62] Américo Castro, "Incarnation in 'Don Quixote'", trans. Zenia Sacks Da Silva, in *Cervantes Across the Centuries*, eds. Angel Flores, M. J. Bernardete, New York, Gordian Press, 1969, p. 161.

> Brod was not, in my opinion, a great reader; because he had a theory of a Great Writer, he was not a great reader.
>
> Brod's theory of a Great Writer ran something like this: a Great Writer was serious, racked by metaphysical doubt, a seer with a message for trouble humanity, a person preternaturally sensitive to pain and suffering. It is Brod's interpretation, therefore – not Kafka's stories themselves – which are correctly described by the adjective Kafkaesque.[63]

Although Kepesh claims that Brod did not invent Kafka, Brod's idealised reading of Kafka expresses his own feeling of friendship and admiration for the author. Commenting on Brod's editing on Kafka's works, Thirlwell observes that "Brod's overall project" was "to sanctify Kafka, to make him a writer of teleological scruple, a great writer with a message of existential loneliness without God, and a writer of self-contained stories."[64] On the one hand, Kepesh resists Brod by reading Kafka's narrative in the light of Kafka's supposed erotic blockage. On the other hand, alluding to Brod's personal reading of Kafka, *The Professor of Desire* reminds the reader of the unavoidability of a self-oriented approach to literature.

However, having presented his life to his students as a text to interpret, Kepesh makes claims for the authorship of the fiction of his own life. In the second volume of *Don Quixote*, the Don learns that someone has written a book inspired by his life and that characters in this book have read it. The book Don Quixote refers to actually exists: it was written by Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda in the ten years passed between the publication of the two volumes written by Cervantes, which were published respectively in 1605 and 1615. For the first time in the history of literature a character can realise he is being read by someone and tries to re-appropriate his own story. As Castro underlines, "[t]he Don Quixote of Part II continues himself and the literary interpretation of flesh and blood, and also as a human-literary figure […]."[65] By presenting his life as a text, Kepesh shows that critical interpretation is not limited to the literary works but involves ordinary experience. Even though Kepesh has stopped reading his life through ennobling Chekhovian frames, and seems to have overcome romantic disillusionment, the exegesis of his sexuality is still an everyday exercise through which to shape his masculinity. I go on now to investigate the ways in which

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63 Adam Thirlwell, "The Last Flippant Writer", in *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, Vintage Books, London, 2012, p. xxiv.

64 Ibid., p. xxv.

65 Castro, "Incarnation in 'Don Quixote'", p. 161.

Kepesh's search for a literary form for his masculinity is unavoidably set in relation to others' representations of his life.

**(iv) The search for form and the limits of introspection**

Kepesh's self-absorption arises in a new form when he uses Soska's story of struggles against an authoritarian regime as a way of expressing his alienation own from his body: "I can compare the body's utter single-mindedness, its cold indifference and absolute contempt for the well-being of the spirit, to some unyielding, authoritarian regime" (PD 162). Kepesh addresses the subject by paraphrasing Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" and presenting an imaginary speech he gives to his students as "an open account to you of the life I formerly led as a human being" (PD 175). Kepesh feels foreign to his sexuality as much as Kafka's ape is alien to life as a human being. Not even in his dreams can Kepesh be emancipated from Kafka's universe. He dreams of meeting a tourist guide, who turns out to be Herbie, the comedian readers hear about at the start of the novel who worked in his father's hotel. Herbie offers Kepesh the opportunity to interview Eva, an ageing prostitute who in the dream sleeps with Kafka. The oneiric vision confirms the impact that Herbie had on Kepesh with his mentoring in scatological humour, as Derek Parker Royal suggests:

> The unforgettable Herbie Bratasky goes on to hold at least as much influence over the development of Kepesh as do Chekhov and Flaubert, if not more. In fact, in a profoundly disturbing dream that Kepesh experiences while on a trip to Prague, Bratasky becomes the professor's guide – the Virgil to Kepesh's Dante, if you will – into the very depths of Kafkadom, at the very centre of which sits Kafka's aged prostitute. Bratasky's usurpation of influence can even be read as […] a shift from his earlier forays into Jamesian/Flaubertian realism and, with his increased emphasis on comedy […].[66]

The presence of Herbie signals the satire in *The Professor of Desire*. By desacralizing the figure of Kafka, not just his works, the meeting of the prostitute with Kafka radicalises Roth's ironic attitude to Kafka in *The Breast*: "Where better for irony abound than à la tombe de Franz Kafky?" (PD 166), Kepesh wonders in continuing his literary exploration of Kafka's sexuality.

In the dream Kepesh carries on with his metaliterary discourse on Kafka and asks his students: "Next question: What, if any is the relationship between Kafka's

[66] Derek Parker Royal, "Roth, Literary Influence, and Postmodernism, in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, ed. Timothy Parrish, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 23-24.

whore and today's story, 'The Hunger Artist?'" (PD 178). This further reference to "The Hunger Artist" shows Kapesh's proximity to Baumgarten's aesthetic. Kepesh questions Eve about Kafka's sexual performances until she offers to show him her genitals, which Herbie regards as "a national literary monument" (PD 181). *The Professor of Desire* explores Brook's definition of the body as "a prime vehicle of narrative significations".[67] Kepesh consents to look at Eve's genitalia and exhorts his students: "'Students of literature […]. You must face the unseemly thing itself! […] There, *there* is your final exam" (PD 181). By looking at her genitals as an exam, he converts her body into an "'epistemophilic' project".[68] Kepesh's search for the sexual experience at the heart of Kafka's narrative suggests that sexual desire generates literary fantasies more than being shaped by them. Where Coetzee in *Disgrace* stresses that the female body is recalcitrant to signification, as I argued in Chapter One, Roth conversely displays the process of literary signification as stemming from the overwhelming materiality of the body.

In "Some Notes on Roth's *My Life as a Man* and *The Professor of Desire*", Kundera describes Kepesh's sexual struggles as exemplary of contemporary men's relation with their bodies:

> [I]n Philip Roth sexual freedom is nothing more than something given, acquired, universal, banal, codified: not dramatic, tragic, or lyrical.
>
> […] Man no longer finds himself in opposition to laws, parents, and conventions. Everything is allowed – the only remaining adversary is our own body, stripped, demystified, unmasked. Philip Roth is a great historian of American eroticism. He is also the poet of that strange solitude of the man, abandoned, face to face with his own body.[69]

The estrangement from the body explored by Kundera is epitomized by Kepesh's proximity to Kafka's hunger artist. Nonetheless, I would rather argue that Kepesh's difficulties arise from the oscillation between a body stripped of desire and an eroticized body. Looking again at the analogy between Kepesh and the hunger artist, it appears that the hunger and appetite also characterise his affair with Claire. In the climax of their passion Kepesh and Claire "have come to the very brink of tearing flesh with cannibalized jaws", but when they "no longer *succumb* to desire", their bodies seem to

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67 Brooks, *Body Work*, p. xii.

68 Ibid., p. 5.

69 Milan Kundera, "Some Notes on Roth's *My Life as a Man* and *The Professor of Desire*", in *Reading Philip Roth,* eds. Asher Milbauerand, Donald Watson, London, MacMillan Press, 1988, p. 165.

lose their meaning outside the dynamics of desire: "Teeth […] are simply teeth again, and tongues are tongues, and limbs are limbs" (PD 188-89). For Kepesh the eroticized body and its imperative stimulate the generation of literary meanings, but the body devoid of desire is a meaningless space he cannot inhabit.

For Kundera *The Professor of Desire* explores Kepesh's feeling of isolation, "the solitude of a man confronted by sex", in opposition to the love between his parents.[70] Their presence pervades the novel with "the nostalgia for the love itself, for that moving and old fashioned love of which the modern world has been deprived".[71] The search for an emotional frame in which to embed erotic impulse is at the heart of Kepesh's intellectualism, and is symbolized by the love between his parents:

> This is not the futile intellectual exhibitionism of that type of literature which narcissistically refers back to itself. Rather, it is a way to preserve the past within the novel's horizon, and not to abandon the characters of fiction to an empty void in which the ancestral voices will no longer be audible.[72]

The intertextual web of references woven by Kepesh reverberates with a nostalgia for an ancient love. Unlike Kundera, Hermione Lee reads intertextuality in *The Professor of Desire* as a subversion of literary legacy driven by the erotic impulses of the body: "The desecration of Kafka's image in the dream violently subverts the lecture's attempt to reconcile the conscientious, dedicated life of the mind with the shameful secret life of the body."[73] I believe the concepts of desecration and preservation interwoven in the intertextuality of *The Professor of Desire* outlined by Kundera and Lee are complementary, and that they describe the changing nature of Kepesh's relation to literary works. I interpret this oscillation in the light of Gombrowicz's understanding of form. As the narrator of *Ferdydurke* says about our relation with form, "we conform to it or we violate and demolish it, or we let it create us."[74] Kepesh's desire both to desecrate and to preserve the memory of literary texts responds to the dynamics of form that for Gombrowicz rule our lives.

For as I have argued in my analysis of *Life is Elsewhere*, the pursuit of a form does not only involve literary practices, but also the relationships Jaromil establishes

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70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., pp. 165-166.

73 Hermione Lee, "'You Must Change Your Life': Mentors, Doubles, Literary Influences in the Search for the Self", in *Philip Roth*, London, Methuen, 1982, p. 68.

74 Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, p. 80.

with other characters. In his *Diary* Gombrowicz draws attention to the intersubjective nature of the dynamic of form and hints at "the concept of Interhuman Form as a superior creative force".[75] Gombrowicz clarifies the notion in an interview with Piero Sanavio: "in my first novel [*Ferdydurke*] I talked about the interhuman form that is created between beings, between people, and is imposed on us, in a sense, let's say that when I am with mister A I am a person and when I am with mister B I am an *another* person."[76] With these words in mind let me return to *The Professor of Desire*. In the course of the narration Kepesh feels "de-Kafkafied", "de-Birgittized" and "de-Helenized" (PD 168-9, 196). Wondering about his life, he conceives of himself as "Baumgarten Klingered and Schonbrunned into submission" (PD 131-32). In seeing his lovers and friends as the embodiment of certain notions such as pure desire, repression and salvation and in defining himself in relation to these qualities, Kepesh configures identity as "a relational concept" and "an intersubjective phenomenon" in the way Gombrowicz conceives of form.[77] The interaction between the materiality of Kepesh's desire and literary models discloses his subjectivity: his assimilation of literary models and his reshaping of these models (whether conscious or unconscious) present the dynamics of form as the very dynamics of Kepesh's masculinity.

How is this interconnectedness of the self addressed in the literary legacy of *Disgrace*, *Life is Elsewhere,* and *The Professor of Desire*? In Chapter One, I examined the manner in which Lurie's writing enacts the dynamics of inter- and intrasubjectivity, which place him in relation to other texts and shapes a dialogic interplay of countervoices. In conceiving his life Quixotically as a text to be interpreted by his students, Kepesh arrives at an understanding of his consciousness as based on otherness; and of how his idea of himself is constantly renewed by the forms through which others shape their image of him. Nonetheless, the intersubjective nature of the self that these novels display does not involve a mutual understanding between the self and the other, but rather unintelligibility. I would like now to refer to *Franz Kafka. The Necessity of Form* in which Stanley Corngold focuses on what he describes as moments of

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75 Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*. *Volume Three: 1961-66*, trans. Lillian Vallee, ed. Jan Kott, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1993, p. 182.

76 My translation. The original Italian reads: "in quel mio primo romanzo [*Ferdydurke*] parlavo della forma interumana, che si crea tra gli esseri, le persone che ci è imposta, nel senso, diciamo che quando sono con il signor A io sono una persona e quando mi trovo con il signor B sono un'*altra* persona.". Pietro Sanavio, *Gombrowicz: la forma e il rito*, Padua and Venice, Marsilio Editori, 1974, pp. 35-36.

77 Goddard, *Gombrowicz, Polish Modernism, and the Subversion of Form*, pp. 25-26.

"consternation", when one human being perceives another human being as inhuman. Corngold argues that "intersubjective dialogue in literature is left behind for a moment that contests the power of subjects to understand language, including literary language."[78] Corngold also connects intersubjective relations to Cervantes, Flaubert and Kafka who form the constellation of authors who centrally inform *Disgrace*, *Life is Elsewhere*, and *The Professor of Desire*:

> Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, and Kafka's "The Judgement" describe different characters' responses to consternation. Don Quixote saves himself by enlarging his credulity, blaming magic, and summoning up religious patience: God will help His faithful knight. In *Sentimental Education*, Frédéric Moreau saves himself by constructing erogenous rhetorical fictions of selfhood; mastery of the Oedipus complex will save the consternated lover. In "The Judgement," Georg Bendermann consents to his literalization and death; […]. Literature rewrites anthropology by suggesting that interpersonality is founded on the violent suppression of a more native intelligibility. Interpersonality is the reward for the lost knowledge of the universal failure of reading.[79]

Corngold observes how Cervantes, Flaubert and Kafka display the paradox of interpersonal relations based on the suppression of mutual understanding. We can now rethink the failure to "read" the other in Jaromil's relationship with women, not as the outcome of narcissism but in relation to an ontological incommunicability. In the same way, Lurie's struggles with his lovers and his daughter may expose a failure of intersubjectivity that is larger than sexuality, even though it is exacerbated by a masculinist gendering dependent on the denial of the female body. The stress on the unavoidability of a self-oriented approach to literature in *The Professor of Desire* can now be seen as the consequence of the impossibility of reading or understanding the other.

The failure of intelligibility does not only affect the relationship with the other, but offers an insight into the opacity of one's own emotions, as I discussed in Chapter One through the intertextual references to *Madame Bovary* in *Disgrace*. I want to offer a few comments on the relationship between the narratives of Flaubert and Kafka and their presence in *The Professor of Desire*. The influence of Flaubert on Kafka is well known. In a 1912 letter to Felice Bauerto whom he was twice engaged, Kafka writes

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78 Stanley Corngold, *Franz Kafka. The Necessity of Form*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 166.

79 Ibid., pp. 175-176.

that he has always felt Flaubert's "spiritual son, albeit a weak and awkward one."[80] Albert Mingelgrun argues that Kafka admired Flaubert for his decision not to get married and to dedicate himself to literature.[81] Flaubert wrote that "I am bachelor and a recluse."[82] Kepesh's reading of *Letter to His Father* and his celebration of Kafka's resistance to marriage are reminiscent of the feeling Kafka had for Flaubert. Thirlwell reads Kafka's narrative in the light of Flaubert's influence on a more specifically literary level and describes Kafka's narrative as an examination of "the constant inability of humans to introspect correctly".[83] For Thirlwell Kafka's stories show two types of character: the central ones who, despite believing in a certain truth, are deeply aware of the precariousness of their understanding, such as the animal in "The Burrow"; and the secondary characters, such as the members of Gregor Samsa's family, who are significant for their lack of awareness and for their theatrical display of feeling. Resisting Brod's reading of Kafka as Kundera and Roth do, Thirlwell argues that Kafka should be read in the context of European fiction and Flaubert in particular:

> For Kafka's tradition is the ironic and stylish tradition of European fiction, deriving from Flaubert. As such, it is an examination of psychology; more precisely it is an examination of the constant temptations of vanity and other illusions, the constant inability of humans to introspect correctly.
>
> In his third blue octavo notebook, for instance, Kafka writes: "How pathetically scanty my self-knowledge is compared with say, my knowledge of my room. (Evening.) Why? There is no such thing as observation of the inner world, as there is of the outer world. At least descriptive psychology is probably, taken as a whole, a form of anthropomorphism, a nibbling at our own limits. The inner world can only be experienced, not described."[84]

Exposing the limits of Kepesh's self-reflexivity in understanding his life and his masculinity, *The Professor of Desire* reflects Kafka's (and Flaubert's) skepticism about the ability to introspect correctly. The opacity of Kepesh's emotions reverberates in the web of intertextual references he draws on in attempting to approach his body's urges, regardless of his sense that it is the body which generates literary meanings: the

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80 Kafka's feeling for Flaubert resembles veneration: "*L'Éducation Sentimentale* is a book that for many years has been as dear to me as are only two or three people; whenever and wherever I open it, I am startled and succumb to it completely". Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, eds. Erich Heller, Jürgen Born, trans. James Ster, London, Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1974, p. 42.

81 Albert Mingelgrun, "Kafka à la rencontre de Flaubert", *Europe*, Nov. 1971, 49 (511), pp. 168-178.

82 Gustave Flaubert, *The Selected Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1954, p. 186.

83 Thirlwell, "The Last Flippant Writer", p. xxi.

84 Ibid., pp. xxi-xxii.

interpretations of his first sexual experiences as libertine adventures, and of his relationships with Helen and Claire as Chekhovian texts, fail to provide him with any understanding about the nature of his own feelings. The elusiveness of Kepesh's urges informs the co-dependency of literature and emotion in *The Professor of Desire*.

At the end of the novel, Kepesh can only shift from one literary model to another – "I am no sympathetic, unspectacular sufferer out of a muted Chekhov tale of ordinary human affliction. No, more hideous by far, more like Gogol's berserk and mortified amputee" (PD 247). The intertextual dimension of *The Professor of Desire* expresses the impossibility of introspection. In discussing *Life is Elsewhere* I referred to Mihanen's reading of Rimbaud's "Enfance" and I argued that in understanding his body in contraposition to his mother, the male infant conceives of his subjectivity as a space of indeterminacy. In *The Professor of Desire,* this sense of indeterminacy is inflected through the narratives of several authors and addresses the ambiguity of Kepesh's feelings. Corngold argues that for Frédéric, the protagonist of *Sentimental Education,* "rhetoric functions to create, repress, and recreate desire."[85] Literary references for Kepesh have the same function that rhetoric has for Frédéric: Kepesh's engagement with literature is not simply a form through which to seek self-knowledge, but a way of enacting his desire.

Before focusing on the implications of this performative dimension of Kepesh's desire, I want to underline that Kepesh places the ability to live pleasure in relation to the ability to introspect and to write:

> I have been wondering if there has ever been in America a novelist with a point of view toward the taking and the living of pleasure even vaguely resembling Colette's, an American writer, man or woman, stirred as deeply as she is by scent and warmth and color, someone as sympathetic to the range of the body's urgings, as attuned to the world's every sensuous offering, a connoisseur of the finest gradations of amorous feeling, who is nonetheless immune to fanaticism of any sort, except, as with Colette, a fanatical devotion of the self's honorable survival. […] One thinks of her as egotistic, in the sharpest, crispest sense of the word, the most pragmatic of sensualists, her capacity for protective self-scrutiny in perfect balance with the capacity to be carried away (PD 191).

In surveying the American literary landscape, Kepesh cannot find anyone as sympathetic to the body's urgings and senses as Colette. Kepesh connects her capacity to abandon herself to her desire with her capacity for introspection. Awareness of one's sensations and emotions is presented here as a condition for experiencing pleasure. Just

[85] Corngold, *Franz Kafka*, p. 187.

like in the case of Birgitta and Helen, Kepesh projects again his masculine fantasy of a total consonance with pleasure on to the female, reiterating again his sense of a masculine inability to access pleasure. Furthermore, Colette is described as "immune to fanaticism of any sort" (PD 191): an expression which seems to hint at the literary notions of desire to which Kepesh has intensely adhered and which have emerged as an obstacle to his self-understanding.

With these considerations on the unintelligibility of emotions in mind, let me now address the performative nature of desire. Kepesh asks his students why it is "compellingly necessary" for him to present his life as a text (PD 174). As the title of the novel stresses, Kepesh is a "professor", but as he says his students by organising the course for them he hopes to learn something about desire. Kepesh does not seem to have any knowledge about the nature of desire. In "Professing Desire: The Kepesh Novels", Kevin West discusses Kepesh's intellectual efforts to synthetize the conflicting elements of his desire and considers the different meaning of the word 'professor':

> If Kepesh "professes" desire, then he teaches it as a professor, of course, but he also, according to another meaning of the term, claims to have some particular skill in it […] More accurate is the definition that reads, "to affirm or declare one's faith in or allegiance to," for Kepesh seems incapable of being the master of the desire he follows, rather only its subject, and indeed proclaims this allegiance and faith – professes himself – in the contemplated address to his erotic desire students.[86]

Understanding Kepesh's engagement with masculine desire as an act of faith sheds light on his incapacity to understand the nature of his urgings. Only by conceiving of his life as a text to be read to his students he can have a sense of them: "[T]he time has come", Kepesh tells his students, "to begin to disclose the undisclosable – the story of the *professor's* desire" (PD 174). By writing 'professor' in italics Roth seems to draw his readers' attention to the multiple meanings of the word. Kepesh's "undisclosable" desire resonates with the opacity of his emotions, which is at the heart of his admiration for Colette's self-scrutiny.

In conclusion Kepesh's profession is a performative act which both displays the failure to find self-knowledge and enacts his attempt give a form to his sexuality. In *The Professor of Desire*, the representation of the limits of self-reflexivity informs the notion of masculinity as an intersubjective, cultural and biological form, and presents the as yet unfulfilled desire to shape impulses prior to the acquisition of any knowledge.

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[86] Kevin West, "Professing Desire: The Kepesh Novels", in *Philip Roth: New Perspective on an American Author*, ed. Derek Parker Royal, Westport, Praeger-Greenwood, 2005, pp. 236-237.

Drawing on the representations of masculinity and the limits of self-reflexivity in *Life is Elsewhere* and *The Professor of Desire*, in the next chapter I shall examine how the male characters of Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa explore their heterosexual desire through their practice of writing. Their attempts to give shape to masculinity reveal the tension between writing and self-reflection.

## Chapter Three

## Authorial Masculinities:
## Writing and Self-Reflection in Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa

*His true Penelope was Flaubert*
Ezra Pound

In *Textuality and Sexuality* Still and Worton write that "manhood is a *script*".[1] This chapter examines writing as an engendering practice considering three scripts of masculinity. Drawing on the masculine archetypes that populate Kundera's narrative, I suggest that in the works of Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa heterosexual masculinity emerges also as a form of authorship or as an attempt at authorship. Firstly, I examine how Milanku, the narrator of Kundera's *Slowness,* reads Vivant Denon's "No Tomorrow". Milanku's creative response articulates an authorial masculinity able to reflect on heterosexual desire and to overcome masculine narcissistic urges. Secondly, commenting on Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, I discuss the way in which Marito's rise to a discursive position of authority is developed through his writing, in a balance between authorial control and romantic sentimentality. Finally, studying Roth's *My Life as a Man*, I explore how Peter's struggle to write an account of his marriage questions the possibility of shaping a narrative understanding of his own masculinity.

### 1. *Slowness*

#### (i) Nostalgia and masculine archetypes in Kundera and Roth

In discussing the scripts of masculinity which the novels of Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa enact, my starting point is the dialogue on the literary archetypes of masculinity Kundera and Roth in particular have established in their fictional as well as non-fictional works. In "Some Notes on Roth", Kundera addresses *The Professor of Desire* and examines the notion that desire seems to have been freed by moral and religious concerns in the twentieth century. Kundera's considerations evoke those of Dr Havel, the protagonist of "Symposium" and "Dr. Havel After Twenty Years", two of the short stories included in his *Laughable Loves*. Havel focuses his attention on the figure of

[1] Judith Still, Michael Worton, "Introduction", in *Textuality and Sexuality. Reading Theories and Practices*, eds. Judith Still, Michael Worton, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1993, p. 39.

Don Juan and says: "Don Juan, after all, was a conqueror. […]. A Great Conqueror. But I ask you, how can you be a conqueror in a domain where no one refuses you, where everything is possible and everything is permitted? Don Juan's era has come to an end."[2] In "Some Notes on Roth" Kundera sketches the background of the change that has deprived Don Juan of its tragic dimension. In his study dedicated to Don Juan, Giovanni Macchia argues that the definitive version of this myth appeared in the seventeenth century and that it expresses the need for transgression of a rigid Christian morality.[3] In the contemporary scenario Macchia and Kundera describe, Havel is a Don Juan who aims to seduce women who have not been educated to resist their impulses. The banality of sexual relations reduces modern seducers to a comic role, and Havel himself states "I am at most a figure of comedy".[4] As I shall discuss in the next pages, this sense of ridiculous is crucial in the representations of masculinity of Kundera and Roth.

*Laughable Loves* continues the dialogue of Kundera and Roth. In 1974, Roth wrote the introduction for its American edition. In recognising that the "alleged" seductiveness of Kundera's seducers' lack of pathos, Roth observes that in these stories "Don Juanism is viewed as a sport played by a man against a team of women" and "a way of life in which women […] willingly participate as 'sexual objects'"[5]. Besides presenting the relation between men and women as antagonistic and hinting at the objectification of women in Kundera's narrative, this review published three years before *The Professor of Desire* strikes me particularly because it anticipates Kepesh's contrasting feelings, the central character in that novel. On the one hand, it sketches the scenario in which Kepesh's fantasies as a seducer are to be frustrated by Birgitta's emancipation. On the other hand, in the "detached Chekhovian tenderness" of the story entitled "Let the Old Dead Make Room for the Young Dead", Roth notices echoes in the feeling of nostalgia experienced by his own character Kepesh.[6] The "concern with the painful and touching consequences of time passing and old selves dying" that Roth

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2 Milan Kundera, *Laughable Loves*, trans. Suzanne Rappaport, London, Faber and Faber, 1991, pp. 140-141.

3 Giovanni Macchia, *Vita, avventure e morte di Don Giovanni*, Milano, Adelphi, 1991. Similarly, Camille Dumoulié argues that the dominant theme in the myth of Don is the conflict against the laws of the father (*Don Juan ou l'héroïsme du désir*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1993, p. 27).

4 Kundera, *Laughable Loves*, p. 142.

5 Philip Roth, "Milan Kundera", in *Reading Myself and Others*, New York, Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 262-263.

6 Ibid.

detects in *Laughable Love* is a theme characteristic of Chekhov's narrative which strongly emerges when Kepesh receives his father's visit. Kundera himself underlines this nostalgia for the way of loving of Kepesh's parents in opposition to the solitude Roth's characters live confronting sexual freedom, as I discussed in Chapter Two.

In *Kundera, or The Memory of Desire*, Eva Le Grand focuses on the sense of nostalgia characteristic of Kundera's fiction. In examining mainly Kundera's works written in Czech, Le Grand argues that his narrative engages with Don Juan's "double textual journey, both scriptural and erotic".[7] Kundera's modern Don Juans express "a desire for memory – borne by a nostalgic gaze back to Europe's past, to its 'erotic dream'", as Havel witnesses.[8] Le Grand shows that Don Juan is not the only figure of eroticism structuring Kundera's fiction: his novels are pervaded by the tension between Don Juan and another mythical literary figure of Eros, Tristan. While Don Juan emerges in a figuration of "asentimental eroticism" in Kundera's characters, Tristan represents the archetype of the "sentimental love" which fascinates Jaromil in Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*, and which Kundera describes as the defining quality of the *homo sentimentalis* in *Immortality*.[9] Referring to Denis de Rougemont's *L'Amour et l'Occident* (translated into English as *Love in the Western World*), Le Grand underlines that, while Don Juan and Tristan are traditionally presented as antithetical to each other, Kundera "shows the two figures of desire in double exposure in their disturbing proximity and interchangeability".[10] Let me return to *Life is Elsewhere* and argue that Jaromil displays the proximity of these two archetypes: despite exploring sentimental/lyrical love in his poems, he dreams of being a seducer called Xavier. Le Grand's analysis is essential in identifying two recurrent models of male heterosexuality whose tracks, as I argued in Chapter Two, we can find not only in Kundera's narrative, but also in the fictions of Roth.

This interchange between Roth and Kundera illuminates the role they each attribute to these literary archetypes in shaping straight male subjectivities. Kundera's narrative creates several variations on the archetypes of Don Juan and Tristan, articulating their opposition in different ways and challenging it as well. In *The*

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7 Eva Le Grand, *Kundera, or The Memory of Desire*, trans. Lin Burman, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999, p. 93.

8 Ibid., p. 6.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 97.

*Unbearable Lightness of the Being*,[11] Kundera imagines womanizers who act according to the impulses embodied by both Don Juan and Tristan, describing them in terms of literary forms: the lyrical seducer projects his ideal of love on to one lover after another and can be seen as a serial *homo sentimentalis*, while the epic seducer considers a woman merely for the aesthetic features he wants to add to his list of conquests. In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera returns to this classification and explains he has derived the distinction between the epic and the lyric from Hegel: "the lyric is the expression of a self-revealing subjectivity", while "the epic arises from the urge to seize hold of the objectivity of the world."[12] In the manner of *Life is Elsewhere*, literary genres express the attitudes a man can take in his relationships with women. Kundera regrets he had to change the terms of this opposition in the French translation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in order to adopt notions more familiar to the French reader, turning "the lyrical womanizer into the romantic fornicator, and the epic womanizer into the libertine fornicator."[13] This adaptation reveals how Kundera models on literary genres the typologies of masculinity he conceives.[14]

A further insight into the way Kundera thinks of the relation between literary models and masculinity is offered by his novel *Slowness*. Drawing on past literary representation in a more conscious way than the protagonists of *Disgrace*, *Life is*

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[11] Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of the Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, London, Faber and Faber, 1999, p. 197.

[12] Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher, London, Faber and Faber, 1988, pp. 137-138.

[13] Ibid., p. 138. In addition, Kundera's *The Book of Laughter of Forgetting* (1978) also refers to the idealization of women and seduction as the trends defining heterosexual masculinity "Men have always been divided into two categories. Worshipers of women, otherwise known as poets, and misogynists, or, more accurately, gynophobes. Worshipers or poets revere traditional feminine values such as feelings, the home, motherhood, fertility, sacred flashes of hysteria, and the divine voice of nature within us, while in misogynists or gynophobes these values inspire a touch of terror. Worshipers revere women's femininity, while misogynists always prefer women to femininity" (trans. Aaron Asher, London, Faber and Faber, 1996, pp. 180-181).

[14] Insofar as the archetype of Kundera's epic seducer stems from the figure of Don Juan, donjuanism and *libertinage* should not be confused (we should also keep in mind this distinction when reading Kepesh's juvenile adventures which display the linkage between Don Juan-like seducers and libertines). I adopt here the term *libertinage* following Jean-Pierre Dubost who underlines the heterogeneity of libertine works and argues that we cannot identify a genuine libertine discourse which would justify the use of "libertinism". Examining both the continuity and the differences between Don Juan and libertines, Macchia observes that, in entering libertine discourse, the figure of Don Juan loses his original cockiness and is intellectualised, in line with libertine seducers who tend to declare their libertine doctrine and a Machiavellian view of love (58-66). For Dubost Don Juan "expounds […] the most fundamental paradigms of libertine desire" and "anticipates in a very coherent manner the genuine libertine problem of disenchantment and the erosion of values" ("Libertinage and Rationality: From the 'Will to Knowledge' to 'Libertine Textuality'", *Libertinage and Modernity*, *Yale French Studies* 94, ed. Catherine Cusset, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 54).

*Elsewhere*, and *The Professor of Desire*, the narrator of *Slowness*, Milanku reflects in his writing on heterosexual relationships not by adopting a masculine archetype as a model, but rather the figure of a female seducer from a libertine novella. While Kundera's previous fictional works were published originally in Czech, *La Lenteur* is originally written in French and translated into English as *Slowness*.[15] Although the novel is generally considered as a break from the previous ones,[16] I intend to argue that *Slowness* expresses concerns about the changes that eroticism has undergone in the twentieth century that Kundera explores in "Some Notes on Roth" and in Havel's words. My aim is to examine how Milanku's writing and his masculine fantasy of femininity interweave in shaping a form of authorial masculinity and a reflection on heterosexual love which together emancipate him from an acritical assimilation of the archetype of the seducer on the one hand and the romantic lover on the other.

**(ii) Ridiculous men and imagined women**

Milanku relates the encounter he had thirty years before with an American woman. The meeting is dated back to the Sixties, "the era of *total abandon*" as Kundera describes it quoting from Roth in his study on *The Professor of Desire*.[17] The woman lectured him on sexual liberation and depicted what Milanku defines as "[t]he religion of orgasm", the reduction of coition to an obstacle to be overcome as quickly as possible to reach the sexual climax (S 4).[18] Recalling this meeting, Milanku asks himself: "Why has the pleasure of slowness disappeared?" (S 4). He elucidates the ambiguous notion of the "pleasure of slowness" by reference to Vivant Denon's *Point de lendemain*, a libertine

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15 Several critics have focused on Kundera's relationship with the French language: Frank Søren observes the importance that moving to France has in Kundera's life (*Migration and Literature. Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjærstad*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), Michelle Woods details Kundera's gradual passage to French as his writing language (*Translating Milan Kundera*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 2006), Christine Angela Knoop discusses the interconnectedness of Kundera's novels and essays written in French "as a conscious way of opting for a cultural and literary space that accommodate the breadth of his theoretical and fictional literary production" (*Kundera and the Ambiguities of Authorship*, London, MHRA, 2011, p. 15).

16 *Slowness* represents a watershed in Kundera's narrative. François Ricard observes that it has an inaugural and distinctive character and marks the abandonment of the rigid architecture based on the number seven characteristic of Kundera's previous novels ("Le Roman où aucun mot ne serait sérieux", in Milan Kundera, *La Lenteur*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998, pp. 185-197). Guy Scarpetta links this newfound freedom of expression to the adoption of French, as if along with the language, Kundera embraced the stylistic freedom of Diderot ("Divertimento à la française", in *L'Âge d'or du roman*, Paris, Grasset & Fasquelle, 1996, pp. 253-270).

17 Milan Kundera, "Some Notes on Roth's *My Life as a Man* and *The Professor of Desire*", in *Reading Philip Roth*, eds. Asher Milbauerand, Donald Watson, London, MacMillan Press, 1988, p. 164.

18 Milan Kundera, *La Lenteur*, Paris, Gallimard, 1995; in *Slowness*, trans. Linda Asher, London, Faber and Faber, 1996.

novella published in 1777 and translated into English as *No Tomorrow*, relating the night of love between Madame de T. and the young Chevalier. The meta-literary dimension of *Slowness* responds to the very words Kundera wrote about *The Professor of Desire*:

> The rapidity with which history unfolds […] confronts a novelist with a quite new task: to preserve that sense of continuity which is being lost, […], and to indirectly demonstrate the parallel between our way of living (of feeling, of thinking, of loving) with the half-forgotten ways of our predecessors.[19]

By examining the notion of desire embodied by Denon's *No Tomorrow* and by incorporating it into his writing, Milanku exemplifies the task that Kundera designs for the novelist. His reading of *No Tomorrow* as the text holding the secrets of the pleasure of slowness displays the will to remember our predecessors' way of loving. Milanku is revealed to be the creator of the storylines we read in the moments when his characters start populating the dreams of his wife Véra: "'you're the victim of my crazy imagination'", Milanku says to her, "'As if your dreams are a wastebasket where I toss pages that are too stupid'" (S 77-8). Through this metaliterary device, the novel Milanku is writing emerges as a means to articulate his thoughts in the way Kundera does with his novels, as I discussed concerning *Life is Elsewhere* in Chapter Two. Finally, the fact that Milanku is a writer is the last of a series of elements which correspond to Kundera's own life: Milanku, the common nickname of Milan, is a fictional Czech writer who lives in France, and his wife is called Véra. Even though *Life is Elsewhere* also features a projection of Kundera as a man in his forties, and who appears to oppose Jaromil's emotional immaturity and narcissism,[20] I would like to stress from the start that Kundera's decision to design an alter-ego of himself in *Slowness* so explicitly invites us to look at this choice with suspicion, and to doubt fundamentally that Milanku is an entirely assumes the voice of the narrator, even though his ideas are reminiscent of the positions Kundera expresses allegorically and formally. As I shall argue, we need carefully to observe the intricacies of the particularly narrative function that Milanku's narratorial reading of *No Tomorrow* plays within the novelistic structure of *Slowness*.

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19 Kundera, "Some Notes on Roth", p. 165.

20 In *The Art of the Novel* Kundera claims that "the middle-aged man […] is among of all my characters the one closest to me" (129).

In addressing the interconnectedness of authorship and masculinity in Milanku's writing, my first step is to describe the ways in which *No Tomorrow* is assimilated in *Slowness,* and the ways in which the figure of Madame de T. sheds a light on the representation of the relation between the sexes in Kundera's narrative. Milanku summarises the plot of *No Tomorrow*. The narrator, whom Milanku refers to as "The Chevalier", is the lover of the Comtesse. One evening, Milanku tells us, the Chevalier goes to the theatre where he meets Madame de T., a friend of the Comtesse. The Chevalier is surprised when Madame de T. invites him to see her house because he knows her lover, the Marquis. While his wife Véra is sleeping, Milanku wonders about the walk Madame de T. and the Chevalier take together. He focuses on Madame de T.'s words by quoting from Denon's work. After kissing the Chevalier, Madame de T. turns away and walks on. Milanku observes that behind her behaviour lies a wish to extend their meeting: "What stagecraft! After the initial befuddlement of the senses, it was necessary to show that love's pleasure is not yet a ripened fruit; […] it was necessary to create a setback, a tension, a suspense" (S 29). In Denon's original text, the narrator senses: "All this was like an initiation rite."[21] In a manner that contrasts to some extent with contemporary erotic practices, Madame de T. and the Chevalier's pleasure has to respect the rules of an appropriate rite of seduction, which is followed and developed in their conversation. Milanku observes, "conversation is what organizes time, governs it, and imposes its own laws, which must be respected" (S 28). In prolonging their rendezvous and increasing the Chevalier's excitement and her own, Madame de T. displays her mastery in the art of conversation, giving him "a short course in sentimental education" and "her practical philosophy of love" (S 31).[22]

The morning following their night of love, the Chevalier meets the Marquis, the lover of Madame de T., who tells him that Madame de T. wanted to spend time with him (the Chevalier) in order to distract her husband from the idea that he (the Marquis) was her lover with the idea of a lover that was in fact false. The Chevalier then realises

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[21] Vivant Denon, "*No Tomorrow*", trans. Lydia Davis, in *The Libertine Reader. Eroticism and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Michel Feher, New York, Zone Books, 1997, p. 742.

[22] Catherine Cusset offers a different perspective on *No Tomorrow*. By stressing the role of chance in the night of love between the narrator and Madame de T., Cusset argues that Denon's approach to the rituals of seduction is parodic. Nonetheless, echoing Kundera, Cusset underlines Madame de T.'s pedagogical role: "she gives the hero a lesson in materialist philosophy after the act of love. She teaches him that as long as the public knows nothing about it, their night of pleasure does not create any bond, any engagement, between them" ("Madame de T——, or Decency", in '*No Tomorrow'. The Ethics of Pleasure in the French Enlightenment,* Charlottesville and London, University Press of Virginia, 1999, p. 154).

that Madame de T. has lied to him, her husband and her lover all at once. He decides not to divulge his night of love with Madame de T. to the Marquis, her lover, and to keep her secret, and to play the untenable role that Madame de T. has given him in the version of the story she has told her lover. Insofar as the Chevalier cannot understand Madame de T.'s behaviour or read beyond the veils of her discretion and deception, Milanku imagines her as a figure of knowledge:

> Denon gives no description of Madame de T.'s physical appearance, […] I imagine her to have 'A round and supple waist' (these are the words Laclos uses to characterize the most coveted female body in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*), and that bodily roundness gives rise to a roundness and slowness of movements and gestures. […] She possesses the wisdom of slowness and deploys the whole range of techniques for slowing things down (S 32).

Milanku's interpretation of Madame de T. as an embodiment of the art of protecting pleasure interweaves with his masculine impulse to shape her body. Reiterating the logic of intertextual male desire governing the sexual responses of Lurie, Jaromil and Kepesh, Milanku cannot conceive of Madame de T. outside a literary frame. Paradoxically, Milanku shapes his mental image of her by quoting from *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the novel he presents as antithetic to *No Tomorrow*.[23] In considering the measured quality of the calculation underlying her seduction, Milanku believes that she is not motivated by "the pitiless reason of the Marquise de Merteuil", the protagonist of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*; but on the contrary that she is driven by "a gentle, tender reason, a reason whose supreme mission is to protect love" (S 31). While Laclos's characters are motivated by the desire for conquest more than pleasure, for Milanku Madame de T. materialises the possibility of living "in pleasure and for pleasure" (S 121).

