

**MOTHERLANDS/OTHERLANDS:
READING 'EXILE' IN THE POETRY OF DEREK WALCOTT, JOSEPH
BRODSKY, SEAMUS HEANEY AND REINALDO ARENAS**

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"MOTHERLANDS/OTHERLANDS: READING 'EXILE' IN THE
POETRY OF DEREK WALCOTT, JOSEPH BRODSKY, SEAMUS
HEANEY AND REINALDO ARENAS"

submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur
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Note to this Dissertation

This dissertation has been cited as per the 17th edition of the Chicago Manual of Style. The “Footnotes and Bibliography” convention has been used to cite all relevant sources and explanatory notes pertaining to it. All foreign (originally non-English) words have been italicised and glossed over, to the extent possible.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Having stripped me of my seas, my flight, my running start,
And given my feet the platform of the violent earth,
How'd you do? Just great!
You couldn't still my moving lips.

—Osip Mandelstam, 'May 1935', *The Voronezh Notebooks*¹

The present dissertation proposes a comparative reading and examination of the poetry of exile as manifested in the works of four poets in the second half of the twentieth century, to identify certain points of convergence as well as divergence between them. It will try to compare the poetry of Derek Walcott (1930-2017), Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996), Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) and Reinaldo Arenas (1943-1990) as varying specimens of writing that responds to the condition of exile in the second half of the twentieth century. In doing so, the project shall also hope to accomplish an extensive survey of exile not merely as a political condition imposed upon an intellectual along broadly geo-spatial lines, but also as an ontological condition of both being and writing.

My criteria for the choice of these four poets, from four different geo-political and socio-cultural contexts, were their approximate contemporaneity (broadly, the second half of the twentieth century) and their performances of four different exilic subjectivities through their poetry. For the purpose of properly situating my study within the body of theoretical work concerning exile, I have used two essays by Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile"² and "Expatriates and Marginals"³ to formulate a basic conception and schema of what the experience of

¹ Osip Mandelstam, "7:May 1935," in *Voronezh Notebooks* trans. Andrew Davis (New York: New York Review Books, 2016), Kindle edition, 23

² Edward E. Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 180-92.

³ Edward W. Said, 'Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals', *Grand Street* 47 (Autumn 1993): 112-124.

“exile” transmutes into in the twentieth century, and used them as points of departure for comparing the literary oeuvres of the aforementioned poets. In other words, in order to demonstrate four differing instances where exilic subjectivity is constructed and manifested in poetry, I have used these two essays by Said as representative of a broad template of exilic subjectivity in the second half of the twentieth century. In order, however, that I demonstrate the ways in which the twentieth century has radically transformed the conception of exile, I need first to gloss over the etymology of the word ‘exile’ and the history of its emergence, from the ancient to the modern world. Prominent examples of literary representations of the exilic experience (in particular poetry), drawn from ancient, medieval and modern European history, are likely to be instrumental to the grounding of this particular dissertation as well, since the poetic oeuvres of the poets included within my study are also part of mid- twentieth century interventions into the literature of exile.

Exilic experiences commonly involve displacements from a previous place or space (imagined and perceived as “home”) to a different one (perceived as the “place of exile”). The etymology of the word ‘exile’—derived from the Latin verb *exsilire* and connoting a “leaping out”⁴—suggests forced displacement from one’s place of origin, often for an extended period of time. Both the spatial and temporal aspects of exile must be considered in unison, since they concern the material and emotional difficulties encountered by the exile owing to this severance from their “home” or *patria*, which has to be re-imagined through its absence in the new, relatively alien “place” where the migrant has to settle in. In a comparable manner, one might be also able to conceive of a temporal displacement where the memory of the *patria* inscribed within the exile freezes at the point when they take the said “leap”, thus initiating a rift between the lived live of the *patria* at present and the said memory. However, the traditional understanding of ‘exile’ is built on an idea of “forced displacement”—often owing to factors which lie outside the scope of the individual’s active volition. A descriptive definition of exile as a condition can be found in the work of Jo-Marie Claassen:

⁴ See “*Exsilire*”, *Dictzone: Latin-English Dictionary*, <https://dictzone.com/latin-english-dictionary/exsilire> (accessed May 01, 2022)

Exile is a condition in which the protagonist is no longer living, or able to live, in the land of his birth. It may be either voluntary, a deliberate decision to stay in a foreign country, or involuntary. In some cases, exile can be merely the result of circumstances, such as an offer of expatriate employment. Such instances will usually cause little hardship to the protagonist. However, exile may be enforced. This last occurrence frequently results from a major difference of political disagreement between the authorities of a state and the person being exiled. Often such exiles are helpless victims of circumstances beyond their sphere of influence; sometimes, however, the exiles are themselves prominent political figures, exiled because of the potential threat to the well-being of their rivals.⁵

While this definition broadly covers most aspects of the exilic experience, its widened scope, (allowing for even “voluntary migration” as a legitimate form of exile), indicative of a certain essentialist Universalism, has come under critique, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. For Edward W. Said, “exile cannot be made to serve notions of humanism”, especially since, at best, during the twentieth century, “the literature about exile objectifies an anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience first-hand; but to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as “good for us”⁶. Although I shall return, at a later point in chapter, to engage with Said’s essays on exile, it suffices, for the present to alert the reader to Said’s premise that the “broad and impersonal setting” against which, “exile” is often regarded as a timeless, and universal experience, “obscure what is truly horrendous: that exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human beings”⁷.

1.1 “Happy, I once sang happy things, sad things I sing in sadness”: Traditional Forms of Exile as Banishment.

But one might ask how exilic subjectivity comes to manifest itself in literature by emphasizing the links between the exiled writer’s worldview and their literary production. The reference to “exile” in the literature of the ancient world

⁵ Jo-Marie Claassen, *Displaced Persons: The Literature of Exile from Cicero to Boethius* (London: Duckworth, 1999), 9

⁶ Edward E. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 181.

⁷ *Ibid.*

saw the condition associated with a form of perpetual suffering. One of the first known instances of such a view occurs in the first century B.C., through a phrase from Publilius Syrus: “*Exsul, ubi ei nusquam domus est, sine sepulcro est mortuus*”⁸. For Publius Ovidius Naso (known to the Western world as Ovid), banished in 8 A.D. from Rome to Tomis, near the shores of the Black Sea by royal decree of Emperor Augustus, the cause of his exile was “*carmen et error*” (“A poem and an error”)⁹. He had been banished from Rome for either portraying sexual excesses in the *Ars Amatoria*, or for having committed an act of personal indiscretion to the Emperor.¹⁰ Ovid’s work composed during his Black Sea exile, the *Tristia*, *Ibis* and *Epistulae Ex Ponto*, introduced a conception of the exilic experience which became the norm against which future exiled poets and writers would go on to define themselves: a form of banishment (sometimes also seen as a ‘necessary’ phase of probation”) unfairly thrust upon misunderstood genius.

The exile to Tomis gave rise to an exilic subjectivity within Ovid, who attempted a clear separation between himself and his literary work. In the First Book of the *Tristia*, he urges his “little book” to travel to the city without him, and to not expect to adequately adorned, “be cloaked, dyed in hyacinthine purple”, because only “[h]appier books are decorated with these things”¹¹. The “book” is therefore treated as a metonymic reference for the exiled Ovid and his sufferings:

No brittle pumice to polish your two edges,
so you’re seen ragged, with straggling hair.
No shame at your blots: he who sees them
will know they were caused by my tears.
Go, book, greet the dear places, with my words:
I’ll walk among them on what ‘feet’ I can.¹²

⁸ The Latin phrase is translated by Alexandru Boldor as meaning “The exile, whose home is nowhere, is dead without being buried”. See Alexandru Boldor, “Exile as Severance” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2005), 4.

⁹ See Ovid, “His Plea: *Carmen et Error*”, *Tristia* II: 207-252, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkTwo.php> and “Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid)” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th edition, eds. Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 506.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ovid, “The Poet to His Book: Its Nature”, *Tristia* I.I: 1-68 trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkOne.php> (accessed May 02, 2022)

¹² Ibid.

One of Ovid's expressed objectives he wants to achieve is to "find someone who sighs about my exile" and evoke feelings of pity in such a hypothetical reader, which would thereafter pave the path towards his "punishment lightened by a gentler Caesar"¹³. His exilic wanderings also function as wonderings, as he broods on Homeric descriptions of the Trojan War where several gods such as Mulciber, Apollo, Venus, Pallas Athena, Neptune or Minerva had chosen sides either with the Greeks or the Trojans.¹⁴ He wonders "however different" he is from the aforementioned gods, so much so that he has been abandoned by them against the wrath of the "angry god" Emperor Augustus.¹⁵ He acknowledges that "part of my punishment is in the place"¹⁶. Even as his sails crave for Italian shores, a disconsolate Ovid leaves Rome, brooding on his "error" and freely employing hyperbole to exaggerate his sufferings. He urges the "wise poets" of the future to write of his exilic tribulations rather than the wanderings of Ulysses, for "I've suffered more than the Neritian"¹⁷. In Ovid's estimation, the sufferings of Ulysses were lighter in comparison to his own, since while the latter "wandered a narrow space for many years/ between the palaces of Ithaca and Troy", he was doomed to suffer in much faraway "Getic and Samartian shores"¹⁸. The separation between his "loyal" and his literary self was of great importance to Ovid's pleas to sympathetic fellow Roman citizens, which he intended to submit before them through the *Tristia*. In the Second Book of the poem, the exiled poet writes,

Poetry made Caesar condemn me, and my ways,
through my *Ars Amatoria*: only now is it banned.
Take my work away, and you take the accusation
against me away, also: I charge the verse with guilt.¹⁹

He pleads for mercy before Augustus, adding that what he sings now "is lawful, permissible intrigue"²⁰. He accepts the charges levelled against him, of

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ovid, "The Journey: Storm at Sea", *Tristia* I.II: 1-74 trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkOne.php> (accessed May 02, 2022).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ovid, "The Journey: the Destination", *Tristia* I.II: 75-110.

¹⁷ Ovid, "His Odyssey", *Tristia* I.V: 45-84.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ovid, "His Plea" His Poetry", *Tristia* II: 1-43,

<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkTwo.php> (accessed May 03, 2022).

²⁰ Ovid, "His Plea: *Carmen et Error*", *Tristia* II: 207-252

having taught obscenity through his *Ars Amatoria*. The exiled Ovid however, tries to present his case before the Emperor by referring to numerous Greek precedent-poets, who also wrote on love and sexuality, and presents himself as merely having conformed to already established codes of depicting *amatoria* in lyric poetry. Alluding to the examples of Anacreon, Sappho of Lesbos, Callimachus, Menander and a host of characters from the body of Homeric poetry, he tries to present his persecution and exile as an extreme form of punishment for a slight offence.²¹ He also gives examples of Roman precedent-poets before him who had dealt with “frivolous matter”—Ennius, Lucretius, Catullus, Calvus, Ticius, Memmius, Cinna, Cornificus, Cato, Hortensius, Servius, Gallus, Tibullus, Propertius and Virgil.²² If they could avoid the doomed fate of the *exsul*, the poet—albeit in a periphrastic manner—also pleads for Caesar’s mercy to end his banishment and re-instate him to his “home”. In the Third Book, he explicitly addresses the slow metamorphosis wrought within him by his exilic fate; from being “tender, and incapable of labour” to being hardened enough to endure the trials of a harsh climate, and communicates to the reader a heartfelt longing for his wife.²³ The melancholy and dejection exuding out of the language deployed by the exiled poet calls for particular attention; notably, in Ovid’s description of his own auto-epitaph:

I lie here, who toyed with tender love,
Ovid the Poet betrayed by my genius
Be not severe, lover, as you pass by,
Say, “Easy may the bones of Ovid lie”.²⁴

Ovid describes, in great detail, the slow passage of the seasons at Tomis and his endurance of the same with a painful patience. In the Fifth Book, he describes the frozen Danube and the harsh winter at Tomis, wondering if “time stood still”²⁵. He describes the mutual animosity existing between himself, a Roman, and the “barbarous” tribes of the Getae. The inherent foreignness of their clothing inspires paranoia and fear within Ovid, who is confounded every day by “the sight/ of their sheepskins, their chests covered by their long hair”²⁶. However,

²¹ Ovid, “His Plea: His Defence”, *Tristia* II: 253-312

²² Ibid.

²³ Ovid, “The Weariness of Exile”, *Tristia* III. II: 1-30,

<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkThree.php>

²⁴ Ovid, “His Epitaph”, *Tristia* III. III: 47-88.

²⁵ Ovid, “Harsh Exile at Tomis”, *Tristia* V.X: 1-53.

<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkFive.php>

²⁶ Ibid.

in spite of his pride as a Roman, Ovid cannot but notice the inversion of the traditional Roman-Barbarian binary. He finds that,

Here I'm the barbarian no one comprehends,
the *Getae* laugh foolishly at my Latin words,
and they often talk maliciously to my face,
quite safely, taunting me perhaps for my exile.²⁷

Rachel Severynse Philbrick, in her doctoral dissertation on the use of hyperbole and the 'Hyperbolic Persona' in the exilic poetry of Ovid, directs our attention towards the latter's frequent use of the device of the *adynaton* (literally an "impossibility")—a figure of speech in the form of the hyperbole which is taken to such extreme proportions so as to insinuate an utter impossibility.²⁸ Many instances of Ovid's use of the *adynata* are identified by Philbrick, who argues that the repetitive use of this figure of speech was part of the poet's linguistic strategy.²⁹ Ovid wanted to show his exilic sufferings as far, far greater than his literary, and even mythical predecessors. In the Fifth Book of the *Tristia*, he magnifies his misfortunes to such extent as to actually depict them as utter impossibilities:

Select the very least of all my woes, the smallest,
and that will be greater than you would imagine.
as many as the reeds that shroud the sodden ditches,
as many as the bees that flowery Hybla knows,
or the ants that carry the grains of wheat they find
down little trails to their granaries underground,
so dense is the crowd of evils that surrounds me.

Believe me, what I complain of is less than the truth.
Whoever's dissatisfied with them is one who'd add
sand to the shore, wheat to the fields, water to the waves.³⁰

The repeated use of the *adynaton* helps to construct exile as an "otherworldly" experience³¹. As Philbrick aptly points out, Ovid "elides nearly all geography that lies between Tomis and Rome, producing a world map that contains

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See Rachel Severynse Philbrick, "Disruptive Verse: Hyperbole and the Hyperbolic Persona in Ovid's Exile Poetry" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2016), 21, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:674268/PDF/> (accessed May 03, 2022).

²⁹ Ibid. 58. Philbrick posits that hyperbole is "disruptive", which constantly calls "attention to itself by embracing the impossible".

³⁰ Ovid, "A Plea for Loyalty", *Tristia* V.VI: 1-46, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkFive.php>.

³¹ See Rachel Severynse Philbrick, "Disruptive Verse: Hyperbole and the Hyperbolic Persona in Ovid's Exile Poetry" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2016), 68.

only these two starkly contrasted points”³². In his depiction of Tomis, Ovid relied on traditional projections of Scythia as the frozen and ice-capped “north”³³. Garth Tissol has argued that Ovid’s numerous references to Scythia as his place of exile “similarly exaggerate the truth: taking advantage of the fact that the area around Tomis was known as Scythia Minor, he opportunistically conflates that small coastal area, south of the Danube, with the vast expanse of Scythia north and north-east of it”³⁴. Besides, through his liberal use of “Scythia” in trying to denote a large geographical region, Ovid could also appropriate Roman constructions of Scythia as a land of proverbial hardships and bone-chilling winters that inspired the qualities of fortitude, austerity and moral integrity. The nomadic Scythians, who lived in “the absence of houses, fortifications and above all, agriculture”³⁵, were therefore seen as eschewing a life of settled luxuries. The supposed moral righteousness of the Scythians had been illustrated by Horace in his *Odes*, who considered them virtuous for their not having known wealth.³⁶ By the time Ovid was exiled to Tomis, “the popular image of Scythia had ossified into one of a hard primitivist utopia”³⁷. This idealisation of Scythia in the Roman world of letters conflated it with “two mythical utopian societies, the Golden Race and the Hyperboreans”³⁸. The construction of the Scythian as a “Noble Savage”, James William Johnson writes, commenced in the fourth century B.C with Ephorus’ account, “who eulogized them as being simple, just, generous, frugal, and highly virtuous”³⁹. Strabo, writing the first century B.C., cites Homer and Aeschylus in Book XI of his *Geography*, to elucidate on the inherently “noble” Scythians, “the most sincere, the least deceitful of any people, and much more frugal and self-

³² Ibid. 70.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Garth Tissol, *Ovid: Epistulae ex Ponto Book I* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 11

³⁵ Rachel Severynse Philbrick, “Disruptive Verse: Hyperbole and the Hyperbolic Persona in Ovid’s Exile Poetry”, 73.

³⁶ See Horace, *Odes* 3.24 in *Odes and Epodes, Perseus Digital Library*, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0025%3Abook%3D3%3Apoem%3D24> (accessed May 04, 2022): “Better life the Scythians lead/Trailing on waggon wheels their wandering home/ Or the hardy Getan breed./As o’er their vast unmeasured steppes they roam”.

³⁷ Rachel Severynse Philbrick, “Disruptive Verse: Hyperbole and the Hyperbolic Persona in Ovid’s Exile Poetry”, 67.

³⁸ Ibid. 68.

³⁹ See James William Johnson, “The Scythian: His Rise and Fall”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20, no.2 (April 1959): 252, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2707822> (accessed May 05, 2022).

relying than ourselves”⁴⁰. In fact, Strabo constructed the idealistic figure of the Scythian as an apotheosis to the perceived avarice of Roman life, to “effeminacy, luxury, and over-great refinement, inducing extortion in ten thousand different ways”⁴¹.

The nomadic way of life followed by the Scythians was also likened to Hesiod’s conception of a self-sufficient world where “a golden race of mortal men” lived “without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils”⁴². The Hyperboreans (*Hyperboreoi*) were a mythical race believed to be residents of a northern paradise beyond the reaches of Boreas, the Greek god of the north wind. Ovid remains deliberately ambiguous about the precise location of his exilic place because he would have been aware of a problem of reference for his Roman readers, for whom the “north” referred to an immense, and unknown *topos* at the limits of the known world.

Virgil, in his *Georgics*, viewed the Scythians as an enduring and congenial race of people, who made the most of their climactic adversities, and yet managed to live a life of fortunate simplicity.⁴³ He derived his description by mostly perpetuating already established tropes about the Scythian. Ovid however, as we have already seen, markedly departs from this utopian view, depicting the Scythian society as essentially ‘Hobbesian’—a society so subsumed by the naturalised violence of warlike invaders that the rule of law remains yet to be established there. In the face of these hostile invasions,

Some men flee: and, with their fields unguarded,
their undefended wealth is plundered,
the scant wealth of the country, herds
and creaking carts, whatever a poor farmer has.

⁴⁰ See Strabo, *Geography* 7.3.7, *Perseus Digital Library*, <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0239%3Abook%3D7%3Achapter%3D3%3Asection%3D7> (accessed May 03, 2022)

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Hesiod, *Works and Days* II.105-120, *Perseus Digital Library*, <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0132%3Acard%3D109> (accessed May 03, 2022).

⁴³ Virgil, “The Herdsmen of Africa and Scythia”, *Georgics* III.339-383 trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/VirgilGeorgicsIII.php> (accessed May 03, 2022). s

Some, hands tied, are driven off as captives,
looking back in vain at their farms and homes.
some die wretchedly pierced by barbed arrows,
since there's a touch of venom on the flying steel.

They destroy what they can't carry, or lead away,
and enemy flames burn the innocent houses.
Even at peace, they tremble on the edge of war,
and no man ploughs the soil with curving blade.
This place sees the enemy, or fears him unseen:
the earth lies idle, abandoned to harsh neglect.⁴⁴

Ovid's revisionist account of the Scythian society also appropriated the exaggeration of the "idyllic" in former Utopian projections of Scythian society, only to invert it. He first establishes his credibility before the Roman reader by posing as an "eye-witness" of Scythian society, where he corroborates, with preceding sources the nomadic nature of the Scythians and the harsh winters in the region. But once he has established his reliability as a narrator-witness, he radically departs from ideas of Scythia as utopia, hyperbolically re-inventing yet more ingenious analogies for his exilic tribulations. For example, in the tenth section of the Third Book, he compares his exilic suffering to the roasting of "the brazen bull in the slow fires"⁴⁵. Philbrick suggests that Ovid's careful association of the Latin *otium* (literally "leisure" or "freedom from toil") with Rome, the 'civilised' and constructed city (*oikumene*) was based on its binary opposition to a remote outpost such as Tomis, replete with its hard labours.⁴⁶ This peculiar inversion contrasted radically to traditional constructions of Scythia as a pre-agrarian and leisurely society. Thus, for Ovid, Scythian realities emerge as dystopic when compared to the security and comfort available in Rome. Writing to his friend Rufinus in the *Epistulae Ex Ponto*, he acknowledges that "[o]ur native soil draws all of us, by I know not/ what sweetness"⁴⁷. Thus, even as he pits Tomis against Rome by asking "Where's better than Rome, where's worse than cold Scythia?"⁴⁸, he agrees that

⁴⁴ Ovid, "Barbarian Incursions", *Tristia* III.X: 41-78 trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkThree.php> (accessed May 04, 2022)

⁴⁵ Ovid, "Exile as Torture", *Tristia* III.XI: 39-74.

⁴⁶ Rachel Severynse Philbrick, "Disruptive Verse: Hyperbole and the Hyperbolic Persona in Ovid's Exile Poetry", 77-78.

⁴⁷ Ovid, "To Rufinus: Yearning for Rome", *Epistulae Ex Ponto* I.III: 1-48 trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidExPontoBkOne.php> (accessed May 05, 2022)

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

this is only a form of perspectival vision which will not hold true for the “homesick barbarian”, who “will still flee the city” owing to his homesickness.⁴⁹

The Ovidian template of exile was also replicated in the case of a medieval poet such as Dante, who was banished from his native city, Florence in 1302, as he ended up on the losing side in the civil war between the White and the Black Guelphs.⁵⁰ Dante’s opposition to the annexation of Tuscan lands by Pope Boniface VIII earned him the ire of his opponents. Backed by the papacy and emerging as a more formidable opponent than the poet must have imagined them, the victorious Black Guelphs accused Dante of financial mismanagement and corruption during the brief phase of two months—during 1300— when he had served as the Prior of Florence.⁵¹ He was ordered to pay an exorbitant fine for his alleged wrongdoings, and, when the poet refused, his assets in Florence were taken away by force. Dante was sentenced to “perpetual exile” and disallowed from returning to Florence without paying the fine, failing which he would be burnt at the stake.⁵² In exile, Dante authored the *Divina Commedia* and finally settled in Ravenna, where he breathed his last in 1321.

As Guy Raffa has summarised, Dante’s exilic experience and his literary representation of it in the *Divina Commedia* “place him at the center of a long continuing tradition” of predecessor- *exsuls* in Classical and Biblical literature such as Adam, Ulysses, Aeneas, Ovid and Boethius.⁵³ Although Dante had been conversant with exile (especially when his closest friend, Guido Cavalcanti was exiled in 1300), the utter shock of permanent banishment from his beloved Florence led him into “turning his loss into the realization of a singular artistic achievement”⁵⁴. In Dante’s creative imagination, exile would transmute from a tangibly lived material experience within the socio-political realm to a mythico-literary theme, one which allowed him to see a Christian afterlife as a continuation of this life. This explains Dante’s characters in the *Commedia* trying to continue, in

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See Guy P. Raffa, “Dante’s Exile”, *Lapham’s Quarterly*, June 05, 2020, <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/dantes-exile> (accessed May 06, 2022)

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Guy P. Raffa, “Dante’s Poetics of Exile”, *Annali d’Italianistica* 20, Exile Literature (2002): 73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24009755?seq=1> (accessed May 06, 2022)

⁵⁴ Ibid. 74.

their afterlife, the exact mould they had fit into in their lived lives. It is therefore appropriate to say that Dante's exile from Florence was a historical event that allowed him to see his fate more as a "metonymy" rather than as a "metaphor"⁵⁵, where historical exile would metonymically represent an allegorical departure from the known world. Catherine Keen therefore writes that "[t]he multi-layered narrative in the *Commedia* is very clearly based around exilic central motifs of quest, exodus, or peregrination..."⁵⁶

Keen further locates Dante's exilic imperative, as it were, through his reflections in the *Vita nuova* (*The New Life*)— a pre-exilic work—on the obstacle-laden course of wooing Beatrice, a lady who remains socially and morally distant from him. Here, Keen elaborates that "the experience becomes a journey of spiritual transformation, and the narrator's erotic understanding of love is changed into a Christian one, so that he comes to see Beatrice as significant less because of herself than because she points her seeker forward to the divine"⁵⁷. Thus while Dante was certainly writing within the tradition of courtly love, he also laboured to present the quest as an allegorical one. He attempted instead "to write himself out of the courtly equation where love plus pursuit focuses inevitably on the lover's reward"⁵⁸. The link between Dante's impending exilic separation from Florence, Beatrice's death and his depiction of himself in 'Oltre la spera che più larga gira', one of the final lyrics of the *Vita nuova*, may be sought in Dante's self-depiction as a *peregrini* (pilgrim) wandering the spheres and gazing upon the splendour of his lady:

Beyond the sphere that wheels most widely
passes the sigh that issues from my heart;
a new perception grieving Love imparts,
a new Intelligence, leads higher sweetly.

When it has reached the goal of its desires,
it sees a lady who is bathed in honour,
and such light that, amidst her splendour,
the pilgrim spirit gazes and admires .⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid. 75.

⁵⁶ Catherine Keen, "The Language of Exile in Dante", *Reading Medieval Studies* XXVII (2001): 79, https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84399/1/RMS-2001-03_C_Keen%2C_The_Language_of_Exile_in_Dante.pdf (accessed May 05, 2022).

⁵⁷ Ibid. 81

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Dante, "Oltre la spera che più larga gira," in *Vita nuova* trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/DanteRime.php#anchor_Toc365804621 (accessed May 05, 2022).

After his exile from Florence, Dante looked to re-define his new identity, especially since through banishment, his identity as a *florentinus* came under direct threat. Through his engagement with the exilic fates of his literary precursors, Dante turned his physical banishment from Florence to become an “*exsul inertius* or as *peregrino*”⁶⁰. In this context, the Latin word *peregrino* should not be taken to mean only a pilgrim, but also “to indicate an expatriate, stranger, someone far away from his place of birth”⁶¹. The *peregrini*, in common Roman parlance, referred to those from outside the city, as opposed to naturalised citizens, and Dante may have had in mind Cicero’s reformulation of penal banishment (*exsilium*) as a form of perpetual peregrination.⁶² In the *Convivio*, a work immediately succeeding his banishment from Florence, Dante writes,

Since it was the pleasure of the citizens of the most beautiful and famous daughter of Rome, Florence, to cast me out of her sweet bosom—where I was born and bred up to the pinnacle of my life, and where, with her good will, I desire with all my heart to rest my weary mind and to complete the span of time that is given to me—I have travelled like a stranger, almost like a beggar, through virtually all the regions to which this tongue of ours extends, displaying against my will the wound of fortune for which the wounded one is often unjustly accustomed to be held accountable. Truly I have been a ship without sail or rudder, brought to different ports, inlets, and shores by the dry wind that painful poverty blows.⁶³

The Christian context to this newly emergent ethos is Dante, of the exile and severance of Adam and Eve through their Fall from the Garden of Eden is not to be missed. Christ, who became the sacrificial lamb to atone for the Original Sin of human beings, also opened up a spiritual path to Kingdom of Heaven promised to human beings, promised through his Resurrection. Thus, “the spiritual *patria* of Heaven” promised by Christ, posits the human life itself as a form of exile or *peregrinatio*, “from which repatriation follows only beyond the grave”⁶⁴.

⁶⁰ See Catherine Keen, “The Language of Exile in Dante”, *Reading Medieval Studies* XXVII (2001): 83.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Dante, *Convivio* 1.3.4, *Princeton Dante Project*, <https://dante.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/dante/DispMinorWork.pl?TITLE=Conv&REF=I%20iii%201-11> (accessed May 05, 2022)

⁶⁴ See Catherine Keen, “The Language of Exile in Dante”, *Reading Medieval Studies* XXVII (2001): 84. As Keen has pointed out, this conceptualisation receives its most well-articulated form in the 5th Century A.D. through St. Augustine’s concept of a separation between an “Earthly City” and the “City of God”.

During the course of negotiating with the seeming catastrophe of his banishment, Dante also turned to the example of Boethius, whose consolatory philosophy had served as pretext for defending “himself against the perpetual infamy of his exile, by showing it to be unjust”⁶⁵. As Gian Martinelli suggests, “Dante the poet identifies with Boethius’ initial bitterness to loss, but ultimate gain in transcending Fortune”.⁶⁶ However, Boethius was, in his own turn, emulating “a number of earlier classical writers who had evolved a literary tradition of consolatory writing urging endurance of the pains of exile”, such as Seneca and the Stoic philosophers, who “provided him with models for exilic conduct and attitudes in the moral and political arena of the active life”⁶⁷. Therefore, in the *Paradiso*, Cacciaguda, his ancestor warns him,

You must be exiled from Florence, as Hippolytus was exiled from Athens, through the spite and lies of Phaedra, his stepmother. It is already willed so, and already planned, and will be accomplished soon, by Boniface who ponders it, in that place where, every day, Christ is sold. The cry will put the blame on the injured party, as is usual, but truth will bear witness to itself, by the revenge it takes.⁶⁸

Cacciaguda also builds upon the irrevocable firing of “Exile’s Bow”, which would force Dante to discover “how bitter the taste of another man’s bread is, and how hard it is to descend, and climb, another man’s stair”⁶⁹. Virgil, who serves as Dante’s guide during his journey through *Inferno*, informs him that Aeneas, “the father of Sylvius, while still corruptible flesh, went to the eternal world, and in his senses”⁷⁰. For Aeneas, the exilic banishment which forced him out of Troy in the

⁶⁵ Dante, *Convivio* 1.2.7, *Digital Dante*, <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/text/library/the-convivio/book-01/> (accessed May 06, 2022).

⁶⁶ Gian Martinelli, “The Consolation of Boethius for Dante the Poet and the Pilgrim”, *Proceedings of Great Day* 2010 (2011), <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1196&context=proceedings-of-great-day> (accessed May 06, 2022).

⁶⁷ Catherine Keen, “The Language of Exile in Dante”, *Reading Medieval Studies* XXVII (2001): 85.

⁶⁸ Dante, “Cacciaguda unfolds Dante’s Future”, *Paradiso* XVII: 1-99, in *The Divine Comedy* trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/DantPar15to21.php> (accessed May 07, 2022).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Dante, “Dante’s doubts as to his fitness for the journey”, *Inferno* II: 1-42, *The Divine Comedy* trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/DantInf1to7.php#:~:text=on%20behind%20him,-,Inferno%20Canto%20II%3A1%2D42%20Dante's%20doubts%20as%20to%20his,%2C%20without%20error%2C%20shall%20recall.> (accessed May 07, 2022).

wake of the Greek victory was thus a paradoxical twist of fate, since it enabled him to be “chosen to be the father of benign Rome”⁷¹. But Aeneas’s journey to the Elysian fields of afterlife, recounted in Book VI of the *Aeneid* is now appropriately Christianized by Dante, allowing him to imbue it with exilic implications, where an afterlife hints at a re-unification to the idealised “homeland” of the soul. In the *Commedia*, Dante himself is compared to Aeneas in his exilic sufferings: “...lost in a wasteland, with no familiar landmarks or pathways, he is both literally a lost wayfarer or *peregrina*, and allegorically an *exsul filius Evae*, seeking a spiritual path toward the Christian *patria* of Heaven”⁷². Saint Paul, who had entered the beatific land of the blessed, is also identified as a “noble fore-runner” to himself. In Canto XXIV of the *Paradiso*, Saint Paul asks Dante from whence faith, “that dear gem, on which all virtue is founded” has come to him, and the latter confesses that “[t]he profuse rain of the Holy Spirit which is poured over the Old and the New pages, is the reasoning that brought it to so clear a conclusion for me”⁷³, beyond the scope of argument or doubt.

Yet, it needs careful consideration to understand that Dante’s Christian peregrination is also intrinsically tied to his Florentine (and by extension, Roman) identity. As he suffered his exilic tribulations, he gradually grew disillusioned with the different orders of partisanship in medieval Florence and the continuing political intrigues between them. This prompts Dante to pay heed to the advice of his ancestor Cacciaguda, and make “a party of oneself”⁷⁴. In Canto XV of the *Inferno*, Dante encounters the shade of Guglielmo Borsiere, who cautions the citizenry of Florence of their “pride and excess”, arising from “[n]ew men and sudden wealth”⁷⁵. Similarly, in Canto IX of the *Paradiso*, Dante decries the corruption of usury in Florence, “that accursed lily flower”⁷⁶. He laments the loss of the spirit of

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Catherine Keen, “The Language of Exile in Dante”, 87.

⁷³ Dante, “The Source of Faith”, *Paradiso* XXIV: 88-114 in *The Divine Comedy* trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/DantPar22to28.php> (accessed May 07, 2022).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Dante, “The condition of Florence”, *Inferno* XVI: 46-87, in *The Divine Comedy* trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/DantInf15to21.php#anchor_Toc64094705 (accessed May 07, 2022).

⁷⁶ Dante, “Florence: The corruption of usury”, *Paradiso* IX: 127-142, in *The Divine Comedy* trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*,

inquiry and the typically un-Christian avarice of the ecclesiasts in the following lines:

“...the Gospels and the Great Doctors are neglected, and only the Decretals, the law-books are studied, as can be seen by their margins. On that, the Pope and Cardinals are intent: their thoughts do not stray to Nazareth, where Gabriel’s wings unfolded, But the Vatican and the other sacred parts of Rome, that cemetery for the soldiers who followed Peter, will soon be freed from the bond of adultery”.⁷⁷

The crucial link to Dante’s idealisation of his Italian (“Roman”) identity may be sought in in Canto XXXII of the *Paradiso*, where Beatrice, Dante’s beatific Muse, reassures him of their union in Paradise: “You will not be a forester long, here, and will be with me, a citizen, eternally, of that Rome of which Christ is a Roman”⁷⁸. The pangs of separation which Dante was experiencing through his exile from Florence undoubtedly inflected such a nostalgic longing for the “homeland”, which is thus re-imagined as Paradise.

The exilic experiences of both Ovid and Dante, and their expression in their poetic works, reinforce the idea of exile as caught up between the contrary pulls of “creative freedom” and “restrictive nostalgia”⁷⁹. Within the larger context of this conception, Sophia McClennen outlines the traditional critical understanding of exilic creative subjectivity as marked by a binary opposition, despite the fact that the history of exile literature can be dated back to the earliest eras of human history:

Despite this vast and varied literary tradition, criticism of exile writing has tended to analyse these works according to a binary logic, where exile produces creative freedom or it traps the writer in restrictive nostalgia. Either scholars suggest that exile is a creative of liberating state, which enables the writer to function freely of the limitations of the local or the national, or they argue that exile literature is profoundly nostalgic and yearns for the lost nation.⁸⁰

https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/DantPar8to14.php#anchor_Toc64099868 (accessed May 07, 2022).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Dante, “The Church’s Past, Present and Future”, *Purgatorio XXXII*: 100-160, in *The Divine Comedy* trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*,

https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/DantPurg29to33.php#anchor_Toc64099747 (accessed May 07, 2022).

⁷⁹ See Sophia A. McClennen, “Introduction,” in *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2004), 2.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

One of the more prominent strategies deployed by exiled men of letters from the ancient and medieval epochs, was the creation of “a myth of exile” through their literary endeavours. Exiled authors such as Seneca or Boethius broadly followed in the footsteps of the Ovidian template of exile as banishment, recasting their tribulations and misfortunes in a heroic light. Ovid’s exilic works—the *Tristia* (“sad songs”), the long invective poem *Ibis* and *Epistulae Ex Ponto* (“Black Sea Letters”) thematically revolve around the poet’s active projection of his ulterior innocence before Emperor Augustus, and his sufferings in loneliness and isolation in one of the farthest corners of the Roman Empire. Jo-Marie Classen, commenting on Ovid’s creation of the heroic persona of “the Exiled-Poet-that-suffers”, writes that a tendency towards irony and self-mockery may be observed in his work.⁸¹ Thus, Ovid’s eager embracing of his “literary Muse”, allowed the Roman poet to introduce a perceivable distance between his poetic and exilic selves. The alienation faced by Ovid at Tomis was sublimated through “a newly integrated, powerful stance, supported by his comforting Muse”⁸². His personal, subjective suffering in exile is transformed into “into an objective, quasi-fictional mode, a poetic depiction of alienation during exile comparable with contemporary authors’ narratives and metaphors”⁸³. These more “contemporary authors”, although not properly “exiled” in the political sense of the term, nevertheless hint at their smaller dislocations in the language institutionalised by Ovid in his banishment. Jo-Marie Classen therefore mentions a young John Milton (who, after having been rusticated from Oxford to London, found the university town “a barbarous Tomis” that he was now only too happy to flee), Oscar Wilde (who, while in prison described his own sufferings in Ovidian terms in *De Profundis*) and D.H. Lawrence (forced to leave his native Cornwall in the wake of the First World War because of his German connections) as astute examples of self-identification with Ovid.⁸⁴ These cases of conscious self-identification lead Classen towards “an innate psychological relationship between all in isolation – a relationship that transcends imitation and

⁸¹ See Jo-Marie Claassen, ““Living in a place called exile”:The Universals of the Alienation caused by Isolation”, *Literator* 24, no.3 (Nov. 2003) :85-111, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271305018_Living_in_a_place_called_exile_The_universals_of_the_alienation_caused_by_isolation/link/57e93e9908aed0a291303158/download (accessed May 08, 2022).

⁸² Ibid. 89.

⁸³ Ibid. 91.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

lies within the nature of human reaction to a particular kind of hardship”⁸⁵. Exile operates like a rupture, cutting the displaced migrant off from “all that is familiar, along with a feeling of repression and persecution”⁸⁶.

Hints of such a universalism also proliferate *The Oxford Book of Exile*, where John Simpson writes that exile is “the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added physical expression to an inner fact”⁸⁷. Being a reasonably “dated” concept that can be traced back to ancient times, the exact connotative force of the term “exile” has undergone considerable dilution so as to be virtually without a stable meaning:

Each of us is in exile: the thought is a hackneyed one, but it still retains a little force. We are exiles from our mother’s womb, from our childhood, from private happiness, from peace, even if we are not exiles in the more conventional sense of the word. ⁸⁸.

Simpson begins his survey with an account of Adam and Eve’s exile from the Garden of Eden in the *Book of Genesis* to underline the Judaeo-Christian subtext to such perceived universality. He presents sections from Virgil’s *Aeneid* where Aeneas, son of Anchises, leaves a fallen Troy, carrying his father and a large number of displaced Trojans into a “long exile”⁸⁹. Thereafter, he quotes from Josephus’ *The Jewish Wars*, to describe the hardships experienced by the Jewish diaspora after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. during the First Jewish-Roman War. Simpson’s later instances of exile are drawn from diverse cultures and over a broad expanse of time, stretching from antiquity to the twentieth century. He includes the exiles of Ovid (from Rome), Muhammad (from Mecca to Medina), Puritans from early-Modern England (to the ‘New World), Native Americans or “first settlers” (from their ancestral lands), slaves traded across the Atlantic (from Africa), dissidents from Communist dictatorships (such as the Soviet Union), Jews during the reign of the Third Reich (from Germany), Palestinian Arabs (from their ‘home’, now turned into ‘occupied territory’) and Latin Americans (from ideologically averse dictatorships or war-stricken nations). As one can easily infer, these

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ John Simpson, “Introduction”, in *The Oxford Book of Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3

⁸⁸ Ibid. 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 221.

instances of exile and dislocation owe their existence to a variety of factors—not all of which can be properly understood through either “forced displacement” or “banishment”. As we shall see in the subsequent section on Romantic literature, the trope of exile as banishment outlined above, undergoes a shift and re-emerges as a form of voluntary de-familiarisation with the known; so that exile (even when it arises as a result for forced banishment by the state) and the exilic imaginary are subsumed within the broader scope of the Romantic imagination.

1.2. “Men without country...too long estranged”: Romanticism, “the Face of the Other” and Exilic Subjectivity

In so far as Romanticism foregrounds the self-consciousness of the Romantic artist— occasioned by “the product of division in a self”⁹⁰ which the former seeks to negate through enacting a return to the “Unity of Being”, and through recovering “deeply buried experience”⁹¹—it shares many affinities with the experience of exile, especially if the displacement happens to a “natural” (pre-social) locale. The rupture brought in by exile now opens up to an enabling surge of literary creativity which, despite the artist’s tribulations, empowers them to construct exilic narratives of self-assertion. The creative resonances thus outlined thus acquire a ‘Romantic’ character, especially when exile manifests itself as forced banishment which dislocates the *exsul* from the centres of civilisation to its peripheral margins. An arresting instance of this phenomenon occurs in David Malouf’s novella *An Imaginary Life* (1978), a re-writing of the Ovidian tale of banishment. In it, the poet Ovid is exiled, from his familiar urban milieu of Rome to a relatively uninhabited, barren Tomis, by the Black Sea. Given that Ovid’s dislocation was forced, and came from circumstances not entirely under his control, it “becomes a phenomenological prerequisite for self-transformation”⁹². Here, exile emerges as a liminal space, inherently unstable and subject to continuous change by circumstances. Exile is experienced as a sudden, life-changing event but is

⁹⁰ See Geoffrey H. Hartman “Romanticism and “Anti Self-Consciousness”, *The Centennial Review* 6, No. 4 (FALL 1962): 558, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23737893> (accessed May 10, 2022).

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 558

⁹² Hasti Abbasi and Stephanie Green, “Writing and Romantic Exile”, *TEXT 41: Romanticism and Contemporary Writing: Legacies and Resistances* (October 2017): 3, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue41/Abbasi&Green.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2022).

actually “a process rather than a singular state”⁹³. In Malouf’s novella, Ovid’s transformative exilic experience becomes also an existential quest for anchoring his gradually evolving idea of “self”. He finds himself resistant to change in the beginning, especially since his sense of self is located in “Roman” pride—the urban, ‘civilised’ centre of the known world. He discerns that even as the Getae (the local inhabitants of Tomis) are of the same species as himself, his “soul aches for the refinements of our Latin tongue, that perfect tongue in all things can be spoken, even pronouncements of exile”⁹⁴. But as Hasti Abbasi and Stephanie Green, in their work on Malouf’s novella have observed, though initially resistant, Ovid undergoes a phenomenological transformation, whereby “he begins to see himself as implicated in the place to which he has been forced to come”⁹⁵. Malouf depicts Ovid as now cognisant of the fact that his ‘exile’ is not limited to *this* place—that it began as soon as he started leaving his childhood behind to become “more than other men”⁹⁶. Thus, whereas initially Ovid describes Tomis as “centuries from the notion of an orchard or a garden made simply to please”⁹⁷, it is the otherness of the place from Rome which allows him an imaginative metamorphosis. The sheer foreignness of the place is what strikes Ovid as he regards his exile as “a dream, as isolated from the world of men as if I belonged to another species”⁹⁸. As local inhabitants do not understand Latin, he finds himself “[d]iscovering the world as a small child does, through the senses, but with all the things deprived of their special magic of their names in my own tongue”⁹⁹. The exiled poet’s imagination seizes upon the wild, lush and unkempt country he sees around him, and he encounters a native child whom he imagines as his own past self, “the wild boy of my childhood”¹⁰⁰. Seeing him “naked” and “unhoused”, Ovid now finds himself possessed with “a tenderness, an immense pity”¹⁰¹ towards the child, even as he cannot entirely be free of his self-enclosed (and supposedly ‘superior’) colonial identity as a Roman among ‘barbarians’. As he tries to force his own culture,

⁹³ A. Kaminsky, *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), xvi.

⁹⁴ David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 7.

⁹⁵ Hasti Abbasi and Stephanie Green, “Writing and Romantic Exile”, 5.

⁹⁶ David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, 77

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 5.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 8.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 28.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 42.

customs and language on the child, he finds, to his astonishment, that the latter silently refutes his superiority-complex through showing him a more effective form of mimicry than the one forced on him:

But he, in fact, is the more patient teacher. He shows me the bird whose cry I am trying to imitate. He makes me hold it, trembling in my hands. I know what he intends. I am to imagine myself into its life. As the small, soft creature beats its warmth into me, I close my human mind and try to grow a beak, try to leap out of myself, defying the heaviness of my own flesh, the solid bones, and imagine what it is to soar out of the wet grass towards the clouds. A strange piping comes from my throat, small bird cries, and the Child clasps his hands and make the sound himself, encouraging me, bringing me closer to it, the simple scale that is the bird's individual being.¹⁰²

The irretrievable changes within Ovid's own subjectification also ensure that he now sees his exile as not from Rome, but "from the universe"¹⁰³. Contrary to his former certitude in the superiority of Latin, he now believes "Latin is a language for distinctions", and that "every ending defines and divides"; whereas the language he has now laid claim to "is a language whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation"¹⁰⁴. Abbasi and Green have therefore suggested that Malouf's re-writing of the traditional Ovidian tale of banishment "employs the aesthetics of Romanticism; he cultivates and exploits elements from the natural world, and becomes thoroughly entwined in language and imagination"¹⁰⁵.

Expanding the conceptual horizon charted by them, it is possible to read the novella as a Lévinasian negation, and refutation of the "fundamental ontology" promoted by Heidegger. Emmanuel Lévinas's critique of ontology as "first philosophy" denounced the use of "instrumental reason" to bring about a form of 'totality' that always—of necessity—reduced the "other" to sameness and identity. He had advocated the primacy of "ethics" over "ontology", a phenomenon justified by the "face of the Other"¹⁰⁶. In *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas suggests that "Being is Exteriority", where "Man as Other comes to us from the outside, as

¹⁰² Ibid. 56.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Hasti Abbasi and Stephanie Green, "Writing and Romantic Exile", 6.

¹⁰⁶ See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 24.

separated—or holy—face”¹⁰⁷. The “Other” than emerges as a reminder of the finitude of the “Self”, “infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us, whose virtualities are inscribed in our nature and developed by our existence”¹⁰⁸. Within Malouf’s novella, Ovid is able, by admitting to his slow change, to see the face of the sleeping child that “has that remote entranced look of sleepwalkers, who even when they pass you in a corridor, or on stairs, seem untouchably beyond reach, as if they were moving in some other and equally present world that is separated from ours, but not by walls”¹⁰⁹. By the end of the novella, Ovid finds himself *becoming* the child, having now gained a panoramic view of not just his dislocation from Rome, but that of his entire life, stretching back to “the ground” of his earliest memories, a psychological *topos* he seeks to return to. The “Child”, endowed with the face of the “Other” guides Ovid through this imaginative retrogression where Ovid acknowledges being “immeasurably, unbearably happy”¹¹⁰, as he ends his narrative to having reached that “place”:

I am three years old. I am sixty. I am six.

I’m there.¹¹¹

Romanticism, through its espousal of the “sublime”, aimed at recognising an absolute ‘alterity’ (in “nature”, or through an alternative conception of aesthetics) which though “irreducible, evasive and defiant”¹¹², is finally reconciled through the “esemplastic” quality of the imagination which unites differences and attempts to reach a synthesis in the “One”¹¹³. “Alterity” usually appears in the order of “nature”, which is reconceptualised, in the words of Kate Rigby, “as a dynamic, self-generative unity-in-diversity, of which humans are integrally a part”¹¹⁴. In a similar manner as we see a de-familiarisation being attempted by the Romantics—from the city to the country, or from an exclusively

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 291.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 194.

¹⁰⁹ David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, 60-61.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 90.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² See E. F. Carritt, “The Sublime”, *Mind* 19, No. 75 (1910): 365,

<https://philpapers.org/go.pl?id=CARTS&proxyId=&u=https%3A%2F%2Fdx.doi.org%2F10.1093%2Fmind%2FXIX.1.356> (accessed May 12, 2022).

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville and London: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2004), 53.

‘mimetic’ aesthetics advocated by Neo-classicism to a necessary sublimation of psychological realities, repressed hereunto by the codes of ‘civilisation’. Exile as banishment “represents a move out of a fixed urban consciousness into the mystery of ‘what we have not yet become’”¹¹⁵. It opens up a space where the initial, subjective consciousness of the *exsul* undergoes a transformation, in order to expand and be able to accommodate the “Other” as the “Other”.

For both Shelley and Byron, self-imposed exile, usually to the Continent, served as a form of deliberate de-familiarisation resulting from the social ostracism they faced through the vilification and marginalisation of their poetic sensibilities as “Satanic”¹¹⁶. Both of these poets lived during a time when the old monarchies of Europe were undergoing a process of slow disintegration. Unlike the first generation of British Romantic poets, they were less disillusioned with the anarchical possibilities embedded within the French Revolution; they saw in it “a possibility for progress and the empowerment of the populace”¹¹⁷. Their radical and progressive political stances were famously criticised by Robert Southey, who in his *Vision of Judgement*, denounced them as “[m]en of diseased hearts and depraved imaginations, who, forming a system of opinions to suit their own unhappy course of conduct, have rebelled against the holiest ordinances of human society...they are more especially characterised by a Satanic spirit of pride and audacious impiety, which still betrays the wretched feeling of hopelessness wherewith it is allied”¹¹⁸. The adjective “Satanic”, though applied by Southey in a spirit of pure vilification, is nevertheless apt, especially in view of both poet’s admiration of “Satanic exile”¹¹⁹—a condition marked by banishment and dislocation by repressive governance embodied in God—in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (written during his self-imposed exile to Italy during 1818-19) may be termed as a “literary amalgam” of the Miltonic legacy, Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, his reading of the Gnostic philosophy and

¹¹⁵ Hasti Abbasi and Stephanie Green, “Writing and Romantic Exile”, 7.

¹¹⁶ See Robert L. Berger, “Satanic Exile,” in “Enemy Life: Theorizing Exile through Milton, Shelley and Byron” (PhD diss., Binghamton University, 2018), 83-114, https://orb.binghamton.edu/dissertation_and_theses/61 (accessed May 12, 2022).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 148.

¹¹⁸ See Robert Southey, *A Vision of Judgement* (1820), *Lord Byron and his Times*, <https://lordbyron.org/contents.php?doc=RoSouth.1821.Vision.Contents> (accessed May 12, 2022).

¹¹⁹ Robert L. Berger, “Enemy Life: Theorizing Exile through Milton, Shelley and Byron” (PhD diss., Binghamton University, 2018), 145.

his awareness of the repercussions of political struggles aimed at overthrowing despotism. As Prometheus, the recalcitrant Titan and the harbinger of fire is tortured, through his agonising cry he attains a transgressive martyrdom that disrupts the authoritarian rule of Zeus. Yet, in Hesiod, he is a figure who borders on ambivalence, especially since Prometheus' act of passing on the secrets of fire to humanity also caused the Fall of Man and loss of the Golden Age, "which means the loss of divine society, submission to the divine by the necessity of sacrifice, and a life which entails mortality, work, pain and family"¹²⁰. But while Prometheus has been used extensively as a literary symbol and vehicle of the Romantic ego, in the nineteenth century he became associated with the "double-edged" myth of Napoleon, and the exilic experience of the latter at St. Helena after his defeat at the Battle of Trafalgar.¹²¹ As Carmel MacCallum-Barry has pointed out, the "aesthetic mistake" of Napoleon consisted in making "himself Emperor and thereby, betray the Revolution"¹²². But through his exile at St. Helena, Napoleon, (the once widely hailed "son of the Revolution" and thereafter, a "Fallen Titan" after Trafalgar) did "once more become Prometheus in a way much more acceptable to the Romantic imagination"¹²³, as he was seen as expiating his guilt in exile.

George Gordon Byron (amidst rising scandal of his failed marriage with Annabella Millbanke and his incestuous affair with his half-sister Augusta Leigh) left Britain in 1816 for Switzerland, for what would turn out to be a "permanent self-exile"¹²⁴. Although he found himself faced with "the exotic otherness offered by foreign places and personae" in the Continent, he adequately masked his "expatriate nostalgia" through a dramatic distancing of his subjective self from his characters.¹²⁵ In Byron's closet-drama *Manfred*, the eponymous hero is a Faustian nobleman living in the Bernese Alps, and is suffering from the pangs of some mysterious guilt for the death of his beloved, Astarte. Peter W. Graham has read, in it, Byron's deliberate distancing from Manfred, through his deployment of a cast of "natural and supernatural characters who enact Byron's personal drama from a

¹²⁰ Carmel MacCallum-Barry, "Myth under Construction", *Classics Ireland* 7 (2000): 100.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* 101-102.

¹²² *Ibid.* 102.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ See Peter W. Graham, "Byron and Expatriate Nostalgia", *Studies in Romanticism* 47, No. 1: Byron's Scots and Byron's Scotland (Spring 2008): 78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25602130> (accessed May 13, 2022).

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 79.

painful, recently past period of English life”, albeit in an oblique manner, and “in contingent circumstances literally different from his own”¹²⁶. Such distancing is also effected through the use of the exilic subtext in Old Testament story of Cain and Abel. The “Byronically contrarian”¹²⁷ Cain, the firstborn of Adam, is banished to a life of toil. He resents the weight of banishment, “...because/ My father could not keep his place in Eden” and loiters around its gates at twilight to set his eyes upon “...those/ Gardens which are my just inheritance”¹²⁸. In *Don Juan*, Byron uses two versions of exilic, and expatriate nostalgia, both derived from the Homeric epic on Odysseus’s life and adventures, *The Odyssey*. In Canto I, we are introduced to Don Alfonso, a “kind of homecoming Odysseus who finds his unchaste Penelope with her lover, then fails to wreak revenge in his scuffle with the 16-year-old suitor Juan”¹²⁹. However, the more significant instance occurs later, when Lambro the pirate, after a harrowing delay at sea, returns to his Cycladic Island, now ruled in his absence by his daughter Haidee. As Peter W. Graham writes, “[i]n Byron's revision of Homer, Haidee plays both Penelope and Telemakhos to Lambro's Odysseus”¹³⁰. Aspects of the Odysseus figure remain scattered across three characters—Don Alfonso, the “mock”-Odysseus, Lambro the pirate and Don Juan himself.¹³¹ Lambro, who had no means to know that the report of his death had arrived at the island and that it has been mourned for several weeks, chances upon his own people abandoning work and idling away in dance, feasting and festivities. In Byron’s inimitably witty and sardonic tone (aimed as ‘mock-heroic’ undercutting of the gravity of the Homeric tale), the reader discerns that Odysseus’s reconciliatory homecoming was, in fact, a lucky coincidence:

An honest Gentleman on his return
 May not have the good fortune of Ulysses
 Not all lone Matrons for their husbands mourn,
 Or show the same dislike to Suitors’ kisses;
 The Odds are that he finds a handsome Urn
 To his memory, and two or three young Misses

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ George Gordon Byron, *Cain, a Mystery* (Chamalières, France: Editions Artemis, 2004), 10-11, https://eclass.uoa.gr/modules/document/file.php/ENL285/byron_cain.pdf (accessed May 13, 2022).

¹²⁹ Peter W. Graham, “Byron and Expatriate Nostalgia”, 82.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Born to some friend, who holds his wife and riches,
And that his Argus bites him by – the breeches.¹³²

What strikes the reader here is Byron's more general point that once expatriation and severance has taken place from the place known and remembered as "home", one can return only to an altered place, a place that *has been* home but *is* no longer. This same exilic crisis had also been Lambro's fate, for even as he returns,

He enter'd in the house no more his home,
A thing to human feelings the most trying,
And harder for the heart to overcome,
Perhaps, than even the mental pangs of dying;
To find our hearthstone turn'd into a tomb,
And round its once warm precincts palely lying
The ashes of our hopes, is a deep grief—
Beyond a single gentleman's belief.

He enter'd in the house, his home no more,
For without hearts there is no home;--and felt
The solitude of passing his own door
Without a welcome; *there* he long had dwelt,
There his few peaceful days Time had swept o'er,
There his worn bosom and keen eye would melt
Over the innocence of that sweet child,
His only shrine of feelings undefiled.¹³³

It is important also to notice the subtle distinctions Byron tries to make between Homeric *nostos* and that of his own era. Penelope's unchanging fidelity to Odysseus in the Homeric myth is appropriately shortened, in Haidee's case, to a matter of weeks and months during which Lambro's "death" is mourned and slowly left behind. However, doggedly resistant to modification, Lambro is shown as resenting inevitable and natural change in his daughter Haidee, now grown up into a lady, and in love with Don Juan. Through Lambro's resentment, Byron constructs a thinly veiled self-portrait of himself as a repentant and desperate expatriate father, to his daughter Ada, whom he had left behind forever. Yet, Byron's poetic self (notwithstanding the weight of its inherently 'Romantic' ego) leaves ample evidence of regarding this expatriate nostalgia as deceptive; as "the milk of human kindness" in the homecoming Lambro metamorphoses into rage, turning him "like

¹³² George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan* 3.23, *Project Gutenberg*,
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21700/21700-h/21700-h.htm> (accessed May 13, 2022).

¹³³ George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan* 3.51-52, *Project Gutenberg*,
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21700/21700-h/21700-h.htm> (accessed May 14, 2022).

the Cyclops mad with blindness”¹³⁴. In Peter W. Graham’s reading, Lambro-as Odysseus freely transmutes into Lambro-as-Cyclops—“the brutish, island-bound antitype to the wily sea-wanderer”¹³⁵. The blindness of the Cyclops serves as a well-fitting likeness to Lambro’s blindness in the love of his daughter. His rage may therefore be seen as a tacit acknowledgement of a desperation Byron should have been no stranger to in his self-imposed exile.

The conventionally Romantic exhortation of expatriation however, also occurs in a Byronic work such as *The Island*, composed during the years when Byron joined the cause of the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Turks and set in a lonely Polynesian island such as Tahiti. Although Captain Bligh longs to return home, his nostalgia is not shared by the crew (especially since he anticipates returning home successful and well-compensated with profits) comprised of “conscripted and disenfranchised Britons”¹³⁶. Their young hearts “which languished for some sunny isle” full of “summer years and summer women”¹³⁷, reject the pull of patriotic fervour, having been away too long from England. The Romantic intervention into the discourse of Noble Savagery clearly informs Byron’s depiction of the isle as a stereotypical tropical paradise where men of ‘civilisation’ unlearn their acquired aspirations and “half uncivilized, preferred the cave/ Of some soft savage to the uncertain wave”¹³⁸. However, a typical Romantic exhortation of Noble Savagery can only take place through the Byronic conception of the island as “perfectly idyllic—a seasonless Arcadia without political inequality, capitalism, and even the need to labor”¹³⁹. However, once such a humanistic position is adopted, the fact that this *locus amoenus* is only imagined by European consciousness problematizes this expatriate nostalgia. One of the major sources for the poem was William Mariner’s account of staying a long period of time in the Tonga islands, being the sole survivor of a ship’s crew massacred by

¹³⁴ George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan* 3.57, *Project Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21700/21700-h/21700-h.htm> (accessed May 14, 2022).

¹³⁵ Peter W. Graham, “Byron and Expatriate Nostalgia”, 84.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 88.

¹³⁷ George Gordon Byron, *The Island, or Christian and his Comrades* 1.2 ed. Peter Cochran, 3, https://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/the_island.pdf (accessed May 15, 2022).

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Peter W. Graham, “Byron and Expatriate Nostalgia”, 89.

the islanders.¹⁴⁰ In Mariner's account, this eulogisation of the natives as "harmless children of Nature" was nowhere to be found; he had, in fact, depicted them "as prone to rage, murder, thievery, cannibalism, and sporadic internecine warfare"¹⁴¹. Despite the attempts to re-integrate the "other" through exilic experiences that de-familiarise, Byronic expatriate nostalgia never attempts to understand the Other *as the* Other, running instead the predictable course of using the relative benefits of exilic distance to critique political events back "home".

But even as British Romanticism, by the late 1820s, was already on the wane, the Romantic ideology gained widespread recognition and prominence in Russian literature only during that decade. Two of greatest poets of this period in Russian literature were Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, and both are related to an idealised conception of exilic forbearance. Pushkin, arguably Russia's greatest lyric poet, became the central literary figure of the epoch, dominating the Russian world of letters for the next two decades. Being one of the few Russians who had received a liberal European education, the young Pushkin was an advocate of introducing modern language-reforms into Old Russian. He had joined the liberal humanist Arzamas Society, a literary circle active during the years 1815-18.¹⁴² The Arzamas Society were also pitching a "literary battle" of sorts, against the conservative group "Lovers of the Russian Word" (associated with the philologist Aleksandr S. Shiskov), who wished to keep the modern Russian language firmly anchored to its Old Church-Slavonic roots.¹⁴³ Pushkin had also joined the Green Lamp Association, a literary-political circle that thrived in St. Petersburg¹⁴⁴—where Pushkin had also relocated to, in 1817 as part of his duties in the Imperial Civil Service—during 1819-20. The Green Lamp Association was more of a study circle where poetry, reviews of theatre productions and discussions on socio-political issues through historical and political articles would be carried

¹⁴⁰ See George Gordon Byron, "Introductory Note," in *The Island, or Christian and his Comrades* ed. Peter Cochran, 3, https://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/the_island.pdf (accessed May 15, 2022).

¹⁴¹ See James C. McKusick, "The Politics of Language in Byron's *The Island*", *ELH* 59, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 844, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2873297> (accessed May 15, 2022).

¹⁴² See B. Hollingsworth, "Arzamas: Portrait of a Literary Society", *The Slavonic and East-European Review* 44, no. 103 (July 1966): 306-326, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4205778> (accessed May 15, 2022).

¹⁴³ See "Arzamas Society: Russian Literary Society", *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arzamas-society> (accessed May 15, 2022)

¹⁴⁴ See "Green Lamp: Russian Literary Society", *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Green-Lamp> (accessed May 15, 2022).

out, consolidating the opinion of the class of educated Russians towards a more progressive society of the future through the overthrow of the monarchical despotism of the Tsars.¹⁴⁵ Pushkin's composition and self-recital of his poem "Ode to Liberty" was deemed seditious by Tsar Nicholas I, an event following which he was exiled to the Russian "south" through a civil service transfer.¹⁴⁶ The poem "Ode to Liberty" advocates radical rebellion against the iron-hand of a tyrannical monarchy. The slowly decaying monarchy is not only directly denounced in the poem, Pushkin poses it as a rallying cry to unite the oppressed serfs, "thrilled" to their "slavery":

Now, flighty Fortune's favoured knaves,
Tremble, O Tyrants of the Earth!
But ye: take heed now, know your worth
And rise as men, ye fallen slaves!¹⁴⁷

The youthful Pushkin's exhortation of the French Revolution was not well-taken by Tsar Nicholas I, who intended to exile him to Siberia. However, through the intervention of Count Mikhail Miloradovich who pleaded with the Tsar to "soften" the sentence, he was transferred to the Caucasus-region.¹⁴⁸ Pushkin left St. Petersburg in May, 1820 and for the next six years, he travelled extensively across the Caucasus, Crimea and Moldova. He was sent first to Yekaterinoslav (now Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine) where he was taken gravely ill and thereafter, kept travelling along the northern Caucasus region into Crimea, and finally, to Moldova. He was posted at Kishinyov (now Chişinău), a remote outpost in "Moldovia" during the period 1820-23 and thereafter to Odessa, in 1823-24.¹⁴⁹ In Odessa, Pushkin "publicly courted the wife of his superior, Count Vorontsov, governor-general of the province, the affair becoming so scandalous that the kindly official had to ask for the poet's recall"¹⁵⁰. And thus, quite obligingly, the police intercepted Pushkin's personal letters to cite his sympathies for the atheistic

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ See *Pushkin in Exile: A Musical Journey through the Life of a Great Poet*, <https://www.pushkininexile.com/> (accessed May 15, 2022).

¹⁴⁷ Alexander Pushkin, "Ode to Liberty" trans. A.Z. Foreman, <https://ruverses.com/alexander-pushkin/ode-to-liberty/> (accessed May 15, 2022)

¹⁴⁸ See "Early Life", *Pushkin in Exile: A Musical Journey through the Life of a Great Poet*, <https://www.pushkininexile.com/early-life> (accessed May 15, 2022)

¹⁴⁹ See "Kishinev and Odessa", *Pushkin in Exile: A Musical Journey through the Life of a Great Poet*, <https://www.pushkininexile.com/kishinev-and-odessa> (accessed May 15, 2022).

¹⁵⁰ See Antony Wood, "Translator's Introduction," in *Alexander Pushkin: Selected Poetry* trans. Antony Wood (London: Penguin Classics, 2020), 27.

arguments of a local philosopher, a certain “deaf Englishman”, for which he was expelled from the Imperial Civil Service and was confined to surveillance and house arrest, in his mother’s “small estate at Mikhailovskoe, near Pskov”¹⁵¹.

It would not be an overstatement to suggest that internal exile ‘liberated’ Pushkin, bringing out of the best of the Romantic sensibility in him. The majestic splendour of the Caucasus mountains inspired in him a “sublimity” that creatively transmuted into his long Byronic narrative poem of 1821, *The Prisoner of the Caucasus (Kavkazskii plennik)*— sometimes also alternatively translated as the *Captive of the Caucasus*—about an exiled Russian officer gravely disillusioned with the artificialities of elite urban life, who is exiled and enslaved in the Caucasus mountains as part of his penal servitude to the Imperial Tsardom.. Pushkin dedicates, to the Muse of Liberty, “the song of the banished lyre/ And its inspired leisure”¹⁵². The nameless, exiled officer is rescued by a “black-eyed” Circassian maiden who also falls in love with him. But despite the plaintive requests of the maiden, the officer rejects her love for him, stating his inability to reciprocate her feelings. His gradual acculturation to the indigenous Circassian culture, which he discovers in the Caucasus region, also leads him to try, however vainly, to relate to, and identify with it. One night, while the men are out to raid a nearby Cossack village, the Circassian maiden cuts away at his chains with a saw, in order to free him. When it is his turn to declare his love for her however, she refuses, urging him instead to find love in another, and to leave her to her own cruel fate. Presumably, in the final sections of the tragic poem, she commits suicide by drowning herself in a river.

Pushkin’s “Epilogue” to the poem however, offers a jarring note to his seeming glorification of native Circassian courage and heroism in the poem-proper. In it, he explicitly glorifies “Kotliarevsky, the scourge of the Caucasus” and admonishes the “Proud sons of the Caucasus”, who despite having fought, “have perished terribly”¹⁵³. He goes on, in one of the earliest attempts in Russian

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 28-29.

¹⁵² Alexander Pushkin, “Prisoner of the Caucasus”, 2, <http://faculty.washington.edu/jdwest/russ430/prisoner.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2022).

¹⁵³ Ibid. 9.

literature, to depict the “still mythical Caucasus”¹⁵⁴—a counterpoint, in its “noble savagery” to Western imperial domination. Thus, John Lyles has gone one to show that Pushkin’s poem “reveals the double-edged sword of imperialistic expansionism: on the one hand, there is an idealization of an Other and its way of life, while on the other, contact between the empire and the Other leads to the destruction of that way of life”¹⁵⁵. The Soviet scholar Boris Tomashevsky has read the epilogue to the poem as Pushkin’s way of contradicting his exotic and idealised portrayal of the indigenous Circassians: he “uses the epilogue to remind the reader that the Circassian way of life was not superior to the Russian”¹⁵⁶. Although Pushkin’s attempted de-familiarisation of “Russian” values satisfied the eager ethnographical curiosities of the average Russian reader regarding these indigenous “Others”, such a strategy is conveniently subsumed under the rhetoric of justifying Russian imperial hegemony. Pushkin’s innate belief in the relative “superiority” of Eurocentric ways of life over those of the “Orient” also shows forth. Tomashevsky specifically lays bare epistolary proof of Pushkin writing to the Pavel Pestel, one of the leaders of the failed Decembrist uprising of 1825, where the former expresses hope at the fact that

The savage Circassians have become timorous; their ancient audacity is disappearing. The roads are becoming less dangerous by the hour, and the numerous convoys are becoming superfluous. It is to be hoped that this conquered land, which until now has brought no real benefit to Russia, will soon form a bridge between us and the Persians for safe trading, that it will not be an obstacle to us in future wars - and that perhaps we shall carry out Napoleon's chimerical plan of conquering India. ¹⁵⁷

The modern commentator on Romanticism and its connections to exilic subjectivity will not fail to notice Pushkin’s Eurocentric apologia for subsuming the “Other” within its fold. This fact becomes all the more problematic when seen in the light of Pushkin’s sympathies for a more democratic form of governance and

¹⁵⁴ John Lyles, “Bloody Verses: Rereading “Pushkin's Prisoner of the Caucasus”, *Pushkin Review / Пушкинский вестник*, 16/17 (2013-2014): 234, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43783280> (accessed May 16, 2022).

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 234-35.

¹⁵⁶ Boris Tomashevsky, quoted in Lyles, “Bloody Verses: Rereading “Pushkin's Prisoner of the Caucasus”, 235.

¹⁵⁷ See *The Letters of Alexander Pushkin: Three Volumes in One*, ed. and trans. J. Thomas Shaw (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 75-76.

his covert support for the failed Decembrist uprising of 1825¹⁵⁸. Pushkin believed, with the Decembrist leader Pavel Pestel, in the justification of European hegemony over Asia, although this position was deemed, in Susan Layton's words, as "perfectly compatible with a program of radical reform and modernization at home"¹⁵⁹. In all probability, as Layton has claimed, the "Epilogue" to the poem was Pushkin's way of trying to appease the government in the hope of obtaining an early pardon which would terminate his exile.¹⁶⁰ However, this seeming act of servile posturing should not deter us from noticing that Pushkin also problematizes the imperial project, "by showing it for what it was: the annihilation of a people sympathetic and human, with whom his readers largely related over the first two parts of the poem"¹⁶¹. But, in his depiction of the indigenous Circassians, he took recourse to the same "Orientalist" stance that had characterised Byron's depiction of "the exotic Other, noble, yet savage, living in an age long past guided by simple laws and uncorrupted by advances in science and technology"¹⁶².