In considering *libertinage* himself, Kundera addresses two works in which a woman plays the dominant role. In the case of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, as Macchia argues, "the real Don Juan is not Valmont, but the Marquise de Merteuil."[24] *No Tomorrow* inverts even more radically the libertine relation of power based on an asymmetrical relationship between men and women. As Catherine Cusset notices, while the revelation of the Marquise's plots in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* provokes

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[23] Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, trans. Douglas Parmée, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

[24] My translation. The original Italian reads: "il vero Don Giovanni non è Valmont, è la Marchesa de Merteuil". Macchia, *Vita, avventure e morte di Don Giovanni*, p. 63.

catastrophe, Madame de T.'s manipulation instead provokes the admiration of the narrator.[25] The decision to place this libertine novella at the heart of *Slowness* offers an insight into Kundera's sceptical account of the possibilities of sexual liberation conveyed in "Some Notes on Roth". While in this non-fictional work, in which the authorial voice is nonetheless mobile and veiled, sexual liberation is presented as the principle element relegating the seduction of women by men to the past, Kundera's novels depict a more variegated scenario. While Havel's nostalgia for Don Juan figures can be seen as a longing for a system of unequal relations between men and women, in *The Unbearable Lightness of the Being* Sabina shows that seduction is still possible and is not exclusively a male domain. Draper underlines that Kundera's view of the sexual revolution echoes Jean Baudrillard, who looks at seduction outside an opposition between the sexes shaped by the hegemonic phallic discourse and the feminist resistance to it. Mistaken as a mere expression of political and sexual power, seduction rather "represents mastery over the symbolic universe".[26] In Milanku's mind this mastery over the symbolic meaning of sexuality is wielded by Madame de T.'s "art of the conversation, which lets no gesture without comment and shapes its meaning" (S 28). Through her words Madame de T. weaves a ritual which intensifies the Chevalier's experience of pleasure as well as her own. Her command over pleasure seems to embody the mastery Kepesh strives for in Roth's *The Professor of Desire*. Nonetheless, the fantasy Milanku projects onto Madame de T. differs from Kepesh's fantasy of an unmediated experience of sex embodied by Birgitta: Madame de T.'s heightened relation with pleasure depends on her ability to remediate her impulses through a ritual of seduction. Her control of her own sensations brings to light the exploration of the authenticity of emotions unfolding in *Life is Elsewhere*: the intensity of Madame de T.'s sensations and her lover's do not seem to be based on their actual experience, but on the suggestions generated by the ritual she designs. Once more Kundera questions the limits of our (in)experience, of our ability to understand emotion or distinguish the (in)authentic.

For Kundera Madame de T.'s seduction represents a standpoint through which to re-consider the way contemporary men and women live eroticism.[27] Kundera's

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25 Cusset, "Madame de T——, or Decency", pp. 159-164.

26 Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecliptic of Sex", in *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer, Montreal, New World Perspectives, 1990, p. 8.

27 Milanku's reading of *No Tomorrow* seems to respond to Nancy Miller's insight into libertinage. In underlining that "most definitions of libertinage refer to the playful pursuit of pleasure", Miller stresses

reflection develops through the plot lines Milanku is imagining for his own future novel. Among these plots, I would like to focus on the meeting between Vincent and Julie. Milanku underlines Vincent's fascination for the Marquis de Sade and "the frame of mind we call 'libertine'" (S 9). During a conference of entomologists he meets Julie in a bar. After a stroll in the park, they kiss. Milanku presents their encounter in relation to the one between Madame de T. and the Chavalier: "They are transported, without knowing by what; but I know: they are hearing Madame de T.'s river, the river from her nights of love; from the well of the past, the age of pleasure is sending Vincent a quiet greeting" (S 75). But soon the impression that Vincent is truly absorbed by the libertine worldview is confuted, and he alludes to Sade merely to impress Julie. The superficiality of his fascination with *libertinage* is unveiled by his reaction when he sees Julie under the light of the moon:

> [H]e [Vincent] is bewitched: the white light has endowed the girl with the beauty of a fairy, a beauty that surprises him, new beauty he did not see in her before, a fine, fragile, chaste, inaccessible beauty. And suddenly, he cannot even tell how it happened, he imagines the hole of her ass. Abruptly, unexpectedly, that image is there, and he will never be rid of it (S 76).

Despite his desire to act as a libertine, Vincent tends to idealise women: he cannot reconcile the sight Julie as a fairy tale beauty to her corporality. In confronting the idealised image of her that the moonlight creates, her anus, the emblem of the materiality of her body, represents a paradox that obsesses him: "The more he thinks about her ass hole, the more Julie is white, diaphanous, and angelic" (S 77). Milanku addresses directly Vincent's sudden interest in the anus and observes that the lyrical attitude pervades it: "he is incapable of discussing his fine libertine obsessions except by making them lyrical; by turning them into metaphors. Thus he sacrifices the spirit of libertinage to the spirit of poetry" (S 84). Milanku's understanding of the spirit of poetry is reminiscent of *Life is Elsewhere*: Vincent uses metaphors to make the scatological functions of the female body tolerable in the manner of Jaromil. Here the meaning that Milanku confers to *libertinage* is consistent with Cusset who describes *libertinage* as a "violent rejection of transcendence […] based on the metaphysical idea that even the most beautiful woman is nothing in the end but bones, blood, and shit".[28] By describing

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the importance of considering "performance" as a defining element of libertine novels along with play, pleasure, and power ("Libertinage and Feminism", in *Libertinage and Modernity* 94, p. 17).

[28] Catherine Cusset, "The Lesson of Libertinage", *Libertinage and Modernity* 94, p. 4.

the moon as "the ass hole of infinity" (S 84), Vincent translates his libertine fantasies into a lyrical style and dispossess both of their subversive charge.

When Julie takes off her clothes and gets into the swimming pool, Vincent merely registers that she is naked. Unlike his character, Milanku, Kundera's narrator imagining Vincent, offers a different image of Julie's body: "The simple-hearted Vincent has no idea, but what I myself see here, at last, is a nudity that represents nothing at all, neither freedom nor filth, a nudity divested of all meaning, nudity denuded, just that, pure, and bewitching to a man" (S 99). Milanku argues that he can conceive of her nakedness as devoid of any meaning. Although his words are evocative of Coetzee's idea of an "unmediated representation", the reader of *Slowness* cannot forget Milanku is not actually seeing Julie's body but imagining it as he composes his novel, just as we imagine it in reading Kundera's novel. Furthermore, even though Milanku declares the female body to be outside any cultural frame, he is able to describe Madame de T's body only by reference to Laclos's words. Milanku's constant appropriation of literary texts emerges once again when he opposes Vincent's fantasies about Julie's anus with two poems that Guillaume Apollinaire sent in letters to his lovers from the trenches of the First World War. The first one entitled "En Allant chercher des obus" [In Search for Shells"] was written to Lou on 13 May 1915, the second one entitled "Les neuf portes de ton corps" ["The Nine Doors to Your Body"] to Madeleine on 21 September of the same year.[29] As Milanku observes:

> The poems […] differ in their imagery but are constructed in the same fashion: each stanza is devoted to one portal of the beloved's body: one eye, the other eye, the right nostril, the left nostril, the mouth; then, in the poem for Lou, "the portal of your rump" and, finally, the ninth portal, the vulva. But in the second poem, the one for Madeleine, there occurs at the end a curious switch of portals. The vulva recedes to eighth place, and it is the ass hole, opening "between two pearly mountains," that becomes the ninth portal: "yet more mysterious than the others," the portal "of the sorceries one dares not speak of," the "supreme portal" (S 82).

Reiterating the masculinist urge to shape the female, Apollinaire re-maps the female body configuring the anus as "the supreme portal; […] the most mysterious, the most secret" (S 83). After denouncing the risks of lyricism, *Slowness* underlines the power of

[29] Kundera writes that "En Allant chercher des obus" was sent to Lou on 11 May 1915, but the exact date is 13 May 1915 (Guillaume Apollinaire, *Lettres à Lou*, ed. Michel Décaudin, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, pp. 362-365). Guillaume Apollinaire, "En Allant chercher des obus", in *Œuvres Poétiques*, eds. Marcel Adéma, Michel Décaudin, Paris, Gallimard,1965, pp. 459-462; "Les neuf portes de ton corps", in *Œuvres Poétiques*, pp. 619-621.

a lyrical poem in addressing female corporality. In this way it becomes clear that Kundera's own novel presents a more complex view of poetry than his authorial narrators propose. Unlike *Life is Elsewhere*, *Slowness* offers an example of poetry capable of exploring the materiality of the female body, which reminds me of Baumgarten's erotic poems in *The Professor of Desire*. The reference to Apollinaire's poems suggests reconsidering carefully the role of poetry in Kundera's narrative and distinguishing poetry from lyricism: poems can emancipate themselves from a lyrical expression of emotions and embody a rejection of transcendence expressed in the spirit of *libertinage*. *Slowness*'s novelistic discourse fosters critical thought beyond the perspective of its authorial narrator and seems to contradict the understanding of the lyric as a form of self-display and an exacerbation of emotions that Kundera provocatively proffers in *Life is Elsewhere* and *The Art of the Novel*.

After Julie has undressed, instead of getting close to her Vincent swims away from her. Once again his action is reminiscent of Jaromil. Despite their obsession with the female body, when they have the occasion to have sex, their sexual drive disappears. While Jaromil's desire responds mainly to his narcissism, Vincent's libido is linked to external factors as he seems to regain his excitement in the presence of a potential audience for his sexual acts: "True, the amphitheatre is empty, but even though it is empty, the audience, imagined and imaginary, potential and virtual, is there, is with them" (S 100). Staged for an audience, no matter if real or imaginary, Vincent's desire displays "the modern trend of performing as though permanently in front of a camera."[30] The impact of the logic of the media on Vincent is such that he feels his acts have sense only in the presence of a third party. The radical difference between Madame de T.'s performance and Vincent's, is that while Madame de T.'s acts give life to a ritual designed to prolong her lover's excitement and her own, Vincent cannot engage directly with his own pleasure and is only interested in catching the attention of strangers. While Jaromil is driven by his narcissism and male anxieties towards a total merge with an anonymous crowed, all Vincent looks for is the temporary satisfaction of being at the centre of attention. Despite the sense of a moralistic judgement of them, these narcissistic drives emerge as the authenticity of emotion itself in Kundera's narrative and they inform his characters' masculinity fundamentally.

[30] Tim Jones, "Milan Kundera's *Slowness* – Making It Slow", *Review of European Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2009, p. 65.

When Vincent believes that someone may be able to hear him, he shouts at Julie "'I'll tear open your ass hole for the whole world to see!'" and tries to have sex with her (S 102). Realising he cannot have an erection he simulates sex instead. To express Vincent's estrangement from his desire Milanku gives voice to his character's penis:

> Why is it so small?
> I put that question directly to Vincent's member and frankly, astonished, it replies: "And why shouldn't I be small? I saw no need to get big! Believe me, the idea really didn't occur to me! I was not alerted. […].
> The member was telling the truth (S 102-3).

The dialogue between Milanku and Vincent's genitalia is an example of the irony with which Kundera narrates male sexuality. In considering Kundera's first works including *Laughable Loves* and *Life is Elsewhere*, John O'Brien argues that "Kundera's critique of masculinity is principally translated into an open parody of male behaviour and either/or thinking, leaving male characters seeming more ridiculed than 'critiqued.'"[31] The use of the comic further connects Kundera's fiction to Roth's.[32] Interviewing Kundera, Roth observes that Kundera's early works "find their denouement in great scenes of coitus."[33] Kundera confirms this impression and explains "that a scene of physical love generates an extremely sharp light that suddenly reveals the essence of characters and sums up their life situation."[34] With these words in my mind, I look at Vincent's erotic failure as emblematic of his masculinity. Similarly, Kundera's and Roth's male protagonists are illuminated by their heterosexual struggles. What strikes me the most is the irony permeating the exposition of their protagonists' sexual difficulties. In *The Professor of Desire* the ironic insight into Kafka's sexuality and manhood leads to paralysis in Kepesh's self-reflexive exploration of his masculinity. But in *Slowness*, the ironic dialogue between Milanku and Vincent's penis displays Vincent's inability to account for his impulses while at the same time reinforcing Milanku's discursive position as a man who can understand heterosexual desire through literary knowledge. Evocative of the relationship between the authorial narrator and

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[31] John O'Brien, *Milan Kundera & Feminism. Dangerous Intersections*, London, MacMillan, 1995, p. 107.

[32] Guy Scarpetta underlines the pivotal role the comic plays in these narratives: "Kundera sets the scene of […] a series of situations whose intrinsic comic dimension nobody, with the possible exception here again of Philip Roth, has explored until now" ("Forward. A Collaborative Reading", in Le Grand, *Kundera, or The Memory of Desire*, p. xvii).

[33] Philip Roth, *Shop Talk. A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work*, New York, Vintage Books, 2002, p. 99.

[34] Ibid.

Jaromil in *Life is Elsewhere*, Milanku's ironic authority rests on the manipulation of a fictional and inexperienced man.

The young male subjectivities depicted by Roth and Kundera fail in their exploration of desire. Madame de T.'s heightened relation with her pleasure calls Kepesh's reference to Colette to mind. As I discussed in Chapter Two, in praising Colette as "a connoisseur of the finest gradations of amorous feeling", Kepesh underlines "her capacity for protective self-scrutiny in perfect balance with the capacity to be carried away" (PD 191). Colette's alleged ability to introspect and her self-awareness are at the heart of her faculty to live "all that desire longs for and promises" (PD 191). This construction of self-consciousness and desire combined is paradoxical for Jaromil and Kepesh as well as Vincent. The idealization of Colette resonates with the depiction of Madame de T. in *Slowness*. Both accounts weave a sense of concealment that these women, both imaginary and actual, evoke in these male characters: Milanku celebrates the secrecy of Madame de T.'s seduction, while Kepesh emphasises Colette's protective self-scrutiny. Reminiscent of the unknowability of the other sex expressed in *Disgrace*, Milanku and Kepesh project their fantasies of a fulfilment of desire on to the female; a desire made whole. Nonetheless, echoed in their relationship with women, in the novels I have analysed the male experience of estrangement from the body is inflected in different ways by each author. For Kundera this estrangement emerges as a generalised sense of semiotic-erotic confusion; in Coetzee this feeling of estrangement intersects the most controversial aspects of a cultural legacy of violence towards women and its political consequences; finally for Roth, it figures the subject as a space of indeterminacy in which pre-linguistic, biological elements and textual dynamics converge. In the next section, drawing on my reading of the elements in Milanku's discursive position, I shall describe how his authorial status within Kundera's novel is a reflection of the self-conscious authorial dimension of *Slowness* as a whole. I shall further examine how the particular figuration of the practice of authorship through Milanku is doubled by Madame de T's practice of seduction.

**(iii) The Don Juan of form**

From the privileged position he reaches at the expense of his own character, Vincent, Milanku seems to invite a questioning of his interpretation of *No Tomorrow*. He declares that he is manipulating the original work by calling the male protagonist

"Chevalier", and provokes his readers by saying they have never heard of *No Tomorrow* and will probably never read it. Most of all, *Slowness* exposes the alleged lack of seriousness in Milanku's creative attempt. The meta-fictional dialogue between Milanku and Véra reported at the centre of *Slowness*, the twenty-sixth chapter out of the fifty-one that compose the novel, is significant. Milanku confesses he is writing a novel whose characters have populated Véra's dream. Véra warns him: "You've often told me you wanted to write a novel someday with not a single serious word in it. A Big Piece of Nonsense for Your Own Pleasure. I'm frightened the time may have come" (S 79). The fact that the reader of *Slowness* is told that the form of the novel s/he is reading responds to Milanku's own pleasure induces me to examine the way in which Madame de T.'s art of seduction displays the relation between pleasure and form, and to examine that relation further in the art of the novel.

As a seducer, Madame de T. differs from Kundera's previous Don Juans who embody the epic search for all the peculiarities of the opposite sex. In their pursuit of knowledge through sexuality, Kundera's seducers have often been described by reference to Nietzsche's notion of Don Juan of knowledge.[35] In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche wonders about a "Don Juan of knowledge" whom philosophers and poets have not yet discovered. Nietzsche's version of Don Juan "does not love the things he knows, but has spirit and appetite for and enjoyment of the chase and intrigues of knowledge".[36] Stemming from this definition, Steinby argues that Thomas, the seducer in the *The Unbearable Lightness of the Being*, is driven by the desire to investigate the behaviour of his sexual partners.[37] Jørn Boisen identifies an analogy between the Don Juan of knowledge and the novelist in Kundera's narrative: "Behind the erotic longing, it is the desire for knowledge that pushes forward the Kunderian Don Juans. In this respect, the myth of Don Juan imposes itself like the myth of the novelist. In both cases, the attitude is essentially enquiring, sceptical and ironic."[38] For Kundera the novelist and the

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35 In *Don Juan ou l'héroïsme du désir*, Dumoulié dedicates a chapter to the Don Juan of knowledge, a seducer who is inhabited by a devouring will to knowledge which leads him to sacrifice his happiness in name of an ethic of desire ("Nietzsche : Don Juan pétrifié. Trois figures du séducteur", pp. 199-213).

36 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak. Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, eds. Maudemarie Clark, Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 161.

37 Liisa Steinby, *Kundera and Modernity*, West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2013, p. 166.

38 My translation. The original French reads: "Derrière la soif érotique, c'est le désir de connaître qui force en avant les Don Juan kunderiens. Le mythe de Don Juan s'impose dans cette optique comme le mythe du romancier. Dans les deux cas l'attitude est essentiellement interrogatrice, sceptique et ironique". Jørn Boisen, *Une fois ne compte pas. Nihilisme et sens dans* L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être *de Milan Kundera*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005, pp. 109-110.

seducer share the will to knowledge. In *Slowness*, this resemblance unfolds when Milanku argues that the greatness of libertine art "consists not in some propaganda or other for hedonism but in its analysis", and praises Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* for its examination of the characters' desire (S 9). Thanks to its epistolary form, Laclos's novel exposes the characters' yearning to tell the story of their conquests. In uncovering both his characters' thoughts and their desire to share them, Laclos's use of the epistolary form offers an insight as well as disclosure. I believe the dialectics of form and knowledge, pivotal in Kundera's theory of the novel, characterises Madame de T.'s art of seduction as well. As Milanku observes:

> By slowing the course of the night, by dividing it into different stages, each separate from the next, Madame de T. has succeeded in giving the small span of time accorded them the semblance of a marvelous little architecture, of a form. Imposing form on a period of time is what beauty demands, but so does memory. For what is formless cannot be grasped, or committed to memory. Conceiving their encounter as a form was especially precious for them, since their night was to have no tomorrow and could be repeated only through recollection (S 34).

Madame de T.'s seduction is driven by the urge to shape her experience. Through her seduction, she allows the Chevalier and herself to give their pleasure a form to be remembered. Her knowledge lies in the code of erotics she transmits to the Chevalier and the rite of seduction to which she gives life. As much as a Don Juan of knowledge, I suggest that Kundera's reading of *No Tomorrow* configures Madame de T. as a Don Juan of form.

Let me return to *No Tomorrow* and its place in Kundera's unfolding novelistic discourse. Regarding Denon's novella, Cusset writes:

> Physical pleasure is never articulated in words. Words express only feelings. But the text clearly shows what words serve to hide and where they ultimately lead: ellipsis points and silences are stronger than social and sentimental words. Through this silence in the text the body speaks and unmasks codes. […]
>
> […] the text shows that what we usually call reality is nothing but a hypocritical appearance that serves to hide our true reality, that of our body.[39]

Cusset's insight reminds me of Coetzee's stress on the power of body to impose itself on imagination, which I discussed in Chapter One. Cusset highlights that in *No Tomorrow* inarticulable bodily experience produces silence – an interpretation arising from the narrator (whom Milanku calls the Chevalier) who claims "we are such

[39] Cusset, "Madame de T——, or Decency", p. 153.

*machines*".[40] As Cusset notices, the sentence "seems to reveal the libertine conception of desire in *Point de lendemain*: […] that desire itself is but a mechanical artifice acting independently of people."[41] Such a view is reflected in Gérard Genette's account of the function of silence in *Madame Bovary*. Genette calls the "silences of Flaubert" those descriptive moments in the text which are devoid of a causal connection to the narrative, and which evoke an external reality that is resistant to human sense-making.[42] Jonathan Culler describes this phenomenon in terms of Roland Barthes's concept of the *effet de réel*.[43] In the light of Genette's and Culler's analyses of *Madame Bovary*, *No Tomorrow* may be seen as shifting this sense of a primordial experience from external reality to the materiality of the body, and accordingly removes the discursive element of seduction and its interface with pleasure. Milanku's reading of Madame de T.'s seduction configures sexuality as a formless set of impulses and sensations, which can be confronted exclusively through the act of giving form. Once again Milanku evokes Baudrillard, who describes sex as "*the disenchanted form*" of seduction; and also Octavio Paz, who argues that while sexuality is animal, eroticism is human.[44] For Paz seduction represents a social phenomenon which "consists of deviating or changing the reproductive sexual impulse and transforming it in a representation".[45] In focusing on the literary representation of seduction as much as its rituality, Milanku's examination of heterosexual desire hints at a formlessness reminiscent of Gombrowicz at the heart of human experience.

In Chapter Two I discussed Gombrowicz's understanding of form in relation to *Life is Elsewhere*. As Ariel Denis writes, Gombrowicz's literary creations chart the history of his "fight against Form (social, aesthetic, etc.) to reveal the changing, anarchic absence of forms that Life is".[46] While Gombrowicz exposes the absurdity of

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40 Denon, "*No Tomorrow*", p. 742.

41 Cusset, "Madame de T——, or Decency", p. 155.

42 Gérard Genette, "Silences de Flaubert", in *Figures I*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, pp. 223-243.

43 Jonathan Culler, "The Realism of *Madame Bovary*", *MLN*, Vol. 122, No. 4, September 2007, p. 694.

44 Baudrillard, "The Ecliptic of Sex", p. 21.

45 My translation. The original Spanish reads: "La sexualidad es animal; el erotismo es humano. Es un fenómeno que se manifiesta dentro de una sociedad y que consiste, esencialmente, en desviar o cambiar el impulso sexual reproductor y transformarlo en una representación." Octavio Paz, *La llama doble. Amor y erotismo*, Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1993, p. 106.

46 My translation. The complete fragment in the original French reads: "L'œuvre de Gombrowicz se définit comme une lutte contre la Forme à travers les formes infinies dont Elle se travestit. […] Lutte essentielle : toute création est l'histoire de ce combat contre la Forme (sociale, esthétique, etc.) pour montrer cette absence mouvante et anarchique de formes qui est la Vie". Ariel Denis, "Destruction de la

the forms social life has shaped (*Ferdydurke*) and the cognitive process through which we engage with the outside world through the act of giving form (*Cosmos*), Kundera explores the forms in which heterosexual experience have been crystallised through previous literary traditions.[47] This investigation echoes in Milanku's examination of heterosexual desire in which he interweaves an intertextual analysis of *No Tomorrow* with Vincent's story. Milanku's creative attempt culminates with the recognition that the figure of the Chevalier embodies the secret of living pleasure: "I have the vague sense that on your capacity to be happy hangs our only hope" (S 132). What strikes me the most is that Milanku does not end his reflection by referring to Madame de T., whose art of seduction he celebrates throughout the novel, but rather to the Chevalier and his ability to assimilate her lesson. Milanku's creative attempt as a novelist and Madame de T.'s ritual as a seducer converge in giving form to the figure of the Chevalier, who escapes the masculine archetypes of both Don Juan and Tristan. The Chevalier embodies a fantasy of masculinity not based on the objectification/idealization of the feminine, but rather on the ability to live pleasure. Thanks to Madame de T's practice of seduction which gave a form to his impulses, he avoids the alienation from his own body experienced by Vincent, Jaromil and Kepesh. The Chevalier also overcomes the narcissistic urges that envelop Vincent, Jaromil and Kepesh by accepting the role Madame de T. has designed for him in the story she tells her lover, however ridiculous. The Chevalier's ability to distance himself from masculinist urges mirrors Milanku's own ability to create intellectual distance from his desire as a novelist to write a novel without a serious word.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the idea of crystallization and how it responds to two notions which I have argued are pivotal in Kundera's narrative: the notion of inexperience and the questioning of the (in)authenticity of feelings. The forms of masculine desire crystallized by literature are the frames through which male characters model their desire and from which they derive a range of emotions to long for. Besides marking the crucial legacy of Girard on Kundera's narrative, this desire for desire, or "desire for memory" as Le Grand also describes it, translates the urge for

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forme. Formation de la réalité", in *Gombrowicz*, eds. Constantin Jelenski, Dominique de Roux, Paris, Éditions de L'Herne, 1971, p. 269.

[47] Steinby argues that even though Kundera places his discourse on sexuality outside the dynamic of power and control, an analogy between Foucault and Kundera can be identified: "according to them, historical change affects only the human being's relationship toward erotic pleasure […] and the practices belonging to it, not pleasure itself" (167). Kundera's interest in literature lies in the different literary forms and practices shaped around pleasure.

literary frames through which to enact erotic impulses.[48] This need suggests that the confusion of authenticity and imitation is unresolved in the investigation of the dynamics of sex and text. For the male characters depicted by Coetzee, Kundera and Roth reading literature and composing it detach sensations from the body and attach them to literary forms of desire. In the next section I go on to examine the ways in which the protagonist of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* assimilates the rhetoric of emotions in romances, the extent of the control he reaches over his textual practices, and the nature of the authorial masculinity he constructs as a result.

## 2. *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*

### (i) Of masculine sentimental education

Set in Peru, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* tells the story of a 17-year old young aspiring writer, Marito, who falls in love with Julia, the 32-year old sister-in-law of his uncle Lucho.[49] Their relation is narrated by an older version of the protagonist who has become a successful writer. Narrating his story from a more mature perspective, the narrator underlines the rigidity of his approach to life and literature as a young man, establishing an interplay reminiscent of the relationship between Milanku and "his" character Vincent in *Slowness*.

Driven by the ambition to become a writer, Marito reminds me of Kepesh's absolutistic engagement with literature as a means of shaping his personality:

> I told her [Julia] the whole story of my life – not my past life, but the one I was going to have in the future, when I lived in Paris and was a writer. I told her I'd wanted to write ever since I'd first read Alexandre Dumas, that since that moment I'd dreamed of going off to France and living in a garret, in the artists' *quartier*, dedicating my heart and soul to literature, the most marvelous thing in the world (AJS 93).[50]

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48 Le Grand, *Kundera, or the Memory of Desire*, p. 6.

49 *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* is inspired by Vargas Llosa's first marriage: the author married at 19 Julia Urquidi, the sister-in-law of his uncle. Urquidi wrote a memoir *Lo que Varguitas no dijo* [*What Varguits Did Not Say*] in response to Vargas Llosa's fictionalisation of their marriage. In parallel, the figure of Pedro Camacho is inspired by the work and psychological struggles of the Bolivian scriptwriter Raúl Salmón, whom Vargas Llosa met when he worked at Radio Panamericana. In his talk with José Miguel Oviedo, Vargas Llosa offers an insight into the genesis and the development of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and discusses how the events narrated in the novel are a fictionalisation of his personal experience ("A Conversation with Vargas Llosa about *La tía Julia y el escribidor*", in *Mario Vargas Llosa. A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Charles Rossman, Alan Warren Friedman, Austin and London, University of Texas Press, 1978, pp. 154-159).

50 Mario Vargas Llosa, *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1977; in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, trans. Helen Lane, London, Faber and Faber, 2002.

Marito is giving life here to the fiction of his life as a writer. He explains to Julia that love was invented by the Italian poet Petrarch and the Provençal Troubadours. Reminiscent of Kundera, Marito addresses the way in which literary forms have shaped our understanding of sexuality and emotions. While Marito exhibits scepticism about love and argues for an asentimental model of sex – what he calls his "erotico-biological theory" (AJS 12) – in order to impress Julia, the narrator emphasises the superficiality of Marito's words which he says express the latter's insecurity. Marito repeatedly expresses his desire to be considered an adult man – "Nothing irritated me as much as being called 'Marito'. I had the impression that this diminutive automatically put me back in short pants" (AJS 6). Besides representing a key to manhood, Marito's engagement with literature articulates his alleged cultural superiority in relation to Julia: "We talked a great deal about literature as well; or rather, Aunt Julia listened and I talked" (AJS 133). Like Kepesh, who believes that Helen's mind has been shaped by *screen romance*, Marito highlights the influence of popular cultural and sentimental romance on his partner:

> [Julia] (like all the women I'd ever known thus far in my life) was terribly aliterary. I had the impression that during her many long, idle hours on her Bolivian hacienda the only things she'd ever read were Argentine magazines, some of Delly's trashy books, and no more than a couple of novels at most that she considered memorable: *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*, by a certain E. M. Hull (AJS 95).

Marito refers to the so called 'sex-novels' (or 'desert-love novels') of E. M. Hull, the pseudonym for Edith Maud Winstanley, which were considered works "written mostly by women, for women, and cheap enough to be enjoyed by lower-middle-class and working-class women."[51] Likewise, the reference to Delly, the pen name of Marie Petitjean de la Rosière, is significant for the conservatism of the gender stereotypes her works express.[52] Marito's derogatory tone conveys an understanding of romance as

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[51] The quotation is from Karen Chow, "Popular Sexual Knowledges and Women's Agency in 1920s England: Marie Stopes's *Married Love* and E. M. Hull's *The Sheik*", *Feminist Review*, 63 (Autumn, 1999), p. 73. For further insights into the representations of gender relations in the works of Hull see: Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs*, Houndmills and London, MacMillan Press, 1988; Patricia Raub, "Issues of Power and Passion in E. M. Hull's *The Sheik*", *Women's Studies*, April 1992, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 119-128.

[52] Diana Holmes recognises the appropriateness of feminist criticism towards Delly, but argues that an analysis of the reactionary politics which her narrative embodies fails to account for why women found pleasure in reading romances. According to Holmes, romances offered a fantasy of evasion which shaped a utopian solution to their dissatisfaction arising from a notion of womanhood conceived in the patriarchal French society at the beginning of twentieth century (*Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France. Love Stories*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 141).

cheap mass-produced product, and of women as "the sentimental sex […] narcissistically inclined to consume stories that reproduce and embellish their personal dramas".[53] This view figures intellectual engagement and creativity as exclusive spheres of masculinity. In addressing the role of literary reading in the construction of gender and subjectivity, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* shows how Marito is affected by the model of sentimentality romances express in their form. In the next pages I will discuss how this model interacts with Marito's notion of authorship as an ideal of manhood.

As its title suggests, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* gravitates around another figure in addition to Julia, the Bolivian scriptwriter Pedro Camacho, the most popular Latin America writer of radio soap operas. The pivotal roles of Pedro and Julia are reflected in the novel's binary structure, in which the odd-numbered chapters tell the story of Marito and Julia, while the evenly-numbered chapters offer what at a first sight seem to be the soap opera episodes written by Pedro. Pedro starts working at Radio Panamericana owned by Don Genaro and his son, who also possess Radio Central in which Marito works. The friendship with Pedro offers Marito an insight into the life of a professional writer and a standpoint from which to reflect on his own writing.

Pedro is an extremely prolific writer, "'He's not a man – he's an industry!'" says Marito's boss (AJS 7). Pedro writes all the radio serials for Radio Panamericana, directs them and plays the male lead in every one of them. Initially, he seems to embody the commodification of literature: Marito underlines that "his goal was quantitative, not qualitative" (AJS 152).[54] Nearly illiterate, Pedro does not read anything except a volume entitled *Ten Thousand Literary Quotations Drawn from the Hundred Best Writers in the World* because he fears that other writers may influence his style. By opposition, Marito strives to find his own voice among several literary models and cultural references. The short story Marito intends to entitle "The Qualitative Leap" hints ironically at his search of a highbrow output: "I wanted it to be as coldly objective, intellectual, terse, and ironic as one of Borges's" (AJS 45). The reference to Borges's erudition, which I shall discuss in Chapter Four, and his image as an intellectual reinforce Marito's desire to engage with literary tradition. Afterwards Marito thinks about writing a story inspired by a senator from Arequipa whom Julia is dating, and the gossip around the small size of his genitals, and describes it as "something light and

53 Holmes, *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France*, p. 1.

54 Keith Brooker describes the commodification of culture and the blurring between high and low culture in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* in relation to postmodern aesthetic (*Vargas Llosa among the Postmodernists*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1994, pp. 54-74).

entertaining, in the manner of Somerset Maugham, or perversely erotic, as in Maupassant" (AJS 49). For Marito erudition is not only a source of inspiration, but also a defining element in his masculinity as a young male intellectual in the manner of Kepesh, who regards his favourite writers as the architects of his mind. A conversation between Pedro and Marito offers the image of this convergence of heterosexual masculinity and intellect:

> Camacho had held forth, dogmatically and eloquently, on the subject of the man in his fifties. The age at which his intellectual powers and his sensuality are at their peak, he had said, the age at which he has assimilated all his experiences. That age at which one is most desired by women and most feared by men. […] I had deduced that the Bolivian scriptwriter was fifty himself […] (AS 59).

The model of intellectual masculinity Marito longs for is parodically embodied by Pedro, whose attractiveness and intellect are constantly undermined. In addition, Marito's intellectual interests are perceived by his family as an obstacle to his manliness. When Marito dances with Julia, his uncle Lucho says ironically "[o]ur intellectual's becoming perverted", and when Julia learns that Marito aspires to be a writer, she comments: "We'll have to watch out that Dorita's boy doesn't turn out to be a queer" (AJS 61, 7). In addressing writing as a demasculinising practice, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* presents the paradox of writing: although the literary canon is mainly composed of male writers, writing still supposedly expresses lack of masculinity.[55] Evocative of Jaromil's anxious search for masculinity in *Life is Elsewhere* as a way of differentiating himself from his mother's femininity, Marito's ideal of a creative and intellectual masculinity informs his double path, writerly and erotic, towards manhood.

Marito's relationships with Pedro and Julia interweave. Julia appears in Marito's life on the same day that he hears about Pedro: "I remember very well the day he spoke to me of this genius of the airwaves [Pedro], because that very day, at lunchtime, I saw Aunt Julia for the first time" (AJS 5). Julia tells Marito that their relationship is reminiscent of Pedro's soap opera: "'The love affair of a baby and an old lady who's also more or less your aunt,' […] 'A perfect subject for one of Pedro Camacho's serials'" (AJS 96). In view of the continuity between their liaison and Pedro's stories, Philip Swanson highlights that "Camacho's stories also echo their relationship, based as they are on convention-versus-desire, scandalous love affairs, the trials and tribulations

[55] Still and Worton observe that "men are nervous about the 'effeminacy' of writing as a professional practice (although the established canon is largely made up of 'great' male writers!)" (50).

of romance and the conflict between age and youth."[56] Mario records that in their nocturnal conversations "Aunt Julia sometimes gave me a résumé of certain episodes that had impressed her, and I in turn gave her a rundown of my conversations with the scriptwriter, and thus, little by little, Pedro Camacho became a constituent element in our romance" (AJS 98). The interaction of the romances evoked by Julia and Pedro's practice of writing are to shape Marito's masculinity. In his conversation with Charles Ruas, Vargas Llosa himself explains that *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* "'is not only about the apprenticeship of literature but also about the apprenticeship of love, of a sexual relationship."[57] Despite his initial dismissiveness towards feelings, Marito falls deeply in love with Julia and plays the role of the romantic lover who overcomes difficulties to be with his beloved. When their relationship gets more serious Marito writes book reviews and articles for literary supplements and periodical published in Lima – "'prostituting my pen'" (AJS 132) – so as to be able to pay the checks on their dates. Facing the opposition of his family to their relationship, he decides to marry Julia while still completing his studies and struggles to earn a living based on his artistic vocation. Through this relationship Marito emancipates himself from his abstract understanding of sexuality; but on the other hand, he starts to live the naïve and excessive sentimentality of the romantic rhetoric he has despised. As Sharon Manganelli underlines, Marito's "principal function" is "the re-creation and imitation of the love sentiment itself".[58]

In order to illuminate the role that romantic rhetoric plays in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, I intend now to address the understanding of romantic rhetoric Vargas Llosa develops in his study dedicated to *Madame Bovary*, entitled *The Perpetual Orgy*.[59] In her study of romance in twentieth-century France, Diana Holmes regards *Madame Bovary* as "[t]he novel that consecrates the divide between the intellectually and aesthetically serious novel, and the foolishly feminine romance".[60] Holmes writes:

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[56] Philip Swanson, "Mario Vargas Llosa and *La tía Julia y el escribidor*: Freedom, authority and textual control", in *The New Novel in Latin America. Politics and Popular Culture after the Boom*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1995, pp. 64-65.

[57] Charles Ruas, "Talk with Mario Vargas Llosa", *The New York Times*, August 1, 1982, p. 15.

[58] Sharon Magnarelli, "The Diseases of Love and Discourse: *La tía Julia y el escribidor* and *María*", *Hispanic Review*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring, 1986), p. 195.

[59] Marina Gálvez Avero describes the effects of Vargas Llosa's analysis of *Madame Bovary* on his understanding of postmodernism and the writing of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (*La novela hispanoamericana contemporánea*, Madrid, Taurus, 1987, pp. 135-144).

[60] Holmes, *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France*, p. 8.

> Itself a formal *tour de force* as well as a deeply persuasive expression of moral disillusionment, *Madame Bovary* condemns the discourse of romance as both tawdry and pernicious. Fed on a diet of *romans d'amour*, Emma misinterprets the world around her, imagining searing passion where there is only sexual appetite and self-interest, failing to recognize the fatal incongruence between her dreams and reality.[61]

Likewise, in *The Perpetual Orgy* Vargas Llosa highlights how Emma's experience and her dreams are irreconcilable. But while for Holmes romances represent a cheap and tasteless narrative in *Madame Bovary*, Vargas Llosa praises Flaubert for incorporating melodramatic elements into novelistic discourse. In particular, Vargas Llosa is interested in Emma's overly sentimental behaviour:

> My fondness for melodrama has […] [to do with] a primarily emotional identification with this material, by which I mean a total obedience to its laws and an orthodox reaction to its excitement and its effects. Melodramatic may not be the precise word to express what I am trying to say, since it has a connotation closely linked to theatre, films, and the novel, and I am referring to something broader that is present above all in real things and real people. I am speaking here of a certain distortion or exacerbation of feeling, of the perversion of the recognized "good taste" of each era, of that heresy, counterpoint, deterioration (at once popular, middle-class, and aristocratic) to which, in every society, the aesthetic, linguistic, moral, social, and erotic patterns established by the elite as models fall victim; I am speaking of the mechanization and vulgarization to which emotions, ideas, human relations are subject in everyday life […]. This material does not interest me intellectually but emotionally.[62]

By examining how narrative can inform emotional repertoires and produce sensual responses, shaping the models through which we live and express feelings, Vargas Llosa addresses a larger phenomenon: the mutability of emotions and the dynamics they undergo in everyday experience. Along with *Don Quixote* and its exploration of the tension between lived experience and fiction, *Madame Bovary* has emerged in my analysis as a crucial text through which the writers I discuss engage with emotions and their narrative representation. In Chapter One I discussed the way in which, through the references to *Madame Bovary*, *Disgrace* explores the paradox of Romantic rhetoric, which appears as the only way to convey love while also expressing feelings in artificial and conventional forms. In Chapter Two, I referred to *Madame Bovary* to describe the intoxication of feelings Jaromil longs for in his sexual experience and which he expresses his poems. *Madame Bovary* represents a standpoint from which to reflect on

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61 Ibid., p. 9.

62 Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Perpetual Orgy. Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, trans. Helen Lane, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986, pp. 17-8.

emotions for Coetzee, Kundera and Vargas Llosa. For Holmes *Madame Bovary* is the quintessential expression of Realism understood "as the very antithesis of the emotion-centred, idealizing mode of romance".[63] Vargas Llosa offers an antithetical view: "Flaubert's 'realism' is not so much a romanticism rejected as a romanticism carried to completion."[64] In converting the exacerbated emotion into a theme to be investigated by the novel, *Madame Bovary* does not only widen the range of elements realism could address, but offered a new way into the way narrative affects how we experience emotions. Vargas Llosa's interest in "melodrama" recalls Kundera's exploration of the forms in which our emotions have been crystallized in literature. But while for Kundera, with *Madame Bovary*, "Flaubert unmasked the mechanism of sentimentality, of illusions; he showed us the cruelty and aggressiveness of lyrical sentimentality",[65] Vargas Llosa is sympathetic towards the effect of sentimentality on Emma and his own characters. Following Flaubert, Vargas Llosa investigates dynamics such as distortion and exacerbation, mechanization and vulgarization which emotions undergo in everyday experience. The lexicon Vargas Llosa uses configures the comprehension of human feelings as a question of form in the manner of Gombrowicz's understanding of human experience. On this basis, in the next section I shall address how Marito's emotional response to Julia and to the sentimentality of the romance intersects with the control he develops through his textual practices over the sentimentality of Pedro's soap operas, presenting the maturation of his male subjectivity as a question of form.

**(ii) Masculinity and discursive authority**

Despite the success of his radio soap operas, Pedro lives like a beggar in an empty room of the size of a cell. The austerity of his life and his total dedication to writing fascinate Marito, who wonders:

> How could he [Pedro] be, at one and the same time, a parody of the writer and the only person in Peru who, by virtue of the time he devoted to his craft and the works he produced, was worthy of that name? […] It was becoming clearer and clearer to me each day that the only thing I wanted to be in life was a writer, and I was also becoming more and more convinced each day that the only way to be one was to devote oneself heart and soul to literature. […] The person I'd met who came closest to being this full-time writer, obsessed and impassioned by his vocation, was the Bolivian author of radio serials […] (AJS 212-13).

63 Holmes, *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France*, p. 9.

64 Vargas Llosa, *The Perpetual Orgy*, p. 217.

65 Jordan Elgrably, Milan Kundera, "Conversations with Milan Kundera", *Salmagundi*, No. 73 (Winter 1987), p. 6.

Pedro embodies Marito's idea of writing as a totalising vocation and calls Marito's prettified view of the writer into question. Pedro's example leads Marito to reconsider negatively those "alleged" writers more educated than Pedro who dedicate most of their time to activities unrelated to literature and have professions and fulfilling lives. Marito's observations remind me of Kepesh's question of whether Baumgarten is a possible version of himself or a parodic projection. The suggestion that someone fulfilling their desires may be a parody of themselves illuminates the sense of ridicule these men experience, and the distance and proximity combined which they feel towards their ideals of masculinity.

During their time working together, Marito observes Pedro writing the scripts of his radio soap operas without any hesitation, as if he were typing a text he knew by heart in a hallucinatory state. Flowing "directly from the subconscious, bypassing the censorship of reason" (AS 140), Pedro's creative process makes Marito think of the French Surrealists' notion of automatic writing.[66] Pedro subsumes into his soap operas the idea of poetry as "a debacle of intellect" that André Breton and Paul Éluard formulate in opposition to prose.[67] In examining Breton's understanding of hallucination, Suzanne Guerlac underlines that "in hallucination […] the difference between reality and dream (or, in the language of "Le Message automatique," perception and representation) cannot be distinguished."[68] Reminiscent of Surrealist automatic writing, the confusion of reality and dream, imagination and real, pervades the creative process of Pedro. Hosting Julia and Marito in his home, Pedro reveals that he finds inspiration by wearing different costumes and transforming himself into the characters who populate his fictional worlds. In responding to the amazement of Julia and Marito, Pedro says:

> "And why shouldn't I have the right to become one with characters of my own creation, to resemble them? Who is there to stop me from having their noses, their hair, their frock coats as I describe them?" […]. What does it matter to anyone if I lubricate my imagination with a few bits of cloth? […] What better way is there of creating realistic art than by materially identifying oneself with reality? And doesn't the day's work thereby become more tolerable, more pleasant, more varied, more dynamic?" (AJS 146).

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66 Alicia Andreu observes that Pedro personifies the hallucinating process of writing ("Pedro Camacho: Prestidigitador del lenguaje", *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring, 1986), p. 24).

67 André Breton, Paul Éluard, "Notes on Poetry", in Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 274.

68 Suzanne Guerlac, *Literary Polemics. Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 141.

This continuity between creator and creation exacerbates the Quixotic tension between life and fiction. The Quixotic dimension of Pedro's practice also emerges in his search of pleasure. When Marito asks him why he does not use the scripts he wrote in Bolivia as a basis for his new stories, Pedro explains he has not saved any of his works. He claims excitedly that "'Pleasure stems from variety'" and that "the complete change of place, milieu, mood, subject, and characters reinforced the exhilarating sensation that one was starting afresh" (AJS 144). The pleasure Pedro finds in writing evokes the experience of reading that Don Quixote describes to the Canon: "read these books, and then you will see the pleasure you derive from them. […] is there any greater joy than seeing, before our very eyes, you might say, a great lake of boiling pitch, […] enclosed within the seven castles of the seven enchantresses which lieth beneath this blackness".[69] For Don Quixote reading should not have any educational or ethical concern, but only provide pleasure. Similarly, Pedro's writing is driven by the incessant desire to renew his pleasure. His obsession with writing alienates him from his life in the same way that reading does for Don Quixote, leading him to a mental breakdown.

The odd-numbered chapters telling the story of Marito contain many clues that Pedro's soap operas are becoming too extreme. For instance, Marito hears distractedly Aunt Olga saying that Pedro has gone too far with the story of the minister who castrates himself with a letter opener in front of the judge, in order to prove he had not raped a thirteen-year-old girl. In addition to the increasing presence of morbid elements, Pedro's soap operas start to lack consistency: characters who died in previous episodes return to life, while others move from one soap opera to another without any explanation. Questioned about these issues by the Genaros, Pedro has a crisis:

> He [Pedro]'d had a nervous collapse: the catastrophes were stratagems to enable him to begin the stories all over again from scratch, since his memory was failing him, and he could no longer remember what had happened in the plots in previous episodes, nor which character was which, nor which serial they belonged to, and – "weeping hysterically and tearing his hair," Nelly assured me – he confessed to them that in the last few weeks his work, his life, his nights had been torture (AJS 376).

A physician gives the opinion that Pedro is no longer in condition to work: "his 'exhausted' brain had to have a rest" and "his psyche is undergoing a process of deliquescence" (AJS 376-77). As a result of Pedro's "mental liquefaction", Marito is asked to continue writing Pedro's soap operas and he is given back the typewriter that

69 Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman, New York, Ecco, 2003, pp. 455-56.

he had to give to Pedro when the Bolivian scriptwriter started working for Radio Panamericana. Drawing on this symbolic event that marks Marito's emergence as a creator, my next step is to explore how his masculinity emerges as a form of discursive authority.

As the narration proceeds, it appears that since the even-numbered chapters are not written in a dialogical form as radio soap operas should be, they cannot be identified as Camacho's dramas, but rather as their narrative adaptations realised by Marito. Vargas Llosa himself observes that "Pedro's dramas are not presented in scripts but are described by Varguitas, who transforms them. That is the apprenticeship he passes through."[70] The juncture between the two narrative lines becomes explicit in the twentieth and last chapter of the novel, which does not include another soap opera as the previous odd-numbered chapters, but the continuation of Marito's story. *Aunt Julia and The Scriptwriter* may be described as one side of a Möbius strip and regarded as an example of what Steven Kellman defines as a self-begetting novel, a work which represents "the development of a character to the point at which he is able to take up his pen and compose the novel we have just finished reading."[71] As an account of Marito's marriage and literary apprenticeship, the text of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* unfolds the initiation rite through which Marito enters "into textuality as well as into adult sexuality".[72]

Besides displaying Marito's apprenticeship for mastering the craft of storytelling, the even chapters also draw Pedro's decay as a writer. In his reading of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, Carlos Alonso emphasises the rivalry between the serious writer Marito and the scriptwriter Pedro: "the scriptwriter's collapse" should be seen in relation to "the narrator's rise to a position of discursive authority".[73] In view of Marito's appropriation of the twentieth chapter, and of the rigid alternation which would have assigned this space to Pedro, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* expresses an "agonistic view of the universe of discourse" in which "becoming a writer is equated

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70 Ruas, "Talk with Mario Vargas Llosa", p.15.

71 Steven Kellman, *The Self-Begetting Novel*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1980, p. 3. Swanson observes that *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* "ends with a kind of epilogue where the mature writer is now in a position to start writing the story which the reader is about to finish" (67).

72 Still, Worton, *Textuality and Sexuality*, p. 42.

73 Carlos Alonso, "*La tía Julia y el escribidor*: The Writing Subject's Fantasy of Empowerment", *PMLA*, Vol. 106, No. 1 (Jan., 1991), p. 50.

[…] with the vanquishing of one's precursors as well."[74] After his struggles to find his voice among several literary influences, Marito succeeds in shaping the account of his rise as an author, through the literary "murder" of his precursor. Marito's story evokes the notion of influence Harold Bloom elaborates concerning poetry. For Bloom poetry "is necessarily a competitive mode […] because poetic strength involves a self-representation that is reached only through trespass".[75] By incorporating his adaptations of Pedro's work, Marito distances himself from his model.

Let me return to the moment when Marito witnesses Pedro disguising himself. Marito asks Pedro whether he acquires disguises to fit his characters or he invents them on the basis of disguises he already owns. Pedro replies: "It's plain from your question that you're still very young […] Don't you know that in the beginning is the Word – always?" (AJS 146). Besides stating his position of authority in relation to a young writer, Pedro claims centrality for the written word in the creative process. Learning this lesson, Marito assimilates Pedro's texts as a counterpart to his biographical narrative and imposes his aesthetic on Pedro's. The mastery that Marito attains resonates in the symmetry of the novel. As Swanson writes:

> The evolution from the labyrinthine structural forms of his earlier works towards the more rigid symmetry of *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, coupled with the neutralisation of both the youthful uncertainty of the love-struck Marito and the rampaging 'fantasmas' of Pedro Camacho by the framing of the novel from the controlling perspective of a mature and successful husband and author may suggest that the driving force behind the text is to combine all these multiple and interpenetrating elements and reduce them to a single principle of coherence.[76]

Swanson opposes other novels by Vargas Llosa, such as *The Time of the Hero*, *The Green House* and *Conversation in the Cathedral* in which different narrators' perspectives alternate and narrative planes overlap to the binary structure of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. The principle of coherence Swanson highlights in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* is informed by the position of authority Marito reaches at the end of the novel, as both a writer and a husband. Marito displays a self-reflexive form of authorial masculinity: in shaping the story of his marriage as well as his maturation, he is critical towards his own pretensions and emotional immaturity as a young man.

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74 Ibid., p. 51.

75 Harold Bloom, "Poetry, Revisionism, Repression", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Winter, 1975), p. 237.

76 Swanson, "Mario Vargas Llosa and *La tía Julia y el escribidor*", p. 63.

In his interview with Ruas, Vargas Llosa calls into question the different approaches to literature of Marito and Pedro: Pedro "is a natural storyteller without any kind of sophistication, a genius at that level, with a tremendous capacity to transform reality and fiction into his own form", while Marito "wants to be a writer but is self-critical. This rigor, in his case, is a kind of impotence."[77] But in drawing on Pedro's material, Marito overcomes the impotence induced by his excessive self-criticism.[78] Marito's difficulties remind me of Jaromil's struggle to enact his erotic impulses due to being overly self-conscious: self-consciousness and self-reflexivity represent an obstacle to enacting masculinity. Jaromil's and Marito's creative practices evoke the parallel between creativity and masculinity Peter Schwenger formulates by rephrasing Archibald MacLeish's verse "A poem should not mean / But be" in "the perfect male 'must not mean but be'".[79] By opposition, Pedro's breakdown arises from his inability to distance himself from his writing practices, which is in sharp contrast to the capacity for self-scrutiny that Kepesh projects onto Colette, and the ability to control her sensations that Milanku projects onto Madame de T.. Marito finds a balance between self-criticism and writing in the narrative account of his life shaped by the metaliterary interplay between his biographical account and soap operas he writes in Pedro's style. Compared to Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere* and Roth's *The Professor of Desire*, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* represents a narrative of male sentimental education in which the artificial and conventional way in which emotions are expressed do not have alienating effects on a male subjectivity that they do in the other two novels. While for Jaromil and Kepesh literary mediation contributes to their estrangement and exacerbates their ignorance of emotion, Marito reconciles himself through his writing with the emotional repertoires conveyed by the romances of which Julia is fond. But what is the nature of the maturation of Marito and the self-awareness he supposedly gains in the novel?

Marito's achievement depends on his success as a writer. For José Miguel Oviedo the subterranean thread of the novel "is that of the writer in the process of

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77 Ruas, "Talk with Mario Vargas Llosa", p. 15.

78 A different insight into Marito's writing is offered by Sally Harvey, who underlines that Marito merely imitates other writers' styles rather than producing anything original. Observing that Marito fulfils a series of inauthentic roles including that of the writer in order to comply with the requirements of the Peruvian bourgeoisie, Harvey proposes that Marito is a satirical depiction of Vargas Llosa himself ("La *tía Julia y el escribidor:* Self-Portrait of an *en-soi*", *Antipodas*, No. 1 (December 1988), pp. 74-87).

79 Peter Schwenger, "The Masculine Mode", *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1979), p. 632.

writing – writing about a fiction in life, writing himself a life through his fiction."[80] The passage from Salvador Elizondo's *El grafógrafo* [*The Graphographer*] which serves as epigraph to *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* conveys the pivotal role of writing in the novel: "I write. I write that I am writing. Mentally I see myself writing that I am writing and I can also see myself that I am writing" (AJS IV). If Marito observes that "[f]or him [Pedro] to live was to write" (AJS 141), the reader of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* may say that for Marito to write is to live. This Quixotic tension between experience and fiction evokes Gines de Pasamonte, the character who embodies the picaresque genre in *Don Quixote* and claims to be the author of a text about his own life.[81] Let me refer to the dialogue between Don Quixote and Gines:

> "[B]ut if you want to know about mine, know that I'm Gines de Pasamonte, whose life has been written by these very fingers."
>
> "He's telling the truth," said the commissary. "He wrote his own history himself, as fine as you please, and he pawned the book for two hundred *reales* and left it in prison."
>
> "And I intend to redeem it," said Gines, "even for two hundred *duca-dos."*
>
> "Is it that good?" said Don Quixote.
>
> "It's so good," responded Gines, "that it's too bad for *Lazarillo de Tormes* and all the other books of that genre that have been or will be written. What I can tell your grace is that it deals with truths, and they are truths so appealing and entertaining that no lies can equal them."
>
> "And what is the title of the book?" asked Don Quixote.
>
> *"The Life of Gines de Pasamonte,"* Gines replied.
>
> "And is it finished?" asked Don Quixote.
>
> "How can it be finished," he responded, "if my life isn't finished yet? What I've written goes from my birth to the moment when they sentenced me to the galleys this last time."[82]

Just as Don Quixote reads his life as a chivalric adventure worthy of *Amadís de Gaula*, Gines writes his life to create a better text than *Lazarillo de Torres*, the novella founding the picaresque genre. Gines's act of writing mirrors Quixote's act of reading, which converts the text into the substance of his life. In *Don Quixote*, reading and writing represent two opposite movements which together articulate the interdependence of lived experience and fiction. In the light of my analysis, we may

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80 José Miguel Oviedo, "*La tía Julia y el escribidor*, or the Coded Self-Portrait", trans. Marcela Loiseau de Rossman, in *Mario Vargas Llosa. A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 167.

81 Vargas Llosa's flirtation with the picaresque and his interplay between different narrative genres also emerge in his interview with Oviedo. Vargas Llosa explained he had discarded *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* as a title for his novel and wanted to give it a new one which was "more that of a picaresque novel: *Vida y Milagros de Pedro Camacho*" [*The Life and Miracles of Pedro Camacho*] (164-5). After the interview, Vargas Llosa returned to his original idea and published the novel with the title that it has.

82 Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, pp. 184-185.

imagine Kepesh the reader and Marito the writer having a conversation like the one between Don Quixote and Gines, but focusing on their literary explorations of the opacity of their impulses.

While in *The Professor of Desire* Kepesh's failure at reading his own desire is evident, Marito's inability to see the motive behind his urges is more subtle. Although Marito and Julia have no blood connection, their *liaison* evokes an incestuous relationship between mother and son. The novel repeatedly presents Julia as a surrogate mother figure: she says Marito that she may be his mother – "'I'm very nearly old enough for you to be my son'" (AJS 94), "'The fact is, I *could* be your mama'" (AJS 175), Marito himself wonders "what was I doing, wasting my time with a woman who […] was almost old enough to be my mother?" (AJS 169), and he is teased by municipal functionaries: "'So you want to marry your mama, do you?'" (AJS 301). Alonso observes that "[i]n choosing his aunt as an object of sexual desire, Varguitas transgresses the boundaries established by the laws of kinship" and that "the even-numbered chapters delineate the aspiring writer's successful seduction of a symbolic mother figure and link that accomplishment to his attainment of authorial mastery."[83] For Alonso this para-incestuous relation parallels the symbolic murder of Pedro at the heart of Maritos's process of discursive empowerment, strengthening the oedipal subtext of the novel. In a poststructuralist fashion, Marito's masculinity unfolds as a textual performance driven by his incestuous impulses. As Otto Rank wrote, "incest is a symbol of a man's self-creative urge".[84] The interconnectedness of a desire for autonomous creativity and incest is strengthened by the fact that, after the end of his marriage with Julia, Marito marries again with his cousin Patricia. In describing his family's reaction to his marriage, Marito observes that this time it did not create an uproar since they "could predict […] my blackest misdeeds" (AJS 393). This new transgression of the law of kinship increases the ambiguity of Marito's formation as a writer. The conclusion of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* insinuates doubts as to whether Marito is marrying the woman he loves or repeating a path of transgression. While in *Slowness* writing represents a means to articulate Milanku's reflection on heterosexual desire, Marito's writing emerges as a practice through which an authorial masculine enacts itself; but whether this performance is based on a necessary cessation of self-doubting or a suppression of Marito's innermost feelings is unclear. In the next

83 Alonso, "The Writing Subject's Fantasy of Empowerment", pp. 51-52.

84 Otto Rank, *Beyond Psychology*, New York, Dover, 1941, p. 114.

section I shall examine how the tension between self-reflexivity and writing depicted by Roth in *My Life as a Man* challenges the suggestion that writing opens up masculinity to an effective reflection as in the case of Milanku in *Slowness*; or that writing opens up masculinity to a textual performance which enacts manhood and masculine identity, as it does for Marito in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*.

### 3. *My Life as a Man*

#### (i) Discrepancy and identification: literary masculinity and heteronormative discourse

*My Life as a Man* juxtaposes the autobiographical narrative of the 34-year-old writer Peter Tarnopol, entitled "My True Story", with his short-stories, "Salad Days (or, Serious in the Fifties)" and "Courting Disaster". Approaching this dual structure I shall firstly focus on the supposedly autobiographical account of Peter's masculine experience. Secondly, I shall discuss how these autobiographical elements reverberate in Peter's fictions exploring his masculinity.

Written between 1966 and 1967, during Peter's sexual quarantine in a foundation-supported retreat for artists, "My True Story" focuses on "*his nightmarish marriage*" to Maureen, "*a barmaid, an abstract painter, a sculptress, a waitress, an actress (and what an actress), a short-story writer, a liar, and a psychopath*" (MLM 99). While in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* marriage marks the passage from youth to manhood, *My Life as a Man* offers an antithetical view.[85] Peter's account goes back to 1958, when at twenty-five, he has already published stories inspired by his boyhood in literary quarterlies. As it does for Marito, Peter's engagement with literature defines his character: "I was distinguishable from the mass of my contemporaries: I read books and I wanted to write them. My master was not Mammon or Fun or Propriety, but Art" (MLM 175).[86] Peter is writing his first novel, *A Jewish Father*, based on his experience as a corporal in Germany and his parents' reaction to his relationship with a Gentile girl,

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[85] Like *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, *My Life as a Man* is inspired by Roth's first marriage. Bernard Rodgers underlines some analogies between the lives of Roth and Peter Tarnopol: "Both writers had similar childhoods. As young, beginning writers, both were dedicated to art of the 'earnest moral variety.' In 1959, at the age of twenty-seven, both published highly praised first books, and both married divorcées. Both received Guggenheim grants, spent time in Rome, gave a public lecture in California in 1960, and taught during the same years at large Midwestern state universities. Both were separated from their wives and underwent psychoanalysis between 1962 and 1967; and both of their estranged wives died violent deaths in auto accidents in Central Park" (*Philip Roth*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1978, p. 152).

[86] Philip Roth, *My Life as a Man*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974; in New York, Vintage, 1993.

a German student-nurse. Ten years after the Second World War, the German young woman is unaffected by the fact that Peter "was a dark Jew and she a blonde Aryan" (MLM 180), while Peter's self-conscious struggle with their relationship is at the heart of *A Jewish Father*. The problematic assimilation of his Jewish legacy and his sense that he is transgressing this legacy echoes in his search for Gentile women.

The influence of literature reverberates in Peter's fascination with complex moral issues in his everyday life:

> I was not about to settle for complexity and depth in books alone. Stuffed to the gills with great fiction – entranced not by cheap romances, like Madame Bovary, but by *Madame Bovary* – I now expected to find in everyday experience that same sense of the difficult and the deadly earnest that informed the novels I admired most (MLM 195).

Like Emma Bovary, Peter is a Quixotic reader whose sense of reality is modelled on his readings. Peter describes his dedication to literature as a "Flaubertian vocation" (MLM 175). For him Flaubert is the "genius" who "form[ed] my literary conscience as a student and an aspiring novelist" (MLM 240-1). Flaubert's journey to Egypt inspires Peter to look for a relationship that can add interest to his life, "that temptingly unknown creature of a young man's eroto-heroic imaginings, *an older woman*" (MLM 176). Evocative of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *Sentimental Education*,[87] Peter's desire is satisfied when he meets Maureen. Twenty-nine old and twice divorced, Maureen is a Gentile woman who embodies a world unknown to Peter's literary (in)experience in the manner of Helen in Roth's later novel *The Professor of Desire* (1977): "Maureen's chaotic, daredevil background had a decidedly exotic and romantic appeal" (MLM 178).

Despite their initial attraction, Peter desires to end his relationship with Maureen because of their constant arguments. After they split, Maureen claims to be pregnant by Peter and rages at his refusal to marry her:

> "[…] I've taken enough from men like you in my life! You're going to marry me or I'm going to kill myself! […]" […] "[…] You selfish, spoiled, immature, irresponsible Ivy League bastards, […]" […] "With your big fat advance and your high Art – oh, you make me sick the way you hide from life behind that *Art* of yours! I hate you and I hate that fucking Flaubert, and you are going to marry me, Peter, because I have had enough! I'm not going to be another man's helpless victim!" (MLM 187-88).

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87 Efraín Kristal underlines the analogies between Vargas Llosa's novel and Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (*Temptation of the Word. The Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1998, pp. 92-97).

Maureen's anger reflects her conflictual relationship with men. She claims she has been a victim of her first violent husband Mezik and deceived by her second husband Walker, a secret homosexual. Emphasising Peter's privileged social position as a male intellectual, Maureen feels that he is not recognising her right to be a wife, making of her a victim of men once again. Her rage does not only reiterate the masculinist logic by which her realisation as a woman depends on a man, but also strengthens the heteronormative masculinity imposed on men. After their relationship deteriorates, Maureen complains about Peter's inadequacy as a lover: "even *Walker*, the homosexual who was her second, knew more about how to satisfy a woman than the selfish, inept, questionable heterosexual who was I" (MLM 135). Marito is called a queer because of the alleged effeminacy of writing, and in the same way Peter's demasculinization arises from his failure to satisfy a woman sexually and his refusal to form a family. In both novels homosexuality emerges as the horizon against which heteronormative masculinity re-confirms itself.

In addressing how literature mediates Peter's desire, *My Life as a Man* engages explicitly with the social background of heteronormative discourse. Peter links his masculine experience to the relationship between the sexes characteristic of 1950s American society:

> Decency and Maturity, a young man's "seriousness," were at issue precisely because […] in that the great world was so obviously a man's, it was only within marriage that an ordinary woman could hope to find equality and dignity. Indeed, we were led to believe by the defenders of womankind of our era that we were exploiting and degrading the women we *didn't* marry, rather than the ones we did. […] It was up to us then to give them the value and the purpose that society at large withheld – by marrying them (MLM 170).[88]

The challenge to seriousness is a pivotal notion in Roth's oeuvre. Although Roth has dedicated his writing to a relentless search for the "unserious" since the publication of his irreverent 1969 novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, at the beginning of his career he established himself as a serious intellectual and, when criticised, he argued for the seriousness of his work in his essayistic writing.[89] For Roth to be serious meant to

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[88] As in the case of Kundera's comments on sexual liberation and seduction, I am not concerned with the validity of such a position, but rather in examining the ways in which Peter's perspective intersects with the notion of masculinity he derives from literature. For a discussion of *My Life as a Man* in view of America's social context see: Sally Robinson, *Marked Men. White Masculinity in Crisis*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 89-101.

[89] David Gobblar discusses Roth's idea of seriousness at the beginning of his career as a writer ("The Idea of Seriousness: *Portnoy's Complaint*", in *The Major Phases of Philip Roth*, London, Continuum, 2011, pp. 33-57), while Ross Posnock reads Roth's oeuvre from the point of view of his

engage with the legacy of prominent writers and contemporary society, carrying out an "investigation of our times and the impact of those times upon human personality".[90] In *My Life as a Man* seriousness is not only presented as an intellectual concern, but also as a core value for the notion of masculinity envisioned by American society in the 1950s. Peter's stress on the notions of Decency and Maturity (both written with the capital letter) evokes Gombrowicz's exploration of the forms of maturity that society imposes on the subjects and the individual's struggle against them. My next step is to investigate the tension between heteronormative discourse and the influence of literature on Peter's intellectual ideal of masculinity.

Maureen deceives Peter by showing him the result of a pregnancy test made on a specimen of urine she bought from a pregnant woman in a park. Knowing that Peter does not desire children, she promises that she will have an abortion if he marries her. Even though Peter thinks she is lying, he accepts. The moment in which Peter takes his decision is revealing:

> It seemed then that I was making one of those moral decisions that I had heard so much about in college literature courses. […] Perhaps if I had not fallen so in love with these complicated fictions of moral anguish, I never would […] arrived at what seemed to me the only "honorable" decision for a young man as morally "serious" as myself (MLM 195).

Peter's fascination with literature informs his masculinity as a young intellectual. Maureen's pregnancy satisfies Peter's urge to live the moral anguish of high literature. His emphasis on seriousness and honour confirms the role that the notion of maturity has in engendering young men's experiences, as I discussed in relation to *The Professor of Desire* as well as Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*. The co-dependency of Peter's literary understanding of his experience and the social values at the heart of heteronormative masculinity shapes the script of masculinity to which Peter adheres.

Like a modern Don Quixote, Peter's literary expectations clash against his experience. The marriage exacerbates the tension between Maureen and Peter. When Peter visits his brother Moses, the stress he suffers in his marriage is expressed at a physical level: "I was in the bathroom by this time; Moe […] kneeled down in that tiny tiled room beside the toilet, where I was sitting on the seat, watery feces running from

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search for the unserious (*Philip Roth's Rude Truth. The Art of Immaturity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006).

[90] Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction", *Commentary*, March 1961, p. 226. Available online at: https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/writing-american-fiction/. Accessed on 14/09/2017. A slightly edited version is available in *Reading Myself and Others*, pp. 173-191.

me, sweating and simultaneously trembling as though I were packed in ice" (MLM 106). The somatization of his traumatic relationship with Maureen brings to light his corporality, challenging the poststructuralist critical trend towards the disembodiment of the author which seems to be displayed in Marito's discursive rise as an authorial masculinity. More than achieving maturity through his marriage, Peter undergoes a regression: his brother Morris calls him by his childhood nickname "Peppy" and comforts him as if he were a kid while he seats on the toilet. Reminiscent of Baumgarten in *The Professor of Desire*, Morris calls Peter a "poor, pussy-whipped bastard" when he learns how Maureen has forced Peter to marry her (MLM 126). The antagonistic view of the sexes Roth's characters convey provoked accusations of misogyny. In "Why Do These Men Hate Women?", Vivian Gornick argues that the lack of distance between character and author in *My Life as a Man* configures Peter's hatred for his wife as a statement of the author.[91] Following Debra Shostak, who suggests that these allegations of misogyny should be seen "according to the logic that misogyny emerges from a perceived threat to symbolic masculine power",[92] I intend to argue, rather, that *My Life as a Man* exposes the symbolic power imposed on Peter as a heterosexual man, his troubling identification with this role and his sense of discrepancy in relation to it.[93]

To evade his marriage Peter has an affair with one of his students, Karen Oakes, who soon interrupts their relationship, explaining she cannot be the one saving him from his marriage. When Maureen listens to Peter on the phone imploring Karen to come back, she simulates a suicide attempt. Afterwards she tells Peter she knows about his affair, but she will forget about it if he will forgive her for lying about her pregnancy. Outraged by the revelation, Peter ends their relationship. As a response Maureen tries to slit her wrist with a razor blade. Peter's attempt to stop her escalates into a fight in which they end up covered in blood, an event which results in Peter's nervous breakdown. He runs into their room, where he tears his clothes off and wears

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[91] Vivian Gornick, "Why Do These Men Hate Women?", *The Village Voice*, 6 December 1976, pp. 12–15; in *Essays in Feminism*, New York, Harper & Row, 1978, p. 189. Roth refers to this essay in "Interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*" (*Le Nouvel Observateur*; May 1981, in *Reading Myself and Others*, pp. 118-119).

[92] Debra Shostak, *Philip Roth. Countertexts, Counterlives*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2004, p. 22.

[93] Joseph H. Pleck introduces the notion of discrepancy in relation to gender male performance in "The Male Sex Role: Definitions, Problems, and Sources of Change" (*Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 1976, pp. 155-164).

Maureen's underwear, begging her to let him go.[94] The scene puts on display Peter's desire to abdicate the power and responsibilities he is given against his will as a heterosexual man by a patriarchal society – "as a man I surrendered", he says (MLM 173). By opposition, Maureen embodies an extreme response to the "sense of defenselessness and vulnerability" which patriarchy projects onto her (MLM 173): as Kundera underlines in his reading of *My Life as a Man*, "Maureen's aggressiveness resides in her weakness".[95] Peter's autobiographical account denounces the inadequacy of the gender roles America society envisions and the fallacy of what he calls "the myth of male inviolability" (MLM 173). His crisis reveals the vulnerability and fragility that his man-role denies.

Even though Peter presents himself as a victim, "My True Story" exposes his violent behaviour. After one of their fights, Peter questions his conduct: "my idea of manliness had little to do with dishing out physical punishment […] To find Maureen's blood on my hand was in fact *un*manning" (MLM 183-84). Peter's ideal of an intellectual masculinity contrasts with the patriarchal belief that violence is a man's feature. Nonetheless, guilt and regret do not prevent Peter from hitting her again. After convincing Peter to meet in his apartment to agree on the divorce, Maureen declares she is never going to divorce him and starts reading him her short story "Dressing Up in Mommy's Clothes" about a serious writer who wears his wife's underwear. In the following fight Peter hits her repeatedly and observes "I was not even really in a rage any longer. Just enjoying myself thoroughly" (MLM 283). The pleasure Peter feels illuminates the patriarchal violence he has interiorized. The conversation he has with his therapist reveals his joy derived from enacting this distorted notion of masculinity: "In retrospect, one of the high points of my life! I thought, '[…] She wants a beating, I'll give it to her!'" (MLM 289). His satisfaction seems to derive from his ability to perform the male violence characteristic of Maureen's previous relationships which he claims she was asking for. Peter highlights the performative nature of his gendered violence: "You should have seen that performance" (MLM 290). Only Peter's new partner, Susan, denounces this violence. Underlining that Maureen is mentally unstable, Susan addresses the paradox of Peter's behaviour: "You keep trying to do the 'manly' thing, and all you over do is act like a child" (MLM 293). Lost the sense of the ennobling

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94 For an insight into Roth's pervasive engagement with psychoanalysis in *My Life as a Man* see: Margaret Smith, "*My Life as a Man*: 'The Surprises Manhood Brings'", in *Philip Roth: New Perspective on an American Author*, ed. Derek Parker Royal, Westport, Praeger-Greenwood, 2005, pp. 75-87.

95 Kundera, "Some Notes on Roth", p. 162.

literary frames he has projected onto his masculinity, Peter emerges as an abusive partner and wonders "[h]ow do I ever get to be what is described in the literature as *a man*?" (MLM 302).

Driven by his desire to transgress his Jewish legacy, Peter is attracted by troubled Gentile women. Susan is a widow with a history of psychological problems, and Moses is explicit about the dynamics of Peter's desire: "A pretty face […], plus a good strong dose of psychoneurosis, and a girl is in business with my little brother" (MLM 162-3), and again, "Fucked-up shiksas […] you can't resist them, Pep" (MLM 169). Peter himself explains that "What I liked […] was something taxing in my love affairs, something problematical and puzzling to keep the imagination going even while I was away from my books" (MLM 180). While Susan's neediness seems to reassure Peter about his male role and to satisfy his narcissism, his relationship with Maureen alienates him from the literary world to which he aspires. When Maureen is hospitalized after another attempted suicide, Peter visits her on his lawyer's advice. At the hospital he meets Flossie, a member of the support group for women Maureen has joined, from whom Peter learns the different account of her life Maureen has told the group. In this version, Maureen was abused by her father in her childhood (an account which reminds Peter of Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*) and despite Peter's affair, she still loves him and has told the group all the details of their time in Italy. Observing Flossie's involvement with their fate, Peter realises that "[w]e […] were her own private soap opera: she was the audience to our drama, our ode-singing chorus; this was the Fortinbras my Deep Seriousness had called forth. Fair enough, I thought – this Fortinbras for this farce!" (MLM 307). The reference to *Hamlet* displays how Peter's urge for experiencing literary seriousness is nourished by tragedy, but with Maureen, "instead of the intractability of serious fiction", he gets "the intractability of soap opera" (MLM 196).[96] This aesthetic fall in the domain of a mainstream genre conveys Peter's estrangement, which is then exacerbated by Maureen's death in a car accident. He cannot accept it because he considers her sudden death an event too fortuitous to fit in a realistic plot: "Defies credulity" (MLM 113). As a biographical account, "My True Story" presents the dialogical tensions between literary, social, ethnic and emotional

[96] The tension between high and low culture and the flirtation with soap opera characterise both *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *My Life as a Man*. As in Vargas Llosa's novel, the cultural synthesis displayed by Roth has been interpreted in relation to the postmodern aesthetic and as a reflection of "broader aesthetic and cultural shifts in the States in the late 1970s" (Paul McDonald, Samantha Roden, *Philip Roth through the Lens of Kepesh*, Penrith, Humanities Ebooks LLP, 2016, p. 60).

discourses underlying Peter's masculinity and the ways in which he projects meaning onto his sexual urges. In the next sections, I shall explore Peter's self-reflexive struggle to discover his masculinity through his writing and to synthetize these different discourses.

**(ii) 'To be a man': an unfulfilled tragedy**

Peter's dependency on literary categories and his sense of not living up the gravity of serious fiction characterise his search for masculinity. Patrick Hayes reads *My Life as a Man* within Roth's engagement with the tragic and his attempt to redefine it. Hayes connects this attempt to the metafictional dimension of the novel and Roth's response to the trend towards metafiction expressed by John Barth in his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion".[97] Hayes investigates *My Life as a Man* in relation to Alain Robbe-Grillet's writing. On the one hand, *My Life as a Man* offers a narrative representation of Robbe-Grillet's reading of the tragic in the modern novel as the human tendency to anthropomorphise experience, projecting meaning onto objects and events deprived of meaning.[98] Peter's urge to read his life through fictional frames displays the "narcissistic falsification of life" that Robbe-Grillet describes.[99] On the other hand, *My Life as a Man* "diverges sharply from the aims and methods of the *nouveau roman*, most especially from Robbe-Grillet's positivist conviction that the anthropocentric bias of the novel can ultimately be overcome."[100] Stemming from Hayes's insight, I intend rather to read *My Life as a Man*'s engagement with the tragic and the metafictional forms of the novel in the light of Peter's masculinity and his struggle to achieve an understanding of it through writing.

Peter's urge to fulfil a literary form of masculinity pervades his writing. Schwenger writes that "[t]his overriding aspiration to the fulfilment of his masculinity informs Tarnopol's literary endeavours, too – making of them all […] an attempt to write his own manhood."[101] Peter's obsession is to write a narrative account of his marriage:

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97 John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion", in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*, London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1984, pp. 62-76.

98 Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Nature, Humanism and Tragedy", *New Left Review* 31, 1965, pp. 65-80.

99 Patrick Hayes, *Philip Roth: Fiction and Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 75.

100 Ibid., p. 78.

101 Peter Schwenger, *Phallic Critiques. Masculinity and Twentieth-Century Literature*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 150.

> *That* book, based upon my misadventures in manhood, I still, of course, spent maddening hours on every day, and I had some two thousand pages of manuscript in the liquor carton to prove it. […] what impressed one upon attempting to penetrate that prose was not the imaginary world it depicted, but the condition of the person who'd been doing the imagining: the manuscript was the message, and the message was Turmoil (MLM 241).

By writing a fictional account of his marriage Peter aims to make sense of his life and masculinity. The act of penetration (and its failure) is the metaphor Peter choses to articulate self-seeking: "[o]ver the three years I had tried easily a hundred different ways to penetrate that mystery; […] obsessed, I was as incapable of not writing about what was killing me as I was of altering or understanding it" (MLM 104). Unable to complete his work, Peter's investigation of his experience is conveyed in "Salad Days" and "Courting Disaster", featuring his alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman as a protagonist.[102] While "Salad Days" focuses on the childhood and youth of Nathan, "Courting Disaster" focuses on his marriage. The increasing emotional proximity with the experiences which inspired them is marked by the passage from a third-person narrator to a first-person narrator. Peter's exploration of masculinity through writing calls to mind the role that Lurie's *Byron in Italy* plays in *Disgrace*: "Salad Days" and "Courting Disaster" also induce the reader to look in Peter's experience for traces that explain the formation of his writing.[103] But if in *Disgrace* the stress is on Lurie's creative process, in *My Life as a Man* Peter's stories are complete: the differences between Peter's experiences narrated in "My True Story" and their literary transpositions generate an interpretative space that the actual reader has to fill. Nonetheless, the actual reader's attempt is anticipated, and partly frustrated, by the interpretations of Peter's writing other characters provide within the novel. Reflecting on Peter's literary creations and mirroring the actual reader's interpretations, the metaliterary dimension of *My Life as a Man* gives a sense of circularity in interpretation. My next step is to investigate how

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[102] In *My Life as a Man* Nathan Zuckerman is a creation of the fictional author Peter Tarnopol. Another character named Nathan Zuckerman appears in several Roth's novels: he is the protagonist of *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *Anatomy Lesson*, *The Prague Orgy*, *The Counterlife* and *Exit Ghost*; a secondary character in *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain*; and the fictional author of a letter commenting on Roth's autobiographical manuscript in *The Facts*. The Zuckerman who appears in these novels has only one brother, Henry, and has never married a woman named Lydia, while *My Life as a Man*'s Zuckerman is the widower of Lydia and has two siblings, Sherman and Sonia.

[103] Considering this metafictional device, David Brauner underlines the postmodern features of the novel, "its relentless interrogation of the nature of reality and its own fictional status" ("The 'Credible' Incredible", in *Philip Roth*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 61).

"Courting Disaster" illuminates *My Life as a Man*'s engagement with tragedy and meta-literariness.