Pushkin's larger poetic realisation of exile is concentrated in his reception of Ovid during the years 1821-24. This phase includes his close reading of *Tristia* and *Epistulae Ex Ponto*, as well as "legends he heard about Ovid in Moldavia"¹⁶³. Pushkin consciously constructed an Ovid-persona in his poem "To Ovid" (1821), the introductory stanzas of his verse-novel *Eugene Onigin* (1823) and in *The Gypsies* (1824). As David Houston has phrased it, "Pushkin's Ovid becomes less historical and increasingly legendary over time, and Pushkin's myth

¹⁵⁸ **Decembrist Uprising of 1825:** The Decembrist (Russian. *Dekabrist*) Uprising was a failed uprising in St. Petersburg, on December 14, 1825, backed primarily by the upper classes with military background, to de-throne Tsar Nicholas I, who became Tsar after a brief period of interregnum after the death of his brother Tsar Alexander I. The roots of the Decembrist Uprising may be sought in Russia's gradual "opening up" to European culture and ways of life during the decade of the Napoleonic Wars—forms of intellectual Westernization that had been fostered in the eighteenth century by an Tsarist autocracy. However, through their political radicalisation through the "liberal" ideals of the French Revolution and the American War of Independence, the demands of the Decembrists now included opposition to autocracy, a representative government, calls for the abolition of serfdom, and, in some instances, even the advocacy of a revolutionary overthrow of the government. Although the rebellion failed, it became an eminent forerunner of the October Revolution which finally led to the abolition of Tsardom in 1917.

¹⁵⁹ Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ John Lyles, "Bloody Verses: Rereading "Pushkin's Prisoner of the Caucasus", 241.

¹⁶² *Ibid.* 242.

¹⁶³ See David Houston, "Another Look at the Poetics of Exile: Pushkin's Reception of Ovid 1821-24", *Pushkin Review / Пушкинский вестник* 10, Special Issue in Honor of J. Thomas Shaw (2007): 129, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43783181> (accessed May 14, 2022).

of voluntary exile comes to mirror the realities of forced banishment”¹⁶⁴. Ovid’s creation of a new genre of lyric poetry—the exilic elegy—attracted Pushkin most to the former’s literary projections of his exiled self. On the factual level, the similarities between both poets’ exile as banishment (though far removed in time), and other biographical parallels between the two poets had informed Pushkin’s poetic re-assessment of Ovid’s exile to Tomis, near the shores of the Black Sea. Moreover, Ovid’s literary representations of his exilic reality consisted in projecting both a hyperbolic and an autobiographical self, thus marking the differences between the narratorial modes employed in lyric poetry and the epistle respectively. Houston also identifies the biographical legends Pushkin came across during his three-year residence at “Moldavia” as having informed the newly assumed “Ovid-persona” in his poems.¹⁶⁵ “To Ovid” builds on Pushkin’s reading of the *Tristia* and the *Epistulae Ex Ponto* and posits a subjectivity analogous to the exiled Roman predecessor. The lyrical “I” of Pushkin reflects on the fact that he is now residing in Ovid’s place of exile: “...near the quiet banks, where you once brought your exiled native gods and left your ashes”¹⁶⁶. Stephanie Sandler therefore, aptly reads the deployment of the Ovidian mask as “an act of ventriloquism”¹⁶⁷. However, certain jarring references to the “Other” do abound within the poem, particularly the one to the “fierce sons of Scythia”¹⁶⁸, whose courage know no limits. The elderly Ovid is chastised, by Pushkin’s lyric persona, for the former’s turning away from codes of martial behaviour, “despising the tumult of the warrior's life from your youngest days, accustomed to crowning your head with roses...”¹⁶⁹. Pushkin also obliquely makes reference “to Voltaire’s conjecture that Ovid was involved with Augustus’ daughter, Julia”, accusing the Roman poet of having “eternally humiliated his proud conscience”¹⁷⁰. These expositions pave the path for Pushkin to estimate his own exilic subjectivity vis-à-vis that of his poetic predecessor. The lyrical “I” of the poems proclaims,

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 130.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Alexander Pushkin, “To Ovid” trans. David Houston and Catherine O’Neill, quoted in David Houston, “Another Look at the Poetics of Exile: Pushkin’s Reception of Ovid 1821-24”, 133.

¹⁶⁷ See Stephanie Sandler, *Distant Pleasures: Alexander Pushkin and the Writing of Exile* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 46.

¹⁶⁸ Pushkin, “To Ovid”, quoted in David Houston, “Another Look at the Poetics of Exile: Pushkin’s Reception of Ovid 1821-24”, 134.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 134.

I was your equal not in glory but in destiny. But I never tainted with lawless treachery either my proud conscience or my unbending lyre. ¹⁷¹.

The poet-narrator further says that he is exonerated of the guilt of appeasement, something which Ovid could not lay claim to, owing to his ardent pleadings before Emperor Augustus to shorten the span of his exilic hardships at Tomis. This servility on the part of Ovid was disconcerting and unsettling for Pushkin, who has the poet-narrator say “I don’t pay homage to an ignoramus”, and that he will not “blinded by hope/ Sing to Octavius my plights of flattery”¹⁷². Nevertheless, Pushkin did find himself greatly moved by the sorrowful Ovidian lament of displacement as the following rhetorical questions, conceived of as a linguistic strategy of coping with the plight of exile, go on to show:

Whose cold heart, despising the Graces,
Can reproach your despair and your tears?
Who can in his crude pride read and not be touched
By these elegies, your last creations,
Where you bequeathed your last groan to the descendants? ¹⁷³

But despite claiming to “understand” the hyperbole of Ovidian “tears”, Pushkin’s poet-narrator describes himself as “a stern Slav”¹⁷⁴, unflinching perhaps, in his solemnity, in contrast to Ovid’s vexed Mediterranean temper. Pushkin’s place of exile, although geographically closer, and similar to Ovid’s legendary Tomis certainly cannot be considered as having been beset with the same tribulations that Ovid had faced because, as Sandler has argued, what appeared as a cold, gloomy and a *barbari*-infested wasteland towards to the Roman poet appeared as the warm and inviting “south” to former.¹⁷⁵ The final lines console the Roman poet’s spirit since the legacy of his poetry, reminding the reader that “the Ovidian wreath, has not withered”¹⁷⁶. To Pushkin, a twenty-two year old Romantic poet, exile did not necessarily mean a “poetic death” (as it had appeared to Ovid) but he saw it “almost as a resurrection, a cleansing moment, an opportunity for a new beginning but more

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Alexander Pushkin, “To Ovid”, *Alexander Pushkin*, <https://aleksandr-pushkin.su/k-ovidiyu/?lang=en> (accessed May 15, 2022).

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ See Stephanie Sandler, *Distant Pleasures: Alexander Pushkin and the Writing of Exile* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 49.

¹⁷⁶ Alexander Pushkin, “To Ovid”, *Alexander Pushkin*, <https://aleksandr-pushkin.su/k-ovidiyu/?lang=en> (accessed May 15, 2022).

importantly for the assertion of his freedom, a theme that in the poems written after the brutally suppressed Decembrist uprising in 1825 acquired a specially poignant character. The Romantic notion of free self-assertion demanded that within the space of a literary work such as a poem, the lyric poet may also resort to falsification—Pushkin thus concealed the realities of banishment and penal servitude that had conditioned his own exile to the Russian “south” and instead dubbed the lyrical “I” as having been a “self-willed exile”¹⁷⁷.

In Pushkin’s narrative poem *The Gypsies* (1824), the poet traces the failures of the Greek Revolution and the War of Independence, through which he critiques European liberalism and Rousseau’s conception of the “noble savage”. As Masim Hanukai has shown, the poem may be considered “as a watershed work for Pushkin, one that marked his break with the peculiar brand of Romanticism that he inherited from Lord Byron”¹⁷⁸. The political context in which the poem was composed also helps one to locate Pushkin’s disagreement, in its course, with the Byronic trope of voluntary exile. The Philhellenic Movement, which sought to reinstate Greece to her former glory, enlisted the support of a host of European literary luminaries such as Shelley, Byron, Goethe, Chateaubriand, Alexander Dumas and Victor Hugo who traced their cultural roots back to it. Demetrios J. Farsolas therefore, hails the Philhellenic Movement as the “greatest expression of liberalism in the period of reaction”¹⁷⁹. Pushkin, in the initial phases of the Greek Revolution, reserved great respect for its Hetairist leader Alexander Ypsilantis who became for him “the latest incarnation of the Byronic hero”¹⁸⁰. But despite being initially successful and quite assured of Russian support, the Greek cause gradually started to lose momentum, especially since “the Russian tsar, who feared that a conflict with the Ottoman Empire would open a breach in the Holy Alliance” decided to not take sides, and by the autumn of 1821, “the Turks had retaken Wallachia and Ypsilantis was compelled to lay down arms and seek refuge in Austria”¹⁸¹. Farsolas also shows, in another essay, that from 1823, a change was visible in Pushkin’s

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ See Masim Hanukai, “Pushkin’s Tragic Visions, 1824-1830” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014), 12, <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D81834ND> (accessed May 15, 2022).

¹⁷⁹ See Demetrios J. Farsolas, “The Greek Revolution in the Principalities as Seen by Alexander Pushkin,” *Neo-Hellenika* II (1975): 98-99,

¹⁸⁰ Masim Hanukai, “Pushkin’s Tragic Visions, 1824-1830”, 21.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 18.

poetry, wherein “a new note of scepticism was heard, scepticism both with respect to the successful outcome of any revolutionary movement and with respect to the genuine determination of the peoples to achieve freedom”¹⁸².

Against this backdrop, Pushkin started work on *The Gypsies* in January 1824, foregrounding, what Jerome J. McGann has called the “dramas of displacement”—works in which “the actual [i.e., topical] human issues with which poetry is concerned are resituated in a variety of idealized localities”¹⁸³. But within this idealized locale, Pushkin attempted a creative re-assessment of the model of the “Noble Savage”, made popular within the larger scope of European Enlightenment discourses through Byronic appropriations of it in literature. Masim Hanukai has demonstrated that Pushkin attempted to critique Rousseau’s set of hypotheses about social contract and the “primitive man” (“man” in an anterior state of civilisation), advanced in the Second Discourse.¹⁸⁴ Apart from outlining a variety of causes for the emergence of inequality among mankind and proposing a theory of the ‘Social Contract’, Rousseau also partakes of the nature/civilisation binary typical of European Enlightenment thought, especially through his unambiguous preference for the savage (the “man of nature”). Hanukai thus summarises Rousseau’s position in the following lines:

Civilized man, according to Rousseau, lacks the vigor of his primitive ancestor, having been sapped of his strength by the twin evils of labor and luxury. Whereas the savage lives in harmony with nature, enjoying the benefits of its gifts and ignorant of any restrictions on his freedom, civilized man has inflicted misery upon himself by entering into a state of society that deforms his natural character and subjects him to universal dependence.¹⁸⁵

In contrast to the “savage” who only has “needs”, civilised man, Rousseau argues, is subject to the mercy of their “passions”¹⁸⁶. For Rousseau, the more violent the “passions”, more the need to contain and limit human behaviour

¹⁸² Demetrios J. Farsolas, “Alexander Pushkin: His Attitude Toward the Greek Revolution, 1821-1829,” *Balkan Studies* 12, no. 1 (1971): 73.

¹⁸³ See Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 1

¹⁸⁴ See Masim Hanukai, “Pushkin’s Tragic Visions, 1824-1830”, 7-8.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 32.

¹⁸⁶ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality”, trans. G.D.H. Cole, *AUB: American University of Beirut*,

<https://aub.edu.lb/fas/cvsp/Documents/DiscourseonInequality.pdf879500092.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2022), 16.

by the use of laws, often found insufficient to actually prevent human beings from committing criminal behaviour. “Civil society” itself arose, he writes, when “[t]he first man, who, after enclosing a piece of ground, took it to his head to say this is mine, and found people simple enough to believe him”.¹⁸⁷ Rousseau also directly cites a Lockean axiom: “[w]here there is no property, there can be no injury”, to point out the manifold evils of civil society as opposed to a “state of nature”¹⁸⁸. Thus, through the lens of a European, ‘civilised’ man, Rousseau could only see the “savage” as having “not the least idea of *meum* and *tuum*”¹⁸⁹, and no true conception of justice; they looked upon every violence to which they were subjected, rather as an injury that might easily be repaired than as a crime that ought to be punished; and they never thought of taking revenge,¹⁹⁰. The primitivist utopia posited by Rousseau to advance the hypothesis of the “noble savage” was a world without laws, property relations or the family. In the poem, Pushkin begins from Rousseau’s line of thinking, but, by the end, critiques the static conception of this “Originalist” utopia. He depicts the gypsies in “Bessarabia” as a nomadic tribe with several of the hallmarks of Rousseau’s “savage” (such as freedom, “calm of the passions” and tranquillity) but desists from showing them as immune to the march of history and the irreversible changes it induces. By showing a gypsy family who have known the bliss of domesticity, Pushkin is drawing attention to the fact that even the gypsies should be seen as representing an intermediate state of civilisation, where they are slowly evolving as community. Within this decidedly “foreign” and exotic setting, Pushkin introduces the Romantic hero Aleko (a thinly veiled literary projection of himself) who has deliberately chosen exile and displacement to escape the Law, which is closely tied with “civil society”. At its very beginning, the poem re-enacts a typically Levinasian scenario through the meeting of the ‘civilised’ Aleko and the gypsy girl Zemfira. Aleko wants to become like the Gypsies, integrated within the folds of a community he has imagined to be idyllic, in the closeness to Rousseau’s “state of nature”¹⁹¹. When Zemfira asks him whether he regrets having to leave his own homeland, Aleko retorts:

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 23.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 27.

¹⁸⁹ *meum* and *tuum* (Latin); literally meaning “mine and thine”

¹⁹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality”, 20.

¹⁹¹ See Alexander Pushkin, *The Gypsies* trans. Colin J. Holcombe (Santiago, Chile: Ocaso Press, 2019), 91-94.

What to regret? When you knew,
when you imagined
the bondage of stuffy cities!
There people in masses behind enclosure,
do not breathe morning cool nor vernal smell of meadows;

love ashamed, thoughts being driven by bargain,
will their heads before idols bend,
and begging if money, and yes, chains.

What threw I? Betrayal, excitement,
prejudice, condemnation,
the crowd's insane persecution
or resplendent disgrace.¹⁹²

But notwithstanding Aleko's denunciation of "civil society" here, he urges the Gypsies "never to change", so that their other-ness from the life he is fleeing from may remain a constant sign of refuge to his now-exiled "Citizen" self.¹⁹³ Aleko says he desires for "love, leisure/ and voluntary exile"¹⁹⁴. A nameless "Old Man" among the gypsies then introduces him to the legend of Ovid in Bessarabia, but in a cruel twist of fate and irony, he has forgotten "his learned nickname"¹⁹⁵. Pushkin's Ovid comes across as "weak and timid", one who could never accustom himself to "the cares of poor life" in exile.¹⁹⁶ A desolate and inconsolable Ovid is visualised by Pushkin, "[w]andering along the banks of the Danube" shedding the "bitter tears of exile".¹⁹⁷ This is especially true for the orders of civilised men for whom "freedom is not certain good", since they have been brought up in more civil, and "softer ways"¹⁹⁸. Thus, in ways that radically depart from an older Byronic model of imagining the Other in terms of the self, Pushkin attempts to provide the European reader an insight into a supposed conception of how Aleko's desire for integration into the society of the Gypsies might have seemed to the Old Man. And by suggesting a continuity between the nameless exiled poet and Aleko's desire, Pushkin highlights the impassability of a few borders that separate the self from the Other. His rendering of the Ovid myth departs from, and contradicts, the quasi-historical accounts of Ovid among the Getae, a barbaric people who often "talk maliciously to my face/ quite safely, taunting me

¹⁹² Ibid. 94

¹⁹³ Ibid. 96.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 98.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 32.

perhaps for my exile.¹⁹⁹ Pushkin also hints at constant changes wrought on both men of ‘nature’ and ‘civilisation’, particularly in the section where, after a brief period of conjugal happiness, Zemfira falls out of love with Aleko and takes a new lover (the young Gypsy) for herself. Her father now recounts the tale of his ex-wife Mariula abandoning him—a tale of personal misfortune and desolation where the fickleness of womanly affections is compared to the changing moon: “Women range/ to where they will, and none believe/ the young in love will never change”²⁰⁰.

But in a way markedly unlike the old man’s Stoic resignation against a personal misfortune, Aleko, the man of civilisation, finds himself afflicted with sexual jealousy and possessiveness. He is unwilling to cede his rights unto Zemfira, and contemplates revenge against his rival in love. Pushkin invests the plot with a self-negating circularity where earlier events proleptically foreshadow their later, more ominous counterparts. In a final, and violent confrontation scene by a similar funeral mound as the one Aleko and Zemfira had met at the beginning of the poem, we find Aleko stabbing both Zemfira and her lover, the young Gypsy man. He is expelled from their community, but, as Thomas Barran has argued, the exposure of the Gypsy society to self-destructive passions such as Aleko’s only foreshadows the collapse of their pre-civilisational state; “for the Gypsies now know the fatal passions and they are held in thrall by the Fates”²⁰¹. Pushkin however goes a step further when he shows the Gypsies being not only familiar with violent “passions” such as love, hatred and jealousy, but also subject to their whims and fluctuations.

The Gypsies thus remains a text which demonstrates that “the Rousseauist utopias of Byron and other Romantics”²⁰² fail for Pushkin, insofar as they conceive of alterity (the “state of nature”) as static, and offer a nostalgic view of human history. The Romantic trope of choosing “voluntary exile” to exotic and idealised locales is critiqued as a form of self-deception, especially since, from Pushkin’s subjectivity as a European man of letters, the alterity posed by the

¹⁹⁹ See Ovid, “Harsh Exile in Tomis”, *Tristia V.X*: 1-53, trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkFive.php#anchor_Toc34217368 (accessed May 15, 2022).

²⁰⁰ Alexander Pushkin, *The Gypsies* trans. Colin J. Holcombe (Santiago, Chile: Ocaso Press, 2019), 48.

²⁰¹ See Thomas Barran, *Russia Reads Rousseau, 1762-1825* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2002), 307-308.

²⁰² See Masim Hanukai, “Pushkin’s Tragic Visions, 1824-1830”, 47.

“Other” was not a mere sanctuary to those beset with the ills of civilisation, it was a site of dynamic changes that could threaten (and therefore, alter) the very identity of the European subject. Pushkin thus undermines “the logic behind Rousseau’s dream of escape from civilisation” which usually was the subject of a significant body of Romantic texts that deal with exile and exilic subjectivity—most notably, “Byron’s “Eastern Tales”, with their exotic, Oriental locales and strong-willed protagonists”²⁰³.

The Gypsies also mark a turn in the young Pushkin, from a being a “Byronic” apprentice to an engaged and evolved critic of the Byronic model of Romantic exile. In Pushkin’s later works, notably in the verse novel *Eugene Onegin* (1833), the vagaries of the egotistical Byronic hero are met not with uncritical authorial admiration, but also derision and scorn. Born into wealth and privilege, Onegin represents Pushkin’s pioneering fictionalisation of the character-type, the “Superfluous Man” (*Lisny chelovek*), whose typical traits consist of disregard for tradition, a recalcitrant cynicism and existential boredom.²⁰⁴ The essentially self-serving and indifferent nature of this character-type is striking, and according to David Patterson, he appears as “not just another literary type but as a paradigm of a person who has lost a point, a place and a presence in life: the superfluous man is the homeless man”²⁰⁵. Citing references from two prominent Russian literary encyclopaedias, Patterson notes the “alienation from the official life of Russia” as the result of an unfavourable exposure to Western education in the “Superfluous Man”²⁰⁶. Similarly, Jesse Clardy and Betty Clardy have argued that “the superfluous man emerged as a result of too much affluence, too much leisure, too much idle time for the children of the privileged class in Tsarist Russian society”²⁰⁷. Patterson shows his “monological discourse” as standing “outside any process of becoming” thus pitting him against the “free man”, someone “free to become something other than what we are through a capacity for response, a responsibility,

²⁰³ Ibid. 53.

²⁰⁴ See “Superfluous Man”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/superfluous-man> (accessed May 16, 2022).

²⁰⁵ David Patterson, “The Loss of the Word in the Superfluous Man,” in *Exile: The Sense of Alienation in Modern Russian Letters* (Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1995), 2.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ See Jesse V. Clardy and Betty S. Clardy, *The Superfluous Man in Russian Letters* (Washington D.C.: Univ. Press of America, 1980), 160.

toward another”²⁰⁸. In his case, Patterson goes on to claim, “the discourse that interacts with life proclaims an exile from life...a discourse of exile from discourse, a word expressive of the loss of the word”²⁰⁹. In course of time, the “Superfluous Man” became the enduring prototype emulated by Ivan Turgenev (Tchulkaturin in *Diary of a Superfluous Man*), Ivan Goncharov (*Oblomov*), Mikhail Lermontov (Pechorin in *A Hero of Our Time*) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*). In course of time, Pushkin would outgrow his initial fondness for the Byronic hero and the Romantic trope of self-exile. In particular, through formulating a character-type who, despite his idealism and goodwill, fails at effective action, Pushkin also hints at the “outdated” nature of the character. The rise of the “Superfluous Man”, Frank Friedeberg Seeley has shown, coincides with the estrangement of the Russian intelligentsia from the old feudal order as well as the emergence of a new “Europeanised” monarchical ruling elite, causing the political circumstances “when the intelligent inveighs against the society which has rejected him without actually seeking any fresh alliance and jangles the chains of his frustration without being able to shake them off”²¹⁰. While it is true that part of Pushkin’s sympathies do lie with a romanticised-Ovid or the jealous lover Aleko, he is also aware of the tragic pitfalls of over-indulgence. For twentieth century Russian poets such as Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsetaeva and novelists such as Vladimir Nabokov, Boris Pasternak, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Mikhail Bulgakov, this existential isolation and ‘exile’ transmutes into “an expression of that Russian condition that most of all announces the homelessness of the modern human condition in its existential and metaphysical aspects”²¹¹.

1.3. “Beyond bread, beyond a home/ A great dream comes”: The Poetry of Exile in the Twentieth Century

In the twentieth century, “exile” undergoes a transformation, where it no longer operates now as a form of banishment or aimless wandering but is instead

²⁰⁸ David Patterson, “The Loss of the Word in the Superfluous Man,” in *Exile: The Sense of Alienation in Modern Russian Letters* (Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1995), 6.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 5.

²¹⁰ Frank Friedeberg Seeley, “The Heyday of the 'Superfluous Man' in Russia,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 31 (1952): 94-95. .

²¹¹ David Patterson, *Exile: The Sense of Alienation in Modern Russian Letters* (Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1995), ix.

symptomatic of an unfulfilled “median state”²¹² as designated by Edward Said. The fact that the coordinates of space and time invite a move away from the conventional interstices of “home” and “away” in the increased sense of dissolution faced by the social and the cultural polity in the last decades of the earlier century radically disorients notions of a simple political estrangement from home and family. This also explains, Alexandru Boldor points out, why during the twentieth century, exile writing “has evolved from a category definable as “notable exception” into a widespread occurrence”²¹³. The universalism frequently encoded in ancient, medieval and the Romantic literature of exile now gives way to a certain “relativism”, and the singular prototype of exile as banishment or self-withdrawal cannot adequately explain the ubiquity of dislocation in the twentieth century. As Joseph Brodsky, the Russian-American poet who suffered both internal exile and exile outside the borders of the nation state points out, in the twentieth century, “exile has been transformed from the exquisite, and sometimes exclusive, punishment of special individuals—such as Ovid, who was banished from Rome to a remote town on the Black Sea—into a cruel punishment of whole communities and peoples, often as the inadvertent result of impersonal forces such as war, famine, and disease”²¹⁴. In the twentieth century, exile becomes irredeemably “political” in nature and is co-terminous with a variety of causes, including, but not limited to deportation, forced migration, state harassment and torture, the threat of genocide, anticipation of impending imprisonment, religious persecution and voluntary desertion. The pervasive scattering of human populations across the many corners of the world owes its existence to the horrors of direct political conflicts such as the two World Wars, the rise of totalitarianism and the ignominious history of the Nazi Holocaust during the reign of the Third Reich in Germany, “Stalinist” Purges in the USSR and the phenomenon of ‘internal exile’ to forced labour camps (the “Gulag”), the Israel-Palestine geopolitical conflict, the Vietnam War, regional ethno-nationalist conflicts (such as the cases of Northern Ireland, Kashmir or Tibet), indirect (and, often protracted) geopolitical conflicts such as the “Cold

²¹² Edward W. Said, ‘Intellectual Exiles: Expatriates and Marginals’, *Grand Street* 47 (Autumn 1993): 114

²¹³ Alexandru Boldor, “Exile as Severance” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2005), 21-22.

²¹⁴ Joseph Brodsky, ‘The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh’, in *On Grief and Reason* (London: Penguin, 1995), 21.

War” and the gradual liquidation of European colonial forms of government in the wake of nationalist struggles across the world. Seamus Deane elaborates on the ubiquitous nature of modern exilic identity:

[Exile] can lead from belonging nowhere to becoming at home everywhere, a migrant condition that owes something to the old Enlightenment ideal of the Citizen of the World, but also owes much to the contemporary belief that there is an essential virtue and gain in escaping the singularity of one culture into the multiplicity of all, or of all that are available.²¹⁵

The twentieth century is the period of rising nationalist struggle in the erstwhile colonies, a complex interplay of regional, national and “extra-national” politics that shaped the diverse histories of this arduous process. The instrumental role played here, by diverse national diasporas, towards the consolidation of national identities can hardly be overestimated. For example, as Joseph Duffy’s study of Irish diasporic nationalism during the initial years of the Irish Independence Movement (1919-21) reveals, “long-distance Irish nationalism” was the product of a “cohering sense of exile”, which “was strongly linked to Ireland’s experience of empire and, coupled with their global mindedness, led the leaders of the Irish diasporic movement to position themselves between one ascendant (American) and one embattled (British) empire”²¹⁶. Similarly, Laura Hilton’s work on the fate of “Displaced Persons” (DPs) and “Prisoners of War” (POWs) in post-war Europe of the late 1940s pays particular emphasis to forms of “cultural nationalism” practised by Polish and Latvian refugees who refused repatriation “from fears of political or religious persecution”, were uncertain about the economic stability awaiting them in their respective nations or simply rejected “Soviet-dominated governments”²¹⁷.

The transition of semi-feudal economies (such as Imperial Russia, during the last decades of the Tsarist regime) into modern Communist dictatorships through epoch-defining political events such as the Russian Revolution engendered

²¹⁵ See Seamus Deane, "Imperialism/Nationalism," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 367.

²¹⁶ Joseph Duffy, “Exile, Dual Belongings, and Long-Distance Nationalism: The Role of the Irish Diaspora within the Irish Independence Movement, 1919-1921”, *Global Histories* 7, No. 2 (January 2022), 80. <https://doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2021.466> (accessed May 17, 2022).

²¹⁷ Laura Hilton, “Cultural Nationalism in Exile: The Case of Polish and Latvian Displaced Persons”, *The Historian* 71, No. 2 (Summer 2009): 282, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24454499> (accessed May 17, 2022).

exilic ruptures and dislocations that were, when compared to their precedents in the Middle Ages, greatly magnified in scale. David Patterson notes the continuity between the use of ‘internal exile’ as a penal measure during the Middle Ages, “when “undesirables” were sent to the monasteries on the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea”, and the ensuing conversion of these monasteries into “the first systematic labour camps” after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.²¹⁸ The ‘Gulag’ (an acronym for *Glavnoye Upravleniye- Lagerey*, Russian for ‘Chief Administration for Corrective Labour Camps’) represented a system of forced penal labour that ran in Soviet Russia from 1918 to the mid-1950s. In the late 1920s, the Gulag camps had an estimated population of about 100,000.²¹⁹ Anne Applebaum writes that from 1929, these labour camps “took on a new significance” as Joseph Stalin decided to use them more extensively, in the collectivization of farming and the economic liquidation of the *kulaks* (wealthy and prosperous farmers), rapid industrialisation of the nation and excavation of “the natural resources in the Soviet Union’s barely habitable far north”²²⁰. The scale of expansion it underwent in less than a decade is most striking, since by 1936, these labour camps “held a total of 5,000,000 prisoners, a number that was probably equalled or exceeded every subsequent year until Stalin died in 1953”²²¹. The vast network of these camps extended, at the pinnacle of their operations, extended across the length and breadth of Soviet Russia, “from the islands of the White Sea to the shores of the Black Sea, from the Arctic circle to the plains of Central Asia, from Murmansk to Vorkuta to Kazakhstan, from central Moscow to the Leningrad suburbs”²²². By the early 1950s, the Gulag camps had come to play a key role in the functioning of the Soviet economy, where dissident prisoners “lived, in effect, in a country within a country, almost a separate civilization”²²³. Although the Gulag camps were gradually disbanded after Stalin’s death in 1953 and abolished in 1957, historical estimates

²¹⁸ David Patterson, *Exile: The Sense of Alienation in Modern Russian Letters* (Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1995), ix

²¹⁹ See “Gulag”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gulag> (accessed May 17, 2022).

²²⁰ Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* (London and New York: Penguin, 2003), 16.

²²¹ See “Gulag”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gulag> (accessed May 17, 2022).

²²² Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* (London and New York: Penguin, 2003), 15.

²²³ *Ibid.* 16.

show that about one and a half million prisoners could not survive their incarceration there.²²⁴ Although largely reduced in scale, the legacy of forced labour in the Soviet Union continued in the form of ‘internal exile’ without confinement, a move which “eliminated and drastically reduced overhead costs for facilities, food and administration”²²⁵.

Patterson surmises that “these external manifestations of exile have their internal implications, and the pursuit of these implications has been a major preoccupation of modern Russian letters”²²⁶. In the course of the twentieth century, Russian émigré writers (such as the novelists Boris Pasternak, Evgeny Zamyatin, Mikhail Bulgakov, Vladimir Nabokov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and poets Osip Mandelstam and Joseph Brodsky) have displayed, in their works, a quintessentially Russian “exilic consciousness” or sensibility that sees geographical severance from Russia as a metaphor of the existential and metaphysical dimensions of human homelessness.²²⁷

Twentieth century Russian poetry of exilic subjectivity owes much to the poetry of Osip Mandelstam, a Jewish poet born and raised in St. Petersburg. Mandelstam had published, in 1913, his inaugural volume of poetry *Karmen* (*Stone*), an event which brought him considerable fame as a poet, and one which established his poetic voice in the Russian world of letters. He emerged as one of the founding fathers of Acmeism, along with fellow poets Nikolai Gumilyov, Anna Akhmatova and Georgiy Ivanov. Acmeism was a literary reaction against the vagueness of Symbolism, which had pervaded through Russian poetry by the early decades of the twentieth century. The St. Petersburg journal *Apollon* became the major literary platform to convey Acmeist ideas. Writing in 1913 in “The Morning of Acmeism”, Mandelstam defined the movement as “a yearning for world culture”²²⁸. He was referring, in particular, to the peculiar literary environment of

²²⁴ Ibid. 693. For a fuller account of historical estimates of casualties suffered through their subjection to the Gulag, see “Appendix: How Many?” in Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* (London and New York: Penguin, 2003), 693-702.

²²⁵ Elzbieta Kaczynska, “Forced Labour in Russia and the Soviet Union. Continuity or Change?”, *IAHCCJ Bulletin* 16, *Les travaux forcés / Forced Labour* (July 1992): 8-9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43658105> (accessed May 17, 2022)

²²⁶ David Patterson, *Exile: The Sense of Alienation in Modern Russian Letters* (Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1995), ix

²²⁷ Ibid. xii.

²²⁸ Osip Mandelstam, “The Morning of Acmeism,” in *Osip Mandelstam: Selected Essays* trans. Sidney Monas (Austin, Texas: Univ. of Texas Press, 1977), 151.

St. Petersburg which (owing to its proximity to mainland Europe) was a productive ground for cross-fertilisation of ideas derived from the aesthetics of literary Modernism. Even though, as Clarence Brown has suggested, “Acmeism was curiously conservative both in theme and technique” to be adequately “modern”²²⁹, the real strength of the movement lay in its capacity to fuse, in a measured way, the principles of neo-classicism and modernism.

Mandelstam’s second collection of poems, *Tristia* (1922) and the 1928 volume of his heretofore collected verse, *The Egyptian Stamp* both brought him considerable critical acclaim in Soviet Russia. But his 1933 poem “Stalin Epigram”, an acerbic retort against the arbitrariness of Stalinist totalitarianism, led to his arrest and sentencing to internal exile at Cherdyn, “a small town near the upper reaches of the Kama and to the north of Solikamsk”²³⁰. After Mandelstam had tried to commit suicide, his sentence was commuted to banishment from the largest cities of Soviet Russia. Through his wife Nadezhda’s frequent appeals before the Central Committee for his reprieve, he was allowed to choose another place of exile, which turned out to be Voronezh.²³¹ His literary productions of the phase 1935-37 are poems now compiled as part of the First and Second *Voronezh Notebooks*. In a poem from April, 1935, his ardent pleas addressing the place of his exile reveals his inner despondency and continual anguish:

“Release me, restore me Vorónezh:
You’ll deplore me—or ignore me,
You’ll spurn me—or return me,
Vagrant Vorónezh; raven, edge...”²³²

Although a few poems from 1935 in the *Voronezh Notebooks* are doggedly defiant of authority and are voiced through his perception of a moral victory before an antagonistic totalitarian state, Mandelstam’s poetic voice grew more and more desperate with passing time. He was able to compose sonorously lyrical lines trying to justify, perhaps to his own self that the poet’s foremost

²²⁹ Clarence Brown, “Introduction,” in *The Noise of Time: The Prose of Osip Mandelstam* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), 24.

²³⁰ *Ibid.* 28

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² Osip Mandelstam, “3: April 1935,” in *Voronezh Notebooks* trans. Andrew Davis (New York: New York Review Books, 2016), 19.

commitments are to his artistry and poetic vocation. In one particular poem, he describes his slow attempts at coping with his exilic fate in complete isolation:

Gotta keep living, breathing and bolshevizing,
Work the world, not even listening, myself my only friend.
In the arctic dark I hear the throb of Soviet machines,
And I remember it all: my German brothers' necks
And the gardener, the hangman, who kills spare time
With the lilac hairpiece of the *Lorelei*.²³³

His acute sense of self-desolation is captured in a poem titled “February 1, 1937”. Incarcerated for over three years, the poet feels “drunk” from “locked doors” and sets his eyes upon “[b]arking alleys with their hanging socks” and hooligans darting out “from every crook and cranny”²³⁴. The poet’s urgent entreaty, “[b]ring me a Reader! Counsel! Doctor!”²³⁵ is however left unheard. In another poem, “January 24, 1937”, the poet recounts a lonely sojourn in a country sled among the frozen winter landscape of Voronezh. Mandelstam sees himself as doubly afflicted with his exilic plight and the sled’s reverberations:

While I—at quarrel with both world and will—
Indulge the sled’s affliction—
In silvery parentheses, in tassels fringed—

So that the age may fall more lightly
than a squirrel—half the sky in felted boots,
all feet—down to the gentle river.²³⁶

After his Voronezh exile was over, the Mandelstams settled in Kalinin, near Moscow, since they had been denied the right to domicile in the Russian capital.²³⁷ But he was arrested again, from his sanatorium near Charuste, and this time he was directly charged with “counter-revolutionary activity”²³⁸. Mandelstam was sentenced, yet again to five years of penal exile in a labour camp near Vladivostok. The journey from Moscow to Vladivostok—a strenuous and

²³³ Osip Mandelstam, “4: April 1935,” in *Voronezh Notebooks*, 20

²³⁴ Osip Mandelstam, “February 1, 1937,” in “Five Poems from The Voronezh Notebooks” trans. John High and Matvei Yankelevich, *In Translation*, <https://intranslation.brooklynrail.org/russian/five-poems-from-the-voronezh-notebooks/> (accessed May 17, 2022).

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ Osip Mandelstam, “January 24, 1937”, *Voronezh Notebooks* trans. John High and Matvei Yankelevich, *Asymptote Journal*, <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/osip-mandelstam-voronezh-notebook/> (accessed May 17, 2022).

²³⁷ Clarence Brown, “Introduction,” in *The Noise of Time: The Prose of Osip Mandelstam* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), 29.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

interminably long 5,391 miles—inalterably damaged his health.²³⁹ His problems in this second exile were also compounded by the fact that Mandelstam was undergoing institutional treatment at the time of his arrest and the terrible shock of this second deportation pushed him over the brink of insanity. Mandelstam’s experiences of gradually nearing a slow but painful death in the Vladivostok transit camp were terrifying, to say the least. Clarence Brown quotes the communication of an unknown and anonymous correspondent from Vladivostok:

Suspecting that his guards had received orders from Moscow to poison him, he refused to eat any meals (they consisted of bread, herring, dehydrated cabbage soup, and sometimes a little millet). His fellow deportees caught him stealing their bread rations. He was subjected to cruel beating ups until it was realized that he was really insane. In the Vladivostok transit camp his insanity assumed a still more acute form...In the end he was thrown out of the barracks; he went to live near the refuse heap, feeding on garbage. Filthy, with long, gray hair and a long beard, dressed in tatters, with a mad look in his eyes, he became a veritable scarecrow of the camp.²⁴⁰

Mandelstam could not survive the next winter and passed away on December 27, 1938. Most of his later works were unpublished in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era. His legacy consists in his singular commitment to the poetic craft, even at the cost of exilic banishment, lapsing into insanity and a wretched, untimely death. His sacrifice may aptly be seen as a form of poetic martyrdom, once idealised by the Romantic poet Mikhail Lermontov in his poem “The Death of the Poet”, composed on occasion of the death of Alexander Pushkin. Lermontov had associated ‘Freedom, Genius and Repute’ with the poet-martyr’s legacy, and concluded the poem with an exhortation that despite all of their attempts, the “vainglorious descendants/ Of famous fathers” would not be able to wash off the Poet’s “righteous blood” with the poison of their malice.²⁴¹ Ervin C. Brody thus writes in his introduction to *Poems from Mandelstam*:

No Soviet poet of modern sensibility reflected so intensively as Mandelstam the loss of historical and philosophical self-assurance and the emerging discrepancies between state order and the isolation of individual consciousness. ... He was chiefly

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Anonymous correspondent quoted in Clarence Brown, “Introduction,” in *The Noise of Time: The Prose of Osip Mandelstam*, 29-30.

²⁴¹ See Mikhail Lermontov, ‘Death of the Poet’, trans. Yevgeny Bonver, https://www.poetryloverspage.com/poets/lermontov/death_of_poet.html. (accessed May 17, 2022).

concerned with the preservation of Russia's cultural and moral heritage, and his best poetry attests to the survival of art and conscience—for Mandelstam the two were inseparable— at a time and place when both seemed to have the flimsiest of chances to stay alive.²⁴²

In part, the major cultural movements of the twentieth century of the Western world such as Modernism and Postmodernism are marked by the idea of displacements—cultural, spatio-temporal and ontological—so that “[i]t would appear, almost by definition, that ‘to be’ in the postmodern sense is somehow to be an Other: displaced”²⁴³. In case of Modernism, the displacement occurred with respect to seemingly “outdated” modes of living, forms of literature and art, as well as modes that bordered on the “traditional”. Postmodernism, with its innate ontological doubt regarding concepts such as “truth” or “verity”, also signals radical instability, as well as a fundamental link to the ephemerality of popular media and technologically manufactured specimens of mass culture such as television and the popular media. The ushering in of ‘globalisation’ in the present, latest stage of evolving capitalism (neoliberalism) has produced radically fragile, and ephemeral notions of identity and the ‘self’. Alexandru Boldor writes that “[t]he main factor contributing to such aspirations is perhaps the fact that one of the defining traits of the modern intellectual is the construction of his identity around the idea of alterity”²⁴⁴. In the postmodern sense, “the self can seldom be conclusively defined among the countless alternatives for one’s existence (and identity)”²⁴⁵ in the common “global village” of post-nationalistic identities. Within such a circumstance, the modern intellectual encounters the schism between the inner world of psychological “realities” and the outer world of artificial “constructedness”, “thus left to oscillate indefinitely in an interstice placed between his own reality and the society in which he lives—the paradigmatic *exsul*”²⁴⁶.

Following in the footsteps of the twentieth century came the aesthetics of modernism which, to some degree, was informed by the realities of exilic rupture

²⁴² Ervin C. Brody, “Introduction,” in *Poems from Mandelstam* trans. R.H. Morrison (Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1990), 21.

²⁴³ See Angelika Bammer, “Introduction,” in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question* ed. Angelika Bammer (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1994), xii.

²⁴⁴ Alexandru Boldor, “Exile as Severance” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2005), 6.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

and dislocation. The reflexivity of modern art, which envisions a crisis between traditional social life and the violent effects of an “advancing technological modernity”²⁴⁷, also mirrors similar apprehensions expressed in the work of twentieth century exiles such as the German painter Max Ernst, who represented himself as “Loplop”, an anthropomorphic bird that was a “mythified” version of himself, and his alter-ego. Loplop also features in Ernst’s autobiographical account of himself, “Some Data on the Youth of Max Ernst, as Told by Himself” (1942)²⁴⁸, composed while he was in exile in the United States. Charlotte Stokes, elaborating on why Ernst chose an anthropomorphic bird as his alter-ego, notices the similarity between the artist’s “smooth fair hair, piercing eyes and sharp nose”, which made him resemble “an alert bird”²⁴⁹. She also notes that for the *avant-garde* artist, “the bird has always been associated with freedom”²⁵⁰. However, a more crucial link could be uncovered, following Stokes, in the association deliberately provoked by Ernst, between the German word *volgefrei* (literally “bird-free”, but more topically, a bandit or a miscreant with a price on his head) and Loplop.²⁵¹ In other words, following a Nietzschean trajectory, the wanderer and the wild bird coalesce to form a figure which challenges “the regimentation which society imposes on its members”²⁵². Charlotte Stokes further illustrates that for the Romantic artists such as Goethe, and for philosophers such as Nietzsche, “wandering is not exploring or hiking, and the wilderness is not only the wild unsettled land but also a metaphor for the unbridled creative areas of the mind”²⁵³.

For European contexts that are, nevertheless, marked by a form of “Otherness” from the more dominant nationalities of Europe, a form of collective historical dispossession may lead to an enduring sense of national identity which, paradoxically, may consist of émigré/ exilic identities. Ireland and the ensuing

²⁴⁷ See Charlotte Stokes, “The Scientific Methods of Max Ernst: His Use of Scientific Subjects from La Nature”, *The Art Bulletin* 62, No. 3 (Sep., 1980): 455, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3050030> (accessed May 18, 2022).

²⁴⁸ Max Ernst, “Some Data on the Youth of M.E. As Told By Himself”, *View* 2nd series, 1 (1942): 28-30.

²⁴⁹ Charlotte Stokes, “Surrealist Persona: Max Ernst's "Loplop, Superior of Birds"”, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 13, No. ¾ (1983): 228, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3780542> (accessed May 18, 2022).

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

senses of “Irish” identity are cases in point. Patrick Ward has argued that exile and emigration are informed by “an etymological, cultural and psychic history in Ireland”²⁵⁴. These thematic influences found their way into the popular culture of oral Gaelic legends such as Columcille, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, *Buile Shuibhne* or the *Immrama*, “the work of Catholic and Ascendancy writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the writing of the Young Irelanders, the poetry of Mangan, various works of nineteenth-century fiction...the work of George Moore” and finally, the modernist re-interpretations of the exilic experience in a tradition of Irish writing “from James Joyce to Edna O’Brien”²⁵⁵. However, Ward specifically eschews the privileging of literary representations and instead, looks at popular poetry, of Lady Dufferin, Thomas D’Arcy and Lady Wilde, songs and folk ballads from the nineteenth century to arrive at “the inevitable concentration on the communal at the expense of the individual” which “necessitated the elimination of difference in sectarian, gender and class terms as well as the suppression of differing exilic experiences”²⁵⁶. In advancing his claim, Ward explores stock themes in these cultural artefacts, where the rhetoric of the émigré Irish identity metamorphosed into sentimental representations and parodies. Popular music hall entertainers such as Harrington and Hart appealed to the demands of Irish-American audiences “for idealised images of ‘Old Ireland’”,²⁵⁷ as well as attempting a cultural construction of the stereotypical Irish émigré in nineteenth century American society. Thus, Ward concludes that “Irish Americans colluded with and acquiesced in their own misrepresentation and added to the developing divergence between the interests, needs and self-perception of those now resident in American and those at home in Ireland”²⁵⁸.

Historically, Irish artists and intellectuals have felt stifled by averse local conditions, finding themselves constrained by “official versions” of Ireland constructed through British colonialism, the aggressive ethno-religious nationalism of Catholics in Ireland, and the long and arduous history of the Irish nationalist freedom struggle. The measure of effectiveness they ascribed to their writing has

²⁵⁴ Patrick Ward, *Exile, Emigration and Irish Writing* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002), xi.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 27.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 54.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 62-63.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 64.

therefore, consisted in estrangement from these local factors. The Irish adoption of English in the nineteenth century for articulations of nationalism has also been an ambivalent exercise, whereby literary and political enunciations of “Irish separatism” chose the coloniser’s language for self-expression, primarily owing to the fact that mass media such as newspapers, handbills, pamphlets and ballad-sheets (products of the technology of printing) were all available in it.²⁵⁹ More significantly than any other phase in its history, post-famine Ireland saw waves of voluntary migrations. The numbers estimated by Timothy J. Hatton and Jeffrey G. Williamson, of Irish migrants during the phase 1850-1913 are 4.5 million.²⁶⁰ As they further demonstrate, “[a]s a proportion of the population, the rate of emigration for Ireland was more than double that of any other European country, with as many as 13 persons per 1,000 emigrating on average each year”²⁶¹. These emigrations caused the Irish population to fall “from 6.5 million to about 4.4 million between 1851 and 1911”.²⁶²

Michael D. Higgins and Declan Kiberd also illustrate, in their work, the contribution of the Irish diaspora in England and the United States towards “the invention and refinement of the idea of Ireland”²⁶³. Higgins and Kiberd go on to show the similarities in forms of national identification between the Irish sense of “home”, and that of the Jamaicans, who, though part of an overall Caribbean identity, admit that “in their earlier years, their loyalty and self-image is wholly bound up with Jamaica, and that it is only on the streets of Camden Town or the grandstands of the Oval Cricket Ground in south London that they learn what it is

²⁵⁹ See Tony Crowley, “Language, Politics and Identity in Ireland: a Historical Overview” in *Sociolinguistics in Ireland* ed. R. Hickey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 198-217, <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/98924/3/CrowleyLanguage%2C%20politics%20and%20identity%20in%20Ireland.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2022) and John French, “Irish Assimilation and Americanization” in “Irish-American Identity, Memory, and Americanism during the Eras of the Civil War and the First World War” (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2009), 20-26, https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1194&context=dissertations_mu (accessed May 17, 2022) for a detailed overview on the Irish adoption of English, the language of their colonisers.

²⁶⁰ Timothy J. Hatton and Jeffrey G. Williamson, “After the Famine: Emigration from Ireland, 1850-1913”, *The Journal of Economic History* 53, no. 3 (Sep 1993): 575, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2122406?seq=1> (accessed May 17, 2022).

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ See Michael D. Higgins and Declan Kiberd, “Culture and Exile: The Global Irish”, *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 1, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20557418> (accessed May 18, 2022).

to be “West Indian”²⁶⁴. The Irish similarly, “tend to love the “little platoon” from which they came and to give primary affection to townland or country”²⁶⁵. The reshaping of modern Irish culture therefore had to historically partake of difference or cross-fertilisation, and even though “Irish nationalism has often been charged with stifling individuality”²⁶⁶, the quest for individual Irish self-definition through exile in the twentieth century has certainly meant a broadening of identitarian horizons, if only to consolidate more fully what it means to be “Irish”. This is best illustrated through Stephen Daedalus’s assertion, in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, that “[t]he shortest way to Tara is via Holyhead”²⁶⁷. Higgins and Kiberd explain that Tara was “the epicentre of ancient Gaelic Ireland”, while Holyhead meant the “port of disembarkation for Irish immigrants to Britain”²⁶⁸. The statement is not meant to serve as a mere witticism, but serves to demonstrate the “recognition that Irish people discover themselves to be such only on the streets of some foreign country”²⁶⁹. This has turned the trope of “literary” or “spiritual” exile from Ireland into an enabling and necessary form of artistic self-distancing, where the exiled artist must “forge in the smithy” of their soul the “uncreated conscience”²⁷⁰ of Irish identity.

In the twentieth century, literary negotiations with Irish émigré identity include those of the towering modernists James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, both of whom espoused forms of exilic subjectivity in their work, because the individuality of the Irish artist could not have blossomed in their own country: “...the economic and intellectual contradictions that prevail in his own country do not allow the development of individuality”²⁷¹. Joyce chose voluntary exile in 1904 away from Ireland, travelling extensively across Europe, living in Zurich, Trieste and Paris successively, across the span of the two World Wars. Beckett left Ireland in the early 1930s, travelled similarly across Europe and settled, for the greater part of his remaining life, in Paris. However, in stark contrast to the verbal cornucopia ushered

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid. 10.

²⁶⁷ See James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 211.

²⁶⁸ Michael D. Higgins and Declan Kiberd, “Culture and Exile: The Global Irish”, 9.

²⁶⁹ Ibid. 11

²⁷⁰ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 213

²⁷¹ James Joyce, “Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages (1907)”, in *The Critical Writings of James Joyce* eds. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), 171.

in by his artistic mentor Joyce, Beckett posited himself, in an interview with James Knowlson as one whose “own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding”²⁷². Thus, he was in effect, “rejecting the Joycean principle that knowing more was a way of creatively understanding the world and controlling it”²⁷³. In future, Knowlson writes, “his work would focus on poverty, failure, exile and loss – as he put it, on man as a 'non-knower' and as a 'non-can-er’²⁷⁴”. Maddie Rooney, a character in Beckett’s radio-play *All that Fall* (1957), succinctly expresses his disposition towards an Irish émigré subjectivity:

It is suicide to be abroad. But what is it to be at home... what is it to be at home? A lingering dissolution. ²⁷⁵

In Irish poetry of the twentieth century, this émigré subjectivity has embodied itself in poets such as Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967), John Montague (1929-2016), Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) and Eavan Boland (1944-2020), to mention a few— even if not all of them were not, politically speaking—“exiles” in the truest sense of the term. One might conclude the discussion on Irish émigré subjectivity here with a statement from George O’ Brien, who claims that “[i]t only seems a slight exaggeration to say that without exile there would be no contemporary Irish fiction”²⁷⁶.

The immediacy and directness with which the traumas of dislocation have come to haunt twentieth century poets from Eastern Europe, during the ravages of World War II and the Nazi-Soviet occupation in the region, makes their poetic testimonies serve as valuable documents of human endurance and will. The exilic fates of the Polish poets Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004) and Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998), and that of the Romanian-born German poet Paul Celan (1920-1970) offer valuable insights into forming a conception of poetic exile in the twentieth

²⁷² See Samuel Beckett, ‘Interview with James Knowlson’ in *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett: A Centenary Celebration: Uncollected Interviews with Samuel Beckett and Memories of Those Who Knew Him*, ed. James & Elizabeth Knowlson (London: Bloomsbury; NY: Arcade 2006), 47.

²⁷³ See James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 492.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ Samuel Beckett, “All that Fall (1957),” in *The Collected Shorter Plays* (Grove Press: New York, 1984), 15.

²⁷⁶ See George O’Brien, “The Aesthetics of Exile”, in *Contemporary Irish Fiction*, eds. Liam Harte and Michael Parker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 35.

century. As the Second World War broke out in Poland in 1939, Warsaw became “the most agonizing spot in the whole of terrorized Europe”²⁷⁷. During the German occupation, Milosz wrote for clandestine publishing houses in Warsaw and translated texts such as Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* into Polish from his war-ghetto.²⁷⁸ He lived through the five years of the Nazi Occupation of Warsaw and in 1943, by which time the tide of the war had turned in favour of the USSR, “detachments” of the Red Army started to arrive in the city. In his book, *The Captive Mind*, Milosz ironically notes, “I was thus liberated from the domination of Berlin—in other words, brought under the domination of Moscow”²⁷⁹. From 1945-51, Milosz first worked as a freelancer in Poland, and then as cultural attache for the Polish government embassy in Washington and thereafter, in Paris. While Milosz had enough conviction in Socialism’s capacity to address the pressing problems of the people, he was motivated more by the desire to “keep alive freedom of thought in my own special field”²⁸⁰. He had decided to serve abroad precisely for the tangible benefits it offered in facilitating the individual freedom of the writer, whereby “the material which I sent to my publishers could be bolder than my colleagues at home”²⁸¹.

Milosz was witness to the horrors of Fascist dictatorial warmongering as well as to the hegemony of Soviet domination in Poland, which now had been reduced to a satellite-state controlled from Moscow. But initially, he writes, these changes were welcomed, as “the only hope was to set up a social order which would be new, but would not be a copy of the Russian regime”²⁸². Milosz saw the slow, but gradual co-option of his literary friends to “the magic influence of the New faith”²⁸³ that was Socialism, and with it, to the dictates of writing within the aesthetic norms of Socialist Realism. He defines the latter as not “merely an aesthetic theory to which the writer, the musician, the painter or the theatrical producer is obliged to adhere”, but a form of mental slavery that contradicted the

²⁷⁷ Czeslaw Milosz, “Preface,” in *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), v

²⁷⁸ See Czeslaw Milosz, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*, trans. Catherine S. Leach (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002), 238.

²⁷⁹ Czeslaw Milosz, “Preface,” in *The Captive Mind*, vi.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* viii.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ *Ibid.* ix.

writer's obligations "to look at the world from his own independent viewpoint, to tell the truth as he sees it, and so to keep watch and ward in the interest of society as a whole"²⁸⁴. Post-war Europe was in complete disarray and now was to be partitioned between the "Western" (liberal, 'bourgeois' democracies) and the "Eastern" (USSR and its satellite states) bloc. Torn asunder by this "ruthless battle for world domination", East-European poets and intellectuals of Warsaw, Prague, Budapest or Bucharest were burdened by a "compulsion from without"²⁸⁵, so that their road to orthodoxy and state-servitude became more and more pronounced with the ongoing years. Speaking at the Lisbon Conference on literature, Milosz admitted that in response to the dictates of blind allegiance to a Socialist political ideology,

Many times I was inclined to say *non serviam*, as young James Joyce said about the Irish cause, and I was torn internally between a desire to practice what I considered perfection in literature and a cry of indignation and despair.²⁸⁶

Milosz's poem "Child of Europe", composed in New York in 1946, contrasts the circumstances of post-war 'peace' to the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust. The scathing irony of his measured lines reinforce the idea that those who could survive the ravages of war, genocide and racial miscegenation in mid-twentieth century Europe were able to do so *because* others perished. He deliberately leaves it to the (European) reader to determine whether to take his lines at face value or to attempt a self-reflection critical of past choices:

Having the choice of our own death and that of a friend
We chose *his*, coldly thinking: Let it be done quickly.
We sealed gas chamber doors, stole bread
Knowing the next day would be harder to bear than the day
before.

As befits human beings, we explored good and evil.
Our malignant wisdom has no like on this planet.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. x.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. xi.

²⁸⁶ Czeslaw Milosz, speech delivered at the Lisbon Conference on Literature, in "The Lisbon Conference on Literature: A Round Table of Central European and Russian Writers", *Cross Currents* 9 (1990): 79, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/crossc/anw0935.1990.001?node=ANW0935.1990.001:29&view=text&seq=85> (accessed May 18, 2022).

Accept it as proven that we are better than they,
The gullible, hot-blooded weaklings, careless with their lives.²⁸⁷

In the third section of the poem, Milosz illustrates the curious form of ‘doublethink’ the mind is subjected to in the so-called “People’s Democracies” of Eastern Europe, where “a single grain of truth” can give rise to a “tree of falsehood”²⁸⁸. He pays an ironically self-effacing lip service to the dictatorial nature of the Soviet-backed Polish Communist government when he admits— by the deductive logic of “the Diamat”²⁸⁹— “[h]e who has power, has it by historical logic”²⁹⁰. Milosz also realised that traditional Marxist-Leninist narratives of the historical emancipation of the labouring masses served as a form of ‘doublespeak’, one where the lies turn out to be “more logical than the truth itself”, giving “weary travellers” the promise of a false sense of “repose”²⁹¹. In the ensuing sections of the poem, with equal irony, Milosz critiques the deliberate ambiguity followed in interpreting the meanings of words: “Fashion your weapon from ambiguous words/ Consign clear words to lexical limbo”²⁹². The suspension of reason at the expense of passion is ironically deemed as necessary by the poet, because “[t]he passionless cannot change history”²⁹³. The poet understands that the ‘best’ way for continuing this form of governance is to strictly avoid self-reflection, because “the pools of the past” would only reflect a “face different from the one you expected”²⁹⁴. He highlights the deliberate falsification of official histories under Socialist regimes, because the formulaic invocation of “historical” inequities always envisions a past tailor-made for justifying the policies of the present. Thus, Milosz inverts, with trenchant sarcasm, the “historical logic” and claim of Communism to rule Eastern Europe, especially because such a claim is buttressed by military aggression and coercion:

He who invokes history is always secure.
The dead will not rise to witness against him.

²⁸⁷ Czeslaw Milosz, “Child of Europe”, *Poemhunter*, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/child-of-europe/> (accessed May 18, 2022).

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ “Diamat”, an abbreviation for “dialectical materialism as interpreted by Lenin and Stalin”. See Czeslaw Milosz, “Preface,” in *The Captive Mind*, viii

²⁹⁰ Czeslaw Milosz, “Child of Europe”, *Poemhunter*, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/child-of-europe/> (accessed May 18, 2022).

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

You can accuse them of any deeds you like.
Their reply will always be silence.

Their empty faces swim out of the deep dark.
You can fill them with any feature desired.
Proud of dominion over people long vanished,
Change the past into your own, better likeness.²⁹⁵

When Milosz was recalled to Warsaw from his post of cultural attaché from Washington D.C., he was deemed “an individual who ideologically is totally alien”²⁹⁶, especially for his decision to not join the Polish Communist Party. His passport was consequently confiscated and he could predict that remaining in Poland was no longer safe for him.²⁹⁷ However, since at the time, “McCarthyism” was the dominant official ideology in the United States, and because the U.S. administration was convinced from the account of influential Polish émigrés that he was a Communist, he was denied entry there.²⁹⁸ He finally sought asylum in Paris and was re-joined by his family there in 1953. Michael Parker writes in the introduction to Andrzej Franaszek’s biography of Milosz, that while the poet was working in the United States, he had adopted a strategy of “linguistic bifurcation as a means of stabilising the self”, whereby he could use a foreign language (English) during his working hours while “he conducted his inner, creative and domestic life in Polish”²⁹⁹. The paradoxes of exilic identity are adequately explored in his “Notes on Exile” where he states that “[e]xile, accepted as a destiny, in the way we accept an incurable illness, should help us see through our self-delusions”³⁰⁰. While the writer remains within their native country, being aware of their historical responsibility, they may be inclined to speak out the truth, especially since people read him. However, “he is forbidden to speak” in such a circumstance, and when he is in exile and free to speak, “nobody listens and, moreover, he forgot what he had to say”³⁰¹. One of the crucial points he makes in the essay concerns literary imagination, which is “always spatial”, building upon the “privileged space” which

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ See Andrzej Franaszek, *Milosz: A Biography* eds. and trans. Aleksandra Parker and Michael Parker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 277.

²⁹⁷ Ibid. 281-83.

²⁹⁸ Ibid. 301.

²⁹⁹ Michael Parker, “Introduction”, in Andrzej Franaszek, *Milosz: A Biography* eds. and trans. Aleksandra Parker and Micheal Parker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 21.

³⁰⁰ Czeslaw Milosz, “Notes on Exile,” in *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays*, eds. Bogdana Carpenter and Madeline G. Levine (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001), 13.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

the writer considers their native realm.³⁰² Exile and bilocation displaces that privileged centre, making a writer nostalgic about his lost country, as a mode of “coping with estrangement from one’s native land”³⁰³. In order that the writer’s coping mechanisms enable them to coalesce these (at least) two centres, they must adopt the strategy of dwelling in both linguistic spaces simultaneously. Milosz elaborates on ways in which the twentieth century experience of exile contradicts previous instances of banishment, because whereas “[a] hundred years ago average people not familiar with remote regions of the globe quietly relegated them to the realm of the legendary or at least the exotic”, now they ought to be prepared “to embrace places and events of the whole Earth simultaneously”³⁰⁴. Often it so happens that the disparity between the writer’s perceived notions of the new culture and what he observes there in presence becomes too magnified, reaching “astronomical proportions”³⁰⁵. What then remains to be done for the exiled artist or intellectual is a rigorous self-examination and a constant scrutiny of their objectives in writing. Milosz emphatically goes on to state that “the true goal of writing is to reach all the people of the world and to change their lives”,³⁰⁶ and even if such a goal is not practically viable, the best a writer can do is to try and fail.

The Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert represented another instance of the émigré sensibility, although he was never an “exile” in the full sense of the term. Born in Lwow, then a part of Poland, Herbert witnessed the successive occupations of Polish territory by the armies of the Third Reich and the Red Army. As has been already discussed in Milosz’s case, the onset of the tyranny of Socialist Realism in art in Poland during the years 1945-56 profoundly affected Herbert’s poetics as he struggled to free his work from such dictates. His ideological resistance to Soviet rule in Poland is brought out through his poem “The Power of Taste” where he highlights the question of aesthetic “taste” which allows the writer-intellectual to resist co-option into Socialist Realism.³⁰⁷ “Taste” for Herbert, was comprised of “the fibres of the soul” and the “gristle of conscience” which allowed the dissident

³⁰² Ibid. 16.

³⁰³ Ibid. 16-17.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. 17.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid. 18.

³⁰⁷ Zbigniew Herbert, “The Power of Taste,” in *The Collected Poems: 1956-1998*, trans. Alissa Valles (New York: Harper-Collins, 2007), 482.

Polish intellectual to reject tyrannical dictates, choosing exile over the possibility of having to conform:

Yes taste
which has fibers of soul and the gristle of conscience
Who knows if we'd been better more prettily tempted
sent women pink and at as wafers
or fantastic creatures out of Hieronymous Bosch

but what did hell look like in those days
a mud pit a cutthroat's alley a barracks
called a Palace of Justice
a moonshine Mephisto in a Lenin jacket
sent Aurora's grandchildren into the field
boys with potato-eaters' faces
very ugly girls with red hands

...
So in fact aesthetics can be an aid in life
one shouldn't neglect the study of beauty

Before we assent we must examine closely
architectural forms, rhythms of drum and fife,
official colors the homely rituals of burial

Our eyes and ears refused to submit
our princely senses chose proud exile.³⁰⁸

From 1965-71, Herbert travelled extensively across Europe, visiting England, Scotland and France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium and finally to the United States and finally returned to Warsaw. His desires to escape the drudgery and monotony of life in Poland and to acquaint himself with the culture of Western Europe beyond the "Iron Curtain" prompted his decision to travel, even though the cost of such travel would be accommodated from his modest, and not always stable income from poetry readings and prizes.³⁰⁹ As Milosz commented on his fellow-poet, "Herbert's treatment of the basic theme of Polish postwar poetry—the tension between an artist's concern with form and his compassion for human suffering" made him a "poet of civilisation, not a rebel decrying the "nothing in Prospero's cloak"³¹⁰. Herbert's poetry probes into the historical legacy of classicism and the disinheritance from it forced upon East-European poets through the ravages of war and successive military occupations. In the words of Stanislaw Baranczak,

³⁰⁸ Ibid. 482-83.

³⁰⁹ See Bozena Shallcross, *Through the Poet's Eye: The Travels of Zagajewski, Herbert, and Brodsky* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 43-45

³¹⁰ Czeslaw Milosz, *The History of Polish Literature* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983), 470.

Herbert's poetic voice typified a dichotomy—between his profound attachment to the aesthetics and values of Western 'civilisation' and his sense of disenfranchisement to that very tradition through Eastern Europe's isolation during the decades of 1940s and 50s.³¹¹

Although Herbert did return to Poland in 1971, he lived abroad again during the phase 1975-81, residing in Germany, Austria and Italy.³¹² When he returned to Poland in 1981, he joined the editorial team of the underground journal *Zapis* and became one of the major opponents to the coercive politics of the USSR-led "Eastern bloc"³¹³. He also joined the mass organisation Solidarity, a broad anti-authoritarian and independent civilian movement which was able to survive the state-endorsed political repression in Poland during the decade of the 1980s, and which was able to enter into negotiations that finally led to the 1989 legislative elections in the country, the first of such elections since 1947.³¹⁴

Paul Celan (Paul Antschel), the Romanian-born Jewish German poet, had grown up in the ethnically pluralistic society of the Bukovina region of the country. By June 1940, northern Bukovina fell into Soviet occupation. As a coup followed in Romania, the dictatorial government under Ion Antonescu came to power and veered the country towards the Axis powers.³¹⁵ Romanian support to the Nazis initiated a series of invasions in Soviet-gained territory and, by the next year, northern Bukovina was recaptured by the Axis powers.³¹⁶ As Romanian troops entered Czernowitz in July that year, "[t]he Great Synagogue was put to the flame, wearing the Star of David was mandated, hundreds of Jews were murdered"³¹⁷. Waves of deportation followed for the Jews in the ensuing months, and the Antschel

³¹¹ See Stanislaw Baranczak, *A Fugitive from Utopia: The Poetry of Zbigniew Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), 1

³¹² See Michael Parker, "Introduction", in Andrzej Franaszek, *Milosz: A Biography* eds. and trans. Aleksandra Parker and Micheal Parker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 26.

³¹³ *Ibid.* 26-27.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ Ilarion Tiu, *The Legionary Movement after Corneliu Codreanu : From the Dictatorship of King Carol II to the Communist Regime (February 1938 – August 1944)*, trans. Delia Drăgulescu (Boulder, Columbia: East European Monographs, 2010), 184-86, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305994137_The_Legionary_Movement_after_Corneliu_Codreanu_From_the_Dictatorship_of_King_Carol_II_to_the_Communist_Regime_February_1938-August_1944 (accessed May 18, 2022).

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ See Hugo Bekker, "Preface: Celan's Early Years," in *Paul Celan: Studies in His Early Poetry* (Amsterdam & New York: Editions Rodopi, 2008), xii.

family was also not spared and was deported to “German-occupied Ukraine”³¹⁸. The deportation occurred on a particular night when Celan had sought shelter elsewhere, causing the final separation between him and his parents. Celan himself was sent to a forced labour camp a few hundred miles south of Czernowitz, relegated to working at a construction site while his parents hastened to their death in Ukraine. His father Leo Antschel died “either from typhus or a bullet” and his mother was shot soon after, when she was declared “unfit for labour”³¹⁹. After the tide of the war began to turn decisively in favour of the Allies, Czernowitz was reclaimed by the Soviets in 1944. Celan returned there, only to find his homeland irretrievably altered and destroyed. Chernowitz was now proclaimed as part of the USSR-backed Republic of Moldavia and was given a Slavic name, Chernovtsky.³²⁰

However, Stalin’s larger plan was to re-settle Jews originally residing in the Bukovina region, by means of “voluntary emigration”, and Celan had to relocate to the Romanian capital, Bucharest in 1945.³²¹ Working as an editor and translator, he took on the *nom de plume* “Celan”, an anagram of the Romanised spelling of his surname, Ancel.³²² His poem “Death Fugue” (“*Todesfugue*”) describes the almost indescribable violence of the forced labour camps, articulating without punctuation the horrors of death and destruction unleashed by the German occupation. Describing the “black milk” of dawn, morning, noon and evenings the Jews are forced to drink, he describes the figure of Death as “a master from Deutschland”, blue-eyed, who “sets his dogs on us”³²³. His hybridised Jewish-German identity translates artistically into the “golden hair” of Margarete and the “ashen hair” of Shulamit.³²⁴

Fleeing from the new Communist regime in Romania after the war, Celan immigrated to Vienna, and thereafter to Paris in 1948.³²⁵ He was invited to read his poetry at the meetings of the “*Gruppe 47*” in Germany, but his work

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid. xiii.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Paul Celan “Death Fugue”, trans. Pierre Joris, *Poets.org*, <https://poets.org/poem/death-fugue> (accessed May 19, 2022).