Teaching a night course in Creative Writing, Nathan meets his future wife, Lydia. Five years older than him, Lydia is a divorced woman, mother of the ten-year old Monica. Lydia's story includes childhood miseries, her father's sexual abuses, a violent husband called Ketterer, and a mental breakdown. The details of Lydia's life are inspired by the different accounts Maureen tells Peter and Flossie. Peter himself elucidates that "Courting Disaster" is a fictional meditation on his marriage: "what if Maureen's personal mythology had been biographical truth?" (MLM 113). Nathan starts a relationship with Lydia, although he believes this will ruin his life and he feels no attraction for her. Nathan describes her body as "mannish, awkward" (MLM 33). Lydia herself is extremely dismissive towards herself and tries to dissuade Nathan from dating her because she is older and unable to experience pleasure. Nathan's initial concern with Lydia's body focalises then on her genitals exclusively:

> [I]t seemed to me curious that I should be *so* repelled by her flesh as I was that first night. […] Earlier, caressing her body, I had been made uneasy by the unexpected texture of her genitals. To the touch, the fold of skin between her legs felt abnormally thick, and when I looked, as though to take pleasure in the sight of her nakedness, the vaginal lips appeared withered and discolored in a way that was alarming to me (MLM 71).

Conveying the abjection he feels for her, the adjective "alarming" anticipates Nathan's consideration a few pages later about his tendency to project literary meaning onto his desire: "what was 'hideous' – alarming, shameful, astonishing – was the significance that a young man of my pretensions should attach to his lust" (MLM 76). Nathan's self-reflection addresses how Peter tends to turn his desire, in the words of Hayes, into an "inauthentic literary construct".[104] But more than mirroring Peter's habit of reading his life through a literary frame, "Courting Disaster" explores this tendency and its implications. The description of Lydia's genitals articulates the tension between Nathan's erotic practices and his imagination:

> But where she was dry, brownish, weatherworn, I pressed my open mouth. I took no pleasure in the act, she gave no sign that she did; but at least I had done what I had been frightened of doing, put my tongue to where she had been brutalized, as though – it was tempting to put it this way – that would redeem us both (MLM 72).

[104] Hayes, *Philip Roth*, p. 76.

The hyper-realistic description of Lydia's genitals is juxtaposed with the literary fantasies it inspires. Focusing on the redemption he and Lydia may obtain through oral sex, Nathan develops a parallel with *Madame Bovary* in the manner of Peter in "My True Story": "Where Emma Bovary had read too many romances of her period, it would seem that I had read too much of the criticism of mine. That I was, by 'eating' her, taking some sort of sacrament was a most attractive idea – though one that I rejected after the initial momentary infatuation" (MLM 72). Reflecting on his experience via his literary alter-ego, Peter acknowledges that life events do not conform to narrative dynamics and the influence of literary criticism on his life. "Courting Disaster" enacts Nathan's urge to give significance to his masculinity and, at the same time, his awareness of this impulse and his resistance to it. As in *Disgrace*, the comparison between the male protagonist and Emma highlights their awareness of the influence of literature on their lives. Nevertheless, this realization does not emancipate Lurie and Peter/Nathan. Their awareness seems to trap them in a self-reflexive loop they cannot interrupt and which continues to inform and shape their literary masculinities. This trend is exacerbated by the continuation of Nathan's story.

After Lydia has committed suicide by opening her wrists with a metal can opener, the object Peter believes Maureen used as a dildo, Nathan and Monica, or Moonie as he calls her in their intimacy, become lovers and move to Italy: "Under the guise of father and daughter, we touched and fondled one another's flesh; […] but in the end, as though she were my own offspring or my own sister, I honored the incest taboo" (MLM 82). Re-enacting Lydia's tragic past, Nathan continues the "cycle of disaster" (MLM 78). While in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* the transgressive charge of the para-incestuous relationship with Julia informs Marito's masculinity and creativity, for Peter it elucidates the irreconcilability of Nathan's desire and his literary interpretations of it. Nathan is surprised that Monica is not as unhappy as Anna Karenina was with Vronsky in Italy, and he is not as disabled as Aschenbach is by his passion for Tadzio.

The reference to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* is significant for two reasons. Firstly, Roth mentions Aschenbach as an image of the serious writer. Roth writes that in his twenties he expected that fame "would come as it had to Mann's Aschenbach, as Honor" and, quoting from *Death in Venice*, he refers to his narratives "which taught a whole grateful generation even after he has plumbed the depths of knowledge…".[105]

[105] Philip Roth, "Imagining Jews", *The New York Review of Books*, September 29, 1974; in *Reading Myself and Others*, p. 272.

Secondly, *Death in Venice* strengthens *My Life as a* Man's engagement with tragedy. Many critics have read *Death in Venice* in connection to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*: the story of Aschenbach would represent the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, for Nietzsche the elements whose interaction defines Greek tragedy as the highest form of art and the expression of the human condition.[106] Aschenbach is a mature writer embodying the Apollonian model who confronts the Dionysian impulses the fourteen-year Polish boy Tadzio rises in him. By opposition, Peter cannot live through his illicit love with Moonie the tragic sublimation Aschenbach undergoes through his passion for Tadzio: "I had expected more agony; with my self-dramatizing literary turn of mind" (MLM 83). Peter's ambition is also frustrated by the social changes induced by sexual revolution that has made Nathan and Moonie's exile unnecessary. Nathan observes they may return to America, "where we will live, we two lovers, like anybody else – like *everybody* else" (MLM 86). On this basis, Hayes observes that "[w]ith the sexual revolution the tragic intensity generated by his troubled relationship now seems merely misplaced".[107] While Kundera criticises sexual revolution as the main cause of the disappearance of the pleasures of seduction, *My Life as a Man* offers an opposite insight into the effects of sexual revolution thanks to which people are not to be blamed for their sexual life. Nevertheless, both the writings of Kundera and Roth explore the reactions of masculine subjectivities at the sunset of the worldview projected onto sexuality by patriarchy, and their struggle to leave behind its symbolic domain whether they endorse its values or not: "The country may have changed, I have not" (MLM 86), Nathan comments.

Presenting himself as the author of "Courting Disaster", Nathan systematically questions his conduct, hinting at the inconsistency of Peter's analysis of his own behaviour as symptomatic of a social phenomenon: "the writer […] develops […] the idea of Zuckerman's 'seriousness,' […] as to describe that seriousness as something of

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106 Susan von Rohr examines the influence of Nietzschian antithetical thinking on *Death in Venice* ("Plato and Nietzsche in Mann's *Death in Venice*", in *Approaches to Teaching Mann's 'Death in Venice' and Other Short Fiction*, ed. Jeffrey Berlin, New York, Modern Language Association of America, 1992, p. 141); in describing the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, Eric Heller argues that *Death in Venice* is "Mann's first tragic allegory of Art" ("The Embarrassed Muse", in *The Ironic German: A Study of Thomas Mann*, Cleveland and New York, Median Books, 1961, p. 104); John T. Sizemore Jr. reads *Death in Venice* in the light of Nietzsche's influence identifying references to Dionysus and Apollo ("An Analysis of Art Represented in Classical Mythology in Mann's *Death in Venice*", *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, 2014, Vol.7(5), pp. 235-241). A different insight is offered by Jerry S. Clegg who argues that *Death in Venice* should be rather read as an apologia of the Socratic artist criticized by Nietzsche, and that it is a retelling of Euripides's *The Bacchae* ("Mann Contra Nietzsche", *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 1, April 2004, pp. 157-164).

107 Hayes, *Philip Roth*, p. 79.

a social phenomenon; but to be frank, it does not seem, even to the author, that he has […] answered the objection of implausibility" (MLM 80). Even more ambiguously, Nathan reveals that he had no sexual desire for Lydia and claims that his reader shares his incredulity: "to the reader who finds himself unable to suspend his disbelief in a protagonist who voluntarily sustains an affair with a woman sexless to him and so disaster-ridden, I should say that in retrospect I find him nearly impossible to believe in myself" (MLM 79). Nathan's failure to identify the reason of his fall and its tragic consequences mirrors Peter's frustration at being unable to live up to the intensity of tragedy and serious fiction. To elucidate this point, let me refer to Coetzee's review of Roth's 2010 novel *Nemesis*. Focusing on the relation the novel establishes with Greek tragedy, Coetzee writes "[i]t seems to be a rule of tragedy that only in retrospect can you see the logic that led to your fall."[108] Questioning the logic behind Nathan's fall, "Courting Disaster" exposes Peter's resistance to the narcissistic fulfilment he longs for and that the archetype of incest would confer on the fictional version of his life.

Peter's attempt to de-fatalize the account of his marriage also concerns the legacy of Jewish-American writers. For Nathan, Lydia, Ketterer and Monica are "figures out of the folk legend of the Jewish past" and "the embodiment of what my grandparents, and great-grandparents […] had loathed and feared" (MLM 95). Bringing to light the question of the Jewish integration into American WASP culture, *My Life as a Man* addresses a tropos of Jewish-American literature, the relations with Gentile women. Commenting on "Courting Disaster", Moses says to Peter:

> What is it with you Jewish writers? Madeleine Herzog, Deborah Rojack, the cutie-pie castrator in *After the Fall*, and isn't the desirable shiksa of *A New Life* a kvetch and titless in the bargain? And now, for the further delight of the rabbis and the reading public, Lydia Zuckerman, that Gentile tomato (MLM 118).

The intertext Moses draws on includes Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*, Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*, and Bernard Malamud's *A New Life*. The creation of Lydia would complete the collection of Gentile women described by Jewish-American writers. Moses's words may also evoke the novels Roth wrote before *My Life as a Man,* focusing on the relationships between Jewish-American men and Gentile women, such as *Goodbye, Columbus*, *Letting Go* and *Portnoy's Complaint*. In

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[108] J. M. Coetzee, "On the Moral Brink", *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LVII, No. 16, October 28 2010, p.15. Besides *Nemesis*, Coetzee also reviewed Roth's *The Plot Against America* ("What Philip Knew", *The New York Review of Books,* Volume LI, No. 18, November 18 2004, pp. 4-6).

"Some New Jewish Stereotypes" Roth explicitly writes that "the Jewish women are mother and sister. The sexual yearning is for the Other."[109] In his studies of Jewish-American literature, Giordano De Biasio argues that the second generation of Jewish-American writers including Bellow, Mailer, and Malamud embraced the latent misogyny of the founding fathers of American literature.[110] But in their works the native tendency to exclude the woman from the novel undergoes a reversal: their protagonists seek desperately the female figures that the male characters in the American canon ignored. While Huckleberry Finn rejects the social and familiar obligations that society imposes on men,[111] the protagonists of Jewish-American narrations long for exogamous relationships with Gentile women, through whom they enact and convey the ambivalence they feel towards American WASP culture and their own Jewish inheritance. In this respect, I should underline that Gornick's essay which I have already mentioned addresses exclusively the works of Jewish-American writers such as Bellow, Mailer and Roth, overlooking the role that misogyny has in the American narrative tradition and the specific significance it assumes for Jewish-American authors. Through the creation of Maureen, "the most frantic and destructive" of all Roth's female characters, *My Life as a Man* challenges and complicates this misogynist tradition.[112] At the same time, the attraction for Jewish women offers Peter the gravity of serious fiction. Hermione Lee underlines that the Gentile women to whom Roth's protagonists are attracted "stand […] as Dionysian or daemonic influences opposed to the Apollonian reason and wisdom of the male analysts and writers".[113] Articulating the contrast between the elements that define tragedy for Nietzsche, these exogamous relationships seem to promise the fulfilment of Nathan's identity as a Jewish-American writer. "Courting Disaster" questions the fatality of Peter's desire, casting an ironic light on his attraction for Gentile women at both the social and the sexual levels. The emphasis on the redeeming power of the *cunnilingus* he performs on Lydia hints at the

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109 Philip Roth, "Some New Jewish Stereotypes", *American Judaism*, Winter 1961; in *Reading Myself and Others*, p. 199.

110 Giordano De Biasio, "Aspettando la fine: note sul romanzo ebraico-americano", in *Ebraismo e antiebraismo: immagine e pregiudizio*, La Giuntina, Florence, 1989, pp. 29-50; *Memoria e desiderio: narratori ebrei d'America*, Turin, UTET, 1992.

111 For a study of the exclusion of adult love in the authors of American canon see: Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Champaign, Dalkey Archive, 2008.

112 Hermione Lee, "'You Must Change Your Life': Mentors, Doubles, Literary Influences in the Search for the Self", in *Philip Roth*, London, Methuen, 1982, p. 77.

113 Ibid.

Christian rite of Eucharist, in which the sacramental bread put on the tongue of the faithful represents the body of Christ whose sacrifice redeemed humanity from their sins. Emblematic of the narcissistic fulfilment for which Peter longs, Nathan imagines a parodic absolution from the contradictions at the heart of his authorial masculinity and ethnic identity. Peter's irony emerges in the title of the thesis Nathan would like to write about his life, "Christian Temptations in a Jewish Life: A Study in the Ironies of 'Courting Disaster'", which refers to the story the actual reader is reading.

"Courting Disaster" escapes all the interpretations Peter suggests. Alluding to Maureen who frustrates Peter's desire for seriousness and gives him the sense of living a soap opera, Nathan describes the year in which he meets Lydia as "fateful" and underlines that "if it smacks of soap opera, that is not unintentional" (MLM 61). For Nathan the conflicts between Monica and Lydia as "amalgams […] of soap opera (that genre again), Dostoevsky, and the legends of Gentile family life that I used to hear as a child" (MLM 92). Nathan's para-incestual relationship with Moonie interweaves the gravity of Dostoevsky's novels, the fear of his grandmothers' Jewish legends, and the cheapness of soap operas, rehearsing them and, at the same time, transgressing them. This oscillation between different genres reminds me of Lurie's realisation during the composition of *Byron in Italy*: "It is not the erotic that is calling him after all, nor the elegiac, but the comic" (D 184). If Lurie's ambition to achieve self-knowledge is mocked by the outcome of *Byron in Italy*, Nathan wonders if he should convert the protagonist or the narrator of "Courting Disaster" into "a character out of a farce" (MLM 81). Peter's resistance to the temptations of the comic strikes me because in the novels I have discussed so far the self-criticism of masculinity tends to ridicule men, often leading to a paralysis of its hermeneutic potential as in the case of Kepesh's engagement with Kafka's masculinity. Whether the rejection of the comic displays a struggle to protect masculinity from this risk or whether it displays those masculine narcissistic urges to project literary meaning onto his life – which Milanku seems to have overcome, as suggested by his desire to write a novel without a serious word – is unclear. Stemming from this observation, in the final section of this chapter, I shall explore how Nathan's quest for seriousness is related to the fulfilment of the authorial masculinity that Peter models on Flaubert; and how the engagement with Flaubert's ideal of aesthetic detachment relates to the self-conscious form of *My Life as a Man*.

**(iii) Aesthetic detachment: Flaubert's impersonality as a masculine inheritance**

At the end of "Salad Days" the narrator comments on the contradictions at the heart of Nathan's masculinity: "the spiritual aspirations and the lewd desires, the softy boyish needs and the manly, the *magisterial* ambitions" (MLM 31). Nathan's literary ambitions are presented as the key to manhood and in opposition to his boyish urges. The adjective 'magisterial' links Nathan's masculinity to the authority he can reach through his literary practices, confirming the co-dependency of authorship and masculinity unfolding in *Slowness* and *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. Schwenger observes that Peter's aspiration to the fulfilment of his masculinity "involves the drive towards a certain self with a certain kind of knowledge."[114] I would like to argue that Flaubert emerges as the embodiment of the form of knowledge and authorship Peter longs for. Tracks of this ideal of seriousness can also be found in the figure of Aschenbach, an Apollonian artist who disciplined his instincts and committed to his craft, who resembles the Flaubertian ideal of the writer.[115] Explaining his failure to write a fictional account of his marriage which should have offered him an understanding of his masculinity, Peter quotes from Flaubert's letter to Louise Colet: "You wrote with a personal emotion that distorted your outlook and made it impossible to keep before your eyes the fundamental principles that must underlie any imaginative composition. It has no aesthetic. You have turned art into an outlet for passion" (MLM 240).[116] In another letter to Louise, Flaubert elucidates the relationship between emotion and writing: "the more personal you are, the weaker. […] *The less you feel a thing, the fitter you are to express it as it is* […].[117] Drawing on Flaubert, Peter believes that the suppression of his emotions is necessary for literary creation. My next step is to suggest that, although Flaubert's ideal of creativity as process of emotional detachment is at the heart of the form authorial masculinity Peter longs for, Peter transgresses it constantly.

Even though "Courting Disaster" is the only way through which to engage directly with Peter's fictionalisation of his marriage, "My True Story" casts several interpretations of it including the ones by Peter, his brother and sister, his therapist and

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114 Schwenger, *Phallic Critiques*, p. 150.

115 For Heller Aschenbach is "the classical writer […] who has […] entered into a convent with Apollo" (104). Similarly, Sizemore highlights that "Aschenbach's stoic persona of an artist committed to his craft is […] is indicative to the persona of the Greek god Apollo" (236).

116 The complete letter is included in Gustave Flaubert, *The Selected Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1954, pp. 164-165.

117 Flaubert, *The Selected Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, p. 140.

different editors. Among them, I would like to focus on the one offered by Karen, which is presented as a paper for an imaginary course taught by Nathan. The title of her paper, "The Uses of the Useful Fictions: Or, Professor Tarnopol Withdraws Somewhat from His Feelings", refers to her epigraph from Sartre's *What Is Literature* which, reminiscent of Flaubert, recites that an author's "decision to write supposes that he withdraws somewhat from his feelings…" (MLM 227). Karen examines Peter's fictionalisation of his marriage:

> Professor Tarnopol invents cruel misfortunes […] to validate and deepen Lydia's despair and to exacerbate Nathan's morbid sense of responsibility – this plenitude of heartache, supplying, as it were, "the objective correlative" for the emotions of shame, grief, and guilt that inform the narration.
> And that informed Professor Tarnopol's marriage (MLM 229).

For Karen, Lydia's past is a literary device through which to sublimate Peter's emotions. Translating Maureen's lies into a narrative form Peter is trying to emancipate himself from the pain he and Maureen have inflicted on each other in search for a "Flaubertian transcendence" (MLM 233). In his reply to Karen, Peter acknowledges that his artistic experiment failed and he should write a character inspired by Henry Miller or Céline rather than Flaubert: "I won't be such an Olympian writer as it was my ambition to be back in the days when nothing called personal experience stood between me and aesthetic detachment" (MLM 231). The notion of aesthetic detachment relates to what critics have described as Flaubert's impersonality. Concerning *Madame Bovary*, Stephen Heath observes:

> Impersonality must replace exposition of the author's personality; art and its producer are distinct, as artist the writer has no right to the expression of personal opinion: inspiration, passion, emotional intensity of the self, all the romantic elevations of the poet, are the very reverse of what is involved in the realisation of a work of art […].[118]

In her study of impersonality, Emily Mi Sun observes that this notion "finds a formal counterpart in the developing detachment of his [Flaubert's] narrative practice."[119] This meant the abandonment of the first-person narration, along with all references to a relationship between narrator and reader, and of authorial intrusions in which he

[118] Stephen Heath, *Flaubert. Madame Bovary*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 104.

[119] Emily Mi Sun, *Literature and Impersonality: Keats, Flaubert, and the Crisis of the Author*, Yale University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2003, p. 120.

expressed opinions and judgement on his texts. Stylistically with his first-person narration, his authorial interventions, addresses to the reader, "Courting Disaster" violates all Flaubert's formal dictates. The greatest violation of all is his fundamental principle: "a writer must not be his own theme."[120] This systematic transgression casts ambiguity on Peter's attempt to follow his model and on the self-referentiality of "Courting Disaster" that Flaubert would supposedly abhor.

*My Life as a Man* exposes the prominence of Peter's experience over his textual practices. As Hayes underlines, "*My Life as a Man* does not try to create the 'neutral,' de-antropomorphised novelistic discourse to which Robbe-Grillet aspired, but insists instead of that the novel's metafictional process must deal primarily with the intractability of human situatedness in cultural forms."[121] The intractability Hayes and Peter emphasises roots in the traumatic relationship with Maureen that Peter cannot transcend through art: Peter realises that "struggling with a woman over a marriage" has occupied him "in the way that […] writing *Madame Bovary* had occupied Flaubert" (MLM 174). Ironically, Roth acknowledges the value of her lesson to Peter by adopting as an epigraph for the novel a line from her diary: "I could be his Muse, if only he'd let me" (MLM 313). The ideal of authorial masculinity Peter projects onto Flaubert interweaves and contrasts with his desire to write an account of his masculinity. In view of this pivotal tension between masculinity and writing, I would like to return to the notion of self-begetting novel I have introduced concerning *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. In the list of self-reflexive fictions included at the end of his essay, Kellman also includes *My Life as a Man*.[122] This genealogy would connect Roth's to the "Modernist ideal of autogeny as embodied in a sub-genre of French, British and American fiction."[123] Following Hayes's insight into *My Life as a Man* as Roth's response to the metafictional forms of the novel, a connection can also be seen with Michel Butor, a prominent figure of the Nouveau Roman along with Robbe-Grillet. Translated into English as *Second Thoughts*, Butor's *La Modification* (1957) is considered by Kellman a self-begetting novel which continues and innovates the French tradition of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and Sartre's *Nausea*, depicting the growth of the protagonist until his decision to write a novel which resembles the text the reader

120 Flaubert, *The Selected Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, p. 186.

121 Hayes, *Philip Roth*, p. 78.

122 Kellman, *The Self-Begetting Novel*, p. 145.

123 Ibid., p. ix.

is reading.[124] In *La Modification* the typewriter bureaucrat Léon Delmont decides to write a novel resembling *La Modification* which will rescue him from the banality of his life: "[h]is identity is inseparable from that of the novel in which he appears, and until it is complete neither is he."[125] Even though Kellman does not adopt a gendered perspective, I believe that this tension between writing and the realization of the self can illuminate the gender implications of writing and authorship as a specific form of masculinity.[126] Comparing *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *My Life as a Man*, I shall go on to discuss the ways in which Roth's and Vargas Llosa's engagement with Flaubert reverberates in the way their respective practices are gendered, and explore the effects of gender.

Vargas Llosa elucidates his theory of the novel in *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio* [*García Márquez: Story of a Deicide*] and discusses the co-dependency of an author's experience and his writing:

> The *reason* why a novelist writes is viscerally blended with *what* he writes *about*: 'demons', facts, people, dreams, myths […] [which] engraved themselves in his memory and tormented his spirit, […], and which he will try to recover and exorcise simultaneously, with words and fantasy, in the practice of that vocation which originates from them and is nourished with them, in those fictions in which they, disguised or identical, […], appear and re-appear over and over converted into 'themes.'[127]

Several critics have described Pedro as an embodiment of Vargas Llosa's view of the writer.[128] Efraín Kristal argues that Pedro's fanaticism and compulsion to write fiction are a consequence of his personal humiliation, as the adult Mario learns that Pedro's

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124 Butor's innovation lies in the adoption of the formal second person pronoun 'vous' which prefigures the possibility of realising the writing self in collaboration with the reader.

125 Kellman, *The Self-Begetting Novel*, p. 50.

126 Kellman's list of self-reflexive fictions corroborates the thesis of the interconnectedness of masculinity and the self-reflexive novel: out of fifty-three authors only four of them are women and only six of the seventy-eight novels listed are written by women. All the male authors are white.

127 My translation. The original Spanish reads: "El *por qué* escribe un novelista está visceralmente mezclado con el *sobre qué* escribe: los 'demonios' de su vida son los 'temas' de su obra. Los 'demonios': hechos, personas, sueños, mitos, […] se grabaron con fuego en su memoria y atormentaron su espíritu, […] y a los que tratará simultáneamente de recuperar y exorcizar, con las palabras y la fantasía, en el ejercicio de esa vocación que nació y se nutre de ellos, en esas ficciones en las que ellos, disfrazados o idénticos, omnipresentes o secretos, aparecen y reaparecen una y otra vez, convertidos en 'temas'". Mario Vargas Llosa, *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*, Barcelona and Caracas, Barral Editores, 1971, p. 92.

128 See Oviedo, "*La tía Julia y el escribidor*, or the Coded Self-Portrait", p. 173; Swanson, "Mario Vargas Llosa and *La tía Julia y el escribidor*", p. 66.

wife is a prostitute who has left him.[129] Observing that Pedro's characters engage in their compulsive activities to the point of insanity and death, Oviedo describes Pedro's inner world as "an inferno of psychopathic obsessions looking for a way to express themselves".[130] Comparing *My Life as a Man* to *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, neither Peter nor Pedro can overcome through writing the obsessions their marriages have engraved on their psyche. As Peter explains, "the artist's success depends as much as anything else on his powers of detachment" (MLM 242). By opposition, Marito succeeds in taking control over the fictionalisation of his experience by juxtaposing the biographical account of his relationship with Julia with his rewriting of Pedro's creations. The centrality of the notions of distance and control reveals the interconnectedness of the narrative of Roth and Vargas Llosa, and suggests Flaubert as a common influence. In *The Perpetual Orgy*, Vargas Llosa develops the theory of narrative creativity he introduced in *Garcia Márquez* by focusing on *Madame Bovary*. Vargas Llosa describes the rigorous composition and the rational control of intuition through which Flaubert converted his concerns into a work of art. Vargas Llosa praises Flaubert's impersonality, objectivity, and obsessive attention to form: "the novelist must be above all an else artist, a tireless and incorruptible craftsman of style".[131] This Flaubertian ideal intertwines with the forms of authorial masculinities Roth and Vargas Llosa draw and the ways their characters assimilate this ideal: expressed by the textual practice which informs Marito's masculinity in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, it is projected onto Lydia in *My Life as a Man*.

The stories Lydia writes for Nathan's class are inspired by the childhood recollections she delivered forth to her doctor focusing on her father's rape. Nathan admires the control she exhibits in her writing:

> To say that I was drawn to her story because it was so lurid is only the half of it: there was the way the tale was told. Lydia's easy, familiar, even cozy manner with misery, her droll acceptance of her own madness, greatly increased the story's appeal – or, to put it another way, did much to calm whatever fears one might expect an inexperienced young man of a conventional background to have about a woman bearing such a ravaged past. Who would call "crazy" a woman who spoke with such detachment of her history of craziness? Who could find evidence of impulses toward suicide and homicide in a rhetorical style so untainted by rage or vengeful wrath? No, no, this was someone who had *experienced* her experience, who had been *deepened* by all that misery. […] she had, without benefit of books

129 Kristal, *Temptations of the Word*, p. 96.

130 Oviedo, "*La tía Julia y el escribidor*, or the Coded Self-Portrait", p. 174.

131 Vargas Llosa, *The Perpetual Orgy*, p. 218.

> or teachers, mobilized every ounce of her intelligence to produce a kind of *wisdom* about herself. For surely it required wisdom to recite, calmly and with a mild, even forgiving irony, such a ghastly narrative of ill luck and injustice (MLM 45-6).

Setting his inexperience as a young man in contrast with Lydia's tragic past, Nathan emphasises the pivotal role of experience. The catharsis Lydia reaches through her writing inscribes her life in that tragic dimension Peter sets as the horizon of his life and masculinity. Her wisdom is reminiscent of Barthes's description of tragedy in his essay dedicated to Robbe-Grillet as "a means of recovering human misery, of subsuming it, hence of justifying it in the form of a necessity, a wisdom, or a purification."[132] Her ability to create a narrative account of her violent background informs the literary form of wisdom Nathan longs for. Lydia embodies the drive to tell one's own story despite its emotional burden: "the Lydia I had chosen […] detested *this inheritance herself*. In part what was so stirring about her (to me, to me) was the price she had paid to disown it – it had driven her crazy, this background; and yet she had lived to tell the tale, to *write* the tale, and to write it for *me*" (MLM 94). Lydia's conflictual relationship with her own inheritance evokes Peter's compulsion to disown his Jewish background and Flaubert's legacy.

While in *Slowness* Milanku assimilates Madame de T.'s wisdom, Nathan is unable to do the same: "I am able to make no connection at all between its [literature's] wisdom and my existence" (MLM 86). Literature emerges as an obstacle to Peter's masculinity – "I wanted to fulfil my dream of a 'library' as easily and simply as I squandered my manhood" (MLM 96). In the same way, his desire to write his story reiterates his impossibility of self-seeking: "as far as I can see there is no conquering or exorcising the past with words […] as there seems to be (for me) no forgetting it. Maybe I am just learning what a past is. At any rate, all I can do with my story is tell it. And tell it. And tell it. And *that*'s the truth" (MLM 233). Peter's self-oriented writing reveals his desire to tell the story of his masculinity over and over. This urge illuminates Peter's distance from Flaubert's control and impersonality. For Peter writing is not propaedeutic to self-seeking, but as the epigraph from Simone de Beauvoir that opens Karen's essay suggests – "*On ne peut jamais se connaître, mais seulement se raconter*" ["One can never know oneself, but only narrate oneself"] (MLM 227), it only articulates

[132] Roland Barthes, "There Is No Robbe-Grillet School", in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1972, p. 92.

his compulsion to tell the story of his masculinity, the mystery he cannot penetrate. In commenting on Peter's struggle, Roth himself explains:

> [F]or Tarnopol the presentation or description of himself is what is most problematical – and what remains unsolved. To my mind, Tarnopol's attempt to realise himself with the right words [....] is what's at the heart of the book, and accounts for my joining his fictions about his life with his autobiography. When the novel is considered in its entirety, I hope it will be understood as Tarnopol's struggle to achieve a description.[133]

In view of Peter's struggle, I suggest that *My Life as a Man* represents a failed attempt at self-begetting, more specifically, the failure of forging Peter's masculinity. The different outcomes of Peter's and Marito's writings are displayed at a formal level. I have described how the symmetrical architecture of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* crystallizes his authorial control. In *My Life as a Man* Peter's striving is expressed by the intratextual texture of what Peter describes as a "novel-in-chaos" (MLM 240-1). The book about his manhood Peter wants to write may be the very text the reader is reading as the letter Peter imagines to receive from Maureen after her death suggests: "Good luck with *My Martyrdom as a Man*. That *is* to be the title, is it not" (MLM 227). The fragmented structure of *Life as a Man* and the intratextual tension between its parts articulate a "continuos process of (self)-erasure and (self)-inscription that never comes to unity or completion."[134] In order to elucidate this point, I would like to refer to the words Vargas Llosa wrote about Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook,* an investigation of femininity in which the writer Anna Wulf tries to tie her four notebooks into a fifth one. Vargas Llosa argues that: "[t]he fragmentary nature of the books is not gratuitous. Nor is its kaleidoscopic structure, in which stories form and de-form each other."[135] Likewise, the stories that compose *My Life as a Man* form and de-form Peter's masculinity and his endeavour to inscribe his gendered identity in literary horizons which can give meaning to his experience.

In conclusion, in this chapter I have discussed three scripts of masculinity, bringing to light the different forms of authorial masculinity emerging from the novels of Kundera, Vargas Llosa and Roth. In *Slowness* Milanku's authority arises from his

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133 Martha Saxton, "Philip Roth talks about His Own Work"; *Literary Guild*, June 1974, 2, in *Conversations with Philip Roth,* ed. George J. Searles, Jackson and London, University Press of Mississippi, p. 80.

134 Patrick O'Donnell, "'None Other': The Subject of Roth's *My Life as a Man*", in *Reading Philip Roth*, p. 156.

135 Mario Vargas Llosa, "Doris Lessing: *The Golden Notebook*", in *Making Waves*, ed. and trans. John King, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 101.

ability to assimilate literary legacy and to articulate his reflection through writing. *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* displays how the control Marito achieves over the fiction of his masculinity seems to be based on the suppression of his inmost emotions, and of the incestuous urges which are the heart of his creativity. Finally, in *My Life as a Man* Peter's writing explores the process of self-inscription through which masculinity tries to give meaning to itself as a compulsion rather than a form of self-discovery. In the final chapter, I shall discuss how writing and reading lead JC and Rigoberto, the older male protagonists respectively of Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* and Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* to establish a dialogue between their emotions and their intellect. The new-found consonance with their emotions induce JC to redefine his model of intellectual masculinity and Rigoberto to subvert his moral codes.

## Chapter Four

## Masculine Search for Emotional Reciprocity: Affective Crisis and Textual Fragmentation in Coetzee and Vargas Llosa

*I leaf through now one book, now another*
*without order and without plan,*
*by disconnected fragments.*
Montaigne

In this chapter, I address the ways in which the emotional needs of adult masculinities reverberate in their essayistic writing in the narratives of Coetzee and Vargas Llosa. Concerning Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, I examine JC's essays in view of Coetzee's interest in Borges's essayistic writing, underlying how JC's intellectual and polemical engagement with contemporary reality informs his authorial masculinity. I focus then on the insights that the influence of Pound and the Troubadours on JC offers into his feelings for Anya and the echoes in the dialogue between intellect and emotions in his essayistic writing. Regarding *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, I enquire into the affective crisis lived by Rigoberto after his separation from his wife. Drawing on Vargas Llosa's reading of Borges's erudition, I examine how the masculine imagination conveyed by visual art and literature interweave nourishing Rigoberto's erotic fantasies. I investigate then the ways in which Rigoberto's self-reflection inspired by his reading of Onetti illuminates his emotional needs, defying common morality and the rules of heterosexual love.

### 1. Prelude: desire and rebellion in Vargas Llosa's essayistic writing

In "Four Centuries of *Don Quixote*" Vargas Llosa highlights how *Don Quixote*, originally conceived as a criticism of chivalric romances, becomes "a fiction about fiction, about what fiction is and how it operates in life".[1] My reading of *Disgrace*, *Life is Elsewhere*, and *The Professor of Desire* as an examination of the effects of literature on their protagonists' masculinity resonates with Vargas Llosa's insight. Along with his reading of *Madame Bovary*, Vargas Llosa's interpretation of *Don Quixote* is at the heart of his theory of fiction. For Vargas Llosa, fiction originates in the dissatisfaction of men and women with "the realities of their existence" which leads them to "live in dreams –

[1] Mario Vargas Llosa, "Four Centuries of Don Quixote", trans. Kristin Keenan de Cueto, in *Wellsprings*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 4.

in the story they tell."[2] Uninterested in the philosophical debates on its social construction, for Vargas Llosa 'reality' emerges as a lived experience inspiring a narrative, which the storyteller aims to evade through a further narrative. In *Letters to a Young Novelist*, Vargas Llosa emphasises the relativity of the notion of "real world" as opposed to "fantastic world", and stresses the multiplicity inherent to the notion of 'reality':[3] "In theory, reality can be divided and subdivided into a boundless number of planes, giving rise to infinite points of view in fictional realities".[4] For Vargas Llosa 'reality' and 'real' serve to articulate his reflections on written narrative: "Thanks to writing, […], alternative lives created to fill the gap between reality and desire obtained the right to citizenship and the ghosts of imagination became part of life experience".[5] Literary writing providing readers and writers with archetypes and nourishes personal mythologies.

I will return to the tension between reality and desire shortly, but I want now to stress the subversive charge that Vargas Llosa associates with the fundamental need to invent stories:

> The appearance of a great novel is always a sign of a vital rebelliousness taking the shape of a fictional world – one which, while resembling the real world, actually questions and rejects it. That may explain the fortitude with which Cervantes appears to have endured his difficult circumstances: by taking revenge on them through a symbolic deicide, he replaced the reality that mistreated him with the splendor which, drawing strength from his disappointments, he invented to oppose it.[6]

According to Vargas Llosa, *Don Quixote* is for Cervantes a way to take revenge on a world that does not satisfy our desires. The notion of deicide is at the heart of Vargas Llosa's theory of the creative act, which he elucidates in *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*. For Vargas Llosa each novel is a symbolic assassination of God that replaces reality with a parallel world created by the novelist. The fictional versions of the world we create constitute both "an act of rebellion against the limitations of real

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2 Ibid., p. 5.

3 Mario Vargas Llosa, *Letters to a Young Novelist*, trans. Natasha Wimmer, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, p. 74.

4 Ibid.

5 Vargas Llosa, "Four Centuries of Don Quixote", p. 5.

6 Ibid., p. 7.

life" and an attempt "to fill the gap between reality and desire".[7] Both these elements emerge in Vargas Llosa's reading of *Madame Bovary*:

> Emma wants sexual pleasure, she is not resigned to repressing this profound sensual need […]; she wants to surround her life with pleasing and superfluous things, elegance, refinement, to give concrete form by way of objects to that appetite for beauty that her imagination, her sensibility, and her reading have aroused in her. […] Emma's rebellion is born of one conviction, the root of all her acts: […] I want my life to be wholly and completely fulfilled her and now.[8]

Stemming from the idea of a world that frustrates our desires, Vargas Llosa's reading of *Madame Bovary* strictly resembles his interpretation of *Don Quixote*. If the most obvious analogy between the novels lies in the protagonists' desire to emulate the models they have absorbed in their reading, chivalric romances, or the heroines of the Romantic novels,[9] Vargas Llosa emphasises the interconnectedness of the fulfilment of desire and rebellion. In the next pages I shall explore how both these elements are pivotal in the adult masculinities in Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* and Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*. However, the protagonists of these novels, JC and Rigoberto respectively, rather than through their fictional writing convey their recalcitrance to the world through is expressed in their essays, which I now go on to explore.

## 2. *Diary of a Bad Year*

### (i) A "revenge on the world for declining to conform to my fantasies"

Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* consists of two sections, "Strong Opinions. 12 September 2005 – 31 May 2006", and "Second Diary". Each is formed of multi-layered pages. The first pages of "Strong Opinions" involve two narrative levels. At the top of the first page the reader can see an entry entitled "On the origins of the state", while the bottom level is cast as a diary entry relating the meetings between JC, a South-African writer who has emigrated to Australia, and his neighbour Anya, a Filipino to whom he is attracted. Enchanted by her, JC offers her the job of typing up the audio recordings of his contribution to *Strong Opinions*, a volume to be published by a German publisher.

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7 Ibid., pp. 5-6.

8 Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Perpetual Orgy: Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, trans. Helen Lane, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986, p. 13.

9 Flaubert explicitly acknowledges the influence of *Don Quixote*: "I can find my origins in the book that I knew by heart before I knew how to read, *Don Quixote*" (Letter to Louise Colet of June 12, 1852, quoted in Soledad Fox, *Flaubert and Don Quijote. The Influence of Cervantes on Madame Bovary*, Brighton and Portland, Sussex Academic Press, 2008, p. 104).

In this way JC is revealed as the fictional author of the essayistic entries of the upper narrative level. As JC explains to Anya, *Strong Opinions* gives him and the other five authors contributing to the volume the opportunity "to say their say on any subjects they choose, the more contentious the better. Six eminent writers pronounce on what is wrong with today's world" (DBY 21).[10] JC polemically engages with a wide range of topics, including philosophical discussions on the origins of the state and of forms of government. As a literary man, JC embodies the ideal of authority and intellect Marito and Peter long for respectively in Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and Roth's *My Life as a Man*. The layout of *Diary of a Bad Year* changes when Anya accepts the job as a typist for JC: another horizontal line appears creating a third narrative level featuring the entries from Anya's own diary. These entries mainly refer to her thoughts and her dialogues about JC with her boyfriend, Alan. This three-layered layout is interrupted in the last entry of "Strong Opinions", involving a new series of opinions dedicated to themes such as kissing, compassion, birds and children that Anya calls "Soft Opinions". Through this multi-layered structure, the novel creates a polyphony of different voices including those of Alan, Anya, and both JC's authorial tone and his more intimate diaristic one.[11]

When Anya asks JC the reason why a novelist has accepted to contribute to a non-fictional work such as *Strong Opinions*, JC explains that the volume is "[a]n opportunity to grumble in public, an opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to my fantasies: how could I refuse?" (DBY 23). JC's sense of living in a world which frustrates his desire seems to address the feeling of dissatisfaction driving Vargas Llosa's theory of fiction:

> Fiction is both a testament to and a source of our nonconformity. [...] Contemptuous of the world as it is, fiction is irrefutable proof that reality – life lived – is tailored only to what we are, not to what we wish to be. The fictitious life we superimpose onto real life is not a tribute to social harmony but just the opposite, especially if it is produced in times of upheaval, as was the case when Cervantes wrote his jovial epic.[12]

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[10] J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, London, Secker & Warburg, 2007; in London, Vintage, 2008.

[11] For discussion of the experimental form of *Diary of a Bad Year* see Eric Paul Meljac, "Seductive Lines: The Use of Horizontal Bars by Josipovici and Coetzee, and the Art of Seduction", *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 33, No.1, Fall 2009, pp. 92-101.

[12] Vargas Llosa, "Four Centuries of Don Quixote", p. 7.

Vargas Llosa elaborates further this idea of fiction as an expression of nonconformity in his analysis of Flaubert, whose literary vocation is described as an expression of his psychological and moral marginality within French society.[13] Vargas Llosa describes Flaubert's engagement with literature as a participation in life in the negative. Equally, JC's essays engage polemically with contemporary issues, including the Guantanamo Bay Prison and Al Qaida, and criticize politicians including George W. Bush and Tony Blair. Even though initially JC's discontent is not transfigured into a creative act, as in the case of Cervantes and Flaubert, the polemical nature of his essays offers an insight into JC's combative intellectual attitude. Let me recall Coetzee's collection of essays dedicated to the theme of censorship, *Giving Offense*, in which Coetzee quotes from Vargas Llosa and refers to his understanding of literature as a form of resistance that is not merely political:

> The congenital unsubmissiveness of literature is much broader than is believed by those who consider it a mere instrument for opposing governments and dominant social structures: it strikes equally at everything [that] stands for dogma and logical exclusivism in the interpretation of life, that is, both ideological orthodoxies and heterodoxies. *In other words, it is a living, systematic, inevitable contradiction of all that exists.*[14]

By resisting the fundamental assumptions of Western culture, such as democracy and Darwinism, JC fulfils the tasks Vargas Llosa assigns to the writer and embodies literature's recalcitrance to any given truth. In commenting on Vargas Llosa, Coetzee argues that "the writer occupies a position that simultaneously stands outside politics, rivals politics, and dominates politics."[15] In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the sense of this rivalry with the contemporary world is expressed in the dialogue between JC and Alan generated by the layout of the novel. As I shall argue, their dialogue articulates a particular confrontation between two antithetic models of masculinity.

Alan is a forty-two-year-old businessman who describes himself as a self-made man. Brought up in an orphanage, he has made his fortune after getting his degree in business. Anya highlights that Alan constantly reads economic newspapers, goes to presentations on the most recent thinking to keep his mind sharp, and has made of himself an expert in mathematical modelling. As he listens to the audio recordings of

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13 Vargas Llosa, *The Perpetual Orgy*, pp. 233-240.

14 Mario Vargas Llosa, "The Writer in Latin America", *Index on Censorship*, November 1978, 7:6, p. 36.

15 J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense. Essays on Censorship*, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1996, p. 47.

JC's opinions from which Anya is working, Alan's reductionist perspective on Africa is expressed in comments on JC's South-African origins – "that is where he is stuck, mentally. In his mind he can't get away from Africa" (DBY 95). For Alan, JC cannot understand the dynamics characteristic of Australia's advanced economy since he reads them through a moral lens: "It is all a morality play to him, good versus evil. What he fails to see or refuses to see is that individuals are players in a structure that transcends individual motives, transcends good and evil" (DBY 97). By hinting at Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* and its philosophical questioning of conventional morality, Alan argues that modern states have emancipated themselves from the moral imperatives raised by issues such as violence and crime that are still unresolved in Africa. For Alan overcoming these emergencies would mark the end of politics in favour of the market and a modern view of the state.

The rivalry between JC and Alan is addressed by Alan himself who provokes JC by calling him "Juan", the nickname Anya uses for him: "You are a bit of a dreamer, Juan. A dreamer but a schemer too. We are both schemers, you and I" (DBY 196). By defining him as a dreamer, Alan stresses the ethical and utopian ideals driving JC's writing and describes JC as a "sentimental socialist" (DBY 199).[16] Alan increasingly emerges as an intellectual counterpoint to JC and Alan confronts him on the field of philosophy. Alan refers to JC's idea that paedophilia should not be considered a taboo since the age of majority is purely conventional. Drawing on Kantian thought, Alan argues that the relativity of social conventions cannot be used as an argument to support or to refute any thesis, since our understanding is in any case based on perception and its limitations. While Alan is confident in human perception and human interpretation of the world, in the essay entitled "On intelligent design" JC criticises the ontological incapacity of the human apparatus to understand the world. Engaging with Darwin in opposing Kant, he writes that "[a]n intellectual apparatus marked by a conscious knowledge of its insufficiency is an evolutionary aberration" (DBY 86). JC does not reject evolutionary theory in favour of some creationist belief, but rather argues that evolutionary process has resulted in the human, limited understanding of the world. JC's opposition to the world Western societies have shaped stems from his vision of this ontologically limited understanding.

[16] As I discussed in Chapter One, María López describes the Quixotic traits of Coetzee's characters. Being a dreamer led by high ideals, JC may be added to her list ("Miguel de Cervantes and J.M. Coetzee: An Unacknowledged Paternity", *Journal of Literary Studies*, 29:4, p. 93).

JC does not believe that human reasoning is the only form of thinking available, or in its chances of "unlock[ing] the codes by which the universe works" (DBY 70). Literature plays a crucial part in JC's contestation of Western understanding and rationality. JC refers to Jorge Luis Borges's tale entitled "Funes, His Memory", whose protagonist is the Uruguayan country boy Ireneo Funes. After falling from his horse at the age of nineteen, Funes perceives the world with a hyper-stimulated sensitivity and remembers everything in full detail, including the shape of the clouds and the muscular and thermal sensations linked in his body to every visual image. This extraordinary power of memory emancipates Funes from the normal limits of human memory and of its capacity to retain thoughts and sensations. As JC observes, for Funes "the counting rule, and indeed the even more fundamental rules that allow us to encompass the world in language, are simply alien" (DBY 94). Funes develops a method of counting not based on a numerical system, and he sets aside the principles of economics by giving proper names to quantities ("he would say, for instance, 'Máximo Pérez'; instead of seven thousand fourteen").[17] JC comments:

> Borges' kabbalistic, Kantian fable brings it home to us that the order we see in the universe may not reside in the universe at all, but in the paradigms of thought we bring to it. The mathematics we have invented (in some accounts) or discovered (in others), which we believe or hope to be a key to the structure of the universe, may equally well be a private language – private to human beings with human brains – in which we doodle on the walls of our cave (DBY 96).

By hinting at Plato's allegory of the cave, JC uses Borges's fiction to present paradigms as the way in which we as particular individuals formulate the world, as opposed to approaching paradigms as sign of immutable systems.

This insight into Borges evokes Floyd Merrell's response to Borges's narrative as "the project of unthinking traditional Western thought".[18] Borges challenges established modes of thought such as mathematics and logic by engaging with philosophical concepts, mathematical constructs as well as religious beliefs in the light of their aesthetic value. Borges's narrators refute supposed truths but without providing the reader with an alternative theoretical ground, and constantly assume different metaphysical and narrative positions. Engaging with the critical drive Borges discovers

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[17] Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes, His Memory", in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley, New York and London, Penguin Books, 1998, p. 136.

[18] Floyd Merrell, *Unthinking Thinking. Jorge Luis Borges, Mathematics, and the New Physics*, West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 1991, p. x.

in the creative drive, JC's questioning of Western culture's assumptions does not aim to replace an alleged truth with another one, but rather to reveal the limits of thinking and to sketch the different paths it may take. JC's reference to Borges's interest in the Kabbalah recalls Coetzee's review of a collection of Borges's fiction. Coetzee argues that through his interest in the Kabbalah, Borges presents himself "as an outsider to Western culture, with an outsider's freedom to criticize and innovate."[19] This observation is consistent with the stress on the writer's recalcitrance towards hegemonic culture praised by Vargas Llosa, whom Coetzee lists among the Latin-American novelists who acknowledge a debt to Borges.[20] Like Borges, JC tries to emancipate himself from Western models, and finds in Funes an alternative perspective through which to consider the limits of our mentality and their effects on our formulation of the world. JC's refusal to adhere unconditionally to transmitted forms of knowledge and systemic logic echoes with the capacity of dissociation Coetzee praises in *Don Quixote,* which I highlighted in Chapter One. In addition, the fragmentariness of JC's essays seems to respond to Borges's disruptive aesthetics and to his attempt to escape systematic and systematizing thought.[21] Borges describes himself as "a man of letters who turns his own perplexities and that respected system of perplexities we call philosophy into the forms of literature"[22]. Similarly, JC distances himself from his work – "The opinions you happen to be typing do not necessarily come from my inmost depths" (DBY 91) – and makes the same point in referring to his German editor, who says that JC's opinions are "opinions subject to fluctuations of mood" (DBY 127). Through Anya's response *Diary of a Bad Year* also expresses the actual reader's difficulties in engaging with such a variety of opinions: "I was expecting more of a story, she says. It is difficult to get into the swing when the subject keeps changing" (DBY 30). By exposing its own fragmentariness *Diary of a Bad Year* combines

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19 J. M. Coetzee, "J. L. Borges, *Collected Fictions*", in *Stranger Shores. Literary Essays 1986-1999*, London, Penguin Books, 2001, p. 142.

20 In "The Fictions of Borges" Vargas Llosa acclaims Borges "as the most important thing to happen to imaginative writing in the Spanish language in modern times" (*Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 3, Jul. 1988, p. 1326). Coetzee, "J. L. Borges, *Collected Fictions*", p. 140.

21 Merrell translates a fragment from Jean de Milleret's interview with Borges (*Entretiens avec Jorge Luis Borges*, Paris, Pierre Belfond, 1967, p. 116): "You want to make me into a philosopher and thinker; but the fact is that I repudiate all systematic thought because it always tends to deceive one". See Floyd Merrell, *Unthinking Thinking*, p. 245, n. 1.

22 Jorge Luis Borges, "Forward", in Christ Ronald, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion*, New York, New York University Press, p. ix.

philosophical reflections, essayism and narrative to present novelistic discourse as a form of (un)thinking.

JC's inquiry addresses the limits of scientific understanding: "What is stated in probabilistic terms can be interpreted only in probabilistic terms. […] Can one imagine the Sphinx foretelling that Oedipus will probably kill his father and marry his mother? Can one imagine Jesus saying that he will probably come again?" (DBY 101). Even though probabilistic understanding offers a better comprehension of the universe than previous deterministic models, JC argues that it still cannot convey the intensity or the pathos of human experience as mythical frames can. In response, Alan relies on scientific evidence and on a system of legitimation which embraces a theory until it is refuted. This contrast between JC's and Alan's approaches evokes the conflictual dynamic between scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge Jean-François Lyotard describes as characteristic of postmodernism.[23] Alan displays the postmodern tendency to incorporate scientific knowledge into the dynamics of productivity. Anya records in her diary Alan's rage at JC's attempt to question mathematical models through literature: "Mathematics is not some arcane mumbo-jumbo about the nature of the number one versus the nature of the number two. […] Mathematics is an activity, a goal-directed activity, like running" (DBY 104). Concerning numbers Alan says: "They are what we utilize when we work with mathematics in the real world. Look around you. Look at bridges. Look at traffic flows. Look at the movement of money. Numbers work. Mathematics works. Probabilities work. That is all we need to know" (DBY 111). Alan's rejection of JC's search for an alternative, narrative understanding is based on the performativity of science and in particular the criterion of optimal performance Lyotard identifies with regard to technical devices. Lyotard writes that "[t]echnology is […] a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency: a technical 'move' is 'good' when it does better and/or expends less energy than another."[24] Consistent with the drive to overcome moral concerns that Alan sees in modern economies, Lyotard's criterion of optimal performance seems further to inform Alan's notion of efficiency as a self-sufficient principle. Supported by target-driven mathematics, the criterion of efficiency involves the suppression of all those forms of criticism not aimed at improving performativity. Alan expresses a masculinity modelled

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23 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, pp. 18-36.

24 Ibid., p. 44.

on the rhetoric of the self-made man and shaped by the worldview of late capitalism, and which seeks to expose the anachronism of the ideal of authorial masculinity embodied by JC.

While Alan fiercely tries to legitimate his own position, JC emphasises his own lack of authority. In his essay "On Authority in Fiction", JC refers to the way in which Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault challenged the authority of the author. Drawing on formalist Russian critics of the 1920s, JC emphasises the role of rhetoric in Tolstoy's storytelling: "the authority of the author has never amounted to anything more than a bagful of rhetorical tricks" (DBY 149). In addition, JC observes that Tolstoy and Walt Whitman were regarded as sages, but "neither had much wisdom to offer […]. They were poets above all; otherwise they were ordinary men with ordinary, fallible opinions" (DBY 151). All these references contribute to undermining the prestige of poets and authors and, consequently, JC's own authority as a writer. JC seems to challenge the narcissistic projections of Marito and Peter which inform their ideal of authorship. Once again JC's words are reminiscent of Lyotard who argues that "narrative knowledge does not give propriety to the question of its own legitimation".[25] Alien to Alan's yearning for efficiency, JC rather emphasises the lack of reliability characteristic of literary knowledge.

Alan responds to this loss of authority in the Humanities and with regard to the publication of JC's opinions in Germany argues that while the ideas of "sages with white beards" are still welcome in "*Old Europe*", in English speaking countries intellectuals have to compete for attention with gossip stars and politicians (DBY 207). Starting from opposite positions, Alan and JC agree on the loss of prestige literary knowledge has undergone. Nonetheless, unlike Alan, JC advocates the role of literature, and in his essay "On Dostoevsky", writes that he is moved to tears by Ivan's protest against God in the final chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Reading these pages, JC feels extremely vulnerable even though he does not share Ivan's view:

> So why does Ivan make me cry in spite of myself?
> The answer has nothing to do with ethics or politics, everything to do with rhetoric. In his tirade against forgiveness Ivan shamelessly uses sentiment (martyred children) and caricature (cruel landowners) to advance his ends. Far more powerful than the substance of his argument, which is not strong, are the accents of anguish, the personal anguish of a soul unable to bear the horrors of this world. It is the voice of Ivan, as realized by Dostoevsky, not his reasoning, that sweeps me along.

[25] Ibid., p. 27.

> Are those tones of anguish real? Does Ivan "really" feel as he claims to feel, and does the reader in consequence "really" share Ivan's feelings? The answer to the latter question is troubling. The answer is Yes (DBY 225-26).

The impact of literature on our life does not depend on the validity of the argument a character expresses or an author articulates, but rather on the empathic relationship the reader can establish with them thanks to rhetoric, and which challenges the parameters of rational reasoning espoused by Alan.

The self-conscious narrative rhetoric of *Diary of a Bad Year* is reminiscent of the one in *Don Quixote*. By hinting at Diderot and Sterne, authors "who long ago made a game of exposing the impostures of authorship" (DBY 149), JC embraces the novelistic tradition that challenges realist conventions and that Kundera regards as the authentic tradition of the novel inaugurated by Cervantes.[26] Drawing on JC's resistance to the post-industrial society personified by Alan, and on JC's use of literature to challenge mathematics and logic, in the next pages I shall discuss in more detail how *Diary of a Bad Year* inflects the Quixotic tension between lived experience and fiction. I shall describe the way in which JC's relationship with his ageing body and his response to Anya open his writing to a heightened understanding of emotions and their relation to the intellect.

**(ii) Bodily deterioration and writing**

The multi-layered structure of *Diary of a Bad Year* also conveys the way in which JC's search for a narrative understanding interweaves with his estrangement from his ageing body. The novel examines the interconnectedness of JC's authorial practices and his ageing masculinity. In his essay "On the body", JC emphasises the idea that parts of our bodies such as hair and fingernails live and regenerate, addressing the biological dimension of the body which is independent from the subject's will. JC compares the instinctive and immediate experience of animals to the distance human beings feel from their bodies, and explores the role language plays in the construction of bodily experience:

> The fact that such common locutions as "my leg," "my eye," "my brain," and even "my body" exist suggests that we believe there is some non-material, perhaps fictive, entity that stands in the relation of possessor to possessed to the body's "parts" and even to the whole body. Or else the existence of such locutions shows

[26] Kundera discusses the interconnectedness of Diderot and Sterne with *Don Quixote* in *The Art of the Novel* and *The Curtain*.

> that language cannot get purchase, cannot get going, until it has split up the unity of experience (DBY 59).

JC observes the way in which the English language objectifies the body. While possessive adjectives imbue the relation between the subject and her/his body parts with a sense of possession, they also induce us to conceive of the body as an interface which can never entirely be equated with "us".

JC's mobile estrangement from his body is echoed in his relation with his mother tongue. In the entry to "Soft Opinions" entitled "On the mother tongue", JC writes: "For at times, as I listen to the words of English that emerge from my mouth, I have a disquieting sense that the one I hear is not the one I call myself. Rather, it is as though some other person (but who?) were being imitated, followed, even mimicked. *Larvatus prodeo*" (DBY 195). His situation calls the case of Coetzee himself to mind, that of a writer whose first language is English, but who has not grown up in an English speaking country. JC's estrangement also evokes Jaromil and his imitation of artists in Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*. Both Kundera and Coetzee underline the unconscious human tendency to mimicry, and which informs the notion of identity as a performance not only in youth but in ageing. JC wonders whether his own situation is emblematic of the relation as a whole with language and languages:

> Perhaps it is so that all languages are, finally, foreign languages, alien to our animal being. But in a way that is, precisely, inarticulate, inarticulable, English does not feel to me like a resting place, a home. It just happens to be a language over whose resources I have achieved some mastery (DBY 197).

The reference to an "inarticulate" and "inarticulable" animal dimension strengthens the sense of an unmediated part of human experience that language cannot convey, as I also discussed in my analysis of *Disgrace*. JC is reminiscent of Lurie's observation that English is alien to Petrus. *Diary of a Bad Year* explores this sense of linguistic estrangement through JC's sense of his physical decay and its reverberations in his writing.

In some fragments of *Diary of a Bad Year* JC highlights that he finds in writing a more reassuring experience than speaking: "Writing is a less unsettling experience. Sitting in silence here, moving my hand, calling up these English words, shifting them around, substituting one for another, weaving them into phrases, I feel at ease, in control" (DBY 195). Written words appear less abstract than uttered words, a more tangible and durable expression of language. The possibility of rewriting gives JC the

sense of at least some control over the words he writes. Nonetheless he remains doubtful: “Are these words, printed out on paper, truly what I wanted to say?” (DBY 196). JC’s metaliterary reflections on language and writing expose the limited control the writer has over his own literary creation:

> Stories tell themselves, they don’t get told, he [JC] said. That much I know after a lifetime of working with stories. Never try to impose yourself. Wait for the story to speak for itself. Wait and hope that it isn’t born deaf and dumb and blind. I could do that when I was younger. I could wait patiently for months on end. Nowadays I get tired. My attention wanders (DBY 55).

*Diary of a Bad Year* displays the interconnectedness of creative writing and ageing. When Anya asks JC why he is not writing a novel instead of a set of opinions, a miscellany, JC explains “I don’t have the endurance any more. To write a novel you have to be like Atlas, holding up a whole world on your shoulders and supporting it there for months and years while its affairs work themselves out” (DBY 54). JC’s writing reveals the symptoms of his body decaying: “there is no denying my handwriting is deteriorating. I am losing motor control. That is part of my condition. That is part of what is happening to me. There are days when I squint at what I have just written, barely able to decipher it myself” (DBY 31). While, in *Disgrace*, Lurie addresses his feeling of ageing on a thematic level through *Byron in Italy*, *Diary of a Bad Year* addresses JC’s experience of ageing materially: the sense of his physical deterioration is also an exhaustion he feels in the act of writing which until now has informed his masculinity.

In JC’s “On authority in fiction”, the references to the critical notion of the death of the author interweave with his awareness of living the last stage of his career as a writer. The interplay between the symbolic death of the author announced by Barthes and JC’s sense of his physical decay culminates in his reflection on death in the last entry of “Strong Opinions” entitled “On the afterlife” and in the first entry of “Soft Opinions”, ““A dream”. The crucial position of “On the afterlife” is indicated by a suspension of the multi-layered structure of *Diary of a Bad Year* generally. “A dream” is characterised by the temporary absence of JC’s diaristic entries, and it relates a dream in which JC has died, but has not left the world and is living through the first days of his death, “listening carefully for signs that my dead body was faltering” (DBY 157). The image of his corpse represents the ultimate fantasy of objectification of the body, and conveys the estrangement JC examines in “On the body”. The dream is populated with images expressing the deterioration of the flesh such as a stream of urine turning into

blood and the feeling that his "internal organs were decaying irremediably" (DBY 158). JC derives "[a]n intriguing idea: to write a novel from the perspective of a man who has died, who knows he has two days before he – that is, his body – caves in and begins to fester and smell" (DBY 158). These fantasies of death inform JC's metaphors of writing as an ageing man. The novel he desires to entitle *Desolation* is to focus on the loneliness of death. The experience is explored through his reading of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as a story about "the solitariness of death" in which "Orpheus leaves his beloved behind and returns to his own life" (DBY 159). Observing that Orpheus's love is not strong enough to rescue Eurydice from death, JC feels that this myth conveys a view of the afterworld truer than the Christian view of it. For JC, not even love can mitigate the solitude of approaching death. This tragic acknowledgement is to be the thematic core of his imaginary novel *Desolation*.

Furthermore, the reference to Eurydice and Orpheus is significant because in his dream JC is in the company of a living woman, younger than him, who is supposedly with him when he died and then does "her best to soften the impact of death" (DBY 157). Despite her protectiveness, the young woman tells JC that he can no longer live. In one of his diary entries JC hints at this dream and wonders about the young woman who guides him to the gateway to oblivion: "is she the one who has been assigned to conduct me to my death?" (DBY 60). JC is referring to Anya. Indeed, having met her, he cannot stop wondering about the scenario in which the typist would find his body. The pervasive presence of death and bodily decay in JC's writing echoes in this fantasy which displays the intensity of his new feelings for Anya and, at the same time, his sense of the impossibility of their union given their age difference and his inability to express love physically. In examining how JC's intellectual reflections become increasingly self-referential, my next step is to address his considerations on Pound's fascination with the ideal love celebrated by the Troubadours, and to suggest that this idealised love represents a form of desire through which JC will be able to live his love for Anya.

### (iii) Pound and the Troubadours in *Diary of a Bad Year*

In one of his "Soft Opinions", JC refers to Ezra Pound relates that a decade before, following in the tracks of Pound and the Provençal poets Pound loved, he cycled along some of their routes in Provence:

> What I achieved by doing so I am not sure. I am not even sure what my illustrious predecessor expected to achieve. Both of us set out on the basis that writers who were important to us (to Pound, the troubadours; to me, Pound) had actually been where we were, in flesh and blood; but neither of us seemed or seem able to demonstrate in our writing why or how that mattered (DBY 141).

JC's statement that Pound's writing does not engage with the ways in which the Troubadours have influenced him is highly debatable. Pound's engagement with Provençal poetry in his translations, poems and essays has been extensively studied.[27] JC himself briefly summarises Pound's studies in Provençal poetry: he enrolled in a course in Provençal at Hamilton College and then went on to the University of Pennsylvania with the ambition to become a scholar of the poetry of the late Middle Ages. William Paden Jr. argues that Pound was expected to follow the path of his mentors in Provençal studies when he was named a Harrison Fellow in Romanics at Pennsylvania. "But Pound veered away from the professionalism of the Ph.D. and applied his philological training to the task of poetry."[28] Even though he left academia, Pound did not give up his study of Provençal poetry and kept on researching manuscripts.

Pound's early translations of Provençal poems are crucial in understanding his fascination with Provence and Provençal forms. In *Ezra Pound and the Troubadour Tradition*, Stuart McDougal argues that "[i]n his early translations Pound is seeking a suitable form of English for Provençal poetry […]. Moreover, translation is a way of penetrating an alien sensibility and culture and making it one's own".[29] Highly interpretative, Pound's translations display how the Troubadours' notions of love are absorbed into the fabric of his own creative process. For instance, in his version of Bertran de Born's "Dompna pois de me no'us cal", Pound stresses the most spiritual aspects of love.[30] In the original, Betran describes a Troubadour's carnal desire for an ideal woman, a "domna soisseubud", by combining all the best qualities of several

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[27] In considering the Troubadours' influence on Pound, I shall limit myself to investigating this legacy exclusively in the light of Pound's resonances in Coetzee. For studies of Pound and the Troubadours see Peter Makin, *Provence and Pound*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1978; Stuart McDougal, *Ezra Pound and the Troubadour Tradition*, Princeton, New Jersey Princeton University Press, 1972.

[28] William Paden Jr., "Pound's Use of Troubadour Manuscripts", *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Autumn, 1980), p. 403.

[29] McDougal, *Ezra Pound and the Troubadour Tradition*, pp. 8-9.

[30] Ezra Pound, "'Dompna pois de me no'us cal'", in *Selected Poems*, ed. T. S. Eliot, London, Faber and Faber, 1933, pp. 85-87.

Provençal ladies, while Pound confers ethereal quality on the lady and makes of her an abstraction.[31] As Roberta Capelli underlines:

> The spiritualization of *domna soisseubuda* […] [leads] to the sublimation of passion. In conformity with this new notion of love, in the passage from Provençal to English all the references to the sensual aspect of the relation between the troubadour and his lady disappear, replaced from chaste images, when possible.[32]

By translating the Provençal 'midonz' [my lady] and 'druda' [lover] respectively with 'my phantom' and 'love', Pound changes a carnal and illegitimate passion into a Platonic and spiritual relationship. Capelli's insight into Pound's poem is shared by McDougal, who observes that "Pound shies away from the blatant sexuality of the Provençal, preferring instead a more ethereal relationship" and that "[t]his alteration is important in terms of Pound's developing love ethic."[33] Keeping in mind McDougal's words, I intend to argue that the meaning of the Troubadours' influence on Pound, about which JC is uncertain, lies precisely in Pound's sense of a love ethic and that it stems from the idealization of woman.

In *Diary of a Bad Year* Pound's engagement with the Troubadours and JC's reading of it emerge in the way JC tracks the Troubadours' poetry back to Greek culture, and hints at the assimilation of the Troubadours' legacy in Italian thirteenth-century poetry of *The Dolce Stil Novo*:

> As a field of study, Provençal literature was more fashionable a hundred years ago than it is today. People of a secular-humanist bent traced the spirit of civilization, modern Western civilization, first back to Greece, then forward again to twelfth-century France and thirteenth-century Italy. Athens defined civilization; Provence and the Quattrocento rediscovered Athens (DBY 139).

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[31] Although McDougal underlines the tendency in Pound's translations to idealise the lover, his study offers an insight into the complexity of this process of assimilation and its contradictory trends. For instance, Pound's translation of the anonymous *alba* "En un vergier sotz fuella d'albespi" entitled "Alba Innominata", included in *Exultations* (1909), takes the opposite direction to the idealization of love, by emphasising "[t]he physical aspect of love. treated rather delicately (although unequivocally) in the Provençal version" (15).

[32] My translation. The original Italian reads: "La spiritualizzazione della *domna soisseubuda* porta non soltanto all'esclusione di ogni possibilità di contatto fisico, ma anche alla sublimazione della passione amorosa. In sintonia con questa nuova concezione dell'amore, nel passaggio dal provenzale all'inglese scompaiono tutti i riferimenti all'aspetto sensuale del rapporto tra il trovatore e la sua dama, sostituiti, quando possibile, da immagini più caste". Roberta Capelli, "Pound Traduttore dei Trovatori, Tra Esercitazione Tecnica e Sperimentazione Creativa", *Romanica Vulgarla 95/97*, eds. G. Tavani, C. Pulsoni, 2003, p. 144.

[33] McDougal, *Ezra Pound and the Troubadour Tradition*, p. 38.

The references to Greek culture and the Italian Quattrocento illuminate Pound's engagement with the Troubadours and its echoes in JC's mind. JC believes that the Troubadours' spiritual love reverberates with the Greek notion of Platonic love, and the role of Italian poetry is pivotal. JC's comments that Pound's interest in the Troubadours and in Quattrocento poetry are consistent with McDougal who writes that "[i]n his search for values with which he can confront the chaos of the contemporary world, Pound has retraced his steps through Tuscany to Provence."[34] In a manner reminiscent of JC's intellectual resistance to the post-industrial society advocated by Alan, Pound polemically confronted his time and found his ideal "[i]n the medieval world stretching from the Troubadours to Dante".[35] He realised that the notion of the ideal lady he had been studying in Provençal poets was fully developed in Tuscan poetry: "Although Pound's early work bore evidence of his tacit acceptance of this notion of love," McDougal writes "it did not become the cornerstone of his love ethic until he had immersed himself in the poetry of Guido Guinizelli, Guido Cavalcanti, Dante".[36] Drawing on the observations of McDougal and JC, I want not to show how the ethics of love that Pound found in the poetry of the Troubadours, and in its assimilation in Guinizelli, Cavalcanti and Dante, resonates in the relation between JC and Anya.

The first meeting between JC and Anya is characterised by the emphasis on sight, which is one of the main features of the Troubadours' love:

> My first glimpse of her was in the laundry room. It was midmorning on a quiet spring day and I was sitting, watching the washing go around, when this quite startling young woman walked in. Startling because the last thing I was expecting was such an apparition; also because the tomato-red shift she wore was so startling in its brevity (DBY 3).

In JC's eyes Anya is an apparition. In his work on Dante and the Troubadours,[37] Henry Chaytor underlines that in the transition from Provençal poetry to Italian Quattrocento, "[t]he cause of love, however, remains unchanged: love enters through the eyes; sight is delight."[38] Although Anya's physical features do not conform to the imaginary of the angelic woman – "She has black black hair, shapely bones" (DBY 6), the way JC

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34 Ibid., p. 101.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., p. 71.

37 Both Paden (403) and McDougal (71, n. 3) highlight that Pound studied Chaytor's *The Troubadours of Dante* at Hamilton College.

38 Chaytor, *The Troubadours of Dante*, p. 105.

describes Anya is reminiscent of the ideal lady: "A certain golden glow to her skin, *lambent* might be the word" (DBY 6); "a derriere so near to perfect as to be angelic" (DBY 8); "so celestial a paramour" (DBY 11); "this earthly incarnation of heavenly beauty" (DBY 190). For the reader it is hard to determine whether JC's assimilation of this legacy is conscious or unconscious: the lucidity through which JC describes the continuity between Greek culture, the Troubadours and Italian Poetry contrasts with the sense of uncertainty he feels about the Troubadours' influence on Pound.

JC's love for Anya displays a male idealization of the female lover which has emerged in *Disgrace* and in the narratives of Kundera and Roth. The references to Provençal poets in *Diary of a Bad Year* evoke the notion of *homo sentimentalis* about which Kundera writes in *Immortality*, and which I examined in Chapter Two. I now want to stress that Kundera also identifies the origins of this notion in the Troubadour tradition:

> The transformation of feelings into a value had already occurred in Europe some time around the twelfth century: the troubadours who sang with such great passion to their beloved, the unattainable princess, seemed so admirable and beautiful to all who heard them that everyone wished to follow their example by falling prey to some wild upheaval of the heart.[39]

By hinting at the origins of the idealization of the lover in Western culture, *Diary of a Bad Year* confirms the recurrence in Coetzee's narrative of this archetype of love. In Chapter One I considered the notion of ideal love in *Disgrace* and Coetzee's discussion of it in his essay on García Márquez. *Diary of a Bad Year* inflects this theme through JC's experience of ageing:

> As I watched her an ache, a metaphysical ache, crept over me that I did nothing to stem. And in an intuitive way she knew about it, knew that in the old man in the plastic chair in the corner there was something personal going on, something to do with age and regret and the tears of things. Which she did not particularly like, did not want to evoke, though it was a tribute to her, to her beauty and freshness as well as to the shortness of her dress. Had it come from someone different, had it had a simpler and blunter meaning, she might have been readier to give it a welcome; but from an old man its meaning was too diffuse and melancholy for a nice day when you are in a hurry to get the chores done (DBY 7).

JC describes the arousal of his desire for Anya as a metaphysical pain: an ambiguous expression that may address either the passion he can no longer feel or the awareness that his body is too weak to live up to the intensity of his desire for her. JC's

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39 Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, trans. Peter Kussi, London, Faber and Faber, 1992, p. 218.

metaphysical pain may also be seen in the light of the tension between real and ideal. Let me recall here the words Lurie says his students about Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and the experience of love: "'do you truly wish to see the beloved in the cold clarity of the visual apparatus? It may be in your better interest to throw a veil over the gaze, so as to keep her alive in her archetypal, goddesslike form'" (D 22). Lurie's words seem to reiterate the impossibility of living the experience of love in the clarity of senses. Nonetheless, JC's painful emotion may contradict this logic. An insight into the metaphysical nature of Coetzee's desire for Anya can be found in Pound's essay on Cavalcanti which argues that "[t]he whole break of Provence with this world, and indeed the central theme of the troubadours is the dogma that there is some proportions between the fine thing held in the mind, and the inferior thing ready for instant consumption."[40] A few lines later Pound adds, "[t]he term metaphysic may be used if it were not so appallingly associated in people's minds with unsupportable conjecture and devastated terms of abstraction."[41] JC's metaphysical pain may derive from an encounter with the embodiment of an ideal of beauty that he has imagined until then only as an abstraction.

Initially, JC is unable to understand his emotional and erotic response to Anya. His sense of displacement is expressed in his diary: "this woman with whom […] I seem to have grown obsessed, to the extent that a man can be called obsessed when the sexual urge has dwindled and there is only a hovering uncertainty about what he is actually after, what he actually expects the object of his infatuation to supply" (DBY 88-9). JC is unsure about the nature of his desire since he cannot explore it physically. In the manner of the Provençal tradition, "the lover is swayed by a spiritual and intellectual ideal, and the motive of physical attraction recedes to the background".[42] Even though the way JC is stimulated physically by Anya is unclear, she affects his writing deeply. Anya encourages JC to change the subject of his work and to write about his own experience: "Write your memoirs. […] The kind of writing you do doesn't work with politics. Politics is about shouting other people down and getting your own way, not about logic. Write about the world around you" (DBY 35). Her influence starts emerging in the last essays of "Strong Opinions", focusing on JC's

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[40] Ezra Pound, "Cavalcanti", in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot, London, Faber and Faber, p. 151.

[41] Ibid., p. 151.

[42] Chaytor, *The Troubadours of Dante*, p. 105.

admiration for Provençal poems as well as Romantic composers, and characterised by a more intimate approach. No longer purely polemical, JC's entries are now about kissing, writing, compassion, ageing, birds and children, which translate JC's emotional response to Anya into writing. This change reflects the increasing distance JC feels from the combative attitude which has represented the core of his identity as an intellectual and as a male author until now, and his exploration of old and new emotions.

The importance of Anya's role is increasingly emphasised by JC. Replying to Anya's letter in which she announces that she will no longer work for him, JC writes: "*You have become indispensable to me – to me and to the present project. I cannot imagine handing over the manuscript to someone else*" (DBY 121). It is Anya who gives the name "Soft Opinions" to the entries included in the second part of *Diary of a Bad Year* (DBY 193). "Soft Opinions" equally represents JC's attempt to establish an emotional connection with her. Alan describes JC's behaviour as *"galant*" (DBY 178). He says about "Soft Opinions": "it adds up to you wanting to get your hands on my beauteous lady-friend […]. It adds up to courtship of a particularly devious kind. *From the outside I may seem withered and repulsive* […] *but inside I still have the feelings of a man*" (DBY 201). Even though Alan is ironic in relation to JC's tendency to idealise Anya ("my beauteous lady-friend"), he recognises that the composition of "Soft Opinions" is a form of seduction. JC's affective response to Anya and his desire to be with her become explicit after Anya leaves Alan and her position. In his letter attached to his "Soft Opinions", JC writes her:

> PS, […] *I am beginning to put together a second, gentler set of opinions. I will be happy to show them to you if that will persuade you to return. Some of them take up suggestions that you let drop. A gentle opinion on birds, for example. A gentle opinion on love, or at least on kissing between a gentleman and a lady. Can I induce you to take a look?* (DBY 145).

If not a pure act of seduction, JC's "gentler" opinions are an explicit attempt at persuasion. What Alan overlooks about JC's love for Anya is its spiritual dimension. When Anya asks him if she has been included in the book JC is writing, he tells her "you are in the book – how could you not be when you were part of the making of it? You are everywhere in it, everywhere and nowhere. Like God, though not on the same scale" (DBY 181). In addition to resonating with Flaubert's description of the novelistic author ("An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere

and visible nowhere"),[43] the fact JC that describes Anya as a spiritual presence but not on the same scale of God evokes Pound's fascination with the *stilnovisti*, and the idea that the beloved is a means to reach God drawn from the Troubadours. In *Provence and Pound*, Peter Makin emphasises that for Pound the awareness springing from the courtly-love relationship "is a quasi-religious experience, and includes awareness of the gods and goddesses: there is no clear break between the ordering of the higher faculties and perception of the overall 'coherence' which is divinity operating within the universe."[44] JC himself addresses the spiritual dimension that Provençal poetry had for Pound: "In Pound's eyes, Provence marked one of the rare moments when life and art and the religious impulse cohered to bring civilization to a point of rich flowering" (DBY 139). Fearing an imminent death, ageing has made JC more receptive to his own feelings for Anya and has opened his writing to a new form.

I would like to underline how the influence of the Troubadours and *stilnovisti* on Coetzee further highlights his proximity to Borges.[45] In *Borges and Dante*, Humberto Núñez-Faraco points out that Dante's *Vita Nuova* and *Commedia* sprang from the rhetorical tradition of the Troubadours, and the notion of the angelic woman in the work of Guinizelli. Núñez-Faraco suggests that in Borges's early poems "love is experienced as a radical spiritual adventure rather than a mere physical urge for carnal satisfaction".[46] Specifically, Núñez-Faraco underlines the "contemplative mood striving to reach the mysterious, transcendent essence of the beloved, who is now seen in the angelical purity of a heavenly abode (quite consonant with the woman-angel *motif* of the troubadours and the *stilnovisti*)".[47] This insight into Borges sheds light on the connection between him and Coetzee. Núñez-Faraco's examination of spiritual love in Borges's "El Zahir", its connection with Sufi mysticism and its doctrine of mystical love, highlights Coetzee's sense of Borges's search for a perspective through which to

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43 Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830-1857*, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller, London and Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1980, p. 173.

44 Makin, *Provence and Pound*, p. 117.

45 Another element of continuity between Coetzee and Borges (and Cervantes) is the use of the persona of the author. For an insight into this metafictional device see Fernando Galván, "Borges, Cervantes and Coetzee, or the Fictionalisation of the Author", *European Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 20, Issue 2, pp. 179-191.

46 Humberto Núñez-Faraco, *Borges and Dante*: *Echoes of a Literary Friendship*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2006, p. 131.

47 Ibid., p. 132.

evade the Western worldview.[48] Although, to my knowledge, there are no elements to support the view that Coetzee is aware of the reverberations of the Troubadours and *stilnovisti* in Borges, their respective engagement with the conceptualization of love in these literary traditions illuminates the interconnectedness of their narratives. In the next section I shall discuss the way in which emotions become for JC a form of investigation into his authorial masculinity.

**(iv) Emotion and investigation: writing between diary and essay**

In an entry of "Soft Opinions" entitled "On the writing life", JC returns to his sense that his creativity has been exhausted and focuses on the notion of inspiration. JC quotes from *The Fragrance of Guava* by García Márquez, who does not consider inspiration "as a state of grace", but rather "as the moment when, by tenacity and control, you are at one with your theme […], at that moment, there is absolutely nothing in the world better than writing"' (DBY 192). JC writes that he has experienced such moments of creativity, but reiterates that his writing has been exhausted, and connects the exhaustion of creativity to the exhaustion of desire:

> Growing detachment from the world is of course the experience of many writers as they grow older, grow cooler or colder. The texture of their prose becomes thinner, their treatment of character and action more schematic. The syndrome is usually ascribed to a waning of creative power; it is no doubt connected with the attenuation of physical powers, above all the power of desire. Yet from the inside the same development may bear a quite different interpretation: as a liberation, a clearing of the mind to take on more important tasks (DBY 193).

This fragment suggests that the new creative drive of "Soft Opinions" is related to his increasing desire for Anya, who emerges as a source of inspiration both literary and erotic. Aware of the impact she has had on JC's writing, Anya describes herself as "the little typist who showed you [JC] the way" (DBY 222). She writes to JC that if their ages were more compatible they could have lived together and she could have become his "resident inspiration" (DBY 204). By connecting the waning of desire to a clearing of the mind, the fragment opens up an alternative perspective, a different awareness about the priorities of a writer. What is the relation between JC's new awareness and his invigorated desire?