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Hugo Bekker, “Preface: Celan’s Early Years,” in *Paul Celan: Studies in His Early Poetry*. xii.

received little attention.³²⁶ In the coming years, Celan would earn a living as a translator and lecturer at the *École normale supérieure*. He became a French citizen in 1955. The unresolvable guilt of not being able to prevent the death of his parents, the post-traumatic stress as a victim of the Holocaust and bouts of depression impelled him to commit suicide by drowning himself in the river Seine in 1970.³²⁷

Alain Suied points out that the experience of the Holocaust (the *Shoah*) and the shocking death of his parents remain enduring concerns in Celan's poetry, events through which Celan inscribes himself within a German tradition of exile.³²⁸ "This inscription", Suied writes, "binds him in a very obvious way to Holderlin, the poet of revolution and madness, a key figure of modernity"³²⁹. Although his Jewishness and the body of Hebraic scriptures always has remained an important lens through which he witnessed the horrors of the Holocaust, Celan also engaged with themes recurrent in German philosophy, a tradition marked by its otherness to his Jewishness³³⁰. Thus, in his quest of discovering his fractured self, Celan, "exiled in Paris, holding a modest position as a lecturer in German (both his maternal language and that of his torturers), very naturally had to be confronted with his Jewish difference, with his Romanian past, and with the memory of his perished family"³³¹. Therefore the poet also witnesses the flux of becoming, emerging as "the surveyor of a "dislocating" identity"³³². He therefore pits himself also against "modernity's symbolic and real obliteration of the Other"³³³, even if that means valorising his exilic tribulations and memories of dislocation. But the only way in which he could engage with them was through "inscription", taking a helpless resort to language. He explains this in his Bremen Prize Speech, elaborating on the "accommodation" language provided to him:

Reachable, near and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language. It, the language, remained, not lost, yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its

³²⁶ See Rebecca Braun, "1967-2007: The Gruppe 47 as a Cultural Heimat", *The German Quarterly* 83, No. 2 (Spring 2010), 212-229, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29534048> (accessed May 19, 2022) for a detailed account of Celan's involvement with this particular forum.

³²⁷ Hugo Bekker, "Preface: Celan's Early Years", in *Paul Celan: Studies in His Early Poetry*, xii

³²⁸ See Alain Suied, "Paul Celan: Poet of the Shoah", *New Literary History* 30, No. 1, Poetry & Poetics (Winter 1999): 217, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20057531> (accessed May 19, 2022).

³²⁹ *Ibid.* 218

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ *Ibid.* 219.

own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech. It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened; yet it passed through this happening. Passed through and could come to light again, 'enriched' by all this.³³⁴

It is imperative, especially in a dissertation such as this, that we now turn our attention to instances of poetic engagement from the experience of exile in the twentieth century which are drawn from non-European contexts. For me, a researcher working in a “developing” nation such as India, and within a post-colonial context such as ours, it is all the more significant to pay attention to such a concern. For the so-called “Third World” literatures, and especially for those still battling with remnants of colonial hegemony, (Western) canonicity “signifies a problem in world relations that are still governed by ideologies of supremacy and elitism practiced through hegemonic powers”³³⁵. It is therefore essential to turn our attention to poetic enunciations/performances of exilic subjectivity within post-colonial and non-European contexts.

Exilic subjectivity in the Caribbean has historically had a specific trajectory, largely conditioned by the history of trans-Atlantic slavery, the Middle Passage and the lifelong servitude to plantation-economies forced upon millions of Africans from the mid-sixteenth to the nineteenth century. As Thomas Hugh illustrates, the “First Passage” involved the capture of slaves, usually from the western coasts of Africa and their transportation to African ports. The “Final Passage” involved the disembarkation of the Slave ships in the Caribbean, from whence the slaves would be transported to their plantation. The Middle Passage, which connected the two was across the Atlantic, where slaves, now reduced to

³³⁴ Paul Celan, “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen”, in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 395.

³³⁵ Ayman Abu-Shomar, “Culture” ‘Sous Rature’: A Critical Review of the Notion of “Culture”: Consideration from Cultural and Literary Studies”, *African Journal of History and Culture* 5, no. 9 (Nov 2013): 188, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329543977_Culture_'Sous_Rature'_A_critical_review_of_the_notion_of_Culture_Consideration_from_cultural_and_literary_studies/link/5c0ed6134585157ac1b90b71/download (accessed May 19, 2022).

“cargo”, were denied human rights, and were tortured in order to be subjugated into enslavement.³³⁶

But the trans-Atlantic slave trade is in itself part of the yet larger historical phenomenon of Spanish colonisation of the “Americas”, through ethnocide and the forced displacements of native Amerindian populations. Jan Carew looks at the “diaries of Columbus” to illustrate how, to the modern Caribbean writer-intellectual, Columbus appeared “as a schizoid being, a Janus astride two worlds, one medieval, the other of the Renaissance”³³⁷. What Carew hints at with such elliptical prose are the racial prejudices that conditioned Columbus, those that served in making his “pious declarations of converting natives to Christianity” coexist with his perception of racial Otherness and his “lust for gold”³³⁸. His diaries and the accounts of the people he had observed in the “Indies” reek of contradictory, historically inaccurate and biased claims. In Europeanised accounts of “discovery”, what was envisioned as the “New World” (the mainland of the Americas) was, in fact, the “twin continents which had already been inhabited for over two hundred milleniums (*sic*)”³³⁹ by Amerindian ethnic groups such as the Caribs, the Arawaks, the Aztecs and the “Incas”. *Quatuor Navigationes*, the account of the “New World” by Vespucci, “invented a colonizer's America, and the reality that is ours never recovered from this literary assault and the distortions he inflicted upon it”³⁴⁰. Carew highlights Vespucci's change of his Christian name, from Albertico to Amerigo, as if only to authenticate his linguistic “conquest” of the “New World” found by Columbus. This involves the deliberate “theft of an important placename from the heartland of the Americas” to leave the historical suggestion that the name was, in fact, given by the “dilettante”³⁴¹.

One might cite Jan Carew's work here to summarise the experience of displaced African populations:

The African brought with him, regardless of the mosaic of cultural groups from which he derived, a built-in ethic which

³³⁶ See Thomas Hugh, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870* (New York: Simo and Schuster, 1999), 293.

³³⁷ Jan Carew, “The Caribbean Writer and Exile”, *Journal of Black Studies* 8, No. 4 (Jun., 1978): 454, : <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2783885> (accessed May 20, 2022).

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 456.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

bound him first, as a stranger in a strange land, to study and respect the host culture before he established elements of his own...[w]hen the African arrived in the New World, he knew that the colonizer who had brought him there was a usurper who had seized the land of the Indians, desecrated the graves and the alters of their ancestors, and sent countless of the ones who had welcomed them to the Forest of the Long Night. It was clear to the slave from Africa, that in order to escape the terrible retribution that was certain to overtake their masters, they had to make peace with both the living and the dead in this new land.... The African had to recreate his vision of himself in the universe often being violently uprooted . . . to have seen himself only through his master's eyes and to have even appeared to be an accomplice in his obnoxious deeds, would have left him with a permanent heritage of self-hatred, distorted self-images and guilt. In order to reconstruct his ontological system, the African was compelled by the logic of his own cultural past, to establish relations with his Indian host independent of the white man.³⁴²

With the abolition of slavery among British colonies in the Caribbean in 1834, the need for cheap, indentured labour for working in the sugarcane plantations increased. Even though illegal slave trade did not stop after Emancipation, British colonial administration had to incur rising expenses to prevent the trading in slaves. Certain islands such as Trinidad, “could never under slavery or freedom produce a sufficient Creole labour force to cultivate the land”³⁴³. Similarly, Jamaica was underpopulated at 350,000, while it could support a population of 4,000,000.³⁴⁴ By bringing indentured servants from their own colonies in the Indian sub-continent, the British were able to justify this relocation as “merely moving British subjects from one portion of the empire to another.”³⁴⁵. Thus, the first ships carrying Indian “coolies” left India in 1836.³⁴⁶ Successive waves of immigration took place across the rest of the nineteenth century, as shipments of Indian “coolies” also arrived in the islands of “Guyana (1838), Jamaica (1845), Trinidad (1845), Martinique (1853), French Guiana (1854)

³⁴² Ibid. 461.

³⁴³ See W.M.G. Sewell, *The Ordeal of Free Labor in the British West Indies* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1861), 129-130.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Ibid. 122.

³⁴⁶ Ibid. 126.

Guadeloupe (1854), Grenada (1857), St. Lucia (1859), St. Vincent (1861), St. Kitts (1861), St. Croix (1863), Suriname (1873), and Nevis (1874)”³⁴⁷.

The historical experiences of forced exile and disinheritance suffered by enslaved Africans, as well as indentured Indian, Lebanese or Chinese coolies, have created a hybrid, multi-cultural society in the Caribbean, with a creolised language born out of fragments. But in the twentieth century, the negotiation of black Afro-Caribbean artists and intellectuals with the historical exile and dispossession that led to their becoming has been fraught with a number of self-contradictory impulses. Writing of the Beacon literary circle in the Trinidad of the 1930s, C.L. R. James’s account is indicative of this very dichotomy, where he asserts:

...we of the Caribbean have not got an African past. We are black in skin, but the African civilisation is not ours. The basis of our civilisation in the Caribbean is an adaptation of Western civilisation.³⁴⁸

Undoubtedly, the hegemony of the colonial curriculum is instrumental in this conception, even as James realises that while Western education allowed him to “become a full-fledged member of the colonial club” he is, in practice, “excluded from the same club because of his race and color”³⁴⁹. This self-contradictory impulse—the rift between doing everything one can to be assimilated into the dominant culture of the coloniser (colonial mimicry) and the frustration of never quite being enough to be considered an equal—has conditioned the desire to immigrate in many prominent West Indian artists and intellectuals of the twentieth century. Unlike white members of the Beacon circle such as Alberto Gomes who chose to stay back in Trinidad, James wrote that certain choices were simply not affordable for the black Afro-Caribbean intellectual: “You stayed not only because your parents had money but because your skin was white; there was a chance for you, but for us there wasn’t—except to be a civil servant and hand papers, take them from

³⁴⁷ See “St. Lucia’s Indian Arrival Day”, *Repeating Islands: News and Commentary of Caribbean Culture, Literature and the Arts*, May 7, 2009, <https://repeatingislands.com/2009/05/07/st-lucia%E2%80%99s-indian-arrival-day/> (accessed May 20, 2022).

³⁴⁸ See “An Audience with C. L. R. James,” *Third World Book Review* 1, no. 2 (1984): 6, https://archivespace.sta.uwi.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/15245 (accessed May 20, 2022).

³⁴⁹ Simon Gikandi, “Caribbean Modernist Discourse: Writing, Exile and Tradition,” in *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g6bv.5> (accessed May 20, 2022).

the men downstairs and hand them to the man upstairs”³⁵⁰. The forms of pre-determined fixity in the assignation of roles in a colonised context thus impels the Caribbean intellectual to choose exile. Simon Gikandi explains the phenomenon further when he writes, “Dispossessed in their own land, exiled Caribbean writers would re-territorialize themselves and hence reassert their identity through discourse and narration”³⁵¹. Frequently revisited by the anxieties of being condemned forever to an ‘inferiority complex’ and, through a form of deliberate self-fashioning that privileges the European “cultural fragment”, “...the Caribbean writer oscillates in and out of sunlight and shadows, exile abroad and homelessness at home”³⁵². The work of George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott, Edward Kanau Braithwaite, Louise Benette or V.S. Naipaul are all literary testimonies of such forms of exilic subjectivity. Within the framework of this archetypal “second encounter” between the colonisers and the colonised, exile becomes, for Carew, a form of “willed entry” to terminate this seemingly interminable form of “historical exile”³⁵³.

In another decidedly postcolonial context from mid-twentieth century, forms of exile in Cuba have accompanied revolutionary change in 1959 and the commencement of the dictatorial Castro regime. Disaffection with the inclusivity of the Cuban Revolution has been one of the major causes of this form of dislocation, coupled with economic aspirations of offering labour and services in developed economies such as the United States. In this evolving process, “the “push” of diminishing opportunities” in a gradually stagnating economy at home and “the “pull” of new ones” abroad have been simultaneously operative, and as per Everett S. Lee, conditions such a deliberate choice of the exilic fate.³⁵⁴ But the “push-pull” framework only accounts for the economic reasons informing such a choice, the other reasons of which must be sought in the extent to which the Cuban Revolution and the newly emergent society in Cuba have been able to include

³⁵⁰ See C. L. R. James, "Discovering Literature in Trinidad: the 1930s," in *Spheres of Existence: Selected Writings* (London: Allison and Busby, 1980), 239.

³⁵¹ Simon Gikandi, “Caribbean Modernist Discourse: Writing, Exile and Tradition”, 38.

³⁵² Jan Carew, "The Caribbean Writer and Exile," in *Fulcrums of Change: Origins of Racism in the Americas and Other Essays* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988), 92.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ See Everett S. Lee, “A Theory of Migration”, *Demography* 3, No. 1 (1966): 47-57, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2060063> (accessed May 20, 2022).

populations of diverse political opinions, and of sexual orientations other than cis-gendered heterosexuality.

The trope of exilic subjectivity also has a form of historical anchorage in the Cuban context, through the role of exiled predecessors such as Jose Marti, who were instrumental in the consolidation of nationalist struggle in the final decade of the nineteenth century to liberate the nation from Spanish colonialism. Silvia Pedraza notes that ever since the success of Castro's Revolution as many as four major waves of refugee migration occurred from Cuba.³⁵⁵ Lourdes Casal notes that during the phase 1960-76, the United States admitted over 75,000 Cuban refugees, and after the Mariel exodus of 1980, 125,000 more Cubans arrived there.³⁵⁶ These twenty years of political migration, which have brought close to a million Cubans to the United States, have consisted in "distinct waves of immigrants, as well as distinct refugee "vintages", alike only in their final rejection of Cuba"³⁵⁷. In 2007, after almost fifty years of the Cuban revolution, about 12 to 15 percent of the Cuban population is estimated to have immigrated outside, making the exilic experience common to a really wide section of Cubans.³⁵⁸ The "Revolutionary Offensive" campaign in Cuba, adopted from 1968, was indicative of Cuba's implication in the global geo-political tussle between the "free market" economies of the United States and Western Europe and the Communist nationalised economies of the countries of the Warsaw Pact. In fact, the emergent geo-politics of the Cold War in its final years, in which the collapse of the Soviet Union created a deep economic crisis within Cuba, were responsible for the most recent wave of Cuban immigrations (1985-94)³⁵⁹. Traditionally gendered, aggressive Cuban *machismo* and the Revolution's convenient use of it to maintain

³⁵⁵ See Silvia Pedraza, "Cuba's Revolution and Exodus", *The Journal of the International Institute* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1998), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0005.204> (accessed May 21, 2022).

³⁵⁶ Lourdes Casal, "Cubans in the United States: Their Impact on U.S.-Cuban Relations," in *Revolutionary Cuba in the World Arena*, ed. Martin Weinstein (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1979), 28.

³⁵⁷ Silvia Pedraza, "Cuba's Revolution and Exodus", *The Journal of the International Institute* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1998), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0005.204> (accessed May 21, 2022).

³⁵⁸ See Jorge Duany, "Cuban Migration: A Postrevolution Exodus Ebbs and Flows", *The Online Journal of the Migration Policy Institute*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/cuban-migration-postrevolution-exodus-ebbs-and-flows> (accessed May 21, 2022).

³⁵⁹ Silvia Pedraza, "Cuba's Revolution and Exodus", <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0005.204> (accessed May 21, 2022).

sexual hierarchies in Cuba's patriarchal culture have also contributed to these immigrations in their various waves, caused by the systematic persecution, marginalisation and motivated incrimination of the less fortunate LGBTQ communities, whose sexualities were vilified within the rhetoric of a self-defeating and hypocritical "revolutionary morality". In literature, the experience of this exilic dislocation is adequately represented by a whole corpus of Cuban émigré literature represented by eminent Cuban writers and intellectuals such as Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Heberto Padilla, Miguel Correa, Reinaldo Garcia Ramos, Roberto Valero, Lydia Cabrera and Reinaldo Arenas.

The second half of the twentieth century also witnessed the conflict between Zionist forces and the Palestinian Arabs over the formation of a contested nation, Israel. As the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 escalated, over 700,000 Palestinian Arabs were forced to choose an exodus that expelled them, in most cases forever, from their homeland.³⁶⁰ The *nakba*, or the "Palestinian Catastrophe" involved the fracturing and complete destruction of Palestinian society, which could never recover from this forced, and collective exilic dispossession. Omar Dajani identifies the *nakba* as the Arab construal of a foundational national catastrophe, "of existential significance to Palestinians, representing both the shattering of the Palestinian community in Palestine and the consolidation of a shared national consciousness"³⁶¹. The effects of this traumatic dispossession were further compounded with forced expulsion from, and depopulation of hundreds of Palestinian villages and geographical erasure where more than two thousand Arab place names were changed into Hebrew names (Hebraization), as if only to manufacture a false credence which would legitimise Israel's military conquest of them.³⁶² Masalha claims that the *nakba* was instrumental to Palestinian statelessness, a hallmark of Palestinian life and society today.³⁶³ To Helena Lindholm Schulz, it can only be ironic that "the foundation of the state of Israel,

³⁶⁰ Nur Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory* (London & New York: Zed Books Ltd., 2012), 3

³⁶¹ Omar Dajani, "Surviving Opportunities," in *How Israelis and Palestinians Negotiate: A Cross-cultural Analysis of the Oslo Peace Process*, ed. Tamara Wittes Cofman, (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2005), 42.

³⁶² See Morris Benny, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 604.

³⁶³ Nur Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory* (London & New York: Zed Books Ltd., 2012), 137.

intended to create a safe haven for the ‘archetypal’ Jewish diaspora” gave a new “wandering identity” to Palestinians, who now “became a refugee nation”:

To the Palestinians, the birth of Israel is thus remembered as the catastrophe, *al-nakba*, to imprint the suffering caused by dispersal, exile, alienation and denial ... The *nakba* is the root cause of the Palestinian diaspora.³⁶⁴

The tragedy of the *nakba* forced upon Palestinians and their collective displacement is given literary representation by poets such as Mahmoud Darwish, Tawfiq Zayyad, Taha Muhammed Ali, Naomi Shihab Nye and Ghassan Zaqtan. In addition, novelists such as Ghassan Kanafani have also contributed to the growth of Palestinian national consciousness.

Having completed a reasonably extensive survey of literary representations of exile and exilic subjectivity in the twentieth century, across a variety of European and non-European contexts, I now propose, in the subsequent sections, to offer a theoretical overview of exile in the twentieth century.

1.4. Exile in the Twentieth Century: A Theoretical Overview

The meaning of the condition of exile has radically altered itself in the second half of the twentieth century from a condition of banishment which sometimes articulates itself as a necessary phase of probation. From being a condition of “terminal loss”, exile, as Edward Said has argued, has “been transformed ... into a potent, even enriching motif of modern culture”³⁶⁵. Reflecting on the modern state of exile in the essay, “Expatriates and Marginals”, Said notes:

During the twentieth century, exile has been transformed from the exquisite, and sometimes exclusive, punishment of special individuals – such as Ovid, who was banished from Rome to a remote town on the Black Sea – into a cruel punishment of whole communities and peoples, often as the inadvertent result of interpersonal forces such as war, famine, and disease.³⁶⁶

Said’s critical intervention has radicalized ways of looking at twentieth-century exile as rooted in the collective phenomena of persecution and migration.

³⁶⁴ Helena Lindholm Schulz, *The Palestinian Diaspora: Formation of Identities and Politics of Homeland* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 1-2.

³⁶⁵ Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 180.

³⁶⁶ Edward W. Said, ‘Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals’, *Grand Street* no. 47 (Autumn 1993): 113, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25007703> (accessed May 22, 2022).

Exile, for Said, is primarily a political reality of collective loss of, and longing for, home and belonging, orchestrated by “modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers”³⁶⁷. Following George Steiner’s observation, he remarks: “[O]ur age...is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass migration”³⁶⁸. Said makes reference to Steiner’s designation of “a whole genre of twentieth-century Western literature” as “extra-territorial”, and quotes him: “It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism ...should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language”³⁶⁹. Exile however no longer operates now simply as a form of banishment or aimless wandering but is instead symptomatic of a “median state neither completely at one with the new setting, nor fully disencumbered of the old; beset with half-involvements and half-detachments; nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another”³⁷⁰. Said also states that unless the exile chooses to “sit on the sidelines nursing a wound”, he or she has the opportunity to cultivate a “scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity”³⁷¹.

The precariousness of modern exile, Said goes on to say, is constitutive of the cruel awareness of the traces of home that remain despite being driven out of it. The state of exile, therefore, is one of terrifying in-betweenness that unsettles and ruptures any stable identity for the exiled yet doesn’t irrecoverably uproot them. Said illustrates this when he observes:

The fact is that for most exiles the difficulty consists not simply in being forced to live away from home, but rather, given today’s world, in living with the many reminders that you are in exile, that your home is not in fact so far away, and that the normal traffic of everyday contemporary life keeps you in constant but tantalizing and unfulfilled touch with the old place. The exile therefore exists in the median state...³⁷²

Said’s understanding of exile in the twentieth century as a product of nationalism and its genocidal impulse is strictly anti-humanist; he rejects the idea that the condition of being exiled can be fully captured – and transcended – through

³⁶⁷ Edward E. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 180.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ George Steiner, quoted in Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile”, 180.

³⁷⁰ Edward W. Said, ‘Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals’, 114.

³⁷¹ Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile”, 189.

³⁷² Edward W. Said, ‘Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals’, 114

creative or aesthetic means. At best, the literature that it produces, he argues “objectifies an anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience first-hand”³⁷³. The over-emphasis on the “humanistic” potential of exile literature inadvertently erases or “banalizes” the horrors of exile as embodied in the countless uprooted figures who remain beyond the scope of literary representation; “...refugee-peasants with no prospect of ever returning home, armed only with a ration card and an agency number”.³⁷⁴

Much like the Hegelian dialectic of the master and the slave, Said uncovers what he calls the essential association between nationalism and exile. Even though nationalisms fight to achieve collective belonging in a place, they are also responsible for bringing about state-sponsored displacement of individuals and communities; a nation-state, by its very definition and for its political survival, pits ‘us’ against ‘them’. This insider-outsider dichotomy often translates into real political formations based on one or other kind of identity – race, ethnicity, language, etc. – that literally drives out those who stand to question such homogeneity. But the exiled are situated in between this dichotomy; “the perilous territory of not belonging”³⁷⁵. In other words, as Said notes:

Nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation.

Speaking in relation to this disjuncture from communal belonging that the exiled experience, or more accurately, is made to experience, Said makes a case for what he calls “scrupulous subjectivity” of the exiled intellectual; the state of exile as a state of perpetual and deliberate dissidence that questions and destabilizes the foundations of modern life. He remarks:

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.³⁷⁶

³⁷³ Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile”, 181.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 182.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 183.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 190.

Of critical relevance here is of Said's essay "Expatriates and Marginals", where he argues in favour of metaphorical exile as espoused by an intellectual on the margins. Metaphorical exile is not necessarily a product of mass displacement, but such a subjectivity exists even amongst those who have lived in one society for an uninterrupted amount of time. Here, Said in a way idealizes the outsider-status of the intellectual as an essential characteristic of radical living. He goes on to define the exiled intellectual in the following manner:

[T]he intellectual as outsider, which I believe is the right role for today's intellectual, is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted...tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well-being. Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others.³⁷⁷

The decentred, unstable yet "scrupulous subjectivity" of the exiled intellectual – the epitome of which he finds in the European critical thinker, Theodore Adorno – therefore allows for "a plurality of vision" through which the very private wound or trauma of exile can be negotiated with.³⁷⁸ Comparing and contrasting worldviews and realities becomes an intellectual manifestation of not only of real exile, but also of metaphorical exile. Notwithstanding Said's commitment to real histories of dislocation and estrangement, his understanding also accommodates the "contrapuntal" potential of metaphorical exile, particularly so in the case of the exiled intellectual, who by persistently remaining on the margins, refuses to be co-opted by the institutional politics of the state-party-corporate nexus: "[i]ntellectually this means that an idea or experience is always counterposed with another, sometimes making them both appear in a new and unpredictable light..."³⁷⁹

In the literary domain therefore, especially from the twentieth century onwards, the reading of exile has been complicated by the view that it has become a necessary condition for the development of creative and aesthetic processes that are justly rooted in the political reality of displacement, but are not always limited to it. Following Said's view, Rushdie makes a similar claim in *Imaginary Homelands* that the exiled are suspicious of any homogenous reality, having been

³⁷⁷ Edward W. Said, 'Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals', 117.

³⁷⁸ Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile", 191.

³⁷⁹ Edward W. Said, 'Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals', 122.

thrown into precarious material challenges.³⁸⁰ The exiled therefore emerge as a people who are, in a way, neither here nor there and yet they understand, and discursively locate their position in the world in relation to many kinds of “otherness”. They tend to situate themselves between many subjectivities and the desire to reclaim what is lost is negotiated through the creation of fictional homes; “not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones...”³⁸¹ This liminal existence that the exiled writer clings to – deliberately resisting the illusion of being emplaced – produces the scope for deconstructing existing aesthetic modes and exploring new ways of writing about exile. Rushdie reflects:

The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human beings; people who root themselves in ideas rather than in places...the migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier.³⁸²

This idea of “metaphorical exile” is also echoed by Andrew Gurr when he argues that “deracination, exile and alienation” characterize the work of most modern writers.³⁸³ Modern writers of exile therefore occupy an intersubjective space in which, to borrow Bhabha’s view, the meaning of culture is constantly being produced and re-produced. Bhabha observes that narratives of nationhood, race, class, gender are always in a flux, torn between competing and contrasting ideas and phenomena: “...it is in the emergence of the interstices--the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated”.³⁸⁴ But without disagreeing on the dynamism of the “interstitial perspective”³⁸⁵, Bhabha’s privileging of such liminality may be interpreted as a disengagement from the material conditions of persecution and violence that mass displacements of the modern era are characterized by. It is useful to remember here Said’s observation

³⁸⁰ See Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays on Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Viking, 1991), 124-25.

³⁸¹ Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands”, *London Review of Books* 4, no. 18 (7 October, 1982), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v04/n18/salman-rushdie/imaginary-homelands> (accessed May 22, 2022).

³⁸² Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays on Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Viking, 1991), 124-25.

³⁸³ See Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), 14.

³⁸⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 2.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 3.

that exile is constituted of experiences that do not always find representation in the literary or cultural field. To try to understand or define exile as a purely cultural condition of the twentieth century is to grossly undermine the brutality of imperial wars and genocides responsible for mass migrations around the world, and primarily in the ‘Third World’. This only brings us closer to the realization that exile or literatures of exile in the twentieth century are complex phenomena, not easily understood in terms of one or the other, but in terms of a combination of historical and cultural factors that go on to shape the politics of cultural producers and their production.

Talking about the literatures of exile, Claudio Guillén differentiates between two kinds of exile writings: “literature of exile” and “literature of counter-exile”³⁸⁶. The former, he argues, consists of writings that are produced primarily in terms of loss, displacement, and alienation; illustrated perfectly, he notes, by Ovid.³⁸⁷ Literature of counter-exile, on the other hand, consists of such texts that tend to transcend earlier attachments to place, race, class, language, religion and move toward a more philosophical quest for the modern human condition in relation to one’s own reality of exile.³⁸⁸ He notes that this kind of counter-exilic literature “incorporate[s] the separation from place, class, language or native community, insofar as they triumph over the separation and thus can offer wide dimensions of meaning that transcend the earlier attachment to place or native origin”³⁸⁹. In the literature of counter-exile therefore the subject matter is varied – spiritually related to exile in terms of how it influences the writer’s vision, but also beyond its political limits. In this sense, Guillen’s thesis is closely attached to Said’s views on intellectual exile, and also to Kristeva’s theorization of exile as a language that enables intellectuals to bring about “multiple sublation of the unnameable”, which thereby forms, she remarks, the “real cutting edge of dissidence”³⁹⁰.

³⁸⁶ Claudio Guillén, “On the Literature of Exile and Counter-Exile”, *Books Abroad* 50, No. 2 (Spring, 1976): 271-280: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40130427> (accessed May 21, 2022).

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 272

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ See Julia Kristeva, “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, trans. Leon S. Roudiez and Sean Hand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 300.

In Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*, we find a radical reclamation of the condition of exile. More specifically, the self-other dialectic is read in terms of a politics that brings to question all stable notions of home and belonging. Kristeva asserts that "the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder"³⁹¹. In other words, what is proposed here is the idea that the very essence of being dwells in difference; the self is always already exiled, or the self is always already other.³⁹² Such a notion of the self as exiled interrogates the meaning of any rooted existence and challenges and seeks to redress the "foreigner" self from feeling inadequate about its difference or strangeness. On this note, she writes:

The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities.³⁹³

"Strangers" share an intersubjective bond of difference that cannot always be understood or articulated, but acutely felt in relation to the condition of exile; claims of authenticity or falsehood in terms of one's identity are destroyed insofar as the homeless "foreigner" performs "the actor's paradox: multiplying masks and 'false selves' he is never completely true nor completely false"³⁹⁴. In Kristeva's analysis, there are two kinds of "foreigners": one is the "Ironist", the other is the "Believer"³⁹⁵. She describes the former as someone who doesn't want to absorb or be absorbed into another culture, but maintains distance—albeit with the language of silence—while the latter tries to control the "other" with the passion of an occupier.³⁹⁶ The "Ironist", it can be argued, is more aware of one's own position as a "stranger" to oneself, which has severe repercussions on the perception

³⁹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Univ. of Columbia Press, 1991), 1

³⁹² One recalls here, Arthur Rimbaud's 1871 postulation "*je est une autre*" ("I is an other") where "[t]he materiality of art allows one to encounter oneself as other, and this distance enables perspective, insight and understanding". (See Scott Thurston, "I is an other": Encountering the Self as Other in Expressive Arts Practice", Lecture delivered at 2nd International Arts in Healthcare Event – Arts, Creativity and the Global Crisis: Reimagining Identity, Otherness and the Possible, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York, 4th-6th October 2019, [https://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/59879/3/1%20is%20an%20other%20\(edited\).pdf](https://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/59879/3/1%20is%20an%20other%20(edited).pdf) (accessed May 21, 2022)).

³⁹³ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Univ. of Columbia Press, 1991), 1

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 8.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 10.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

of one's own language and culture.³⁹⁷ Believers are those who are already “bent with a passion ...for another land, always a promised one, that of an occupation, a love, a child, a glory”³⁹⁸. Caught between two or more cultures and languages, Kristeva maintains, the “foreigner” chooses silence as a weapon of resisting stability.³⁹⁹ In a way, Kristeva glorifies the language of silence as once again a marker of essential, powerful and unreachable difference that reflects the autonomy of the exiled self.⁴⁰⁰

In his work *The Anatomy of Exile*, Paul Tabori enumerates the different kinds of displacement that overlap with the idea of exile in the modern world:

Immigrant, colonist, migrant, transmigrant, outcast, (generic) gypsy, expatriate, addicted globe trotter, expelled spouse, émigré intellectual, the “displaced persons” after World War II, the Jews in exile (as per, for example, the “exilic books”), the wandering Jew (as per Eugene Sue and other versions), and yet other exiles – not to forget a large fraction of cultural anthropologists whose voluntary internal exile is marked by hostility to the political economy, conceptual ambivalence and polarization, and the theoretical foregrounding of otherwise quotidian features of social life.⁴⁰¹

Tabori goes on to define the *exsul* as someone who thinks of one's displacement as a temporary affair even though it lasts for a lifetime or someone who lives in one place but is psychologically rooted in another. In other words, according to Tabori, an “exiled” is one who has not, or refuses to, come to terms with the finality of exilic separation, and keeps themselves tied to a hope of return.⁴⁰² This sentiment is indeed shared by a vast number of exiled Palestinian people who have globally mobilized themselves around the right of return.

Andrei Codrescu understands exile as a “cluster of paradoxes”, which inhabits a space in between cultural identity and cultural adjustment.⁴⁰³ Out of this struggle emerge complex discursive narratives about the exiled self as perceived in

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Ibid. 15

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Paul Tabori, *The Anatomy of Exile: A Semantic and Historical Study* (London: Harrap, 1972), 30.

⁴⁰² Ibid. 27.

⁴⁰³ Andrei Codrescu, *The Disappearance of the Outside* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. 1990), 38.

relation to the catastrophic transformations of history, culture and politics. Codrescu defines this in-between space as the “outside – a vast, expansive, changeable, paradoxical, perverse (condition), traversed by all escape routes”⁴⁰⁴. A paradoxical home is one in which the exiled writer lives as an insider and an outsider simultaneously. This “perverse” location, in a way, prods the exiled writer to use both the past and the present to produce texts in which spatial and temporal binaries collapse; identity is redefined “along fragments of multiple locations and time(s)”⁴⁰⁵.

In *Diasporic Meditations*, R. Radhakrishnan makes a similar point about the location of exiled writers between two spatial and temporal dimensions. However, his thesis attempts to work towards a more collective politics of mobilization with the other; building provisional bridges between differences or coming together around a set of common concerns.⁴⁰⁶ His work is more engaged with the praxis of identity-based narratives and what it can achieve in practical terms. He argues for a position from which the exiled can be “both past and future oriented within the history of the present”⁴⁰⁷. This position is also taken up by Rosi Braidotti in her essay “The Exile, the Nomad, and the Migrant” in which, she revisits the feminist idea of women’s planetary exile in terms of contemporary refugee crises across Europe and “internationalism”⁴⁰⁸. Against the backdrop of collective frenzy around European internationalism, Braidotti raises crucial questions about women’s relationship with the nation-state and citizenship and remarks that “[p]roposing an international perspective without critical scrutiny of women’s respective roles in our cultural, national contexts would be only a form of supranationalism, that is, ultimately a form of planetary exile”⁴⁰⁹.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid. 107.

⁴⁰⁵ Noemi Marin, “Rhetoric of Exilic Identity: A Search for Re-definition”, https://www.academia.edu/67566924/Rhetoric_of_Exilic_Identity_A_Search_for_Redefinition (accessed May 23, 2022).

⁴⁰⁶ Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Meditations: Between Home and Location* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996), 155-56.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid. 158.

⁴⁰⁸ Rosi Braidotti, “The Exile, the Nomad and the Migrant: Reflections on International Feminism”, *Women's Studies International Forum* 15, Issue 1 (1992):7-10, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/027753959290027S> (accessed May 23, 2022).

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid. 8.

She describes how through using the “metaphor of women’s exile”, several feminist scholars and critics have engaged with, and opposed the issue of female identity “as a site of negotiations”⁴¹⁰ between the self and cultural contexts. However, Braidotti is also aware of the evasive “ethnocentric” tendency latent in grouping together all women under the category of “homeless”, especially so in the context of real mass displacement of people from war-torn countries.⁴¹¹ She asserts that the idea of a planetary exile can no longer be a political solution to such a problem. The solution that she addresses to white European women is to actively and critically scrutinize the national and cultural frameworks within which they are situated.⁴¹² She argues that the figure of the nomad and the figure of the migrant – as opposed to idea of planetary exile – can provide a new analytical lens through which a non-ethnocentric internationalism can be explored.⁴¹³ Braidotti describes the figure of the woman-as-nomad as an intellectual who crosses borders and boundaries without any definite destination in mind.⁴¹⁴ She finds this kind of movement similar to the crossing over of feminist ideas and cross-cultural networking of feminist politics. The other representative of feminist internationalism is the figure of the migrant whose cultural frameworks are historically different from that of the host country. An acknowledgment of the complexities of such internationalism has serious implications on intersectional feminist politics. Braidotti points out that an emphasis on “situated perspectives allows cultural diversity to be respected...to think of the differences among women without losing sight of the commonalities”⁴¹⁵. In other words, when feminist internationalism is configured as nomadic and migrant based on situated knowledge of socio-cultural contexts, multiple modes of interaction emerge that can substantially challenge the political limits of the nation-state.

Binesh Balan proposes a new concept of exile, in the context socio-religious and caste identities in India, which he terms “comfortable exile”⁴¹⁶. A

⁴¹⁰ Ibid. 9.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid. 8.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid. 9.

⁴¹⁶ Binesh Balan, “Making of Comfortable Exile through Sanskritization: Reflections on Imagination of Identity Notions in India”, *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 11, no. 2(November 2019): 84-93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X19859192> (accessed May 23, 2022).

particular kind of social exile from the mainstream, it denotes a condition of contentment based on “collective interests within the group”⁴¹⁷. He describes such people as otherwise “considered ‘aliens’ or internal ‘others’ on the grounds of their religious, racial, ethnic, linguistic or caste-based identity” and who “therefore migrate to a comfortable place elsewhere after having risked their lives to restore representation, identity and civil rights in their own country and often capture a comfortable identity to being part of a dominant religion, society and culture”⁴¹⁸. His analysis of “comfortable exile” is centred around the phenomenon of “Sanskritization” of Indian society in the twentieth century, which systematically caused the erasure of several indigenous and local socio-cultural rituals and practices.⁴¹⁹ From this emergence of a homogenous Hindu identity – whose primary and pervasive marker has been the internalization of caste hierarchy by other non-Hindu religions such as Islam and Christianity – and the adoption of neo-liberal values within its fold, political power has been consolidated “under the umbrella of Hindutva ideology”⁴²⁰. Within this context, “comfortable exile” is seen as a pragmatic path chosen by many marginalized peoples in India who either allow their cultural assimilation into the hegemonic Hindu fold to ensure social-economic dignity and security.

Large scale phenomena of wars, genocides, human rights violations, and political conflict in the twentieth century have impacted mass mobility in unprecedented ways. The historico-political relationship that the state of exile shared with monarchical banishment has undergone myriad transformations as even the idea of banishment has. As has been amply shown in the aforementioned references, exile in the twentieth century must be understood in terms of collective cultural and political consequences on groups of people as opposed to one individual being forced to live on the margins of a civilization yet unfamiliar with world wars and conflict on a global scale. Nevertheless, an analysis of exile in the modern era only in terms of negative implications is also incomplete and even tends to limit the agentic potential (active volition) of persecuted and marginalized communities living in exile. While an acknowledgement of the precarious location

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. 85.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid. 86.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid. 85.

⁴²⁰ Ibid. 89.

of such peoples – in relation to citizenship and civil rights – is necessary for any meaningful and situated engagement with the reality of displacement, it is also imperative to explore epistemological narratives that emerge out of this framework; the endless exchanges and negotiations that play out across borders when multiple cultures collide and how this interaction manifests itself through creative and aesthetic avenues. The deliberate stance to stay out of the neo-liberal mainstream, embrace a certain kind of ruptured yet transnational identity, and refuse to be co-opted by hegemonic ideas of race, gender, ethnicity and culture have increasingly become prominent characteristics of literatures produced by exiled peoples across the world.

1.5. The Scope of this Dissertation: A Brief Exposition

Against such a larger context of exilic subjectivity and belonging in the twentieth century, the present dissertation focusses upon the poetic oeuvres of Derek Walcott (1930-2017), Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996), Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) and Reinaldo Arenas (1943-1990), four poets in the second half of the twentieth century, drawn from distinctly different geo-political and socio-cultural contexts. There exists a distinctly intertextual and poetic interface between the work of these four poets, across the second half of the twentieth century, where they negotiate with realities of forced dislocation, banishment and deportation, voluntary and coerced exile. They serve as potent examples to reveal the “contrapuntal” nature of the exilic enigma underlined by Said, emphasizing both ‘real’ and metaphoric (or spiritual) displacement from the cultures of their origin. Two of the poets discussed in the course of this dissertation—Walcott and Heaney—belong to cultures with a history of British colonialism, but nevertheless (owing no doubt to their education) chose to write their poetry in English and partook in forms of poetic apprenticeship to canonical poetic masters from canonical figures of Anglo-American literature such as Marlowe, Milton, Tennyson, W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden. While Walcott grew up in the island of St. Lucia and worked in professional capacity from Trinidad, Heaney was profoundly tied to his identity as a Catholic in Northern Ireland during “the Troubles”. However, both of these poets chose to outgrow their initial attachments to their respective places. Both Walcott and Heaney chose to emigrate voluntarily, to the United States and the Republic of Ireland respectively. The two other poets discussed within the scope of this

dissertation (Brodsky and Arenas) emerge from Communist and dictatorial political backgrounds—Soviet Russia and Cuba respectively—and were subjected to internal exile, forced deportation and coerced exile. They are poets who, having irked the respective dictatorial political regimes they were part of, experienced marginalisation on several fronts, notably for their ethnicity, artistic beliefs and their sexuality. The template of forced or coerced exile and displacement applies to the latter pair of poets, while the guilt-ridden angst of self-exile recurs in the poetry of the former pair.

Having sketched out the broad contours of my project against the aforementioned literary and theoretical contexts, I would propose, through this dissertation, a close study of exilic subjectivity and its representations across the poetic oeuvres of each of these four poets. In order however that we grasp clearly the ways in which “exile” (through its tangibly ‘real’ and metaphoric connotations) has manifested itself in their works, it is necessary to provide brief biographical sketches of the literary career of each of these four poets.

Born and raised in Castries, St. Lucia in the Caribbean, Derek Walcott was the son of Alix and Warwick Walcott. His father, a civil servant, died when Walcott was still in infancy, and he was raised by his mother.⁴²¹ The Walcotts were Methodists, a minority community who felt isolated in the dominantly Catholic nature of the island, a historical circumstance attributable to French colonial rule in the island.⁴²² Walcott comes of mixed, multicultural descent (African, English and Dutch) and identifies as a “mulatto”. In his youth, he received tutelage in painting by his mentor Harold Simmons—a painter, poet and playwright, folklorist and editor of the journal *The Voice of St. Lucia*.⁴²³ After finishing his graduation from University College of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica Walcott relocated to Trinidad in 1953, working as a theatre and art critic, as well as a teacher till 1957⁴²⁴.

⁴²¹ Hilton Als, “The Islander”, *The New Yorker*, February 2, 2004, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/02/09/the-islander> (accessed June 02, 2022).

⁴²² William Grimes, Derek Walcott, Poet and Nobel Laureate of the Caribbean, Dies at 87,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/17/books/derek-walcott-dead-nobel-prize-literature.html> (accessed June 02, 2022)

⁴²³ Derek Walcott, “Derek Walcott, The Art of Poetry No. 37,” interview by Edward Hirsch, *The Paris Review*, Winter, 1986, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2719/the-art-of-poetry-no-37-derek-walcott> (accessed June 02, 2022)

⁴²⁴ See Martin Armstrong, Puchner, *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, 4th edition, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2013), 117.

In 1959, Walcott founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop.⁴²⁵ He worked as a pioneering playwright from the West Indies, but found himself, at later stages, frustrated by the lack of public funding in the arts in Trinidad. Thus, when he received a prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship at the University of Boston in 1981, Walcott chose to emigrate to the United States, leaving behind his lifelong attachment to Trinidad.⁴²⁶ For the next two decades, he divided his time between staying in Boston and Trinidad, and publishing newer poetic anthologies and plays. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1992, becoming only the second writer (after Saint John-Perse) from the Caribbean to become a Nobel Laureate.

Although Walcott's decision to relocate to Boston can only be seen as a voluntary choice, his personal and literary negotiations with exilic subjectivity occurs across the poetic anthologies that were published in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. In Walcott's case therefore, exilic subjectivity may be approached in a threefold sense—first, the acute burden of historical exile that marks the Caribbean subject; second, the individual sense of estrangement experienced by him as a colonially educated poet writing in the English language in St. Lucia and finally, his voluntary migration to the United States from the Caribbean and the retrospective guilt arising in him owing to the same. His critical prose, anthologised in the collection *What the Twilight Says* (1998)⁴²⁷, seeks to reinforce that hybridised and syncretic nature of cultural belonging in the Caribbean, shaped by the histories of slavery, indentureship and creolisation in the West Indies. Walcott's most well-known poetic volumes include *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965), *Another Life* (1973), *Sea Grapes* (1976), *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979), *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), *Midsummer* (1984), *The Bounty* (1997), *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), *The Prodigal* (2004) and the epic poem *Omeros* (1990). Walcott's most famous plays include *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970), *Remembrance* (1977) and *Pantomime* (1978).

Iosif Aleksandrovich Brodsky, better known in the Anglo-American word as Joseph Brodsky, was born as a Russian-Jew in Leningrad (now St.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Kathleen Teltsch, "Years of No-strings Creativity Ending for First 'Genius' Group," *The New York Times*, July 10, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/07/10/us/years-of-no-strings-creativity-ending-for-first-genius-group.html> (accessed June 02, 2022)

⁴²⁷ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988)

Petersburg) in 1940. His father, Aleksandr Brodsky worked as a professional photographer for the Soviet navy, and his mother was a professional interpreter.⁴²⁸ Brodsky grew up in communal apartments, and in reasonable poverty during the war-ravaged decade of the 1940s in the Soviet Union, surviving the three year long Siege of Leningrad (September, 1941-January, 1944).⁴²⁹ He dropped out of formal education and worked as a milling machine operator and at the Kresty Prison morgue in Leningrad, as an assistant. He frequently took up menial jobs, working in hospitals, in a ship's boiler room and later, went on geological expeditions⁴³⁰. After the Stalinist regime was over, there was a periodic relaxation of the aesthetic standards of Socialist Realism in Soviet Russia, allowing for greater artistic freedom for the poets of the "Thaw Generation" such as Brodsky, Evgeny Evtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky, Bella Akhmadulina, Robert Rozhdestvensky and Bulat Okudzhava to attempt a "de-Stalinisation" of the Russian language, restoring to it a wider field of connotative variance and truthfulness.⁴³¹ In 1963, Brodsky's poetry was publicly denounced in a prominent Leningrad newspaper, and after a mock trial in 1964, he was sentenced to five years of internal exile and hard labour on charges of "social parasitism" in the village of Norenskaiya, in the Archangelsk region of Soviet Russia.⁴³² Since he was already used to menial labour, Brodsky survived quite well during the eighteen months that he served in the region. His sentence was commuted after protests from the international *literati*, including reputed poets and intellectuals such as Anna Akhmatova, Evgeny Evtushenko and Jean-Paul Sartre.⁴³³ After he returned to Leningrad in 1965, Brodsky began to write prolifically, although very few of his poems were officially published in Leningrad, with most of them circulating "underground" in the form of unauthorised *samizdat* copies.⁴³⁴ But he was too frequently harassed by the Soviet state of the Brezhnev era, and repeatedly coerced (in view of the fact that he could be a repatriate Jew) to

⁴²⁸ Henri Cole, "Joseph Brodsky," in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature in English*, eds. Jenny Stringer and John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 82.

⁴²⁹ Keith Gessen, "The Gift: Joseph Brodsky and the Fortunes of Misfortune," *The New Yorker*, May 16, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/23/the-gift-keith-gessen> (accessed June 03, 2022)

⁴³⁰ Cole, "Joseph Brodsky"

⁴³¹ Emily Lygo, *Leningrad Poetry 1953-75: The Thaw Generation* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1977)

⁴³² See David Remnick, "Gulag Lite," *The New Yorker*, December 20 & 27, 2010, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/12/20/gulag-lite> (accessed June 03, 2022)

⁴³³ Cole, "Joseph Brodsky", 84-85.

⁴³⁴ Lev Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life* trans. Jane Ann Miller (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011), 48.

immigrate to Israel. When Brodsky refused, he was forcefully expelled from the USSR in 1972, and put on a plane to Vienna. He re-settled, with the help of his literary friends Carl Ray Proffer and W.H. Auden, at Ann Arbor, Michigan in the United States of America.⁴³⁵ He also became the poet-in residence at the University of Michigan.

In later years, Brodsky was the recipient of many prestigious literary awards and fellowships, as well as the honorary degrees of Doctor of Letters from Yale University and Doctor of Literature from the University of Oxford.⁴³⁶ He became the Andrew Mellon Professor of Literature and the Five College Professor of Literature at Mount Holyoke.⁴³⁷ In 1981, Brodsky relocated to Greenwich Village in New York.⁴³⁸ While in internal exile, he had already taught himself to read in the English language, becoming gradually familiar to Anglo-American poetry through the works of Robert Frost and W.H. Auden. Although his poetic output had no dearth of translators in the United States, Brodsky also began to translate his own poems to English, publishing the poetic volumes *A Part of Speech* (1980), *To Urania* (1988) and *So Forth* (1996) in English. His volumes of critical essays, *Less than One* (1986) and *On Grief and Reason* (1995) reveal his steadfast commitment to the Russian poetic canon, re-echoing the poetic voices of Alexander Pushkin, Yevgeny Baratynsky, Boris Slutsky, his namesake and fellow-exile from an older time, Osip Mandelstam, and poets from the Anglo-American canon such as W.H. Auden and Robert Frost. In 1987, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, for his “rich and intense vital” poetry, which traversed “great breadth in time and space”⁴³⁹. Brodsky also became the Poet Laureate of the United States of America in 1991.

Seamus Heaney was born and raised in Mossbawn in County Derry (or Londonderry), part of Ulster, Northern Ireland. He was the child of Catholic parents

⁴³⁵ Simon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet's Journey through the Twentieth Century* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 121.

⁴³⁶ Robert Dennis McFadden, “Joseph Brodsky, Exiled Poet Who Won Nobel, Dies at 55,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/29/arts/joseph-brodsky-exiled-poet-who-won-nobel-dies-at-55.html> (accessed June 04, 2022)

⁴³⁷ “Remembering Joseph Brodsky,” <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/stories/66848/remembering-joseph-brodsky> (accessed June 04, 2022)

⁴³⁸ Cole, “Joseph Brodsky”, 91.

⁴³⁹ McFadden, “Joseph Brodsky, Exiled Poet Who Won Nobel, Dies at 55”, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/29/arts/joseph-brodsky-exiled-poet-who-won-nobel-dies-at-55.html> (accessed June 04, 2022)

Patrick Heaney and Margaret Kathleen McCann.⁴⁴⁰ He attended Anahorish Primary School, and later won a scholarship to St. Columb's College, Derry. Heaney studied English Language and Literature at Queen's University, Belfast. after graduating, began his teaching career at St. Thomas Secondary Intermediate School at Ballymurphy in Belfast.⁴⁴¹ Michael McLaverty, the headmaster at St. Thomas, was his early poetic mentor, encouraging him to keep writing and publishing poetry.⁴⁴² His first two poetic volumes, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), brought him considerable poetic fame and consolidated his position as a Catholic voice from Northern Ireland. However, Heaney's "reticence" regarding the gradually aggravating political background of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland earned him the displeasure of the Nationalist circles.⁴⁴³ He taught as a visiting faculty at the University of California, Berkeley in 1971-72 and the next year, resigned from his teaching post at Queen's University, Belfast and emigrated to Co. Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland.⁴⁴⁴ He was later appointed as the Head of English at the Carysfort College in Dublin.⁴⁴⁵ Heaney's exilic poetics may be understood through his complicated relationship to both Ulster and the greater 'Irish' identity, as well as the English literary tradition to which he was deeply indebted to. Heaney's own voluntary exile from Belfast to Wicklow in 1972 and his final resettlement in Dublin also undoubtedly constitutes an important event in his 'growing out' of the 'Ulster-poet' identity and consolidates his sense of being an "inner émigré" capable of withdrawing himself and achieving a poetic detachment that nevertheless is intent on performing the responsibility of poetic "redress".

Heaney's later life saw him live a considerable amount of time at Harvard University, where he had become the Bolyston Professor of Rhetoric and

⁴⁴⁰ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), 3.

⁴⁴¹ Seamus Heaney, "Sweet Airs that Delight," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2002/apr/13/artsandhumanities.highereducation> (accessed June 05, 2022)

⁴⁴² Bernard O'Donoghue, *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

⁴⁴³ See, for example, Edna Longley, "North: 'Inner Emigre' or 'Artful Voyeur,'" *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986)

⁴⁴⁴ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), 88.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 91.

Oratory, serving from 1985-1997.⁴⁴⁶ He later became the Ralph Waldo Emerson Poet-in-Residence at Harvard, in which capacity he served till 2006.⁴⁴⁷ He was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1995, and possibly became the best-known Irish poet in the second half of the twentieth century. His mid-career poetic volumes *Wintering Out* (1973), *North* (1975), *Field Work* (1979), *Sweeney Astray* (1983), *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991) and *The Spirit Level* (1996) are testaments of his engagement with, and troubled resolution of, his psychological anxieties and inner guilt relating to his gradual dissociation from the politically charged circumstances of the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland, and his choice of voluntary exile to Wicklow. Heaney’s critical prose anthologies, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (1980), *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), *The Redress of Poetry* (1995) and *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (2002) try to arrive at a conceptualisation of “poetic redress”, a form of alleviation and counter-balancing that may be useful in remedying historico-political inequities of any given context.

Reinaldo Arenas was born in Aguas Claras, in the Oriente province of Cuba, in 1943. He was born into abject poverty, in an illiterate and peasant family. Abandoned by his father, Arenas and his mother took refuge in the household of his grandparents.⁴⁴⁸ Owing to the fact that it was gradually becoming impossible to earn a living through agriculture, Arenas’s grandfather sold the family farm and moved to the nearby town of Holguín, where Arenas had to take up a menial job in a guava paste factory, earning a peso for a day.⁴⁴⁹ However, it was in school itself, through his interactions with other boys, that Arenas had his first sexual experiences. It was at this age when he discovered he was a homosexual, and that, for the most part, he identified as a *maricon*.⁴⁵⁰ In 1956-57, as fighting reached aggravated proportions between Fulgencio Batista’s armies and Fidel Castro’s guerrillas from the 26th of July Movement, the fourteen year old Arenas decided to

⁴⁴⁶ See Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), 177.

⁴⁴⁷ “Seamus Heaney,” British Council, <https://web.archive.org/web/20101214173915/http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=author189> (accessed June 04, 2022)

⁴⁴⁸ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, trans. Dolores M. Koch (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2001), Kindle edition, 9-10

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 30.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 31.

flee from home and join the rebels in the town of Velasco.⁴⁵¹ On December 31, 1958, as Santa Clara fell to the hands of the advancing guerrillas, Fulgencio Batista escaped Cuba. The institution of the new revolutionary government in Cuba facilitated Arenas's education. He was awarded a state-funded scholarship at La Pantoja, a newly founded polytechnic institute converted from a military camp used by the old regime.⁴⁵² Graduating as an agricultural accountant from the *Instituto Politecnico* in Havana, Arenas briefly worked at a State Farm before moving to Havana in 1963. He worked at the *Biblioteca Nacional* and submitted the manuscript of his first novel *Celestino antes des alba (Singing from the Well)* to the inaugural National Literary Competition (*Premio Nacional de Novela Cirilo Villaverde*), organised and sponsored by the Union of Writers and Artists in Cuba (UNEAC) in 1965.⁴⁵³ It received an honourable mention, as did his second novel *El mundo aluciante (Hallucinations, or The Ill-Fated Peregrinations of Fray Servando)* at the next edition of the literary competition in 1966, although on both occasions Arenas's departure from Socialist Realism was taken stock of by the UNEAC, which deprived him of the first prize. As post-revolutionary Cuba gradually began to veer towards the Eastern bloc within the geo-political scenario of the Cold War, Arenas's openly homosexual life in Havana ran afoul of the government. Before the Ten Million Ton sugarcane harvest in 1970, he was sent to offer "voluntary labour" in a labour camp at the Manuel Sanguilly Mill in Pinar del Rio.⁴⁵⁴ In 1974, he was arrested and thrown into prison, charged and convicted with "ideological deviations" and corrupting minors with his homosexual advances.⁴⁵⁵ After a couple of failed attempts to escape prison, Arenas was imprisoned at the El Morro castle prison, notorious for housing the most hardened criminals such as murderers or rapists.⁴⁵⁶ After being released from prison in 1976, Arenas lived for only four more years in Cuba. In 1980, he emigrated permanently to the United States of America as part of the Mariel Boatlift.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵¹ Ibid, 34-35.

⁴⁵² Ibid, 27.

⁴⁵³ Jorge Olivares, *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas: Family, Sexuality and the Cuban Revolution*, 22.

⁴⁵⁴ Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 74

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, 86-87.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, 95.

⁴⁵⁷ "Mariel Boatlift of 1980", *Immigration History*, <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/mariel-boatlift/> (accessed June 04, 2022).

Arenas briefly lived in Miami before settling down in New York, where he lived till his death in 1990. Along with a host of fellow Cuban émigré writers of his generation such as Juan Abreu, Carlos Victoria, Luz de la Paz, Roberto Valero, Rene Cifuentes and Reinaldo Ramos, he began the journal *Mariel* (1983-85), which represented the voices of fellow-Marielitos like himself.⁴⁵⁸ Afflicted by AIDS during his final years, Arenas lived in almost complete isolation in his rat-infested New York apartment, writing prolifically, and was able to finish his *pentagonia*, a quintet of five novels—*Celestino antes des alba* (*Singing from the Well*), *El palacio de las blanquisimas mofetas* (*The Palace of the White Skunks*), *Otra vez el mar* (*Farewell to the Sea*), *El color de verano* (*The Color of Summer*) and *El asalto* (*The Assault*). His poetic volumes *El central* (1981) and *Leprosorio: trilogia poetica* (1990) are marked by the experiences of the sustained marginalisation he faced in Cuban society as a homosexual, a pronounced aversion and disgust at the arbitrariness of the dictatorial Castro regime and an ethical resolve to stay true to his homosexuality, which Arenas re-configured into a form of counter-militancy. His memoir *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*) brought him more widely into public attention within the domain of Anglo-American literary criticism.

One can thus foresee, in the literary careers of these four poets, a form of exilic and multicultural confluence taking shape in the United States of the 1980s, where all of them found themselves. In the case of the first three poets discussed under the scope of this dissertation, there is ample evidence to suggest a their common belonging to an affective community of literary artists, displaced from four different corners of the world and re-uniting in the United States of America during the 1980s. The poetic “triangulation” of exilic voices of Walcott, Brodsky and Heaney occurs through their critical, and meta-textual poetic commentaries they wrote on each other. As I will go on to show in the course of the subsequent chapters, Walcott began to explicitly refer to the exilic fate of Brodsky in his poems such as “Forest of Europe”⁴⁵⁹ in *The Star Apple Kingdom* (1979) and then again in many different poems from *Midsummer* (1984) and *The Bounty* (1997). His review essay on Brodsky’s poetic volume *To Urania* (1988), “Magic Industry”, introduces

⁴⁵⁸ Camelly Cruz-Martes, “Prologue: “The Will to Live Manifesting Itself,” in Reinaldo Arenas, *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 9

⁴⁵⁹ Derek Walcott, “Forest of Europe,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 375

Brodsky to the Anglo-American reader, and praised Brodsky's "self-conscription, his daily soldiering with no army behind him except the phantoms of the race's greatest poets"⁴⁶⁰. As Robin Hanford has revealed, Brodsky came to know of Walcott's poetic work through their mutual acquaintance, the poet Robert Lowell, in 1977.⁴⁶¹ In course of time, Brodsky would also write a critical essay on Walcott's work, titled "The Sound of the Tide"⁴⁶². In this essay, Brodsky imagines a time within the lifespan of civilisations "when centers cease to hold"⁴⁶³. "The job of holding at such times", he writes, "is done by men from the provinces, from the outskirts"⁴⁶⁴. Brodsky specifically draws attention to typically "Walcottesque" manipulations of language and eschews traditional notions of poetic biography, "because "[a] poet's biography is in his vowels and sibilants, in his metres, rhymes and metaphors"⁴⁶⁵. He especially commends what he considers Walcott's belief that "language is greater than its masters or its servants, that poetry, being its supreme version, is therefore an instrument for self-betterment for both; i.e., that it is a way to gain an identity superior to the confines of class, race or ego"⁴⁶⁶.

In a similar manner, Carmen Bugan has also read, in the poetic oeuvre of Seamus Heaney, a "poetics of exile" or "extra-territorial poetics", emerging out of his close reading of the East-European triad of poets Czeslaw Milosz, Joseph Brodsky and Zbigniew Herbert.⁴⁶⁷ In Bugan's reading, Brodsky's poetry "defined itself against Russia's political background" and provided Heaney with a model of foreignness through which he 'refract[s]' his engagement with the Northern Irish experience. The important poetic link between Heaney and Brodsky is the British expatriate poet W.H. Auden, whose lifelong espousal of "self-restraint" was able to achieve such a standard of aesthetic precision where "sentiments inevitably

⁴⁶⁰ See Derek Walcott, "Magic Industry," in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 150.

⁴⁶¹ Robin Hanford, "Joseph Brodsky as a Critic of Derek Walcott: Vision and the Sea", *Russian Literature* XLVII (2000): 346, www.elsevier.nl/locate/ruslit (accessed June 04, 2022).

⁴⁶² See Joseph Brodsky, "The Sound of the Tide," in *Less than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), 164-175.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.* 164.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 171.

⁴⁶⁷ See Carmen Bugan, "Introduction," in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation: Poetics of Exile* (London: Legenda, 2013), 6.

subordinate themselves to the linear, and unrecoiling progression of art”⁴⁶⁸. In Heaney’s reading of Auden too, the “poetic authority”(in Heaney’s phrasing, “the rights and weight which accrues to a voice”⁴⁶⁹) of the latter consists “not only because of a sustained history of truth-telling, but by virtue also of its tonality, the sway it gains over the deep ear...”⁴⁷⁰. As soon as one is able to envisage this form of triangulation taking place here, between three “émigré” poets—Heaney, Auden and Brodsky—a mutually shared belief between Heaney and Brodsky, regarding the virtues of maintaining artistic economy comes to the fore. In particular, a chain of elegies connect the three poets, where Heaney’s elegy “Audenesque” from *Electric Light* (2001), by paying tribute to Auden’s verbal restraint, mourns the death of Brodsky.⁴⁷¹ Auden, who in his own turn, had composed his elegy “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” occasioned by the latter’s death, provided Brodsky with the poetic model for writing his elegy “Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot” while in internal exile at Norenskaiya.⁴⁷² Heaney’s essay occasioned by the awarding of Brodsky’s Nobel Prize, recalls the former’s visit to the latter’s New York apartment, which felt like entering “some kitchen of the mind where operations had been temporarily suspended: Russian encyclopedias, piled books, encroaching paper, all disposed without any of that designerish calculation that can subtly call into question the whole *raison d’être* of a work space”⁴⁷³. Heaney acknowledges having met Brodsky for the first time “during the 1972 Poetry International”⁴⁷⁴ and the ensuing friendship between the two over the subsequent years, till Brodsky’s death in 1996.

A third, and evidently comparable nexus of mutual exchange exists between Heaney and Walcott, commencing in the former’s essay on the latter’s

⁴⁶⁸ Joseph Brodsky, “To Please a Shadow,” in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 360.

⁴⁶⁹ Seamus Heaney, “Sounding Auden”, *London Review of Books* 9, No. 11 (June 1987), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v09/n11/seamus-heaney/sounding-auden> (accessed June 04, 2022).

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷¹ Seamus Heaney, “Audenesque,” in *Electric Light* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001) 77.

⁴⁷² Joseph Brodsky, “Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot”, in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems*, trans. George L. Kline (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 100.

⁴⁷³ Seamus Heaney, “Brodsky’s Nobel: What the Applause was About”, *New York Times*, November 8, 1987,

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/20/specials/heaney-brodsky.html> (accessed June 05, 2022).

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

work, “The Murmur of Malvern”⁴⁷⁵. In this essay, Heaney applauds Walcott’s “language woven out of dialect and literature, neither folksy nor condescending, a singular idiom evolved out of one man’s inherited divisions and obsessions”⁴⁷⁶. He compares Walcott’s artistic vision of the Caribbean to its Irish counterpart in the case of J.M. Synge.⁴⁷⁷ Commenting on the opening of Walcott’s long narrative poem “The Schooner Flight”, he compares it to the opening of Joyce’s *Ulysses* and retraces the textual paths of Walcott’s early apprenticeship to the Anglo-American poetic canon, “for surely it returns to an origin in *Piers Plowman*”⁴⁷⁸. Heaney also expresses his identification with Walcott’s artistry which, while mocking “that old British notion of Commonwealth literature”, does not turn him away from possessing English “more deeply and sonorously than most of the English themselves”⁴⁷⁹.

As Jamie Olson points out in his doctoral dissertation, a “close friendship and profound sense of artistic kinship developed between the three of them while they were all living as “foreigners” in and around Boston in the 1980s, when they used to hold weekly gatherings at Walcott’s apartment solely for the pleasure of discussing poetry in one another’s company”⁴⁸⁰. The reminiscences of Seamus Heaney are recounted in Hilton Als’s article on Walcott for the *New Yorker*:

Derek’s apartment in Brookline turned into a kind of time machine ... It was like being back in your first clique as a young poet ... with all your original greed for the goods and the gossip of poetry instantly refreshed. Poems being quoted and poets being praised or faulted, extravagantly; anecdotes exchanged; jokes told; but underneath all the banter and hilarity there was a prospector’s appetite in each of us for the next poem we ourselves might write.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁵ Seamus Heaney, “The Murmur of Malvern,” in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 23.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid. Heaney compares the opening lines of Walcott’s “The Schooner Flight” to the opening lines to the prologue to Langland’s *Piers Plowman*.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid. 26.

⁴⁸⁰ Jamie L. Olson, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and Joseph Brodsky” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. Of Michigan, 2008), 8, <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/60800> (accessed June 05, 2022).

⁴⁸¹ Seamus Heaney, quoted in Hilton Als, “The Islander”, *The New Yorker*, February 2, 2004, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/02/09/the-islander> (accessed June 05, 2022).

The mutually shared affective kinship among the three poets culminated, in 1996, with the publication of *Homage to Robert Frost* (1996)⁴⁸², a volume which showcased their admiration for Frost, a towering figure in the history of American poetry. But as William Pratt points out, “[r]eading their essays helps one understand why Frost could be at the same time an American and a universal poet”⁴⁸³. Coming from diverse cultural backgrounds through which each of these three poets sought to approach Frost’s artistic legacy, the book anthologizes three essays, which reveal their individual engagements with it. Brodsky’s “On Grief and Reason” tries to locate Frost’s quintessential “Americanness” through reading his poems such as “Home Burial” and arrives at a postulation of “language’s terrifying success” within it.⁴⁸⁴ The second essay, Heaney’s “Over the Brim” concentrates upon Frost’s “sound of sense”⁴⁸⁵. Heaney reads poems such as “Desert Places”, “Stopping by Woods”, “Birches” and “Home Burial” to recognize the diverse ways in which poetic language operates in excess of the poet, “brimming up beyond the poet’s deliberate schemes and performances”⁴⁸⁶. For Brodsky and Heaney, poets whose literary sensibilities are inflected more with the echoes of European predecessors such as Dante, Frost’s “New England” woods appear, in their proverbial darkness, to match the “dark wood” of Dante’s *Inferno*. Walcott’s essay “The Road Taken”, true to his Caribbean identity, builds upon themes of racism in Frost’s work, and the obliteration of native Amerindian identity.⁴⁸⁷ Despite these shortcomings, Walcott does not hesitate to acknowledge that “[a] great poem is a state of raceless, sexless, timeless grace”⁴⁸⁸.

⁴⁸² Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Walcott, *Homage to Robert Frost* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996). Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Walcott, *Homage to Robert Frost* (New York: Farrar, 1996). This co-authored volume contains three essays: Brodsky’s “On Grief and Reason,” Heaney’s “Above the Brim,” and Walcott’s “The Road Taken.”, all of which try to engage with, and critically appraise the literary achievements of Robert Frost, an eminent pre-cursor poet who influenced all three of the above poets.

⁴⁸³ See William Pratt, “Homage to Robert Frost (Book Review)”, *World Literature Today* 71, no.4 (Autumn 1997), <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA20417792&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=01963570&p=LitRC&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7Ec7ca988d> (accessed June 05, 2022).

⁴⁸⁴ Joseph Brodsky, “On Grief and Reason,” in *Homage to Robert Frost* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 3-41.

⁴⁸⁵ Seamus Heaney, “Above the Brim,” in *Homage to Robert Frost* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 42-76.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 70.

⁴⁸⁷ Derek Walcott, “The Road Not Taken,” in *Homage to Robert Frost*, 77-102.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 98-99.

The poetic triad of Derek Walcott, Joseph Brodsky and Seamus Heaney was also acknowledged by Askold Melnyczuk when he termed them as “the triumvirate of “exiled” poets who presided over the relatively tame literary communities of New England for more than a decade, by the strength of their art and the, to most of us, enviable strangeness of their experience”⁴⁸⁹. Each of these poets witnessed things, Melnyczuk writes, “not vouchsafed to us in American suburbs, and they offered access to dimensions of consciousness we’d otherwise not known about”⁴⁹⁰. I had been introduced to the existence of the literary and affective kinship between them through reading the doctoral dissertation of Jamie Olson, who has considered each of the three as “rooted cosmopolitans”—simultaneously anchored in their respective “native” traditions while also espousing a form of “cosmopolitan” belonging to language itself.⁴⁹¹ But while Olson’s dissertation introduced me the variety of ways in which the poetic appraisals of such “cosmopolitanism” (and “New Internationalism”) continue their dialogue, the exilic experience, as observed in the works of these three poets was not focussed upon in his work. In contrast, this study concentrates precisely upon the exilic import of their poetry, exploring the ways in which such subjectivities emerge within it.

My decision to include the poetry of Reinaldo Arenas within this dissertation also points towards the ways in which I have departed from Olson’s work. In fact, Reinaldo Arenas, in view of his homosexual identity and his irreverence for institutional forms of literary canonisation, serves as an interesting counterpoint against the aforementioned triad of poets, all of whom privilege a recourse to literature.⁴⁹² Arenas challenges the privileging of the “lyrical” and the

⁴⁸⁹ Askold Melnyczuk, “Killing the Common Moth: Some Preliminary Notes on the Once and Future Heaney, by way of an Introduction to a Twelve Volume Essay on Seamus, Man and Poet”, *Harvard Review* 10, Homage to Seamus Heaney: 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature (Spring, 1996):108, : <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27560625> (accessed June 06, 2022).

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Jamie L. Olson, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and Joseph Brodsky” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. Of Michigan, 2008), 10, <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/60800> (accessed June 05, 2022).

⁴⁹² Several commentators such as Francisco Soto, Joey Whitfield, Maureen Spillane-Murov and Rafael Ocasio have illustrated Arenas’s anti-institutional stance with regard to “literature” as an officially sanctioned body of works within the purview of the dictatorial Castro regime. Insofar as the institution of “literature” is built on selective canonisation i.e. forms of censorship and epistemic violence which must necessarily exclude “seditious” or dissenting literature in order to preserve the status quo guaranteed by existing power structures and relations, Arenas remained one of its most vocal critics.