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[48] For further information see "The Theme of Lovesickness in 'El Zahir'", in Núñez-Faraco, *Borges and Dante*, pp. 160-197.

In the last essay of "Strong Opinions", "On the afterlife", JC argues that the idea of an individual who is endowed with the faculty to think is so inherently rooted in our culture that it emerges even in religious conceptions of the afterlife, which for JC highlights "an incapacity to think of a world from which the thinker is absent" (DBY 154). While the essays composing "Strong Opinions" are confined to the development of an argument, I believe that "Soft Opinions" displays the understanding to which JC has tried to give voice in the first part of *Diary of a Bad Year*. To clarify this point, let me return to the figure of Borges. In his introduction to a collection of Borges's fiction, Coetzee observes that the stories of *The Garden of Forking Paths* "use as model the anatomy or critical essay rather than the tale."[49] In focusing on the essayistic form that Borges develops in works such as *Fictions* (a collection of his short stories composed of *The Garden of Forking Paths* and *Artifices*, the latter including "Funes, His Memory") and *The Aleph*, Coetzee wonders: "What do the operations of fiction offer this scholar-writer that enables him to take ideas into reaches where the discursive essay, as a mode of writing, fails him?"[50] The same question should be asked about the essayistic writing characteristic of "Soft Opinions" which combines the essay form with the intimacy of the diary. This interaction is also echoed in the tension between literary genres generated by the multi-layered layout of *Diary of a Bad Year*. Revealing the influence of Anya on JC's writing, the affection and confidentiality characteristic of diaristic entries open JC's intellectual reflection to new speculations on topics such as kissing, writing, compassion, and ageing, all of which seem to address the myth of femininity.

This new form for reflection responds to the question JC poses in his strong opinion "On avian influenza", "what if there are equally powerful modes of 'thinking,' that is, equally effective biochemical processes for getting to where your drives or desires incline you?" (DBY 71). While Borges searches for a perspective outside Western culture by exposing the limits of its theoretical assumptions, JC attempts to overcome the constraints of rational thinking by interweaving it with his emotional response to Anya. Through the composition of "Soft Opinions", a form of writing capable of integrating reason and emotion, logic and instinct, JC embarks on an exploration of affect and develops a grammar of his emotions.

As a form of writing and (un)thinking, "Soft Opinions" is responsive to Pound's reading of the Troubadours, the other main literary influences on *Diary of a Bad Year*.

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49 Coetzee, "J. L. Borges, *Collected Fictions*", p. 143.

50 Ibid., p. 145.

Following Pound, in "Soft Opinions" JC conceives of "love, passion, emotion as an intellectual investigation".[51] Pound writes that "[t]he cult of Provence had been a cult of the emotions; and with it there had been some, hardly conscious, study of emotional psychology".[52] The study of emotions also marks the continuity between Provençal poetry and the Italian Quattrocento, which was not just limited to the idealization of the beloved: "I cannot repeat too often", Pound writes, "that there was a profound psychological knowledge in Medieval Provence, […]; that men […] have there displayed considerable penetration; that this was carried into early Italian poetry".[53] In the manner of the Troubadours' and *stilnovisti*'s poems Pound admires, the dialogue between JC's emotions and his intellect in "Soft Opinions" develops into a form through which to seek self-knowledge.

In "Psychology and the Troubadours", Pound wonders if chivalric love has led to an "interpretation of the cosmos by feeling".[54] In that manner, in "Soft Opinions" JC explores his disembodied desire for Anya, and evokes the Platonic love celebrated by the Troubadours and the refinement of feelings described by Pound. "On music", one of the last "Strong Opinions", investigates the fleeting nature of our feelings by examining their translation into music:

> Music expresses feeling, that is to say, gives shape and habitation to feeling, not in space but in time. To the extent that music has a history that is more than a history of its formal evolution, our feelings must have a history too. Perhaps certain qualities of feeling that found expression in music in the past, and were recorded to the extent that music can be recorded by being notated on paper, have become so remote that we can no longer inhabit them as feelings, can get a grasp of them only after long training in the history and philosophy of music […] (DBY 130).

In considering "the history of music as a history of the feeling soul" (DBY 130), JC is reminiscent of Kundera: for both, in giving meaning to our own impulses, art forms represent an archive of our feelings. Kundera investigates the way literary representations have shaped our sexuality, as I discussed in Chapters Two and Three, and goes on to address the relation between music and affect. In *Immortality* Kundera's authorial narrator stresses the connection between his notion of *homo sentimentalis* and

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51 Ezra Pound, "Remy De Gourmont: A Distinction", in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 343.

52 Ezra Pound, "Lingua Toscana", in *The Spirit of Romance*, London, Peter Owen Limited, 1952, p. 116.

53 Pound, "Remy De Gourmont: A Distinction", p. 344.

54 Ezra Pound, "Psychology and the Troubadours", in *The Spirit of Romance*, London, Peter Owen Limited, 1952, p. 94.

European music: "Europe: great music and *homo sentimentalis*. Twins nurtured side by side in the same cradle. Music taught the European not only a richness of feeling, but also the worship of his feelings and his feeling self."[55] Kundera emphasises the role of music in shaping feelings and in moulding them to human consciousness. Furthermore, in the manner of Milanku in Kundera's *Slowness*, JC is critical of the contemporary understanding of sexuality, which he believes to be epitomized by the image of athletes having sex. JC fantasises about their intercourse and describes it as a "vigorous activity, followed by a burst of orgasm, rationalized as a kind of reward to the physical mechanism" (DBY 134). JC criticises the notion of the body as a biological machine aimed at the best performance and its inflection in the field of sexuality. Again like Milanku, JC deems this view of the body as characteristic of US culture: "The body as conceived in America, the American body, is a complex machine comprising a vocal module; a sexual module, and several more, even a psychological module" (DBY 133). This conception of the body deprives the human being of his soul: the spiritual component is replaced by "the model of the self as a ghost inhabiting a machine" (DBY 133). JC's examination of the history of European music is a search for a form of erotics able to include spirituality.

JC describes how in the nineteenth-century art of song a singer was trained to sing from the depths of her thorax to emit a tone which displayed "the contrast between the mere physical body and the voice that transcends the body, emerging from it, rising above it, and leaving it behind" (DBY 131). This urge to transcend the body is at the root of JC's sense of bodily deterioration. JC goes on to praise the pursuit of transcendence in Romantic composers:

> Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Bruckner, Mahler, Elgar, Sibelius composed within the bounds of symphonic form a music of heroic rebirth and/or transfiguration. Wagner and Strauss did much the same in forms of their own invention. Theirs is music that relies on parallels between harmonic and motival transmutation on the one hand and spiritual transfiguration on the other.

For JC the spirituality of Romantic music is forgotten in the popular music of the twentieth century and its "newfound rootedness in body-experience" (DBY 135). JC believes this process started in the late Eighteenth Century with the search in the Balkans, Turkey and Central Asia for rhythmically challenging music, and was confirmed in the emergence of popular music in America via the music of African

[55] Kundera, *Immortality*, p. 229.

slaves. By opposition, JC's sense of his rootedness in the body only exacerbates his feeling of being close to death. JC's intellectual exploration of the feelings conveyed by Romantic music provides him with a way to live the passion for Anya that his body denies him: "the music we call Romantic has an erotic inspiration – that it unceasingly pushes further, tries to enable the listening subject to leave the body behind, to be rapt away […]?" (DBY 138). JC is fascinated by the potentialities of erotic desire to transcend his ageing body. He emphasises "the striving toward transcendence" of Romantic music and recognises "the quality of yearning" of its "erotic idealism" (DBY 135). The metaphysical ache that creeps over JC when he first sees Anya evokes the "metaphysical hunger" he deems characteristic of Romantic music and its drive to live physical urges philosophically as an erotic idealism (DBY 138).

JC's interest in the yearning towards transcendence illuminates the interconnectedness of Romantic music and Provençal poetry in his writing and, at the same time, highlights the transcendental dimension of love embodied for him by Plato's philosophy and Provençal poetry. Presenting Pound's sense of courtly love as "a cult for the purgation of the soul by a refinement of, and lordship over, the senses",[56] "Soft Opinions" articulates JC's attempt to emancipate himself from those forms of carnal desire he can no longer realise and his search for a new spiritual dimension. My final step is to explore the idealised representation of the relation between the sexes in *Diary of a Bad Year*.

**(v) A disturbing proximity: ideal love and hegemonic heterosexual discourse**

In "On the erotic life", JC writes about a friend of his, a Hungarian photographer called Gyula, and the conversation they had one year before Gyula committed suicide. The conversation centres on "eros as he [Gyula] knew it in the autumn of his days" (DBY 175). Gyula used to be a womanizer, but growing older his "need to make love to women in the flesh receded", even though "he remained as keenly receptive to feminine beauty as ever" (DBY 175). Unable to enact physically his attraction for women, Gyula finds another way via his imagination:

> [Gyula] had mastered the art of conducting a love affair through all its stages, from infatuation to consummation, wholly within his mind. How could he do that? The indispensable first step was to capture what he called a "living image" of the beloved, and make it his own. Upon this image he would then dwell, giving breath

[56] Pound, "Psychology and the Troubadours", p. 90.

> to it, until he had reached a point where, still in the realm of the imagination, he could begin to make love to this succubus of his, and eventually conduct her into the utmost transports; and this whole passionate history would remain unbeknown to the earthly original (DBY 175).

Gyula uses the expression "living image", which reminds me of the fragment from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* that Lurie reads to his students. The fragment focuses on the impossibility of the human eye to perceive and to preserve the image of the unveiled summit of Mont Blanc, a "living thought". If *Disgrace* addresses the limits of human senses, Gyula praises his own ability to capture the essence of a woman through sight, crystallizing it into a living image:

> It all hinged, he replied, on being able to capture, through the closest, most dedicated attention, that unique unconscious gesture, too slight or too fleeting to be noticed by the average eye, by which a woman gave herself away – gave away her erotic essence, that is to say, her soul. […] Once that unique movement was caught, the erotic imagination could explore it at leisure until the woman's every last secret was laid open, not excluding how she moved in the arms of a lover, how she came to her climax (DBY 177).

For Gyula, erotic imagination is a way to sharpen his sensuality. JC is sceptical about the fact that Gyula's "imaginary couplings" might bring him "anything approaching the same satisfaction as lovemaking in the real world" (DBY 176). According to Gyula, his mental process is representative of European culture, "namely a Greek, that is to say Platonic, turn of mind" (DBY 178). When JC implies that his platonic coupling is a practice of masturbation, Gyula rejects the idea: "What I speak of is ideal love, poetic love, but on the sensual plan" (DBY 178).

Inflecting the notion of Platonism sensually, Gyula's platonic love differs from the erotic idealism that animates JC. Modelled on Romantic music and courtly love, JC's yearning for transcendence is inspired only by Anya, while Gyula's ideal love concerns all the women to whom he is attracted and emerges rather as a form of mental donjuanism or *libertinage*. As I discussed in Chapter Three courtly love and donjuanism are traditionally conceived as antithetical. For instance, Camille Dumoulié describes courtly love as the counterpoint of the myth of Don Juan,[57] and Cusset describes *libertinage* as opposed to the notion of transcendence. In conferring an erotic charge on the ideal of a platonic love, Gyula's imaginary seductions challenge the Platonic emancipation from the body and, in the manner of Kundera's narrative, reveal the

[57] Camille Dumoulié, *Don Juan ou l'héroïsme du désir*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1993, p. 205.

paradoxical and disturbing proximity of these two forms of love. JC is perplexed by Gyula's paradoxical erotic-ideal love:

> I had every reason to get a grasp of this phenomenon that he called ideal love on the sensual plane, every reason to get a grasp of it and take it over and practise it on my own behalf. But I could not. There was the real thing, which I knew and remembered, and then there was the kind of mental rape Gyula performed, and the two were not the same. The quality of the emotional experience might be similar, the ecstasy might be as intense as he averred – who was I to dispute that? – yet in the most elementary of senses a mental love could not be a real thing (DBY 179).

The tension between "ideal love" and the "real thing" JC portrays is reminiscent of Vargas Llosa's reading of *Don Quixote*. In "Four Centuries of Don Quixote" Vargas Llosa writes that Cervantes's work "recreates in a simple myth the insoluble dialectics between the real and the ideal."[58] *Diary of a Bad Year* translates this dialectic into the field of sexuality and explores the possibility of recreating sexual experience through the imagination. For JC, no fantasy can replace the authenticity of erotic experience: "we cannot do without the real thing, the real real thing; because without the real we die as if of thirst" (DBY 179). Gyula's mental translation of sexual practices is reminiscent of the "magic of inexperience" in Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*. Even though Gyula does not escape the materiality of the female body in the manner of Jaromil's poetry, his abstractions seem to reverberate Jaromil's masculine anxiety. By opposition, JC's urge for real is reminiscent of Kepesh's own search for it in *The Professor of Desire*. Articulated through literary paradigms, their urge for experience seems to address a cultural construction of the "real" and to configure it as an ultimate fantasy, a fetish which reiterates the binary oppositions such as real and ideal, real and fictional through which they read their lives. *Diary of a Bad Year* challenges this Quixotic dialectic. JC's reflections on writing break with the opposition between fictional and real which restricts literary practices to the mental:

> [S]ketching stories seems to have become a substitute for writing them. I think of Gyula and his harem of images. Is it one of the consequences of growing old that one no longer needs the thing itself, that the idea of the thing suffices – as, in matters of the heart, the entertainment of a possibility, called ideal love by Gyula but more familiar to ordinary people as flirtation, may become a substitute, a not unwelcome substitute, for love itself? (DBY 185).

JC redefines the terms of this opposition by conceiving of writing and sexuality as real experience opposed to the imagination involved in sketching and flirting.

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58 Vargas Llosa, "Four Centuries of Don Quixote", p. 4.

Gyula's implicitly embraces of the European erotic tradition and a male hegemonic culture, like Lurie in *Disgrace*. This emerges in the notion of a woman's "erotic essence", which reduces female subjectivity to her sexuality, and implies a logic of domination which allows a man to possess this alleged "essence". JC himself wonders if a misogynist component underlies Gyula's practice: "had he ever reflected that the wish to ravish women in the privacy of his thoughts might be an expression not of love but of revenge – revenge upon the young and the beautiful for disdaining an ugly old man like him" (DBY 176). Ageing increases the distance between men and women and exacerbates the masculine tendency to flatten the feminine into the categories of beauty and youth. JC's dismissiveness in relation to Gyula resembles the way Alan describes JC – "*withered and repulsive*" (DBY 201) – and his unattractiveness in Anya's eyes. JC goes further and defines Gyula's imaginary sexual performance as a "kind of mental rape" (DBY 179). If having erotic fantasies about someone is considered legitimate, or at least inoffensive, JC investigates the drive under a man's erotic imagination, which may not be aimed at providing him with pleasure, but rather at imposing an undesired act on a woman and domination generally. *Diary of a Bad Year* remains ambiguous on the issue. For the moment I would like to focus on the machismo of Gyula's reply:

> "What do you think it means to be a womanizer?" he said (it was one of his favourite words in English, he liked to roll it on his tongue, *wo-man-i-zer*). "A womanizer is a man who breaks you up and makes you come together again like a woman. Like an a-tom-i-zer that breaks you up into atoms. It is only men who hate womanizers, from jealousy. Women appreciate a womanizer. A woman and a womanizer belong naturally together" (DBY 177).

Gyula tries to legitimise and ground his theory of sexuality in ancient Greek philosophy. After his (mis)appropriation of Platonic love, he uses Democritus's atomism to convey the control that a male seducer can exercise on a woman. In describing the relation between a male seducer and a woman as the privileged relation between the sexes, Gyula reinforces Kundera's emphasis on the centrality of the archetype of Don Juan and the importance of seduction in Western culture. Gyula emerges as a deeply Kunderian character and reminds me of Martin, the protagonist of Kundera's short tale "The Golden Apple of Eternal Desire" included in *Laughable Loves*. Happily married, Martin flirts with other women and the idea of illicit sex, even though he never cheats on his wife nor means to do. In the manner of Martin, Gyula is driven more by the possibility of sex rather than its achievement. Their behaviour reveals their need to rehearse those

seductive practices which are supposed to define their manhood and, at the same time, their lack of interest in the unemotional sex characteristic of donjuanism. Unrelated to sexual satisfaction, seduction is presented as a performance to satisfy masculine narcissistic urges and identity. Kundera and Coetzee address in different ways their characters' behaviour. While in *Diary of a Bad Year* JC expresses scepticism towards Gyula's erotic fantasies, Kundera's narrative does not offer a criticism of Martin's view, but is rather aimed at analysing the paradoxes that drive his seductions.

In displaying JC's resistance to Gyula's view of seduction, *Diary of a Bad Year* ambiguously presents similarities between the two characters. I have stressed before JC's gaze on Anya during their first meeting. Anya often records her sense of being observed: "when I make my silky moves I can feel his eyes lock onto me", "his eyes avid upon me" (DBY 28, 30). These elements conform to Gyula's belief that "no woman can be unaware of the gaze of desire settling upon her" (DBY 175). JC has erotic fantasies about Anya. At first, he tries to reject them – "God, grant me one wish before I die, I whispered; but then was overtaken with shame at the specificity of the wish, and withdrew it" (DBY 8); then he cannot prevent himself from visualising Anya having sex with Alan: "the devil waylays me, sends me an image of this Anya on a sweaty summer night, convulsed in the arms of ginger-haired, freckle-shouldered Alan, opening her womb in gladness to the gush of his male juices" (DBY 53). Furthermore in her letter to JC, Anya writes she would like to hear more about whether Gyula actually existed or is a fantasy of JC. The hypothesis that Gyula is a mask of JC may originate in the fact Gyula finds it admissible to have erotic interest in children, which recalls JC questioning the relativity of the concept of paedophilia. If this were true, JC's creation of Gyula would exemplify Coetzee's notion of writing as the process of "awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them" which also emerges in Lurie's composition of *Byron in Italy* as I discussed in Chapter One.[59] *Diary of a Bad Year* would then explore the dialogic nature of writing as a means to explore the estrangement JC feels towards his own drives.

In continuing to wonder if Gyula is a fictional character JC has created, Anya reassures JC that she was aware of his interest in her. In her letter, she writes that although the idea of being the object of other men's fantasies bothered her, she did not mind being the centre of his attentions: "I was never embarrassed by your thoughts, I

[59] J. M. Coetzee, "Interview [The Poetics of Reciprocity]", in *Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, p. 65.

even helped them along a little. And nothing has changed since I left, you can go on having thoughts about me to your heart's content […]. And if you want to write and tell me your thoughts, that is OK too, I can be discreet" (DBY 211). In welcoming JC's fantasies, Anya confirms the Platonic level of their love. Their closeness grows as Anya proposes herself as a confidant for JC's most intimate thoughts. Anya's acceptance of JC's desire and the emotional bound she has established with him are the result of her own self-affirmation. At the beginning of *Diary of a Bad Year*, Anya feels frustrated because her voice is unheard:

> Señor C has opinions about God and the universe and everything else. He records his opinions (drone drone) which I dutifully type out (clickety clack) and somewhere down the line the Germans buy his book and pore over it (*ja ja*). As for Alan, Alan sits all day hunched over his computer and then comes home and tells me his opinions about interest rates and Macquarie Bank's latest moves, to which I dutifully listen. But what about me? Who listens to my opinions? (DBY 101)

The adverb she repeats both in relation to JC and Alan, "dutifully", gives the sense of feeling of responsibility Anya feels towards the men of her life. Tired of a subordinate position, Anya confronts Alan's dominant attitude and breaks up with him. As I have discussed, by mitigating JC's intellectual and polemical engagement with politics and society, she has deep influence on his life and makes him more receptive to his own feelings and to the surrounding world: "I did feel that you were taking a risk, being so isolated, so out of touch with the modern world" (DBY 196). *Diary of a Bad Year* addresses the binary vision of gender in which masculinity and femininity emerge as realms of intellect and emotionality, and which evokes the fiction of Robert Musil.[60] Like Musil's protagonists JC tries to reconcile these two spheres.

JC's emotional response to Anya is not the only one narrated in *Diary of a Bad Year*, Anya's own feelings for JC are crucial too. They emerge when she reads JC's account of his dream about his death:

> I remember you once told me you would not put your dreams in the book because dreams don't count as opinions, so it is good to see one of your soft opinions is a dream, the dream you told me long ago about yourself and Eurydice. Naturally I wonder if it doesn't contain a secret message about needing help. It is a pity you are so alone in the world. We can all do with someone by our side, to help us (DBY 197).

[60] I discuss the reverberations of Musil on Coetzee in my article "'On the Edge of Revelation': The Influence of Robert Musil on J. M. Coetzee's Narrative", *European Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 20, Issue 2, pp. 166-178.

The solitude of JC arouses Anya's pity. Although Anya is not in love with JC, she understands the depth of his feelings. Unconsciously, Anya seems to evade the courtly frame JC is projecting onto their relationship. In the tradition of courtly love the knight addresses his beloved lady as "domina", but in evading such a role Anya inverts the role given to man and woman in this tradition. Although she calls JC señor, as JC underlines: "This young woman who declines to call me by my name, instead calling me *Señor* or perhaps *Senior*" (DBY 60), her awareness of JC's feeling – "I was the one he was in love with" (DBY 225) – is at the heart of her growing sense of responsibility for him. This bond does not relegate her to a submissive position or her position as JC's typist. The sense of her agency grows along with desire to help JC. Anya promises herself she will be with JC when his end gets close:

> I will hold his hand. I can't go with you, I will say to him, it is against the rules. I can't go with you but what I will do is hold your hand as far as the gate. At the gate you can let go and give me a smile to show you are a brave boy and get on the boat or whatever it is you have to do. As far as the gate I will hold your hand, I would be proud to do that (DBY 226).

Although Anya escapes the roles given to the sexes in courtly love, her sympathy for JC expresses the ethical dimension of Troubadour love that Pound praises. The interconnectedness of Anya's words and JC's dream strengthens the sense of dialogue between their sensitivities. In my analysis of *Disgrace*, I discussed Lurie's attempt to give voice to his daughter and, more generally, the otherness of the opposite sex. If the dialogic interplay of *Disgrace* exposes Lurie's self-absorption and his inability to understand the other, the multi-layered structure of *Diary of a Bad Year* displays the empathic bond JC and Anya are nonetheless able to establish. Finally, for the first time in the male-centred narrations I have considered so far, the subjectivity of a female character is not drawn exclusively in the light of her gender, but rather through the ethical dimension of her behaviour. In my next section, I shall continue the exploration of the masculine fantasy, expressed in works of art and literature, informing the imagination of Rigoberto in Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Rigoberto*. I shall focus on Rigoberto's self-reflection, nourished by literary texts which convert his fantasies into a stage through which to explore his emotions and his morality.

### 3. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*

#### (i) The struggle against hegemonic masculinity in Rigoberto's essay-letters

*The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* is the sequel to *In Praise of the Stepmother* (1988), which narrates the story of Don Rigoberto discovering that his second wife Lucrecia is having an affair with his son Fonchito from his first marriage. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* reprises their story after the separation of Rigoberto and Lucrecia.[61] In the manner of *Diary of a Bad Year*, through the fragmentation of its narrative *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* juxtaposes its protagonist's thoughts expressed in an essayistic form with accounts of his emotional situation. While in *Diary of a Bad Year* JC's and Anya's impressions are collected as confessional memoirs, an extradiegetic narrator relates the lives of Lucrecia and Rigoberto.

The fragmented structure of *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* consists of nine chapters and an epilogue. With the exception of the second, each chapter has four sequences. The first sequence is based on the meetings between Fonchito and Lucrecia, with the young boy trying to have his stepmother reconciled with his father. The second is an essay in epistolary form written by Rigoberto to express his views and opinions on a range of topics. The third relates the sexual fantasies of Don Rigoberto during his separation from Lucrecia, which are inspired by literary works as well as pictures and reproductions of famous paintings. The fourth consists of short letters, which might be the anonymous letters written by Fonchito that Lucrecia receives in the first sequence of the novel. Only the second chapter does not follow completely this structure since the fantasy it describes is divided into two distinct parts.

Written in the form of essays, Rigoberto's letters display his resistance to the contemporary world in the manner of JC's "Strong Opinions". Rigoberto critically engages with religions, social utopias, patriotism, sport, pornography, while celebrating individual and sexual freedom. In "Letter to a Rotarian" Rigoberto describes his struggle in the following terms:

> Since the world is moving so quickly toward complete disindividualization and the extinction of that historical accident, the rule of the free and sovereign individual […], I am mobilized and combat-ready, with all my five senses, twenty-four hours

[61] Rigoberto, Fonchito and Lucrecia also appear in Vargas Llosa's 2013 novel *The Discreet Hero* (trans. Edith Grossman, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015).

> a day, prepared to delay, as much as I can and in areas that concern me, this existential calamity (NR 112).[62]

Rigoberto's letters give a sense of his rivalry against the world, and they address the acceleration of the twentieth-century world described by Milanku in *Slowness*.[63] His battle against "the planned, the organized, the obligatory, the routinized, the collective" is pervaded by the same pessimism that characterise JC's opinions (NR 113). Both Rigoberto and JC look with nostalgia at past modes of life whose meaning have deteriorated in contemporary life. But while JC finds an ideal in Romantic music and its yearning for transcendence, Rigoberto searches for pleasure through the exaltation of the body and the senses. For instance, in "Diatribe against the Sportsman" Rigoberto considers the ancient Greek understanding of sport which:

> served to enrich human pleasure (masculine pleasure, since women did not engage in sports), stimulating and prolonging it with the representation of a beautiful, smooth, oiled, well-proportioned harmonious body, inciting it with pre-erotic calisthenics and certain movements, postures, frictions, bodily exhibitions, exercises, dances, touches, inflaming desire until participants and spectators were catapulted into coupling (NR 85).

In praising sport as practiced in Plato's days as a horizon to be rediscovered for its stimulation of body pleasure, Rigoberto's hedonistic approach is antithetical to JC's search of a transcendental love. Nevertheless, both Rigoberto's letters and JC's opinions are contentious in conveying their scepticism concerning human procreation and the prospects of humanity – Rigoberto considers reproduction "an accident of sex which one must accept as a minor inconvenience" (NR 86) – and in discussing the relativity and mutability of the notion of paedophilia.

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the interplay between Alan and JC evokes the dynamics between functional and critical knowledge. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* addresses another aspect of "post-industrial society" as Rigoberto calls it (RN 87): the incredulity towards metanarratives that Lyotard regards as the defining feature of postmodernism.[64]

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[62] Mario Vargas Llosa, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, Madrid, Alfaguara, 1997; in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, trans. Edith Grossman, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998.

[63] Both Kundera and Vargas Llosa seem to hint ironically at the opinions they express in their interviews and non-fictional works. "Don Rigoberto's epistolary essays are stylized and slightly hyperbolic versions of ideas Vargas Llosa has expressed in his journalistic articles", as Efraín Kristal suggests (*Temptation of the World. The Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1998, p. 179).

[64] "Simplifying to the extreme," Lyotard writes, "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv).

By metanarratives or grand narratives, Lyotard means cultural frames which represented an apparatus of legitimization in modern societies, such as religion and science. In "An Exaltation and Defense of Phobias", Rigoberto confesses he was "a worshipper of social utopias" and, as a militant Catholic, he spent his youth working to build a homogenous society based on Christian values, a "collectivist utopia of the spirit" (NR 143). Critical of the efforts of his youth, Rigoberto writes that he and his companions tried to homogenize "the vortex of incompatible particularities which constitute the human conglomerate" (NR 143). In "Letter to a Rotarian", Rigoberto explains that his militancy in Catholic Action opened his eyes to "the illusory nature of all social utopias" and raised his "defence of hedonism and the individual" (RN 112). Rigoberto believes that social phenomena including patriotism, ideology, and religion lead to the loss of freedom and individuality, reducing the subject to "the condition of mass-man" (RN 112). Whereas in *Diary of a Bad Year* a thematic core cannot be found in JC's opinions, all Rigoberto's letters are motivated by a fierce defence of individual freedom, and display the interconnectedness of his incredulous response to metanarratives and his increasing sense of individuality.

Concerning this incredulity, let me refer to Pedro Koo who argues that "[t]he essays included in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* work also as a subversive element which questions and deconstructs the metanarrative that represents the hegemonic masculinity in the novel".[65] Rigoberto criticises a set of patriarchal institutions and discourses such as the Rotary club, sport and pornography which Koo describes as agencies engendering boys and men.[66] Rigoberto regards men's social clubs which deny membership to women as misogynistic, and observes how physical exercises and sports brutalize contemporary man "by catering to his most ignoble instincts: tribalism, machismo, the will to dominate" (NR 87). Drawing on Koo's insight into the novel, I intend to argue that Rigoberto's rejection of machismo is linked to his resistance to the role of gender in the formation of collective identity.

Despite being sympathetic with feminist struggles for equal rights, Rigoberto still despises feminism for falling "into the collectivist intellectual category": more important than the rights to education, employment, health is "the right to pleasure" (NR 57). For Rigoberto, this right is endangered by the loss of individuality implicit in

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65 My translation. The original Spanish reads: "Los ensayos presentes en *LCDR*, funcionan también como el elemento subversivo Que cuestiona y desconstruye la metanarrativa que representa en la novela la masculinidad hegemónica" (37).

66 Koo, "Not between Men", p. 41.

any form of human aggregation, independently of the fairness of the aims it pursues. Roger Zapata argues that liberal ideology nourishes Rigoberto's defence of individuality. In this regard, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* differs from *Diary of a Bad Year* by featuring a protagonist who does not reject entirely the liberal ideology of late capitalism.[67] In addition, for Zapata, Rigoberto's understanding of pleasure as a liberating principle reminiscent of Sade and Bataille. Similarly, Efraín Kristal underlines that Vargas Llosa is in debt to Bataille for the notion of *sovereignty*, understood as "a human being's claim to the erotic, to desire and pleasure."[68] While for Bataille pleasure is impossible without the transgression of those values that make collective life possible, the power of transgression praised by Rigoberto seems to be limited to the protection of the individual against the post-industrial society.[69]

Rigoberto sees the division of humanity into two sexes and its construction on that basis as a denial of freedom. In addressing the dichotomy between men and women, he refers to Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Myths of Gender*, which conceives of five sexes (male, female, merm, ferm, and herm). Rigoberto welcomes her research and praises the research of scientists like her as "powerful allies for those who believe […] that the Manichean division of humanity into men and women is a collectivist illusion marked by conspiracies against individual sovereignty – and therefore against liberty" (NR 58). For Rigoberto, Fausto-Sterling's alternative model of gender increases the possibilities of sexual experience and its singularity beyond the constraints of a binary understanding of human biology. Rigoberto writes, "[w]ith regard to sex, we humans represent a gamut of variations, families, exceptions, originalities, subtleties. To grasp the ultimate, untransferable human reality in this domain, as in all others, one must renounce the herd instinct, the crowd view, and have recourse to the individual" (NR 59). Antithetic to Jaromil's longing to merging with a crowd in *Life is Elsewhere*, Rigoberto's desire displays an urge for autonomy. His view of sexuality emerges most clearly in his essay-letter entitled "Letter to the Reader of *Playboy*, or a Brief Treatise on Aesthetics" which is an attack on readers of *Playboy*. For Rigoberto a *Playboy* reader

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67 Roger Zapata, "Ficción, ideología y erotismo en dos novelas de Vargas Llosa", in *Me gustas cuando callas… Los escritores del "Boom" y el género sexual*, ed. Ana Luisa Sierra, San Juan, Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2002, pp. 227-228.

68 Kristal, *Temptation of the World*, p. 175.

69 My observation is supported by Kristal who compares of *In Praise of the Stepmother* to Bataille's *My Mother*: "While in Bataille's novel the sexual impulse culminates in death, in Vargas Llosa's novel this impulse is checked when it threatens Don Rigoberto's personal sense of moral comfort with the behaviour of his wife" (178).

renounces his erotic imagination and lets his fantasies be led by the erotic content of a magazine. Rigoberto writes:

> [Y]ou […] succumb to the municipal vice of permitting your most subtle drives, those of the carnal appetite, to be reined in by products that have been cloned, and by seeming to satisfy your sexual urges actually subjugate them […] serializing and constricting them in caricatures that vulgarise sex, strip it of originality, mystery, and beauty […] (NR 193).

Rigoberto's understanding of pornography as a denial of individual freedom resonates with Harry Brod who investigates the alienating effect of pornography on male sexuality. Brod argues that sexual freedom is the "radical freedom *to* construct authentically expressive sexualities" and sets in opposition to pornography understood "a vehicle for the imposition of socially constructed sexuality".[70] Even though Rigoberto's and Brod's observations stem from different assumptions (Brod's study proceeds both from feminist and Marxist theories), they converge in describing the interconnectedness of sexuality and freedom. For both Rigoberto and Brod the space of self-definition expressed by sexuality is threatened by the representations and practices that the imaginary of pornography conveys.

In Rigoberto's eyes, magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse* deprive sexuality of the secrecy and the subversive charge which nourish erotic fantasies:

> This kind of magazine symbolizes the corruption of sex, the disappearance of the beautiful taboos that once surrounded it and against which the human spirit could rebel, exercising individual freedom, affirming the singular personality of each human being, gradually creating the sovereign individual in the secret and discreet elaboration of rituals, actions, images, cults, fantasies, ceremonies which by ethically ennobling the act of love and conferring aesthetic distinction upon it, progressively humanized it until it was transformed into a creative act (NR 194).

By presenting sexuality as an act of rebellion against moral taboos, Vargas Llosa brings together the notion of seduction as both a ritual and a creative act, both of which are embodied by Madame de T. in *Slowness*. In discussing that novel I referred to Octavio Paz's understanding of eroticism as "a phenomenon which manifests itself within a society and which consist, essentially, of deviating or changing the reproductive sexual impulse and transforming it in a representation."[71] Returning to the idea of a pure sexual

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[70] Harry Brod, "Pornography and the Alienation of Male Sexuality", *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 14, Issue 3, Fall 1988, pp. 265-284.

[71] My translation. The original Spanish reads: "[La sexualidad] Es un fenómeno que se manifiesta dentro de una sociedad y que consiste, esencialmente, en desviar o cambiar el impulso sexual reproductor

impulse, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* emphasises the role of creative practices and literary mediation in shaping our pleasure, and explores the tension between the social construction of eroticism and the individual's struggle for cultural (re)appropriation of sexual impulse, and its representations in the post-industrial society.

In celebrating individuality against any form of socialization, Rigoberto's writing seems to be inspired by the poet who fascinates JC, Pound, who writes that "Civilization is individual".[72] Rigoberto links his notion of individuality to fetishism, which he considers "a privileged form of expression of human particularity that allows men and women to define their space, mark their difference from others, exercise their imagination, express their anti-herd spirit, and be free" (NR 145). For Rigoberto the sexual gratification provided by a fetish is a source of individuality which opens one's imagination to new forms of desire. Although fetishism increases the ways in which excitement can be raised and satisfied, Rigoberto's idea that fetishism represents a space of active and conscious self-definition is debatable since the choice of a fetish may be unconscious or involuntary. In "An Exaltation and Defense of Phobias", Rigoberto writes "the solitary individual can – by acting on his appetites, manias, fetishes, phobias, or preferences – create his own world, one that approaches […] the supreme ideal in which experience and desire are one" (NR 146). The pursuit of sexual desire offers the individual the possibility of displaying his creativity and living temporarily at the height of her/his imagination. Confronting the ontological dissatisfaction at the heart of Vargas Llosa's view of fiction, Rigoberto projects all the power of imagination onto sexual fantasies and makes of them the only way to fill the gap between experience and desire. On this basis, in the next section, I shall discuss the way in which references to literary texts, visual art, movies and music put on display masculine imagination expressed in the history of Western arts and nourish Rigoberto's erotic fantasies. I shall read the interconnectedness of eroticism, erudition and imagination that pervades *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* in the light of Borges's influence.

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y transformarlo en una representación." Octavio Paz, *La llama doble. Amor y erotismo*, Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1993, p. 106.

72 Pound, "Remy De Gourmont: A Distinction", p. 344.

**(ii) Eroticism and Borges's erudition in Rigoberto's fantasies**

Rigoberto's first essay "Instructions for the Architect" echoes with the "insoluble dialectic between the real and the ideal" which Vargas Llosa praises in *Don Quixote*.[73] In this letter, Rigoberto explains to his architect the principles of the new library: "in the small constructed space that I will call my world and that will be ruled by my whims, we humans will be second-class citizens; books, pictures, and engravings will have first priority" (NR 8). Included in the first chapter, Rigoberto's radical worldview resonates throughout the novel:

> It was in no way easy for me to adopt a position that contradicted the ancient traditions […] of anthropocentric philosophers and religions in which it is inconceivable that a real human being, an organism of perishable flesh and bone, can be considered less worthy of interest and respect than the invented one that resides (if it makes you more comfortable, let us say it is reflected) in the imagery of art and literature (NR 9).

The supremacy of the written word over the flesh offers a radicalised aesthetic of *Don Quixote* reminiscent of *The Professor of Desire*. Investigating the ways in which fiction influences life, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* examines how Rigoberto's fantasies nourished by his intellectual interests affect his sexual life. Still desperately in love with the woman who has cheated on him with his own son, Rigoberto spends his free time in his library and compulsively looks to books, paintings and vinyl to stimulate his imagination. Vargas Llosa's analysis of the influence of masculine imagination on male heterosexual experience is not limited to literature, but also includes visual art, music and cinema. As I have discussed, Coetzee's novels also examine the impact of various forms of art on his characters' emotional life and their understanding of the relation between sexes: *Disgrace* focuses on the composition of Lurie's opera *Byron in Italy* and hints at Nicolas Poussin's painting *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, while JC's reflections on Romantic music are crucial in drawing his theory of feelings in *Diary of a Bad Year*. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* explores the reverberations of music on Rigoberto's sexual fantasies and examines in depth the influence on him of visual art.

The epigraphs from Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion* ("Man, a god when he dreams, barely a beggar when he thinks") and Montaigne's *Essais* ("I cannot keep a record of my life through my actions; fortune has buried them too deep: I keep it though my fantasies") express the key role of male fantasy in the novel. Rigoberto's fantasises

[73] Vargas Llosa, "Four Centuries of Don Quixote", p. 4.

obsessively feature Lucrecia in transgressive sexual scenarios. In the first of them, "The Night of the Cats", Lucrecia relates to Rigoberto her erotic encounter with a faceless man. The imaginary dialogue between Lucrecia and Rigoberto is juxtaposed with Lucrecia's narration and her dialogue with the faceless man. Dialogic juxtaposition is characteristic of Vargas Llosa's prose: in his study José Miguel Oviedo calls "telescopic narrations" the narrative device in which two dialogues from different temporal lines interweave, one present and the other evoked and made present by the first.[74] *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* offers a variation on this technique by interweaving imaginary dialogues happening in two different moments and places. The faceless man asks Lucrecia to get naked in front of him in a room full of kittens. In imagining the scene, Rigoberto can hear a sonata by the Italian composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi: "He [Rigoberto] understood why that sonata had been chosen: the eighteenth century was not only the time of disguise and confusion of the sexes; it was also the century par excellence of cats" (NR 11). Connecting the presence of cats to a scenario involving disguise and sexuality, Pergolesi's sonata corroborates Rigoberto's fantasy in which the faceless man scrupulously covers Lucrecia's skin with the honey from the bees on Mount Hymettus described by Aristotle and let the kittens lick her skin. Lucrecia explains to Rigoberto she has accepted undergoing this practice to please him because she is still in love with him. The juxtaposition of these two narratives offers an insight into the way in which Rigoberto's erotic fantasies are created: "Had he begun to apply honey? Yes. With a painter's fine brush? No. With a cloth? No. With his bare hands? Yes" (NR 13). Rigoberto's fantasy surprises him and at the same time scares him: "The vision was so clear, the definition of the image so explicit, that Don Rigoberto become fearful" (NR 14). While in the case of Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*, Jaromil's literary imagination exacerbates his feelings, Rigoberto's fantasies have an impact on a more sensuous plan. *Life is Elsewhere* suggests that the intensity of feelings are independent of authenticity, and *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* seems to suggest that the same applies to the intensity of sensations.

Rigoberto wonders where such a fantasy might have originated and he considers a book by the Dutch animalist Midas Dekker, Fernando Botero's painting entitled *Rosalba* (1969), a woodcut by the Félix Vallotton's *Languor* (1896), and finally the languid girl represented in Balthus's *Nu avec chat* [Nude with Cat] (1949). In none of

[74] José Miguel Oviedo, *Mario Vargas Llosa: la invención de una realidad*, Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1982, p. 172.

them can Rigoberto find the answer he is looking for. Alluding exclusively to men's paintings featuring female nudes, Rigoberto confirms the masculine imaginary at the heart of his fantasies. Vargas Llosa has an essay entitled "Botero: A Sumptuous Abundance", where he observes that "Botero paints as if he were making love" and "the pleasure that they [Botero's paintings] give us comes from: from the pleasure with which they have been painted".[75] The notion of art "as an activity that is justified by the pleasure that it produces and displays" is thus one that Vargas Llosa has drawn at least in part from Botero and it reverberates in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*.[76]

Hedy Habra shows how Rigoberto borrows manias from artists and focuses her attention on Balthus, who converts the cats included in his paintings and the nudes into *voyeurs*, doubling the viewer's *voyeurism* and stressing the intimate relation of the painter with the model.[77] The intimate bond between (a male) creator and (a female) model, which Habra regards as characteristic of Balthus's art, also emerges at the climax of Rigoberto's fantasy when his words starts resonating with the words of the faceless man – "'Open your legs, my love,' asked the faceless man. 'Open them,' pleaded Rigoberto" (NR 15). The overlapping between the two narratives shows Rigoberto's lack of distance from his creation: "The invisible man was no longer invisible. His long, oiled body silently infiltrated the image. Now he was there too" (NR 16). Rigoberto's increasing involvement is witnessed by his own appearance in the fantasy to which he devotes life. Zapata explains the influence of art on Rigoberto's desire in the following terms:

> Rigoberto's desire, likewise the desire of the characters of Proust, Dostoyevsky or Stendhal is a mimetic desire. He is unable to desire on his own, and needs that the object of his desire is designed by the image of other pictures, paintings, carvings, lithographs, etc. His desire is no more than the voracious cannibalization of other texts and images: it is an intertextual hunger which presupposes previous readings, views and sounds.[78]

Zapata argues that Rigoberto borrows his objects of desire according to Girard's theory of mimetic desire, to which I referred in my analysis of *Disgrace*. By opposition, I suggest that in his search of art works that can stimulate his imagination, Rigoberto is

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[75] Mario Vargas Llosa, "Botero: A Sumptuous Abundance", in *Making Waves*, ed. and trans. John King, London, Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 265.

[76] Ibid., p. 267.

[77] Hedy Habra, *Mundos alternos y artísticos en Vargas Llosa*, Vervuert, Iberoamericana, 2012, p. 76.

[78] Zapata, "Ficción, ideología y erotismo en dos novelas de Vargas Llosa", p. 221.

not only mimetic but productive. By subverting the plots of movies and narratives, he assimilates their erotic charge into the fabric of his fantasies and intensifies it.

This fabric is illuminated by Vargas Llosa's reading of Borges and by the way he assimilates Cervantes's legacy. In his second essay on *Don Quixote*, entitled "A Novel for the Twenty-First Century", Vargas Llosa emphasises the metafictional dimension of Cervantes's novel:

> The central theme of *Don Quixote de La Mancha* is fiction, its raison d'être, and the way it infiltrates life, forming and transforming it. Thus, what would seem to many modern readers the Borgesian theme *par excellence* (from "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius") is actually a Cervantine subject, which, centuries later, was revived by Borges, giving it his own personal twist.[79]

For Vargas Llosa Borges has revitalised Don Quixote's reading of the world as pure fiction. His interest in Borges lies in the self-reflective aspects of his narrative.[80] In "The Fictions of Borges", one of four essays on Borges, Vargas Llosa observes that the central concern of Borges's fiction is "conjecture, speculation, theory, doctrine, and sophism."[81] In this interconnectedness of narrative form and intellectual speculation, Vargas Llosa's fascination with Borges is reminiscent of Coetzee's but distinct. While Coetzee wonders why Borges chose fiction as a way of developing a thought rather than the essay, Vargas Llosa is more concerned with the way erudition nourishes Borges's literary imagination as emphasised in his 1978 essay "A Reality against Reality", which focuses on John Sturrock's *Paper Tigers. The Ideal Fiction of Jorge Luis Borges*.[82] Often confused with exhibitionism and pedantry, Vargas Llosa instead describes Borges's erudition as an "inseparable complement" to his stories.[83] Literary but also historical, philosophical, or theological references and associations lose their

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79 Mario Vargas Llosa, "A Novel for the Twenty-First Century", trans. Johanna Damgaard Liander, *Harvard Review* 28 (2005), p. 126.

80 Vargas Llosa also interviewed Borges in 1963 and in 1981. These interviews, along with the four essays, have been collected in a volume published only in French, *Un demi-siècle avec Borges* [*A Half-Century with Borges*].

81 Vargas Llosa, "The Fictions of Borges", p. 1330.

82 The emphasis on Borges's erudition is partly based on the image of the writer promoted abroad from the 1960s. Nevertheless, Borges's references did not exclusively include high culture. In "Borges and Popular Culture" Philip Swanson underlines Borges's engagement with popular culture including gauchos, Buenos Aires hoodlums, pirates, classical Hollywood movies, detective stories and tango. See *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 81-95.

83 Ibid., p. 1331.

exclusively scientific charge and "fulfil an essentially narrative (i.e. fictive) function."[84] Sturrock suggests that cultural references and philosophy in Borges's creations acts as a support of mental life and are subjects usable by literature "for its power to attract or astonish."[85] Drawing on Vargas Llosa's reading of *Paper Tigers*, my next step is to examine Sturrock's observations about Borges as a key to understanding how the affective crisis Rigoberto lives through with Lucrecia spurs his intertextual masculine desire.

In "A Reality against Reality", Vargas Llosa emphasises that Sturrock focuses on three elements including isolation, inspiration and idealisation, which are presented as prototypes of Borges's fiction. Isolation signifies simultaneously "the physical solitude of the author, his breaking off communications with the world, and the distance which his consciousness must take from its surroundings in order to effect the 'separation' from reality that is the essence of narrative creation."[86] In Borges's stories creators find themselves confined in catacombs, like Tzinacán, the Maya magician set on deciphering the stripes of a tigers,[87] or Don Isidro Parodi, who solves police mysteries from the depths of a Buenos Aires prison-cell.[88] Similarly, Rigoberto secludes himself in his library after the trauma of the separation from his wife – "[h]e rediscovered the fluid silence of the Barrancan night, the solitude in which he found himself, surrounded by mindless engravings and books" (NR 127) – alienating himself even from his son Fonchito. The second element that Sturrock identifies in Borges's narrative is inspiration, which Borges's narrators experience as a state of physical ebullience enabling them to generate fiction. When his feelings for Lucrecia are at their most intense, Rigoberto's mind becomes the stage for imaginary adulterous acts committed by his former wife and inspired by paintings, movies, photos and novels. Regarding Borges's creators, Sturrock writes "[t]he writer's first act is to isolate himself, his second, […], to be in two places and to be two people at once. He

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84 Mario Vargas Llosa, "A Reality against Reality", *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 3969, London, 28 April 1978, p. 470.

85 John Sturrock, *Paper Tigers. The Ideal Fiction of Jorge Luis Borges*, Oxford, Claredon Press, 1977, p. 22.

86 Vargas Llosa, "A Reality against Reality", p. 470.

87 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Writing of the God", in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley, New York and London, Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 250-254.

88 Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy-Casares, *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni, London, Allen Lane, 1981.

withdraws […] into a peculiar and imaginative state of mind."[89] This duplication of the self emerges in dialogues which present Rigoberto as a creator of his fantasies, a *voyeur*, and one of their protagonists all at the same time. Finally, the third prototype is idealization, understood as the process "to derealize reality by means of a particular use of language and of literary tradition."[90] In trying to evade the pain caused by the separation from Lucrecia, Rigoberto uses both visual art's iconic language and literary references to create scenarios in which he is reconciled with Lucrecia. The will to "derealize reality" is pivotal in Vargas Llosa's theory of fiction. In this regard, I should underline that the Spanish title of "A Reality against Reality" is "El deicidio borgeano", literally "The Borgesian Deicide". The title clearly recalls Vargas Llosa's *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio* which as I showed before is an account of his conception of fiction.

In the fantasy of the second chapter, which is narrated in two sections entitled respectively "Pluto's Dream" and "The Ideal Week", Rigoberto imagines finding in his notebooks a letter addressed to Lucrecia from Pluto, a man she rejected many years before. In his letter, Pluto invites Lucrecia to spend a week with him visiting New York, Paris and Venice: "*join me for this ideal week, cherished in my mind for so many years, which circumstances now permit me to make a reality. You will not regret sharing these seven days of illusion with me, days you will me remember fondly for her the rest of your life*" (RN 28). Pluto's desire to make a reality of the ideal week he has dreamt about for years displays the Quixotic tension between ideal and real. Wondering about what Lucrecia's response to Pluto would be, Rigoberto has the impression "that his notebooks were waiting for the denouement as impatiently as his tormented spirit" (NR 32). As in the case of the novel Milanku is composing in Kundera's *Slowness*, in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* desire and narrative seem to respond to the protagonist's urge for pleasure.

When Lucrecia comes back from her trip with Pluto, Rigoberto asks her to relate the infidelity he has imagined. His desire to hear about her adultery responds to the quotation of Borges which opens "Pluto's Dream": "In the solitude of his study […] Don Rigoberto repeated from memory the phrase of Borges he had just found: 'Adultery is usually made up of tenderness and abnegation'" (NR 27). The account of the nights Lucrecia and Pluto spent together satisfies Rigoberto's pleasure: his wife's

89 Sturrock, *Paper Tigers*, p. 39.

90 Vargas Llosa, "A Reality against Reality", p. 470.

infidelity has become the horizon of his desire. At the same time, by making the narration of this infidelity an act of love, tenderness and abnegation as ambiguously defined by Borges, Rigoberto is attempting a symbolic reconciliation. Soon Pluto's words become Rigoberto's: "'I love you and admire you,' said Don Rigoberto. 'I love you and admire you,' said Pluto" (NR 42). Pluto's love for Lucrecia illuminates Rigoberto's feelings for her: "'For him you meant something more subtle,' Don Rigoberto observes, 'Unreality, illusion, the woman of his memory and desires. I want to worship you the same way, the way he does'" (NR 36-7). After their marriage has ended, Rigoberto conceives of Lucrecia as the woman of his memory. Absent from his everyday life, Lucrecia reappears on the plane of illusion, becoming the fulcrum of the Quixotic interplay between real and imagination, lived experience and fiction. The coincidence between real and ideal which JC experiences at the sight of Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year*, and Pound regards as the object of the Troubadours' dogma, permeates Rigoberto's fantasies in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*.

*The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* is thus a profoundly Borgesian work. The originality of the incorporation of Borges's legacy into this novel lies in charging imagination with an intense eroticism: sexuality is a theme that Borges himself avoided. In "The Fictions of Borges", Vargas Llosa writes, "[w]hat is singular about Borges is that in his world the existential, the historical, sex, psychology, feelings, instincts, and so forth, have been dissolved and reduced to an exclusively intellectual dimension."[91] Similarly, in a "Reality against Reality", Vargas Llosa underlines that "the intellectual always devours and destroys the mere physical."[92] This observation is confirmed by Núñez-Faraco: as I have discussed in relation to Coetzee, Borges's early poems reveal "a mind of great passion and amorous intensity", but through the notion of spiritual love.[93] Furthermore, Núñez-Faraco notices that "many of the allusions to love and sex in his [Borges's] later writings are entwined in such a dense fabric of literary references as to become inaccessible".[94] *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* changes the terms of this equation since everything in Rigoberto's fantasy is permeated with sexuality: cultural references are not reduced to sex, but rather ennobled by it. What is most significant is that Rigoberto's attempt to derealize the reality of his separation from Lucrecia

91 Vargas Llosa, "The Fictions of Borges", p. 1331.

92 Vargas Llosa, "A Reality against Reality", p. 470.

93 Núñez-Faraco, *Borges and Dante*, p. 131.

94 Ibid., p. 149.

interweaves with his need for the materiality of her body. In this regard, I would like to draw attention on the way in which the description of Lucrecia's body in "Pluto's Dream" is carried out through references to paintings such as Goya's *Naked Maja* and Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World*:

> At least she began to open her legs, revealing her inner thighs and the half-moon of her sex. 'In the pose of the anonymous model of *L'Origine du monde*, by Gustave Courbet (1866),' Don Rigoberto sought and found the reference, overcome by emotion to discover that the exuberance of his wife's belly, the robust solidity of her thighs and mound of Venus, coincided millimiter by millimiter with the headless woman in the oil painting that was the reigning prince of his private collection. Then eternity dissolved (NR 39).

Drawing a parallel with the title of Courbet's painting, Lucrecia's body is the origin of Rigoberto's fantasies. The realism of Courbet's representation of a woman's genitalia confers materiality to the evocation of Lucrecia's body. Similarly, in the following fantasy entitled "Drunkenness and Hangover", Courbet's art is once again the inspiration for Rigoberto's imagination: the Sapphic love between Lucrecia and her servant Justiniana is modelled on *Sloth and Lust*, or *The Dream*. In *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* plastic representations of the body convey an illusionary sense of immediacy. Playing with the illusion of transparency, Vargas Llosa explores the spaces of pleasure that these men's representations of the female body open up for Rigoberto's imagination.

The references to visual art have a similar function in the fantasy entitled "The Corsican Brothers" which is named after the 1941 movie with the American actor Douglas Fairbanks that impressed Rigoberto as a child. The fact that the movie was inspired by the tale written by Alexander Dumas in 1844 gives the sense of the constant process of borrowing and adaptation that characterises creative process across different forms of art. In "The Corsican Brothers" Rigoberto's brother Narciso reminds him that they look alike and how girls used to confuse them. One evening, Rigoberto, Lucrecia, Narciso and his wife Ilse go to dinner at a restaurant, where Narciso starts dancing with Lucrecia. Suddenly the light is turned off and Rigoberto feels a female presence close to him. The woman turns out to be Ilse, who informs Rigoberto that Lucrecia and Narciso have gone upstairs together and asks him if he would like to spy on them. The imaginary view of Lucrecia's body brings the following to Rigoberto's mind:

> [T]he splendid rump in the gorgeous photograph *La Prière*, by Man Ray (1930). He searched through his notebooks and in a few minutes was contemplating the image. His heart sank as he recalled the times when Lucrecia had posed like this

> for him, in their nocturnal intimacy, sitting back on her heels, both hands supporting the hemispheres of her buttocks. Nor did he find any dissonance in the comparison to another by Man Ray that his notebook offered next to the first, for the musical back of *Kikí de Montparnasse* (1925) was precisely the one displayed by Lucrecia as she twisted around and turned (NR 99).

Increasingly grounded in men's artistic representations of the female body, Rigoberto's fantasy moves to photography and the phantom of a more realistic representation of 'reality'. Ignoring how the sound-holes Man Ray painted on Kiki's body affect the representation of female corporality, Rigoberto is certain that Lucrecia's back perfectly resembles Kikí's back as Man Ray represents it.

In "The Scent of Widows" the interaction of references to literary texts and paintings reinforces the illusion of immediacy Rigoberto gets from art works and his idea that these works can mirror human corporality. He manages to re-evoke image of Lucrecia sitting on the toilet through Pablo Neruda's poem entitled "Widower's Tango", which recites: "*And to see you urinate, in the dark, at the back of the house, as if you were pouring out a slender, tremulous, silvery, obstinate stream of honey, I would give up, many times over, this choir of shades I possess and the clang of useless swords that echoes in my soul…*" (NR 119). In imagining Lucrecia urinating, a new figure, Manuel of the Prostheses, pops up in Rigoberto's mind. Manuel is a Lucrecia's childhood friend and a motorcycling champion, who due a severe incident was castrated by the cross he wore to call for divine protection and then had his genitals replaced with a prosthesis. Since childhood, Manuel has been getting excited by listening to women's physical functions, but in all his relationships his desire has been frustrated. Eventually Manuel finds the courage to ask Lucrecia to go to the toilet leaving the door open so that he can listen to her, and she accepts:

> Her odor was there, no doubt about it: corporeal, intimate, with marine touches and fruity reminiscences. Closing his eyes, he breathed it in avidly, his nostrils very wide. I am smelling the soul of Lucrecia, he thought, deeply moved. The merry splash of the stream in the bowl did not dominate this aroma; it barely colored with a psychological tint what was an exhalation of hidden glandular humors, cartilaginous exudations, secretion of muscles, which were condensed and confused in a thick, valiant, domestic discharge. […] Ah yes, how well he understood the mutilated motorcyclist. But it was not necessary to […] undergo a prosthetic procedure to assimilate that culture, convert to that religion, and, like the poisoned Manuel, like Neruda's widower, like so many anonymous aesthetes of hearing, smell, fantasy […] who felt themselves transported to heaven as they watched and heard the squatting or sitting beloved creature interpret that ceremony, in appearance so trivial and functional, of emptying a bladder, who elevated it into spectacle, into amorous dance, the prologue or epilogue (for the mutilated Manuel, a substitute) to the act of love (NR 126-27).

Manuel becomes a means to celebrate the scatological function of the female body. In Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere* and *Slowness* and Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, idealization expresses a denial of flesh, and in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* idealization is rooted in the bodily dimension to the point that Lucrecia's urine ironically becomes an expression of her soul, and Manuel's fetishism is described as a religion. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* rejects the abstractions imposed on the female body by notions of love and the dichotomy between body and soul, opening to a notion of the female as inclusive.

Nonetheless, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* casts the figure of Lucrecia as created by Rigoberto's masculine desire, and I would like to compare Rigoberto's erotic fantasy to Gyula's erotic idealizations. While Gyula's fantasies involve a multitude of women, Rigoberto can only think of Lucrecia – "'I am monogamous. I can make love only to my wife'" (NR 109). Whereas Gyula carries out intercourse in his mind, Rigoberto never imagines himself having sex, and in his imaginary erotic scenarios he appears as a voyeur listening to Lucrecia's account of her sexual experiences. If initially these fantasies satisfy Rigoberto, soon he cannot longer imagine successful outcomes and starts displaying his innermost feelings. In "The Corsican Brother", the dialogue between Lucrecia and Rigoberto after Narciso has left her alone in the bed is revelatory: "'Do you understand any of it, Rigoberto?' he heard her ask. 'Only that I love you,' he replied" (NR 100). In "The Professor's Panties", the imaginary erotic scene is interrupted by Rigoberto bursting into tears and begging Lucrecia for forgiveness. Lucrecia tries to soothe him: "Calm yourself, Rigoberto. Don't cry anymore, my love, my heart. It's over, it's finished now, nothing has changed. […] I forgave you. […] Dry your tears, sneeze, go to sleep. Hush, baby, hush" (NR 157). In addressing him as a child, her words reveal his emotional regression. It is only in the second half of the novel, in the section entitled "Damned Onetti! Blessed Onetti", that Rigoberto understands that what he desires the most is a reconciliation with Lucrecia and he says to his mental image of her: "What I want is to have you here, flesh and blood, not a phantom. Because I love you" (NR 182). Rigoberto realises that the depth of his sorrow has nourished his private utopias made of fantasy and literature, and alienated him from his life and son. Rigoberto's case is reminiscent of Brod who, commenting on the "Don Juan Syndrome", claims that "men look to sex for the fulfilment of non sexual emotional needs".[95] Rigoberto's attempt to enact in fantasy the intimate bond between

[95] Brod, "Pornography and the Alienation of Male Sexuality", p. 270.

creator and model characteristic of Balthus's painting expresses his desire for a surrogate for the loss of intimacy with Lucrecia. I shall now go on to investigate the ways in which the intertextual expressions of Rigoberto's desire affect Fonchito as well as Lucrecia herself.

**(iii) Mirrors of masculine desire**

The primary narrative line of *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* relates Fonchito's visits to Lucrecia. In their encounters, Lucrecia constantly struggles to avoid the ambiguity of Fonchito's words and the sexual connotation he confers on any circumstance. Referring to the events of *In Praise of the Stepmother*, Fonchito apologises for leading Lucrecia into temptation and tries to regain her trust. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* plays with the ambiguity of the figure of Fonchito and with a cultural background in which it is more "tolerable" for an adult woman to have sex with an underage male than vice versa.[96] Rigoberto himself blames her only for deceiving him, but he is untroubled by the experience his son has undergone with her. On the one hand, despite being a minor, Fonchito is presented by Lucrecia as a manipulative seducer – "He, he had been the seducer. With his youth and cherubic face, he was Mephistopheles, Lucifer in person" (NR 191). On the other hand, the narration desexualises him by stressing his young age – "Doña Lucrecia could feel the fragile form trembling, the delicate bones, the small body on the verge of the adolescence, that age when boys could still be mistaken for girls" (NR 108).

While Rigoberto's fantasies are inspired from several sources, the encounters between Fonchito and Lucrecia gravitate towards one pivotal figure: the Austrian painter Egon Schiele. Fonchito constantly talks with Lucrecia about him and his art. Fonchito believes that he is the reincarnation of Schiele and that he will die of Spanish influenza at the age of twenty-eight just as Schiele did. Lucrecia describes Fonchito's passion for Schiele as "pathological" and believes "it might also shape an exceptional future for Fonchito as an eccentric creator, an unconventional artist" (NR 187). Fonchito explains to Lucrecia that he has read "'everything there is about him [Schiele] in my papá's library'" (NR 22). The source of father's and son's fantasies is the same micro-world Rigoberto has created, as explained in the "Instructions for the Architect". Through Schiele's art, Fonchito himself addresses his increasingly strong bond with

[96] Zapata argues that their relationship could place the novel in the category of child pornography (223).

Rigoberto – "Only through Schiele could I understand what he [Rigoberto] meant" (NR 52). Furthermore, Schiele's "obscene" and "sacrilegious" imaginary provides Fonchito with a frame in which to explain his own behaviour (NR 107). Commenting on Schiele's relationship with his sister Gertrude and his sister-in-law, Adele, Fonchito seems to find a correspondence with his relationship with his stepmother Lucrecia: "'The books say so, Stepmamá. I mean, he did things with both sisters. That's probably where his inspiration came from'" (NR 23). The account of incest as a source of inspiration alludes to *In Praise of the Stepmother* which suggests Fonchito's Oedipus complex, and also evokes the incestuous tension of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* discussed in Chapter Three.

In the section entitled "The Picture Game" Fonchito convinces Lucrecia to pose like the woman in Schiele's *Reclining Nude in Green Stockings* (1914) with the participation of her maid, Justiniana. In discussing Schiele's interest for the young girls he portrays, Fonchito says that Schiele made them undress and "had them wear those colored stockings he liked so much" (NR 106). Having Lucrecia wear green tights and pose for him, Fonchito hints at Schiele's creative process and tries to turn himself into a creator, as Lucrecia expects:

> Very gently, paying close attention to the reproduction, he [Fonchito] raised and moved her leg. The touch of his slender fingers on her bare flesh stirred Doña Lucrecia. The lower half of her body began to tremble. She felt a palpitation, a vertigo, something overpowering that brought both distress and pleasure (NR 53-4).

Fonchito's desire to re-create in real life the art of Schiele is reminiscent of Don Quixote's desire to live the knightly life as narrated in Amadís de Gaula. Vargas Llosa's own assimilation of visual art can be seen in the light of Roman Jakobson's concept of intersemiotic translation or transmutation, the interpretation of verbal signs by means of a non-verbal sign system.[97] Vargas Llosa's engagement with Schiele's painting is also an example of *ekphrasis*, which James Heffernan describes as "the verbal representation of visual representation."[98] In addition to the ekphrastic account of Schiele's paintings carried out by Fonchito, images representing parts of Schiele's paintings are included at

[97] Roman Jakobson, "Linguistic Aspects of Translation", in *On Translation*, ed. Reuben Brower, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1959, pp. 232-239.

[98] James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 3.

the end of each chapter of the novel, and this intermediality as defined by Peter Wagner is a further element in the intertextual effects of this novel.[99]

The notion of intertextuality is usually associated with literary texts, but as Wendy Steiner highlights in her discussion of intertextuality in painting, the meaning which is given to a painting arises from other paintings, the art-historical concepts of period, genre, style, or subject, and the subtexts from literature, myth and sacred writings. In discussing the reasons why intertextuality in painting is often neglected, Steiner addresses the iconicity of paintings:

> Yet there is a commonly held belief that paintings are texts whose closure and self-sufficiency are indisputable. Their material finitude seems so much more marked than that of the other arts. You can pick up a painting or statue in a much more literal sense than you can a novel or a symphony, and a painting appears to be visible all at once rather than abstractly unfolding over time. Moreover, paintings have what might be termed a "hyper-semantic" quality. […] Their primary semiotic mode is assumed to be iconic, red paint signifying red objects, the size and position of shapes signifying the relative size and disposition of objects in space. […]
>
> This a-temporality and hyper-semantic quality – if one might so call it – have given rise to the naive view of painting as a mirror of nature, a perfect equivalent of a visual field, a complete vision of the beautiful.[100]

Steiner's sense of "a-temporality and hyper-semantic quality" in painting offers a way into Rigoberto's engagement with visual art and his search for works of art which can corroborate his sensual life.

Vargas Llosa's ekphrastic account interweaves with the imitative games of his characters. Both Lucrecia and Justiniana get deeply involved in the game. More than aroused by Fonchito's touch, Lucrecia's response is produced by the role Fonchito plays as a creator of erotic scenarios. When Justiniana and Fonchito pose like the characters of Schiele's *Mother and Child* (1914), Lucrecia is "caught up in a desire for perfection" and, holding the book of Schiele's reproductions, she leans over Justiniana and Fonchito to have the painting to which they are giving life perfectly resemble the original (NR 55). Lucrecia's desire evokes Gombrowicz's idea that any human action is inscribed into a form or enters in relation to other forms, which I discussed in Chapters Two and Three to highlight how form rules sexual experience as well as creative practice. Lucrecia is surprised by her excitement:

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99 Peter Wagner, *European Culture Studies in Literature and the Arts. Icon-Texts-Icontexts: Essays on Ekphrasis*, Berlin and New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1996, p. 17.

100 Wendy Steiner, "Intertextuality in Painting", *American Journal of Semiotics* 3 (4) (1985), p. 58.

> Her head was resisting on her maid's thighs and her right hand held her waist. From time to time she pressed it to feel the moist heat emanating from her, and in response to that pressure, Justiniana's fingers clasped her right thigh and made her feel what she was feeling. She was aroused. Of course she was; that intense, heavy, disturbing odor, where would it come from if not Justiniana's body? Or did it come from her? How had they ever gone so far? […] had the boy made them play this game? Now she didn't care. She felt content to be in the picture (NR 56).

The erotic scenario depicted by Fonchito/Schiele enhances the excitement generated by the proximity of their bodies. The form Fonchito borrows from Schiele offers Lucrecia and Justiniana a way to experience a more intimate contact with their impulses. As in the case of Rigoberto, the scene shows the responsiveness of Lucrecia's libido to the forms of desire expressed in art works.

Following Fonchito's instructions about how to pose, Lucrecia observes that Fonchito has "a subtle, precociously mature intelligence, a psychology as complex as Rigoberto's" and he has "inherited his tortuous imagination, his manias, his power of seduction'" (NR 107, 54). In recognising the similitudes between father and son, Lucrecia hints at what attracted her to a man without physical charms like Rigoberto: she had the sense that there was "something complicated and mysterious in his life" (NR 100). Her attraction for Rigoberto seems to lie in the erotic fantasies that animate his private life. This emerges when Lucrecia realises that Fonchito has read Rigoberto's notebooks, learning the details about his sexual life with Lucrecia. In "The Anonymous Letter" Fonchito says Lucrecia that he is aware that she used to pose like the female characters in her erotic games with Rigoberto: "'you'd imitate the paintings to give him pleasure'" (NR 136). Lucrecia denies it, but secretly remembers how Rigoberto's fantasies spiced "her life – her nights – with endlessly renewed fictions" (NR 137). This interconnectedness of desire and fiction remind me of the pleasure Pedro finds in writing in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. The reader learns that Lucrecia and Rigoberto enjoyed his erotic fantasies together. In the same way, her falling into temptation with Fonchito does not seem to depend on the boy's "strategy for seduction", but rather on her responsiveness to the erotic imaginary Rigoberto has shaped through art and literature, and in which Fonchito takes part through his obsession with Schiele, "a siren song calling her down to the abyss" (NR 21).

In "Beast in the Mirror", Lucrecia relates a dream in which she goes to a mysterious appointment indicated in one of the anonymous letters she has received and has an intense sexual encounter with a man who turns out to be Rigoberto. Lucrecia feels "an acute, almost painful pleasure" (NR 186). Like Rigoberto, she starts dreaming

about "the new life opening before them following this abracadabraesque reconciliation" (NR 186). In her case as well, then, happiness and sexual satisfaction belong to the sphere of dream and illusion as opposed to the disappointment of her everyday life: "she woke, wet, languorous, confused and had to struggle for some time before she could accept that her intense happiness had been only a dream" (NR 186). The opposition between real and ideal reverberates in the sensations of her body. The body is not only the seat of the 'real', but is also responsive to the sphere of the ideal and fantasy. On the one hand, physical pleasure questions the dependency of the body on the materiality of experience in the manner in which *Life is Elsewhere* questions the authenticity of feelings. On the other hand, the emphasis on corporality stresses the materiality of sexual experience even in the sphere of dream. In her dream Lucrecia feels "filled to overflowing by a body which, of course, was Rigoberto's" (NR 186): in the same fashion of Rigoberto's fantasy, for Lucrecia the lover's body emerges as an autonomous entity independent of Rigoberto himself. Suspended between the bodily and the imaginary, this ambiguous representation of the body is at the heart of the interaction between desire and art in the novel.

In the last episode of the first narrative line entitled "The Date at the Sheraton", Rigoberto's imagination definitively invades Lucrecia's mind. Lucrecia receives an invitation to the Hotel Sheraton to meet a mysterious man. As in the other fantasies of the novel, the narration is juxtaposed with another dialogue in which Lucrecia and Justiniana comment on the meeting. At the Sheraton, Lucrecia pretends to be a prostitute and meets a young girl who has a "rather common face, the kind that Egon Schiele's girls had" and it turns out to be Adelita, the daughter of Fonchito's godmother (NR 213). When the mysterious man appears Lucrecia describes him as "[a] Fonchito with ten years added" and who looks exactly like Schiele (NR 217). The mysterious man tells her that he will wait for her in the bedroom and asks her to enter the room naked. Lucrecia is pleased that the mystery man does not only remind her of Fonchito and Schiele, but also of Rigoberto:

> Giving herself to this slender youngster […] would be like making love to a Fonchito-youth, almost-man, or to a rejuvenated and beautified Rigoberto, a Rigoberto-youth-almost-boy. The idea made her smile. […] But not even that fear made her regret coming here or acting out this cruel farce in order to please Rigoberto (or Fonchito?) (NR 218).

The analogy between father and son reaches its climax when they are regarded as expressions of the same individuality, differentiated only by age. Lucrecia is glad she

may be playing a role able to satisfy the fantasies of both Fonchito and Rigoberto. Despite what Lucrecia anticipates, the mysterious man does not try to have sex with her, but welcomes two other guests: Adelita and an overweight man whose body might have been created by Botero, except for having moles. Adelita and Lucrecia have sex with him. The mysterious young man stays on the top of a ladder placed close to the bed. Lucrecia notices that the young man is intent on drawing the whole scene and that "his virile member […] had forced its way out of his trousers […]. A flying serpent […] contemplating her with its great Cyclopean eye" (NR 221). By converting the male organ into an eye, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* symbolizes the intimate connection between sight and masculine desire and offers a plastic representation of Rigoberto's urge to visualize Lucrecia as the protagonist of his fantasies. At the same time, this phallic eye illuminates the connection of art and sexuality conveyed by the novel (in consonance with Vargas Llosa's view of art exposed in his essay on Botero) and Rigoberto's sense that art works are crystallization of an artist's desire.

Once the orgy has ended, Lucrecia hears a voice telling the painter not to let the participants go:

> It was the boy, her stepchild, Rigoberto's son. Was Rigoberto there too? Yes. Where? Somewhere, hidden in the shadow in that room of miracles. […] And at last she found them, reflected in a great oval mirror where she saw herself as well, repeated like one of Egon Schiele's models. The half-light did not dissolve them; instead, it revealed father and son, sitting next to each other – the former observing them with benevolent affection, the latter overexcited, his angelic face red with so much shouting – "Hit them, hit them" – on a setee that seemed like a box in a theater perching over the stage of the bed (NR 221-22).

Lucrecia's fantasy is articulated through a series of questions reminiscent of Rigoberto's. But while Rigoberto's erotic fantasies reveal his emotional discomfort, Lucrecia's imagination displays her ability to experience her sexuality satisfactorily. Lucrecia feels "overflowing, intoxicated, grateful, full to the brim, thinking now of Fonchito, now of Rigoberto" (NR 221). In the manner of Madame de T. in *Slowness* and Birgitta in *The Professor of Desire*, Lucrecia emerges as the product of a male mind projecting fantasy of total sexual satisfaction onto a female character. On the one hand, Lucrecia's art-based fantasy lives suggests that she has interiorized the intertextual logic of Rigoberto's masculine desire. As Elisabeth Bronfen writes, "[t]he feminine figure functions as a sign whose signified is masculine creativity."[101] Through her fantasy and

[101] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1992, p. 174.

the explicit comparison of the bed on which she has had sex to a theatre stage, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* confirms the presence of the female exclusively under the male gaze, subject and object at the same time of a male fantasy. On the other hand, the interconnectedness of her fantasy and Rigoberto's imaginary displays the dependency of subject on the other's desire, regardless of the gender. In the same way, Rigoberto's search for Lucrecia's emotional response in the erotic scenarios he depicts, and her acceptance of the most intimate obsessions of her partners, real or imaginary, emphasises co-dependency and affectivity in sexual practices.

As I have shown, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* offers a view of woman which includes its scatological aspects, and resists the abstraction of the female body explored in *Diary of a Bad Year*. Nonetheless, unlike *Diary of a Bad Year*, in which Anya's sensitivity is brought to light by dialogic interplay and has a deep impact on JC, Lucrecia's voice cannot be heard and is a creation of Rigoberto's fragility. The various representations of the female in these novels sheds light on the limits of their protagonists' different understandings and their inability to recognize women's autonomy and complexity. In the final section, I shall examine the extent of Rigoberto's lucidity and how it intersects with his reading of masculinity in Juan Onetti's *A Brief Life*.

**(iv) Masculinity and self-reflexivity in Rigoberto's reading of Onetti's *A Brief Life***

The figure of Schiele illuminates Rigoberto's worldview. As Alessandra Comini writes, "the elusive element which this Expressionist artist [Schiele] sought in his portraiture accurately mirrors the collective cultural quest of his time: the inner self-psychological man, rather than the political, religious or economic man of time past".[102] Schiele's focus on his inner psychological life and that of his subjects echoes Rigoberto's disenchantment with socio-economic and religious utopias as well as the world he and Schiele reject. For Comini the new expressionist aesthetic of Schiele has enriched portraiture with "a new definition that included a violently subjective interpretation of reality".[103] The subjective dimension of Schiele's interpretation of reality informs Rigoberto's radical approach in "Instructions for the Architect". Rigoberto does not only believe that texts and art forms are more important than people, but also explains

[102] Alessandra Comini, *Egon Schiele's Portraits*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1974, pp. 1-2.

[103] Ibid., p. 7.

that in order to add a new item to his library collection, he has to burn an old one. The discomfort of the choice coexists with "the spice of committing a cultural sacrilege, an ethical transgression" and the awareness that he is "engaging in literary and artistic criticism as it should be practiced: radically, irreversibly, and flammably" (NR 9). Reminiscent of Bataille, Rigoberto searches for transgression both in the fields of eroticism and the intellect in an effort to reconcile himself with his emotions, and I want to explore this effort further.

In the fantasy entitled "The Professor's Panties", Rigoberto finds his notes on Patricia Highsmith's *Edith's Diary*.[104] Rigoberto describes *Edith's Diary* as "[a]n excellent novel for understanding that fiction is a flight into the imaginary which emends life" (NR 152). Published in 1977 and set in suburban America, *Edith's Diary* relates the life of Edith Howland, a housewife-writer with liberal ideas who lives with her husband, Brett, and son, Cliffie. Her life severely deteriorates when Cliffie exhibits the problematic and anti-social behaviour that leads him to alcoholism. Brett abandons his responsibilities and leaves Edith for a younger woman, while Edith must take care of a dying senile uncle. Edith confronts these problems and frustrations, but starts to record in her diary an imaginary, successful life in which Cliffie is a well-established journalist, happily married and with children. In commenting on *Edith's Diary*, Rigoberto writes:

> But fiction is only temporary remedy […], it removes her [Edith] from life's struggle, isolating her in a purely mental world. Relationships with her friends are weakened or ended; she loses her job and becomes destitute. Her death seems melodramatic, but from a symbolic point of view it has coherence; Edith moves physically to the place she had already occupied in life: unreality (NR 152-53).

Rigoberto addresses the effects of imagination and fiction on Edith's life. His criticism emerges as a form of self-reflection: in recognising the similarities between his behaviour and Edith's, he wonders, "Would he, like Edith, eventually slide into ruin because he abused fantasy?" (NR 153). Edith's choice to give life to an "unreality", a fictional version of her life is reminiscent of Don Quixote's knightly life. By describing her story as emblematic of "the merciless struggle between reality and desire" (NR 153), Rigoberto inflects the Quixotic tension between lived experience and fiction, presenting them as a dynamic rather than a conflict to be resolved. But Rigoberto

[104] Patricia Highsmith, *Edith's Diary*, New York, The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994.

presents this dynamic as unaffected by gender, failing to recognise the family responsibilities at the heart of Edith's struggles.

Despite the doubts about his mental health raised by *Edith's Diary*, Rigoberto abandons himself to another fantasy: the illusion of immediacy conveyed by the intertextual references to visual art reverberates with the illusion of self-reflexivity. In "The Professor's Panties" Rigoberto helps his old professor, the jurist and philosopher Nepomuceno Riga, to respond to the sexual invitation of Professor Lucrecia. Once again, Lucrecia's body exists by reference to men's artistic representations of the feminine:

> But Rubens, Titian, Courbert, Ingres, Urculo, and a half-dozen other master painters of feminine posteriors also seemed to have banded together to give reality, consistency, abundance, and, at the same time, softness, delicacy, spirit, and a sexual vibration to that rump whose whiteness seemed opalescent in the semidarkness (NR 154).

While visual art seems to give form to Rigoberto's desire, literary references play a more ambiguous role. On the one hand, they corroborate his fantasy as in the case of the quotation from Keats: "He was repeating the line from Keats ("Beauty is truth, truth beauty"). […] 'And so these things do exist. Not only in evil thoughts, in art, in the fantasies of poets, but in real life. And so an ass like this is possible in flesh-and-blood reality, in women who inhabit the world of the living'" (NR 155). But on the other hand, literary references emerge as a means for self-reflection by interrupting the flow of his fantasies and questioning their meaning.

Self-reflection is central in the fantasy entitled "Damned Onetti! Blessed Onetti", in which Rigoberto is awoken by the image of Lucrecia lying on an operating table after a mastectomy. Reading his notebooks, Rigoberto realizes that the image was inspired by *A Brief Life*, a novel of the Uruguayan writer Juan Carlos Onetti:

> Here were the dreadful citations: "I thought of how difficult it would be to look without disgust at the new scar Gertrudis would have on her chest, round, complex, with red or venations that time would perhaps transform into a pale confusion the same color as the other scar, thin, flat, as brisk as a signature, that Gertrudis had on her belly and that I had traced so often with the tip of my tongue" (NR 175).