“poetic” over the tangibility of human suffering, with many of his poems often bordering on the verbose, and easy colloquialisms of human speech. Nevertheless, Arenas’s Cuban context, with its instances of persecution of poets by the dictatorial state (notably in the case of Heberto Padilla) is geographically very close to that of Walcott’s own. As I have demonstrated later in this dissertation, Walcott does make reference to Padilla’s persecution in poem VIII of *Midsummer* (1984)⁴⁹³ and was aware of the Castro regime’s intolerance of its dissident intellectuals. He had also authored a review of Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s self-translated memoir, *Guilty of Dancing the Chachachá*, titled “The Great Exile”, where, in a particularly vivid and lyrical passage, he imagines the extreme pain caused to the exile (Cabrera Infante) by the rift from their country:

To the exile, the music of his country must bring the most pain. Imagine then, Cabrera Infante surprised by a bright burst of Cuban music, from a sun-lanced lane in London. He will never return to Havana, a city he has described with such acrid affection in his previous works: the novels *Tres Tristes Tigres* (*Three Trapped Tigers*), *Infante’s Inferno*, and *View of Dawn in the Tropics*; the monolithic monograph on cigars, *Holy Smoke*; and the collected prose, *Mea Cuba*. The theme that no exile, however prolonged, can banish is a *Habanera*, a lament without reconciliation that contains the deaths of friends, many by their own hand, the treacheries inherent in every revolution, and the sordid banality that, Cabrera Infante thinks, has been made of Cuban life.⁴⁹⁴

Thus although Walcott never explicitly makes reference to Arenas’s literary oeuvre, he does show a more than cursory familiarity with the political realities of a context geographically close to that of his own.

One can further imagine another kind of pairing, where the geo-political realities of a protracted global phenomenon such as the Cold War play a key role in determining the differences between the exilic experiences of these four poets. The polarisation of the geo-political relations in the second half of the twentieth century, with the “Western” and “Eastern” blocs separated by the proverbial “Iron Curtain”, saw the emergence of mutual intolerance of difference, banal propagandism and deeply polarised worldviews across the globe. The Brodsky-Arenas pair are united

⁴⁹³See Derek Walcott, “VIII,” in *Midsummer* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984), 9.

⁴⁹⁴ Derek Walcott, “The Great Exile”, *The New York Review*, March 28, 2002, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2002/03/28/the-great-exile/> (accessed June 06, 2022).

by the commonalities of belonging to dictatorial contexts with histories of forced labour, deportation and internal exile, aligned to the powers of the “Eastern bloc” during the second half of the twentieth century. The Walcott-Heaney pair, owing to the fact that the histories of their respective contexts are invariably inflected with British colonialism, can be thought of as representing two different exilic experiences within the postcolonies of the British Empire during the same period. While the emotionally debilitating nature of exile is largely foregrounded within the poetry of the former pair—for the latter—voluntary exile mostly becomes an enabling experience, allowing them to outgrow the narrow parochialism of exclusively identifying with “national” cultures. In a comparable vein to Paul Gilroy’s conceptualisation of the “Black Atlantic” as “this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity”⁴⁹⁵, the metapoetic exchanges on exilic subjectivity that are surveyed across the length of this dissertation effectively challenge such an acute binary polarisation by offering ample evidence of mutual empathy, literary exchange and identification with the “foreign”. These poetic interventions therefore, reject the force of the traditional limiting boundaries that mark off “Western” Europe from its “Eastern” counterpart, and are subsequently anticipate the impending realities of a “global culture” that would follow from the early 1990s.

1.6. Thesis Statement and Research Questions

Building upon Said’s considerations on the comparability of the traumas set forth by physical separation from “home” and forms of intellectual isolation that characterise the modern intellectual, this dissertation attempts a cross-cultural study of the poetry of Derek Walcott, Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney and Reinaldo Arenas, in order that the recurrent strategies, motifs and tropes of exilic subjectivity and belonging are foregrounded in them. After the investigation is concluded, this dissertation hopes to collate its research findings in order to posit important similarities, dissonances and relevant comparative frameworks pertaining to the poetics of exile in the second half of the twentieth century.

The chief questions likely to be asked in the course of this study are:

⁴⁹⁵ See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London & New York: Verso, 1993), 19.

- (i) How does political exile as an experience peculiar to the vast demographic and geopolitical shifts in the twentieth century get represented in varying specimens of twentieth century poetry across the globe?
- (ii) Is it apt, in context of the ubiquity of exilic dislocations in the second half of the twentieth century, to regard “exile” as an experience specific to the circumstances of material estrangement from one’s country, or is it more of an ideological question (leading invariably, to an informed, but nevertheless individual choice) related to the exiled poet’s own sense of ‘home’?
- (iii) Is the exilic space—inscribed in the *exsul*’s memory—subject to modification through historical time, or is it rather an insular space inscribed within their subjective consciousness?
- (iv) Can the writing of poetry—against the ravages of war, dislocation and forced banishment—be considered as an alleviating force in exacerbating the trauma of exilic separation?
- (v) To what extent does the dialectic of the ‘reality’ and the ‘fiction’ of the exilic experience colour the ‘aesthetics of exile’? Is the ‘real’/ ‘fictive’ binary sufficient to encompass the complexities of twentieth century exilic poetry?

1.7. Argument and Methodology

Having framed the research questions thus, this dissertation try to offer sustained readings of the poetic oeuvre of each of these four poets. Owing to the fact that this is a cross-cultural study representing four widely different historical, political and cultural contexts, I am perfectly aware of the precariousness of applying theoretical frameworks that are overarching in their wideness to accommodate this variety. The research methodology followed in this dissertation therefore includes close textual readings of the primary texts (i.e. the body of poetic work) and the secondary texts (critical commentaries on aforementioned primary texts) that are the object of its study. In addition, I have also conducted dense historical research pertaining to each individual context under scrutiny, in order to properly anchor my readings within them. The dominant research methodologies

used are therefore “textual” and “historical” analysis, although I have made use of a host of theorists to defend my arguments in each case.

The title of this dissertation tries to address the intricate complexities of exile as an experience, which cannot be reduced to forced physical displacement from the native realm alone. While I am aware of the dangers of universalizing exile by concentrating on its “metaphoric” and “fictive” aspects, the fact that poets such as Walcott or Heaney have referred to their isolation and self-distancing in terms of ‘exile’ cannot be overlooked. Hence even if we agree to use other terms such as “expatriate” or “émigré” for poets such as Walcott and Heaney instead of “exile”, the fact that these two poets showcased a form of exilic subjectivity in their poems cannot be disputed. I have therefore refrained from using the word “exile” without a pair of inverted commas, which, following Said’s cautionary note on misapplying the term, ironizes “metaphorical exile” to an extent. Nowhere within this dissertation do I claim that poets such as Walcott or Heaney, who chose voluntary emigration, are political exiles in the fullest sense of the term. What I do claim instead is, drawing upon the body of the literature of exile in poets such as Ovid, Dante, Osip Mandelstam, Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Patrick Kavanagh or John Montague, and authors such as George Lamming, C.L.R. James, V.S. Naipaul, Joseph Conrad or James Joyce, these poets liken their distancing from “home” through an “exilic imaginary”⁴⁹⁶, a term I borrow from Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon. In their book *Performance, Exile and ‘America’* these authors explore the recurrence of the “exilic chronotope” in constructions of the experience of ‘America’—a constantly shifting *topos* comprised of imagined and lived exilic experiences.⁴⁹⁷ Just as they propose “the notion of exilic chronotope as a framework within which to investigate various dramatizations of tension between imagined and lived exilic America”⁴⁹⁸, I have proposed the existence and ubiquity of a “global exilic imaginary” in the second half of the twentieth century—one that is being constantly metamorphosed through newer, and yet newer representations not just within poetry but also theatre, film and the performing arts. As Jestrovic and

⁴⁹⁶ See Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon, “Introduction: Framing ‘America’ – Between Exilic Imaginary and Exilic Collective,” in *Performance, Exile and ‘America’*, eds. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2-8.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 3.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 7.

Meerzon have written, “[e]xile reinforces the inevitable gap between what immigrants imagine of their new land and home and what they truly face after they have landed in those places”⁴⁹⁹. The totality of the experience of exile therefore, gets framed through the constant interplay between the tangibly ‘real’ and the ‘imagined’. Exilic subjectivity, in case of poets such as Walcott or Heaney, is a by-product of this very “imaginary” through which they imagine, project and pose their dislocation from “home”. On other hand, this dissertation has also included Brodsky and Arenas, poets who were conditioned, by the realities of forced or coerced displacement, to write nostalgically about a “home” that once was theirs. Taken together in unison, they poetically construct and represent, during the second half of the twentieth century, the two different sides of the “global exilic imaginary”.

In the second chapter on Derek Walcott, I begin with a few remarks from William Logan’s 2007 review of Walcott’s *Selected Poems*, which conceptualises the trope of “perpetual flight” in Walcott’s poetry as indicative of the historical factors of collective exile and dispossession within the Caribbean context.⁵⁰⁰ I then go on to provide an account of relevant theoretical frameworks that may be used to understand the Caribbean context, replete with its histories of trauma and dislocation owing to slavery, indentureship and the history of European colonialism. After using the theoretical models of Franz Fanon and Octave Mannoni⁵⁰¹ to understand the psychosocial effects/affects of colonisation, I go on to elaborate on “Schizoanalysis and Nomadology”⁵⁰² (a model proposed Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*) to demonstrate later theoretical frameworks which conceptualise trajectories of “re-territorialisation” followed by Caribbean writers. I shall closely

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid. 8.

⁵⁰⁰ William Logan, “The Poet of Exile,” review of *Selected Poems*, by Derek Walcott, *New York Times*, April 8, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/08/books/review/Logan.t.html> (accessed June 07, 2022).

⁵⁰¹ See Franz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008) and Octave Mannoni, “The Decolonization of Myself”, *Race VII* (1966):327-35

⁵⁰² See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000), xii.

follow the conceptual models of Eleanora Natalia Ravizza⁵⁰³ and Michael J. Dash⁵⁰⁴ to arrive at the conceptions of latency, formlessness and the plurality of Caribbean subjectivity. Exploring the work of twentieth century Anglophone Caribbean writers in exile such as George Lamming, C.L.R. James and V.S. Naipaul, and a Francophone Caribbean poet such as St. John Perse, I ground my analysis of Walcott's early career poems from *Selected Poems (1964)*, *The Castaway and Other Poems (1965)* and *The Gulf and Other Poems (1969)* through their complex inter-relationships with the theme of historical exile and dispossession in the Caribbean, and thereafter, with an Adamic reclamation of the "New World". The chapter then provides close readings of poems from *Sea Grapes (1976)* which engage with the work of Osip Mandelstam, an archetypal poetic model for exile in the twentieth century. Next, the long narrative poem "The Schooner Flight" from *The Star Apple Kingdom (1979)* is analysed and discussed within the broader theoretical framework of exilic voyaging provided by Edouard Glissant in the *Poetics of Relation*.⁵⁰⁵ The final two sub-sections respectively concentrate on Walcott's poetic projection and performance of exilic subjectivity in *The Fortunate Traveller (1981)* and the transcultural poetic affinities sought by Walcott with a host of other exiled poets such as Joseph Brodsky, Thomas Venclova and Heberto Padilla in poems from *Midsummer (1984)* and *The Bounty (1997)*.

In the third chapter on the poetry of Joseph Brodsky, I begin with an attempt to look at the marginalisation of Brodsky in the Soviet society of the mid-twentieth century owing to his Jewish identity. I then go on to build on Brodsky's artistic postulation of "estrangement", understandable in relation to theoretical models proposed by Viktor Shklovsky⁵⁰⁶ and Svetlana Boym.⁵⁰⁷ The chapter then turns to a historical account of the Khrushchev regime and the "Thaw" years in

⁵⁰³ Eleanora Natalia Ravizza, *Exile and Return as Poetics of Identity in Contemporary Anglo-Caribbean Literature: Becoming Home* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019).

⁵⁰⁴ See Michael Dash, "In Search of the Lost Body: Redefining the Subject in Caribbean Literature," *Kunapipi* 1, no. 1 (1989), 17, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol11/iss1/5> (accessed June 08, 2022.).

⁵⁰⁵ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997).

⁵⁰⁶ Viktor Shklovsky, "Art, as Device", trans. Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today* 35: 151-74. https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/first/en122/lecturelist2017-18/art_as_device_2015.pdf (accessed June 08, 2022.)

⁵⁰⁷ Svetlana Boym, 'Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shlovsky & Brodsky', *Poetics Today* 17 no. 4 (Winter 1996): 511-530, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1773211> (accessed June 08, 2022).

Soviet Russia, focussing upon the marginal poetic group, the “Avvakumites”. I have made use of the work of Alexei Yurchak to understand the “authoritative discourse” of Stalinism which debased the use of language in Soviet Russia and have thereafter gone on to demonstrate the ways in which a reclamation of the language was attempted by the Avvakumites in these years, concentrating on the deliberate adoption of “foreignness”—if only as a temporary reprieve—from the monotony of “authoritative discourse” in Soviet Russia.⁵⁰⁸ I then discuss, in considerable detail, the twin phenomena of jazz music and Hollywood movies of the 1950s from the United States and their “exotic” appeal for audiences in the Soviet Union, in particular the “Avvakumites”. The chapter then concentrates on the existential dimensions of exilic subjectivity available to Brodsky through the work of Lev Shestov and Soren Kierkegaard. Using David M. Bethea’s insights on the literary ramifications of Brodsky’s internal exile to Norenskaya, I then go on to demonstrate Brodsky’s initiation to the canon of Anglo-American elegiac verse through the model of the ‘Audenseque’ elegy.⁵⁰⁹ The next sub-section of the chapter concentrates upon poems directly dealing with Brodsky’s banishment in 1972 from Soviet Russia, building on poetic strategies such as self-deprecation and figurations of the ‘outsider’. The final two sub-sections respectively deal with the impossibility of homecoming and Brodsky’s own considerations on the “metaphysical” dimensions of exile. It also needs to be stated that in complementing my analysis of Brodsky’s poetry from *Selected Poems* (1965) *A Part of Speech* (1980), *To Urania* (1988), *So Forth* (1996) and *Collected Poems in English* (2000), I have relied extensively on his critical prose, anthologised in *Less than One* (1986) and *On Grief and Reason* (1995) to support my claims throughout this chapter.

The fourth chapter looks at Seamus Heaney’s negotiations with exilic / émigré subjectivity, and its representation in his poetry, trying to reach an elusive balance between enabling forms of artistic distancing and self-exile, and the resulting guilt and realisation of poetic responsibility. It maps the early identity of Heaney as an “Ulster poet” (as evidenced in poems of his first two poetic volumes) affiliated to “the Belfast Group” and charts the trajectory of his movement from

⁵⁰⁸ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, Until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006).

⁵⁰⁹ David M. Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994).

“place” to “placelessness” over the course of the next two decades. Drawing upon the work of Heather Clark⁵¹⁰, John Boyd⁵¹¹, Philips Hobsbaum⁵¹² and a few others, I then go on to demonstrate Heaney’s self-distancing, and defamiliarising poetic manoeuvres, in poems from *Wintering Out* (1973) and *North* (1975) and his gradual dissociation of himself from the compulsion of choosing among the rivalling demands of Unionist and Nationalist camps in Northern Ireland against the context of “the Troubles”. The models of the émigré consciousness available to Heaney includes that of Osip Mandelstam, Joseph Brodsky and the Polish poets Czeslaw Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert. The chapter thereafter concentrates on Heaney’s *apologia* for poetry offered through the “Glanmore Sonnets” from *Field Work* (1979), elaborating upon his inner anxieties and guilt on choosing voluntary exile to Wicklow. Subsequently, I look at Heaney’s adaptation of the myth of the exiled Irish bird-king Sweeney in his poetry as a poetic gesture in which the experiences of this voluntary exile are superimposed. The chapter then explores Heaney’s “penitential peregrination” in the twelve-part long poem “Station Island” and his negotiations with exilic subjectivity in Dante, an important European poetic precursor. The last sub-section of the chapter deals with literary constructions of exilic longing, metaphors of frontier-crossing and imagined spaces in *The Haw Lantern* (1987). As with my previous two chapters, I have tried to ground my analysis of the primary texts with an adequately diverse range of references from Heaney’s critical prose, anthologised in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (1980), *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), *The Redress of Poetry* (1995) and *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (2002).

The fifth chapter concentrates upon the exile of Reinaldo Arenas, the dissident homosexual poet and novelist from Cuba who immigrated to the United States during the Castro regime. Beginning with Arenas’s meteoric rise from dire poverty and elaborating on the gradual self-perception of his homosexuality, I have tried to show his disillusionment with the arbitrariness of the dictatorial Castro regime and the exclusion of the homosexual in post-revolutionary Cuba. I continue

⁵¹⁰ Heather Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-72* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵¹¹ John Boyd, ‘The Ulster Novel’, *Rann* 20 (1953): 35-38.

⁵¹² Philip Hobsbaum, ‘The Belfast Group: A Recollection’, *Eire-Ireland* 32, no. 2-3(1997): 173-182.

my analysis of Arenas’s poetry in the subsequent sections, drawing from his early novels, the poetic volumes *El central* (1981) and *Leprosorio: trilogía poética* (1990), and grounding my textual readings of them against the historical context of post-revolutionary Cuba. In order to understand the nature of totalitarian governance in Cuba, I refer to the model of totalitarianism proposed by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brezinski⁵¹³ and try to apply it to Arenas’s post-revolutionary Cuban context, enmeshed in a complex network of geopolitical relations within the larger discourse of the Cold War. Thereafter, the chapter on Arenas expands upon the “Revolutionary Offensive” campaign of 1968 in Cuba, which signalled Cuba’s alignment with the powers of the Eastern bloc. The consequences of this choice, my chapter tries to argue, led to the adoption of the Sino-Guevarist line of facilitating labour relations in Cuba, emphasizing the greater importance of “moral incentives” over their material counterparts. I offer readings of poetic excerpts from *El central*, a poem informed with the realities of forced expropriation of labour in Cuba in the wake of the Ten Million Ton Harvest. Arenas’s defiance of authoritative discourses, and his adoption of a form of *mariconeria* which serves as an important tool of his oppositional counter-militancy to Cuban *machismo* are then approached, and the systematic marginalisations he faced within the dominantly patriarchal society of Cuba are adequately demonstrated. I have made use of the work of scholars on homosexuality in Latin American cultures such as Allen Young⁵¹⁴, Marvin Leiner⁵¹⁵, Rafael Ocasio⁵¹⁶, Roger Lancaster⁵¹⁷, Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich⁵¹⁸, Lillian Guerra⁵¹⁹ and

⁵¹³ See “The General Characteristics of Totalitarian Dictatorship” in Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 15-27.

⁵¹⁴ Allen Young, *Gays under the Cuban Revolution* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1981)

⁵¹⁵ Marvin Leiner, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality and AIDS* (London & New York: Routledge, 2019 (1994)).

⁵¹⁶ Rafael Ocasio, “Gays and the Cuban Revolution: The Case of Reinaldo Arenas”, *Latin American Perspectives* 29 no. 2, “Gender, Sexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Latin America” (March 2002): 78-98.

⁵¹⁷ Roger N. Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley, California: Univ. of California Press, 1994)

⁵¹⁸ Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich, “Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience, Part I”, *Signs* 9 no. 4, The Lesbian Issue (Summer 1984): 683-699, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173617> (accessed June 08, 2022).

⁵¹⁹ Lillian Guerra, “Gender Policing, Homosexuality and the New Patriarchy of the Cuban Revolution, 1965–70”, *Social History* 35, no. 3 (August 2010): 268-289, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27866661> (accessed June 08, 2022)

Brad Epps⁵²⁰ to support my readings of individual poems that deals with the exclusion of the homosexual subject. The subsequent sub-section of the chapter deals with the experiences of arrest, torture and incarceration of Reinaldo Arenas during 1974-76 and the poetic representations of these experiences in poems from *Leprosorio: trilogia poetica* (1990). I move on, in the next sub-section, to provide a historical account of the Mariel exodus, Arenas's coerced or conditioned choice of exile to the United States in 1980 and his active espousal of literatures produced by émigré Cubans and fellow *Marielitos* of his generation. I conclude the final chapter by establishing the importance of Arenas's lifelong activism for the securing of gay rights in post-revolutionary Cuba and his refusal to be co-opted into the language of passive victimhood. Throughout the length of the chapter, I have tried to back my analysis of primary texts with a host of references to Arenas's memoir *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*) and selections from his critical prose compiled in *Libro de Arenas (Prosa Dispersa, 1965-1990)*

Although this dissertation takes, as the object of its primary analysis, the representation of exilic agency and subjectivity in the poetry of these four twentieth century poets, it would not be unfair to state that a host of other exiled and émigré poets fall within the limits of its broader scope. The exilic fates of other poets such as Ovid, Dante, Alexander Pushkin, Osip Mandelstam, Cesar Pavese, John Montague, Patrick Kavanagh, James Joyce, Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Thomas Venclova, Heberto Padilla and St. John Perse are also indirectly touched upon in this dissertation, through the exposition and analysis of these primary texts. As my subsequent chapters would hope to demonstrate, the host of these literary "echoes" (with some emanating from beyond the historical margins that separate modernity from its preceding eras and which are metamorphosed, in modern exilic interventions in poetry) offer a literary genealogy of the poetry of exile as well as certain enduring themes, motifs and tropes of exilic subjectivity that commemorate, by virtue of their diversity, "a journey into the wideness of language,

⁵²⁰ Brad Epps, "Proper Conduct: Reinaldo Arenas, Fidel Castro, and the Politics of Homosexuality", *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6 no. 2 (Oct. 1995): 231-283, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704123> (accessed June 08, 2022).

a journey where each point of arrival...turns out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination”⁵²¹.

⁵²¹ Heaney, “Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture,” in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), Kindle edition, 441

Chapter 2

“The bowsprit, the arrow...the lunging heart”: Exile, Perpetual Flight and the Poetic Self in Derek Walcott

The problematic of exilic identity is hinged, in Walcott’s case, on a number of interrelated questions that pertain to the nature of self-description employed by the third-world intellectual, the Caribbean as a *topos* for contested, and often widely conflicting identities and finally, the thematic of “transport” that complicate simplistic notions of “home” and “away”. For indeed, despite the numerous homages that celebrated Walcott’s identity as émigré, especially since 1992 after he was awarded the Nobel Prize, he has himself rejected that description.¹ Nevertheless, as Gray has shown, travel has remained a lifelong concern in Walcott, sometimes often with a dispassionate, stoical and bardic mode of observation. Yet there are problems embedded in this stance towards the Caribbean. In his celebrated Nobel lecture, Walcott unveils the Antillean landscape as “there to be written about, not to write itself” through the gaze of the “compassionate and beguiled outsider”, the traveller². It is this point of view, exemplified through the “Caribbean books” of Charles Kingsley, the novels of Trollope and Patrick Leigh-Fermor that Walcott decries:

What is hidden cannot be loved. The traveller cannot love, since love is stasis and travel is motion...So many people say they “love the Caribbean” meaning that someday they plan to return for a visit but could never live there, the usual benign insult of the traveller, the tourist.³

¹ Derek Walcott, interview with Edward Hirsch, in *Conversations with Derek Walcott* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 116. See also Jeffrey Gray, “Walcott’s Traveller and the Problem of Witness,” *Callaloo* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2005), 117.

² Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), 77.

³ *Ibid.*

This would seem to reinforce the idea of travel as some form of a “treachery” implicated in the very act of moving away from the contours of the (imagined) *topos* or “home”. Against the “movement” of the traveller, Walcott had pitted the “native”, but given the nature of the Caribbean as a site of infinite racial difference, one is tempted to ask if at all stable prefigurations of a “home” might surface in the rhetoric of the Caribbean artist. For if “travel” raises questions for poets coming from a single cultural background, for the Caribbean artist, it is inextricably bound up with the question of conflicted identity that often (albeit tendentiously) highlights a perception of an ethnic Caribbean poet as a hybrid of Europe and Africa. Quoting Swedish Academy member Kjell Espmark who characterised Walcott’s poetry as “a meeting place of the virtuosity of Europe and the sensuality of a Caribbean Adam”⁴ Gray rightfully raises the question as to how far it is fit to subject Walcott to the “burden of poetic representation, and therefore to a kind of criticism, to which many poets are not”.⁵

The object of this chapter is to map this troubled dichotomy of “home” and “exile” through readings of Walcott’s poetry that will try to “situate” him in a number of conflicting, although interconnected, textual subjectivities that take up the varied roles of “traveller/émigré” and/or “insider/outsider”. In doing so, I not only hope to uncover a few of the general propensities of a creative artist inhabiting an exilic mode of being but also to underline how Walcott’s poetic career serves as a particular testimony towards

- (a) the ambivalent nature of the exilic experience mediating between the tenuous and often fragile notions of “home” and “away” in a Caribbean historical context.
- (b) an acute and rooted kinship towards St. Lucia, and by extension the Caribbean, which survives even after the onset of his ‘American’ phase.
- (c) the problem of his varying projections (self-constructions) as an ‘exiled artist’ which, despite his explicit rejection of the label, have persisted recurrently across his poetic oeuvre.

⁴ Raoul Grunquist, “Does It Matter Why Walcott Received the Prize?,” *Research in African Literature* 25 (1994), 153.

⁵ Gray, “Walcott’s Traveller”, 118.

Since this chapter is a part of my larger objective to trace the transcultural exchanges between poets who experienced some variety of the exilic experience during the context of a historical era marked by the polarised geo-political relations responsible for the Cold War, I have deliberately limited the scope of my primary texts until the mid-90s in Walcott's career. In view of the fruitful poetic correspondences Walcott managed to form with fellow 'exiles' Joseph Brodsky and Seamus Heaney, limiting the scope within Walcott's poetic oeuvre was necessary to properly ground my analysis properly within a historical framework of contemporaneity. I have therefore excluded all of Walcott's poetic works after *The Bounty* (1997) from the scope of this chapter, even though they might offer valuable insights into Walcott's projection of his 'exile'. I have also kept out the verse epic *Omeros* (1990) as the immensity of the work demands chapter-length probing of its own.

2.1. The Poet of 'Exile' and the Questions of Belonging: Traveller, Tourist, Émigré or Exile?

We might begin with a review of Walcott's *Selected Poems* that William Logan authored in 2007. Logan begins by likening poets to "conquistadores", who pick up "new verse form, a lover, some inventive cursing, a disease"⁶. Walcott, he suggests, self-fashions himself as a 'prodigy of the wrong age and colour'. Logan takes issues with Walcott writing *Another Life* "a pretentious, pressure-cooker affair, a *tour de force* fatally uneasy with itself"... 'an act of hubris'. For him, Walcott's 'tin eared poems in island *patois*' have been least successful, though he exhorts Walcott as the 'most striking poet of seascapes since Coleridge'. A little later in the review, Logan almost half-sneeringly remarks:

If he had not invented himself, academia would have had to invent him. In condensed form, Walcott believes that the British Empire was bad, except where it was good, and English literature good, except where it was bad. His islands are ravishing but painterly, observed with a detachment that leaves him more a tourist than a fortunate traveller, not a man who got away but one who was never quite there.⁷

⁶ William Logan, "The Poet of Exile," review of *Selected Poems*, by Derek Walcott, New York Times, April 8, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/08/books/review/Logan.t.html> (accessed July 9, 2020)

⁷ Ibid.

Logan's remark seems to me to be a little hasty, particularly since it unnecessarily prioritises Walcott's more "painterly" affects as a poet over his achievement in weaving a masterful *patois* 'dialogicity' around his poems such as *The Schooner Flight* or 'Sainte Lucie'. In particular, the latter parts of the review continue the forced irony, amounting to a constant disparagement of Walcott's attempt to capture the islands with "a lushness and richness rare in our poetry—the outposts of empire once seemed as strange as Kipling's India or Bishop's Brazil". It is remarkable however, that Logan confronts at least two distinct prototypes of 'poetic exile' towards the end of his piece: the first, the more conventional Ovidian form ("No matter how awful Rome, the Black Sea will never seem like home") and secondly, the one he allocates to Walcott, the more 'prodigal' variety:

For more than half a century he has served as our poet of exile — a man almost without a country, unless the country lies wherever he has landed, in flight from himself.⁸

I believe what is of value here in Logan's distinction is his (implicit) acknowledgement of the fact Walcott's estrangement cannot be negotiated only through his physical severance from St. Lucia—though doubtlessly it remains one of the many determinants—but deserves understanding of the Caribbean as a site of many conflicting undercurrents of belonging and perhaps, that of constant flux and becoming. The Caribbean predicament consists precisely in having to measure up to the idea of a stable "home" (the imperial heartland) constructed, in relation to the "away" of the colonies, by the Empire. Here, "home" becomes part of a larger strategy deployed to promote a centrist myth that excludes those populations whose native "in-placeness" was systematically debilitated by the ravages of colonialism. Walcott, in claiming numerous times the pointed particularity of his 'Caribbeanness', has celebrated his own "in-placeness" within St. Lucia, while at other times, after his eventual migration to Boston, he has identified himself as a "single, circling homeless satellite"⁹. This directs us towards an ambivalence already built into the exilic condition, existing as punishment and privilege at the same time, giving the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Derek Walcott, "North and South," in *Collected Poems: 1948-84* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 405.

individual poet opportunity for self-determination not strictly bound by the traditional dialectical positioning of categories such as “similarity” and “difference”, Within the history of Western metaphysics and philosophy, Paula Burnett writes, an elaborate taxonomy of concepts are born through “defining homogeneity by its antithetical relationships to otherness”¹⁰. In this schema, “median positions” are conveniently obliterated or suppressed in order to ensure rigid clarity within the taxonomy with the express intention of separating the “same” (Self) and the “different (Other). Within this binary itself falls the Kristevan conception of the “foreigner”: ‘the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder’¹¹. Burnett also goes on to add that in Rimbaud’s iteration “*Je est une autre*” (“I is an other”) there is not merely the echo of that irrepressible psychotic ghost that haunts poetry¹², Kristeva delineates that living with the “foreigner” was not just a matter of humanitarian acceptance, it is “a matter of being in his place”, which would finally amount to identifying and accepting the foreigner within us:

The word foreshadowed the exile, the possibility or necessity to be foreign and to live in a foreign country, thus heralding the art of living of a modern era, the cosmopolitanism of those who have been flayed. Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture. ¹³

While this quest to engage with alterity would produce an originary ‘rift’ in the construction of identity by the European subject, within the context of cultures that were erstwhile colonies of the Empire, this rift is already initiated at the moment of colonial contact, affecting the colonised in myriad ways and engendering in them a schizophrenia born out of a psychological violence inflicted by the ‘relation/encounter’ that demarcates the boundaries of the European subject and his (racialised, mongrelised) Other. Through the work of Franz Fanon and Octave Mannoni’s understanding of the psychosocial effects/affects of

¹⁰ Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2000), 17.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1

¹² Burnett, *Derek Walcott*, 17.

¹³ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 13-14.

colonisation, it has been made clear that it is through an explicit acknowledgement of ‘difference’ (one that demarcates race or colour) that the colonised subject constructs himself and becomes self-conscious. This self-consciousness comes from without, since the ‘Negro’ has “not ontological resistance to the eyes of the white man”¹⁴. He is overdetermined by racial stereotypes that makes him withdraw to a ‘third-person consciousness—his corporeal schema is historically racialised—to produce self-alienation, “of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person...I was not given one but two, three places”¹⁵. Alluding to the scenario within his native Martinique, Fanon refers to the validation sought by the man of colour through an unconscious, but ultimately inviolable comparison to whiteness. This colonial neuroses seals off both coloniser and colonised through a ‘dual narcissism’ and prevents any form of social intercourse between them. Walcott’s own racial designation as a ‘mulatto’ allows him a subject-position to question the supposedly ‘implacable’ nature of ‘differential’ opposition, foregrounding a striking hybridity that Paula Burnett epitomizes within “I-an-I, the Rastafarian pronoun that serves as both ‘I/me’ and ‘we/us’¹⁶. The syncretism of the Rastafarian cult reflects (that) all individuals share a commonality that is in spite of their differences. Through the projection of the ‘I-ness’ of the self, the Other is made constitutive of the former and understood purely in terms of its relation with the self. It is therefore, as Burnett writes, “a case of both difference and sameness, simultaneously. It involves the recognition of otherness specifically as the point of sameness, of identification...the sharedness of difference”¹⁷. Pertinent to the question of exilic identity then is also the concern with what constitutes the self in relation to the other, or what can be looked forward to as a form of transcending the despotism of monocultures, as per Deleuze and Guattari, that affix the individual’s belonging to a community through the idea of the ‘root’. Walcott, as a hybrid poet representative of both the canonical Anglophone tradition of poetry and ‘the idea of Caribbeanness’, subverts an oppressive singularity in identity-formation by foregrounding a ‘schizophrenic’ subject position—one that is multinodal and counters the totalitarian idea of a singular “root”—that becomes the “means to a

¹⁴ Franz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 83

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84

¹⁶ Burnett, *Derek Walcott*, 22

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 18

richer selfhood than that postulated under the Western epistemology derived from Freudian and post-Freudian thought”¹⁸. A brief exposition of Deleuze and Guattari’s formulations on ‘Schizoanalysis’ and ‘Nomadology’ is therefore in order, so that Walcott’s reclaiming of a “home” within the Caribbean may be better understood, while at the same time exemplifying how “home” is always (re)constituted in relation to “away”. The latter might help us to contextualise ‘exile’ in relation to the several different phases of Walcott’s career.

2.2. “Divided to the vein”: “Home” and the Caribbean Subject

In his introduction to *Anti-Oedipus*, Michel Foucault famously refers to the period 1945-65 in European history, where “there was a certain way of thinking correctly, a certain style of political discourse, a certain ethics of the intellectual.”¹⁹ The ‘strange occupation’ of critical writing were thus delimited by conformity (or, at the very least, acquaintance) with the theoretical milestones of Marxism, Freudianism and a privileging of ‘sign systems’ with particular reference to the ‘signifier’. All of these technologies seem to bind the production and circulation of desire to fix alibis to re-confirm their presence, and are finally symptomatic of epistemic repression and control. Deleuze and Guattari, who resist such a movement, offer a three-pronged resistance to these machinations:

- a. They resist those “political ascetics, sad militants and terrorists of theory” who maintain a “pure order of politics and political discourse”. Foucault is presumably referring to those who view the order of politics as “extrinsic” from other orders of social life²⁰.
- b. Nomadology seeks to dismantle the discursive apparatus of psychoanalysts and semiologists—“the poor technicians of desire”—who subjugate the mechanics of “desire” along Manichean lines, through its inevitable “excess” and “lack”.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, “Preface,” in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000), xi.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., xii.

c. It is directed more towards a strategic adversary—fascism, not simply in a historical sense (that of Hitler or Mussolini) but in everyday life, that trains subjects to “desire” their powerlessness and to be led by others.²²

What Deleuze and Guattari were proposing was a reformulation of theory beyond the totalising assumptions of psychoanalysis—the seeming ‘privilege’ accorded to “conformity to social norms” that always subjects “desire” along pre-determined channels:

Psychoanalysis transforms and deforms the unconscious by forcing it to pass through the grid of its system of inscription and representation. For psychoanalysis, the unconscious is always already there, genetically programmed, structured and finalized...For schizoanalysis, it's a question of constructing an unconscious, not only with phrases but all possible semiotic means, and not only with individuals or relations between individuals, but also with groups...with machines, struggles and arrangements of every nature.²³

Thus, “desire” is not regulated and overdetermined by psychoanalytic “transference” of authority to the hands of the analyst examining the neurotic on his couch; nor is it to be measured up against the threat of neurosis and castration and therefore, to be delimited to fixed territories that prevent it from ever reaching its full potential. Schizoanalysis therefore recognises the Oedipal schema as a form of colonisation which maps desire within “oedipalized territorialities” (Family, Church, School, Nation, Party). Its explicit aim is to “deterritorialize” those desiring machines “that escape such codes as lines of escape leading elsewhere”.²⁴ The primary dislocations brought on by Schizoanalysis would resist “re-territorializations” that transform madness into mental illness by foregrounding the role of “production” within the unconscious, rather than treating it as a theatre of representations (a stage where the drama of Oedipus is acted out). The flow of desire, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is a function of desiring-machines, where the “machinistic” aspect refer to the libidinal economy of flows of desire (including flows, interruptions and withdrawals, etc) in their very literal sense. In an interview with Vittorio Marchetti, Deleuze designates the language of the schizophrenic as “a

²² Ibid.

²³ Felix Guattari, quoted in Charles J. Stivale, *The Two-fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari: Intersections and Animations* (New York & London: The Guilford Press, 1998), 31.

²⁴ Ibid.

breakthrough”, likening it to “a breach, a tearing open” and an “undermining of the wall”, as Van Gogh, Nietzsche, Artaud or Roussel had accomplished at the level of language. The wall of the signifier and signification here becomes the site of mythic identification, “the wall of mommy daddy” which has to be transcended through a decisive breach in perception which the schizophrenic alone undergoes:

He [Artaud] achieved a "wonderful breakthrough," he knocked down the wall, but at what price? The price of a collapse that must be qualified as schizophrenic. The breakthrough and the breakdown are two different moments.²⁵

The collapse is the inevitable “price” which the schizophrenic pays for achieving the “breakthrough”, and the latter is therefore achieved at a very real “danger”, but which, Deleuze and Guattari claim is nevertheless “worth it”. The “breakthrough” is laden with creative possibilities, represented as “the rupture with causality that forces a rewriting of history on a level with the real, and produces this strangely polyvocal moment when everything is possible.”²⁶ Great writers are the ones that speak “from the depths of psychosis”, like the schizoid who resists Oedipal individuation by foregrounding the ‘productive’ role of the unconscious as a veritable cornucopia, a repository nourishing a “revolutionary machine on the horizon”: “For literature is like schizophrenia, “a process and not a goal, a production and not an expression”²⁷.

Within the Caribbean context perhaps, the importance of the ‘revolutionary’ element in the schizoid’s “breakthrough” cannot be overestimated. The Caribbean subject manifests a “schizophrenia” where “shifting temporal and spatial modes in the quest for origins and identity fragments” are asserted through an evolving cultural ethos that is keenly perceptive to the intense loss of ‘history’ that the region suffered as a result of colonialism. Within the topos of the Caribbean, the experience of exile may be understood not as geo-cultural rupture(s) between nationalities, but as a fragile, migratory and hybrid one where a constant ‘play’ of two interrelated themes, ‘exile’ (*déracinement*) and return (*enracinement*) has dominated the production of most major literary narratives. As Michael J. Dash argues, the experience of exile may indeed be considered in terms of an

²⁵ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “Interview on Capitalism and Schizophrenia,” in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 240.

²⁶ Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 378.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

“inscription” which alternates between “the existential experience of exile and the essentialist temptation of home.”²⁸ These elements “are inscribed “ more generally within a thematic of a quest for identity in all Caribbean culture”²⁹ which had to contend with the extreme dispossession suffered by being pushed into a space of perpetual ‘alterity’ (“non-being”) which prevents individual and collective self-realisation within the community. However, the very polysemic nature of the word ‘exile’, despite its connotations of dispossession, allow a certain degree of flexibility in the possibility of a constant dialectics between figurations of “home” and “away”. These multiple “figurations of becoming” , Eleanora N. Ravizza has argued, mean that

...dealing with exile, as a matter of fact, not only means dealing with the precondition in which the Caribbean journeys of return are embedded, but also with their point of arrival. Exile is the condition of the never-ending exploration which allows, to quote Eliot's “Little Gidding” once more, “[.] to arrive where we started/ and know the place for the first time.”³⁰

Ravizza’s conceptual apparatus may guide us towards a better understanding of the fragility of the borders between the “self” and its inescapable antipode of otherness. The extent to which this ‘otherness’ is never completely lost within the discursive field of Caribbean identity is also a measure of its hybridity. Like Deleuze’s emphasis on the refusal of the schizophrenic to conform to the condescending , benign oedipalized lines of thought and the turn towards the unconscious as a productive site, nomadic thought, in the context of the Caribbean is constituted, for Dash, in two particular ways: the “poetics of location”, where the object is the imaginative re-territorialisation of “place” by the homogenisation of difference and an “ahistorical wholeness” (the model of Césaire’s reclamation), and the “poetics of dislocation” that takes an opposite route, “totalizing difference through a vision of opacity and indeterminacy through the theorization of ‘relation’

²⁸ Michael J. Dash, “Exile and Recent Literature,” in *A History of Literature in the Caribbean. Vol. I: Hispanic and Francophone Regions*, ed. Albert James Arnold (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1994), 451.

²⁹ Eleanora Natalia Ravizza, *Exile and Return as Poetics of Identity in Contemporary Anglo-Caribbean Literature: Becoming Home* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 22.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 23

(the model of Edouard Glissant)³¹. The relationship with writing which conditions the specificities of the Caribbean's 'irruption into modernity' foregrounds a "latency, formlessness and plurality" whose fulcrum is an acute self-reflexivity that serves as an aid in the "discursive annihilation of otherness"³². Active self-formation, what Dash alternatively calls 'subjectification' is the most frequently observed aspect of Caribbean literature where the space of becoming (operating both as temporal and spatial metaphor between cultures) collapses known taxonomies of self-description and identification. The interior landscape of the Caribbean writer is often inscribed in exilic self-negation, understood as epistemic dependency on systems of signification derived from a colonial past that "are enforced in order to produce docility, constraint and helplessness"³³. In his unique reading of the Caribbean condition, it is this same 'interior landscape' of "contrastive mental spaces which symbolically reflect the relationship between power and the promise of its subversion, between spiritual pretence and its demonic underside, between the self-certain subject and the liberating thrust of Otherness."³⁴

Walcott's deep sense of self-negation as a Caribbean subject originated not only in his hybrid racial origins. It was rather a quest at two distinctive levels—first, the collective experience of 'historical exile' wherein the region suffers from a deep sense of rootlessness through its marginalisation by reductive systems of signification perpetrated by a colonialist historiography advanced by the likes of Froude (also by its perpetually 'provincial' role to the metropolitan experience of the 'North' (the United States) and secondly, the individual experience of being a colonially educated poet in St. Lucia 'estranged' from his environment by his systematic apprenticeship to, and love of the English language. This 'estrangement' takes the rhetorical tropes of a Caribbean selfhood never quite being able to match 'The Great Tradition' of canonical English literature:

I saw myself as legitimately prolonging the mighty line of Marlowe, of Milton, but my sense of inheritance was stronger because it came from estrangement. I would soon learn that every tribe hoards its culture as fiercely as its prejudices, that English

³¹ Michael J. Dash, "Farming Bones and Writing Rocks: Rethinking a Caribbean Poetics of (Dis)location," *Shibboleths: Journal of Comparative Theory*, 1, no. 1 (2006), 64-71

³² Eleanora Natalia Ravizza, *Exile and Return*, 26.

³³ Michael Dash, "In Search of the Lost Body: Redefining the Subject in Caribbean Literature," *Kunapipi*, 1, no. 1 (1989), 17, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol11/iss1/5> (accessed July 10, 2020).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

literature, even in the theatre, was hallowed ground and trespass that colonial literatures could grow to resemble it closely, but could never be considered its legitimate heir.³⁵

For Walcott, the commitment to his poetic craft began under the able supervision of Harold Simmons, the painter, his mentor and editor of *The Voice of St. Lucia* from 1957 to 1959. Simmons not only felt the necessity of “a distinctive West Indian art” with regard to painting, he inspired Walcott to conceive of his craft as a distinct commitment to the “provincial”, the “in-placeness” of St. Lucia. The epiphanic wonder he felt at the “virginal” nature of the island (“To a Painter in England”) led him to conceive of a language that would lay bare those aspects of island life that were hitherto unnamed and unacknowledged. Paul Breslin’s biographical sketch of Walcott’s life shows how his early poem ‘1944’ that appeared in Simmons’ journal reveals a deep sense of debt to a Wordsworthian conception of nature that foregrounds a deep sense of wonder and solace. However, the poem came under the censure of C. Jesse of the Roman Catholic Church in St. Lucia who accused the fourteen year old Walcott “of pantheism, animism, in short of heresy”.³⁶ This was the first instance of estrangement and isolation that would replicate itself over the course of the next three and a half decades of his poetic and dramatic career while residing in the Caribbean. Walcott’s metrical apprenticeship to canonical poets such as Wordsworth, Andrew Marvell, John Milton, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden was, to a great extent, responsible for rearing in him a poetic sensibility “that had at its core a more mature malaise than that typically experienced by a young man coming of age in a British colony”³⁷. *25 Poems* (1948) and *Epitaph for the Young* (1949), written before he left St. Lucia to attend the University of the West Indies in 1950 bear witness to this creative engagement with European modernism. However, there is enough reason to be wary of what “creative borrowings” might turn out to mean for the Caribbean artist. When the structuring ethos of a culture trying desperately to catch up with the model of a colonial modernity is deeply entrenched in self-negation, a ‘derivative’ aesthetic

³⁵ Derek Walcott, *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (London: Cape, 1972), 31.

³⁶ Derek Walcott, quoted in Paul Breslin, *Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 15.

³⁷ Antonia MacDonald-Smythe, “The Privileges of Being Born in...A Backward and Underdeveloped Society,” *Callaloo* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2005), 89-90

becomes the foundational principle of any form of artistic activity. Imaginatively, the Caribbean artist was still, as O.R. Dathorne puts it, an “expatriate”, “looking away from the West Indies for their mentors, their metres and their audience”³⁸. In *Another Life*, Walcott therefore alludes to this phase of his creative engagement thus, conceiving of himself as entering :

.. the house of literature as a houseboy,
[who] filched as the slum child stole
as the young slave appropriated
those heirlooms temptingly left
with the Victorian homilies of *Noli tangere*.³⁹

The implications of this creative apprenticeship were diverse, but most importantly, they allowed the young Walcott to forge a rhetorically enabling mask to deal with many of the traumas which were, by default, built into his self-construction as a young poet in a West Indian colony trying to find his own footing. The several narrative voices and rhetorical styles he apprenticed himself to allowed him to deflect “onto the various ‘masters’”, in order that the young poet can examine it, manipulate it and start to come to terms with it almost in the way that a playwright investigates and manipulates his characters. But the axes of Walcott’s identity as a poet, in my opinion, are also contingent upon a double-edged sword of (un)belonging.. On the one hand, Walcott’s creative apprenticeship hitherto mentioned ensures his deep immersion in traditions of Anglo-American verse and conditions his vision in the fabled ‘mirror’ of language, the medium of representation, “where a generation yearned/ for whiteness, for candour, unreturned”⁴⁰; on the other, his tendency towards the “sublime and allegorical, his movement from the historically concrete to the universality of the symbolic”⁴¹ have found sore critics such as Dionne Brand, who insists Walcott’s vision of the Caribbean is through the “eyes of an imperial stranger”⁴².

This loss of history encountered within the Caribbean psyche was felt, translated and metamorphosed into varying conceptions and strategies of historical

³⁸ O.R. Dathorne, quoted in Stewart Brown, “The Apprentice: 25 Poems, Epitaph for the Young, Poems, and In A Green Night,” in *Derek Walcott* ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003), 80.

³⁹ Derek Walcott, *Another Life*, in *Collected Poems: 1948-84* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 219

⁴⁰ Walcott, *Another Life*, in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 146.

⁴¹ Gray, “Walcott’s Traveller”, *Callaloo* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2005), 118.

⁴² *Ibid.*

reclamation among artists and intellectuals such as V.S. Naipaul, Edward Kanau Braithwaite, George Lamming or Derek Walcott. Walcott's work is identifiably distinct from those of his contemporaries, in terms of his melancholic and uneasy relationship to "The Muse of History" and his acceptance of the void of "amnesiac history" as a turning point in the reclamatory act of moulding a positive Caribbean aesthetic. In doing so, he places himself in opposition to Naipaul's tacit endorsement of James Anthony Froude's now notorious, colonialist assessment of the West Indies:

There are no people here in the true sense of the word', Froude had written, 'with a character and purpose of their own'...how can the history of West Indian futility be written? What tone shall the historian adopt? The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told...History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.⁴³

However, as Patricia Ismond in her book *Abandoning Dead Metaphors* has shown, this positioning of Walcott is the result of his dialectical engagement with the "borrowed metaphors" of the coloniser that shaped his self-fashioning as a poet within the Anglophone tradition and his assertion of an indigenous, though multinodal, Caribbeanness that abandons these "dead metaphors" and generates newer ones, through an Adamic vision and "the forging of a language that goes beyond mimicry to an elemental naming of things with epiphanic power". This would be a journey that would encompass Walcott's poetic career from 1948 to 1979, culminating with *The Star Apple Kingdom*, which Ismond regards "the last fully Caribbean volume"⁴⁴. Nevertheless, the point remains that such a self-assertion is a poetic achievement that has had to grapple with the "schizophrenic" nature of Caribbean identity, split between that twilight which "became a metaphor for the withdrawal of empire and the beginning of our doubt"⁴⁵. The investment of the colonial subject who inherits colonial values faced a primary, and sometimes obstinate futility:

Colonials, we began with this malarial enervation that nothing could ever be built among these rotting shacks, barefooted back

⁴³ V.S. Naipaul, quoted in John Thieme, *Derek Walcott* (Manchester and New York: Manchester Univ. Press, 1999), 63

⁴⁴ Patricia Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors: The Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott's Poetry* (Kingston, Jamaica: Univ. Of West Indies Press, 2001), 1.

⁴⁵ Derek Walcott, "What the Twilight Says: An Overture," in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), 4.

yards, and moulting shingles; that being poor, we already had the theatre of our lives...In that simple *schizophrenic boyhood* one could lead two lives: the interior life of poetry, the outward life of action and dialect. (*italics mine*)⁴⁶

The plight of the Caribbean artist was inscribed in his condition of rootlessness, and Walcott's position here is less hopeful towards the possibility of an African revival. It is an "escape to another dignity, but one understands the glamour of its simplifications"⁴⁷. In this particular essay, Walcott carefully delineates three distinct types of West Indian artists. The first, bent on a certain lexical populism is tempted to try to "write in the language of the people, however gross or incomprehensible". The second in trying to synthesize local differences, deliberately takes to creolisations, while the third, "dedicated to purifying the language of the tribe" is chastised for his pretentiousness or "playing white": "He is the mulatto of style"⁴⁸. His 'assimilation' earns the contempt of both the other parties, even as he is caught in a veritable maze of self-contained Caribbean-ness that celebrates "difference" rather than "equality". The "schism" of the mulatto here may be aptly narrativized within Walcott's own thematic of exile and migrancy: the "Adamic" consciousness persists in a "nourishing ignorance", the sheer jubilation of new nomenclature with self-contempt, in a language that "earned", while "our subject was bare, "unaccommodated man"⁴⁹. It is the "unaccommodated" nature of the mulatto which is an offshoot of his in-betweenness, his 'exile'. In this condition is also inscribed the Caribbean artist's paradox of belonging: the place of one's birth is also the place of one's inherited exile and displacement, "because the soil was stranger under our own feet than under those of our captors"⁵⁰. In his seminal volume *The Pleasures of Exile*, George Lamming sums up the predicament of the West Indian intellectual trapped in this inevitable paradox of asserted identity and "placeless-ness". He is forever haunted by discomfiture within the spatio-temporal schema he finds himself in:

In the Caribbean we have a glorious opportunity of making some valid and permanent contribution to man's life in this century. But we must stand up; and we must move ... already I feel that I have had it (as a writer) ... [that] I have lost my place, or my place has

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 10.

deserted me. This may be the dilemma of the West Indian writer abroad: that he hungers for nourishment from a soil which he (as an ordinary citizen) could not at present endure. *The pleasure and paradox of my own exile is that I belong wherever I am.*⁵¹(italics mine)

Lamming's perceptive irony dwells on the fact that for the Caribbean writer or intellectual, a condition of perpetual flight is not merely a matter of conscious choice. It is rather, unwittingly, "the pleasure and paradox of [my] exile", one that has little to do with "the geography of circumstances" but that which remains circumvented by a geography of possibility that emerges out of an ethos of constant voyaging, explorations and (re)discovery. For Lamming the roots of this angst for the Caribbean exile lie in having to come to terms with, or "grapple with that colonial structure of awareness which has determined West Indian values", one that simultaneously wrought by a spatio-temporal disjunction informed by "the whole aetiology of the Caribbean as a colonial enterprise that emerged as a "distinct cultural entity, while still subordinate to, and dependent on, the discourses of empire for self-definition"⁵². These delineations lead Edouard Glissant to conclude "that exile is within us from the outset, and is even more corrosive because we have not managed to drive it into the open with our precarious assurances nor have we succeeded all together in dislodging it here. All Caribbean poetry is a witness to this."⁵³.

Jan Carew, in his article "The Caribbean Writer and Exile" at once defines the dilemma of the archetypal Caribbean writer, "a creature balanced between limbo and nothingness, exile abroad and homelessness at home"⁵⁴. For Carew, the dispossession of "home" that is the plight of the Caribbean artist has partly to do with primordial and often elementary robbing of "naming" that was carried forward through a suppression of indigenous orders of intelligence and de-legitimated through the very act of inscription: 'America', he argues, was not in fact a name used to pay homage to Vespucci but a name used by the "first settlers", the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the continent. The fact that Vespucci changed his

⁵¹ George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1992), 50.

⁵² Sandra Pouchet Paquet, "Foreword," in George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1992), ix.

⁵³ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1996), 153-54.

⁵⁴ Jan Carew, "The Caribbean Writer and Exile," *Journal of Black Studies*, 8, no. 4 (June 1978), 453.

name from Alberico to Amerigo to advance the illusion of naming a virginal landscape remained part of a deeply self-conscious mythification of ‘discovery’. “To rob people or countries of their names is to set in motion a psychic disturbance which can in turn create a permanent crisis of identity”⁵⁵ which has emerged as constitutive of much of ‘indigenous writing’—“a mosaic of cultural fragments – Amerindian, African, European, Asian” where the European fragment “is brought into a sharper focus, but it remains a fragment”⁵⁶.

A transformation occurs within these cornucopian matrices of shared identity and belonging, from an entire population uprooted from its habitat and modes of survival to a new elsewhere—a movement which Glissant delineates as one from ‘reversion’, the “obsession with a single origin” to ‘diversion’, predicated upon the impossibility of return. ‘Diversion’ arises when the elaborate procedure of domination by the Other is concealed; “it then must search elsewhere for the principle of domination, which is not evident in the country itself...[D]iversion is the parallactic displacement of this strategy”⁵⁷. Glissant views the emergence of the Creole language as a form of ‘diversion’, the origins of which are shrouded in strategies of trickery and camouflage, which lead to “a continuous process of undermining its innate capacity for transcending its French origins” through a politics of self-derision”⁵⁸. The immediate social reality of the Caribbean has also therefore meant that, “Caribbean intellectuals have exploited this need for a trickster strategy to find another place”⁵⁹ where this need for articulation may be displaced. Glissant’s examples include the Jamaican Marcus Garvey’s African Dream, or Césaire’s Negritude poetry, both of which engage with this question of elsewhere—carried over to their logical end. As in his novel *The Fourth Century*, Glissant’s call is for a return of displaced and transplanted populations to where they started from, not to “some immutable state of Being” but to a “point of entanglement” concerned with an unending process of Becoming”.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Ibid., 457-58

⁵⁶ Ibid., 454.

⁵⁷ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 16-17.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 22

⁶⁰ Ibid., 26.

As we have already observed, Walcott's emphasis on the schizophrenic split in his creative consciousness has to be seen within the wider context of his Caribbeanness, as well as against the more topical and limited context of St. Lucia. Walcott's native island changed hands between the British and the French for as many as fourteen times before its eventual seizure by the British in 1814. Thus the island bears a cultural heritage based on a decidedly pluralist lineage, where English, English Creole and French Creole are simultaneously spoken. By using all of the three languages in his poetry, Walcott emerges as a multivocal poet whose literary career emerged from a 'divided childhood'⁶¹. Patricia Ismond reads this creative schism in Walcott as the conflict between "the reality of a young talent strongly fired with the ambition of being among the first pioneers of a West Indian art, and at the same time, deeply drawn to the artistic achievements of the colonizer's world"⁶². While his impassioned retort towards the end of his well-known poem 'A Far Cry from Africa' ("Where shall I turn, divided to the vein...") has been too often read as "a classic expression of the psychological dimension of the crisis faced by the colonized in those early stages of anticolonial militancy"⁶³, Ismond draws attention, specifically to Walcott's subject position as colonially educated poet whose love and claim to the "English tongue" was a historical legacy but yet was "sensitive from the outset to the levels of servitude and indentureship to the coloniser's Word/world that complicates his love of the latter"⁶⁴. This creative synthesis in Walcott's literary career has such a paramount significance which, I believe, is essential to all literary problematisations that his work may be subject to, having bearings on his poetics, as well as his quarrel with traditional Western historiography. In an essay such as "Meanings" (1970), he contrasts the native "exuberance" with Classical "formalism" and the creative "fusion" between them that informs the Caribbean psyche, although the latter may be "sneered at as colonial values"⁶⁵. It is the synthesis of these contradictory values that would lead the New World poet to delight in metaphors, for they were "not a symbol but

⁶¹ Jamie L. Olson, "Rooted Cosmopolitanism in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, and Joseph Brodsky" (Ph. D. diss., Univ. of Michigan, 2008), 117.

⁶² Patricia Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors: The Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott's Poetry* (Kingston, Jamaica: Univ. of West Indies Press, 2001), 17.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Derek Walcott, "Meanings," in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1993), 50.

conversation”, taking delight in a “new melodic inflection” by their constant engagement with the coloniser’s language⁶⁶. Walcott deemed that this was “an electric fusion of the old and the new” achieved by the Caribbean writer making “creative use of his schizophrenia”⁶⁷.

2.3. The Plight of “nameless”-ness:: Two Early Poems

Walcott’s engagement with the theme of exile is distributed throughout the length of his poetic career. Among early poems ‘As John to Patmos’ re-enacts the exilic thematic through suggesting an analogy between the narrator of the poem and John the Divine, author of the Book of Revelations, who was presumably exiled to the Greek island of Patmos, undergoing a time of religious persecution by the Roman emperor Domitian. The poem was part of the early *25 Poems* (1948) and was later compiled as part of Walcott’s *Collected Poems (1948-84)*. John’s exile to Patmos, as island in the Aegean Sea, off the coast of Asia Minor could be seen as his ‘tribulation’ which enabled him to prophesy the Book of Revelations. But Walcott’s own situation, though offered here as a parallel, also has important differences from that of John, in the sense that his presence in his own St. Lucia can be conceived of as a simultaneous exile and ‘homing’: “So I shall voyage no more from home; may I speak here”⁶⁸. Thus, the condition of making a ‘home’ out of St. Lucia “hounds” the poet’s heart to peace. The St. Lucian landscape appears to the poet as a site of “epiphanic wonder”⁶⁹. For Walcott, who under the mentorship of Harold Simmons had “grown to learn [a] passionate/ talent with his wild love of landscape” (“To a Painter in England”), the contours of the St Lucian—or more generally the Caribbean—landscape, “became more than mere background and was instead validated as a source of order and harmony”⁷⁰. The island, as a provincial space, is thus conceived of as “heaven—away from the dustblown blood of cities”, whose black children, surrounded by beauty are freed from “homeless ditties”⁷¹. Yet, like John, who was “surrounded” by the waves, the woods and the “blue

⁶⁶ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, 15-16.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 16.

⁶⁸ Derek Walcott, ‘As John to Patmos’, in *Collected Poems: 1948-84* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 5

⁶⁹ Antonia McDonald-Smythe, ‘The Privileges of Being Born in...A Backward and Underdeveloped Society,’ *Callaloo* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2005), 89

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Derek Walcott, ‘As John to Patmos’, in *Collected Poems*, 5.

scapes”, they are also amidst an inexorable “beauty”, comparable to Walcott’s envisioning of “the destitute, in their orange-tinted back yards, under their dusty trees, or climbing to their favelas”⁷². They are part of the island’s troubled relationship to history, but this way of making them stand out ensures that “poverty were not a condition but an art”⁷³. For the island artist then, any representation committed to aestheticizing the lives of the poor in St. Lucia had an unstated responsibility of alleviating the loss and erasure of history that characterises the experience of living on the island.

‘As John to Patmos’ may be treated as a poem that introduces many of the themes that are staple to Walcott’s later work: the theme of one’s native place of origin paradoxically equated at once as both ‘home’ and ‘exile’, the ulterior responsibility of the poet to represent his own people with empathy. The exhortation to “speak here” and “praise lovelong, the living and the brown dead” reflects the idealism of the young Walcott, one that can be better contextualised through his autobiographical narrative persona in *Another Life*, who swore, with Gregorias (the name he chose for friend and fellow painter, Dunstan St. Omer) never to “leave the island/ until we had put down in paint, in words/ as palmists learn the network of a hand/ all of its sunken, leaf-choked ravines,/ every neglected, self-pitying inlet”⁷⁴. Yet, within the limited context of this particular poem, Walcott’s appropriation of the “borrowed metaphors” emulated in his creative apprenticeship is, in a sense not complete. The fact that the Greek island of Patmos that became the site of John’s exile is compared by means of a simile to the poet’s own island life should therefore, not lead us to ignore the fact that no identifiable locale has been specified within the poem (despite evoking a distinctly Caribbean landscape).

Similar themes are taken up in ‘Origins’, the long poem which constitutes the second half of *Selected Poems* (1964), investigating the dialogic relationship between the Old and the New World, the paradox of a culture living simultaneously at “home” and in “exile”, and the essentially hybrid nature of the Caribbean Muse. The last point is significant, because Walcott will take this up in his rebuttal of Western historiography and a reclamation of agency on part of his

⁷² Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Derek Walcott, *Another Life*, in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 194

own people. The poem begins with the image of waves dashing on to the Caribbean coast, with its “white bees”—symbols of early colonialists—hissing in the “coral skull”⁷⁵. The indisputable violence of that “nameless” arrival that marked the immigrant populations finally surmount to a void in memory designated as ‘nothing’:

Nameless I came among olives of algae,
Foetus of plankton, I remember nothing.⁷⁶

This ‘namelessness’ historically originates from slavery and forced immigration but is conceived of here as an enduring legacy that marks the poet’s being cast ashore as an “amnesiac”, a “foetus” in its nascent state of being. Soon however, he comes across narrativizations of pre-history, here recounted as Homeric myth, the “annals of ocean” symbolically evoking the Aegean islands as a counterpoint to the poet’s own Antillean ones. But while the colonial is made to learn of these annals of Occidental history, nothing is known of “that fine race of people which came off the mainland/ To greet Christobal as he rounded Icaros”⁷⁷. Here, the log of Cristóbal Colon (Columbus) serves, among other things as a chronicle of the first traces of Spanish colonization. Walcott cites Lord Bulbrook’s habitual dismissal of the ‘knowledge’ gathered by traditional Amerindian communities such as the Caribs and the Arawaks as mere ‘recognition’ of seasons, by which they cultivate, “assisted by magic”, followed by the sneer: “Primitive minds cannot grasp infinity.”⁷⁸ Thus, in a cleverly embedded analogy that likens the arrival of Europeans to the waves that “detonate” the surf, Walcott hints at the unrepresentable moment of colonial contact—which is also a rupture, a “gap”—which robs the Caribbean of its ‘history’. Just as the log of Colon, a written document was earlier likened to clouds, Walcott reads the ‘volumes’ of ‘changing cumulus’ clouds as part of an effervescent movement that escapes conventional Western historiography-as-hierarchy. He ironically reconstructs the moment of encounter between Europeans and native Amerindians as resulting in a historical amnesia for the colonised peoples, depriving them of their past. The image of

⁷⁵ Derek Walcott, “Origins,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 11

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

“skulls of crackling shells trampled underfoot”⁷⁹ bears evidence of such literal, as well as epistemic violence.

The “void” in history is ultimately symptomatic of a loss of memory that can only be reconstructed through creative (re)imaginings. However, Walcott soon realises that the unreliability of memory ensures that the image of Africa “embalmed in an amber childhood” may well be, to borrow a phrase from Chinua Achebe, “a technicolour idyll.”⁸⁰, frozen to the point of non-recognition. The ‘uncoiling’ of memory leads the poet into a space that is an intermediate position “(b)etween the Greek and African pantheon”, which allows him to “rechristen’ trees in the manner of this hybrid assimilation:

Caduceus of Hermes: the constrictor round the mangrove,
Dorado, their golden, mythological dolphin,
For the broken archipelago of wave-borrowed gods.⁸¹

Thus, the sibyl the poet honours bears, “in her black hand a white frangipani, with berries of blood”⁸². The botanical reference here is striking, for Walcott gives the “plumeria” flower indigenous to Central America and the Caribbean to his muse, deliberately juxtaposing the ‘blackness’ of her hand to the ‘whiteness’ of the flower. The African sibyl, when transported to the Americas, seems to be amenable to change—although the price of such change is often violent, imagined as the ‘berries of blood’. Again, noticeably, Walcott compares the islands of the African coast to “gommiers”, (another identifiably Caribbean tree that exudes a gum-like incense) that drift, anchorless, beyond the “childhood of rivers”. Possibly unstated is also the implied metaphor of the “rivers” of ‘African’ childhood draining themselves out into the ‘sea’ of history. While the third section of the poem does attempt a (re)imagining of Africa, it also does concede the fact that memory remains elusive when it is trapped within “archives of bamboo and wild plantain” leaving only “the odour of rivers in unopened cupboards”⁸³. The sea in contrast emerges as moving and tenuous repository of history, with the European

⁷⁹ Ibid., 12

⁸⁰ Chinua Achebe, “The Role of a Writer in a New Nation,” in *African Writers on African Writing*, ed., G. D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1978), 11

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 13.

voyages of exploration “stitching” the sea whole, and thus making it a site of the meeting of the Old and the New worlds. The death of the old gods of the African pantheon mean that newer gods, from disparate fragments of cultures (Jewish, Aegean) take their place, washed up metaphorically by sea waters:

The mind, among sea-wrack, sees its mythopoeic coast,
Seeks like the polyp, to take root in itself.
Here, in the rattle of receding shoal,
Among these shallows I seek my own name and a man.⁸⁴

Jamie L. Olson reads the second line in the quoted section as a particular instance in the early Walcott which shows his “rootedness” amidst his otherwise “cosmopolitan” voice that is at once fragmented, plural and ‘multivocal’⁸⁵. While Olson’s reading does not generally underplay the degree of pluralism embedded in Walcott’s aesthetic, it nevertheless seems to privilege a sense of ‘rootedness’ which, despite the best attempts, runs the risk of taking on an oppressive, ‘essentialist’ character that reduces the Other in order to nurture and create its own self-definitions. Olson does not investigate, for example, Walcott’s use of the word ‘polyp’ here. While within the generally marine context in which the poem is set, a ‘polyp’ might mean a sea anemone with a columnar body and a mouth at its end surrounded by tentacles, the secondary (medical) sense of the word is also illustrative: a small, temporary growth (usually benign) that projects from a mucous membrane. In the sense that a unique Caribbean identity can only be forged here-and-now (as opposed to the Muse of History that allows only a chronicle of gradual accumulation of ‘achievement’, and thus, the “absence” of history in the Caribbean), Walcott compares the mind of the artist as responsible for devising a hybrid identity that ‘takes root’ only through a self-conscious project of historical inversion by living in one’s own time-and-space through the flux of epistemic contradictions. In an interview with Edward Hirsch for example, Walcott describes the geography of his own island as embodying “a simultaneous newness and a sense of timelessness at the same time—the presence of where you are. It’s a primal thing

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁵ Jamie L. Olson, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, and Joseph Brodsky” (Ph. D. diss., Univ. of Michigan, 2008), 125.

and it has always been that way.”⁸⁶ In seeking his “own name and a man”, Walcott uses the distinction between the Old and the New worlds based on the historicist idea of succession, while at the same time negotiating what David W. Hart calls a breakthrough, “breaking through the “threshold” of imperial cultural hegemony and asserting a sense of Caribbean cultural agency”, by writing from within an ‘exilic chronotope’ that must first “row backwards” in order to develop a meaningful identity⁸⁷. Hart’s formulations are extremely valuable from the point of view of the present dissertation because it probes the question of how the ‘exilic chronotope’ can be instrumental in an act of reclaiming agency by the Caribbean artist, in a manner not very different from that of Walcott.

The fifth section of ‘Origins’ foregrounds the role of language in this act of reclamation, the sheer unbounded joy of naming objects and creatures, which are the privileges of a Caribbean Adam in a New World of endless possibility. This is reflected in the process of creolisation which adapts African tongues to their new geography and environment: “(s)haping new labials to the curl of the wave”⁸⁸. Walcott’s potent example here is the (re)christening of the pomegranate (etymologically derived from *pomum granatum* in Classical Latin, literally meaning a fruit with many grains) into the New World ‘*pommes de cythere*’, the “bitter Cytherean apple”⁸⁹, which owes its name to its likeness to the golden apple awarded by Paris to Venus. The Antillean bitter fruit (*Spondias cytherea*) is colloquially known as the “Jew plum” and is cultivated throughout the tropics, including the Caribbean. The (re)christening of the ‘Old World’ fruit pomegranate to the ‘*pommes de cythère*’ or more simply ‘*pomm-sitè*’ enacts the dialogue between Aegean and Antillean mythologies. These are the “new songs” that emerge out of the Caribbean experience, fragmented, dialogic and plural, mimicking “ancestral voices” from the sea who lost their histories through the troubled legacies of exile and immigration. Interestingly enough, it is these ancestors “who conceive the birth of white cities in a raindrop/ And the annihilation of races in the prism of the dew”⁹⁰.

⁸⁶ Derek Walcott, interview with Edward Hirsch, in *Conversations with Derek Walcott* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 72.