The fragment from *A Brief Life* describes how Onetti's protagonist, Juan María Brausen, recognises the body of his wife, Gertrudis, by the touch of his tongue. The detailed description of the scar makes it almost tangible for the reader. Literature

nourishes Rigoberto's imagination, but not his desire: for Rigoberto, having undergone mutilation the female body is no longer a source of eroticism.

Published in 1950, *A Brief Life* relates the life of Brausen who is devastated by the mastectomy Gertrudis has undergone. About to be fired from the advertising agency for which he works, Brausen sees in the offer to write a movie script for his friend Julio Stein an opportunity to earn extra money. The script Brausen writes is set in Santa María, a fictional city in which a doctor named Díaz Grey meets a new patient Elena Sala. If Díaz Grey emerges as Brausen's fictional double, Elena Sala is inspired by Gertrudis, but with her breast unaffected. Soon Elena convinces Díaz Grey to get involved in the illegal selling of morphine. At the same time, Brausen gets interested in a prostitute "La Queca" who has moved next door on the night when Gertrudis undergoes her surgery. At the beginning Brausen can hear only the noises coming from her room and imagine her. Brausen enters into her life presenting himself as a pimp named Juan María Arce. Having created this violent version of himself, Brausen/Arce starts sleeping with Queca and beating her. Considering his double life with Gertrudis and Queca, Brausen thinks "I was dissolving myself in order to permit Arce's birth. Sweating in both beds, I was saying good-bye to the prudent responsible man putting up an appearance based on limitations that others have placed on him".[105] Brausen's violent instincts and masochistic desires expressed in the character of Arce intensify at the point when Brausen plans the murder of Queca in order to fulfil Arce's identity definitively. His plan is not realized only because another pimp, Ernesto, kills Queca before him. When Brausen/Arce helps Ernesto to escape to the city he has drawn in his fiction Santa María, the overlap between experience and fiction, life and dream is total. As this brief account suggests, *A Brief Life* addresses a fundamental aspect of my analysis: the performative role of literature in the construction of heterosexual masculinity. I shall discuss how Rigoberto and Vargas Llosa highlight that the metaliterary dimension of *A Brief Life* is reminiscent of *Don Quixote*. Secondly, I shall focus on the emotional blockage Brausen experiences in his relationships with women and show how it reflects Rigoberto's affective crisis.

In *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto,* Brausen's creation of multiple selves presents a literary version of the multiplication of the self characteristic of Schiele's self-portraits and which has impressed Fonchito: "'He [Schiele] doubles, even triples

[105] Juan Carlos Onetti, *A Brief Life*, trans. Hortense Carpentier, London, Serpent's Tail, 2008, p. 185.

himself. *Triple Self-portrait*, 1913. […] That's how he saw himself, as if he had several Egon Schieles inside him. Isn't that schizophrenic?'" (NR 138). Similarly, thinking about his affinities with Brausen, Rigoberto wonders: "Are Brausen and I nothing but a couple of schizophrenics?" (NR 178). Brausen's fictions of the self grow to the detriment of his everyday life: "Meanwhile I was almost not working and scarcely existing; I was Arce at the regular drunken parties with La Queca, in the growing pleasure of beating her, amazed that it was easy and necessary to do it; I was Díaz Grey, writing or thinking about him, astonished by life's richness and my power."[106] The proximity of Brausen's fictional persona (Díaz Grey) and his violent alter-ego (Arce) suggests that writing Díaz Grey and impersonating Arce are performances of evasion which paradoxically enact the reality Brausen is trying to evade. In his analysis of *A Brief Life*, James Irby describes the novel as a reflection on fantasy and evasion whose central theme is fiction itself, understood as making believe and inventing, the activities which *A Brief Life* "practices and studies".[107] Vargas Llosa creates a similar focus on Onetti's novel in his lengthy essay *El viaje a la ficción* [The Journey to Fiction] entirely dedicated to Onetti's narrative. For Vargas Llosa *A Brief Life* continues the tradition inaugurated in *Don Quixote* investigating the effects of fiction on lived experience:[108]

> Is Brausen crazy? He is in the way of other memorable literary characters whom the seduction of imaginary life, which is the one of knightly romances in the case of Don Quixote, or the romantic love romances in the case of Madame Bovary, leads to replace their real life with the life of their desires.[109]

Reflecting the integration of theory and practice in Vargas Llosa, Rigoberto's own analysis of *A Brief Life* addresses the role of fiction in Brausen's life:

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106 Onetti, *A Brief Life*, p. 141.

107 The complete quotation is: "the central theme […] is fiction itself, the activity of making believe and inventing, activity which *A Brief Life* practices and studies at the same time." My translation. The original Spanish reads: "el tema central […] es la ficción misma, la actividad de fingir e inventar, actividad que *La vida breve* a la vez practica y estudia, en varios planos que se reflejan vertiginosamente entre sí". James Irby, "Aspectos formales de *La vida breve* de Juan Carlos Onetti", *AIH*, Actas III, 1968, p. 453.

108 Regarding the effects of fiction on experience, Josefina Ludmer argues that *A Brief Life* expresses a theory of the imaginary and an ideology of literature (*Onetti. Los procesos de construcción del relato*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 1977, p. 16).

109 My translation. The original Spanish reads: "¿Está loco Brausen? Lo está a la manera de esos personajes memorable de la literatura a quienes la seducción que ejerce la vida imaginaria, sea la de las novelas de caballerías, como a Don Quijote, o las novelitas de amor romántico a Madame Bovary, lleva a sustituir la vida real por la de sus deseos". Mario Vargas Llosa, *El viaje a la ficción. El mundo de Juan Carlos Onetti*, Madrid, Alfaguara, 2008, p. 98.

> The memory had come back not to drown him but to help him or, as Brausen said when describing his own feverish imagination, to save him. Isn't that what he said when he transported himself out of the real Buenos Aires and into the invented Santa María, and fantasized a corrupt physician, Díaz Grey […]? Didn't he say that this transposition, this move, this carefully elaborated act, this recourse to fiction, *saved him*? Here it was in his notebook: "A Chinese puzzle box. In Onetti's work of fiction his invented character, Brausen invents a fiction in which there is a doctor, Díaz Grey, based on himself, […]; confronting reality with dream is his defense against reality, his way of annihilating the horrible truth of his life with the beautiful lie of fiction." He was overjoyed, ecstatic at his discovery. He felt as if he were Brausen, he felt redeemed and safe…" (NR 177-78).

Fiction emerges as a defence against the world and its discontents. Rigoberto's reading of *A Brief Life* strictly resembles his observations about *Edith's Diary*. His sense of these two novels is illuminated by a quotation from Kipling's "If": "If you can dream – and not make dreams your master" (NR 178). Rigoberto fears he is no longer the master of his fantasies, but rather that his life is dominated by these fantasies, as in the narratives of Don Quixote and Madame Bovary, Brausen and Edith. As a metaliterary reflection on their stories, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* explores the ambiguous nature of fiction as a form of evasion, which brings pleasure along with the risk of losing contact with the world. Aware of the influence of fiction on his life, Rigoberto refers to Emma Bovary in the manner of Lurie in *Disgrace* and Peter/Nathan in *My Life as a Man*, still ignoring the implications of gender.

Rigoberto's observations evoke Vargas Llosa's analysis of *A Brief Life* in *Letters to a Young Novelist*, a collection of essays published in Spanish in 1997 (the same year of the publication of *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*). Vargas Llosa writes that *A Brief Life* "revolves entirely around the artifice of the Chinese box, which Onetti manipulates masterfully to create a world of delicate superimposed and intersecting planes, in which the boundary between fiction and reality is dissolved."[110] The description of this literary device illuminates the interconnectedness of *Don Quixote* and *A Brief Life*. Vargas Llosa praises Cervantes for "the variety and diversity of Chinese box stories in *Don Quixote*" and describes its structure as "a *matryoshka* of at least four levels of connected stories" including the manuscript of Cide Hamete Benengeli, the story of Don Quixote and Sancho, the stories told among the actual characters and, finally, the written stories unconnected to the events lived by Don Quixote and Sancho that the characters read.[111] In their analyses of *A Brief Life* Vargas Llosa and his character Rigoberto seem to hint

110 Vargas Llosa, *Letters to a Young Novelist*, p. 106.

111 Ibid., p. 104.

at the narrative procedure of *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto,* including four levels of connected stories in the manner of *Don Quixote*; Rigoberto's erotic fantasies evoked in the seclusion of his library; Rigoberto's essays-letters; the meetings of Fonchito with Lucrecia; and the "anonymous" letters to Lucrecia written by Fonchito and mentioned by Lucrecia.

While the traditional use of the Chinese Box is limited to an overlapping between different narrative levels, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* develops this mechanism through the interaction of different art forms. Rigoberto's reflections on *A Brief Life* are juxtaposed with another fantasy of his, in which he imagines Lucrecia telling him that she washed herself in a bathroom in the company of the Algerian ambassador's wife. The scene is inspired by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's painting *The Turkish Bath (*1862) and explicitly compared to it, but the dialogue between the two women is driven by Rigoberto's memories of *A Brief Life*. Lucrecia explains to Rigoberto that the ambassador's wife has undergone a reconstructive surgery after the removal of her breast. Lucrecia insists that no shadow of a scar is left on her. The interaction of visual art and literary references intensifies as Rigoberto finds a note in his notebooks concerning "an erotic dream of Juan María Brausen ('taken from paintings by Paul Delvaux that Onetti could not have known when he wrote *La vida breve* because the Belgian surrealist had not even painted them yet,' said a brief note in the parentheses)" (NR 182). In imagining that Brausen's erotic dream was inspired by Delvaux's works which he had not painted yet, Rigoberto interweaves temporal planes and uses time in a manner reminiscent of *A Brief Life* as Vargas Llosa observes in *El viaje a la ficción*:

> [Onetti] often used time as if it were a space in which narration could be displaced forward (the future) or backword (the past) in a counterpoint whose effect would be abolishing real time – chronological and linear – and replacing it for another, not realist, in which past, present and future instead of following each other, they rather coexist and intersect each other.[112]

*The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* exemplifies the concept of time that Vargas Llosa regards as characteristic of *A Brief Life*. In inflecting Onetti's technique of the Chinese Box through the use of cultural references, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* is

[112] My translation. The original Spanish reads: "[U]tilizó a menudo el tiempo come si fuera un espacio, en el que la narración pudiera desplazarse hacia adelante (el futuro) o hacia atrás (el pasado) en un contrapunto cuyo efecto sería abolir el tiempo real – cronológico y lineal – y reemplazarlo por otro, no realista, en el que el pasado, presente y futuro en vez de sucederse uno a otro coexistían y se entreveraban". Vargas Llosa, *El viaje a la ficción,* p. 88.

reminiscent of Borges's erudition and brings together the literary aesthetics of the two writers. In *El viaje a la ficción*, Vargas Llosa addresses the artistic affinity between Onetti and Borges which he believes has been overlooked by critics:[113]

> [A]lthough [Onetti] was never a devout follower of Borges, whose writing had some aspects that irritated him, he read it in depth and, perhaps without realizing it completely, fruitfully, since the Argentine helped him discover an intimate proclivity of his literary vocation. *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* relates the secret conspiracy of a group of scholars to invent a world and interpolate it secretly in reality, as Brausen does with the creation of Santa Maria, and *The Circular Ruins* fantasizes about a magician engaged in a similar business – inventing a man and smuggling him in the real world – who discovers that the reality he believed objective is a fiction, a dream of another magician-creator as he himself is.[114]

Even though Onetti presents Brausen's fictional world under a realist mask, Vargas Llosa recognises the influence of Borges in Brausen's attempt to interpolate a fictional world with his own reality.[115] Vargas Llosa shows a common genealogy: the literary tradition embodied by *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* explores the proximity between Borges and Onetti by combining their narrative procedures. At the same time, Vargas Llosa partly distances himself from his models: Rigoberto's erudition differs from Borges's because of its erotic charge, while the variation on the "Chinese box" technique is characterised by the interaction of visual art and written text, unlike *A Brief Life*. Finally, conveyed by the interplay between

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113 Hugo Verani argues that the narratives of Borges and Onetti represent a rupture with traditional narrative forms of Hispanic-American literature, shaping a new model which has become dominant in contemporary literature (*Onetti: el ritual de la impostura*, Caracas, Monte Avila Editores, 1981, p. 18).Without advocating a special affinity between Borges and Onetti, Mark Millington compares the way in which space is used to articulate subjectivity in Onetti's "Jacob el otro" ["Jacob and the Other Man"] to Borges's "The House of Asterion" ("Otherwise, or Reading Onetti with Borges", in *Onetti and Others. Comparative Essays on a Major Figure in Latin American Literature*, ed. Gustavo San Román, New York, State University of New York Pres, 1999, pp. 51-64).

114 My translation. The original Spanish reads: "Y, aunque [Onetti] no fue nunca un seguidor beato de Borges, en el que había aspectos que lo irritaban, lo leyó con profundidad y, acaso sin advertirlo del todo, con provecho, pues el argentino lo ayudó a descubrir una proclividad íntima de su vocación literaria. *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* narra la secreta conspiración de un grupo de eruditos para inventar un mundo e interpolarlo secretamente en la realidad, como Brausen con Santa María, y *Las ruinas circulares* fantasea el descubrimiento que hace un mago, empeñado también en una empresa parecida – inventar un hombre y un contrabandearlo en el mundo real –, de que la realidad que él creía objetiva es también ficción, un sueño de otro mago-creador como él mismo". Vargas Llosa, *El viaje a la ficción*, p. 105.

115 Vargas Llosa's impression is shared by Verani who observes that Onetti's creative imagination is never metaphysical or intellectual as Borges's is, and that the fictional world forged by Brausen in *A Brief Life* is projection of the profound reality of his sordid life (43). Similarly, commenting on interplay between dream and reality in Onetti's narrative, Juan Angel Rama observes that in Onetti "dreams are encysted within a realistic narration" ("Origen de un novelista y de una generación literaria", in Juan Onetti, *El pozo*, Montevideo, Arca, 1969, p. 93).

different narrative planes, the psychological struggles of Brausen and Rigoberto have different outcomes.

Regarding Onetti's use of the Chinese Box, in *El viaje a la ficción* Vargas Llosa argues that the overlapping of different narrative levels echoes in the psychology of Onetti's protagonists:[116]

> Holing themselves up in this lucid delirium, in madness, or pushed to suicide for their incompatibility with the world they live, the characters of Onetti evolve in a world which is not fantastic nor realist, but an alliance of both – this is one of the most unused features of literature – in which we are constantly passing from one side to the other of this border that in the real life divided the lived life and dreamt life.[117]

In *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, initially the confusion between dream and desire echoed in the interplay between different media seems to exacerbate Rigoberto's mental condition, his readings of *Edith's Diary* and *A Brief Life* are at the heart of his self-reflection, offering him a standpoint through which to examine his behaviour. The figure of Brausen is fundamental to an examination of Rigoberto's situation:

> Would he end up like Brausen? Was he Brausen already? A failed man, […] as an irremediable libertine individualist and agnostic hedonist or a creator of private enclaves of the highest fantasy and artistic good taste, a man defeated by everything, the woman he loved, the son he fathered, the dreams he tried to embed in reality, decaying day after day, night after night, behind the repellent mask of an executive in a successful insurance company, transformed into the "purely desperate man" mentioned in Onetti's novel, into a copy of the pessimist masochist in *La vida breve* (NR 182-3).

Onetti's writing becomes a means for Rigoberto to engage with his own despair. Rigoberto finds a way to articulate his emotions in the manner Kepesh does through the narrative of Kafka, as I discussed in Chapter Two. The nature of Rigoberto's self-oriented reading and misappropriation is illuminated by the replacement of the traumatic image of Gertrudis/Lucrecia's cancerous breast with the image of the surgically reconstructed breast of the ambassador's wife. What is the nature of the

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116 Verani also underlines that in Onetti's narrative dreams and illusions offer compensation on an imaginary plane to the affective crisis of the protagonists (34).

117 My translation. The original Spanish reads: "Refugiados en ese delirio lucido, en la locura, o empujados al suicidio por su total incompatibilidad con el mundo en el que viven, los personajes de Onetti evolucionan en un mundo que no es fantástico ni realista, sino una alianza de ambas cosas – éste es unos de los rasgos más inusitados de literatura –, en el que constantemente estamos pasando a uno y otro lado de esa frontera que, en la vida real, separa la vida vivida de la vida soñada". Vargas Llosa, *El viaje a la ficción*, p. 227.

different male anxieties conveyed in these two novels, and their relation to the literary reflection of masculinity in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*?

The representations of male subjectivity and the female body play a crucial role in *A Brief Life* and, in general, in Onetti's narrative.[118] As in the case of Lurie in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, for Brausen women represent an irreducible otherness whose identity is rooted in the materiality of their bodies. If Gertrudis's cancerous breast is the traumatic event which triggers Brausen's fantasy and epitomises his problematic relationship with women, *A Brief Life* is pervaded with the wider sense of loathing Brausen lives in relation to female corporality. Scholars of Onetti including Irby and Mark Millington highlight the repugnance Brausen feels for the female body, which becomes in the novel an expression of the mystery and the rhythms of the natural world, with Gertrudis's breast cancer representing the decay of the universe.[119] Similarly, Judy Maloof emphasises that in Onetti's fiction women represent "an essential category, rather than a socially and historically constructed one (Millington 1987: 359)."[120] Brausen's existential crisis is generated by the indifference of the world embodied by the female body. In his essay on the representation of women in Onetti, Millington offers an insight into the alienation from the female that Brausen experiences: "The woman's status as a signifier in male discourse is clear from this key fact: there seems to be no need for emotional reciprocity in the relationships with women, there is no stress on love."[121]

This lack of a search for emotional reciprocity in Onetti's characters is linked to a reticence about sex. As Millington writes, "Sexual relationships are frequently implied in the narratives but there is a perennial silence about them. The narratives elide reference to sex, indeed there is little mention even of physical contact. This is the counterpart of the narratives' centeredness on male emotions and needs."[122] Contrary to

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118 Millington writes that "[i]n Onetti we read a narrative of male subjectivity. It is a narrative founded on male characters' heterogeneity, incompleteness and difficulties" ("No Woman's Land: The Representation of Woman in Onetti", *MLN*, Vol. 102, No. 2, Mar 1987, p. 358).

119 For comments on Brausen's feeling of repugnance towards the female body, see Irby, "Aspectos formales de *La vida breve* de Juan Carlos Onetti", pp. 456-457; Millington, "No Woman's Land", pp. 363-364.

120 Judy Maloof, *Over Her Dead Body. The Construction of Male Subjectivity in Onetti*, New York, Peter Lang, 1995, p. 3.

121 Millington, "No Woman's Land: The Representation of Woman in Onetti", p. 360.

122 Onetti's reticence about sex is reminiscent of Borges. A further analogy is to be found in their respective representation of gender. Although Borges's narrative does not display the violence towards women characteristic of Onetti's fiction, his representation of gender emphasises the dichotomy between men and women by casting women as unable to articulate his philosophical concerns. For a detailed

this reticence, explicit sexual representation is abundant and plays a pivotal role in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*. This contrast illuminates the misappropriation of *A Brief Life* carried out by Rigoberto. Even though Rigoberto does not emancipate himself completely from male hegemonic discourse, he is at least aware of the cultural frames which construct women's corporality. Through his fantasy, Rigoberto displays his acceptance of the female body and praises its scatological function as an erotic inspiration. The fundamental difference between the male subjectivities depicted in *A Brief Life* and *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* lies in the nature Rigoberto's sexual fantasies: the narrative space opened by erotic narrations is filled by Rigoberto's urge for intimacy which is denied in Onetti's narrative. As I have discussed, the outcomes of Rigoberto's erotic fantasies are barely satisfactory in sexual terms and display the emotional trauma caused by the separation from Lucrecia. In bringing to light Rigoberto's love for her and the pain of their separation, rather than sexual desire his fantasies enact his need for emotional reciprocity. Rigoberto's search for intimacy echoes in the masculine struggle to create a space in which to experience the emotions which are excluded in the way Onetti's novel, and the others I have studied, map the affectivity of their protagonists. Lurie (*Disgrace*), Jaromil (*Life is Elsewhere*), Kepesh (*The Professor of Desire*) and Vincent (*Slowness*) try to suffocate their anxieties and fail to gain any understanding of their condition. Among these works, *The Professor of Desire* is the most emblematic case: the alienation Kepesh lives in his sexual experience stems from his inability to incorporate affectivity into the forms of male heterosexuality he has found in his literary models, epitomised by his sense of alienation in attempting to confer an erotic charge to the estrangement expressed in Kafka's narratives.

By opposition, the need for emotional reciprocity is at the centre of the constellation of Rigoberto's self-oriented readings and misappropriations: while Brausen creates the masks of Díaz Grey and Arce in order to avoid confronting his wife's mutilated body, Rigoberto learns from Brausen's experience of alienation that he needs a reconciliation with Lucrecia. Intertextuality emerges once again as a source of self-reflection in the last fantasy of the novel entitled "Dream is a Life". Inspired by Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play *Life is a Dream*, Rigoberto models Lucrecia on the character of Rosaura. He quotes from Calderón and comments:

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analysis of gender in Borges, see Ana Luisa Sierra, "Inquisiciones sobre el género sexual en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges", in *Me gustas cuando callas… Los escritores del "Boom" y el género sexual*, pp. 175-206. Millington, "No Woman's Land: The Representation of Woman in Onetti", p. 360.

*What is life? Confusion.*
*What is life? Illusion,*
*a shadow, a fiction;*
*its greatest goods are small,*
*life is a dream, and all*
*our dreams another dream*

> "It's a lie," he said aloud, slamming the desk in his study. Life was not a dream, dream were a feeble lie, a fleeting deception that provided only temporary escape from frustration and solitude in order that we might better appreciate, with more painful bitterness, the beauty and substantiality of real life, the life we ate, touched, drank, the rich life so superior to the simulacrum indulged in by conjured desire and fantasy. Devastated by anguish […] he clung desperately to Lucrecia-Rosaura's body, using these last few seconds to achieve an impossible pleasure (NR 238).

Rigoberto's reflection on himself succeeds in showing him how imagination affects his life. Transfigured by literary and artistic projections onto it, Lucrecia's body becomes the symbol of an impossible pleasure, the integration of desire and reality that Vargas Llosa places at the heart of the Quixotic quest. Seeking to dissolve the opacity surrounding his deepest emotions, Rigoberto aims to re-establish his connection with the world and with Lucrecia.

In the manner of JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*, Rigoberto has reached an awareness of his feelings that the mature Lurie and the young Jaromil, Kepesh and Vincent are unable to reach. The examples of JC and Rigoberto offer an insight into the potential of literary practices to act as a form of self-reflection. While JC develops a grammar of his feelings through a more intimate form of writing responsive to Anya's emotional impact on him, Rigoberto's readings help him confront his emotional discomfort and the affective burden caused by the separation from Lucrecia. Even though Rigoberto fails to recognize that Lucrecia's para-incestuous relationship with his son represents the quintessence of the literary imaginary that inspires his (male) erotic fantasies, in realising that his pain is provoked by their separation more than her betrayal, Rigoberto forgives Lucrecia and transcends the moral imperative that induced him to break with her. The reconfiguration of Rigoberto's sense of ethics according to his feelings evokes JC once again and his newfound emotional maturity. By embracing his feelings for Lucrecia, Rigoberto translates Bataille's notion of sovereignty and transgression from the fields of eroticism and intellect into affectivity: his claim for the right to live his love for Lucrecia transgresses the social dictum to reject the adulteress. By conceiving of her adulteries as acts of love enacting the erotic imaginary he longs for, Rigoberto's fantasies substantiate the quotation from Borges regarding adultery – "Adultery is

usually made up of tenderness and abnegation" (NR 27) – which sets off Rigoberto's attempt at a reconciliation with her.

In this chapter my analysis of the intertextual dimension in the representation of male figures has revealed the space of self-reflexivity and agency that the practices of intertextuality open for the protagonists of *Diary of a Bad Year* and *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*. In the previous chapters I discussed the ways in which for Jaromil (*Life is Elsewhere*) and Vincent (*Slowness*) the intertextual attempts to impersonate literary models of masculinity result in their alienation from their desires; and the ways in which Lurie (*Disgrace*) and Kepesh (*The Professor of Desire*) struggle to emancipate themselves from their emotional immaturity, and to see past the opacity of their feelings as a consequence of their literary education. By opposition, JC and Rigoberto succeed in engaging with past cultural and literary models of male heterosexuality, shaping masculine forms more responsive to their affective needs through their textual practices. Rigoberto is the only Quixotic reader who emancipates himself from the self-reflexive loop which Lurie (*Disgrace*) and Peter and Nathan (*My Life as a Man*), who also become aware of the hegemonic influences on their lives, cannot escape. Unlike them, Rigoberto overcomes self-absorbed self-referentiality. His metaliterary reflections illuminate his feelings for Lucrecia and his pain at their separation. In the same way, JC is the only writer who succeeds in re-defining his masculinity. In Chapter Three I discussed how in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* Marito's creative writing enacts his creative/incestuous urges and suppresses his self-reflexivity, and how in *My Life as a Man* Peter's short stories epitomise the impossibility of self-knowledge or an understanding of masculinity through writing. The integration of essay and diaristic writing provides JC with a form through which to integrate intellectual discourse and emotional understanding through his practice of authorial masculinity.

## Conclusions

### Novelistic Practices and Emotional Repertoires

*...the I traverses narrative orders*
*– disrupting and maintaining –*
*while it is simultaneously traversed by them*
Rob Halpern

The narratives of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa address the inscription of heterosexual masculinity into Western literary legacy and the ways in which masculinity is re-fashioned in contemporary self-reflexive novels. In this study, I have examined how intertextuality and intratextual interplay convey the struggles of male self-discovery and, at the same time, a reflection upon the literary archetypes of masculinity, by exploring the literary forms in which heterosexual desire is articulated in male subjects.

In Chapter One, I began my investigation of heterosexual masculinities by focusing on Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Lurie's practices as a reader and a writer. Each of the following chapters then dealt with a specific stage of masculinity. In Chapter Two, I investigated the coming of age of Jaromil in Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere* and Kepesh in Roth's *The Professor of Desire* and how their urge for self-definition interweave with their literary vocation. In Chapter Three, I queried man's entrance into adulthood through marriage and authorship. In particular, looking at *Slowness*, Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and Roth's *My Life as a Man*, I proposed the notion of authorial masculinity to address precisely that intersection. In Chapter Four I discussed men's maturity and ageing and how even in these late stages of life traditionally associated with wisdom, the problems characteristic of men's youth and adulthood persist and are still discovered or even induced through literary frames. JC in Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* and Rigoberto in Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* confront their emotional isolation and erotic frustration through their readings and writings. Drawing on the plurality of these forms of literary heterosexual masculinities, in this concluding section I shall focus on men's opacity of emotion, a dominant feature in all the stages of heterosexual masculinity I have discussed. I shall examine this opacity and straight men's response to it in relation to a conception of the novel inspired by *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*.

In the Introduction, I described how emotional illiteracy is regarded as a distinctive feature of heteronormative masculinity in men's studies, especially in the works which create the background for my investigation, Middleton's *Inward Gaze* and Schwenger's *Phallic Critics*. I suggest now that emotional illiteracy is deeply affected by the novel as a medium, or better by an understanding of the novel derived from the works of Cervantes and Flaubert as a means to reflect on human experience. As Alejo Carpentier writes:

> With *Don Quixote*, Cervantes installs the imaginary dimension within man, with all its implications, terrible or magnificent, destructive or poetic, new-fangled or inventive, making of this new *I* a means of investigation and understanding of human nature, according to a worldview which places in reality everything it searches for and even more.[1]

Carpentier's suggestive description evokes the role of the imagination in *Don Quixote* and establishes the dynamics between experience and literary imagination as the field of its investigation. The sense of this dichotomy is addressed also by Jonathan Culler in his study of Flaubert. Culler writes that "[t]he novel is an ironic form, born of the discrepancy between meaning and experience, whose source of value lies in the interest of exploring the gap and filling it, while knowing that any claim to have filled it derives from blindness."[2] For the readers and writers whom Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa cast as protagonists, this discrepancy lies in the struggle to confer meaning on their masculinity and their sexual experience. Their characters find themselves in the situation about which Culler wonders in relation to Flaubert's readers, "What if, when readers had composed their lives as novels, they found them unintelligible? What if, instead of learning how to unify their dispersed selves into a personality and the disparate events of together according to novelistic models things still did not fit together?"[3] For Culler *Madame Bovary* draws a parallel between the process through which readers make sense of a text and the process through which men make sense of their experience: both are destabilised.

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1 My translation. The original Spanish reads: "Cervantes, con el 'Quijote', instala la dimensión imaginaria dentro del hombre, con todas sus implicaciones terribles o magníficas, destructoras o poéticas, novedosas o inventivas, haciendo de ese nuevo *yo* un medio de indagación y conocimiento del hombre, de acuerdo con una visión de la realidad que pone en ella todo y más aún de lo que en ella se busca." Alejo Carpentier, *La novela latinoamericana en vísperas de un nuevo siglo y otros ensayos*, Madrid, Siglo Veintiuno, 1981, p. 194.

2 Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert. The Uses of Uncertainty*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 24.

3 Ibid., p. 85.

Coetzee's *Disgrace* engages intertextually with *Madame Bovary*, addressing the paradox of Romantic rhetoric: despite expressing love in artificial and conventional forms, Romantic poetics offer Emma a unique voice for an intensity of feeling that could not otherwise be conveyed. As I suggested in Chapter One, *Disgrace* seems to corroborate the idea Bersani formulates with respect to Flaubert's writing: language is what separates us from the self.[4] The interaction between Lurie's desire and quotations from other texts authenticates Lurie's sensations and, at the same time, alienates him from his experience. Similarly, Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere* explores the hiatus between feeling and experience. The intoxication of feeling Jaromil expresses in his poems involves an imitation of the intense feelings expressed in the lyrical tradition: through his poems Jaromil attempts to inhabit emotions and feelings which do not originate in his relationship with his loved one, but derive from the pursuit of an emotional form itself. This confusion of authenticity and imitation in *Life is Elsewhere* evokes Flaubert's exploration of the complexity of emotions in *Madame Bovary*. In engaging with Flaubert's legacy, both *Disgrace* and *Life is Elsewhere* reveal how emotions are transported by literature and literary language.

The themes of the (in)authenticity of men's feelings and the opacity of their emotions characterise *The Professor of Desire* as well. Kepesh oscillates between asentimental eroticism inspired by literary seducers in his relationship with Birgitta and Elisabeth and the solemn, conflicted love he derives from Chekov's narrative and which he tries to project onto his unhappy marriage. But none of these models provides Kepesh with an understanding of the emotions associated with his desire. As a consequence, Kepesh searches in Kafka for a literary form through which to explore his sexual and emotional despair. For Kepesh Kafka is both an artistic reference and a model of masculinity: Kafka's bachelorhood emerges as an alternative to the male archetypes of the seducer and the romantic lover. Epitomised by the alienation pervading Kafka's narrative, Kepesh's desire and his questioning of it reverberate in a web of intertextual references which enact his urges, and at the same time, reiterate their opacity.

Shifting the bewilderment Don Quixote feels at a world unresponsive to his fantasies to their protagonists' experience of "being a man", these novels expose how the literary models their male protagonists adopt heighten the unintelligibility of their

[4] Leo Bersani, "Flaubert and the Threat of Imagination", in *Balzac to Beckett. Centre and Circumference in French Fiction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 175.

emotions. Reading *The Professor of Desire*, I referred to Corngold's analysis connecting the narratives of Kafka, Flaubert and Cervantes in terms of their contestations of "the power of subjects to understand language, including literary language".[5] I suggested that this failure of intersubjectivity gives rise in the narratives of Coetzee, Kundera and Roth to a failure of introspection itself arising from issues of gender. Let me refer to Ronald de Sousa who draws a parallel between emotion and language: "Our emotional repertories in some ways resemble our languages. Like language, emotions frame our possibilities of experience. […] our emotional life is the ultimate in 'method' acting: the role we play teaches us how to feel."[6] In addressing the co-dependency of emotional education and literary language, my analysis of literary masculinities has revealed how the archetypes of heterosexual love Kundera identifies in his essays and fiction, and the forms of authorial masculinity I described express men's emotions as a site of ignorance.

The emotional repertoires imbued with this sense of unintelligibility are not only conveyed by literature, but also enacted through literature. In addition to modelling his sexuality on a literary understanding of seduction, in *Disgrace* Lurie explores his own emotions through *Byron in Italy*. His opera displays the struggle and the Otherness Lurie experiences in his sexual relationships, and seems to allude to Holquist's reading of Bakhtinian dialogism as a process in which "the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness."[7] Similarly, the metaliterary dimension of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *My Life as a Man* exposes creativity as an unfulfilled quest for self-discovery. In Chapter Three, I read the intersections between writing and masculinity drawn by *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *My Life as a Man* in relation to Kellman's notion of a self-begetting novel. I interpreted the writings of Marito and Peter as attempts at forging masculinity through the type of writing Kellman identifies. The rigorous structure of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* displays Marito's apprenticeship in the craft of writing and the control he achieves over his personal experience. Nevertheless in writing his masculinity, Marito enacts the incestuous compulsion at the heart of his creative practices, rather than illuminating it, and the path to transgression

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5 Stanley Corngold, *Franz Kafka. The Necessity of Form*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 166.

6 Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, The MIT Press, 1987, p. 332.

7 Michael Holquist, *Dialogism. Bakhtin and his World*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 17.

through which Lurie lives his incestuous tension for his daughter is repeated. Foreshadowing incest as the underlying motive of their protagonists, *Disgrace* and *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* address the "split between behaviour and consciousness" which seems to be at the heart of masculine performance.[8] *My Life as a Man* gravitates around Peter's attempt to emancipate himself from the emotional burden generated by the problematic assimilation of his Jewish legacy and his troubled relationships with women. Peter's fetishization of Flaubert's notion of impersonality configures emotional detachment as an essential process through which to articulate an understanding of his masculinity. In being conflating with the notion of authorship, masculinity depends on the control over emotions. Even though Flaubert's ideal of authorial control deconstructs the illusion of writing an account of his masculinity, for Peter writing only reiterates the unknowability of his desire in the manner that reading does for Kepesh. The superabundance of textual allusion and interpretation that enfolds Kepesh's sexuality in *The Professor of Desire* parallels the proliferation of writing in *My Life as a Man*. In Roth's narratives the compulsion to write, to read and to interpret literary texts displays the relentlessly unresolved tension between textuality and sexuality.

Nonetheless, the sense of the unintelligibility of emotion inherent to *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* does not pervade all these account of men's emotions. The authorial approach to heterosexual love Milanku develops in *Slowness* configures authorship as a form that can embrace masculinity. Scepticism towards the authenticity of emotions leads Kundera to reject the emotional repertoires offered by literature. In *Slowness* Vincent's alienation from his body and emotions results from his unreflective adhesion to a literary model of desire. While in *Life is Elsewhere* Jaromil's histrionic emotional life is inspired by the ideal of a great, unique love, in *Slowness* Vincent's involvement with *libertinage* responds only to Narcissism and evades an engagement with his own desire. By opposition, through his re-creation of the figure of Madame de T., Milanku looks at seduction as the process through which men and women give meaning to their sexuality. Expressed in the form of these authorial narrators, Kundera's "semiotic" approach to the literary forms of desire explores men's ability to inhabit the emotions they have learnt to feel. Kundera explores the impossibility of distinguishing spontaneous emotions from the ones shaped by the auto-suggestive desire to live by literary frames, and in Epicurean fashion finds in the experience of pleasure the only

[8] Peter Middleton, *The Inward Gaze. Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 189.

truth men and women should follow – a form of wisdom that for Kundera it is the prerogative of literary texts to behold.

Kundera's narrative offers an example of the insight that the self-reflexive forms of the novel can shed on men's emotional awareness, whether the reader agrees or not with the positions Kundera's narrators seem to endorse. In particular, the ambiguity and the irony pervading Kundera's writing induce the reader not to be reductionist and to doubt the messages his novels give the appearance of conveying. Drawing on the sense of uncertainty that Kundera praises as the wisdom of the novel,[9] I move now to the last two works I discussed in the main body of this work. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* and Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* open heterosexual masculinity to a new-found consonance with emotion, challenging the sense of unintelligibility pervading the other novels I discussed. The intertextual references which mark Rigoberto's increasing lucidity into the nature of his desire offer an opposing point of view to the limits of self-reflexivity suggested by the effects of intertextuality in *Disgrace* and *The Professor of Desire*. Even though *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* is open to the possibility of reconfiguring masculinity through a self-reflection generated by literature, it confirms emotional complexity of Vargas Llosa's narrative. As in the case of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* desire is reminiscent of Bataille's understanding of sexuality and expresses the irrationality of human experience. In both novels the irrationality of desire is paired with the limited lucidity of the protagonists: just like Marito does not recognise the incestuous tension at the heart of his creativity, Rigoberto fails to see that Lucrecia's para-incestuous relationship with Fonchito epitomizes his own erotic fantasies and delusions of betrayal. Nevertheless, the impossibility of encompassing the irrationality of impulse does not prevent Marito and Rigoberto from changing their situation and trying to live more satisfactory lives. Marito succeeds in writing an account of his masculinity, and Rigoberto recognises the pain provoked by the separation from his wife and decides to reconcile with her.

*The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* reveals how emotion can lead to a re-framing of values and moral codes. Let me refer again to de Sousa, who writes that "[w]hatever their own susceptibility to rational criticism, they [emotions] themselves give us frameworks in terms of which we perceive, desire, act, and explain. Their reputation for

[9] Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher, London, Faber and Faber, 1988

irrationality is partly due to their power to reinterpret the world."[10] In *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, acknowledging his sufferance, Rigoberto transgresses the moral code which would impose the rejection of the adulteress. The impact of emotions is not only limited to morality: in *Diary of a Bad Year* JC's emotional response to Anya leads him to overcome his intellectual and polemical disengagement with the world. In addition, as a consequence of his relationship with Anya, JC searches for a form of transcendence from the erotic impulses he cannot longer satisfy physically. Reminiscent of Kundera, JC's readings of Troubadours and Pound configure literature as an interface through which to explore the cultural forms and emotional repertoires available for the expression of heterosexual desire.

Finally, I would like to underline the heterogeneity and complexity of men's responses to these emotional repertoires. In *Disgrace*, Lurie's tendency to aesthetize his desire induces him to overlook the complexity of Byron's work. As Donelan emphasises in his study of Byron's *Don Juan*, "male fantasy can contradict patriarchy as well as agree with it: because myths as they develop can contain their opposites."[11] The novels of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa bring to light the opposing responses enveloped in myths of patriarchy. The myth of seduction inspiring Lurie in *Disgrace* and Kepesh in *The Professor of Desire* alienate them both from their emotions and induce them to reify women. By contrast, Kundera's Milanku rejects the desire for conquest he sees at the heart of Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and shapes a new model of eroticism: Milanku conceives of Madame de T.'s ritual of seduction as a way of protecting pleasure from the alienating effects of sexuality explored by *Disgrace*, *The Professor of Desire* and *Slowness* itself. Opposing responses to the idealization of the beloved are encompassed by the narcissistic projections of Jaromil in *Life is Elsewhere* and the empathic bond JC establishes with Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year*. For Jaromil the redheaded young woman is only a means to compose poetry and to enact the creativity which defines him as a male poet: no empathic connection is established with her. By opposition, the influence of the idealization of the beloved carried out by Troubadours' poetry and by Pound on JC's feelings for Anya lead him to a heightened understanding of his emotions, expressed by the combination of essayistic and diaristic writing in his "Soft Opinions". The ways in which the protagonists of these novels respond to

[10] de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, p. 24.

[11] Charles Donelan, *Romanticism and Male Fantasy in Byron's 'Don Juan'. A Marketable Vice*, New York, MacMillan Press, 2000, p. 18.

masculinity with literary means show its diversity and the space for creativity and self-determination even within culturally embedded forms of masculinity. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* is emblematic: Rigoberto becomes aware of the alienating effects of literature through reading of Onetti's *A Brief Life*, but he is unaffected by the misogyny of Onetti's narrative. Finally, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *My Life as a Man* expose the paradox of literary masculinities: only the illusion of self-awareness allows Marito to compose an account of masculinity, while Peter's urge for self-discovery is constantly frustrated by his writing.

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