⁸⁷ David W. Hart, “Caribbean Chronotopes: From Exile to Agency,” *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 2, Issue 1 (2004), 2, <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol2/iss2/2> (accessed July 10, 2020)

⁸⁸ Derek Walcott, “Origins,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 14.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

Not only do these lines question a historicist teleology of Western civilisation modelled on ‘achievement’, it shows that the former event, the birth of the metropolis is achieved only at the cost of ‘annihilation’ of other races which by dint of their non-European lineage are seen only as outdated and archaic. As Paul Breslin suggests, Walcott’s analogy linking “white cities” to a “raindrop” initiates an ironic reversal of natural scales that sees each urban (Western) metropolis as ultimately, as insignificant (or at least, just as significant) as a raindrop when taken against the larger, macrocosmic scales of the Universe:

...in reading him [Walcott]...I am forced to confront my own culture’s provincialism—a provincialism of the center, next of kin to the arrogance of Empire. This provincialism is too impressed with its own artifacts, forgetting that the proudest city is just a dot on the face of the earth, and earth itself just a dot on the sky. Placed against this scale of nature, we are all small islanders and forget it at our peril.⁹¹

2.4. “Who will teach us a history of which, we too, are capable?”: Exile, Adamic Poetics and Agency

The figure of the exile in Walcott’s verse, especially from *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965), took on various embodiments—first, through the figure of the castaway, and then through the specific figure of ‘Crusoe’, who is derived from Defoe’s prototype of the castaway creating a universe anew from the condition of estrangement from his known, old, familiar world. For him, the fragmentary nature of Caribbean subjectivity takes shape from the originary experience of spatio-temporal estrangement that the many different immigrant communities of the Antilles have historically experienced. Yet it is this experience which has paradoxically, brought these communities closer to each other. The estrangement the castaway encounters leads him away from his Old World, corresponding to Europe, to the New, corresponding to the American continent as a whole (in Walcott, this idea is connected to what Ismond calls an “alternative order of humanist intelligence”⁹²). In many of the poems of this phase, the void that permeates into any meaningful conceptualisation of a past as a part of the collective

⁹¹ “Paul Breslin, Derek Walcott’s “Reversible World”: Centers, Peripheries and the Scale of Nature,” *Callaloo* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2005), 10.

⁹² Patricia Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*, 6.

Caribbean experience is aptly projected onto the physical geography of St. Lucia, or at other times, collectively, onto the ‘fragmented’ Antillean islands in general. Typically Walcottian conceptualisations of this form of historical void encapsulate the fact of lost collective memory in the Caribbean. A second New World figure also emerges in his prose during the period: the Second Adam, who in a post-lapsarian world reassembles “this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs”⁹³. In his 1965 lecture, ‘The Figure of Crusoe’, Walcott defines the figure of Crusoe as the “namer”, because, faced with his immense loneliness, he sits before a bonfire on an empty beach made out of the dead twigs and branches of his past, itself an outcome of old customs and habit ritualised through tradition and subjective memory.⁹⁴ This image invokes the almost magical capacity of fire as an agent for transformation, effecting a metamorphosis where “such simple chores as lighting fires for food, for light, for contemplation, for light, repossess their original use”⁹⁵. Each object around him therefore becomes a ‘household God’ whom he (re)christens in a new light which is, in a metaphorical sense cast on them by the fire. In his Nobel Prize lecture, Walcott further explicated that “this process of renaming, of finding new metaphors, is the same process that the poet faces every morning of his working day, making his own tools like Crusoe, assembling nouns from necessity”.⁹⁶ Defoe, who wanted to rewrite the story of Alexander Selkirk’s experience, was thus also advancing a new kind of man who becomes “monarch of all [he] survey(s)”. Far from stereotypical allegories that reduce the figure of Crusoe to the figure of the coloniser, Walcott’s Crusoe “does not possess the island he inhabits”, which means he suffers from the paradoxical pull of desiring to leave his own ‘place’:

It is his and Friday’s children who have generated this disturbing society. Disturbing to others, because on one hand there is resolution in landscape and in faith in God, and on the other hand a desperate longing to leave these island prisons forever and to survive on nostalgia.⁹⁷

⁹³ Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” in *What the Twilight Says*, 70.

⁹⁴ Derek Walcott, “The Figure of Crusoe,” in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, 36.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹⁶ Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” in *What the Twilight Says*, 70.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

Crucial to this exiled nature of Crusoe's consciousness is his sense of namelessness, "that is past despair"⁹⁸. This induces a madness in him from which he must seek solace only through imagining another before him. To this effect, Crusoe's everyday journal becomes a space where he might put his imagination to use and look at himself as 'another object'. Thus, Crusoe, the artisan crafting simple things of everyday use is now seen to "abandon dead metaphors" and conjure up fresher ones. However, only when Crusoe is confronted to the actual presence of a Friday does he become homesick: "He has made the island his home, but now he sees its "shortcomings" and is filled with an angst to leave it behind"⁹⁹. Walcott compares this angst in Crusoe to the crisis which both Naipaul and Lamming had to face and concludes that while the terror of their historical 'isolation' and uprootedness have made them wilfully turn away from "home", it paradoxically becomes a site of reclamation of lost histories, replete with infinite possibilities for positive self-assertion, where, the exiled island artist draws his strength, like a Second Adam from "the rich irony of [our] history"¹⁰⁰. The incantatory power of poetry in the New World becomes a 'hermetic exercise' where Crusoe emerges as "the embodiment of the schizophrenic Muse whose children are of all races"¹⁰¹. In poems such as 'The Castaway', the figure of Crusoe thus becomes extremely significant because in Walcott's staunch refusal to mourn the 'amnesia' that characterises the West Indian condition, Crusoe comes to represent the exiled Caribbean writer, who through the metamorphosis of all that he has inherited from colonial servitude is able to turn the condition to his advantage, a "subversive act: he tacitly refuses the condition of servitude and inferiority as the primary term of his identity."¹⁰²:

Godlike, annihilating godhead, art
And self, I abandon
Dead metaphors...¹⁰³

The poem begins among images of negation with the castaway's eye "devouring" the seascape for a sail which will not present itself. The isolation of

⁹⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰⁰ Derek Walcott, "The Figure of Crusoe," in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, 40.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Patricia Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*, 48.

¹⁰³ Walcott, 'The Castaway', in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 58.

the castaway also accompanies a sense of fear, “lest [his] own footprints multiply”¹⁰⁴. The general sense of desolation that pervades the opening stanzas is complemented with protean, shape-shifting images in a world filled with the joy of infinite wonder, while at the same time evocative of an equally deep sense of abandonment. Crusoe’s condition suits a creative transformation that is paralleled with images from the elemental world around him, such as the dog’s excreta which dries up in the heat of the sun and “whitens like coral” or the infinitesimal building of the polyp. The regeneration at work in the order of nature is carried over into the human order with echoes from the Book of Genesis and the startling image of a “green wine bottle” that becomes emblematic of the forlorn castaway himself, with soteriological interpretations of the Crucifixion of Christ, “the Second Adam”, who through the transformative mystery of his incarnation and exemplary sacrifice was able to regenerate the old creed, freeing it of old dogmas and fetters. Paul Breslin, though partly at unease with Walcott’s claims to this Adamic state of transcendence, nevertheless has to concede that this particular trope in Walcott acts as “the secular adaptation of a theological topos”¹⁰⁵. A noticeable aspect in “The Castaway” is the complete annulment and negation in the language used to depict landscape: the net “inches across nothing.”, and the green wine bottle that is choked with sand is alternatively named (“labelling” is a form of naming) “a wrecked ship”¹⁰⁶. Such imaginings frequent ‘Crusoe’s Island’, the second poem in the Crusoe-triptych, comparing the Godlike artist’s labours at his art in a New World while estranged from human company which he craves for desperately. In absence of human company, the archetypal castaway borders on solipsistic self-worship in which all things appear to have been created in his own image:

Exiled by a flaming sun
The rotting nut, bowled in the surf,
Became his own brain rotting from the guilt
Oh heaven without his kind...¹⁰⁷

The poem may be read as a lyric of angst written by a middle-aged narrator-poet, standing alone among the hybrid legacies of Crusoe and Friday

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Paul Breslin, “Adam’s Amnesia: The Uses of Memory and Forgetting,” in *Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 103.

¹⁰⁶ Walcott, ‘The Castaway’, in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 58.

¹⁰⁷ Walcott, ‘Crusoe’s Island’, in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 69.

figures. It therefore also constitutes a progression within the Crusoe-triptych: the Crusoe figure is gradually displaced in favour of a reclamation of historical agency through the progeny of Crusoe and Friday. As Erik Martiny ably reads the sequence: “If in “The Castaway”, Friday is little more than a footprint, “Friday’s progeny”, alluded to in “Crusoe’s Island”, takes over the final part of the sequence”¹⁰⁸. Yet, the poet-narrator’s sense of being excluded from the common population (“Black little girls in pink...”) of the island (presumably Tobago) is a profound one.¹⁰⁹ Like the preceding poem, it compares his failure to fully comprehend the nature of their simple, even if ‘native’ faith:

And nothing I can learn
From art or loneliness
Can bless them as the bell’s
Transfiguring tongue can bless.¹¹⁰

This rift between the colonially educated artist/poet and his people, the objects of his representation, marks his spiritual, as well as artistic isolation. It grows out of the collective experience of historical exile that characterises Caribbean society and, at another level, simultaneously remains a private quest for self-definition. Walcott’s allusion, in explicating the revelatory power of art, to the “crippled Vulcan”¹¹¹, who was cast outside Olympus for his exemplary ugliness reinforces our understanding of the isolated artist, who, through his very abandonment is able to conceive of the cornucopian variety offered by the universe. Thus, Walcott re-interprets the section of Homer’s *Iliad* where Vulcan fashions the legendary shield of Achilles as another prototypical precedent of the artist’s personal exile. The juxtaposition between the estrangement suffered by the artist and the landscape, caught in a supposedly inscrutable, and often indifferent form is central to poems like “The Swamp” (from *The Castaway and Other Poems*), “Air”, “Homecoming: Anse La Raye”, “Exile” and “The Gulf” (from *The Gulf and Other Poems*) to which I shall return after examining the third poem with Walcott’s Crusoe figure, “Crusoe’s Journal”.

¹⁰⁸ Erik Martiny, “Multiplying Footprints: Alienation and Integration in Derek Walcott’s Reworkings of the Robinson Crusoe Myth”, *English Studies* 87, Issue 6 (December 2006), 669-78.

¹⁰⁹ Walcott, ‘Crusoe’s Island’, in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 72.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

“Crusoe’s Journal” marks a definite progression from the earlier two poems. For one, Walcott transcends the depiction of imagined scenes in Defoe’s novel and incorporates Crusoe as a hybrid figure, a Protean shape-shifter who adapts to his changing environment and takes newer forms that distance him from his novelistic origins. Walcott gives him myriad dimensions in his 1965 lecture “The Figure of Crusoe”, suitably subtitled ‘On the Theme of Isolation in West Indian Writing’: he is “Adam, Christopher Columbus, God, a missionary, a beachcomber (from the novels of Conrad, Stevenson and Marryat) and his interpreter, Daniel Defoe”¹¹². As Adam, he has known the unbridled delight of ‘naming’ objects, and discovering them, like Columbus, only “by accident, by fatality”.

He is a beachcomber because I have imagined him as one of those figures of adolescent literature, some derelict of Conrad or Stevenson [. . .] and finally, he is also Daniel Defoe, because *the journal of Crusoe, which is Defoe's journal, is written in prose, not in poetry, and our literature, the pioneers of our public literature have expressed themselves in prose.* [. . .] I have tried to show that Crusoe's survival is not purely physical, not a question of the desolation of his environment, but a triumph of will [. . .] We contemplate our spirit by the detritus of the past.
¹¹³(italics mine)

Among his other dimensions, his identity as ‘Daniel Defoe’ is important to us in two particular ways. First, as author of *Robinson Crusoe*, among the first English novels, he pioneers the journalistic narration of fictional events and inaugurates the realist tradition of fictional prose in English. Realist fiction is predicated on its capacity to use language as an undistorted mirror of transparent meaning corresponding to reality. It developed historically therefore, as an enabling mask where the mode’s own status as artifice had to be concealed. For early pioneers of the West Indian novel such as Lamming or Naipaul, it is the notion of this mask, differently phrased as “the wish to dramatize ourselves”¹¹⁴ in the poem, that becomes crucial in their artistic self-fashioning. Secondly, like Crusoe’s simple tool-making and gathering, the simplest objects of the island undergo a metaphoric transformation, through their Adamic ‘re-christening’. Through the New Word,

¹¹² Derek Walcott, “The Figure of Crusoe,” in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, 35.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

¹¹⁴ Walcott, ‘Crusoe’s Journal’, in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 94.

language is inherited by those Fridays who assimilate and adapt it to the changing circumstances of their world:

[I]n a green world, one without metaphors;
like Christofer he bears
in speech mnemonic as a missionary's
the Word to savages,
its shape an earthen, water-bearing vessel's
whose sprinkling alters us
into good Fridays who recite His praise,
parroting our master's
style and voice, we make his language ours,
converted cannibals
we learn with him to eat the flesh of Christ.¹¹⁵

The partaking of a Catholic communion thus leads to a more complex and culturally diverse conception of “cannibalism” with Crusoe himself “shoring up” the fragments of his hybrid cultural belonging from the sea, already identified as a site of myriad accumulations of lost (hi)stories. Walcott then proceeds to insert parenthetically, the image of “some noon-struck village” such as Choiseul or Canaries that now appears like “a savage settlement” from Henty’s or Marryat’s novels against a lonely boy at the edge of the sea, perhaps with an outstretched hand¹¹⁶. This image offers a three-way association between the Protean Crusoe, engulfed in a Godlike loneliness, the apotheosis of the lonely boy-figure who stands as mediator (perhaps a self-conscious meditation of Walcott’s own childhood) and the archetypal Caribbean artist who is confronted with the problematic of exile. The lines that succeed may allow us an insight into the kind of activity the poetic vocation partakes of—a “hermetic” skill that puts together words “with raw, mimetic cries”¹¹⁷. Crusoe’s journal becomes a paradigmatic exemplar of such mimesis, elsewhere hailed in Walcott as “our profane Genesis”, from which, one is able, for oneself to forge a mask through which meaning can be invested into the natural order. Thus, although exile and isolation may be personal experiences to the Caribbean artist, Walcott’s hybridised Crusoe is a figure that can be easily emulated by them,

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 93

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 94.

...posing as naturalists,
drunks, castaways, beachcombers, all of us
yearn for those fantasies
of innocence, for our faith's arrested phase
when the clear voice
startled itself by saying "water, heaven, Christ,"
hoarding such heresies as
God's loneliness moves in His smallest creatures.¹¹⁸

The last line can either be read as expressing a pantheistic view of the universe, where the spirit of God is thought to run through all of his created order, or one in which the Godhead feels an acute separation between himself and his creation. The latter is undoubtedly a parallel to the essentially 'lonely' universe of the poet as the castaway/exile in whose isolation is mirrored the loneliness of God.

The association of the loneliness of the artist-creator and the enormity of his metaphoric project of indigenizing language runs through a poem such as "The Flock". In many ways, the poem begins a serious dialogue between the natural order, suggested by the seasonal migration of birds, with the order of images and ideas that are instrumental in the conception and composition of poetry. In a winter landscape (which Patricia Ismond reads as possibly the United States) where the poet-narrator finds himself stranded, "volleys of blue-wing teal and mallard" descend, like "arrows of yearning for our different sky"¹¹⁹. By way of an extended metaphor, Walcott here suggests an opposite movement, that of "images migrating from the mind" from the Caribbean to the abode of the "dark impartial Arctic", indicative of the Old World¹²⁰. The wintry landscape, with its primordial "skeletal forest", intercepted by the hooves of a "sepulchral knight" seems to reinforce the idea that we are presented with a re-interpretation of the Grail legend. Walcott's possible intimations to the reader may include embedded references to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a site of the layered detritus of the civilisations of the Old World—the Aegean, the Roman, the Hebraic, or the Indo-Aryan. Just as the outline of these birds disappear against the background of the snowy winter landscape, the poet-

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Walcott, 'The Flock', in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 77

¹²⁰ Ibid., 78.

artist inscribes white pages with letters of his own, laden with meaning. The “iron contradiction” that is referred to between these migrating birds and the knight proceeding “ant-like across the forehead of an alp” is then likened to the opposition between ideas that ought to emanate from the poet’s mind (variable with “change of language, climate, customs, light”) and the seeming fixity of the Old World that “froze giant minds in marble attitudes”¹²¹. The fluidity of these ideas “survive our condemnation”, for condemnation precludes engagement with language, as well as specific temporal and geographical contexts. The quest of the poet is, for Walcott, comparable to lonely quest of the “sepulchral knight”, without that “blind defiance” that marks the ‘vizored’ knight. Through the repeated dialectical pairing of opposites (winter/summer, darkness/light, Arctic/tropic, Old World/New World, fixity/changeableness) Walcott projects the estranged, lonely artist engaged in finding adequate metaphors that transcend the constraints of the Old World, with its “frozen” sense of historicism without necessarily letting go of the virtues of the New. Therefore Walcott’s Adamic claim in “The Muse of History”, that the great poet and artists of the New World, such as Whitman or Neruda, or even Borges reject traditional Western historiography and are “capable of enormous wonder” , walking in a “world without monuments and ruins”¹²² (similar to those glacial, “marble attitudes” of the Arctic). The transition from history to mythos takes place effortlessly, as do these birds, standing for fresh ideas, “flying by instinct to their secret places”¹²³. What strikes Walcott is the similarity, amidst a world of difference, in the transition from the order of facts to the order of myths in Borges and the poet St.John-Perse from Guadeloupe, who “conduct us from the mythology of the past to the present without a tremor of adjustment”¹²⁴. In Perse, for example, Walcott locates the typical prototype of the Caribbean artist, by nature exiled, but underlining thereby the sheer elation that comes with a paradoxical, but “perennial freedom”. In their borrowings from the old orders of human intelligence (originating in the “universalist” pretences of Europe) these masters incorporate a

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Derek Walcott, “The Muse of History”, in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), 38.

¹²³ Walcott, ‘The Flock’, in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 78.

¹²⁴ Walcott, ‘The Muse of History’, in *What the Twilight Says*, 38.

“revolutionary or cyclic vision” that is at least as equally powerful as the supposed discord occasioned by “patrician syntax”:

What Perse glorifies is not veneration but the perennial freedom; his hero remains the wanderer, the man who moves through the ruins of great civilizations with all his worldly goods by caravan or pack mule, *the poet carrying entire cultures in his head, bitter perhaps, but unencumbered.*¹²⁵ (italics mine)

Like St. John-Perse’s earnest entreaty that “the barest place for assembling on the wastes of exile” is a “great poem born of nothing”¹²⁶, Walcott’s idea of poetic isolation is one that is borne with extreme fortitude and forbearance, through an epiphanic engagement with his surroundings despite the many challenges posed by the historical void that accompanies the sense of exile in the Caribbean.. Such a positive step would be part of a cultural reclamation of agency, such as Walcott’s impassioned narratorial question in *Omeros*: “Who will teach us a history of which we too are capable?”¹²⁷ This essentially “revolutionary” act is constituted in the Caribbean artist’s gradual dismantling of the European muse of History, and this is something Walcott locates in the best exemplars of West Indian prose (who, in exploring the Caribbean landscape through the means of language, also explore the interior landscape of the mind), such as Dennis Williams, Alejo Carpentier, or Wilson Harris¹²⁸. Patricia Ismond identifies at least three examples of such explorations in prose: Dennis Williams’ *Other Leopards* (1963), Alejo Carpentier’s *Lost Steps* (1953) and Harris’ Guayana Quartet— *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961), *The Whole Armour* (1962) and *The Secret Ladder* (1963)¹²⁹. In each of these examples, what becomes of value to Walcott is the propensity to engage with the literature of the Old World, while at the same time contesting its claims to “universality”. The experience of the New World therefore, is tinged with acidity, because with the troubled history of colonialism that contaminated it at its very outset also ensured that an early Fall came with an acute foreknowledge of past deprivation. But it is this very acidity that also furthers greater potential for self-discovery and regeneration. Thus its literature is bittersweet: “the apples of its second Eden have the tartness of

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ St. John-Perse, “Exile,” in *Collected Poems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 147.

¹²⁷ Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 197.

¹²⁸ See Walcott,

¹²⁹ Patricia Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*, 84.

experience...the golden apples of this sun are shot with acid”¹³⁰. This self-conscious cynicism about his environment, however, redeems the New World artist against charges of transcendental naiveté or essentialism in the seemingly facile claim of reverting to a “lost Paradise” Rather, it is in this passionate and intense self-scrutiny that the aesthetics of the New World elevates it to a greater intellectual honesty. Walcott is careful to add in the essay titled “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?”:

The New World originated in hypocrisy and genocide, so it is not a question for us, of returning to an Eden or of creating Utopia; out of the sordid and degrading beginning of the West Indies, we could only go further in decency and regret. Poets and satirists are afflicted with the superior stupidity which believes that societies can be renewed, and one of the most nourishing sites for such a renewal, however visionary it may seem, is the American archipelago.¹³¹

The role of memory in foregrounding distinct elements from the nameless void of historical loss is crucial in determining the epistemic nature of this reclamation. Interestingly, Walcott designates two distinct conceptions of ‘history’—the first, as the linear accumulation of events (and “achievements”) in time and “its original concept as myth, the partial recall of the race”¹³². The New World writer chooses the latter conception since it discharges him of duty to the “fitful muse, memory”¹³³. Instead, he proceeds to the order of the ‘elemental’, where man remains “not a creature chained to his past”, but instead, coalesces, as Edward Baugh comments, the past, present and future into the “original fertile nothingness out of which he can build a new world”¹³⁴—a transcendental order of the ever-present which rejects “history as hierarchy”¹³⁵. Thus, like David W. Hart’s observations on the paradoxically ‘positive’ implications of the ‘exilic chronotope’ of Caribbean subjecthood, in which the “fissures of the past” become “the rhetorical figures of a national present”¹³⁶, Walcott privileges historical amnesia as a new

¹³⁰ Walcott, “The Muse of History,” in *What the Twilight Says*, 41.

¹³¹ Derek Walcott, “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?,” in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, 57.

¹³² Walcott, “The Muse of History”, in *What the Twilight Says*, 37.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Edward Baugh, quoted in Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, 82.

¹³⁵ Walcott, “What the Twilight Says,” in *What the Twilight Says*, 11.

¹³⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, quoted in David W. Hart, “Caribbean Chronotopes: From Exile to Agency,” *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 2, Issue 1 (2004), 2, <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol2/iss2/2> (accessed July 10, 2020)

beginning, since he envisions an ideal *topos* within the imaginative order where “rowing back” to ‘nothing’ would be necessary. This has also significant implications for Walcott’s stance towards the vision of history-as-progress:

It should matter nothing to the New World if the Old is again determined to blow itself up, for an obsession with progress is not within the psyche of the recently enslaved...The vision of progress is the rational madness of history seen as sequential time, of a dominated future.¹³⁷

What carries forward the rhetorical tropes of a continuous, willed amnesia in the collective Caribbean memory in Walcott’s model of reclamation is the emphasis on the present to imaginatively incorporate the ruptures of the past. Like Glissant’s formulations on myth and the Caribbean folktale which “zeroes in on [our] absence of history”¹³⁸, Walcott inverts the temporally sequential nature of historiography by choosing to privilege ‘nothingness’ as an able assertion of beginning again: “The children of slaves must sear their memory with a torch”¹³⁹. In order to “record the anguish of the race”, the Caribbean intellectual “must return through a darkness whose terminus is amnesia”¹⁴⁰. Within Walcott’s oeuvre, the notion of this ‘nothingness’ is projected onto the topography of the Caribbean landscape. Patricia Ismond reads this particular tendency in the light of Walcott’s depiction of the Antillean landscape:

The crux of the “nothingness” that Walcott confronts here is that it is loaded with history: “There is too much nothing here”. In emotional and psychic terms, what this poem expresses is his apprehension of the deep alienation and confounding effects of the void of landscape. It is an apprehension charged with spiritual urgency—which is precisely where his response to negation differs from Naipaul’s—pointing to the imperative of human reclamation...¹⁴¹

Among poems within *The Castaway* and *The Gulf*, the mark of this customary negation projected onto the Caribbean landscape. In “The Swamp” for example, the “black mouth” of the highway ironically hums, “Home, come home...” at sunset and after evening descends onto the landscape,

¹³⁷ Walcott, “The Muse of History,” in *What the Twilight Says*, 41.

¹³⁸ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1989), 85.

¹³⁹ Walcott, “What the Twilight Says,” in *What the Twilight Says*, 5.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Patricia Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*, 65.

How the last bird drinks darkness with its throat,
How the wild saplings slip

Backward to darkness, go black
With widening amnesia, take the edge
Of nothing to them slowly...¹⁴²

The last bird drinking the darkness that fills the valley is emblematic of the island artist, who must overcome the terrible crisis of a cultural amnesia that is the result of historical dispossession. This forgetfulness is juxtaposed against the swamp, a veritable ground of dissolution of the “civilised” consciousness on an impassable terrain. The overt metaphor, of course alludes to the problem faced by the Caribbean artist when confronted with his lack of ‘history’ and the acute crisis of surviving under conditions inimical to the creative being.

“Air” famously begins with James Anthony Froude’s notorious libel of “nothingness”, concerning the question of historical identity in the West Indies. Froude’s ethnocentric verdicts were questioned by many Caribbean intellectuals and thinkers, most notably, in C.L.R. James’ *The Black Jacobins* (1939), which was first staged in London with Paul Robeson playing Touissaint¹⁴³. Silvio Torres-Saillant identifies Césaire’s 1960 study *Touissaint L’ouverture* as another important landmark in the history of this refutation, where Touissaint’s heroism rejects its dismissal by Froude as a result of “philonegro enthusiasm”¹⁴⁴. He also cites John Jacob Thomas, the Trinidadian scholar and contemporary of Froude, who in his book, *Froudacity: West Indian Fables Explained* (1889) demonstrated the lack of intellectual seriousness and scholarly acumen in Froude’s work, by shedding light on his sloppy, and generally faulty method of data collection, coupled with his typical racial bias that homogenised the inherent plurality of Antillean culture¹⁴⁵. Naipaul’s use of Froude’s statement as the epigraph to *The Middle Passage* is an instance where the difference between the former and Walcott’s vision of nothingness can be deduced: whereas Naipaul’s use of Froude is at best acerbic to

¹⁴² Derek Walcott, “The Swamp,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 60.

¹⁴³ Silvio-Torres Saillant, “The Endless History: The Caribbean versus Western Discourse,” in *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 113.

¹⁴⁴ James Anthony Froude, quoted in Silvio-Torres Saillant, *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean*, 113.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

the Caribbean intellectual's identity, Walcott's use proclaims a certain liberty to interpret this "nothingness" as a necessary condition for regeneration. The poem depicts an "unconverted", primordial rainforest that is by nature all-devouring. Crucial to the perils presented by this rainforest is the exilic thematic of man estranged or "unaccommodated" in the face of primitive, and hostile natural forces. Walcott extends the horrors of the rainforest which devoured 'two minor yellow races', the Caribs and the Arawaks and "half of a black" (African Maroons) and refused to be tamed to Christianity, "that Word made flesh of God"¹⁴⁶. Instead of a possibility for prayer, the forest exudes "nothing; milling air". As Patricia Ismond identifies, the Caribs are designated specifically through the flower motif¹⁴⁷, alluding possibly to El Dorado, the mythic city of gold while the Arawaks gradually vanish, leaving "not even the lightest fern-trace/...to be cultured by black rock"¹⁴⁸. Walcott's next image is however of a "rainbird", which, to my mind is a programmatic reference to the (absent) Caribbean intellectual, who would be the poet's own alter ego (similar to the "last bird" in "The Swamp") "summoning his race/ from vaporous air"¹⁴⁹.

The void of the landscape is adequately intermingled with the acute crisis of artistic isolation in a poem such as "Homecoming: Anse La Raye", where the poet returns to his native St. Lucia after a number of years, only to find the extreme poverty, backwardness and destitution in Anse La Raye, a tiny fishing village to the northwest of the island, whose "spindly, sugar-headed children", suffering from malnutrition, race up to him "like flies" round a wound in his heart. Walcott's overarching feeling in this poem is the crisis of exile based partly on non-recognition by his own people. However, the terminal reasons for this isolation is the failure of the poet to adequately represent his island and its people,

for once, like them,
you wanted no career
...
but hoped it would mean something to declare
today, I am your poet, yours,
all this you knew,

¹⁴⁶ Walcott, "Air," in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 113.

¹⁴⁷ Patricia Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*, 63.

¹⁴⁸ Walcott, "Air," in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 114.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

but never guessed you'd come
to know there are homecomings without home.¹⁵⁰

Walcott seems to realise that not being able to make a difference in the lives of these people is tantamount to a failure of the poetic vocation and is indicative of the inexorable 'gulf' between the purported ambition and actual powerlessness of the island poet, whose "posture/seem a tourist's"¹⁵¹. The burden of this exile seems doubly heavy because the children leave with curses when they realise that he is no tourist. Patricia Ismond opines that the poem reaches "a realisation that his own exile carries a reflection of their own"¹⁵². The St. Omer persona, the chief protagonist figure of the novels of Garth St. Omer—the St. Lucian novelist to whom Walcott dedicates this particular poem—comes from the lower-middle class stratum of St. Lucian society and frequently faces an existential futility through persistent death, poverty and backwardness that hinder him from making any valuable contribution to the betterment of his island society. Added to this sense of estrangement is his colonial education which renders him incapable of sharing the faith of his parents' generation. In Ismond's reading, the "posture serves... as an insulation against the burden of responsibility"¹⁵³, gradually leading him to recede into anonymity and non-involvement with his surroundings. In Walcott's vision, the ultimate paradox of being without a 'home' is built into the experience of this spiritual distancing, although his position also betrays a guilt at not having been able to take up responsibility. The poem finally transfers the inhospitable, oppressive sense of nothingness to the seascape itself:

The black cliffs scowl,
the ocean sucks its teeth,
like that dugout canoe
a drifting petal fallen in a cup,
with nothing but its image,
you sway, reflecting nothing.¹⁵⁴

Walcott thus unites the paradox of a 'return' to a home where he remains "unaccommodated" in spite of his deep-seated sense of belonging to his

¹⁵⁰ Walcott, "Homecoming: Anse La Raye," in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 128.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Patricia Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*, 76.

¹⁵³ Patricia Ismond, "The St. Lucian Background in Garth St. Omer and Derek Walcott", *Caribbean Quarterly* 28, no. 1/2, *Critical Approaches to West Indian Literature* (March-June 1982), 38.

¹⁵⁴ Walcott, "Homecoming: Anse La Raye," in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 128.

island, whose fishermen continue to cross rivers, “eating their islands”, having held on to a faith which he seems to have lost. But unlike the psychic paralysis usually experienced by St. Omer’s protagonists, the key to Walcott’s crisis lies in an inability to abdicate responsibility on behalf of his own people.

“Exile” begins with the image of a prototypical colonial Caribbean student of Indian origins, who, much like Naipaul, travels for education to England and is marked by an allegiance to it which makes him think of it as “home”. This undue valorisation undoubtedly had its roots in the condition of the colonial, thinking even of England’s “wretched weather” as ‘poetry’. However, within the “prose” of colonial history, his own self-definition as a West Indian is also marked as an exclusion from the tradition of achievement. Walcott therefore identifies the poetics of the exilic condition as an act of remembrance:

And earth began to look
as you remembered her,
herons, like seagulls, flocked
to the salted furrow,
the bellowing, smoky bullock
churned its cane sea,
a world began to pass
through your pen’s eye...¹⁵⁵

Characteristically, the “exile” of this poem would be a novelist, in whose prose is “mirrored” the re-remembered landscape he leaves behind. Walcott, deliberately juxtaposes successive images from island life with the process of artistic contemplation. The lines liberally use enjambment, marking the exile’s re-remembering his “home” through a trail of embedded clues patterned by repetition. The world-as-text analogy, which linked the flight of birds and “images migrating from the mind” in “The Flock” is here repeated through a series of connected comparisons, linking “some phrase/caught in the parenthesis/ of highway” and “the bullock’s strenuous ease...mirrored/ in a clear page of prose” with the exile’s ink filling “leaf after leaf the furrowed villages/ where the smoke flutes/ and the brittle pages/ of the Ramayana stoke the mulch fires”¹⁵⁶. The general sense of melancholy here is overbearing, the “highways lead nowhere”, and the ritual significance of

¹⁵⁵ Walcott, “Air,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 101.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 101-2.

memory is made all too evident. Like the castaway figure's longing for human company, "smoke writhes its blue arms/for [your] lost India"¹⁵⁷.

In trying to re-imagine the plight of historical loss for an ethnic community to which he is an outsider, Walcott, to my mind may have been strongly reminded of a passage from Naipaul, which is strangely evocative of the exile's dilemma about his sense of 'home':

In the arcade of Hanuman House, grey and substantial in the dark, there was already the evening assembly of old men, squatting on sacks on the ground and on tables now empty of Tulsi Store goods, pulling at clay cheelums that glowed red and smelled of ganja and burnt sacking. Though it wasn't cold, many had scarves over their heads and around their necks; this detail made them look foreign and, to Mr. Biswas, romantic. It was the time of day for which they lived. They could not speak English and were not interested in the land where they lived; it was a place where they had come for a short time and stayed longer than they expected.

They continually talked of going back to India, but when the opportunity came, many refused, afraid of the unknown, afraid to leave the familiar temporariness. And every evening they came to the arcade of the solid, friendly house, smoked, told stories, and continued to talk of India.¹⁵⁸

Walcott offers a parallel to Naipaul's "impossible fantasy" by offering a trail of homophonic word-scapes: the "cinema-hoardings", presumably featuring Hollywood movies, "leer/in language half the country cannot read" proleptically foreshadows desolation in the "whine of the cinema-van...summoning the drowned from oceans of deep cane.". The old men who thresh rice in the final stanza have their "brown gaze flecked with chaff" while their loss is "chafed" by this desultory whine. True to his stance against the "pastoralists of the African revival", Walcott does not flinch away from acknowledging "The hymn/to Mother India whores its lie" but instead goes on to strongly underline the fragmentary nature of the exilic experience:

Your memory walks by its soft-spoken
path, as flickering, broken,
Saturday jerks past like a cheap film.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 102.

¹⁵⁸ V.S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (London: Picador, 2016), 201.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

It is important however, to realise that the repetitive trail of clues, enjambed lines and alliterative words are Walcott's ways of tapping into the order of the mnemonic. Like his admission in his celebrated Nobel lecture 'The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory', about memory "that yearns to join the centre, a limb remembering the body from which it has been severed"¹⁶⁰, Walcott re-members fragments to use collective memory in the Caribbean to attempt a possible reversal where the 'lack' of history is adequately recompensed by the effectiveness of a "partial recall". Paula Burnett succinctly sums up Walcott's deliberate mythification of memory when she identifies the propensities of personal memory that constantly fades into amnesia: "The historical rite is then necessarily an act of imaginative recovery, replacing Clio, the muse of history with Mnemosyne, memory, the mother of the Muses, and reconceived as art."¹⁶¹

Within this larger strategy of historical reclamation, one might therefore conceptualise the isolation of the bardic vocation, which Walcott defines as "the challenge of endurance through ordinary objects" which Walcott also extends to his portrayal of the shamanic hermit figure Makak in his *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, as well as the figure of Shabine in "The Schooner Flight". It seems to resolve many of the seemingly irreconcilable contradictions that encapsulate the question of exilic identity in the Antillean experience. It is also in this particular sense that the Caribbean phase of Walcott's poetry may be deemed "revolutionary".

2.5. "This time, Shabine, like you really gone!": Exile, Nomadic Thought and Possible Lines of Flight

The final two volumes of Walcott's poetry in the Caribbean, *Sea Grapes* (1976) and *The Star Apple Kingdom* (1979) mark a move towards a more mature, lyrical and graceful diction. The exilic thematic manifests itself in several poems of these two volumes, most notably in "Preparing for Exile" from *Sea Grapes* (1976), and "Forest of Europe" and "The Schooner Flight" from *The Star Apple Kingdom* (1979). All of these three poems metaphorically encapsulate the positive affects of artistic isolation and exile. The early traces of this phase may be

¹⁶⁰ Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in *What the Twilight Says*, 67.

¹⁶¹ Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, 82-83.

observed in the title poem in *The Gulf*. The poem, set during an airplane flight from Texas to Trinidad, finds the poet surrounded by mementos from his travels, such as matches, or a flower or “this book of fables by Borges”¹⁶² which connote the poet’s newer engagements within the Caribbean and the United States. Yet there is a retrospective guilt at the fact that “the South felt like home”, and a further epiphany that the metaphoric gulf between the poet and his “home” is “daily widening”¹⁶³. The ambivalence of “leaving” and “returning” is revisited by Walcott in each of the poems mentioned above and they finally culminate in Walcott’s conception of himself as a “fortunate traveller” in his 1981 volume of poems. This particular section will therefore examine each of these three poems and go on, by using Deleuze’s concept of ‘nomad thought’ (and by extension, Glissant’s re-appropriation of it in his concept of Relation) to formulate a propensity in the Walcott of this phase towards the construction of a unstable subject that complicates any essentialist (pre)figuration of ‘home’.

“Preparing for Exile” begins with the poetic persona imagining “the death of Mandelstam”, interestingly, “among the yellowing coconuts”, a seeming slice of Caribbean ‘topos’ juxtaposed against the history of the exiled Osip Mandelstam.¹⁶⁴ Mandelstam was the iconic Soviet poet dissident who was repeatedly harassed, arrested twice—first in 1934 (for his transgressive poem ‘Stalin Epigram’) and later again in 1938 during the beginning of the great Stalinist Purges for “counter-revolutionary activities”— and finally was sentenced to five years of corrective labour at a transit camp near Vladivostok where he died of the cold and starvation. Here, Walcott subjectively reimagines this death and finds his Muse already unsettled, looking “over its shoulder/For a shadow to fill the door”¹⁶⁵. Mandelstam’s death becomes a point of departure for Walcott for surmising about his own exile, where the benign moon “increase[s] into an arc lamp” and the apparently nondescript “inkstain” on his hand threateningly “prepare[s] to press thumb downward/before a shrugging sergeant”¹⁶⁶. These commonplaces of the migrant’s life acquire portentous significance as Walcott, estranged from the

¹⁶² Walcott, “The Gulf” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 104.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁶⁴ Walcott, “Preparing for Exile,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 304.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

familiar, (typified here through the figure of the cat, who “leap[s] from his path”), tries to rationalise his guilt at choosing to live in Boston, Massachusetts, having emigrated from Trinidad, estranged and isolated from his people.

The poem “Forest of Europe”, dedicated to fellow poet and exiled friend Joseph Brodsky, emphasizes the exilic legacy of Mandelstam for Brodsky by reimagining the latter reciting lines by the former in a desolate forest scene. The sense of emptiness and desolation surrounds the wintry landscape, where the “last leaves” fall like “notes from a piano” and the forest appears as an “empty orchestra, its lines/ ruled on these scattered manuscripts of snow”¹⁶⁷. Against the backdrop of this landscape, Walcott sees Brodsky recite lines from Mandelstam that “uncoil[s] as visibly as cigarette smoke”¹⁶⁸. The association to Brodsky, in fact, owes its origin from those “lines from Mandelstam” that Walcott finds himself reading, sitting in a “brown room in barren Oklahoma”¹⁶⁹. We are immediately made aware here of a triad of exiled poets, Walcott, Brodsky and Mandelstam, brought together by their common inheritance to dislocation, estrangement and their obligation to poetic utterance. The poem also moves across three different locations: first, the Gulag Archipelago, where Mandelstam met his end, second the desolate forest landscape where Brodsky is imagined to recite his lines, and finally, the “brown room in barren Oklahoma” where the poet is presumably sitting. The winter forest scene then transmutes into “...a Gulag Archipelago/ under this ice”¹⁷⁰. In a rapid succession of images that follow, Walcott imagines the snow gradually accumulating, “like Cossacks round the corpse/of a tired Choctaw”¹⁷¹. The choice of the proper nouns here deserve attention. The Cossacks, a warlike community living in the northern hinterlands of the Black and the Caspian Sea were known for their fiercely independent spirit. The Choctaws, on the other hand, refer to an indigenous community of American Indians who originally occupied the southeastern United States. Presumably, Walcott uses these proper nouns for their respective associations to the Russian and the American contexts. Just as the snowflakes, like Cossacks, accumulate around the body of the Choctaw, Walcott

¹⁶⁷ Walcott, “Forest of Europe,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 375.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.* 376.

seems to be suggesting a comparison between his own situation and those of Mandelstam and Brodsky, the fellow-exiles who are united by their common inheritance of the poetic word. Mandelstam becomes the all-pervasive figure of exile, the lonely dissident and “the dark child on the parapets/ of Europe” standing out for his steadfast commitment to the poetic vocation against the seemingly insurmountable might of the Soviet empire which banished him:

He saw the poetry in forlorn stations
under clouds vast as Asia, through districts
that could gulp Oklahoma like a grape,
not these tree-shaded prairie halts but space
so desolate it mocked destinations.¹⁷²

Mandelstam’s death becomes a sacramental rite against which both Walcott’s and Brodsky’s respective experiences of exile are measured. Brodsky is retrospectively imagined as an exiled poet away from his native Russia, “a man living with English in one room”. Brodsky’s condition allows Walcott, now departed from the Caribbean, to see the “tourist archipelagos of [my] South” as “prisons too, corruptible”¹⁷³. The poem commences with Walcott comparing the plight of fellow exiles across different cultures, and dwelling on the potential of ideological resistance to the tyranny of political regimes that may be offered through the incantatory power of poetry. Walcott conceptualises a “tributary of emigrants” now made “classless” by the experience of exile who only become united by being “citizens of a language” partaking of poetry, “the bread that lasts when systems have decayed”¹⁷⁴. Walcott also seems to suggest a heightened personal relationship that the exiled poet forges with language. By the end of the poem, Mandelstam’s divine ague and fever becomes a ‘fire’ whose glow warms and nourishes Walcott, Brodsky and countless fellow exiles against the icy indifference of the winter landscape. In his essay on Joseph Brodsky, Walcott similarly acknowledges that after “the drama of exile” passes, all that the exile is left with happens to be the “mother tongue”, the “mother landscape, seen beyond tears as simply herself in the very way in which the exile, rising, eating, writing,

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 377.

reflects her”¹⁷⁵. The loss of the homeland is compensated for, by a retreat into the mother tongue.

I finally turn to the poem ‘The Schooner Flight’, a relatively well-known text in Walcott’s oeuvre, where Walcott uses the flight of Shabine, the archetypal “red nigger” and the St. Lucian creole name for the mulatto, to foreground an inherently contradictory process of identity-formation that relies, paradoxically, on the very notion of distance from “home”. The conceptual apparatus I have used for my reading comes from Edouard Glissant’s ideas of errantry, exile and a paradoxical sense of rootedness with regard to the Caribbean islands. I have tried to argue that in the course of the long poem, Walcott, with his alter-ego Shabine, manages to forge an identity that rejects the idea of the ‘totalitarian root’ and constructs itself, paradoxically, through Relation. Errantry and exile emerges as a transcendental condition by the end of the poem, resulting in Shabine’s ‘homing’ away from home.

In reading the poem, commentators such as Patricia Ismond and Paul Breslin have drawn attention to the overlappings between Shabine’s subjectivity and that of Walcott himself, suggesting a number of points of identification between the two. As Ismond has commented, Shabine’s clandestine relationship with his lover Maria Concepcion also mirrors “Walcott’s horrors over the break-up of his marriage during this period, torn between his wife and the woman who was to become his third wife”¹⁷⁶. Breslin also notes such similarities to Walcott’s biographical context, stating “one can hardly help reading the poem as grounded in autobiography, preoccupied as it is with the sundering of ties to marriage and nation and with a quest for self-transformation and rebirth”¹⁷⁷. Shabine’s mixed race background and his departure from the Caribbean at the very beginning of the poem consolidates this conflation with Walcott. Written in a Trinidadian creole voice and in the first person, the first section of the poem introduces us to Shabine’s resolve to work as a sailor in the schooner Flight. The departure is characterised by

¹⁷⁵ Derek Walcott, “Magic Industry,” in *What the Twilight Says*, 144.

¹⁷⁶ Patricia Ismond, “Society and Nationhood in the Caribbean,” in *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*, 233.

¹⁷⁷ Paul Breslin, “Pulling in the Seine / of the Dark Sea”: “The Schooner Flight,” in *Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, 189.

conflicting emotions of guilt, pain and freedom as he leaves behind the sleeping Maria Concepcion:

I pass me dry neighbour sweeping she yard
as I went downhill, and I nearly said:
"Sweep soft, you witch, 'cause she don't sleep hard,"
but the bitch look through me like I was dead.¹⁷⁸

Shabine's departure enacts a symbolic death and his venturing into a second life. Even though he admits that "loving these islands must be my load", he feels his soul to be tainted by corruption and he looks to embark upon the flight to escape it. He encounters his double in the taxi rearview mirror, weeping "for the houses, the streets, that whole fucking island"¹⁷⁹. (*CP* 345). He becomes an 'everyman' figure, representing the collective consciousness of his community in a microcosmic sense, asserting:

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.¹⁸⁰

Shabine's flight figures as an act that becomes analogous to the act of composing poetry, with his "common language" acting as the wind, and his pages of poetry the "sails" of his flight. His "common language" may be seen as arising naturally out of his attachment to Trinidad, representative of the entire Caribbean archipelago, from "Monos to Nassau"¹⁸¹. The second section introduces us to Shabine's past and his being drawn into smuggling to be able to afford expensive gifts for his lover Maria Concepcion. However, the entire racket crashes, and Shabine finds that the accusations of the investigating "Commission of Enquiry" are never going to be levelled against "O'Hara, big government man", but at "khaki pant red niggers"¹⁸² like himself. Kicked out of O'Hara's office, Shabine takes to salvage diving for a living with "a crazy Mick/ name O'Shaughnessy, and a limey named Head"¹⁸³. However, his terrible personal remorse and guilt at having done

¹⁷⁸ Walcott, "The Schooner Flight," in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 345.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.* 348.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* 349.

harm to his wife and children through his affair with Maria Concepcion make Shabine increasingly restless till he sees "...God/ like a harpooned grouper bleeding", promising him the "morning star" if he left Maria.¹⁸⁴ The conditions that presage Shabine's desire to venture out on the flight are thus recounted, including his inability to have sex with other women from the madhouse, in whose "spiky cunts" he fails to "dive".¹⁸⁵ The use of this particular verb at once invites us to see Maria as the figure of the muse and a human embodiment of the sea, towards which Shabine is drawn. His lament towards the end of the second section suggest imminent homelessness and isolation. However in this particular phase of the poem, Shabine clearly remains too nostalgic and hopeful for a return to his homeland, to not fully comprehend the very transitoriness of a "rest place" itself:

Where is my rest place, Jesus? Where is my harbour?
Where is the pillow I will not have to pay for,
and the window I can look from that frames my life? ¹⁸⁶

The third section of the poem starts with Shabine's open admission that he has "no nation now but the imagination"¹⁸⁷. His renunciation of national identity however, seems to have been occasioned by his isolation from a shared imagined community whose seeming unity he now doubts. In a 1990 interview with J.P. White, Walcott clarified that a nation of the imagination "would be a nation in which the temperament and the spirit of the poet would enter the spirit of politics... This other nation we are talking about is the nation that acts imaginatively on the higher sense of the imagination"¹⁸⁸. For Shabine, his mixed blood ancestry and his in-between position as a mulatto in Caribbean society isolates him both from the burden of colonial 'History' and the Black Power Movement in Trinidad around 1970. While Shabine insists on a rooted kinship with 'History', he faces only willed amnesia and non-recognition meted out to him, articulated most effectively by the wordless spit of 'History', the "parchment Creole"¹⁸⁹. Similarly, he is sceptical of the revivalist rhetoric of the Black Power movement and its

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. 349-50

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. 350.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Derek Walcott, interview with J.P. White, in *Conversations with Derek Walcott* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 160.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 350.

potential to bring about a decisive change that would suggest a future direction emerging from the burden of historical exile. 'Revolution' degenerates into mindless and never-ending cycles of violence, mitigated only by the cheap thrills of matinee shows at half-past twelve:

In the 12: 30 movies the projectors best
not break down, or you go see revolution. Aleksandr Blok
enters and sits in the third row of pit eating chocolate
cone, waiting for a spaghetti West.
ern with Clint Eastwood and featuring Lee Van Cleef.¹⁹⁰

As the flight nears the fishing village of Blanchisseuse off the northern coast of Trinidad, and moves further out into the sea, Shabine bids adieu to his island, now depicted through images of dusk on the beach. Shabine visualises "dark hands" pulling in the fishing nets of "the dark sea, deep, deep inland"¹⁹¹. These images reinforce Walcott's idea that the elemental powers of the Caribbean seascape offer more than diversion to tourists, it is organically connected to the lives of the fishermen and the seafaring folk who draw in its powers to nourish and to sustain themselves. But in a more metaphorical sense, "pulling in the seine/ of the dark sea" also resembles an attempt to dive deep into the question of historical inheritance on part of Shabine, and by extension, Walcott. It is a conscious metaphor to alleviate the symbolic act of rebuff that 'History' plays on Shabine. Shabine's exile and departure from Trinidad may also be read as an attempt to wash his tainted soul. As both Paul Breslin and Mary C. Fuller have identified, 'Blanchisseuse', the French name for a washer-woman or laundress fits such a motive on his part to achieve a spiritual cleansing¹⁹².

Shabine's encounter of the Middle Passage begins with the surreal image of the ghost ships of the past beyond the swirling fog that envelops the crew of the flight the next morning. A ritual re-experiencing of the horrors of the Middle Passage and the slave trade seems to play out before his eyes, with "men with rusty eyeholes like cannons" pacing on the warships, with their illustrious commanders "Rodney, Nelson, de Grasse"¹⁹³. Walcott alludes generally to the numerous naval

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 351.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 351-52.

¹⁹² See Paul Breslin, "Pulling in the Seine / of the Dark Sea": "The Schooner Flight," in *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, 203 and Mary C. Fuller, "Myths of Identity in Derek Walcott's "The Schooner Flight", *Connotations* 5, no. 2-3 (1995/96), 328.

¹⁹³ Walcott, "The Schooner Flight," in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 352.

battles between England and France in the Caribbean, and more specifically to the Battle of the Saintes (or the *Bataille de la Dominique*, as it was known to the French) where the British Admiral George Rodney defeated a French fleet under General Comte de Grasse. However, these chronicles of colonial victory and defeat are immaterial to Shabine's ritual re-remembering, since what is of consequence to him is "the hoarse orders/ they gave those Shabines"¹⁹⁴ in course of such battles. He realises also, as he passes through the galley of slave ships that his mixed-blood ancestors, buried "below deck too deep", do not figure within such grand narratives of victory and defeat offered by History. This is precisely the historical amnesia Shabine wishes to combat. As the flight comes to its first landfall the next day at Barbados, Shabine meditates on the enterprise of ascribing suitable "names" to the tropical vegetation of the Caribbean islands. He notes, for example, that the trees he had been accustomed to calling "cypresses" were now called as "Canadian cedars" by the Captain. As in other poems such as 'Names' and 'Sainte Lucie' from the same volume, Walcott hints at a strategy of reclaiming the landscape which may be adopted by the colonial subject, who has to move beyond his conflicted historical inheritance of naming these trees after his colonial masters. The "green casuarinas", called somewhat more authentically as "cypresses" by the masters, become living reminders of the "careful mimicry" embedded in the process of naming.¹⁹⁵ But although Shabine acknowledges "the pain of history words contain"¹⁹⁶, he is willing to move beyond such mimicry. His 'singing back' to the casuarinas is thus, an act directed at liberating them from the burden of colonial representation through naming, and trying to reclaim them as themselves in this alternative historical quest. The seventh section is comprised of Shabine's apologia for being a poet, demonstrating his dedication to his craft, finally culminating in his altercation and fight with the crew in the eighth. Paul Breslin has explicitly identified the Muse figure in the seventh section, as "Anna" from *Another Life*, "Walcott's fictional name for his first love Andreuille Alcee"¹⁹⁷. Ismond considers another interpretation, where the addressee may be a personification of St. Lucia itself, to

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. 354.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Paul Breslin, "Pulling in the Seine / of the Dark Sea": "The Schooner Flight," in *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, 206.

which Walcott/ Shabine was deeply indebted to for their poetic vocation.¹⁹⁸ Shabine's thanksgiving to his unnamed Muse promises to leave behind his poetry for her sake:

I have kept my own
promise, to leave you the one thing I own,
you whom I loved first: my poetry.

We here for one night. Tomorrow, the *Flight* will be gone.¹⁹⁹

Paul Breslin chooses to read the last line in a double sense—first, as a literal reminder of the fact that the *Flight* sails the next morning, and secondly, in a metaphoric way: “all anchorages, including the anchorage in life itself, are brief, and the journey presses on”²⁰⁰. Going by Breslin's reading then, the last line already anticipates the condition of transcendental homelessness imminent towards the end of the poem.

Section Eight recounts Shabine's fight with the cook, another “red nigger” with “wash-out blue eyes” who snatches away his exercise book on which he wrote his poetry and reads portions of it dealing with Shabine's lament aloud for the crew: “O my children, my wife”²⁰¹. When Shabine retorts with stabbing him “right in the plump of his calf”²⁰², he stands up for not just his poetry, but towards a display of manliness, a lack of which had been presupposed by the cook. He gains the friendship of Vince through this altercation, and through his passionate defence of the poetic vocation, the respect of the rest of the crew. The ninth section, “Maria Concepcion and the Book of Dreams”, opens with a “screeching jet” overhead, as the *Flight* courses to Dominica, with its onward direction opening up not towards the future, but “opening a curtain into the past”²⁰³. Refusing to align himself with the agents of an elusive “progress” that seems no more than a ritual handing over of the reins of political power from white masters to black ones while the masses are subjected to unchangingly harsh conditions of life, Shabine has ironically learnt that “Progress is history's dirty joke”²⁰⁴. In the ensuing episode that covers

¹⁹⁸ Patricia Ismond, “Society and Nationhood in the Caribbean,” in *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*, 235.

¹⁹⁹ Walcott, “The Schooner Flight,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 354.

²⁰⁰ Paul Breslin, “Pulling in the Seine / of the Dark Sea”, 207.

²⁰¹ Walcott, “The Schooner Flight,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 354-55

²⁰² *Ibid.* 355.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 356.

Shabine's visionary dream, it seems as if Walcott deliberately makes Shabine journey through an interior landscape of the mind laden with the potential to re-evaluate the past. Shabine's explicit identification with the Caribs fleeing from the threat of genocide at the hands of European conquistadores seems to run counter to the course of the Eurocentric and colonialist ideas on 'History as "progress"':

I ran like a Carib through Dominica,
my nose holes choked with memory of smoke;
I heard the screams of my burning children,
I ate the brains of mushrooms, the fungi
of devil's parasols under white, leprous rocks;
my breakfast was leaf mould in leaking forests,
with leaves big as maps, and when I heard noise
of the soldiers' progress through the thick leaves,
though my heart was bursting, I get up and ran
through the blades of balisier sharper than spears;
with the blood of my race, I ran, boy, I ran
with moss-footed speed like a painted bird;
then I fall, but I fall by an icy stream under
cool fountains of fem, and a screaming parrot
catch the dry branches and I drowned at last
in big breakers of smoke; then when that ocean
of black smoke pass, and the sky turn white,
there was nothing but Progress, if Progress is
an iguana as still as a young leaf in sunlight.²⁰⁵

As Shabine looks to interpret his dream, he turns, crucially, to a pre-modern 'Book of Dreams' used by Maria Concepcion, "a soiled orange booklet with a cyclops' eye/ center, from the Dominican Republic. He recalls that Maria had dreamt "of whales and a storm", a dream for which "the book had no answer". Shabine's dream the next night "of three old women/featureless as silkworms, stitching my fate" clearly alludes to the Three Fates, or the *Moirai* in Greek mythology—Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos—who are presented as representatives of an inviolable order of predestined events. These events include Shabine's gradual progression, in a Glissantian sense, from being a mere citizen of the Limers' Republic to becoming a human embodiment for the entire Caribbean, from a desire for "filiation" (the search for a root) to a vocation of "errantry", and finally, signal his arrival at a pluralistic and relational concept of identity. No matter how much he tries to shy away from this responsibility, the refusal of the Fates to disappear from his dream despite his "beating them away with a broom" hints at the fact that

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

he has been chosen for this role. As Shabine contemplates his descent into the depths of delirium and madness, he describes himself through images of sepulchral combat drawn from the Caribbean seascape, “the lances of palms and the sea's shining shield”²⁰⁶, which, through his gift of poetic speech, would descend as retribution on the corrupt bureaucracy of postcolonial Trinidad. Shabine thus emerges as a visionary and a prophetic figure, as Breslin has identified, comparable to Jonah from the Old Testament ²⁰⁷. The Shabine/ Jonah analogy can be worked out further, in that they both were initially reluctant to take on their role as prophets, but were brought to their vocation by the will of God. The unusual storm that begins to rage in the poem’s final section appears as the final trial inflicted on Shabine. In the face of calamity, Shabine realises that in the portentous dream of Maria, it was he who was the drowned sailor. Shabine’s final act of submission to faith redeems him from the persistent plight of homelessness. His resolve to submit to the will of God, mightier than the “Leviathan”, recalls God’s rebuke of Job, warning him of the haughtiness and pride of men who seek to challenge Him. Walcott describes the Captain of the Flight in Christ-like terms, conflating him to the figure of the Saviour:

But if that storm had strength, was in Cap'n face,
beard beading with spray, tears salting the eyes,
crucify to his post, that nigger hold fast
to that wheel, man, like the cross held Jesus. ²⁰⁸

The storm subsides by noon, and in the eleventh section, notable for Shabine’s embracing of his metaphoric homelessness. Shabine’s exile becomes not merely a condition of being far from “home”, but acquires a metaphysical dimension where he embraces the plurality of the Caribbean, unified into “one people” whose grief he has managed to articulate.

In his *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant defines both errantry and exile as lacking in “roots”, a unique entity, “a stock taking all upon itself and killing all

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 358.

²⁰⁷ Paul Breslin, “Pulling in the Seine / of the Dark Sea”: “The Schooner Flight,” in *Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, 209.

²⁰⁸ Walcott, “The Schooner Flight,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 359.

around it”²⁰⁹. Following Deleuze and Guattari, he introduces the idea of the rhizome, “an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the ground, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently”²¹⁰. The concept of the rhizome retains “the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root”²¹¹. The idea of the root maintains an essentialist concept of identity, writes Glissant, a model adopted by the Western idea of the nation-state which later found its way into which most postcolonial nations: “the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root”²¹². In contrast, Glissant proposes a model of Relation, where “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other”²¹³, a forever changing *metissage* of differences. For him, identity, in so far as it is relational, can only be seen as a fluid and a dynamic matrix built upon the play of relation. Thus, in this particular context, “uprooting can work toward identity, and exile can be seen as beneficial, when these are experienced as a search for the Other”²¹⁴. The desire for filiation, of a shared inheritance of ‘History’ that Shabine is so keen on finding in the early parts of “The Schooner Flight” can be thus read as an attempt on his part to recover his “roots”, a privilege that is denied him on account of his mongrelized origins. However, we come to see as the poem progresses that Shabine gradually comes to a fuller acceptance of the ‘Other’ even within the Caribbean archipelago. From Trinidad, the Limers’ Republic, his conception of the Caribbean islands widens into not merely the multiplicity of “[M]ore islands there...than peas on a tin plate, all different size,/one thousand in the Bahamas alone”, but extends far out to an altogether different scale where “this earth is one/island in archipelagoes of stars”²¹⁵. Thus Shabine arrives at an endless errantry, which, Glissant writes, “does not proceed from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deterritorialized) situation of origin”²¹⁶, but instead abandons the quest for a single origin, finding liberation in limitless *metissage*. At the very end of the poem therefore, Shabine summarizes the common theme of his anchorless quest as the perpetual wanderings of a nomad:

²⁰⁹ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997), 11.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² *Ibid.* 14.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ *Ibid.* 18.

²¹⁵ Walcott, “The Schooner Flight,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 361.

²¹⁶ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 18.

The bowsprit, the arrow, the longing, the lunging heart—
the flight *to* a target whose aim we'll never know,
vain search for one island that heals with its harbour
and a guiltless horizon...²¹⁷

Edward Baugh has commented that the ending of the poem “remains problematic, suggesting a paradoxical situation of simultaneous detachment and engagement”²¹⁸. However, if we turn to Glissant’s theorisation of errantry, we can perhaps unravel the acute ambivalence of the ending. For Glissant, “[W]hereas exile may erode one’s sense of identity, the thought of errantry—the thought of that which relates—usually reinforces this sense of identity”²¹⁹. Errantry is not at variance with the “will to identity”, but only with the parochialism of “territorial intolerance, or the predatory effects of the unique root”. In the poem, Shabine outgrows his desire for a fixed “rest place” and his identity as a citizen of his own island Trinidad to an awareness of that “one island”, presumably an abstraction, of a model Caribbean island. His increased awareness of the “Other” (the seemingly infinite variety of “roots” typified in creolisation) leads him to an awareness of limitless *metissage* offered by Relation. In his positing of “home” as an always deferred place, Shabine becomes an errant dwelling in a state of exile that is existential and metaphysical in nature. According to Glissant, “in the poetics of Relation one who is errant (who is no longer traveller, discoverer or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this”²²⁰. Shabine’s calm and resigned acceptance of homelessness at the end of the poem, in a similar manner, demarcates his quest as perpetually incomplete but always on the verge of completion. It is possible therefore, to think of Shabine as an errant whose final detachment paradoxically consolidates his sense of identity as a Caribbean subject. For Jan Carew:

The Caribbean writer and artist, if he must end his exile, is compelled by the exigencies of history to move back and forth from the heart of those cultural survivals and others into whatever regions of the twentieth century, the island, the continent or the cosmos his imagination encompasses; and, in roaming across the

²¹⁷ Walcott, “The Schooner Flight,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 361.

²¹⁸ Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 113

²¹⁹ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 20.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

ages of man in this bloodstained hemisphere, he must penetrate into the unfathomable silences where a part of the Amerindian past is entombed, he must gnaw at the bones of universal griefs, and the reservoir of compassion in his heart for the dispossessed must be limitless.²²¹

Shabine's exile thus makes us keenly aware that "home" can always be a provisional space within the dynamics of Relation, and that within the socio-cultural milieu that is the Caribbean, this homelessness may also prove beneficial for reclaiming agency on part of those disposed by 'History'.

2.6. A Self-Reflexive Transience: Performing 'Exile' in *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981)

The poetry of the 1980s in Walcott's oeuvre has been seen by most commentators as a phase marked by acute transience, an ambiguous sense of belonging and most of all, a self-conscious propensity to evoke irony. Walcott cleverly inverts the title of Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, while he freely remodels the figure of the 'picaro' in Nashe's narrative. Breslin identifies that the key to unravelling the intricacy of the title of the volume could well hinge upon a crucial passage in Nashe's narrative where "a banished English earl scolds the protagonist Jack Wilton for venturing abroad", giving in to "transitory" pleasures to "sell away the inheritance he hath of breathing in the place where he was born"²²². Walcott's nameless traveller protagonist however, cannot seem to share Nashe's view. In the title poem itself, he is seen as keenly conscious of his dubious role as a spy and that the facts of his being "fortunate" enough to be able to fly "first class" and to "see the world", in fact, also make him complicit in the hierarchically ordered developmental paradigm of 'Progress' which his earlier protagonist, Shabine, had steered clear of. The artistic strategy Walcott chooses to follow in *The Fortunate Traveller* dwells on pairing of binaries—most importantly, that of the 'metropolitan North' (broadly, the "first world" cities of the United States) against the 'underdeveloped South' (the Caribbean)—so as to reveals newer structures of

²²¹ Jan Carew, "The Caribbean Writer and Exile," *Journal of Black Studies*, 8, no. 4 (June 1978), 466-67.

²²² See Paul Breslin, "Derek Sans Terre: The Poetry of the 1980s," in *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 216.

oppression, domination and hegemonic control latent within the global turn towards neoliberalism. Thus, in contrast to Paula Burnett's reading of the titular poem and the anthology in general as "the Third World's *J'aacuse*" addressed to the affluent...which moves powerfully to figure both the right to justice and the claim for vengeance"²²³, it is important, in my view, to interrogate how the cultural identity of speaker of the poem is never explicitly revealed, even as he betrays the people of the South for personal gain. The fact that this particular figure is aware of his own privilege and passivity in the face of an unjust world order is given in his open admission:

We are roaches,
riddling the state cabinets, entering the dark holes
of power, carapaced in topcoats,
scuttling around columns, signalling for taxis,
with frantic antennae, to other huddles with roaches;
we infect with optimism, and when
the cabinets crack, we are the first
to scuttle, radiating separately
back to Geneva, Bonn, Washington, London.²²⁴

The surreptitious nature of the machinations which allows the traveller to remain in a position of privilege at the cost of not-so-fortunate others also confirms that his subjectivity bears subtle undertones of Walcott's own retrospective sense of guilt at having abandoned 'home' and having settled at Boston where he now held a reasonably prestigious teaching position, and where he went on to receive a Macarthur Foundation fellowship. The identification with the quester figure is here carried out to initiate a series of tactical inversions that complicate any simplistic paring of opposites: victimiser/victim and coloniser/colonised. If, for example, we consider the nameless speaker of the poem as a man from the South who betrays his own people, then the rigorous ethical self-interrogation Walcott subjects the reader of the poem to, along with himself, is also not free of retrospective irony. Walcott, by virtue of being a voluntarily exiled expatriate poet and dramatist relocating to a privileged neoliberal centre of the North (Boston), presumably attests for the inevitable self-lacerating guilt of having

²²³ Paula Burnett, "Appropriating Heirlooms: *The Fortunate Traveller's* Intertext," in *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, 177.

²²⁴ Walcott, "The Fortunate Traveller," in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 458.

taken the easy way out, of having been a deserter who could not remain true to his erstwhile position of commitment to the Caribbean. If, on the other hand, we read the protagonist as British (the clues to which may indeed be within the image of a receding 'England' to which the narrator bids adieu after betraying the group he was supposed to meet at Bristol to finalise the 'agreement'), the poem will effect reasonable self-distancing of the protagonist from Walcott's own subjectivity, and will serve merely as an allegorical re-telling of the quest narrative vis-à-vis a Conradesque foray into the nature of human greed and selfishness. However, I believe the cues regarding the matrix of cultural belonging inhabited by the nameless protagonist can be found in the last two sections of the poem, and it is therefore, my intent to point out that this quester figure owes much to the affective significance of Walcott's physical distancing from the Caribbean.

The intertextual dimensions of the poem have been commented at length by Breslin and Burnett, both of whom have detected the poem's engagement with one of the founding fables of colonialist fiction, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.²²⁵ Its broad mirroring of the structure of Conrad's tale, that of the protagonist setting off "on a (neo)colonial journey to the tropics"²²⁶ is worked out to a fitting finale at the protagonist's inverted vision that sees Europe, and not Africa, as in Conrad) as a chamber of horrors, the primordial 'heart of darkness': "the core of fire/in the white center of the holocaust"²²⁷. Yet, in his purported rejection of the model of godless technological Progress that is responsible for the indifference and gross violation of human rights in the Holocaust, Walcott's own claims to integrity stand also partially compromised, as he too, like the nameless protagonist, finds himself susceptible to similar forces of isolationist supremacy, built on a cold and rational post-Nietzschean temperament that pronounces the death of God. "The backward tribes" who are keeping "vigil of His Body" in "blissful ignorance" come from a multicultural society of , Catholic, Hindu, as well as several other kinds of animist faith, lighting "deya, lampion and *this* bedside

²²⁵ See Breslin, "Derek *Sans Terre*: The Poetry of the 1980s," in *Nobody's Nation*, 220-21 and Burnett, , "Appropriating Heirlooms: *The Fortunate Traveller's* Intertext," in *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, 180-84.

²²⁶ Burnett, , "Appropriating Heirlooms: *The Fortunate Traveller's* Intertext," in *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, 180

²²⁷ Walcott, "The Fortunate Traveller," in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 461.

lamp”²²⁸. This connection to the immediate circumstances of the narrator makes him one among the “backward tribes” who become “compassionate fodder for the travel book”²²⁹. Like Walcott thus, we may well situate the traveller as a man hailing from the South, but also as a man who makes a South-North-South journey, ending up being complicit with the unjust neoliberal world order. Much like Walcott himself, the traveller also carries out his surreptitious dealings out of his own volition, marking the ending of the poem as replete with ironic import as he has to play a cat-and-mouse game with his pursuers whom he betrays. Thus, despite being a Southerner, he finds himself locked up in a hotel room like a tourist, in a desperate attempt to evade the people he betrayed. Walcott’s use of verses from Revelation 6.6. also foresees the use of apocalyptic images in the concluding lines of the poem:

In loaves of cloud, *and have not charity*,
the weevil will make a sahara of Kansas,
the ant shall eat Russia.
Their soft teeth shall make, *and have not charity*,
the harvest's desolation,
and the brown globe crack like a begging bowl,
and though you fire oceans of surplus grain,
and have not charity. ²³⁰

The italicised refrain is an ironic reformulation of a key phrase we encounter in Paul’s renowned letter to the Corinthians where the former emphasizes upon the power of charity in relation to, and above all other things, such as prophetic knowledge of the World. Burnett, for example, sees the use of Paul’s exhortation to charity “as part of its [the poem’s] figuring of the opposition to justice and mercy and thwarts its movement toward vengeance with an assertion of its antithesis, love”²³¹. The other major intertext used is John’s revelation (quoted in the epigraph) as he hears a voice telling him the inevitable tribulations of the apocalypse where only a quarter of wheat and three quarters of barley could be had in exchange for a day’s wages. The narrator foresees such an outcome, where God’s judgement would exact vengeful retribution for the wrongs and refuse outright any

²²⁸ Ibid. 462.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid. 463.

²³¹ Burnett, , “Appropriating Heirlooms: *The Fortunate Traveller’s* Intertext,” in *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, 463.

charity. In John's vision of Jesus the Lamb opening the seals of the six scrolls, the first four unleash four horsemen, symbolising war, famine, death and a world leader. The fifth scroll uncovers the prayers of martyrs crying out to God to avenge their deaths, while the sixth unleashes natural calamities. In the context of the poem and the biographical events in Walcott's life at this point of time, it is particularly justified to see that the guilt associated with his voluntary exile allows him to consider himself as part of the problems of global economic exploitation which may lead humanity to famine and starvation in the near-foreseeable future, of which the patient grasshopper and the "leather-helmed locust"²³² become arbiters.

The first few poems in the section 'North' of *The Fortunate Traveller* continue Walcott's exploration of the city of Manhattan, New York carried out through his imaginative journeys through 'unarguable' and 'clear' images that make him suppose, at least in the first poems of this section, that he is "falling in love with America", and that he must make a conscious effort to master "her language". In fact, as one reads this particular poem, one gets the impression that his rite of initiation into a language, society and cultural matrix he has not inherited at birth will indeed be an effortless and smooth one:

I will knock at the widowed door
of one of these villages
where she will admit me like a broad meadow,
like a blue space between mountains.²³³

Walcott compares this effortless transition to the warmth of a "homecoming". 'Piano Practice' begins with Walcott strolling through the streets of Manhattan, with its Metropolitan Museum and using the diverse sights and sounds towards an imaginative detour that allows him to see beyond the present, retrospectively into Paris of the turn of the century. The poetic persona is actively engaged in forming a collage of images, drawn from his imagination and all that he sees before him, "the epistolary pathos, the old Laforguean ache"²³⁴. Walcott again draws similarities between his own dislocation from the Caribbean with the death

²³² Walcott, "The Fortunate Traveller," in *Collected Poems:1948-84*, 463.

²³³ Walcott, "Upstate," in *Collected Poems:1948-84*, 402.

²³⁴ Walcott, "Piano Practice," in *Collected Poems:1948-84*, 403.

of the expatriate Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo in Paris in 1938. Walcott specifically alludes to Vallejo's poem 'Black Stone Lying on a White Stone' where the former had foreseen his death, predicting, albeit mistakenly, that it would be Thursday. Although Walcott persists in drawing a series of correspondences between Vallejo's fate and that of his own, as well as Paris of the early decades of the twentieth century and Manhattan of the poem's present, by the end of the poem, he is content to admit the limitations of imaginative travel. The sense of his distance from the 'South', his home, is further consolidated through the familiar sound of a Trinidadian instrument, "the steel tenor pan", which confirms, as Edward Baugh has pertinently pointed out, "the living presence of home in exile, and new artistic possibilities in the meeting of North and South"²³⁵.

'North and South' appears to be the most sustained engagement Walcott makes with the exilic theme in this book. Finding himself away from home, Walcott's poetic persona acknowledges this distancing, dwelling often on the idea of transience as an enduring feature of his being:

I accept my function
as a colonial upstart at the end of an empire,
a single, circling, homeless satellite.²³⁶

Walcott listens to the teeming millions withdrawing "from the raj,/ from the Reich"²³⁷, the centres of global power that are broadly aligned with the 'North' (both the United States and Europe), and those that forced colonisation on the rest of the human race. The afternoon setting prompts Walcott to muse upon the setting sun of Empire and "to hear the worm/ gnawing their solemn columns into coral"²³⁸ as was the fate of lost or destroyed ancient cities and empires such as Atlantis, Sidon, Tyre and Alexandria. In a tone replete with verbal irony, Walcott seems to predict similar desolation awaiting the city of Manhattan, the crusting ice on whose streets makes it appear as if the city was "sown with salt"²³⁹ like Carthage at the hands of the Romans to symbolise a curse on the city and to prevent its re-

²³⁵ Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 155.

²³⁶ Walcott, "North and South," in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 405.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ *Ibid.* 405-06.

inhabitation. As he notices an “obeah priestess” sprinkling flour on the doorstep to ward off evil, the harsh Manhattan winter seems to form rime on the lips of “a shivering exile from his African province”²⁴⁰. What strikes one here is the double sense of the word ‘rime’, suggestively inserted in this context to mean the hoar frost that crystallises upon objects by rapid freezing of water droplets, as well as the archaic spelling of the word ‘rhyme’, meaning poetry. In other words, Walcott’s part-African poetic persona also partakes of this “shivering exile” through the act of poetic articulation and enunciation.

As the poem progresses, Walcott further elaborates on the experience this ‘exile’ by re-imagining ‘death through personification, “an exile farther than any country”²⁴¹. As one may expect, this exile triggers in him the pangs of remembrance, of warm seas and palings by the doddering/ banana fences”²⁴², the “red iron market” with its patois “brittle as slate”, as he pits the “salt freshness” of his “raw” culture against the backdrop of the “cooked” culture of the North²⁴³. In his essay on the nature of intellectual exile, Said argues for a similar function of remembrance characteristic of the exile’s “median state”:

The fact is that for most exiles the difficulty consists not simply in being forced to live away from home, but rather, given today's world, in living with the many reminders that you are in exile, that your home is not in fact so far away, and that the normal traffic of everyday contemporary life keeps you in constant but tantalizing and unfulfilled touch with the old place.²⁴⁴

It is through an imagination richly nurtured by literature, “an old couch stuffed with fleas, /of culture stuffed in the taxidermist's hides”²⁴⁵ that Walcott attempts to enter the subjectivity of his Other, the global ‘North’ here represented by a (European) consul, to allow the (Western) reader an intuitive peek at the affective significance of his own ‘exile’ in Manhattan. In trying to reach out to the ‘North’, Walcott, a

²⁴⁰ Ibid. 406.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid. 407.

²⁴⁴ Edward W. Said, “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals”, *Grand Street* 47 (Autumn, 1993), 114.

²⁴⁵ Walcott, “North and South,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 407.

voice from the South, traverses the space of centuries to try to unravel probable aspects of the Consul's life:

...doing out his service in the African provinces,
who wrote letters like this one home and feared malaria
as I mistrust the dark snow, who saw the lances of rain
marching like a Roman legion over the fens.²⁴⁶

The subtext that underlines the poem is that of the Holocaust, an event Walcott considered pivotal to the discourse of History, marking its climactic apotheosis. Walcott identifies the cold rationality and the callous shrugging off of responsibility in such event:

...there is a faceless clerk who does what he does, and that guy is
working for History, that's his boss. He's not working for Stalin,
he's not working for Hitler, he's working for will, the will that
has to be performed, that has to be observed. So nobody's
responsible.²⁴⁷

In this particular poem, images of such cold and calculative violence are wrought into the order of nature itself, as white smoke from the chimneys of a brick-factory flows through "skeletal lindens", a dog "churns up a pyre of blood-rusted leaves" and a van delivers "from the ovens loaves/ as warm as flesh"²⁴⁸. Victims of similar forces of history, Walcott sees his own race being subject to this same "galloping hysterical abhorrence"²⁴⁹ which brought about the mass killings of Jews. He even goes as far as to speculate "maybe we are part Jewish", feeling an empathetic affinity with all those races that were victims of racist ideologies, "to be yet another of the races they fear and hate/ instead of one of the haters and the afraid"²⁵⁰. And sure enough, the visible spectacle of his coloured skin becomes tantamount to his otherness: as he proceeds to collect loose change at a pharmacy, "the cashier's fingertips still wince from my hand/ as if it would singe hers"²⁵¹. This overt expression of racism however, doesn't surprise him. Instead, with a deeply

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Walcott, quoted in Breslin, "Derek Sans Terre: The Poetry of the 1980s," in *Nobody's Nation*, 220.

²⁴⁸ Walcott, "North and South," in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 408.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid. 409.

ironic shrug, Walcott plays on the verbal assonance between the verb ‘singé’ (to burn) in English and the noun ‘singe’ (monkey) in French—using the French phrase “*je suis un singe*” (“I am a monkey”), declaring himself part of “that tribe of frenetic or melancholy/primates”²⁵², the mongrelised and supposedly childlike Afro-Caribbean subject who is known to the ‘North’ for the exotic otherness of his carnivalesque music. Thus even though an affective identification with the problems of the Other is attempted in the poem, Walcott also becomes painfully aware that the favour will never be returned, that his exilic isolation in Manhattan will be subject to the same forces of historical exclusion and iniquity that culminated in the Holocaust.

An interesting treatment of the exilic theme is attempted in “The Hotel Normandie Pool” which serves to defamiliarize the more accepted connotations of the condition of exile as merely a physical distancing from one’s idea of ‘home’. The poem is set on the morning of New Year’s Day where Walcott—in an ironic manoeuvre of ‘return’—begins to work on a poem in the lobby of a hotel in Normandie, Port of Spain, musing on his separation and divorce with his second wife and family²⁵³. This defamiliarisation is all the more significant, because the poem is set in ‘home’, Walcott’s native ‘South’. The first analogy drawn between the narrator of the poem compares him to a Russian prince who returns home “to watch the soundless waltzers dart and swivel/ like fishes in their lamplit aquarium”²⁵⁴. Surrounded thus by the troupe of musicians and dancers, Walcott is transported to a different plane of consciousness whereby he sees the waters of the pool widen between himself and these spectral shapes, “while a battalion of drunk married men/ reswore their vows”²⁵⁵. It is this last quoted phrase which first alerts us to the problem of marital discord in the poem, and foreshadows its comparison to the exilic experience. Walcott offers a prayer directed at his own *daimon* as a poet, to not allow his craft shroud his subjectivity, even as he embarks upon a textual journey of self-reflection. The analogical allusion to Narcissus is thus

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Walcott, “The Hotel Normandie Pool,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 439.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. 440.

advanced, where the page on which the poem is about to be composed becomes the passage through which such self-scrutiny becomes possible:

The prayer is brief: That the transparent wrist
would not cloud surfaces with my own shadow,
and that this page's surface would unmist
after my breath as pools and mirrors do.²⁵⁶

As in the Ovidian treatment of the crisis Narcissus undergoes when he gazes at his reflection in the mirror-like surface of the pool, Walcott appears to be riven between his desire for self-knowledge through his coming face to face with an 'other', which is also a reflection of a past self. Through this revelatory vision, Walcott seems to plunge into a journey of self-discovery and scrutiny where he encounters "[t]ransparent absences"²⁵⁷ from his second marriage: a vision of his children Peter, Anna and Elizabeth, with their mother Margaret (Maillard). Nevertheless, this act of delving down proves to be too taxing for him and he soon flinches away from the reflected image, concluding that "at fifty I have learnt that beyond words/ is the disfiguring exile of divorce"²⁵⁸. As Gur Zak has concluded, Narcissus' self-knowledge is ambiguous and a double-edged sword precisely because,

The self that knows himself through the reflection is thus by necessity both present to and absent from himself, never fully one or the other. Hence, as long as the source of self-awareness is also that which alienates and separates, Narcissus cannot escape the feeling of constant frustration, of inner division and exile.²⁵⁹

One has to remember however, that although Walcott does indeed use the word 'exile', he does so by specifically divesting the word of its political baggage. Instead, 'exile' becomes an indicator of isolation and alienation from a past life of happy conjugality and togetherness. As the poem proceeds to its second part, Walcott encounters a white male tourist in sandals, who "with Roman

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 441.

²⁵⁹ Gur Zak, "A Humanist in Exile: Ovid's Myth of Narcissus and the Experience of Self in Petrarch's Secretum," in *Metamorphosis: The Changing Face of Ovid in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Alison Keith and Stephen Rupp (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2007), 184.

graveness buries his room key”²⁶⁰, and becomes the modern embodiment of Ovid in exile at Tomis near the Black Sea, the “metonym for artistic exile”²⁶¹. This appearance of Ovid, reincarnated prompts Walcott to see the faint “mineral glint” of a “distant tongue” forming in his brain, even as he finds himself asking “*Quis te misit, Magister?*”²⁶² (“Who sent you, Master?”). Ovid’s visit seems to foreground the theme of constancy-in-transformation; although the world has changed considerably since the former’s time, the same “light that swept Rome’s squares and palaces... now splashes a palm’s shadow at your foot”²⁶³. The binary opposition already advanced between ‘North’ and ‘South’ thus finds an ancient parallel in the relationship between centre and periphery; between civilised Rome and savage Samaria. Walcott finds that the “emerald sands” of his South are littered with waste from “every tin-shacked Rome” and that “corruption, censorship and arrogance/ make exile seem a happier thought than home”²⁶⁴. He compares his own circumstances of self-imposed exile, occasioned by unsympathetic, and often indifferent conditions of survival of the Caribbean artist, to that of Ovid’s, identifying his own indeterminate position as one forever “in and out of the imperial shade”, displaying “the fickle dyes of the chameleon”²⁶⁵. This indeterminacy consists in Ovid’s moving “between the flatterer and the fool”, having been witness to the faces of “negro Neros and chalk Caligulas”²⁶⁶. Taking upon himself the mantle of his old master, Walcott laments the present state of his beloved ‘home’, divided into various conflicting allegiances and united only in their common suspicion of hyphenated figures such as himself.

Ovid however, seems to admit that while initially his exile was constructed upon an absence of all that meant ‘home’ and Roman to him, with time, it was his projections of this very absence, which he calls ‘reflections’, that turned out to be “stronger than their origin”²⁶⁷. The absence of his native ‘tongue’ was merged with a strong desire to accommodate himself in the alien landscape at Tomis

²⁶⁰ Walcott, “The Hotel Normandie Pool,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 441.

²⁶¹ John Thieme, *Derek Walcott* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 166.

²⁶² Walcott, “The Hotel Normandie Pool,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 442.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 444.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 443

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

as he gradually learnt that “desire is stronger than its disease”²⁶⁸. In using Ovid’s Black Sea exile as a means to understanding his own ambiguous position as a transient figure lodged in a hotel while residing at ‘home’, Walcott understands that like the master, he would be mocked alike by ‘Romans’ and ‘slaves’. Yet, the larger point he makes has to do with the poet’s peregrinations in the ordeal of writing when faced with unrewarding circumstances:

...what this pool recites is not a phrase
from an invisible, exiled laureate,
where there's no laurel, but the scant applause
of one dry, scraping palm tree...²⁶⁹

In his admission that it is the poet’s job to refuse to tell the “hardening lie in the face”, Walcott is also admitting, with Ovid acting as a validator that the “tyrannous”²⁷⁰ solitude affecting the poet is all-pervasive, since ‘exile’ seems to be a condition that is perennial; and that to cope with this alienation a poet must attend, first and foremost to his craft. As Paul Mariani comments:

The final government for the exile, then, Ovid reminds Walcott, must remain the government of the word. It is enough to try and keep the attention riveted to the page before you, the master exhorts the poet who would ride his Pegasus. For in the final count all poets are by nature exiles.²⁷¹

2.7. Exile and Transcultural Affinities: *Midsummer* (1984) and the ‘Italian Eclogues’ from *The Bounty* (1997)

The rhetorical tropes of travel, displacement and imaginatively seeking transcultural poetic correspondences fill up Walcott’s 1984 collection, *Midsummer*(1984). Critics such as Edward Baugh²⁷², Patricia Ismond²⁷³ and Paul

²⁶⁸ Ibid. 444.

²⁶⁹ Ibid. 445.

²⁷⁰ Ibid. 444.

²⁷¹ Paul Mariani, “Summoning the Dead: Politics and the Sublime in Contemporary English Poetry”,

New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly 7, No. 3 (Spring, 1985), 313.

²⁷² See Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 166- 175.

²⁷³ See Patricia Ismond, “North and South — A Look at Walcott’s *Midsummer*”, *Kunapipi*, 8 no. 2 (1986), <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol8/iss2/14> (accessed June 14, 2020).

Breslin²⁷⁴ have all written chapter-length or smaller commentaries on it. Yet, what remains relatively less addressed in their work is the fact that apart from addressing Walcott's own evaluation of himself as a "traveller" or a "transient", they have paid little heed to the decidedly exilic subtext in this volume where Walcott continues an ongoing poetic dialogue with fellow poet and friend, Joseph Brodsky. Indeed as one may see when a few poems are examined, the transcultural poetic correspondence initiated in 'Forest of Europe' is renewed in *Midsummer*, the reasons for which may possibly be accounted for in the growing friendship which developed between Walcott, Brodsky and Seamus Heaney during the early 1980s around Boston. Walcott had first met Brodsky as early as 1977, at Robert Lowell's funeral. The reminiscences of Seamus Heaney about this growing friendship is quoted in Hilton Als' profile of Walcott:

Derek's apartment in Brookline turned into a kind of time machine ... It was like being back in your first clique as a young poet ... with all your original greed for the goods and the gossip of poetry instantly refreshed. Poems being quoted and poets being praised or faulted, extravagantly; anecdotes exchanged; jokes told; but underneath all the banter and hilarity there was a prospector's appetite in each of us for the next poem we ourselves might write. We were high on each other's company and that kept the critical standard-setter alive and well in each of us. ²⁷⁵

Walcott's *Midsummer* begins by tritely acknowledging these transcultural poetic correspondences between Walcott and Brodsky, who is addressed in the opening poem itself during the course of a flight where through a "hole in their parchment", Walcott observes the sunlight that "...is shared by Rome/and your white paper, Joseph. Here, as everywhere else"²⁷⁶. The burden of negative representations of the Caribbean offered by "the traveller Trollope, and the fellow traveller Froude"²⁷⁷ is once again, counter-negated through an assertion of shared "cosmopolitan correspondences, dismantling and reassembling places,

²⁷⁴ See Paul Breslin, "'Derek Sans Terre: The Poetry of the 1980s", in *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001, 189-214.

²⁷⁵ Seamus Heaney, quoted in Hilton Als, "The Islander", *The New Yorker*, February 2, 2004, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/02/09/the-islander> (accessed June 15 2020).

²⁷⁶ Walcott, "Midsummer I," in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013* selected by Glyn Maxwell, Kindle edition, 280.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

playing off one native dialect against another”.²⁷⁸ Walcott deliberates at length on the ‘world-as-a-book’ metaphor in the poem, likening the ‘cultivated’ metrics of his own lines to “canefields set in stanzas”²⁷⁹. The poem concludes with a feeling rushing in all of a sudden, “this shelving sense of home” at the imagined sight of “canes rushing the wing, a fence”²⁸⁰. The second poem again addresses Brodsky as a fellow “[c]ompanion in Rome, whom Rome makes as old as Rome”²⁸¹. It is thought-provoking to see Walcott imagining the trials of Brodsky through the lens of another figure of exile from the Biblical Canon, as a “young St. Jerome/ with his rock vault”²⁸². Walcott seems to underline a discrepancy between the “tonsured” exiled poet’s plight at any given moment in history, and the future fate of his muttered line that “your exiled country shall soon learn by heart”²⁸³. Yet again, what strikes us is the transfer of the epithet “exiled” from the poet to his country; Walcott seems to invert the dynamics of claiming agency by prioritising the dissenting vision of the poets in general, and Brodsky in particular, in their role as visionaries capable of looking into the future. He goes on to allude to Brodsky’s ‘Roman Elegies’—a sequence of twelve numbered poems first published in English in 1982²⁸⁴—which “the honey of time will riddle like those of Ovid”²⁸⁵. Walcott seems to locate his own position in this ongoing dialogue with fellow poets who partake of the exilic experience.

Unlike *The Fortunate Traveller*, the structure of *Midsummer* does not group poems into different sections. Instead, what is hinted at is the relatively unchanging trope of midsummer itself, accounting more for sameness over difference across the global ‘North’ and ‘South’. As Ismond has so effectively demonstrated, walking amidst the throngs of poor vendors, hustlers, “floating seraphic Muslims” in the metropolitan ghettos of New York and Port of Spain, he reflects on the extent to which the older world orders of power of the nineteenth

²⁷⁸ Terry Eagleton, ‘Plenty of Life’, review of *Midsummer*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 November 1984, 1290.

²⁷⁹ Walcott, “Midsummer I,” in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013*, 280.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁸¹ Walcott, “Midsummer II”, in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013*, 281.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ Brodsky’s “Roman Elegies” sequence

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

century find the means to continue and spill over to the twentieth.²⁸⁶ Wandering across the streets of Belmont, Port of Spain, he notices “mournful tailors peer over old machines/ Stitching June and July seamlessly”, with its “ordinariness” also accounting for its “terror”²⁸⁷. The never-ending hope of emancipation that “fills its exiles with horror”²⁸⁸ persists also in his evaluation of the Trinidadian Black Power movement and the Cuban revolution in this volume. Even while he finds himself back in Trinidad, the disconcerting “barks of a revolution crying wolf”²⁸⁹ make it difficult for him to consider it as “home”—instead, what he experiences here are the contrary pulls of a “burdensome love” he feels for the island and the pointed distaste for “local” terror at the same time. However, this conflicted attachment draws him closer to “Borges’ blind love for Buenos Aires” with the memory its particular streets swelling in his hand.

What Walcott manages to rehearse through this conflicted attachment to “home” is the impossibility of an essential return. Since all homecomings are subject not just to bridging spatial distance, but also the irreparable nature of a temporal elapsing, he can only hope to recapture a “childhood whose vines fasten [your] foot”²⁹⁰. Walcott continues this technique of obliquely inserting a trail of clues directed at Brodsky which draw our attention to issues of perpetual wandering and proclaiming a common ancestry of vagrancy: “this is the lot of all wanderers, this is their fate/ that the more they wander, the more the world grows wide”²⁹¹. Yet, importantly, this is a fellowship between poets, each conscious of and sensitive to, another’s trials and tribulations at the tyranny of dictatorial regimes. Two other fellow exiled poet-dissidents are mentioned in this context, the first Tomas Venclova the Lithuanian poet and one of the founders of the dissident ‘Lithuanian Helsinki Group’, close friend and associate of Brodsky, while the second is Heberto Padilla, the Cuban poet, someone closer to Walcott’s own context, imprisoned in 1971 for deviating from the Cuban government’s stated line of communist praxis. The Brodsky-Venclova/ Walcott-Padilla pairings in this particular instance of

²⁸⁶ See Patricia Ismond, “North and South — A Look at Walcott’s *Midsummer*”, *Kunapipi*, 8 no. 2 (1986), 79, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol8/iss2/14> (accessed June 14, 2020).

²⁸⁷ Walcott, “VI,” in *Midsummer* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984), 8.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ Walcott, “VIII,” in *Midsummer*, 9.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

poetic articulation has significance. They draw our attention to Walcott's careful consideration of his desire of exilic self-projection as something different from the hardships and tribulations of banishment that Venclova or Padilla underwent. Even though Brodsky did undergo both internal and political exile, here he is likened more to Walcott rather than the other two, ostensibly because Walcott's own subjective experience of exile has served more as an enabling one, where solitude, estrangement and inward looking self-reflexivity serve as strategic devices to enable poetic contemplation, and because Brodsky's reading of the exilic condition as a 'metaphysical' one partly resonated with his own. What Walcott discovers in the course of these reflections is a means to link the isolation of the individual consciousness of the exiled poet and the spectre of subjectively understood exilic loss. Karen Elizabeth Bishop reads in these lines a cartographic imperative which accompanies Walcott's exilic subjectivity in *Midsummer*, commenting:

...in thinking of other exiles, Walcott advances a fundamental ethics to the experience of exile: that even as it is lived by one alone, even as we each alone feel the weight of its loss, even if in the complicated splintering of its diverse contemporary incarnations our experiences of it are vastly different, being displaced in the world is a condition shared by many. The cartographies of exile are landscapes navigated by many and projects undertaken by many. And the cartographic imperative proper to exile provides for a means of projecting outward the solitude, confusion, and longing that displacement so often breeds. It gestures toward the collective so that the cartographical necessity of exile is also an ethical compulsion, a reaching out into the world in order to build the shared space of the world around us.²⁹²

It is the precise distance from the Caribbean that is communicated through images of its "absence". In keeping with the tradition of 'landscape poetry' that Walcott modelled his poems upon, the island of St. Thomas (one of the U.S. Virgin Islands) is depicted through a stark contrast with the Caribbean islands. Unlike the latter, the former deliberately separates the order of the 'elemental' from that of 'civilisation' by means of a metaphoric "chain link fence"²⁹³. The natural world in St. Thomas is represented through cleverly crafted images of

²⁹² Karen Elizabeth Bishop, "The Cartographical Ethics of Exile," in *Cartographies of Exile: A New Spatial Literacy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 249.

²⁹³ Walcott, "XXVII," in *Midsummer*, 26.

mechanisation and industrialisation—the image of an “early pelican” flying only seems to echo an aircraft “with its engine off” and the “sea’s corrugations are sheets of zinc/ soldered by the sun’s steady acetylene”²⁹⁴. By heightening his sense of isolation amidst things in St. Thomas that are “quietly American”, Walcott decidedly points towards an enduring rupture that separates and hierarchically arranges two different world orders related to each other through globalised neo-colonial networks of veiled domination and subjugation. Tourism and recreational sports thus become the two major industries through which neo-colonial exploitation is perpetuated. The privileged tourists at St. Thomas live in villas that “fence-off” beaches “where the natives walk”²⁹⁵. In an ironic gesture which cannot but include himself in his fold, he observes how these “illegal immigrants from unlucky islands” are envious of the “smallest polyp” for its “right to work”. The supposedly ‘natural’ world retreats to a more domesticated garden-variety where “the wetback crab and the mollusc are citizens,/ and the leaves have green cards”²⁹⁶. Under the steady drizzle of an “American rain”, Walcott is acutely aware of the pitfalls of his position as an expatriate poet performing his isolation, admitting that his “own corpuscles/ are changing that fast”²⁹⁷. He has, by this time, already acclimatised himself to straddling two different cultures, but now seems particularly apprehensive about prioritising his ‘adopted’ one over the ‘native’. It is this anxiety which seems to distinguish Walcott from the ordinary ‘migrant’, but when faced with a similar reality as the latter, that of “the fealty changing”, it has profound consequences for the exilic experience Walcott may be understood to have undergone. In fact, it would be fitting to consider the conclusion of the poem as imaginatively setting up a moment of imaginative return “home”, but only through the actual lack of it. The poem thus prepares us for a different kind of ‘homing’ that will be apparent in the final poem of the collection, one where any kind of spatio-temporal distancing from the poet’s perceived idea of ‘home’ has to be embraced as an inevitability.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

If “exiles must make their own maps”²⁹⁸, as Walcott claims, all exiled poets can be surmised to engender their own subjective cartographies through memory and loss. Similar tendencies are confirmed in the next poem, as the poet ruminates upon a younger version of himself, who, he hopes, must have seen what he himself can see, the figure of the poet as an “enduring ruin”²⁹⁹ in his growing isolation. Nevertheless, even though the solitude of the exilic experience is emphasized in the early poems of *Midsummer*, it is measured against the backdrop of a “transcendental Boston” which becomes “the city of my exile” that the poet, ironically, has to ‘return’ to³⁰⁰. The ‘cartographic imperative’ that Bishop identifies in the earlier instance is developed further in the poem in the de-familiarisation Walcott undergoes even as he tries to ‘map’ the world through textual metaphors: the “blocks” of houses he encounters are compared to “paragraphs” that “pass in a style to which I’m not accustomed”³⁰¹. Walcott carefully distances his subjectivity as a black Caribbean man from that of a naturalised American citizen of black skin, stereotypically “costumed/ to drape the cloaks of couples who arrive/ for dinner...”³⁰². As “a fog obscures the Boston Common”, he seems to encounter a figure who could be considered his double, a black coachman “with gloves as white as his white-ankled horse”, a silent witness to the racial tensions and ambiguities counting “their laughter, their lamplit goodnights”, presumably in the form of loose change.³⁰³ This theme continues in the next poem, with its abounding echo of sirens and “some black kids, one bandaged... escorted with drawn baton/ to police cars”³⁰⁴. With the characteristic demeanour of the displaced poet, Walcott realises that the “city of Boston will not change for [your] sake”³⁰⁵. And even though he comes to the disarming realisation that “midsummer is the same thing everywhere”³⁰⁶, he cannot help mistaking “a swash of green-painted roof for the sea”, while his nib can head nowhere else but towards the Caribbean, as a perennial source of creativity.³⁰⁷ The concluding lines of this particular poem likens Homer’s penchant

²⁹⁸ Walcott, “VII,” in *Midsummer*, 9.

²⁹⁹ Walcott, “XIII,” in *Midsummer*, 15.

³⁰⁰ Walcott, “XXX,” in *Midsummer*, 31.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² *Ibid.*

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ Walcott, “XXXII,” in *Midsummer*, 33.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁶ Walcott, “XXXIV,” in *Midsummer*, 35.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

for the “sea’s silence for prologue and epilogue” to his own poetic subjectivity—that of a solitary “pelican rocked on the stern of an empty pirogue...shaking rain from his wings”³⁰⁸. The particular poem is striking in the poet’s claim to understand “a wren’s elsewhere”, a dominion beyond the limits of space and time, “beyond the world ringed in its eye, season and zone”³⁰⁹, a world generated by artistic contemplation that ironically cannot but escape to its foundational mindscapes associated with the memory of island life in St. Lucia. The ethical ground that Walcott hopes to find through this creative exercise is one governed by a sense of “sovereignty”, in the sense George Lamming uses the term, affirming the validity of the Caribbean intellectual’s right to an imaginative return regardless of their present coordinates of space and time:

...whatever location you have, the one thing I want to hold on to, is that acre of ground because you don’t decide that...that acre of ground is that Caribbean wherever I encounter it; it does not matter now whether I find myself in Asia, in Africa, or wherever, it is the window through which I am looking at wherever I am. It is that ground which will never be completed in my excavating of it.³¹⁰

The sense of apparent closure offered at the end of *Midsummer* by addressing Brodsky for a final time fails to mask the distressing unease that marks Walcott’s awareness of growing spatio-temporal distance(s) from the Caribbean (and from his older selves) that could be taken as a measure of his exilic subjectivity. First, it is only because of his now physically distant location in Boston that Walcott feels the need to re-imagine the Antillean landscape through its lack and secondly, it is the increasing temporal distance between the youthful and enthusiastic founder of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in the early 1960s and a mature, partly disillusioned, wily and crafty poet that he matures into by the mid-1980s which becomes unique in his performance of exile.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Walcott, “XXXVII,” in *Midsummer*, 38.

³¹⁰ George Lamming, quoted in Sandra Pouchet Paquet, “The Caribbean Writer as Nomadic Subject or Spatial Mobility and the Dynamics of Critical Thought”, *Journal of West Indian Literature* 18, no. 2, Where is here? Remapping the Caribbean (April 2010), 87.

Therefore, archetypal Caribbean images such as “the midsummer sea, the hot pitch road, this grass”, or “jungle and razor grass shimmering by the roadside” become mapped as internalised mindscapes whereas Walcott, faced with an alien vegetation can only vaguely think of “pines/or conifers of some sort” that are somehow, misplaced in the “tropical heat”³¹¹. By imagining “pines” or “conifers” as having been out of place in this landscape, Walcott touches on the exilic subtext that unites these “Russian” trees, the plight of Brodsky in the United States and his own ‘unaccommodated status’ in the same country. There is a seeming acceptance of the fact that “no man ever dies in his own country”³¹² and further hopes of a “resurrection”(a familiar Ovidian thematic), a movement into a second life that would be comparable to Brodsky’s paradoxical ‘homing’.

I finally propose to turn to ‘Italian Eclogues’, a set of six elegiac poems from Walcott’s 1997 collection *The Bounty* which are dedicated to Brodsky who passed away the previous year. The Eclogues are a further step in mapping Walcott’s metapoetic engagement with exilic subjectivity through a textual triangulation that connects himself and Brodsky to the Ovidian theme of exile and banishment. In composing these poems, Walcott intervenes into a tradition stretching back to Roman origins, from Theocritus to Virgil as well as the exiled Ovid by the Black Sea (here identified as ‘Naso’) with whom Brodsky shared his vocation and banishment, and held steadfast to the sanctity of the poetic Word in the face of political adversity and duress. Ovid is invoked here by means of a tripartite identification between the exiled Ovid’s Italian context, which had metamorphosed in Brodsky’s poems into a lifelong concern and engagement, and which, in turn, becomes a site for Walcott to remember him. The sequence begins on “the bright road to Rome, beyond Mantua”³¹³, a significant setting because it pays homage to Brodsky’s lifelong enchantment with Rome, Venice or more generally, the Italian contexts in his poems. Walcott uses motifs of ruin to locate “perspectives of noseless busts,/open-mouthed ruins and roofless corridors”, amid which he hears Brodsky’s voice rustle “out of the reeds”. The deeply affective bond shared between these two poets hints at a shared sense of linguistic kinship, where

³¹¹ Walcott, “LIV,” in *Midsummer*, 62.

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ Walcott, “Italian Eclogues I,” in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013*, Kindle edition, 384.

“poetry is still treason/because it is truth”. Brodsky’s untimely demise ultimately occasions Walcott’s elegies, where he imagines Brodsky’s soul “encircling the coiled water of Venice/ like a slate pigeon”, and later goes on to describe the ‘shade’ of his now-deceased friend “stands at the end of perspective, waiting...”³¹⁴

The third poem in this sequence is particularly significant, owing to Walcott’s much discussed “painterly” affects” and in being motivated by a topographical imperative that connects the Italian landscape to the world of Brodsky’s poems. Walcott seems to foreground a ‘space’ engendered by poetic language which can be realised only in moments of acute poetic foresight:

the slow northern anthem
of fog, the country without borders, clouds whose shapes
change angrily when we begin to associate them
with substantial echoes, holes where eternity gapes
in a small blue door.³¹⁵

In tracing this “distant geography”, Walcott need only turn to Brodsky’s manoeuvres of language, for in Brodsky’s conception of the poetic vocation, a “poet’s biography is in his vowels and sibilants, in his metres, rhymes and metaphors”³¹⁶. The poem also alludes to Brodsky’s liminal identity as an émigré poet surviving on the fringes, “happier/ with the cold and uncertain edges”³¹⁷. Brodsky’s condition of exile is thus divested, in Walcott’s language, of its particular geo-political context, and transmuted into a metaphysical and existential condition, where the figure of the poet finds himself always and already ‘exiled’ in a timeless and transcendental realm woven by poetic language. It is this “universal rank smell of poetry” that unites Brodsky’s lifelong advocacy of the poetic vocation with Walcott’s, who makes prose “the squire of conduct, poetry the knight/who leans into the flaming dragon with a pen’s lance”³¹⁸. Brodsky’s “conduct” with language, his stoic meter and poise “was modelled upon Wystan”, and his works are compared to the bust of “a minor Caesar preferring a province of distance/to the

³¹⁴ Walcott, ‘Italian Eclogues II,’ in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013*, 385.

³¹⁵ Walcott, “Italian Eclogues III,” in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013*, 385

³¹⁶ Joseph Brodsky, “The Sound of the Tide,” in *Less than One* (New York: GFarrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 164.

³¹⁷ Walcott, “Italian Eclogues III,” in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013*, 385.

³¹⁸ Walcott, ‘Italian Eclogues V,’ in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013*, 386.

roar of arenas”³¹⁹. Walcott, as yet another member of this “common tributary of emigrants” united by their commitment to language and the poetic creed visualises himself as a guiding spirit for Brodsky’s soul:

an eagle bearing you towards Russia,
holding in my claws the acorn of your heart that restores
you past the Black Sea of Publius Naso
to the roots of a beech-tree.³²⁰

The Dantean undertones of the quoted section have been pointed out by Maria Cristina Fumagalli who reads it as part of Walcott’s motivation to cast “the late Russian poet as a sort of Virgil”³²¹, while he himself plays the part of Dante. If we were to further develop this analogy, this metaphoric journey becomes a joint venture embedded in the act of poetic composition. In the fourth poem of the sequence, for example, Walcott compares each new act of composition to the notion of the same expedition attempted over and over again, casting, as it were the “old net” of poetic utterance into the seemingly infinite richness of the “sea” of language. Brodsky’s poetry appears to Walcott as a sort of literary touchstone, which “transforms reader into poet”³²² and offers, even after his demise, an enduring echo through the natural order of the Italian landscape. There is a sustained and well-developed attempt, in this sequence, of a possible comparison between the orders of the textual and the natural world, which manages to nourish the source of poetry even in absence of human activity. The “ornate cyrillics of gesturing fronds”³²³ or “the silent council of cumuli”³²⁴ are the traces of that ever-renewing relationship between the poetic ‘Word’ and the ‘World’ waiting to be represented by it.

While discussing the figure of the narrator in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival*, Walcott decries “a concentrated selfishness...that self-canonization of dedicated writer in a hostile world” as merely another attempt at over-sentimentalisation of one’s plight as an émigré author, “...because either every writer is an exile or no writer is”³²⁵. Yet, as we have observed in the course

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante* (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2001), 50.

³²² Walcott, “Italian Eclogues VI,” in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013*, 388.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Walcott, “The Garden Path: V.S. Naipaul,” in *What the Twilight Says*, 123.

of this chapter, Walcott's verse till the mid-1990s has shown, in its various phases, a succinct engagement with exilic subjectivity. The historical experience of collective exile as a Caribbean poet, the individual experience of estrangement as an English language poet in Trinidad and finally, his voluntary migration to the metropolitan global 'North' are metamorphosed into a poetic awareness in Walcott to think of 'exile' in terms of an alternate landscape, a "distant geography" of trying to forge transcultural affinities that emphasize a common citizenship to poetic language. In Walcott's later volumes such as *The Prodigal* (2004), the idea of exilic being has remained quite potent and foregrounds the condition of transience and of voyaging without end. Yana Meerzon therefore writes, "Walcott's personal trademark of the exilic being" develops when the condition of exile manifests itself as a state of going away, a motion of traveling, which sets up the moment of homecoming but does not bring it any closer"³²⁶. It has been already evident, in the poems we examined, that this performance of an exilic subjectivity is something Walcott has practised consistently throughout his career. Thus, despite the lack of overt political connotations in the sense in which the word 'exile' might apply to Walcott's poetic oeuvre, I have tried to argue that this wilful creative exercise of self-distancing occurs at multiple junctures across Walcott's biography and that together, they constitute Walcott's transformation of the exilic experience as a form of historical handicap to an enabling metaphor of cultivating artistic autonomy and freedom of self-identification.

³²⁶ Yana Meerzon, "Beyond the Postcolonial Dasein: On Derek Walcott's Narratives of History and Exile," in *Performing Exile, Performing Self: Drama, Theatre, Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 123.

Chapter 3

“[T]he tongue of a man who’s departed thence”: The Poetics of Exile, Estrangement, Self-Deprecation and Banishment in Joseph Brotsky

Despite Said’s ardent claim about the nature of exile being a personally debilitating experience which “cannot be made to serve notions of humanism”¹, for Joseph Brodsky, the exilic experience must have manifested itself as more of a continuum than a singular event laden with life-altering consequences. I am, by no means denying the immensity of the affective significance of exile in Brodsky’s life and poetic career, but merely intend to draw attention to the fact that his exile to the United States serves as only a finale to the larger problem of the individual consciousness experiencing confinement in a totalitarian state. The Leningrad-born Russian poet from the U.S.S.R. was infamously tried by the Khrushchev government for his ‘social parasitism’ in 1964 and sentenced to five years of corrective labour in internal exile at Norenskaiya in the Archangelsk region. Brodsky returned to Leningrad in 1965, and lived there for seven years before he was permanently banished from his country in 1972 by the Brezhnev government and was never allowed to return. Brodsky re-settled in the United States through the efforts of his friends Carl Proffer and W.H. Auden and went on receive several prestigious offers for teaching at the universities of Columbia and Michigan, before he became the Andrew Mellon Professor of Literature and the Five College at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Both biographical events of Brodsky’s internal and external exile affected his poetics profoundly and conditioned his gradual drift from writing solely in Russian to writing poetry and essays in both Russian and English.

The bare outlines of Brodsky’s career are suggestive of his role as a poet-dissident, who found himself faced with an “archetypal predicament”—

¹ Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (New York: Granta, 2000), 186.

similar to the experiences of his illustrious precursor and namesake, Osip Mandelstam—that of “a poet versus an empire”². Brodsky’s sincere acts of intellectual probing into the works of his acknowledged twentieth century Russian poetic precursors—Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva and finally, Mandelstam and his Acmeist school—seemed to have adequately prepared him to assume his final role as an ‘émigré poet’ in the Russian tradition, since, as David M. Bethea has claimed, it is from the Acmeist school, most notably Akhmatova and Mandelstam “from whom Brodsky took the central tenet of his *ars poetica*—the poetic word as Christian logos”³. In fact, in a later chapter Bethea goes so far as to state that

Brodsky’s deployment of classical motifs is “Mandelstamian” in the sense that what is at issue is not their “archaeological” correctness or validity... but the way they speak to the poet and serve as distancing filter for his own concerns.⁴

The phrase “distancing filter” seems laden with a significance that concerns Brodsky’s aesthetics of estrangement and alienation that predates his internal exile to Norenskaiya. These tendencies of self-distancing developed, in Brodsky, into a consciously cultivated withdrawal from ascribing much importance to events in his biography. For example, a particular section from an interview he gave to Michael Scammell in 1972 reveals Brodsky’s rather indifferent demeanour towards events in his biography, and by extension, towards the extent to which they can become instrumental in forming a causal connection between his life and work. On being asked why his poetry had not yet been published within the Soviet Union, Brodsky vaguely replies that his name had “became a sort of taboo”⁵, possibly on account of his having been sent to prison. On being further questioned as to what occasioned his imprisonment, Brodsky is sceptical about the extent to which this line of questioning can hope to reveal a link between his work, existence and events in his biography. He says this is “a typically western approach to the problem: every event has to have a cause and every phenomenon has to have something standing

² Joseph Brodsky, “The Child of Civilization” in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986), 128.

³ David M. Bethea, “A Polemical Introduction,” in *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), 10.

⁴ *Ibid.* 49.

⁵ Michael Scammell, ‘Interview with Iosif Brodsky’, *Index on Censorship* 1, Issue 3-4 (September 1972), 150.

behind it”⁶, whereas his own answer to the problem traverses questions of individual autonomy against the backdrop of a totalitarian society and their connection to the figure of the non-conforming dissenter: “A man who sets out to create his own independent world within himself is bound sooner or later to become a foreign body in society and then he becomes subject to all the physical laws of pressure, compression and extrusion”⁷. To create individualistically motivated alternative orders—existential as well as aesthetic—that nonchalantly refuse to fall in line with official party ideology, is also to perform dissidence, to be “a separate private person”⁸. Brodsky seems to verge on strategies of withdrawal and self-isolation as the interview proceeds, closely bordering on a form of mental severance from his perceived reality under a totalitarian state, and finally going on to state that in his view, his life only “somehow acquired an external political dimension”⁹. Brodsky is also found to be particularly reluctant to credit the two events of internal and external exile in his biography with due formative significance: “I remember rather little of my life and what I do remember is of small consequence”¹⁰, writes Brodsky in his opening eponymous essay of the volume *Less than One*, adding that a “writer's biography is in his twists of language”¹¹. This evasive attitude towards the events of his biography is also projected through minor variations of the previous statement elsewhere in his essays: “A poet’s biography is in his vowels and sibilants, in his meters, rhymes, and metaphors”¹². Nevertheless, in spite of these repeated attempts at de-contextualisation, it can hardly be denied, as Brodsky’s biographer Lev Loseff has claimed, that it was the events of Brodsky’s trial in 1964 and the international support it garnered which were largely responsible for his celebration as a poet-dissident who, despite being “the author of a handful of poems only a handful of people had even read, gradually became a symbol, an archetype—the Poet misunderstood and vilified by an ignorant rabble”¹³. Loseff also notes that the phenomena of his unfair trial and subsequent

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. 151.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Joseph Brodsky, “Less than One” in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986), 1

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Joseph Brodsky, “The Sound of the Tide” in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, 164.

¹³ Lev Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life* trans. Jane Ann Miller (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011), 86.

internal exile seemed to the Western intelligentsia, unfamiliar with the “bleak realities of everyday Soviet life”, to be “a romantic story of a young poet harassed and persecuted by malicious, dim-witted bureaucrats”¹⁴. Brodsky’s internal exile to Norenskaiya and the trial that had preceded it were events replete with Platonic strains of eviction or banishment of poets from the ideal Republic, and having managed to arouse sufficient intellectual attention across the world, it had “a classic ripple effect”¹⁵. Loseff also points out that Brodsky’s trial, the details of which were circulated in *samizdat* copies of a transcript prepared by Frida Vigdorova, was also the occasion for furthering growing disillusionment among left-leaning intellectuals around the world who saw in this event “...that freedom of speech was just as impossible under Khrushchev and his successors as it had been under Stalin”¹⁶.

I propose, in this particular chapter, to offer sustained readings of Brodsky’s poetry in order to properly assess the affective significance that can be ascribed to both his experiences of internal and external exile. The chapter will thus chart the gradual evolution of his poetry from its early days within the intellectual climate of Leningrad poetry through his poetic apprenticeship to Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva and the Acmeists to his near-epiphanic introduction to the ‘Audenesque’, and more generally, the English tradition of the elegy during his internal exile to Norenskaiya, to finally towards a post-exilic phase where his poetry is marked by yearning, retrospection and an impossible desire to return to Russia, an event which never took place, even after the demise of the state that used to be the Soviet Union. In doing so, I shall hope, also, to highlight the transition from the younger Brodsky who wrote exclusively in Russian to a bi-lingual poet writing in both Russian and English, and who translated his own works. Brodsky’s three American era collections of poetry are fraught with the perils of translation, often simultaneously engaged with preserving the essence of the Russian originals, while being at liberty to alter the sequence of their constituent poems in the latter. In other words, as Jamie L. Olson has rightly pointed out, “...his work exists simultaneously in two literary traditions: a Russian tradition and an Anglo-American tradition, with

¹⁴ Ibid. 87

¹⁵ Ibid. 86.

¹⁶ Ibid. 87.

much cross-fertilization between the two”¹⁷. Considering the fact that I have no knowledge of the Russian language and am therefore incapacitated to comprehend his poems in Russian, I have focussed primarily on his English-language works, *A Part of Speech* (1980), *To Urania* (1988) and *So Forth* (1996) in my analysis, relying also on the anthologies of essays he authored in English, *Less than One* (1986) and *On Grief and Reason* (1995), the monograph *Watermark* (1992) and his play *Marbles* (1989) and *Democracy!* (1991) to support my claims. Pertinent to my analysis that attempts to bring out the exilic subjectivity of Brodsky are also those elements in his biography which were responsible for fostering an aesthetics of estrangement, alienation and self-deprecation. These therefore, will serve as valuable threads to connect the various dimensions of exilic subjectivity one might expect to encounter when faced with Brodsky’s oeuvre. In summary therefore, this chapter will hope to address the issues of:

- (a) Brodsky’s marginal position as a dissident Jew in the totalitarian Soviet Russian society in the Brezhnev era, and the consequences of such a position that lead him to cultivate wilful exercises of self-estrangement and alienation which ultimately became an inseparable part of his poetic subjectivity.
- (b) The effectiveness of the exilic space in Norenskaiya in fostering Brodsky’s apprenticeship of the ‘Audenseque’ model of the elegy, which eventually led to the beginnings of his English verse.
- (c) The figurations of “going away” and “return” that occur across the length of Brodsky’s oeuvre, with particular emphasis on exile as banishment and the trope of the *izgoi* (‘outcast’) in his poems.
- (d) Possible correlations, as well as ruptures, between the “literal” nature of exile (the conditions of which are embedded in the political realities of Brodsky’s “totalitarian” socio-political context) and its transcendental, or “metaphysical” essence within Brodsky’s oeuvre. In doing so, I shall also hope to dissect the myth/ phenomenon of Brodsky’s supposedly ‘apolitical’ stance in his poetry and the consequences of such a stance on his exilic subjectivity.

¹⁷ Jamie L. Olson, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and Joseph Brodsky” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. Of Michigan, 2008), 163.

3.1. A Leningrad Yid: Jewishness, Estrangement, Exile and Brodsky's Position in a Totalitarian State

I propose to first underline Brodsky's marginal identity as a Jew (*yevrei*) in Russian society and the role such an identity plays in furthering his alienation and estrangement from the mainstream of Soviet socio-cultural life. Anti-Semitism was very commonplace in Soviet society, with a general atmosphere of distrust and antipathy directed towards the Jewish populace. Brodsky himself admits to his father having been "discharged from the navy in accordance with some seraphic ruling that Jews should not hold substantial military ranks"¹⁸, had a particularly difficult time finding a job. Brodsky's biographer Lev Loseff notes that although "official Soviet ideology defined *natsionalnost* (ethnicity) in fairly liberal terms...actual ethnic policy was based on the same "blood-and-soil" myth as popular prejudice was"¹⁹. One might, for example, probe into Brodsky's own account of the history of the first lie he ever uttered, an incident which serves as a good exemplar of the individualistic philosophical dissidence practised by Brodsky. It took place in a school library where Brodsky had to fill out an application for membership:

The fifth blank was of course "nationality." I was seven years old and knew very well that I was a Jew, but I told the attendant that I didn't know. With dubious glee she suggested that I go home and ask my parents. I never returned to that library, although I did become a member of many others which had the same application forms.²⁰

Even though Brodsky is hesitantly defensive in his rejoinder that "I wasn't ashamed of being a Jew, nor was I scared of admitting it", he eventually admits to the discomfoting realisation that he "was ashamed of the word "Jew" itself—in Russian, "*yevrei*"—regardless of its connotations"²¹. This admission attests to a subtle and unconscious sense of one's supposed inferiority in comparison to others in society, a feeling that was doubtlessly amplified by the

¹⁸ Joseph Brodsky, "Less than One," in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 12.

¹⁹ Lev Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 21.

²⁰ Joseph Brodsky, "Less than One" in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*

word's rarity of occurrence in printed Russian²². He later claims he "felt a lot easier with a Russian equivalent of "kike"—"zhyd" (pronounced like Andre Gide)"²³. Incidentally, Khrushchev in his memoirs, had pointed out that the word "zhyd", much like its American counterpart "Yid" carries the same troubled legacy of being used as a pejorative in Soviet Russia and Ukraine, partly as a result of the long history of Anti-Semitism in both nations, even though the term was merely descriptive in nature in Poland, erstwhile Czechoslovakia and a few other Slavic east-European nations²⁴. Even if we consider that Brodsky, who adopts a perpetually "anti-heroic" posture towards the events of forced migration and exile, undercutting any attempts at a simple cause-and-effect correlation with his work and his life, decided not to make much of his marginal Jewish identity, the fact remains that he did delve deep into the essentials of it through his poetry. Marat Grinberg, a reviewer of Ellendea Proffer Teasley's biographical memoir of Brodsky, comments that Teasley had linked the fact of Brodsky's Jewishness to his purported resistance to the monolith of totalitarian values that was Soviet society, often surviving through a tacit majoritarian assent to its machinations. "A man who does not think for himself," Teasley writes, "a man who goes along with the group, is part of the evil structure himself"²⁵. In Proffer's account of the primary subject of their first encounter, Brodsky's Jewish identity was a matter of central concern: "Joseph is voluble and vulnerable. He brings up his Jewish accent almost immediately; when he was a child, his mother took him to speech therapy to get rid of it, he says, but he refused to go back after one lesson."²⁶ The "Jewish accent" had to do with Brodsky's inability to roll his "r"s, which, while by no means unique to Jews, was a mark of the Jew in the largely anti-Semitic Soviet environment. Brodsky "bought into the prejudice and at the same time wore it with pride, making it his own"²⁷.

²² In fact, Brodsky goes on to state "In printed Russian "yevrei" appears nearly as seldom as, say, "mediastinum" or "gennel" in American English", pointing out also how the exclusion of the Jews was perceptible in official, state-sanctioned idiom.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (New York: Bantam Books), 145.

²⁵ Marat Grinberg, "Russian Jew American," review of *Brodsky Among Us*, by Ellendea Proffer Teasley, Commentary, July-August 2017, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/marat-grinberg/russian-jew-american/> (accessed August 27, 2020)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

Grinberg also directs our attention to the theme of Jewishness, an ongoing concern in the early poetry of Brodsky during the 1960s. In keeping with his argument, I have tried to read one of his earliest Russian poems from 1958, “The Jewish cemetery near Leningrad...” in this section to gauge the extent to which Brodsky performs his Jewish marginalised subjectivity. This particular poem, which Brodsky decided not to translate into English, was dismissed by him as part of his early poetic juvenilia. However, in choosing the cemetery as a locale to raise racial and ethnic concerns in Soviet society, Brodsky’s poem also borders explicitly on the ‘political’, a label he tried to consciously avoid throughout his poetic career. In a few of its embedded references and pointed allusions to another important precursor poem by Boris Slutsky, “About the Jews”²⁸, an intensely polemic poem that effectively combined irony and inversion, provoking laughter and indignation at the general tenor of anti-Semitic sentiment in Soviet society:

Jews don't sow bread
Jews in shops trade
Jews go bald before
Jews steal more.

Jews are dashing people,
They are bad soldiers:
Ivan is fighting in the trench
Abram trades in a rabcop.

I've heard all this since childhood,
Soon I'll get quite old
But all is nowhere to go
From a cry: "Jews, Jews!"

Not having ever traded
Not stealing even once
I carry in myself like an infection

Damn this race.
A bullet passed me
So that they say deceitfully:
“The Jews did not kill!”²⁹

²⁸ See Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 23.

²⁹ Boris Slutsky, “About the Jews”, quoted from Marat Grinberg, “All the Young Poets have Become Old Jews: Boris Slutsky’s Russian-Jewish Canon”, *East-European Jewish Affairs* 37 Issue 1 (2007): 29-49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501670701197912> (accessed September 3, 2020).

In Brodsky's poem, the causticity of tone encountered in Slutsky seems largely absent, as his poem is overburdened with an all-pervading universal pathos. It juxtaposes the "Jewish" theme against the backdrop of the more canonised sub-genre of poetry called the elegy. Brodsky's poem is connected to Slutsky's not merely by way of specific phrases, but also through the common, over-arching theme of death, against which, while the latter sounds caustically complaining, the former builds on the effectiveness of shared memory on behalf of a marginalised community. The Stoic virtue of temperance—the way towards the famous Aristotelean metaphor of the "Golden Mean"—enables the poetic voice in the poem to look beyond the politics of resentment, while subtly underlining systematic discrimination meted out to a religious minority in a totalitarian society. The other side of the "curved" and "rotten" plywood fence that separates the world of the dead and the living holds "law, trade, musicians and revolutionaries", united by their Jewish identity³⁰. The addressed figure in this quasi-verbal exchange is presumably a police officer, here used metonymically to represent an entire order against which Brodsky imagines the old patriarchs among the Russian Jews, upholding a path towards self-preservation through tolerance, while refusing to be co-opted as the regime's treacherous beneficiaries:

But first, we pay taxes, respected police officer,
in this world, hopeless material,
interpreting Talmud, remaining idealists.

Can, We saw more.
BUT, perhaps,
They believed blindly.
But the children were taught,
to be tolerant and became stubborn. ³¹

The ensuing line ("And they never sowed bread") alludes back to the line from Slutsky's poem, but unlike the latter, extends its elegiac scope to assume a reflective poise, bordering on a more universal sense of fatalism. K.S. Sokolov Vladimir comments, "For Slutsky, national self-identification becomes part of a

³⁰ Joseph Brodsky, "A Jewish Cemetery near Leningrad", <https://brodskiy.su/evrejskoe-kladbishhe-okolo-leningrada/?lang=en> (accessed September 3, 2020)

³¹ Ibid.

civic position, for Brodsky it dissolves in the more universal problems of cemetery poetry”³²:

They just went to bed
into cold earth like grains.
And they fell asleep forever.
And then - they covered them with earth,
lit candles
and on the day of remembrance
gasping for hunger, shouting for comfort.
And they got it.
In the form of the decay of matter.³³

Nevertheless, even though his identity as a Jew was something Brodsky was well aware of, he never incorporated “Jewishness” as a defining characteristic in his verse. The only other two occasions where he makes Jewishness the subject of his verse were the long meditative poem “Issac and Abraham”, completed in 1962 and the second poem “Liejyklos” from the “Lithuanian Divertissement” sequence³⁴. “Issac and Abraham”, the only work in Brodsky’s poetic oeuvre to use a Biblical plot, recounts the familiar story of the intended sacrifice of Issac by the Jewish patriarch Abraham, but transfers the action against the backdrop of the harsh and wintry Russian landscape. It primarily engages with Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy put forth in “Fear and Trembling” and the work of the Russian existentialist Lev Shestov, *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*. What is noticeable in the poem are Brodsky’s efforts to transport an Old Testament story to see how it ‘sounds’ in Russian. The Russian “Isaak”, a truncated version of the Biblical name Issac is described thus:

In Russian, Isaac loses sound.
But it acquires a lot of qualities,
which for "a letter instead of two"
pay three times, hiding in letters.
In Russian "I" is just a simple union,
which multiplies the number of actions in speech
(similar to plus in mathematics),
however, he does not know who will add them.

³² K.S. Sokolov Vladimir, “Brodsky’s Jewish Cemetery: An Analysis”, <https://ik-ptz.ru/en/fizika/brodskii-evreiskoe-kladbishche-analiz-stihotvoreniya-evreiskoe.html> (accessed September 3, 2020).

³³ Joseph Brodsky, “A Jewish Cemetery near Leningrad”, <https://brodskiy.su/evrejskoe-kladbishhe-okolo-leningrada/?lang=en> (accessed September 3, 2020)

³⁴ See Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 23.

(But the amount was not invested in our mouths.
For this: there is no sound in the world).
What does "C" mean, we know from KUSTA:
"S" is a victim, tied tightly.
And the letter "A" is an old man among these letters,
union so that there is a separate sound between the words.
In essence, this is a terrible cry,
infant, lamentable, deadly howl.
And if double, build: AAA,
put together these sounds,
that should divide words,
then in total there will be a cry of terrible torment:
"All joints of" K "were in flames
and aspires straight to the lonely "A". "
But no hand does not raise a knife,
to finish the flour, there is no near Abram.
The half-name is still sticking out in the mouth.
The flame hides the other half.
And again the victim on fire Shouts:
This is what "ISAAK" means in Russian ...³⁵

While the poem does allude to the tragic fate of the Jewish people, glancing over the exilic theme by referring to the Jewish diaspora and the Nazi Holocaust, the emphasis is overtly on the “sound” of this Jewishness. One recalls Brodsky’s discomfort with the word “*yevrei*” and how it ran counter to his “sense of prosody” even while he was only seven.³⁶ Lev Loseff comments that, “Brodsky was a direct descendant of a sophisticated, cosmopolitan westward-looking Russian intelligentsia. Any ‘Jewish element’ in his verse was roughly the same ‘Jewish element’ found in Western civilization—the Old Testament as received and interpreted by the Christian West.”³⁷ However, what seems significant in the fact of his “Jewishness” is his acceptance and endurance of the systematic discrimination he was likely to encounter in Russian society: “As for anti-Semitism as such, I didn’t care much about it because it mostly came from teachers: it seemed innate to their negative part in our lives; it had to be coped with like low marks”³⁸. The underlined fact in this aspect of his Jewish identity was his attempt at

³⁵ Joseph Brodsky, “Issac and Abraham”, <https://brodskiy.su/isaak-i-avraam/?lang=en> (accessed September 4, 2020).

³⁶ Brodsky, “Less than One” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 8

³⁷ Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 22.

³⁸ Brodsky, “Less than One” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 8-9.

dissociation from any discrimination meted out to him at a personal level: "...even the most ardent anti-Semitic remarks bore an air of impersonal inertia"³⁹

Despite these attempts at rationalising his marginal status within Russian society, Brodsky's Jewish identity could be taken as one of the reasons he developed within himself the desire to "estrangle" himself from the reality that surrounded him. The figure of the 'outcast' (*izgoi*) that was to become such a significant part of his identity was also inspired, in part, due to his early apprenticeship to the poetry of Evgeny Rein. Rein was a slightly older fellow-Russian Jew and poet whom Brodsky considered an early mentor-figure. David M. Bethea, commenting on this literary friendship between the two, describes Rein's poetic persona as "expansive and freewheeling", going on to state that he serves the role "...of a Jewish gypsy or minstrel, even a *balagur* (clown), and he seems to draw energy from his outcast status"⁴⁰. Rein was a close friend and associate-poet of the Leningrad circle called the "Avvakumites" or alternatively, "Akhmatova's Orphans"⁴¹. Brodsky was himself one of the four supposed protégés of Akhmatova, who served as a mentor-figure to the group. The other three were Evgeny Rein, Anatoly Naiman and Dmitri Bobyshev. The "Avvakumites" sought to rescue poetry from the official dictates of Soviet Realism which seemed to them artificially imposed standards, often at the cost of great personal detriment. However, I feel that it would be fruitful to read Brodsky's affiliation to this cultural group as only a particular instance of his practised dissent in a society driven by totalitarian values. A proper evaluation of the genesis and evolution of the "Avvakumites" however, is deserving of a more detailed overview, which will be provided in the next section of the chapter.

It is possible to read Brodsky's profoundly anti-Marxist emphasis on the art of estrangement by which human consciousness is able to dissociate itself

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ David M. Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 31.

⁴¹ These are just two among many other popular phrases to refer to this particular circle of poets. Akhmatova herself had used the names "The Magic Choir" and "The Golden Cupola" to refer to this quartet of poets. See Margo Shohl-Rosen, "The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry: How Dmitry Bobyshev, Joseph Brodsky, Anatoly Naiman and Evgeny Rein Became the 'Avvakumites' of Leningrad (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2011), 251-52.

from the monotony of the repetitive nature of ‘existence’ in a totalitarian state. It serves as an active form of philosophical dissidence practised by the individual through thought, which escapes the mundane dimensions of “existence” for the arcane heights of “consciousness”. The essentials of this dualistic universe were well-known and understood by Brodsky when he was “ten or eleven”: “...it occurred to me that Marx's dictum that "existence conditions consciousness" was true only for as long as it takes consciousness to acquire the art of estrangement; thereafter, consciousness is on its own and can both condition and ignore existence”⁴². Growing up in “the growing vulgarity of its (Leningrad’s) content”, and finding the city inscribed within the national experience also as “Leningrad”, Brodsky adopts a retrospective stance towards the memories of his childhood “at a time when it didn’t look like “Leningrad”—right after the war”⁴³. He chooses to remember the city “which long ago the ordinary people nicknamed simply “Peter”—from Petersburg”⁴⁴. What strikes one in Brodsky’s description of the city of its birth resides in his technique of a keen unfolding of its architecture and its continued legacy of a fusion— older Greco-Roman and Byzantine coupled with the architectural style of the Petrine Baroque, all of which were dented by indiscriminate shelling during the catastrophic, year-long siege of the city in 1940:

I have learned more about the history of our world than I subsequently have from any book. Greece, Rome, Egypt— all of them were there, and all were chipped by artillery shells during the bombardments. And from the gray, reflecting river flowing down to the Baltic, with an occasional tugboat in the midst of it struggling against the current, I have learned more about infinity and stoicism than from mathematics and Zeno.⁴⁵

In trying to preserve, in his mind, and through his retrospection, an image of an older city, Brodsky is performing two distinct forms of non-conformity with the monotonous “present” of his remembered self, comprising of the repetitive variants of Lenin’s image “which plagued every textbook, every class wall, postage stamps, money, and what not”⁴⁶, the same order of ubiquity for Stalin, the “mental

⁴² Brodsky, “Less than One” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 3.

⁴³ Ibid. 4.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 5.

⁴⁶ Brodsky, “A Guide to a Renamed City” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 26

straitjacket of obedience” in the army, the “planks, the governmental iron of railings, the inevitable khaki of the military uniform in every passing crowd on every street in the city, the eternal photographs of steel foundries in every morning paper and the continuous Tchaikovsky on the radio”⁴⁷. Firstly, he is adapting himself to the possibility of imagining a city and a poetic credo outside the confines of officially sanctioned state ideology, in order to retain “ a love for the on-existent...thing called “civilization” and second, he is specifically aligning “retrospection” as a generic feature of his essay to point towards a more various and rewarding universe:

...looking backward is more rewarding than its opposite. Tomorrow is just less attractive than yesterday. For some reason, the past doesn't radiate such immense monotony as the future does. Because of its plenitude, the future is propaganda. So is grass.⁴⁸

In Brodsky's essay 'A Guide to a Renamed City', this archetypal dualism is brought out in a more comprehensive manner when Brodsky compares the “Leningrad” of his once-present and the St. Petersburg of the once-past. What he performs is an exercise in comparison and contrast, between the statue of Comrade Lenin, “done in the style of early-Constructivism”, standing atop an armored car in front of the Finland Station, and the famous “Bronze Horseman” statue, on the opposite bank of the Neva, depicting Peter the Great on horseback⁴⁹. The former sculpture, with the armored car representing the onset of the modern Industrial age in once-imperial Russia, runs counter to the “old society...represented by men on horseback”⁵⁰. However the extent of Brodsky's alienation against the backdrop of the Soviet national experience is also grafted on to the historical evolution of the city. At one particular place in the essay, Brodsky suggests that the city exudes a “certain foreignness and sounds congenial—for there is something distinctly foreign and alienating in the atmosphere of the city”⁵¹. The domesticated name of the city, simply called “Peter” by its inhabitants in the first two centuries of the city's coming into being, was a testament to that element of

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Brodsky, “Less than One” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 7.

⁴⁹ Brodsky, “A Guide to a Renamed City” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 69.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. 71.

foreignness, especially “since the real name of the Emperor in Russian is Pyotr”⁵². These repeated emphases on “foreignness” are due to St. Petersburg’s location in the north-west, on “the edge of so familiar a world”⁵³. In his verse as well as in his disposition as a poet, Brodsky would long for this keen yearning for a world beyond the claustrophobic confines of “Russia”, a legacy he inherited first with Peter I’s endeavours at modernising Russia, making St. Petersburg stand out as a westward-looking “window on Europe”⁵⁴ and secondly with the European-looking avant-garde modernist verse of Mandelstam and the fellow-Acmeists based in Leningrad, all of whom embodied a “nostalgia for world-culture”⁵⁵. Brodsky locates this desire within the city’s westward-looking intelligentsia to the precise location of St. Petersburg on the edge of the sea, which is an idea “still somewhat alien to the general population”:

The notions of freedom, open space, of getting the hell out of here, are instinctively suppressed and consequently surface in the reverse forms of fear of water, fear of drowning. In these terms alone, the city in the Neva delta is a challenge to the national psyche and justly bears the name of “foreigner in his own fatherland” given to it by Nikolai Gogol.⁵⁶

The “foreigner in his own fatherland” trope seems as significant to Brodsky’s general evaluation of the character of the city that shaped him as a poet as it serves as a means to understand his “estranged” subjectivity through the tortuous ordeals of a mock-trial that culminated into internal, and finally forced banishment outside Soviet Russia. The splendour of the city, “attributed first of all to the ubiquitous presence of water”, in the branching tributaries and “coiling canals” of the Neva, “provides this city with such a quantity of mirrors that narcissism becomes inevitable”⁵⁷. This cityscape specially attuned him towards a world of imagination and fiction that strikingly departed from reality and made fiction look realistic. In his seemingly hyperbolic claim that “it is with the emergence of St. Petersburg that Russian literature came into existence”, Brodsky thus re-imagines a genealogy of St. Petersburg poets and novelists—Nikolai Gogol,

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 72.

⁵⁵ Brodsky, “The Child of Civilization” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 130.

⁵⁶ Brodsky, “A Guide to a Renamed City” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 76.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 77

Dostoevsky, Pushkin and his pleiad (Baratynsky, Vyazemsky, Delvig), Lomonosov, Dezhraivin and Akhmatova, culminating in Mandelstam's promise to reunite in the same city—who paved the way towards making it “the capital of Russian letters”⁵⁸.

The art of “estrangement” which Brodsky had referred to in his autobiographical essay “Less than One” finds itself, quite paradoxically, ‘rooted’ in his memory of the city, especially because in his understanding, “the emergence of St. Petersburg was similar to the discovery of the New World: it gave pensive men a chance to look upon themselves and the nation as though from outside”⁵⁹. If one were to aptly ‘localise’ Brodsky’s verse, the locale would be found within the architecture as well as a quality of the light and weather of this particular city, which he describes as relatively unchanging:

It’s the northern light, pale and diffused, one in which both memory and eye operate with unusual sharpness. In this light, and thanks to the directness and length of the streets, a walker’s thoughts travel further than his destination, and a man with normal eyesight can make out at a distance of a mile the number of the approaching bus or the age of the tail following him. In his youth, at least, a man born in this city spends as much time on foot as any good Bedouin... It’s because to walk under this sky, along the brown granite embankments of this immense gray river, is itself an extension of life and a school of farsightedness.⁶⁰

For Brodsky, St. Petersburg therefore becomes “the city where it’s somehow easier to endure loneliness than anywhere else: because the city itself is lonely”⁶¹. Brodsky very deftly provides a textual clue to the city personified as a veritable Narcissus, reflected “every second by thousands of square feet of running silver amalgam” and likens the medium of such mirroring, water to “a condensed form of time”⁶². If his parallel for the personified *daimon* of the city is the “estranged poet”, perhaps the analogy works itself out to bloom—just as old “Peter”, surrounded on all sides by water, is caught up within an infinite maze of its own blinding images, the “estranged poet” in trying to inscribe himself on the

⁵⁸ Ibid. 78.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 79.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 89.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid. 77.

surface of the time he necessarily inhabits, dissociates a part of himself, a part which is able to “estrangle” itself from the tale that he narrates:

If it’s true that every writer has to estrange himself from his experience to be able to comment upon it, then the city, by rendering this alienating service, saved them a trip. ⁶³.

One can easily locate, within Brodsky’s idealised images of the cityscapes of St. Petersburg, the biographical link towards this need to embrace estrangement as a lifestyle as well as poetic disposition. His dedicatory essay to the memory of his parents, “In a Room and a Half” reveals that Brodsky’s childhood was spent in communal apartments, where four families, comprised of eleven people in all, were crammed up within the space of six rooms, and yet consider themselves “lucky”, since “the living quarters’ minimum per person is 9 square meters”⁶⁴. With all three of them “wound up” within the space of forty meters meant the Brodsky’s had an excess of a thirteen meter-space which became the “half” of a room referred to in the title of the essay. This particular makeshift space, serving only as an imagined room in Brodsky’s childhood and youth, offered him a “degree of privacy”⁶⁵. Separated from his parents’ room “by two large, nearly ceiling-high arches”, this space could never be converted into a “real” room, because if one partitioned the room with bricks or wooden boards, “this would result in “having two rooms instead of the one and a half that the borough housing order stated we were entitled to”⁶⁶. With tongue-in-cheek humour, Brodsky recounts a later phase, “when books and the need for privacy increased dramatically” and the “half” room assumed the appearance “of a barricade” behind which “the gamin felt safe, and a Marianne could bare more than just her breast”⁶⁷. Brodsky chooses, in this essay, to call this makeshift half room his “*Lebensraum*”⁶⁸, which besides its surface connotation of “living space/ habitat” has also often been appropriated into larger discourses on ethnic nationalism and the question of legitimacy. Inasmuch as he valued the bit of privacy he had been able to forge for himself as an individual, Brodsky also thought of this bit of space as necessary and beneficial for the proper

⁶³ Ibid. 79.

⁶⁴ Brodsky, “A Room and a Half” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 452.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 474.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 476

⁶⁸ Ibid.

growth and nourishment of his “estranged” consciousness: “[T]hese ten square meters were mine and they were the best ten square meters I’ve ever known”⁶⁹

David M. Bethea, elaborating on the natural tendency within Soviet intellectuals to take refuge into an “estranged” consciousness, comments: “[A]s every Soviet intelligent knows, the “life of the mind” becomes more of a sine qua non when basic physical privacy is hard to come by. It is the last place the state can look when one is forced on a daily basis to share toilets and kitchens with neighbors”⁷⁰. Brodsky admits to the same, adding that totalitarianism “suggests to the individual a kind of vertical hierarchy of his own, with consciousness at the top”⁷¹. This sense of hierarchy is what leads subjects under totalitarian rule to “oversee what’s going on inside” themselves, “we almost report to our consciousness on our instincts”⁷². Even when, considering it was somehow possible, one managed “to outsmart the system by devising all kinds of detours”, the awareness that “the web one had woven was a web of lies”⁷³ led one to despise themselves, pointing towards the ultimate effectiveness of such hierarchized systems of surveillance and control. Under such circumstances, taking recourse to “abstraction” or “nothingness” via thought became commonplace, in order to escape the monotonous “drivel”⁷⁴ which Brodsky recalls having longed to escape during the years of school.

At this point, it becomes useful for us to probe into the importance of estrangement as both a strategy and an artistic device. Brodsky’s delineation of an “estranged” consciousness in his prose has important Russian precursors such as Viktor Shklovsky who also developed the idea in his essay ‘Art, as Device’⁷⁵ (1917). Shklovsky’s work is significant in tracing the evolution of ideas about estrangement in Brodsky, and extends to a conception of estrangement not merely

⁶⁹ Ibid. 454-55.

⁷⁰ David M. Bethea, “A Polemical Introduction,” in *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), 20.

⁷¹ Brodsky, “Less than One” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 21.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid 9.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 33.

⁷⁵ Viktor Shklovsky, “Art, as Device”, Trans. Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today* 35: 151-74.
https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/first/en122/lecturelist2017-18/art_as_device_2015.pdf (accessed September 5, 2020)

as a literary style, but a manner of perception, a “lifestyle”⁷⁶ itself. The inherent complexity of “estranging” things and indeed, consciousness itself in art, Shklovsky claims, lies not in declaring a great rift between the lived order and the artistic one. Instead, “estrangement” operates as a device of mediation between the orders of life and art, where, poetic language, seeking an escape from the established and near-automatic order of “routine actions”, restores the “sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony”⁷⁷. The goal of art consists, for Shklovsky, of creating “the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things” the device of “estrangement” “increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is, in art, an end in itself and must be prolonged”⁷⁸. As Svetlana Boym’s work on the ideological overlappings between Brodsky and Shklovsky’s ideas on estrangement (*ostranenie*) suggests, this artistic device triggers a kind of reverse-mimesis in order, so that “[e]strangement is what makes art artistic, but by the same token, it makes everyday life lively, or worth living”⁷⁹. Moreover, in tracing the role of estrangement, Boym points out that “estrangement” was tantamount to more than a simple distancing, it consisted also in “dislocation, depaysment”⁸⁰. Concerned specifically with the “deautomatisation of perception”⁸¹, poetic language, insofar as it uses artifice to “linger” perception to its “greatest strength and length”—Shklovsky reads Aristotle to have implied—“must have the character of the foreign, the surprising”⁸²: “[I]t often is quite literally a foreign language—Sumerian for Assyrians, Old Bulgarian as the basis of literary Russian—or else it might be elevated language, like the almost literary language of folk songs”⁸³. One recalls, at this juncture, Brodsky’s desire to allow his parents acquire reality under a “foreign code of conscience”, because operating by the rules of “English grammar may at least prove to be a better escape route from the chimneys of the state crematorium than the Russian”⁸⁴. In deliberately choosing to reconstruct his dedicatory memoir about his parents in English, Brodsky realised

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Svetlana Boym, ‘Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky & Brodsky’, *Poetics Today* 17 no. 4 (Winter 1996): 515-16

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Shklovsky, “Art, as Device”, 171.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Brodsky, “A Room and a Half” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 460.

he was decidedly “estranging” them, subjecting them to a different, and freer set of possibilities for their continued survival among the American audience that would form his readership:

Besides, even if I had written all this in Russian, these words wouldn't see the light of day under the Russian sky. Who would read them then? A handful of émigrés whose parents either have died or will die under similar circumstances? They know this story only too well. They know what it feels like not to be allowed to see their mothers or fathers on their deathbed; the silence that follows their request for an emergency visa to attend a relative's funeral. And then it's too late, and a man or a woman puts the receiver down and walks out of the door into the foreign afternoon feeling something neither language has words for, and for which no howl will suffice, either . . . What could I possibly tell them? In what way could I console them?...May English then house my dead.⁸⁵

Brodsky's crossing over of the threshold, his transition into a “foreign code of conscience” had turned a Russian poet to a bilingual one, and had given birth to an essayist in English where there had been none. However, it would be equally significant to remember that Brodsky saw himself as a Russian poet and American citizen. To read and hermeneutically interpret Brodsky in English translation demands some degree of familiarity with his Russian verse, as well as his own personal canon of eminent Russian and Anglo-American poets—Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam, W.H. Auden and Robert Frost, to name a few. And despite seeking cosmopolitan correspondences in their Mandelstamian longing for “world culture”, Brodsky's favourite Russian poets, by foregrounding their version of Leningrad classicism, ultimately reinforce and strengthen the canon of Russian poetry. As Svetlana Boym concurs,

...the cosmopolitan ideal of a "republic of letters" is foreign to Russian culture. Rather, there is a Russian empire of letters, and the writer is a subject of that empire. Hence exile is a cultural transgression that threatens a writer's very survival, both physical and spiritual.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ibid. 460-61.

⁸⁶ Svetlana Boym, ‘Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shlovsky & Brodsky’, *Poetics Today* 17 no. 4 (Winter 1996): 514

Moreover, as Boym has further pointed out, there is an additional difficulty in considering exilic subjectivity in a Russian context. This is because ‘transcendental homelessness’, in the philosophical tradition from “Chaadaev to Berdiaev”⁸⁷ forms a part of Russian national identity: ” Metaphorical exile (usually away from the transient, everyday existence) is a prerequisite for the wanderings of the "Russian soul"; as a result, actual exile from Mother Russia is viewed as unprecedented cultural betrayal”⁸⁸

For Brodsky however, the true loss of the ‘mother’ however, would have consisted in banishment from the Russian language, something which did not happen, but it presented him with a paradoxical kind of opportunity for a form of poetic self-fashioning. In his interview with David Remnick of the *Washington Post*, Brodsky admitted that he considered himself an intrinsic part of Russian culture:

I feel part of it, its component, and no change of place can influence the final consequence of this. A language is a much more ancient and inevitable thing than a state. I belong to the Russian language.⁸⁹

Any perceptive consideration attempting to catalogue the possible ways in which the extent of Brodsky’s marginalisation from officially sanctioned Soviet ideology in the Brezhnev era must also therefore contextualise it within the peculiar historical circumstances in which he had emerged as a poet. In other words, the fact that Brodsky, if only by estranging himself and remaining indifferent to official Soviet ideology and aesthetics, does end up performing an active form of individual dissent in his poetry and overall philosophy of life is also rooted in his belonging, and affiliation to, the “Avvakumites” of Leningrad, who “became exemplary for their generation in their creation of an alternative cultural space that simply ignored the demands of Soviet literature, cleaving instead to the much older tradition of

⁸⁷ Svetlana Boym, “Estrangement as a Lifestyle”, 514.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Joseph Brodsky in conversation with David Remnick of the *Washington Post*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/joseph-brodsky> (accessed September 6, 2020).

humane letters”⁹⁰. The “Avvakumite” reclamation of language and metaphor from the clutches of Socialist Realism also meant that an independent “turn” was observable in Russian poetry ushered in by a sense of impending change in poetic diction. In the next section I will attempt therefore, to ascertain the degree to which Brodsky’s affiliation to this particular Leningrad school of poetry was responsible for his marginalisation as a poet of the fringes, as well as point out the consequences of such an affiliation in the context of his gradually evolving exilic subjectivity across the years.

3.2 Jazz Rhythms in Leningrad: The “Thaw” Years and the “Avvakumite” Reclamation of Language

In the context of Russian literature in general and poetry in particular, a crisis in language, which Margo Shohl Rosen considers similar to the crisis which led to the rise of the French Symbolist poets at the turn of the last century, appeared during the post-Stalin years.⁹¹ For many decades, the officially prescribed dictates of Socialist Realism demanded that literature should both reflect and serve to show avenues towards a progressive Socialist future. During the Stalinist years, drawing on the legacy of Leningrad poetry started by Nikolai Gumilyov and Vladimir Khodasevich as poet-martyrs who were executed or forced to emigrate during the first decade after the October Revolution, the Acmeists, spearheaded by Osip Mandelstam and older poetic figures such as Akhmatova were witnesses to the ruthlessness of the Purges⁹². Part of the Stalinist era’s attempts to scrutinise the use of language in every day discourse consisted in finding an answer to what Alexei Yurchak, in his seminal inquiry of late Socialism in Soviet Russia, has called

⁹⁰ Margo Shohl Rosen, “The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry: How Dmitry Bobyshev, Joseph Brodsky, Anatoly Naiman and Evgeny Rein Became the ‘Avvakumites’ of Leningrad” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2011), 3.

⁹¹ See Shohl Rosen, “The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2011), 11.

⁹² Akhmatova famously alluded to the terror of a police state in her “Requiem cycle” where the phrase “And the stone word fell on my still living breast” became an apt description of state-backed censorship, disappearances and death-in transit to labour camps. Mandelstam also alluded to Stalin’s “cockroach whiskers” and “forged decrees” in the poem “Stalin Epigram” which led to his internal exile and eventual death in a labour camp near Vladivostok. . What I am hinting at is a continuing genealogy of “poet-martyrs” in Russian poetry which has dated even before the October Revolution of 1917, to the legacy of Pushkin and Lermontov.

“Lefort’s Paradox”, drawing upon Claude Lefort’s idea of a split, in the history of Western modernity, between what he calls “ideological enunciation” and “ideological rule”⁹³. The former can be seen as an extension to “the theoretical ideals of the Enlightenment”, while the latter is made “manifest in the practical concerns of the modern state’s political authority”⁹⁴. Yurchak uses Foucault’s methodological apparatus to reveal the paradoxical nature and workings of power in Soviet Socialism whereby “...ideological rule must be “abstracted from any question concerning its origins, thus remaining outside of ideological enunciation and, as a result, rendering that enunciation deficient”⁹⁵. Thus, it was the express task of ideological discourse to “...represent an “objective truth” that exists outside of it; however, the external nature of this “objective truth” renders the ideological discourse inherently lacking in the means to describe it in total, which can ultimately undermine this discourse’s legitimacy and the power that it supports”⁹⁶. Lefort had argued that this inherent contradiction could only be partially covered up by the figure of the “master”, who “by being presented as standing outside ideological discourse and possessing external knowledge of the objective truth, temporarily conceals the contradiction by allowing it “to appear through himself”⁹⁷. In Yurchak’s analysis, the contradiction was played out, in the larger context of post-revolutionary Soviet society, between the professed aim of achieving a complete liberation of society through the creation of a new type of avant-garde intellectual who would become “a creative force united by one idea for the purposes of leading and perfecting society”⁹⁸ and a strictly disciplinarian leadership which attempted to subsume the same for purposes of controlling experimentation and innovation by the vanguard party. The “external” position of the “master” was a crucial factor in resolving this paradox—Yurchak in fact, goes on to claim that it was Stalin who now played the role of Lefort’s “master”—because by standing outside ideological discourse, he initiated “the production and

⁹³ The paradox referred to in this instance concerns Lefort’s use of a Foucauldian paradigm for the invisibilisation of power regimes. Modern democracies, Lefort contended, de-materialised the embodied forms of power and no longer sought justification from determined and stable centres.

⁹⁴ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, Until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 10.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 11

wide circulation of a public metadiscourse about all forms of political, artistic and scientific expression”⁹⁹, evaluating them against the external canon of Marxist-Leninist dogma. After Stalin’s death in 1953, and the denunciation of the excesses of his rule, including his active encouragement of a cult of personality, the conception of such an “external” position ceased to exist, and in absence of a public metadiscourse duly curated by the “master”, all ideological representations such as documents, speeches, ritualised slogans, posters and films “became increasingly normalised, ubiquitous, and predictable”¹⁰⁰. This fixed and normalised system of signification therefore eschewed the conventional status of “ideology” and instead transformed itself into the “authoritative discourse”—used here in the Bakhtinian sense of *monoglossia*—something which “...demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally”¹⁰¹.

It was more owing to this need to find a counter-discourse which could combat this swing towards the impersonality of the “authoritative discourse” in all realms of social life and public policy that the Thaw Generation poets had sought to rescue language from its relentless co-option and control by the state machinery. Margo Shohl Rosen comments that “[a]t the root of this tension is a struggle for control over metaphor in public space: metaphor used by the State to portray violence and enslavement as public service and metaphor used to describe the same violence and enslavement from the humanist perspective”¹⁰².

The corruption of language wrought out by the manoeuvrings of State power allows it to enter a dubious terrain where “truth” becomes not clearly distinguishable from “falsehoods”. Writing on the enduring crisis of language in the post-Stalinist Soviet era, Anatoly Naiman recounts a humorous tale where a researcher at one of the institutes, a timid thirty-year old bachelor, in his attempt to expedite his application to buy a co-operative apartment, tries to bribe an official at

⁹⁹ Ibid. 13.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ M.M Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), 342

¹⁰² Margo Shohl Rosen, “The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University:2011), 15.

Moscow's City Hall with a thousand rubles and finds that the bribe is promptly stowed away into one of the drawers of the official's desk. On feeling himself victimised by the apparent lack of guarantee offered to him by the incident, the timid man suddenly grew indignant and returned to the official to demand one and was given the ironic and laughter-inducing assurance of "the word of a Communist"¹⁰³. What he had wished to underline with this story concerns the consequences of the "artificial" deformation of language; Naiman insists that even though it is theoretically possible, in a totalitarian state, to alter conventional significations, language eventually rejects these changes and ends up revealing more than it manages to conceal: "...by the context which the word organizes, by the artificiality of the elevated style or the mocking wink of irony - by the resulting deformation, briefly put, which is plain for everyone to see, language signals that such a usage is simply not true, that language, against its own will, is being "used"¹⁰⁴. Language thus reveals its capacity to resist deformation by subtly pointing its finger at its own internal inconsistencies, substituting the conventional meaning of words with eliding, "strategic commonplaces" deliberately designed towards investing them with altered, and generally favourable significations towards totalitarian rule:

It was impossible...to call by their proper names the fraud, treachery, theft, and murder that became Soviet state policy. The necessity of replacing these terms with words that expressed the same concepts yet somehow covered over their ugly reality (with a web of strategic commonplaces cast over it from critical angles) - this led to the creation of a special language of double-entendres, a two-track phenomenon that Orwell later named "doublespeak." A man is fired from his job, arrested, and shot; this comes to be called a "purge"... "So-and-so was shot" was the truth, but "such-and-such an establishment cleansed its ranks of an alien element" was not an untruth. The "element" who had been shot really was "alien," and the "ranks" really had been cleansed of him. The concept of "destruction" was invested with a positive connotation by the substitution of the word "cleansing." Such an operation, however, required the effective demotion of the concept of "people" to the category of "ranks" and "elements." The organism of

¹⁰³ Anatoly Naiman, "Language on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown," in *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), Summer, 1994, 18, No. 3 (Summer, 1994), 109.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

speech, forced to function in an environment of artificiality, compensates for the overload on some of its parts by diminishing the activity of others.¹⁰⁵

Naiman provides a particularly vivid and compelling image in the ensuing paragraphs of this essay, of the “spine of language”, bent to the point where “the bones were cracking and the head was bruising its own heel” and “used” by “those whose power permitted whim and wilfulness”.¹⁰⁶ As the essay progresses, Naiman unites, by way of analogy, other forms of alteration to the everyday order of reality with changes forced upon language—the Soviet concept of Time by decree and the ubiquitous sense in which the word for the Russian currency, “rubles” was applied during the Brezhnev era¹⁰⁷—and finally turns to the task that was ahead of Russian poetry, “the work and the art of naming things”¹⁰⁸ with clarity and precision. It was also the singular task of poets to adduce names for things that must, at some deeper level, attest to the verity of the things themselves:

...the listener must be consciously convinced, or at any rate sense strongly, that the name chosen by the poet rings true. The ear of the listening public must not only remain unoffended; it must in the end find pleasure in the poet’s proffered novelty, for the voice of the people, when all is said and done, must merge with that of the poet himself.¹⁰⁹

What is immediately striking in Naiman’s delineation of the relationship between the poet and State power in the context of twentieth century Russian history and politics is the conception of poetry as *parrhesia* or “fearless speech”. The poets, finding themselves at the crossroads of an undesirable and debasing alteration to the ordinary semantics of language by the machinations of totalitarian rule, were faced with exclusion, censorship and a host of punitive measures unleashed upon them for speaking freely. As we have seen in Lefort’s paradox, on the one hand, Power demands that the poet speak freely without apprehension “to give some stability to the order of things”, while on the other, when he “...speaks thus unhindered, everybody hears him—and what he says bears witness to the corruption of language by Power”¹¹⁰. Naiman notes that “to the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 110.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 111.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 115.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 116.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 115.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 116.

names of Nikolai Gumilev (shot by firing squad) and gulag victims Osip Mandelstam and Nikolai Kliuev it is difficult not to add those of the Soviet-era suicides Sergei Esenin, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Marina Tsvetaeva”¹¹¹, along with the Party’s censorship of Akhmatova in 1946 and persecution of Boris Pasternak. Thus, by meting out punitive measures to its poets, the Soviet regime upheld a negative relationship with poetry as “fearless speech” and paradoxically, ended up confirming “the primary *status* of the word above all else”¹¹².

All of the major Thaw Generation poets—the young Brodsky, Evgeny Evtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky, Bella Akhmadulina, Robert Rozhdestvensky and Bulat Okudzhava, along with older poets such as Boris Slutsky and Aleksandr Tvardovsky—thus bore a poetic legacy whose historical context coincided with the narrative of the de-Stalinization of the arts under Khrushchev. At this juncture, it is useful to turn to the work of Emily Lygo, who, in her doctoral dissertation has shown that one of the chief hallmarks of poetry during the Thaw Generation saw the resurgence of the lyric, “which had virtually disappeared from official publications during the Stalin period”¹¹³. The encouragement officially extended by the publication of the influential anthology “Poetry Day”¹¹⁴ in 1956 was a testament to the revival of printed poetry in the USSR, giving a platform to younger poets such as Evtushenko and Rozhdestvensky, but also, importantly, reviving the work of older, canonised poets such as Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva and Pasternak whose work had not been published in Soviet Russia after the 1920s.¹¹⁵ Sparked by the success of the initial volume, the publication of subsequent issues of Poetry Day became an annual affair. In effect, issues of Poetry Day worked out a compromise between conservatism (ranging from eulogistic poetry singing paeans to Socialist Realism) and “the cautious attempt to revive both the lyric and connections with the avant-

¹¹¹ Ibid. 117.

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ See Emily Lygo, “The Return of Lyric Poetry to the Soviet Canon” in *Leningrad Poetry 1953-75: The Thaw Generation* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1977), 13.

¹¹⁴ See Margo Shohl Rosen, “The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University:2011), 23. The “Poetry Day”(*Den’ poezii*) anthology of 1956 was the culmination of the “Poetry Day” celebrations held in Moscow the previous year. It was not only immensely popular, but also became one of the most important anthologies of poetry published in the Soviet Union during the “Thaw” years, bringing together most of the young Moscow *literati*.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 23-24.

garde of the 1910s and 20s”¹¹⁶. The informal style of the introduction attested to a shift in the objectives of publication which were now being endorsed by the Soviet literary establishment. While the need for patriotic ‘proletarian’ literature could not be bypassed, the editors of the Poetry Day insisted that a turn towards the more personal form of the lyric, instead of the eulogistic ode, also served to incite patriotic feelings and was essential to motivate workers and peasants. Thus the editors positioned themselves against the “dogmatists” whose aim was to artificially limit the scope of poetry. A section from Shohl Rosen’s translation of the introduction to this volume serves to illustrate this:

There were days as well in our poetry when literary dogmatists wanted to limit it artificially and place it within dogmatic frameworks, to put the civic theme on bad terms with the lyric. But does civic ardor really abolish the heat of personal feelings? Our poetry has every right to proclaim, “Everything human is dear to me.” The Soviet reader who has just given the country bread, or just come down from the scaffolding of housing under construction, would like to hear a word about both his labor and his heart. Poetry’s word has become for us nourishing like bread and necessary like housing.¹¹⁷

Nevertheless, Shohl Rosen has further demonstrated, the Poetry Day volume sought to strike a rather precarious balance between the lyric and the “odic”, and between traditional Socialist Realism condoned by the Writers’ Union and the more avant-garde elements in poetry that had been vogue ever since the advent of literary Modernism and the coming of the Acmeists¹¹⁸.

But ironically, although the policies of the Khrushchev era, with its public denunciation of the vagaries of Stalinist censures, did encourage the rise of poetry as a genre, it soon ended up engendering “dissidence and non-conformism and to the development of an underground and the phenomenon of *samizdat*”¹¹⁹. The distinct breach which marked the parting of ways of the “Avakuumites” and the “publishable” has been elaborately discussed by Shohl Rosen who traces the

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 23.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 27.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 27-28.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 106.

process through which this particular group of poets were forced to turn away from the prospect of publishing in Soviet journals to alternative ways of sharing their poetry¹²⁰. It was a feature of the Thaw-induced official policy to allow unsupervised student literary publishing, which had appeared even before Khrushchev's Secret Speech. It was this brand of self-publishing, Shohl Rosen adds, which, furthered distance from official approval in the 1960s, came to be known as *samizdat* ("underground") and was comprised of a host of independent journals around Leningrad such as *Goluboi buton* (Light-blue Bud) published from the Leningrad State University's Philological Faculty, the first of its kind.¹²¹ Shohl Rosen provides a representative list of *samizdat* journals published from Leningrad during the mid-1950s, a section that is worth quoting in its entirety:

Other student publications in Leningrad in 1956 included: *Litfront Litfaka* (**L**iterary **F**ront of the **L**iterary **F**aculty), published by students of Leningrad Pedagogical Institute; *Svezhie golosa* (Fresh Voices), by students of the Institute of Railroad Transport Engineers; and *Eres'* (Heresy), by students of the Library Institute. At the Forestry Institute, the school press put out a collection entitled *Stikhi studentov* (Students' Poems).¹³⁹ Non-institution-based publications included A. Domashov's literary almanac *Belye nochi* (White Nights) and an alternative newspaper called simply *Informatsiia* (Information).¹²²

The role of *Kul'tura* (*Culture*), the wall newspaper of the Leningrad Technological Institute, in consolidating the literary friendships between the Avakuumites certainly deserves mention. It published critical articles on contemporary subjects, with Naiman, Rein and Bobyshev as important contributors for its first, and only published issue. The failed Hungarian Revolution of 1956 led to a significant decrease in the State's degree of tolerance of dissent. Shohl Rosen writes that the writers associated to *Kul'tura* came under censure first in late 1956 when they were criticised publicly in the press, "first in the LTI paper, *Tekhnolog* (*Technologist*), and subsequently in the party newspaper, *Komsomol'skaia pravda*

¹²⁰ See Shohl Rosen, "Parting with the Publishable" in "The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University:2011), 116-61.

¹²¹ Ibid. 116.

¹²² Ibid. 117.

(*Young Communists' League of Truth*)”¹²³. Rein was soon expelled from the LTI, while Bobyshev had to take a leave for health reasons. *Tekhnolog* published an article by Yakov Lerner singling out Naiman and Rein for criticism, accusing them of ideological bankruptcy, and therefore, raising questions on their claim to educate future students.¹²⁴ Such public denunciations (“feuilleton”) were not uncommon in the Soviet Union; they often signalled the end of a protracted trail of surveillance on dissenting artists and were accompanied with penal measures such as internal or external exile, along with imprisonment, as well as State censorship on further publication in the form of bans. The author of this article, Yakov Lerner would later dismiss the young Brodsky’s early poetry in the now famous feuilleton, “*Okololiteraturnyi truten*” (“A Quasi-literary Drone”),¹²⁵ that began the campaign against Brodsky in 1963.

Although it is difficult to ascertain, primarily owing to vague reminiscences by Rein and Naiman, the exact date when Brodsky began a literary friendship with this group, it is evident that he became closely associated to them by 1958 or the following year, around the journal *Smena*.¹²⁶ Brodsky, in his interviews to Simon Volkov, described these literary meetings held in artists and their studios, were accompanied with poetry readings, heavy drinking and casual flirtation at the Stray Dog, “a smelly hole where the Petersburg bohemia of the turn of the century gathered”¹²⁷. The experience of these sessions were also fuelled by an independent spirit which was partly encouraged by Voice of America radio host Willis Conover’s *Music USA* show, which was broadcast despite the Iron Curtain in Soviet Russia. The Avakuumites found the show particularly liberating, for it acquainted them with artists and performers in jazz music who “in the face of mainstream disregard, disdain or rejection, conveyed a narrative of independence

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid. 130-33.

Shohl Rosen demonstrates that “Lerner detects a certain pleasure derived in the authors’ minds concerning the shortcomings of the Party’s work so far: “the editorial board [...] in certain articles simply slanders our present, coming to hasty generalizations about a number of facts and delivering these with a feeling of relish, clearly misguiding students”.

¹²⁵ See Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 72-73.

¹²⁶ Shohl Rosen, “The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University:2011), 153.

¹²⁷ Simon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet’s Journey through the Twentieth Century* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 34.

and human dignity, as well as a healthy dose of plain old fun—but through a screen of barely understood English language and poor reception that rendered Conover’s narrative open to the most fantastic construal by his listeners”¹²⁸. Willis Conover’s *Music USA* show, as well as other figures made popular by Hollywood, such as Tarzan proved to be the source of inspiration towards maintaining an alternative order of literary freedom within Leningrad poetic circles, as well as imagining a form of state free from all forms of bureaucratic control. In an interview to Volkov, Brodsky also confirms that the “marvellous cry of Tarzan...hung over every Russian city”¹²⁹.

Conover’s *Music USA* show, widely known to its Eastern bloc-audiences as the “Jazz Hour” was broadcasted from Voice of America during the mid-50s. This show gained an almost mythical status in Soviet Russia, with its content commonly acknowledged as exceptional for the time to Russians. The scenario was also similar in all of the Eastern-bloc countries in Europe. In his assessment of the influence of jazz on the post-Thaw Generation, Rüdiger Ritter, in discussing the role of radio broadcasting, contextualises the problem, drawing in upon the idea of a cultural exchange where the word “jazz”, in its American and East-European contexts respectively, resulted in specific mutual misunderstandings, “especially on the field of what constituted individual freedom and of the black-and-white discourse in jazz”¹³⁰. Ritter also succinctly sums up the role played by the two polarized opposing camps dedicated to continuing the Cold War where “the behaviour of the antagonists became more and more similar, for example, on the field of propaganda, or cultural diplomacy”¹³¹. To listen to jazz was a secret rite of passage undergone by members of a younger generation of listeners who were, in their own turn, participating in widespread youth subcultures and cultural movements across the Eastern-bloc countries such as *stilyagi*¹³² in the

¹²⁸ Shohl Rosen, “The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry”, 163-64.

¹²⁹ Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky*, 99.

¹³⁰ Rüdiger Ritter, “Broadcasting Jazz into the Eastern Bloc—Cold War Weapon or Cultural Exchange? The Example of Willis Conover”, *Jazz Perspectives* 7, No. 2 (2013), 133, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17494060.2014.885641>, 113 (accessed September 8, 2020).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.* 114.

Alternatively spelt as *stilyagi* (lit. “style-hunters”), they were a counter-cultural group from the late 1940s to the early 1960s in the Soviet Union, distinguished by their (usually foreign-label)

Soviet Union, *bikiniarze*¹³³ in Poland, or *potapky*¹³⁴ in Czechoslovakia. Listeners also had to be wary of surveillance while listening to Western radio networks like Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), as well as find ways to bypass the constant jamming of radio signals by the counter-propagandists of the Eastern bloc. Ritter thus sums up this invisible antagonism on part of both camps as “a constant cat-and-mouse play of technicians, forcing listeners to search for frequencies, receiving times, listening places so on”¹³⁵. The commercial marketing of the reel-to-reel tape recorder in the USSR during the post-War years also plummeted the dissemination of Western music across the country. Yurchak also cites Tatyana Cherednichenko who argues “that the generation that was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s”, unlike all previous Soviet generations, “consolidated not on the basis of some epochal achievements, but on the basis of age as such,” which made the “tape-recording of Western albums” a constitutive element of their identity”¹³⁶. The phenomenon of the *magnitizdat* (distribution of self-recorded tape recorder cassettes) was thus born, connecting like-minded communities of music lovers across the country who were united in their common appreciation of variety in Western musical genres compared to the monotony of State-approved “classical” music on the radio¹³⁷. Brodsky provides anecdotal evidence of the significance of the Willis Conover show in his essay ‘Spoils of War’, recalling how a personally owned Philips radio set, “a 10 by 14 inch Bakelite affair, with...yellow dial and a catlike, absolutely mesmerizing green eye”¹³⁸ had the potential to become a window to another world, one marked by the allure of the “jazz” lifestyle on the one hand,

“snappy” clothing, their obsession with Western music and fashions of the Beat Generation and other groups.

¹³³ *bikiniarze* (lit “The Bikini Boys” or “jitterbuggers”) was a name derogatorily given to a similar sub-culture that participated in, and idolised American popular culture during the imposition of Stalinism in Poland in the 1950s.

¹³⁴ *potapky* (lit. “diving birds”) were a Czech urban, youth-based subculture in the 1940s to the mid-1950s, primarily marked by their interest in American popular culture and “swing music”. They were also distinguishable by their eccentricities in fashion such as wearing deformed hats, coloured socks and “zoot-suits”.

¹³⁵ Rüdiger Ritter, “Broadcasting Jazz into the Eastern Bloc—Cold War Weapon or Cultural Exchange?”, 116.

¹³⁶ Tatyana Cherednichenko, quoted in Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, Until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 187.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* 192.

¹³⁸ Joseph Brodsky, “Spoils of War” in *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), 6.

and threatened by systems of surveillance and control meted out by a totalitarian state on the other:

To try to attach your radio to the building's main antenna required a professional's help, and that professional, in his turn, would pay unneeded attention to your set. One wasn't supposed to have a foreign radio, period. The solution was a web-like arrangement under the ceiling of your room, which is what I made. That way, of course, I couldn't get Radio Bratislava or, moreover, Delhi. But then I knew neither Czech nor Hindi. And as for the BBC, the Voice of America, or Radio Free Europe broadcasts in Russian, they were jammed anyway. Still, one could get programs in English, German, Polish, Hungarian, French, Swedish. I knew none of those languages; but then there was the VOA's Time for Jazz, with the richest-in-the-world bass-baritone of Willis Conover, its disc jockey!"

To this brown, shining-like-an-old-shoe Philips set, I owe my first bits of English and my introduction to the Jazz Pantheon. When we were twelve, the German names on our lips gradually began to be replaced by those of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Clifford Brown, Sidney Bechet, Django Reinhardt, and Charlie Parker. Something began to happen, I remember, even to our walk: the joints of our highly inhibited Russian frames harkened to "swing".¹³⁹

The effect of these jazz rhythms immediately reveal themselves in a poem by Anatoly Naiman titled "Voice of America", as well as in Brodsky's poems "These days I feel tiredness too often..." and "A metallic call at midnight...". In the first poem, Naiman tries, in a retrospective manner, to capture the influence of jazz to the new generation of listeners in Soviet Russia:

"At Madison Square, in the park, jazz is playing."
Splendid, smooth words, like "cock-a-doodle-doo."
The sound tickles my lips and trembles in my eyes—
so why not sing out and shed a tear or two?!

When you're 9 years old, and 4 of those were war—
and suddenly it's over, and the wakes pass on
into lively dances, the record player's cranked up
and, shiny with oil, the record sways along,
a fanfare sobs hot and cold,
the shellac gleams at 78 rotations per minute,
and through it, somehow, a shimmying shoulder,

¹³⁹ Ibid.

musky, showing black with blue-ish in it.

And then you're 19: a whiff of colonial wax
comes from another box; the radio receiver's chrome
is all shined up; the saxophone is called a sax;
and how convincing the host, through static from the
world's furthest reaches!

The Voice of America, buzzing, flies into the gloom:
There, in Madison Square—life's free and easy!
And in Carnegie Hall, too. And who cares
which Madison it is—James or Dolly?

The trombone wails; its case lies on the ground,
full of green leaves and rain; whites of eyes gleam
in ecstasy. And I want to be in that number
of black saints, when the saints go marching in.

At Madison Square, in the park, jazz is playing.
It's the end, and the start, it's all of one piece,
there's nothing to add—not even the sobbing
each time the lilac vibraphone player touches the keys.¹⁴⁰

In Naiman's repeated refrain "There, in Madison Square—life's free and easy"¹⁴¹, the mythical aura surrounding the typical Soviet listener that highlights openness and individual freedom in a society propelled by such values is communicated through telescopic images of the record player, "shiny with oil" which smoothly transition into the "shellac" which "gleams at 78 rotations per minute" and "a shimmying shoulder,/ musky, showing black with blue-ish in it"¹⁴² that underlines the African-American context of jazz, principally emphasizing the playing of jazz as an expression of freedom by enslaved Black peoples. In the poem, as we may observe, there are repeated and incantatory references to "smoothness", "shine", "gleam" that underline the seeming effortlessness of the tunes. Shohl Rosen reads the phrase "a whiff of colonial wax" in the poem, identifying it as *vaksa*, a "black substance that was used in the USSR to clean and shine shoes"¹⁴³. Naiman has also confirmed, in his telephonic communication with Shohl-Rosen that such work was traditionally done by an ethnic minority group called the

¹⁴⁰ Anatolii Naiman, "Ritm ruki. Stikhotvoreniia" ("Voice of America"), trans. Margo Shohl Rosen in "The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University:2011), 163-64.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 168.

Assyrians—or the Aisory. Thus, the aroma of *vaksa* “becomes associated with both Soviet minority shoe-shiners and the parallel workers in the USA—African Americans”¹⁴⁴. The liberating aspects of jazz rhythms thus undergo a contextual transformation whereby a similar chronicle of liberation, even if wishfully foretold, is nevertheless, hinted at.

In Brodsky’s “These days I feel tiredness too often...”, the poet-narrator alludes to inventing imaginary “birds” in the mind, while listening to alien melodic rhythms, “as if from non-existence”¹⁴⁵:

Now, I feel the tiredness more often,
and I speak of it less and less,
Oh, my soul’s self-made designs
the warm and joyful crew.

What birds do you invent yourself,
who do you gift or sell them to,
and live in a modern nest,
and sing with a contemporary voice?

Come back, soul, and give me a feather!
Let’s have the radio sing to us about fame.
Tell me, soul, how life looked,
how it looked from the flying bird’s vantage point?

While the snow, falling as if from nonexistence
whirls around the simple eaves,
Draw about death, my street,
While you, o bird, exclaim about life.

And so I walk, while you somewhere are soaring
already out of earshot of our complaints,
And so I live, while you somewhere scream,
and flap your agitated wings.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Joseph Brodsky, “Teper’ vse chashche chuvstvuiuu ustalost’” (“These days I feel tiredness too often...”), trans. Margo Shohl Rosen in “The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry”, 182-83.

This particular poem also appears as “Exhaustion now is a more frequent guest” in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems* trans. George L. Kline (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 32. But I have decided to use Shohl Rosen’s translation because it better captures the “swing movement” of jazz.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Thus the radio-set, located within the “modern nest”, allows the poet to sing “with a contemporary voice” which tries to emulate “the flying bird’s vantage point”¹⁴⁷. Brodsky’s metaphoric bird can be well regarded as an idealistic personification of the tenets of individual liberty. One of the important phrases in the poem is “falling as if from nonexistence” which signals, for Brodsky, the apparent lack of context available to Soviet listeners regarding American society, represented by Conover’s voice full of ready wit, humour and impromptu bravado. In fact, it was this lack of context which impressed the Soviet listener even more, making the experience of listening to jazz akin to a timeless phenomenon.¹⁴⁸ Importantly, Brodsky has also alluded to films, another mode of cultural dissemination, where rolls of Hollywood pre-war productions, found as war trophies were shown to a Soviet audience without titles or credits, “[s]ince our government wasn’t keen on paying for the rights”¹⁴⁹. That stars such as Errol Flynn, Olivia de Havilland, Tyrone Power were performing in them was a fact not known until two decades later to Brodsky:

The absence of who was who on the screen imparted to these films the anonymity of folklore and the air of universality...[t]he absence of credits made them openly archetypal at the time—the early fifties: the last years of Stalin’s rule. The Tarzan series alone, I daresay, did more for de-Stalinization than all Khrushchev’s speeches at the Twentieth Party Congress and after.¹⁵⁰

As Brodsky goes on to further elaborate in the essay, the stark contrast between the “buttoned-up, rigid, inhibited, winter-minded standards of public and private conduct” of the average Soviet Russian to the spectre of “a long-haired naked loner pursuing a blonde through the thick of a tropical rain-forest with his chimpanzee version of Sancho Panza and lianas as his means of

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 184.

Shohl Rosen, for example, quotes Mysovsky’s reaction at first listening to jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker thus: “I heard Parker for the first time in 54. It was like a flash of magnesium. A cascade of sounds, the bad radio receiver and the voice of the host announcing in English I did not then understand” emphasizing thus that part of the “timeless” appearance of the show to Soviet audiences was due to a seeming foreignness and incomprehension.

¹⁴⁹ Brodsky, “Spoils of War” in *On Grief and Reason: Essays*, 8.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

transportation”¹⁵¹ was accountable for this momentous and strong impact. The emphasis on individualism, the “one-against-all spirit”, Brodsky perceptively points out, which was “totally alien to the communal, collective-oriented sensibility of the society we grew up in”¹⁵². These films thus “were received rather as parables of individualism...as historical proof of individualism’s precedence”¹⁵³.

In Brodsky’s second poem “Piece with Two Pauses for Baritone Sax” [*P’esa s dvumia pazami dlia saks-baritona*], the broadcasting of Connover’s *Voice of USA* show at midnight assumes such an archetypal character, pervading known spaces and architectural designs with an alien tune:

A metallic call at midnight
flies down from the Petropavlovsk cathedral,
from wide-open windows in the alleys
the wooden clocks of rooms melodically tinkle,
from radio receivers hymns sound.
All quiets down.
The even whisper of girls in entryways
quiets down,
and lovers in July are calm. ¹⁵⁴

The “dark-blue murk” of the night, standing in startling contrast against the “little yellow squares of windows”¹⁵⁵ point towards the enactment of a surreptitious ritual of listening to music not officially allowed but which, nevertheless, captivates and holds an alien audience in thrall. In the next stanza Brodsky not only names his favourite performers, but also brings out the sheer foreignness of place names such as “forty-second and seventy-second streets”:

Play, play Dizzy Gillespie,
Gerry Mulligan and Shearing, Shearing,
in white dresses, all of you there in white dresses
and white blouses

on forty-second and seventy-second streets,
there, beyond the dark ocean, amidst trees,

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 9.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Brodsky, “*P’esa s dvumia pazami dlia saks-baritona*” (“Piece with Two Pauses for Baritone Sax”), trans. Margo Shohl Rosen in “The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry”, 189-90

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

above which, their airborne lights ablaze, airplanes are
flying,
beyond the ocean.

A good style, a good style
this evening,
Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,
what is Gerry up to there,
the baritone and boredom and so alone,
Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,
the sound draws an ellipsoid so far beyond the ocean
and if black Garner now
hammers his hands on the black-and-white row,
Everything becomes clear.¹⁵⁶

The imaginary “ellipsoid” traced by the mind’s eye within the poem recalls “swing” music, a particular sub-genre of jazz that had become popular in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s, defined, by the *Oxford Dictionary of Music* as a phenomenon “resulting from the conflict between a fixed pulse and the wide variety of accent and rubato that a jazz performer plays against it”, typically by the “the forward propulsion imparted to each note by a jazz player through manipulation of timbre, attack, vibrato, intonation or other means”¹⁵⁷. Shohl-Rosen also cites Elena Petrushanskaia’s reading of this poem where she links the poem’s “improvisational form with its accentual meter as a response to jazz”, paralleling “jazz performance even on the phonetic level”¹⁵⁸.

Erroll!

My God, my God, my God, my God,
what a drummer old Monk has
and how far,
beyond the ocean,
my God, my God, my God,
it’s some kind of hunt for love,
everything is snatched up, but the hunt goes on,
my God, my God,
it’s some kind of pursuit of us, pursuit of us,
my God,
who is that chatting with death, going outside,

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ J. Bradford Robinson, “Swing,” Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2258226> (accessed September 11, 2020)

¹⁵⁸ Elena Petrushanskaia quoted in Shohl Rosen, “The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry”, 191

this morning.

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,
you're running in the street, so deserted, no sound at all,
only in entryways, in driveways, at intersections,
at front doors,
in entryways they're talking with each other,
and on locked facades already-read newspapers snarl their
headlines.
All the lovers in July are so calm,
calm, calm.¹⁵⁹

The “swing” movement is apparent even in Shohl Rosen’s translation of the poem, where the forward propulsion of the notes are compared to “some kind of hunt for love” and a “pursuit” that is never exhausted till the end, verbally mimicking the basic musical structure of a jazz piece where the “head” (composed) tune, played after the first chorus, is followed by several choruses, at the end of each of which, there follows an improvised solo. Finally, at the end, the “head” note is repeated again. In Brodsky’s poem likewise, the first stanza mirrors the last, with their images of crowded “entryways” and the refrain “lovers in July are calm” that is repeated at the end.

It is worth asking at this point the consequences of the profound admiration which Brodsky, as a member of the Avvakumite group, had for these elements of American culture, which in part “estranged” him from his surroundings to an imagined plane where, inverting traditional Marxist dictums, “consciousness” could be thought of as conditioning “existence”. Not only was he profoundly drawn to an alternative individualist ideology, the moorings of his belief-system also resulted in Brodsky’s inclusion among the Avvakumite group, whose nomenclature is derived from the history of Archpriest Avvakum (1620-1682), a proto-presbyter who resisted the reforms brought into the Russian Orthodox Church by Patriarch Nikon, and saw them as corruption of the Russian Church. Owing to his continual opposition to these reforms, Avvakum fell out of the favour of Tsar Aleksey I, and

¹⁵⁹ Brodsky, “*P’esa s dvumia pazunami dlia saks-baritona*”, trans. Margo Shohl Rosen in “The Independent Turn...”, 190.

was exiled to the city of Tobolosk in Siberia.¹⁶⁰ Even though he was temporarily allowed to return to Moscow, he was once again exiled to Mezen in the Arkhangelsk region in 1664; and after a long period of protracted struggles, he was imprisoned and exiled at Pustozorsk above the Arctic Circle where he spent the last fourteen years of his life in a pit. Avvakum was finally executed by being burned at the stake. Avvakum's life and the exilic hardships he faced were recounted in his biography *Life [Zhitie]*, which became one of the earliest biographical records in Russian literature.¹⁶¹ Drawing on the kenosis (emptying out) of Christ's will, which had become merely a vehicle for God's will, Avvakum sought to justify his opposition to Nikon's reforms. Priscilla Hunt, elaborating on the significance of Avvakum's resistance, thus concurs:

Responding to the westernizing elite's adoption of a new secularizing religious ideology, he created a sacred narrative in which he personally embodied the by now traditional, popular kenotic ideal. He found in kenoticism a language to justify his opposition to the elite and symbolize his identification with the people.¹⁶²

Archpriest Avvakum had gathered a sizable number of followers who were well-known in Russia as the Old Believers and his opinions were copied and re-distributed through underground networks in Russia. Given the structural similarities between Avvakum's persecution, exile and eventual martyrdom and the imprisonments, expulsions as well as banishment faced by different members of the Leningrad group of poets, Shohl Rosen is of the opinion that this name is a fitting description, especially since one of the stated motives of the Avvakumite poets has been to adhere to vernacular Russian idiom "in pursuing the ancient practice of humane letters"¹⁶³. As the members of this dissenting group who were barred from the possibility of official publication, these poets were published only in *samizdat*, and all of them were kept under close observation by the KGB. It is therefore immediately apparent that Brodsky's affiliation to this group, no matter his

¹⁶⁰ See "Avvakum Petrovich", *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Avvakum-Petrovich#ref170336> (accessed September 11, 2020)

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Priscilla Hunt, "A Penitential Journey: The Life of the Archpriest Avvakum and the Kenotic Tradition", *Canadian American Slavic Studies* 25, Nos. 1-4 (1991): 201.

¹⁶³ Shohl Rosen, "The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry", 12.

stubborn insistence that he was, above all, a “private” poet, bespeaks of a background of political dissent which must have been among the causes for his trial for parasitism and exile.

3.3 Images of Homecoming: Estrangement, the Kierkegaardian Context and Existential Exile

I propose to read three early poems by Brodsky written during the phase 1961-62, where the act of homecoming is understood in terms of the poet’s spatial, temporal or metaphoric distancing from home’. In other words, home is reduced to being a metaphysical link between several forms of displacement. These poems, composed in the early years of the sixties, proleptically forebode Brodsky’s future relationship to Soviet Russia. They are important in gauging the extent of estrangement Brodsky experiences with respect to the totalitarian ethos of the post-Thaw years. The first important link in this series comes from “A Christmas Ballad” (1962) dedicated to his fellow poet Evgeny Rein, that serves also as the first poem in *Selected Poems* (1973), translated by George L. Kline¹⁶⁴. The poem begins with employing the refrain “In anguish unaccountable” at the beginning of every stanza, setting forth the image of “the small shy streetlamp of the night” floating out of Alexander Park, located “next to the Kremlin on the side opposite the Lenin Mausoleum”¹⁶⁵. George L. Kline, the translator adds the following description of the image in a footnote:

Since its outer edge is below street level, its streetlights (which are shaped somewhat like ship’s lanterns), though above the heads of people walking in the park itself, are below the feet of pedestrians on the sidewalk outside the park.¹⁶⁶

Kline’s description aptly captures the comparison, set forth in the poem, between the light emanating out of Alexander Park, “[I]like a pale-yellow, tiny rose,/ it drifts along, past lovers’ heads/ an walkers’ feet”¹⁶⁷. Through its different images,

¹⁶⁴ Brodsky, “A Christmas Ballad” in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems* trans. George L. Kline (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 29-30.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 30.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 29.

the poem recounts a midnight stroll on the streets of Moscow, depicting its sleepwalkers and drunkards, who “float like bees”, the melancholy stranger taking a snapshot of “the metropolis by night”, a cab bound for “Ordynka Street” while “dead men stand in close embrace/with private homes”¹⁶⁸. Brodsky’s next images describe “a melancholy poet” strolling across the cityscapes, a “round-faced and sad” porter standing alone beside a shop for kerosene, and a “ladies’ man” who “lopes down a dingy street”¹⁶⁹. In a similar vein, the following stanza describes “a random swimmer” who “sadly floats” and the “fragile beauty” who “swims alone...exchanging love for bitterness,/ unable to explain her grief”¹⁷⁰. Echoes of the existential isolation which Brodsky encountered in Lev Shestov’s work abound in the host of movements around the Moscow street laden with echoes of departure, typified by the passage of time through which the year is about to exhaust itself in the next six days, while promises of an unknown but hopeful future gather on the margins. Brodsky ends the poem with a twist that bespeaks of hopes and desires which have remained unfulfilled in the society he inhabits:

Your New Year’s Day floats on a wave,
within the city’s purple sea,
in anguish uncontrollable—
as though life will begin anew,
and we will live in fame and light
with sure success and bread to spare;
as though, from lurching to the left,
life will swing right.¹⁷¹

Brodsky’s translator George L. Kline hastens to add, with reference to the concluding line of the poem, that the “terms “left” and “right” are not meant politically”¹⁷², and this stance is probably in keeping with Brodsky’s lifelong preference of private and individual connotations over their probable “political” counterparts. However, it is tempting, and not without good reason, to read the terms “left” and “right” precisely as political euphemisms of a world split into two halves by the Iron Curtain, What Brodsky visualises at the conclusion of the poem is a pendulum-like movement or “swing” from one possible extremity to another,

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 30.

¹⁷² Ibid.

with the latter holding promises of “fame and light/ with sure success and bread to spare”¹⁷³. When read in context of the decidedly marginal status of the Avvakumites and their poetry in the Soviet world of letters at the beginning of the decade of the 1960s, it seems Brodsky almost anticipates an epoch-changing event about to take place in his personal life which holds the capability of this “lurch” from “left” to “right”. Therefore, contrary to what Kline stipulates, I would go as far as to claim that in the space of two lines, Brodsky anticipates his impending banishment from Soviet Russia with the conflicting, but ultimately associated emotions of foreboding and unbridled hope.

Brodsky’s poem “You’re coming home again...” (1961) chooses to visualise the journey home instead of the concept’s terminal finality¹⁷⁴. The poem zeroes in on the bare loneliness of the speaker who repeats the ordeal of a return homeward. The operative phrase that repeats itself in the course of the poem, “[i]t’s fine” hints at stoic temperament on part of the poet-speaker who is well aware of his complete isolation:

Can there be anyone here who still needs you,
who would still want to count you as his friend?
You’re home, you’ve bought sweet wine to drink with
supper,
And, staring out of the window, bit by bit
you come to see that you’re the one who’s guilty:
the only one. That’s fine. Thank God for that.
Or maybe one should say. “Thanks for small favors”.¹⁷⁵

Brodsky’s lyric poet-protagonist thus features, as Lev Loseff, his biographer has put it, as “the anonymous loner who has consciously chosen loneliness and anonymity”¹⁷⁶. But much as he was influenced by the philosophies of Shestov, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre, Loseff, in fact, has gone on to add that Brodsky’s stance towards them was never oriented towards replicating their elaborately complex theoretical systems in his poetry. Disinclined, in other words, to make “beginnings and endings meet”, he described his position as being “in

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Joseph Brodsky, “You’re coming home again...”, in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems*, trans. George L. Kline (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 33.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 164.

between or all outside, living in a constant state of imbalance, instability, emotional tension and angst”¹⁷⁷. He is constantly troubled by existentialist overtones of individual guilt and responsibility. Existentialism as a movement was a major phenomenon in Brodsky’s time, but the influence of the above philosophers was absorbed and duly restructured to help him “articulate what he already knew by intuition: the sense of isolation and abandonment, the absurdity of being in the face of nonbeing, a passionate individualism, a sense of guilt and responsibility, an urge to identify with those in pain and need”¹⁷⁸. Stoicism, another contending philosophy in Brodsky’s poetic and intellectual universe, prioritizes impassivity and emotional restraint, while existential thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche stressed on living life through the prism of a passionate individual subjectivity. Somewhat erroneously, Brodsky considered Existentialism as a logically developed, “contemporary version of Stoicism”¹⁷⁹, and this resulting conflict, between a recognition of individual guilt and the calm acceptance of the same, dominates this particular poem:

It’s fine that there is no one else to blame,
it’s fine that you are free of all connections,
it’s fine that in this world there is no one
who feels obliged to love you to distraction.

It’s fine that no one ever took your arm
and saw you to the door on a dark evening,
it’s fine to walk, alone, in this vast world
toward home from the tumultuous railroad station.¹⁸⁰

What is of interest to the narratorial voice of the poem is the catching of oneself on this homeward journey, “mouthing a phrase that’s something less than candid”¹⁸¹, a notion that points towards existential loneliness as a form of ontological exile that haunts the finite individual subject in course of their peregrinations through the rather difficult rite of passage that is human life.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 165.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 166.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 165.

¹⁸⁰ Joseph Brodsky, “You’re coming home again...”, in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems*, 33.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

The third poem I intend to take up is “The month of January has flown past” (1962)¹⁸², where the distancing between the self and the homeland is primarily temporal. The poem serves thus as a variation of exile as spatial distancing and enacts an impossible desire to transcend the constraints on individual subjectivity introduced by the temporal dimension. The poet-narrator, who silently observes the “month of January” flow past “prison windows”, standing witness to the joyous singing “of convicts in their labyrinth of cells” at the freeing of a fellow convict, is seemingly dissatisfied with the merely physical dimension of freedom thus gained.¹⁸³ As an alternative, he bids farewell to the month and transcends the material plane of “existence” by estranging himself “deep in thought”¹⁸⁴. In the introduction to his renowned monograph on Brodsky’s exilic creativity, David M. Bethea has commented that his “philosophy of life” may be aptly summed up as “one of metaphysical expansion in the face of physical subtraction”¹⁸⁵. This description also fits the movement outlined by this poem’s trajectory, Evading the protracted tribulations of the poet-narrator’s captivity, and the repetitive cycle of never-ending incarceration “from the last interrogation/ to the next one”, the metaphysical plane now inhabited is called “that distant land/ where there is neither March nor February”¹⁸⁶

Yet another example of distancing is offered in “The tenant finds his new house...” (1962)¹⁸⁷ where the idea of ‘home’ is served as the only possible link between two successive tenants of the same house. However, this unifying connection between the successive tenants is also tinged by the notion of a difference, marked by the passage from the “old” to the “new”, which distinguishes between their statuses as tenants to the same house. Opening with the image of the new tenant who finds himself fiddling with the keys to its entrance in the darkness, the poem focusses on the

¹⁸² Joseph Brodsky, “Sonnet: The month of January...”, in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems*, 31

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ David M. Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), 21.

¹⁸⁶ Joseph Brodsky, “Sonnet: The month of January...”, in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems*, 31

¹⁸⁷ Brodsky, “The tenant finds his new house...”, in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems*, 35.

...unfamiliar objects
whose shadows fit him so imperfectly
that they themselves are quite distressed about it.¹⁸⁸

The rather “ungallant” looking lock therefore, seems resistant to the tenant’s touch in the darkness. The poem is also marked by a continuing interplay between the plane of the temporary and transient, readily available to individual subjects through everyday life and the illusory and misleading plane of erroneously perceived permanence. The older tenant “who moved a chest of drawers in, and a table,/ thinking that he would never have to leave”¹⁸⁹ is proven to be mistaken in his presupposition. Death, the ultimate form of “leaving” cuts him short: “his dose of life proved fatal”¹⁹⁰. Despite the dissonances in their “appearance, character or psychic trauma”, they are forever united by their subjective perceptions of ‘home’¹⁹¹. The figure of the well-adjusted and ‘homed’ older tenant, representing the temporal dimension of being referred to as the “past” inevitably gives way to the ‘homeless’ “present” of the new. One can read the poem not merely in a literal sense, and pay attention to the existentialist subtext embedded in its metaphoric representation. Reduced to its essentials, the human being encounters several kinds of finitude—spatial, temporal and experiential—which limit him or her from realising the full potential of his condition. Within the limited context of the poem, for example, one can easily read the impending ‘homing’ of the “new” tenant in the house as simultaneous to the “older” tenant’s movement to find home elsewhere. Death, in this case, the ultimate “exile” from life, appears to be the timely reminder of the human being’s finitude that cannot be ultimately transcended. This ‘failure’ on part of the individual, one might state in Kierkegaardian terms, to attest to the intelligibility and all-encompassing nature of absolute objective knowledge pertaining to the universe, in turn fosters individual subjectivity, making it adequately amenable to a “leap of faith.”¹⁹² Faith, thus anchored within individual subjectivity, arises in the seeming disjunct between human finitude and the quest for transcendent meaning “Home”, which ultimately emerges as a concept in-

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² For Kierkegaard, the “leap of faith” constitutes the subjective attempt to reconcile the paradoxical relationship between the hope for the infinite through the finite, the eternal through the contingent and temporal.

relation to two contending subjectivities (the ‘older tenant and the ‘new’), can never properly speak for itself in absolute terms. Existential exile inevitably emerges as its double, and as Steven A. Burr has claimed in his work, “...can be understood to name a now-deficient relation between a specific person (or group) and a particular place...making it impossible to preserve their manner of relating (their being related)”¹⁹³. Therefore, as “the severance of this being related is felt as a loss; the individual, ‘exiled’ from a particular place, longs for that place to be returned (or, rather, to return to that place)”¹⁹⁴. In Burr’s study, “existential exile” is defined as “the failure to recognize the possibility of relation between self and world, including others”¹⁹⁵. “Faith”, writes Burr, plays the role “...in the formulation and ultimate realization of the possibility of accomplishing the relation (related-ness) that is necessary both for the transcendence of existential exile and the attainment of existential meaning”¹⁹⁶. In my reading of Brodsky’s poem “Nature Morte”, I shall try to illustrate the inherent idealism within the vantage-point of Brodsky’s poet-narrator in trying to trace the role played by estrangement in the successful resolution of existential exile as a being-in-the-world.

Brodsky composed “Nature Morte”¹⁹⁷ in 1971, three years prior to his banishment by the Brezhnev government. Yet, closer examination of the allusions and references embedded within the poem can alert us towards the interrelationship between the theme of existential exile which is nevertheless, apprehended through a re-iteration of the political subtext of exilic underpinning. The poem begins with an epigraph from a poem by the Italian poet and novelist Cesare Pavese (1908-1950), who during the decade of the 1930s was arrested for moving into anti-fascist circles and for illegal possession of letters from a political prisoner and temporarily imprisoned, before he was sent into confinement (*confino*) and internal exile to Southern Italy.¹⁹⁸ Pavese’s eventual return to Turin was followed by German occupation in Italy, from which he had to flee to the mountains around Serralunga

¹⁹³ Steven A. Burr, “Exile and [Re]union: A Hermeneutic of Existential Exile” (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University: 2011), 113.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* iii.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* iv.

¹⁹⁷ Joseph Brodsky, “Nature Morte,” in *Joseph Brodsky: Collected Poems in English* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 48-52.

¹⁹⁸ “Cesare Pavese”, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cesare-Pavese> (accessed January 2, 2021)

di Crea, near Casale Monferrato. From about 1943 to 1945, Pavese lived with his friends and partisans of the anti-Fascist Resistance in these hills. The bulk of Pavese's work was published after the end of World War II when he joined the Communist Party of Italy and worked for the party newspaper *L'Unita*. Pavese's eventual depression originated in the failure of his short-lived affair with actress Constance Dowling, to whom he dedicated his novel *La luna e i falò* (1950; *The Moon and the Bonfires*) and the poem "Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi" (1951; "Death Will Stare at Me out of Your Eyes") which also served as the eponymous poem of the collection of Pavese's love lyrics and best known poetry¹⁹⁹. The poem "Death will come with your eyes..." that Brodsky uses as the epigraph to his "Nature Morte" serves as a pointed reference to the themes of human mortality and finitude culminating in death. In Pavese's poem, death serves as a constant reminder of human mortality while in the midst of life, "like an old regret,/ or a stupid vice"²⁰⁰. The eyes of the beloved, while reminding the poet of her beauty are very likely to be reduced to

... a useless word,
a muted cry, a silence.
As you see them each morning
when alone you lean over
the mirror. O cherished hope,
that day we too shall know
that you are life and nothing..²⁰¹

This dichotomy of "life and nothing" hinted at in Pavese's poem becomes an enduring motif in "Nature Morte", constantly underlining the contrary states of "death-in-life" and "life-in-death". The latter part of Pavese's poem also brings out the repressed guilt of the poet-narrator who imagines that the stare of death will match his beloved's and his eventual death "will be like terminating a vice/ as seen in the mirror"²⁰². While Pavese visualises the coming of Death as an act of going "down the abyss in silence"²⁰³, Brodsky's poem presupposes an idealism that is ultimately locatable within the Divinity of Christ who embodied the

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Cesare Pavese, "Death will come with your eyes...", <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/death-will-come-your-eyes> (accessed January 2, 2021).

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

Spirit, and in whom the dualism of “people” and “things” met. Indeed, when we read Brodsky’s ten-part poem, we encounter the dichotomous relationship he posits between “people”, who are manifested states of “death-in-life”, and things, which are but the obverse. The poet-narrator, having evidentially known the inevitability of death and decay that awaits all “people” and “things”, as well as the indomitable forcefulness of Time in bringing about change in both of their respective orders, begins by choosing to “live in the dark”²⁰⁴. Having been “fed up with the light”, and thus choosing the dark over it, he nevertheless realises the changeability of his own desires, for “I shall begin to speak/when I’m fed up with the dark.”²⁰⁵. The second stanza, likewise enacts similar dichotomies between silence and speech, nothingness and being, days and nights and finally “people” and “things”:

What then shall I talk about?
Shall I talk about nothingness?
Shall I talk about days, or nights?
Of people? No, only things,

since people will surely die.
All of them. As I shall.
All talk is a barren trade.
A writing on the wind’s wall. ²⁰⁶

The poet-narrator realises, somewhat circuitously, that he prefers “things” over “people”. The connotations in which Brodsky uses “things” may be understood as pointing towards a certain irreducible aspect of Being that outlasts the changeability of “people”: In the third section of the poem, the poet-narrator states:

People are not my thing.

I hate the look of them.
Grafted to life’s great tree,
each face is firmly stuck
and cannot be torn free. ²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Joseph Brodsky, “Nature Morte,” in *Joseph Brodsky: Collected Poems in English* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 48.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. 49.

The paradox that characterises Brodsky's delineation of "people" relates to the question of the living being as a contingent entity, slave to the force of Time, decay and "dust" within a deterministic universe. "Things", in themselves are also subject to the same forces, but since they are but only matter, "Their/ outsides are neither good/ nor evil. And their insides/reveal neither good nor bad"²⁰⁸. Brodsky's hermeneutic approach seems to be that "things" do not make any effort to conceal their inner frailty, because "[t]he core of things is dry rot"²⁰⁹:

Dust. When you switch lights on,
there's nothing but dust to see.
That's true even if the thing
is sealed up hermetically.²¹⁰

Thus, from within the "present" of those things of everyday use the poet-narrator offers an alternative version of reality that concerns their "future". Yet, despite the nature of the "thing" itself as a contingent entity,

Things themselves, as a rule,

don't try to purge or tame
the dust of their own insides.²¹¹

The reason why the poet-narrator seems to prefer "things" is precisely because as entities devoid of the agency of life, "they" seem to have accepted their inevitable outcome as "dust". As decayed matter or as the layered detritus of the past, they also serve as the "flesh" of Time, who is personified in the poem. The theme of the spectre of death haunting the poet-narrator through his experiences of sleep and sleep-induced immobility during the day, is here dubbed as a game of peekaboo where "My/ death, it would seem, is now/ trying and teasing me"²¹². The intimations of death-in-life appear as subtle reminders towards anticipating whether the Self can withstand "non-being in daylight"²¹³. As we shall further examine in

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid. 50.

²¹³ Ibid.

due course, Brodsky's aesthetics of self-deprecation are already apparent; he is also here emphasizing, with a keen eye for detail, the primacy of "things" over "people", since they differ, through their nature as bound material entities within space, "from man's/ world—a world made with words"²¹⁴. The essence of things is their silence, because

A thing can be battered, burned,
gutted and broken up.
Thrown out. And yet the thing
never will yell, "Oh, fuck!"²¹⁵

But by assuming that "things" could have spoken for themselves is also to acknowledge the second term within the dualism which may broadly be termed as "Life" or "Spirit". The "brown" and "blurry outline" of a "thing" therefore (here the fleeting "Twilight") by embodying this very dualism becomes *nature morte* (still life). In his interview with Anne Marie- Braumm, Brodsky emphasizes that the title, "[g]enerally speaking... is about the fact that Christ is in some sense, a still life"²¹⁶. Christ, who embodied the Holy Spirit, thus emerges as a "thing"-in-a-"person. The acknowledgement of the immortality of Christ is however contingent upon a Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" that suspends reason and is designed to shoulder responsibility of a subjectivist viewpoint, especially when faced with the possibility of the paradox embodied in the Absurd—in the paradox of the eternal, immortal, infinite God being incarnated in Time as a finite mortal. Further, as one may easily see, Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* reveals Christianity as an inverted "dialectic", that, through negotiating between its contingently objective nature as historical truth and the Eternal nature of God, posits "faith" as a subjectivist-idealist response to it. This is the spirit of the "speculator" who looks at Christianity less because it has historical veracity but because

It is a matter of indifference to him whether anyone accepts it or not; such anxieties are left to pupils at seminaries and lay people – and also, after all, to those who really are Christians and by no means indifferent as to whether or not they are Christians. He looks at Christianity in order now to

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid. 51.

²¹⁶ Anne Marie-Braumm, "The Muse in Exile: Conversations with the Russian poet, Joseph Brodsky", *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 8 no. 1 (Fall 1974): 237.

penetrate it with his speculative, yes indeed, his genuinely speculative thought. Suppose this whole proceeding were a chimera, suppose that it were sheerly impossible. Suppose Christianity is precisely subjectivity, taking to heart, and suppose that only two kinds of person can know anything about it: those who with an infinite passionate interest in their eternal happiness base this, their happiness, in faith, upon their believing relationship to Christianity, and those who with an opposite passion (but in passion) reject it – the happy and the unhappy lovers. Suppose, accordingly, that objective indifference can learn nothing at all. Only like is understood by like, and the old principle, *quicquid cognoscitur, per modum cognoscentis cognoscitur*, must be expanded to make room for a mode of knowing in which the knower fails to know anything at all, or has all his knowledge reduced to a conceit.²¹⁷

Thus, from within a Kierkegaardian framework of “subjectification”, Brodsky’s ‘Nature Morte’ may be read as a poem where the objective truth of “Death” finds only the “peaceful” body of the Subject—only “Scythe, skull and skeleton—/an absurd pack of lies.”²¹⁸ . The overwhelming emphasis on “subjectification” inherent in this paradigm is also indicative of how Brodsky’s idealist position presents itself as the dissenting obverse of the dialectical or historical materialism of official Soviet Party ideology. It also provides the rationale for the tenth and the final section of the poem:

Mary now speaks to Christ:
“Are you my son?—or God?
You are nailed to the cross.
Where lies my homeward road?

Can I pass through my gate
not having understood:
Are you dead?—or alive?
Are you my son?—or God?

Christ speaks to her in turn;
“Whether dead or alive,
woman, it’s all the same—
son or God, I am thine.”²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), 46-47.

²¹⁸ Brodsky, “Nature Morte”, 51.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.* 52.

Thus, the significance of the miracle of Christianity is left as attestable only to Mary's own subjectification as a believing Christian and through recourse to faith, which helps in restoring her to the "homeward road", passing the gate without having "understood", but having thus believed. For Kierkegaard too, as Burr has pointed out, "truth arises in the relation that is constituted through the passion of absolute subjective commitment; it is the relationship-in-tension between the belief itself and the simultaneous recognition of the objective uncertainty of the object of the belief"²²⁰, thus translating faith to the conscious choice of the individual. "Faith" in this context, must also be realised as the only possible resolution to the problem of existential exile, positing itself around the possibility of relation, while the object of faith becomes a means of relating of ontologically being 'at home-in relation':

If the ultimate *telos* of faith is to achieve a position of home in relation, then the ultimate *expression* of faith is the acknowledgment of and commitment to both the relatedness (as necessary) and the revelation of meaning within that relation, which together constitute the declaration of *home*. The religious desire, discussed above as the attempt to uncover meaning while living with and in mystery, can now be fully revealed as the quest for home, defined as the harmony (however transient) that arises in the realization of meaningful relation, not as an inherent and inevitable human truth but rather as a human potentiality.²²¹

A comparable version of this "inverted dialectic" of Christianity re-emerges in Brodsky's poem 'December 24, 1971', where the invocation of "emptiness" at the level of the word ushers in "lights as if out of nowhere"²²². Through defining "the basic mechanics of Christmas"²²³, Brodsky posits the constant conflict between the absolutist "tyranny" of dialectical materialism and the dissenting subjective-idealist worldview assumed by the individual in response to it:

²²⁰ Steven A. Burr, "Exile and [Re]union: A Hermeneutic of Existential Exile" (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University: 2011): 98.

²²¹ *Ibid.* 105.

²²² Joseph Brodsky, "December 24, 1971," in *Joseph Brodsky: Collected Poems in English* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 53.

²²³ *Ibid.*

Herod reigns but the stronger he is,
the more sure, the more certain the wonder.²²⁴

The pointed reference to King Herod also serves to consolidate, when read within the context of the essay “On Tyranny” (1980) where Brodsky’s depiction of the figure of the tyrant, materially manifested through the personae of “Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Castro, Qaddafi, Khomeini, Amin, and so on” who devotes his “time to think of the soul” in order to use it for preserving the “status quo”²²⁵. Brodsky further explicates that this megalomaniac clinging to power by any tyrant translates into the repressive regime of an intolerant, monolithic form of “truth” which, by its explicit disavowal of individual uniqueness and subjectivity potentially present within the human being. This problem pertains, Brodsky, adds however, not just to one-party dictatorial forms of government but also to the so-called “democracies”:

Today, every new sociopolitical setup, be it a democracy or an authoritarian regime, is a further departure from the spirit of individualism toward the stampede of the masses. The idea of one's existential uniqueness gets replaced by that of one's anonymity. An individual perishes not so much by the sword as by the penis, and, however small a country is, it requires, or becomes subjected to, central planning. This sort of thing easily breeds various forms of autocracy, where tyrants themselves can be regarded as obsolete versions of computers.²²⁶

At the level of politics, Brodsky’s individualist position highlights the faceless nature of tyranny. “The vehicle of tyranny”, states Brodsky, “is a political party (or military ranks, which have a structure similar to that of the party)”²²⁷. It is to be noticed that here Brodsky’s idealist scepticism takes a sarcastic turn when he defines the party as “essentially a fictitious reality invented by the mentally, or otherwise, unemployed”²²⁸ and when, at a later point in the same essay, he simply dismisses the labour involved in constructing a Party as not that “hard” and goes on

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Joseph Brodsky, “On Tyranny,” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 113.

²²⁶ Ibid. 115.

²²⁷ Ibid. 115-16.

²²⁸ Ibid. 116.

to add that “[t]here is a great deal of mental comfort in the incoherence of the aspiration”²²⁹. Brodsky’s refutation of the Marxist hypothesis of the vanguard Party, destined to pave the path towards a “dictatorship of the Proletariat” is therefore advanced also by way of the Christian Existentialist emphasis on subjectivity that Brodsky had encountered during his readings of Sestov and Kierkegaard. His position points to a fundamental inconsistency in the founding fable of the Party, an event which has “purely demographic origins”²³⁰, and thus can be dated to a finite, and dateable point in history. Yet, both “ideology” and Party mythology is crafted at the level of political demagoguery, in order to give them a ‘timeless appearance’: “...in general, a new reality is always created in the image of an old one, aping the existing structures”²³¹. In Brodsky’s view, such a technique not only obscures “the lack of imagination”, it “adds a certain air of authenticity to the entire enterprise”²³², helps in creating a new *modus operandi* for seizing political control and eliminating, one by one, the tyrant’s opponents within the Party ranks. Being a “status quo man”, he tries, to the length of his capabilities as a dictator, to preserve things as they are, rather than introduce changes to the existing political order: “...although his rivals may capitalize on the latter, he would rather eliminate them than introduce any changes, for one always feels a bit nostalgic toward the order that brought one to success”²³³. Nevertheless, it is the very anonymity of a collective such as the One Vanguard Party that leads to the “rule of nobodies”, a “far more ubiquitous form of tyranny”²³⁴ precisely because such a governance thrives on “depersonalization”:

And a tyranny does just that: structures your life for you. It does this as meticulously as possible, certainly far better than a democracy does. Also, it does it for your own sake, for any display of individualism in a crowd may be harmful: first of all for the person who displays it; but one should care about those next to him as well. This is what the party-run state, with its security service, mental institutions, police, and citizens' sense of loyalty, is for. Still, all these devices are not enough: the dream is to make every man his own bureaucrat. And the day when such a dream comes true

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid. 118.

²³⁴ Ibid. 120.

is very much in sight. For bureaucratization of individual existence starts with thinking politics, and it doesn't stop with the acquisition of a pocket calculator.²³⁵

As we shall go on to see in the subsequent sections of this chapter, the Christian Existentialist context responsible for structuring Brodsky's individualist ethos also may direct us towards an anticipation of exilic consciousness that underlines his journey from a monolingual poet to a bilingual one. Such a movement occurred during the years of his internal exile to Norenskaia in the Archangelsk region of the Russian North, and was marked by a series of literary touchstones that paved the path towards Brodsky's initiation to the Anglo-American poetic canon, specifically through the genre of the elegy. The next section will therefore, try to ascertain the role played by Brodsky's internal exile in his development as a poet.

3.4 Arrest, Trial, Imprisonment and Internal Exile at Norenskaiya: The 'Audenesque' Elegy and Brodsky's Metapoetic Apprenticeships

Brodsky's internal exile to Norenskaia of the Arkhangelsk region occurred when after a mock trial in 1964, the Dzerzhinsky District Court found him guilty of social parasitism. Loseff's biography gives a particularly detailed and vivid account of the series of events that led to Brodsky's arrest, imprisonment, trial and the subsequent penal sentence that followed. Loseff quotes Izrail Metter, who records the intricate details of the "insultingly squalid courtroom" and the "shameful hearing"²³⁶. But amidst all of this confusion, Metter records that the young Brodsky "radiated a sort of peaceful detachment—Judge Savalyeva couldn't hurt him"²³⁷ In fact, Brodsky tried to communicate that his vocation as a poet was due not to any sort of formal training that he had received, but that it came from "God". There was much ado thereafter, and in between the first and the second courtroom session,

Brodsky was confined for three weeks in the "violent" ward of the *Pryazhka* (Psychiatric Hospital No. 2 on the banks of the *Pryazhka* river). There, his treatment began

²³⁵ Ibid. 121.

²³⁶ Izrail Metter, quoted in Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 79.

²³⁷ Ibid.

immediately: he was awakened in the middle of a night, plunged into a cold water bath, wrapped in wet sheets and set down next to a radiator. The sheets, contracting as they dried, cut into his flesh...either the hospital staff truly believed Brodsky to be mentally ill and were “treating” him so that he would be judged competent to stand trial and conviction, or this was simply the sort of sadism the entire world would later learn from dissidents subjected to Soviet psychiatric terror.²³⁸

The set of realisations Brodsky went through during his subsequent experiences of being confined within a transit prison cell in Kresty, and “then transported to Arkhangelsk in a prison boxcar—a Stolypin”²³⁹ are best captured in his essay “The Writer in Prison” which was written as the foreword to *This Prison Where I Live: The PEN Anthology of Imprisoned Writers* (1995) and was re-published, a year later, in the *New York Times*. In his elliptically condensed prose, Brodsky begins the essay by stating that “[p]rison is essentially a shortage of space made up for by a surplus of time”²⁴⁰ and owing to this inversely proportional relationship between these two dimensions, incarceration has itself become a metaphor of the human condition, which has thereby made it “an integral metaphor of Christian metaphysics as well as practically the midwife of literature”²⁴¹. What distinguishes the condition of imprisonment in the twentieth century, Brodsky writes, is its ubiquity and all-pervasiveness: “[y]ou can hardly name a language, not to mention a country...whose writers are fully exempted from the trend”²⁴². Nevertheless, what he performs is also a rigorous dissection of the experience of imprisonment, reminding the reader repeatedly of the physical tribulations and hardships that accompany it, because “[n]o matter what historical bell a prison may ring, it always wakes you up -- usually at 6 in the morning -- to the unpalatable

²³⁸ Ibid. 82.

²³⁹ Ibid. 92-93.

In his interviews to Simon Volkov, Brodsky has gone on to state that the Stolypin was “kind of hell on wheels...something straight out of Fyodor Dostoevsky or Dante” where about sixteen prisoners, packed into a compartment originally intended to hold four and with barred windows, were denied the right to relieve themselves, thus having no choice but to evacuate and/or urinate within the compartment itself.. Most of the “crowd” used to be hardened, notorious criminals. See Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet’s Journey through the Twentieth Century*, 75.

²⁴⁰ Joseph Brodsky, “The Writer in Prison”, *New York Times*, October 13, 1996, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/17/specials/brodsky-prison.html> (accessed December 5, 2020).

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

reality of your own term”²⁴³. But this is not merely indicative of the possible material challenges a writer in prison is faced with, nor should he, in Brodsky’s opinion, abandon “abstract notions”, for in fact “it pares them down to their most succinct articulations”²⁴⁴. Brodsky then goes on to define sets of pros and cons for prose and poetry in the essay, likening literary articulation within the former mode as more suited to captive life in a shared cell, while the latter kind of artist, he writes, fares well in “solitary confinement” because the lyric, in its essence is “plotless”, and “evolves according to the immanent logic of linguistic harmony”²⁴⁵. In fiction, Brodsky seems to re-iterate in an Aristotelian sense, there is a greater degree of “mimesis” involved; in order to visualise a fictional universe, “an art rooted in social intercourse”, a writer in prison tends faster “to find a common denominator with his cell mates than a poet is”²⁴⁶. Poetry, especially the lyric for Brodsky, is, on the other hand, rooted in its “abrupt nature” and thus finds itself in disfavoured circumstances, in prison, because its object is beyond the confines of the mundane.²⁴⁷ This however, he cautions, should not come to mean that the “art of poetry refuses to honor the base reality of oppression with the flowers of eloquence”²⁴⁸, but that it forebodes a spiritual capacity within its practitioners to go beyond the spectre of “human suffering” and to allow for the “unwitting by-product” fundamental to all art, “the notion that the overall human potential is far greater than can be exercised, not to mention catered to, by any given social context”²⁴⁹. Art thus defines an alternative, and more ethical mode of existence according to Brodsky, whereby a higher moral imperative is acknowledged. This, Brodsky concludes, at the risk of being dismissed as a piece of facetious essentialism, is because the human being “is in the habit of detecting a higher purpose and meaning in manifestly meaningless reality”.²⁵⁰ Thus literature offers an envisioned alternative, and therefore “writer is himself a superb metaphor of the human condition”²⁵¹. At any rate, Brodsky feels, it is the duty of the imprisoned writer to dispel the “prison mystique”, the notion that captivity and incarceration

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

equates to the “unknown”, enjoying a close proximity to such other limit-experiences such as death.²⁵² Thus the condition of imprisonment is perceived, from the vantage point of commonplace social reality as “an afterlife, structured as intricately and implacably as any ecclesiastical version of the kingdom of death, and by and large rich in gray hues”²⁵³. Instead, emphasizing on the “tactility” of one’s oppressors, he is advocating that the “hell” of prison is both made and manned by human agency. As single-minded and purposive may “tyrants” turn out to be in order preserve the status quo, they are, in an ultimate sense, merely human, and “cruel as they are paid to be, are negligent, corruptible, lazy and so forth”²⁵⁴. Brodsky finishes the essay with the conviction that this very notion of “hope” makes prisons “survivable”, yet is quick to point out, with characteristic irony, that “a lump of sugar would be more useful”²⁵⁵.

Brodsky’s tenure at Norenskaiya proved to become a very significant formative influence in his career as a poet, less due to the actual hardships he experienced there but because of his initiation to the tradition of Anglo-American poetry where he read Donne, Marvell and the English metaphysical poets, and found a life-altering poetic philosophy in W.H. Auden’s technical craftsmanship.²⁵⁶ The trials, in themselves, were far from negligible, because, as Loseff points out, Brodsky’s exile “to a remote village was hardly an idyll”²⁵⁷. Since exiles were expected to find their own jobs, “Brodsky managed to set himself up at the Danilovsky State Farm (*sovkhöz*)”²⁵⁸, where he started working as an agricultural labourer, and for his lodging found himself a cottage in the village of Norenskaia in Konusha district. Brodsky famously, in his interviews to Simon Volkov, called the landscape there “abstract” and “rural”²⁵⁹. In fact, the snow-clad, white landscape induced “this tremendous monotony”, which “communicates something to you about the world and life”²⁶⁰. Similarly, the “white nights” introduced “an element

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ See Lev Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 95.

²⁵⁷ Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 96.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Simon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet’s Journey through the Twentieth Century* (New York: The Free Press, 1998, 77.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

of total absurdity because they shed too much light on what absolutely did not merit illumination”²⁶¹. With the temperature steadily dropping further and further beyond the sub-zero mark towards winter and during it, surviving it became particularly difficult, though Brodsky recalls that the small village with only fourteen households was especially welcoming to his presence, though at first “a rumor went around that I was a spy”²⁶². But then, Brodsky recalls, “they decided that I was suffering for my faith”²⁶³. Loseff quotes at length from A. Babyonyshev (Maksudov), who had visited Brodsky while he was in internal exile at Norenskaia, and who describes, in his account, the details of Brodsky’s room, with only “a rough desk made of boards, on it a kerosene lamp, a typewriter, and a baroque-style inkwell...a bookshelf...a low bunk with a straw mattress, a wooden stand with a water bucket—this was the extent of the décor”²⁶⁴. But what Babyonyshev also recalls was even though Brodsky’s lodgings lacked the typical twentieth century urban conveniences of gas, plumbing, electricity or room-heating, it was “[r]eal, private, personal space”, an “unthinkable luxury” in the city-bred generations of Leningrad and Moscow.²⁶⁵

I will try to proceed with Brodsky’s poem ‘Autumn in Norenskaia’ which introduces the importance of the meditative poet-persona, set against the “abstract rural landscape” of the Russian North, which Brodsky acknowledged as capable of generating “a tremendous monotony [that] communicates something to you about the life and the world”²⁶⁶. The landscape at Norenskaia thus served as a setting to the poet’s meditative self in the midst of “an inner life that seizes on/any spectre to which it feels kin”²⁶⁷. This meditative self, cultivating an ‘inner life’ during Brodsky’s internal exile, dwelling upon “specters” presented before it through the senses, broken only intermittently by “the church bell of a creaking axle”, reflecting internally to the poet’s own subjectivity a reflection of the world lying “reversed in a rut of water”. In other words, this meditative self, like the

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid. 80.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ A Babyonyshev quoted in Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 97-98.

²⁶⁵ Ibid. 98.

²⁶⁶ Simon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet’s Journey through the Twentieth Century* (New York: The Free Press, 1998, 77.

²⁶⁷ Brodsky, ‘Autumn in Norenskaia,’ in *Collected Poems in English* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 8.

opening of an inner eye, finds itself ready to delve into not just sights, sounds and sensory experiences which the landscape presented before him, but also into the conditions that govern poetic crafting itself. It was also responsible, as we shall soon see, for his growing affinities towards the poetry of W.H. Auden and his gradual initiation into Anglo-American poetry through him.²⁶⁸

Brodsky came across Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' during his exile at Norenskaiya, and adapted the structure of Auden's elegy to ventriloquize him in the poem "Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot"²⁶⁹. As reported by his biographer Loseff, Brodsky "had a decent English-Russian dictionary and a small board of books, including Oscar Williams' *Pocket Anthology of English Verse*"²⁷⁰. Brodsky "was young then and therefore particularly keen on elegies as a genre, having nobody around dying to write one for"²⁷¹. Auden's elegy to Yeats, written as the first poem he composed after moving to the United States in 1939, also revealed his own ideological conflicts—" [h]e had yet not relinquished his faith in the left, was still a materialist by conviction, and was trying to fathom for himself the greatness...of the mystic and "reactionary" Yeats"²⁷². The intertextual moorings of Brodsky's text have been commented upon by Bethea who reads Auden's position as outsider, mourning the death of Yeats, also in some sense an outcast and exile, "an Irish nationalist writing in English"²⁷³, Auden, "who laboured under the weight of his debt to Yeats"²⁷⁴ becomes a suitable vessel for Brodsky for articulating his own intervention within the 'in-memoriam' genre, which, for Brodsky, is fraught with the nuances of poetic estrangement precisely because he crosses over the threshold of cultural specificity and peeks into an arena where he is likely to be dubbed an outsider (the world of Anglo-American verse). In thus being "so bent on domesticating the foreign and the "other" in order to create a niche for himself", Bethea contends, Brodsky hovers "on the margins, within the mainstream of Russian-Soviet letters"²⁷⁵, providing legitimacy to Mandelstam's

²⁶⁸ See Loseff, 'Epiphany in Norenskaiya,' in *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 109.

²⁶⁹ Brodsky, "Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot," in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems*, 99-102.

²⁷⁰ Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 101.

²⁷¹ Joseph Brodsky, "To Please a Shadow," in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 361.

²⁷² Loseff, 'Epiphany in Norenskaya', in *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 109.

²⁷³ David M. Bethea, 'Exile, Elegy and 'Auden-ticity,' in *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), 135.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 122.

hypothesization of the Russian national spirit, “formed through ceaseless hybridization, cross-breeding and foreign-born influences”²⁷⁶. Brodsky was not merely borrowing the structure of the elegy, as his two essays on Auden and his poetry, “On “September 1, 1939” by W.H. Auden” and “To Please a Shadow” would reveal, but was imbibing insights, albeit of a metaphysical nature, about the very nature of “Time” that “[w]orships language and forgives/ Everyone by whom it lives”²⁷⁷. In the second essay, Brodsky goes on to explicate the crux of the poetic wisdom he discovered in Auden’s elegy:

For "worship" is an attitude of the lesser toward the greater. If time worships language, it means that language is greater, or older, than time, which is, in its turn, older and greater than space. That was how I was taught, and I indeed felt that way. So if time--which is synonymous with, nay, even absorbs deity-worships language, where then does language come from? For the gift is always smaller than the giver. And then isn't language a repository of time? And isn't this why time worships it? And isn't a song, or a poem, or indeed a speech itself, with its caesuras, pauses, spondees, and so forth, a game language plays to restructure time? ²⁷⁸

And it is probably within this relationship posited between time and language where one ought, in all sincerity, place the very genre of the ‘elegy’. Elsewhere, in his essay on Tsvetaeva’s elegy to Rilke, *Novogodnee* (‘New Year’s Day’), Brodsky praises her ability to “look at herself through the eyes of the deceased Rilke’s soul wandering in space...to see not herself but the world abandoned by him”²⁷⁹. This “spiritual optic” capability, as Brodsky put it, divests Tsvetaeva the poet from herself.²⁸⁰ David M. Bethea claims that by using this device of estrangement “Tsvetaeva turns the tables of habitual cognition or reader expectation by making us the exiles, the ones stranded in the here and now as Rilke’s soul wanders in the empyrean beyond”²⁸¹. This inversion of point-of-view,

²⁷⁶ Osip Mandelstam, quoted in David M. Bethea, ‘Exile, Elegy and ‘Auden-ticity’, in *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, 122.

²⁷⁷ W.H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” in *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 83.

²⁷⁸ Brodsky, “To Please a Shadow,” in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 363.

²⁷⁹ Brodsky, “Footnote to a Poem”, in *Less than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), 215-16.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 217.

²⁸¹ David M. Bethea, ‘Exile, Elegy and ‘Auden-ticity’, in *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, 126.

where the loss of the dead is not experienced from the vantage point of those, including the reader, who survived but is instead rendered as the estranged poetic self of Tsvetaeva “who “sees” Rilke “seeing” all of this”²⁸².

Just as Auden’s three-part elegy on the death of Yeats began with the images of “frozen” brooks and “almost deserted” airports “in the dead of winter”²⁸³, Brodsky’s three-part elegy, beginning with the terse statement pronouncing Eliot’s death, goes on to describe scenes of the bleak winter in an urban cityscape:

He died at start of year, in January.
His front door flinched in frost by the streetlamp.
There was no time for nature to display
the splendors of her choreography.
Black windowpanes shrank mutely in the snow.
The cold’s town-crier stood beneath the light.
At crossings puddles stiffened into ice.
He latched his door on the thin chain of years.²⁸⁴

Eliot’s death is first seen as a parting (“He latched his door on the thin chain of years”) from the living, but more importantly also serves as the occasion of the severance of his “self” from his poetry, now “estranged” through death. David M. Bethea particularly draws our attention to the notion of border-crossing or crossing over the “threshold”²⁸⁵, rendered variously through the sequence of successive images which link, by way of showing Death, which “chooses from its bulging catalogue/ the poet, not his words, however strong,/but just—unfailingly—the poet’s self”²⁸⁶. Brodsky’s elegiac subject, the death of Eliot, a poet from the English literary canon, is similarly mourned through what it leaves behind, but from the aerial perspective of Eliot’s departed soul: “...a January gulf/in that dry land of days where we remain”²⁸⁷. Thus, this section attempts a separation hinted at in Auden’s elegy to Yeats, performed through the device of “mourning tongues” whereby “[t]he death of the poet was kept from his poems”²⁸⁸. However, whereas

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ W.H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” in *Selected Poems*, 80.

²⁸⁴ Brodsky, ‘Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot’, in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems*, 99.

²⁸⁵ See David M. Bethea, ‘Exile, Elegy and ‘Auden-ticity’, in *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, 121-22.

²⁸⁶ Ibid. 131.

²⁸⁷ Brodsky, ‘Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot’, in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems*, 100.

²⁸⁸ David M. Bethea, ‘Exile, Elegy and ‘Auden-ticity’, in *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, 130.

Auden's sceptical awareness of "poetry makes nothing happen" rings contrary to Yeats's purported unification of the Irish nationalist cause and the mysticism of his personal mythology, his "profound existential denial of the symbolist ethos"²⁸⁹ also consists here in carefully separating poetic truths from their historical counterparts, actively contesting the efficacy of Yeats's stated objective:

The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.²⁹⁰

Divested and stripped of the subject that articulates poetry in Auden's scheme of things, poetry becomes "[a] way of happening, a mouth"²⁹¹. In Brodsky's poem however, written when he was only twenty-five, and for the most part, yet uninitiated into the Anglo-American poetic canon, such an active contestation of Eliot's poetic legacy, particularly in an ironic vein could not have occurred, as for Brodsky, "Eliot was equally foreign whether viewed as an American expatriate or as a British citizen"²⁹². The aesthetic loss at Eliot's demise is thus recompensed even as poetry, "...breeds within the glass/ of lonely days, each echoing each, that swim/to distance"²⁹³.

At least two kinds of border-crossing happen in the course of Brodsky's poem; the first being the deceased poet's crossing over from life to death, with not merely tragic consequences for his poetic canon, and the second, the rather tenuous border between two different poetic traditions which Brodsky crosses over in approaching the poem through a metapoetic apprenticeship to Auden's language.²⁹⁴ In other words, Brodsky performs a form of poetic emigration by which mourning an English poet he had scantily read at the time allows him to cross over to a 'foreign' (Anglo-American) poetic tradition and linguistic matrix, permitting him

²⁸⁹ Ibid. 133.

²⁹⁰ W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," in *Selected Poems*, 80-81.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² David M. Bethea, 'Exile, Elegy and 'Auden-ticity', in *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, 134.

²⁹³ Brodsky, 'Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot', in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems*, 99.

²⁹⁴ Bethea, 'Exile, Elegy and 'Auden-ticity', in *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, 121-22

the necessary critical distance to intervene within that adopted tradition. The complexity of Brodsky's articulation of the elegy is compounded by the fact that Eliot was, in the words of Frank Kermode, a "perpetual exile...banished and banishing, honoured and deplored"²⁹⁵. The second section of the poem, commencing with an exhortation to the Magi, and culminates in the chorus to two singing figures, later identified as personifications of "America, where he was born and raised" and "England, where he died", both of them inclining "their sombre faces as they stand, bereft,/on either side of his enormous grave".²⁹⁶

While this section ends with a re-assertion of the 'limit principle' that distinguishes between the earthly domain and the domain of death, Brodsky also retrospectively looks, in the third section of the poem, at the theme of the deathlessness of the poet by alluding to Horace's *exegi monumentum* theme where a poet's linguistic achievements have the capacity to outlast Time.²⁹⁷ The re-employment of this trope is derived from the literary model that Auden had provided for Brodsky, The Horatian subtext is especially important because it deals with the interrelationship, as given in Auden's poem, between language and historical time, upholding, as it were, a form of linguistic disguise and guile where a distancing filter comes to mediate between the poet-narrator and his voice. It was the "treatment" of his subject rather than the subject itself which drew Brodsky to Auden, the "quiet, unemphatic, without any pedal, almost *en passant*" mode of articulation, "translating metaphysical verities into the pedestrian of common sense"²⁹⁸. What Brodsky was performing was a poetic emulation of Auden's voice, to whom he ascribed "a sensibility unique in its combination of honesty, clinical detachment and controlled lyricism". The "sole purpose" of his turning to English, Brodsky goes on to write in the essay, was "...to find myself in closer proximity to the man whom I considered the greatest mind of the twentieth century"²⁹⁹. Brodsky also goes so far as to state that Auden's essentially "anti-heroic posture was the *idée*

²⁹⁵ Frank Kermode quoted in David M. Bethea, 'Exile, Elegy and 'Auden-ticity, 57.

²⁹⁶ Brodsky, 'Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot', 100.

²⁹⁷ See Horace, "Ode 3.30," trans. A.Z. Foreman, <http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2014/08/horace-ode-330-from-latin.html> (accessed November 1, 2020).

Foreman translates "*Exegi monumentum aere perennius*" as "a monument to outlast bronze".

²⁹⁸ Brodsky, "To Please a Shadow," in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 360.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 357.

fixe of [his] generation”³⁰⁰. Later in the essay, Brodsky also calls Auden “...our transatlantic Horace” for the latter’s capacity to “fuse” both British and American idioms of English.³⁰¹ What we can be certain is that by internalising, over time, Auden’s “voice”, “tonality” or “posture towards reality”, Brodsky prolongs his presence within himself, “until that point comes when he occupies in you more of a place than you yourself occupy”³⁰². This hints at Brodsky’s deep-seated desire to acknowledge not merely an apprenticeship to Auden, but one which self-reflexively looks back at the linguistic mask of Auden in formulating poetic utterance. Such an apprenticeship I have therefore chosen to call “metapoetic”, in so far as it embodies, beyond the crafting of poetic lines, an imitable form of looking at the world where the ‘Audenesque’ continues to survive in the very conception of Brodsky’s personality, “In a sense”, Brodsky elaborates in an interview to Montenegro, “I think that their [Auden’s and Akhmatova’s] poems to a certain extent...are written by me, or that I’m the owner...I sort of live their lives...to myself it’s more sensible and more pleasant perhaps to think I’m a postscript to them than that I’m leading my own life”³⁰³. This desire to become the ‘Audenesque’ is also ultimately connected to Brodsky’s desire, as a newcomer, to take refuge within the linguistic space of Anglophone literature, even a good seven years before his actual political exile and banishment. The crossing over of the linguistic border between Russian and English that was to prove itself as defining feature of Brodsky’s journey from a monolingual poet to a bilingual poet and essayist thus, may well be considered as the encroachment into, and inhabitation of yet another form of the ‘foreign’ that is fraught with exilic overtones. With the help of “metrical rules” that served to free him “from the fetters of the Self”³⁰⁴, the legacy of W. H. Auden can be thought to encapsulate a large part of Brodsky’s emergent self-formation.

³⁰⁰ Ibid. 367.

³⁰¹ Ibid. 382.

³⁰² Simon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet’s Journey through the Twentieth Century*, 118.

³⁰³ David Montenegro, “An Interview with Joseph Brodsky”, *Partisan Review* 54 no. 4 (Fall 1987), 538-39.

³⁰⁴ W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems* ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), 857. The self-effacing posture which Brodsky borrows from Auden is condensed in this statement, which he also uses as the epigraph to his collection of essays *On Grief and Reason*.

3.5 A ‘Strange Place’: Banishment, Figurations of the Outsider and the ‘Antinomies of Exile’

Brodsky’s verses were never printed beyond a handful in Soviet Russia, even after his coming back from exile at Norenskaia, except through unauthorised *samizdat* copies, and after a series of failed distractions and coercive actions on part of the Breznev government that indirectly urged him to leave the country, in 1972, he was forced to immigrate to Vienna. Banished from his homeland, and already a *cause celebre* for his internal exile at Norenskaia, Brodsky’s poetic career took a meteoric flight and he soon became a distinguished public intellectual in the United States. Yet, his poems during the early days of his ‘homing’ in the United States was fraught with themes of banishment and exilic identity that bordered on the Pushkinian legacy of the Romantic poet-martyr as a Christ-like figure of persecution with the potential to redeem his homeland through his commitment to a higher vocation, that of serving the Russian language³⁰⁵. In a “faceless, sprawling, bureaucratic state”³⁰⁶ that has little concern regarding personal rights and liberties that pertain to the individual, this conception of the poet as a martyr and visionary seemed to arise out of what the literary critic Vladimir Khodasevich characterised as a “bloody repast”, a fatal contract into which the poet-martyr entered with the state.³⁰⁷ The notion of this “fatal contract” was also based on a Pushkinian legacy typified by the poet Mikhail Lermontov who was exiled to a regiment in the Caucasus under the orders of Nicholas I. In Lermontov’s poem “Smert poeta” (‘Death of the Poet’), Khodasevich associated this poet-martyr figure with “Freedom, Genius and Repute”³⁰⁸ The martyr-figure typified through the “free, courageous” gift of speech is rebuffed by an antagonistic society that speedily assists in the withering of the poet-martyr’s body. This antagonism leaves the martyr defiant, Lermontov posits, mocking with impudence “[t]he tongue and mores of this strange land” which was but once the poet’s home³⁰⁹. This acquired “strangeness” of the homeland from the poet-martyr’s subjective viewpoint sums

³⁰⁵See Megan Price, “Contradictions and Paradoxes: Apoliticism and the Myth of Joseph Brodsky” (MA. Diss.: Durham University, 2014) , 33, <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/10755/>

³⁰⁶ David M. Bethea, “Literature: Chapter 2,” in Nicholas Rzhevsky (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 175.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

³⁰⁸ Mikhail Lermontov, ‘Death of the Poet’, trans. Yevgeny Bonver, https://www.poetryloverspage.com/poets/lermontov/death_of_poet.html.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

up the now existent relationship as an exilic one, even as the “homeland” is redeemed through the self-sacrifice of the Christ-like figure of the poet. Svetlana Boym pointedly links this conception of the artist-martyr in the context of Russian literature, building on the history of its reception in Russia as a phenomenon that is also closely linked with the Romantic myth of the artist illumining society, as M.H. Abrams had postulated, a veritable “lamp”³¹⁰ in excess of the strictures of social convention:

The poet is supposed to be more than just a poet and to have a cultural mission. He can be a voice and consciousness of the nation, a martyr, dying young, a Christ-like figure, who takes upon himself the sufferings of the people. Willingly or not, every Russian writer confronts this heroic tradition that privileges dead authors and literary martyrs and often "kills" literary texts by subjugating them completely to political, biographical, social, and metaphysical concerns. The worship of the Poet with a capital P is a peculiar form of Russian religion which survives today.³¹¹

In accordance with Boym’s conception of the figure of the poet-martyr, Harrington locates within Russian literature the endurance of the “Symbolist, neo-Romantic concept of ‘life-creation’ (*zhiznetvorchestvo*)”, exemplified by the life and works of predecessors “such as Gavrila Derzhavin, Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, who also constructed their lives according to ideal matrices to varying degrees”³¹². Harrington goes on to investigate Akhmatova’s participation in the subtle crafting of her own biography based on this broad template. Further, Harrington’s work also contends that Akhmatova’s emergent biographical legend was no less a conscious mediation on her own part, to reject her own “melodramatic representation” as a “female poet” susceptible to the dangers of being objectified, “be it as Romantic heroine or *femme fatale*”, and to appropriate, for herself, the “predominantly masculine tradition of poet as tragic hero”³¹³. When one encounters, in this context, the phenomenon of Brodsky’s troubled relationship to his biography, and especially to the tribulations that must have accompanied his

³¹⁰ See M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

³¹¹ Svetlana Boym, ““Revolutionary Poet”: History, Myth and the Theatre of Cruelty,” in *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 120

³¹² Alexandra K. Harrington, “Anna Akhmatova’s Biographical Myth-Making: Tragedy and Melodrama”, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 89 no. 3 (July 2011), 458.

³¹³ *Ibid.* 466-67.

exilic experience, we are faced with an apparent contradiction we cannot easily resolve. We might recall that on being asked why he was sent into exile in his interview to Scammell, Brodsky answered that any effectual cause-and-effect relationship that one may try to posit between his penal sentence and his supposed designation as a 'deviant' in Soviet society reflected "a typically western approach to the problem: every event has to have a cause and every phenomenon has to have something standing behind it"³¹⁴. In contrast, Brodsky adopts a posture of self-distancing and effacement when he answers that "[a] man who sets out to create his own independent world within himself is bound sooner or later to become a foreign body in society and then he becomes subject to all the physical laws of pressure, compression and extrusion"³¹⁵. On being probed further, he emphasized his claim that he has "always tried to be - and was - a separate private person"³¹⁶. Further instances of Brodsky's self-effacing relationship to his own biography occur in the titular essay in *Less than One* ("A writer's biography is in his twists of language"³¹⁷) and in his essay on Derek Walcott ("A poet's biography is in his vowels and sibilants, in his metres, rhymes and metaphors"³¹⁸). As we have noticed in the previous section of this chapter, Brodsky's profound admiration and espousal of Auden's self-effacing voice also has to do with this aspect of his poetic self-fashioning. Auden himself, in accordance with Brodsky's view of distancing "poetry" and "politics", comments in his foreword to George L. Kline's translations of the former's poems that Brodsky's "poems are a-political, perhaps defiantly so"³¹⁹. But while Brodsky maintained this evasive distance to his presence as a social being; in subtly crafting for himself a niche within the history of Russian and Anglo-American literature, he was also, in an indirect sense, advancing a political stance of individualism within the "mental straitjacket of obedience"³²⁰ that was Soviet totalitarianism. Moreover, as Sanna Turoma, in her book *Brodsky Abroad: Empire, Tourism and Nostalgia* contends, the "anti-heroic" posture that Brodsky had imbibed from Auden seems to run counter to his "use of the rather obvious

³¹⁴ Michael Scammell, 'Interview with Iosif Brodsky', *Index on Censorship* 1, Issue 3-4 (September 1972), 150.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Brodsky, "Less than One," in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, 1

³¹⁸ Brodsky, "The Sound of the Tide," in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, 160.

³¹⁹ W.H. Auden "Foreword," in *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems*, 12.

³²⁰ Brodsky, "Less than One," in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 23.

Russian lyric conventions and models from Pushkin and Baratynskii to Mandelstam”³²¹, highlighting the contradiction between an already existent tradition of poetic martyrology in Russian literature in which Brodsky found himself belatedly placed, and against which his lyric subject rebels by “the construction of a self-deprecating poetic identity”³²². It is the actualisation of this self-deprecation that I wish to illustrate in this section.

I shall read Brodsky’s poem ‘1972’ to trace Brodsky’s aesthetics of departure through deliberately foregrounding aspects of aging, senility, impotence and self-deprecation. The poem begins with the poet-narrator describing his existence as an ageing recluse, prone to “slip up on nobody’s/cherrystone”³²³. Describing his weakened heart “like a squirrel in brushwood” and his “throat” which shows forth the “huge afflictions” of old age, the narrator exhorts and praises “senility”, because:

...The body repents its proclivities.
All these singing, weeping and snarled activities.
As for my dental cave, its cavities
rival old Troy on a rainy day.
Joints cracking loud and breath like a sewer,
I foul the mirror. It’s premature
to talk of the shroud. But you may be sure,
those who’ll carry you out besiege the doorway. ³²⁴

What emerges gradually in the course of the poem however, is that the “resilient cranium” of the speaker evolves into the “singular/sweetmeat” of Time, outlasting the other, gradually dying and decaying parts of the body³²⁵. As Brodsky goes on to add:

Even when all the wheels of the train keep thundering
below your waistline, there is no faltering
for the flight of fancy. Like the amnesia-
stricken gaze of a graduate with his freckled face,
who confuses a bra with a pair of spectacles,

³²¹ Sanna Turoma, *Brodsky Abroad: Empire, Tourism, Nostalgia* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 42.

³²² *Ibid.* 42-43.

³²³ Brodsky, “1972,” in *Collected Poems in English*, 67.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

pain is weak-eyed and death in its speckledness
looks like the vague outlines of Asia.³²⁶

The speculative and meditative nature of the speaker is immediately apparent, as he can distinguish between the relative permanence of thought over the other faculties, just as he prioritizes silence over speech or song, for “even a cuckoo’s crooning in darkness/moves me little”³²⁷. Aging, which ordinarily reminds human beings of their mortality also develops, within the speaker “a new but a very fine/ hearing that only to silence hearkens”. As strength and bravado leave his muscles, the speaker also realises his “pure cowardice” that prevents him from taking on “the Lord’s own labors”. As he urges himself into the “open valley”, presumably a vantage point from which the entirety of his life would be visible to him, the speaker realises his similarity with many others, appearing in “halls with wisteria”, drinking “a fair bit”, and not hankering for what was not given to him. Brodsky’s nameless poet-narrator is also keenly aware of the performative aspects of reading poetry aloud, revels in his aging body which he means to use as a “hollow pipe fitting the space around”³²⁸. Despite Brodsky’s own self-effacing strategies with regard to his own biography, he concedes that his writing poetry was “for the sake of [my] native tongue and letters”, for which vocation he has been “denied a chalice at the feast of the fatherland and now stands in a “strange place”³²⁹. Yet, Brodsky acknowledges, with his poet-narrator that “[t]he name hardly matters”³³⁰, stripping his experience of exile from all particulars, and fashioning, for himself, a degree of anonymity that is intricately connected to his self-deprecating identity. Suffused with the image of darkness and dampness, the next stanza recounts the speaker’s reaching of a mental understanding of the tribulations that accompany old age, which nevertheless dawns in a series of realisations:

Now I can state with confidence:
here I’ll live out my days, losing gradually
hair, teeth, consonants, verbs, and suffixes,
with this hat of mine ladling the ocean surface, as
Prince Igor’s helmet, just to reduce its size,
munching raw fish, behaving naturally.³³¹

³²⁶ Ibid. 68.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Ibid. 69.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid.

The penultimate lines allude to the anonymous Old Russian epic poem *The Song of Igor's Campaign* dated back to 12th century C.E., recounting the failed campaign of Prince Igor of Novgorod-Seversky against the nomadic Polovetsian community (Cumans), who were cattle-raisers and warriors in the spring of 1185³³². Bearing a number of similarities to the *Chanson de Roland*, the tale recounts the vanity of Prince Igor in launching the campaign and pitting against himself, through heroic indiscretion, insurmountable trials in which he was found wanting. Although Igor is defeated and imprisoned, he escapes with the help of Ovlur, a common Polovetsian past the drunken Cuman guards and is reunited with his own people back in his hometown Kiev. Through Igor's virtues of godliness, selflessness and acute perseverance, he finally overcomes the tribulations of exile and returns home. The allusion underlines the self-deprecating narrator's sense of continued existence despite gradually diminishing powers of both the body and the mind. The sufferings that accompany his acknowledging the loss of abilities being thus constantly on the increase, the speaker adopts an equanimous attitude to them ("I neither nourish it/nor dismiss it"³³³), yet while deliberately keeping his frame of reference mundane:

If an ember still glows inside this monolith,
it's not reason, just blood that keeps circling, going.³³⁴

Aging and banishment are both connected in the poem with acknowledging the "truth" of exilic being. For the poet-narrator, the poem, instead of becoming a "desperate howl of deep distress", becomes "the species' trip back to the wilderness", hinting at a notion of exile that is ontological to the human condition, signalling "[c]hange for the better"³³⁵. The characteristic form of self-diminution Brodsky foregrounds compares the exiled poet's body, now seen as an 'object' against a vast empty space, "...hardening into a moribund/ more or less matter—strong vocal vent"³³⁶ The poet thus sees himself merely an instrument of making sounds in an alien place which would guarantee his continual presence.

³³² See "The Song of Igor's Campaign", Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Song-of-Igors-Campaign> (accessed December 20, 2020).

³³³ Brodsky, "1972," in *Collected Poems in English*, 69.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ *Ibid.* 69-70.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 70

Like Brodsky's earlier poem 'To Lycomedes on Sycros', "1972" also uses the figure of Theseus escaping from the Minotaur's labyrinth to project the image of the banished poet, who sees not a vast horizon before him, but only "...a minus sign/ on [my] previous life"³³⁷. The outcast (*izgoi*)'s symbolic dispossession of his fatherland thus becomes represented in terms of a vast absence, "a good sized loss in the local spheres" which "makes a mortal equal to God"³³⁸. Life itself, seen as a form of "marching along", follows the lead of the "shadow", the being in excess of the ephemeral body and mind.

The next poem that merits closer scrutiny while examining the phenomenon of self-deprecating identity-formation is certainly "The End of a Beautiful Era" where Brodsky defines the basics of his vocation as a poet-narrator, existing as the

...morose,
deaf, and balding ambassador of a more or less
insignificant nation that's stuck in this super
power, wishing to spare my old brain.³³⁹

Brodsky thus projects the figure of the poet as one continually doomed to becoming old and barren, much as he dubs Russia as "a more or less/ insignificant nation"³⁴⁰ trapped within the confines of the global super power that was the USSR. As a timely breeze "disperses the foliage", the poet-narrator, as if struck by the motto "[t]he mirror will please", stares back at his "own sweet reflection"³⁴¹, arousing in him a strange feeling that he cannot quite understand. The poem also goes on to depict the coldness, stasis and monotony of everyday life under totalitarian rule, locating it within the backdrop of a metaphoric Russian winter where "long dreams,/prison walls, overcoats, bridal dresses of whiteness" match that of the snow, recalling "bayonets, Cossack whips of old power" that were transformed into instruments that presently deny individual "freedom"³⁴². The silence of those who are not capable of speech under these oppressive conditions

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Brodsky, "The End of a Beautiful Era," in *Collected Poems in English*, 38.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

paves the way towards yet further oppression, as they are compared to “fish in the sea”, who despite knowing “freedom’s price”, through their “muteness” facilitate “cashier booths of our own”³⁴³. Thus, by refusing to acknowledge the uniqueness of the “free” individual, we also acknowledge our subservience to “space”, which “rises like some bill of fare” and Time, which is “invented by Death”³⁴⁴. What is hinted at within the very spirit of the totalitarian regime is the emphasis on “Deeds” rather than “Words”, a variation of the “existence conditions consciousness” trope so famously countered in the opening essay of *Less than One*. One goes on therefore, to “find not new wonders but what you expected”³⁴⁵. The allusion to Lobachevsky and his refutation of the fifth postulate of Euclid and the onset of a new domain called hyperbolic geometry is then advanced almost in passing: “the widened horizons should narrow somewhere, and here—/here’s the end of perspective”³⁴⁶. Thus by characterising his own era as a dead end and an impasse, the poet-narrator presents it as a stagnant prison, which, in the very next stanza, he wishes to escape but cannot.

The next stanza directly addresses the question of individual moral obligation to choose the subjective path to freedom. But no matter whether one chooses to persist with “a slug” in the brain, or with a delusional “error”, or whether they choose the way of a messianic figure like Christ to pursue individual salvation:

...in these laudable quarters,
eyes dumbfounded by ice and by booze
will reproach you alike for whatever you choose:
traceless rails, traceless waters.³⁴⁷

It is, in the final analysis, this metaphoric “blindness” that is responsible, Brodsky seems to insinuate, in encouraging a “keen-sighted” surveillance, originating in the inability “of drawing clear lines/ twixt those fallen from cradles and fallen from saddles”³⁴⁸. The unwillingness to face the truth of the transitory nature of power turns not only the figure of the tyrant, but also the common citizen of Soviet society into a senseless, “poor Rurik”³⁴⁹, solitary and

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Ibid. 39.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

blinded in their egotism. Systemic purgation within the ranks of power also ensures that the tyrant never faces self-examination and pursues the same beaten track of lies, misrepresentation and power-mongering. The seeming dullness of this monotonous pursuit is deadening to the poet-narrator's spirit, because their "concrete begs for spittle and not for a witty comment"³⁵⁰. The only exception to the rule are the "innocent" who nevertheless are devoted to truth-telling in the face of all odds. Hence, the poem reserves for them the greatest persecution as well as the greatest reward. The "evergreen laurel" wreath, destined to crown the poet also comes with the punitive threat of the "axe"³⁵¹, a fate Brodsky was well-acquainted with, having known it through the lives of Pushkin, Mandelstam, Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva—the array of poet-martyrs in whose shoes he finds himself, and whose heroic legacy he wishes, nevertheless, to undercut with scathing irony and self-deprecating intent.

'In the Lake District', composed in Ann Arbor in November, 1972, continues self-deprecation as a strategy to cope with banishment. Brodsky's poet-persona, famously, compares the abjection of his own aging teeth to the Parthenon and declares himself "...a spy, a spearhead/ for some fifth column of a rotting culture"³⁵². Brodsky can at best see himself as an illustrious outsider with a "lit. professorship", appointed "...to wear out/ the patience of the ingenuous local youth"³⁵³. This poem also specifically reinforces the sense of an incompleteness associated with the abrupt nature of his banishment:

Whatever I wrote then was incomplete:
my lines expired in strings of dots. Collapsing,
I dropped, still fully dressed, upon my bed.³⁵⁴

Exile as banishment, as penal servitude, seems to emphasize the quality of self-sacrifice inherent in it. The "laws of self-combustion" which present themselves before the poet first in the form of a "shooting star" instantly metamorphose into a teardrop rolling "across my cheek and down onto my

³⁵⁰ Ibid. 40.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Brodsky, "In the Lake District", in *Collected Poems in English*, 71

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

pillow”³⁵⁵, reminding him of the abounding grief that follows the predicament of exile.

A third poem from 1972, ‘An autumn evening in the modest square’ highlights the poet-narrator’s increasing alienation as a passive witness in exile. The poem also visualises the narrator’s gradual coming to terms with his strange ‘homing’ in a teeming urban metropolis—Space “shrink[s] to the dimensions of Main Street”, and Time “...stares at the clockface/ above the general store, whose crowded shelves/hold every item that this world produces”³⁵⁶. The ubiquity of material goods and comforts in a consumerist society, ranging from “fancy amateur stargazers’ tel-/ escopes to common pins for common uses”³⁵⁷, in contrast to his erstwhile experiences in a planned economy often faced with the problem of under-production and scanty supply, is emphasized in this section. The desolation that surrounds the empty church “whose net—to fish for men—now flutters/ unfilled”, and the city streets, “empty,/ unpeopled as if by a nuclear strike”³⁵⁸ appear particularly estranging to the émigré poet, who is likened by an analogical allusion to Narcissus in the last stanza. The act of endless mirroring continues indefinitely, as the poet stares transfixed at his own image in the glass, ignoring calendars, never having to leave the house.. The allusion to Narcissus opens up a link between Brodsky’s exile and that of Narcissus. Gur Zak, for example, points out the contrary pulls in Ovid’s Narcissus, where the latter’s own reflected image, his object of desire is also the same that leads to his self-awareness through its dubiously ephemeral nature: “The self that knows himself through the reflection is thus by necessity both present to and absent from himself, never fully one or the other”³⁵⁹. Narcissus may be considered as an apt figuration of “inner division and exile”³⁶⁰, and thus may serve as a means to understand what Edward Said, rather cryptically, had described as “exile’s antinomies”, or paradoxes embodied in the self-fashioning of an exiled poet. For while exile may be treated as a condition of “terminal loss”, the condition also imbues one with “an urgent need to reconstitute their broken

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Brodsky, “An autumn evening in the modest square...”, in *Collected Poems in English*, 65.

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³⁵⁹ Gur Zak, “A Humanist in Exile: Ovid’s Myth of Narcissus and the Experience of Self in Petrarch’s Secretum” in *Metamorphosis: The Changing Face of Ovid in Medieval and Early-Modern Europe* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2007), 183.

³⁶⁰ Ibid. 184.

lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people”³⁶¹.

In Brodsky’s case, one can easily locate the “origin”, as it were, of these paradoxes—between his perceived role as an émigré-dissident poet in the United States who rejected, and was, in turn, rejected by Soviet society at large and his own conception of himself as one deliberately bypassing the order of the ‘political’ in favour of the ‘personal’. For Brodsky, such a “triumphant ideology” certainly consisted in his relentless advocacy of the “privateness of the human condition”³⁶² over the demagoguery of political identification, to play exile’s antinomies, as it were— only in a “minor key”³⁶³. It is also therefore, easily discernible that the deliberate “trimming of the self”³⁶⁴ alluded to the opening essay of *Less than One* would be one of the ways in which he would fashion his exilic subjectivity in the subsequent years. The crucial link to the phenomenon of Brodsky’s exile and the poetic output that followed may be found in his essay on Auden’s poem “September 1, 1939” where, while explicating a particular section of the poem, he comments upon the use of the adjective “exiled” qualifying Thucydides. In Brodsky’s view, Auden, who was “playing historian for his own Athens”, instead of exalting in the high-pitched nature of the adjective, realises “that no matter how eloquent his message...he too is doomed to be ignored”³⁶⁵.

In another essay, Brodsky states that the life of a poet “is hostage to his metier” and that the condition of exile is just one of the possible manifestations of poetic distancing, where the poet “has to get where nobody has been before”³⁶⁶ to be “at uttering something hitherto unutterable”³⁶⁷. Brodsky thus makes poetic estrangement a necessary precondition of linguistic novelty and represents it as an act of crossing over. While figurations of the outsider and the outcast (*izgoi*) occur across the length of Brodsky’s poetic oeuvre, they are always means to ensure the

³⁶¹ Said, “Reflections on Exile”, 179.

³⁶² Brodsky, “{Uncommon Visage: The Nobel Lecture”, in *On Grief and Reason* (London: Penguin, 1995), 40.

³⁶³ See Brodsky, “On “September 1, 1939” by W.H. Auden”, in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 328. Here, Brodsky elaborates on the “high-pitched” nature of ‘exile’, a “loaded word” which Auden, an “exiled Thucydides” to his community, tones down to a ‘minor key’ in the poem.

³⁶⁴ Brodsky, “Less than One”, in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 9.

³⁶⁵ Brodsky, ‘On “September 1, 1939” by W.H. Auden’”, in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 327.

³⁶⁶ Brodsky, ‘Altra Ego’, in *On Grief and Reason* (London: Penguin, 1995), 72.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 73.

poet's "quest for significance"³⁶⁸. Yet, such a quest for significance and self-assertion in his case, has always consisted in his self-effacing relationship to his biography, and a deliberate stance to prioritise his poetry over the historical details of his life.

3.6 Departure and an Impossible Homecoming: Ironic Nostalgia, the Lyric 'Self' and the Anonymity of Exile

In her analysis of the possible links between the taking up of estrangement as a deliberate posture or lifestyle and its links to Brodsky's essays anthologised in *Less than One*, Svetlana Boym differentiates between two different paradigms of nostalgia, which, true to the Greek word's etymology, variably stresses on *nostos*, "emphasizing the return to that mythical place somewhere on the island of Utopia, with classical porticos, where the "greater patria" has to be rebuilt", or on *algia* which "...does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called 'home'"³⁶⁹. While the first kind may be called "reconstructive", Boym identifies the latter sort of nostalgia, following Susan Stewart, as "ironic" and "fragmentary", a mode "enamoured of distance, not of the referent itself"³⁷⁰. Ironic nostalgia, Boym contends, is equipped to accommodate for the "paradoxes of exile and displacement"³⁷¹. In this section, I take up a number of lyric poems by Brodsky and examine their deliberate self-stylisation and projection of the poetic self through the masks of the lyric, and sometimes, epic heroes. Boym's conceptual parameters of 'ironic nostalgia' become useful at this point, to understand how such a distancing act allows space for a conception of the lyric self to be dissociated from the seeming coherence between precise historical events significant to the poet's biography and their relationship to his poetic enunciators. The lyric mask is thus born through the rift of self-effacement, and the speaking "I" is conceived through the poet's engagement with literary tradition that allows him to be displaced from his precise historical circumstances of exile and banishment to project similar predicaments in European poetic precursors such as Dante and Ovid, as well as Pushkin, Osip Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova from his native tradition. I also

³⁶⁸ Brodsky, 'The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh', in *On Grief and Reason* (London: Penguin, 1995), 121.

³⁶⁹ Svetlana Boym, "Estrangement as Lifestyle", 512.

³⁷⁰ Susan Stewart, quoted in Boym, "Estrangement as a Lifestyle", 512.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

propose to read a group of three poems, composed at different points in his career, that demonstrate Brodsky's engagement with the impossibility of 'return' through his use of the wandering figure of Odysseus. In doing so, I shall hope to underscore the role of Brodsky's ironic stance adopted towards his belatedness in relation to his better-known precursors, especially through his explicit disavowal to commit to a mode of "reconstructive" nostalgia when coping with the experience of exile.

I shall first examine Brodsky's poem "December in Florence" as a palimpsest-text which elaborates on Dante's exile from his native Florence by means of a conversation between Brodsky and two of his notable Russian poetic precursors from the Silver Age—Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam. All of these three poets retrospectively engage with Dante at different points in their lives, and Brodsky's position is that of the third in this triad. The poem uses lines from Akhmatova's 1936 poem 'Dante' as its epigraph, which lauds the fact of Dante's never returning to Florence, "even after having died"³⁷². In Akhmatova's poem, Dante's departure is seen as a gallant act with "Fate, a wild howl, at his threshold"³⁷³. Dante's uncompromising attitude towards his own banishment to Ravenna in 1302 by the Black Guelph government outside his beloved city, of which he had been appointed the Prior only two years earlier, allowed Akhmatova to cast him as a heroic, and 'self-deserted' figure characterised by his stern refusal to walk the streets in a "penitential shirt"³⁷⁴. Mandelstam also notes the importance of Florence in the *Divine Comedy* in his essay, 'Conversation About Dante', commenting that "To the exile his sole, forbidden and irretrievably lost city is scattered everywhere; he is surrounded by it"³⁷⁵. In addition, Mandelstam considers the extension of space itself in the *Divine Comedy*, which exists "only insofar as it becomes a receptacle for amplitudes" and further, the spaces of Dante's Italian cities of Pisa, Florence, Lucca and Verona, "these precious civic planets are drawn out into monstrous rings, stretched into belts, restored to a nebulous, gasiform state".³⁷⁶ While Brodsky performs the act of writing back to Dante, in 1975, he was

³⁷² Anna Akhmatova, 'Dante', in *Selected Poems*, trans. D.M. Thomas (London: Vintage, 2009), 61

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ Osip Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," in *The Poets' Dante*, eds Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 81.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

in Florence, the city of Dante's non-return. Yet paradoxically, like his two Russian predecessors, the theme of the lost city is steadfastly maintained through mental images of St. Petersburg.

The poem's opening obviously alludes to the beginning of the *Inferno* in the *Divine Comedy* recalling its "gloomy wood" ravaged by wild beasts. Brodsky however, with characteristic irony imagines "idle couples" by the river bend as "a new kind/of quadruped"³⁷⁷. Even in its present manifestation,

...the atmosphere of this city retains a bit
of the dark forest.³⁷⁸

Exile and departure, Brodsky's nameless poetic enunciator seems to say, is also a form of mental estrangement where "one simply raises the collar to disengage/ from passing humans and dulls the gaze"³⁷⁹. Brodsky goes on to describe the cityscape with its "memory-numbing pills of opaque streetlamps"³⁸⁰ and provides an explanation for Dante's expulsion that, ironically, seems tailored to fit his own exile better rather than Dante's:

Yards off from where the Signoria looms,
the doorway, centuries later, suggests the best
cause of expulsion: one can't exist
by a volcano and show no fist,
though it won't unclench when its owner dies.³⁸¹

Death, which was the ultimate departure for Dante, becomes a "second Florence" with its "architecture of Paradise"³⁸². Brodsky continues with a series of images in the third stanza during noon, with the "Old Bridge", (which Zakhar Ishov identifies as the Ponte Vecchio, damaged by floods in 1966 and repaired by the time Brodsky visited Florence) buzzing with "heavy trading in bric-a-brac"³⁸³. His eyes see "the passing beauty's loose golden lock" and meditates on its stark difference, "like an angelic vestige in the kingdom of the dark-haired"³⁸⁴.

³⁷⁷ Brodsky, "December in Florence", in *Collected Poems in English*, 130

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

The fourth stanza succinctly sums up Brodsky's stance towards his exiled predecessors—Dante exiled from Florence never to return, Dante with the “shade” of Virgil guiding him through the depths of the Inferno, Ovid, exiled to the shores of the Black Sea and finally, Mandelstam and Akhmatova's exile and persecution, and their respective readings of Dante—and the question of the exiled poet's legacy with respect to his life and his works. As has been demonstrated in an earlier section of this chapter, Brodsky's “Audenesque” bent leads him to the conviction that language, having been older to both the state as well as the historical being which is the poet, speaks through his medium, rendering him but merely a vessel, “a way of happening, a mouth”³⁸⁵. In the poem this gets translated into the inevitable reduction of the poet:

...to pen's rustle on paper, to
wedges, ringlets of letters, and also, due
to the slippery surface, to commas and full stops. True,
often, in some common word, the unwitting pen
strays into drawing—while tackling an
“M”—some eyebrows: ink is more honest than
blood. And a face, with moist words inside
out to dry what has just been said,
smirks like the crumpled paper absorbed by shade.³⁸⁶

Brodsky is by no means denying that certain biographical events have importance in the poet's life. The section where the “unwitting pen/ strays into drawing—while tackling an/”M”³⁸⁷ seems a pointed reference to his lover and muse Marina Basmanova with whom he finally had to separate, after six years “marked by frequent breakups and equally frequent reconciliations”³⁸⁸, and to whom he dedicated his *New Stanzas to Augusta*. Interestingly, Brodsky ended up comparing *New Stanzas to Augusta* to Dante's *Divine Comedy* while being completely aware of the fact that the only thread of connection which binds the two works under question was “something like a book with a plot of its own”³⁸⁹. Brodsky use of allusions within “December in Florence” matches the peerless articulation of exilic predicament found in his predecessor and namesake, Osip Mandelstam. As Zakhar Ishov has pointed out, specifically Mandelstam's poem

³⁸⁵ W.H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” in *Selected Poems*, 80-81.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 131.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁸ Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 62.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

dated January 21-22, 1937 in his Voronezh notebook seems to stand out among these, describing the exiled poet climbing the “callous stairs” and “city squares” of the foreign land he finds himself in³⁹⁰. Mandelstam himself is, of course alluding back to Cacciaguیدا’s prophecy to Dante regarding his impending exile in Canto XVII of the *Paradiso*:

Thou shalt leave everything loved most dearly, and this is
the shaft which the bow of exile shoots first. Thou shalt
prove how salt is the taste of another man’s bread and how
hard is the way up and down another man’s stairs.³⁹¹

These metaphoric formulations of the possible tribulations ushered in by exile are experienced first-hand by the exiled Mandelstam who sees Dante’s absence from Florence as a necessary precondition for his imagined descriptions of the city:

From callous stairs, from city squares
With their blocky palaces
The whole circle of his Florence
Alighieri praised more fiercely
With exhausted lips.

So also my shadow chews
With its eyes that gritty granite,
And sees at night a row of blocks
That in the daytime seemed like houses.³⁹²

The parallel attempted by Mandelstam between his own and Dante’s exile is the important element here, re-echoing Pushkin’s comparison of his own predicament of exile with Ovid’s, another illustrious predecessor. Zakhar Ishov posits this as the “brotherhood of exiles”, citing Pushkin’s poem “To Ovid” where Pushkin does not compare himself to Ovid in terms of poetic glory, but only in terms of their shared predicament of exile, which he renders in relative terms.³⁹³

³⁹⁰ Zakhar Ishov, “Joseph Brodsky’s “December in Florence”: Re-interpreting Exile with the Shadow of Dante”, *The Australian Slavonic and East-European Studies Journal* 31 nos. 1-2 (2017), 121-63

³⁹¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, ed. and trans. John D. Sinclair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 244-245.

³⁹² Osip Mandelstam, “January 20, 1937”, *Voronezh Notebook*, <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/osip-mandelstam-voronezh-notebook/> (accessed January 4, 2021).

³⁹³ Zakhar Ishov, “Joseph Brodsky’s ‘December in Florence: Reinterpreting Exile with the Shadow of Dante’”, 8, https://www.academia.edu/35502979/Joseph_Brodskys_December_in_Florence_Re-interpreting_exile_with_the_shadow_of_Dante (accessed January 4, 2021)

For Ovid, the place of his exile at Tomis, by the shores of the Black Sea, “a barbari-infested wasteland at the fringe of the Roman empire” is constructed rhetorically, as Samantha C. Toman shows, “in order to play up the cultural and linguistic Otherness of the locale, and to underscore its distance from Rome-as-center and thus his reading audience, via rhetoric”³⁹⁴. Pushkin’s own exile to the Russian “south” from St. Petersburg, for offending Tsar Nicholas I by composing and publicly reciting his “Ode to Liberty”, was, in contrast, also fraught with the joys of exploring an “exotic” landscape, which are tacitly acknowledged through the settings of his “Southern Poems”, most notably *The Prisoner of Caucasus* and *The Gypsies*. Following Pushkin and Mandelstam’s leads of a possible bond between fellow exiled-poets from different historical epochs, Brodsky begins the fourth stanza with similar images of the exiled poet ascending the stairs of someone else’s apartment:

A shape in an overcoat braves the dank
mouth of a gateway, mounts the decrepit, flat,
worn-out molars toward their red, inflamed
palate with its sure-as-fate
number 16. Voiceless, instilling fright,
a little bell in the end prompts a rasping “Wait!”
Two old crones let you in, each looks like the figure 8.³⁹⁵

What immediately strikes us is Brodsky’s direct analogy between the ascent of the “exilic staircase” alluded to in Dante and the metaphoric ascent of the language itself, along the stairs of the poet’s vocal chord, onto the “red. Inflamed/palate”³⁹⁶ of his mouth which articulates poetry. This is a triumphant nod on Brodsky’s part to pay homage to Dante’s legacy which, by means of language persists in his own exile from the Soviet Union. “A chance ray of sunlight” through the thick blinds of a café sets the Florentine bard (here, conceived as a bird) “ablaze within his wire Ravenna”³⁹⁷. Thus, Dante’s spirit, manifested as a bird, still sings in its exiled captivity in Ravenna, in its service to the Italian language. In a 1977 lecture delivered at Amherst College, London University titled ‘Language as Otherland’, Brodsky compares the examples of Ovid, Dante and Tsvetaeva to show

³⁹⁴ Samantha C. Toman, “The Rhetoricity of Ovid’s Construction of Exile and the *Poeta Structus Exulis*” (MA diss.; University of Oregon, 2012), 51.

³⁹⁵ Brodsky, “December in Florence”, in *Collected Poems in English*, 131.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

that “however tragic... exile is bearable in terms of writing” and that Dante’s ultimate triumph is also that of poetry, for “the real soil, real ground for the writer is language”³⁹⁸. Brodsky’s strategies of underplaying the importance of biography leads to his turning away from the discrete particulars of Dante’s life towards an understanding of the general predicament of exile which all of these exiled poets share.

Brodsky repeats the image of doors “exhaling steam” in Florence at the beginning of the seventh stanza, meditating on the fragmentary nature of love, which, even though endowed with transcendent proportions, “divides things in two, in half”³⁹⁹. In the next stanza, by alluding to the dome Florence Cathedral, “the gigantic egg laid there by Brunelleschi” which “jerks a tear from an eye experienced in the blessed/domes”⁴⁰⁰, he is also addressing the question of architecture, which, to him and Mandelstam, was an inseparable part of what they understood as “civilisation”. In his essay on Mandelstam, for example, Brodsky defines the term as “the sum total of different cultures animated by a common spiritual numerator”⁴⁰¹, subsisting through the device of “translation”: “The wandering of a Greek portico into the latitude of the tundra is a translation”⁴⁰². In Brodsky’s *Watermark*, his essay on Venice, the architecture of the city is described thus:

...one’s notion of afterlife in this city appears to be well taken care of by its clearly paradisiacal visual texture. Sickness alone, no matter how grave it may be, won’t avail you here of an infernal vision.⁴⁰³

Brodsky also follows with two images that connote the mundane and quotidian aspects of reality such as the traffic policeman who “briskly/throws his hand in the air like a letter X” and the loudspeakers that “bark about rising tax”⁴⁰⁴, but immediately ushers in the poetic art of estrangement and departure from this plane. Even though the historical circumstances of the poet’s life, the plane of

³⁹⁸ Brodsky quoted in Zakhar Ishov, “Joseph Brodsky’s ‘December in Florence: Reinterpreting Exile with the Shadow of Dante’”, 17, https://www.academia.edu/35502979/Joseph_Brodskys_December_in_Florence_Re-interpreting_exile_with_the_shadow_of_Dante

³⁹⁹ Brodsky, “December in Florence”, 132.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Brodsky, “The Child of Civilization”, in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 139.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark: An Essay on Venice* (London: Penguin, 2013), 33.

⁴⁰⁴ Brodsky, “December in Florence”, 132.

“living” is perceived as more real, it is actually, for one who chooses “obstinate leaving”—like Dante and himself—this is a mere “mask”⁴⁰⁵. Nevertheless, the crucial link to the experience of exile in the poem is the absence of St. Petersburg—the city to which Pushkin, Mandelstam, Akhmatova and Brodsky belonged—and which therefore, in Brodsky’s case at least, qualifies—like Dante’s Florence—as the site of the poet’s non-return. It is with this sense of irrevocable departure that Brodsky remembers St. Petersburg in the ninth and final stanza of the poem:

There are cities one won’t see again. The sun
throws its gold at their frozen windows, But all the same
there is no entry, no proper sum.
There are always six bridges spanning the sluggish river.
There are places where lips touched lips for the first time
ever,
or pen pressed paper with real fervor.
There are arcades, colonnades, iron idols that blur your
lens.
There are the streetcar’s multitudes, jostling, dense,
speak in the tongue of a man who’s departed thence.⁴⁰⁶

It is worth noting that even though the exiled poet “departs”, what is left behind is his “tongue”, otherwise known as the departee’s trysts with language, to be reflected in the sights, smells and sounds of his departed city which can only mourn his absence. In his long essay, “Flight to Byzantium”, Brodsky credits Virgil with developing the prototype of the epic hero who never returns, following what he calls the “linear principle”⁴⁰⁷. In fact, citing one of Ovid’s “Heroides”, he demonstrates how Dido, the Carthaginian queen reproaches Aeneas, not merely for deserting her, but resolving thereafter never to return home, setting out instead “for unknown lands, a new goal, a new, as yet unfounded city”⁴⁰⁸, and thereby highlights the essential difference between Ovid and Virgil’s estimation of the character of Aeneas. For the latter, Brodsky postulates, Aeneas is a hero directed by the gods and the linear principle of the arrow-like nomad: “his hero never

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Brodsky, “Flight from Byzantium”, in *Less than One: Selected Essays*, 402.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid. 401.

returns; he always departs”⁴⁰⁹. As to the possible historical reasons behind such a conception was to be found in “the expansion of the Empire, which had reached a scale in which human displacement had indeed become irreversible”⁴¹⁰. This reasoning characteristically resonates with the “poet versus empire” predicament that has also historically affected several generations of Russian émigré writers.

And yet, it may also be observed that the tendency of transcending the precise historical circumstances of a poet’s exile allows Brodsky to veer towards a deliberate underplaying of the role of biography, leading him to observe, in an interview to Simon Volkov, that “...although knowledge of a poet’s biography in and of itself can be a marvellous thing...this knowledge very often by no means clarifies the content of the verse”⁴¹¹. Brodsky points out that Dante and Ovid were not the only ones exiled from their respective native places: “...circumstances may recur—prison, persecution, exile—but the result, in the sense of art, is unrepeatable.”⁴¹². Brodsky’s engagement with the Odysseus myth partakes of this same divesting of the precise historical circumstances of his own displacement and non-return to Russia, even after the fall of the Soviet Union. I will try to analyse his lyric mask of Odysseus across three poems, ‘Odysseus to Telemachus’ (1972), ‘New Life’ (1988) and ‘Ithaca’ (1993) to reveal how the lyric hero is conceived through considerable detachment on part of the poet, and how the effect of time on him reduces him almost to a non-entity against the overarching general background of exile. These three poems, composed at different point in Brodsky’s poetic career, chart how the biographical events of his internal exile and banishment go on to spawn, within him, a resolution to the problem of the a “distancing filter” between these events and the projection of a lyric subject—the “I” of poetic enunciation—who, instead of possessing fixed historical co-ordinates, remains constantly in a state of becoming. In the first poem, which was anthologised in *A Part of Speech*, Brodsky’s Odysseus radically undermines any attempt at describing his own situation as ‘heroic’—the island he now finds himself in is “filthy”, and indeterminately located, as if its identity matters little⁴¹³. It begins with undercutting

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid. 402.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Simon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet’s Journey through the Twentieth Century* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 138

⁴¹² Ibid. 139.

⁴¹³ Brodsky, ‘Odysseus to Telemachus’, in *Collected Poems in English*, 64.

the usual eulogies to heroism in a Homeric framework, and instead builds on Odysseus's recognition of the stupidity of the Greek self-conceit,

...for only they would leave
so many dead so far from their own homeland.⁴¹⁴

Although biographical parallels to Brodsky's actual exile, with the figure of Telemachus resembling his son Andrei from whom he was far removed, are tempting, it is important to note that for Brodsky, the tribulations of exile are to a great extent, impersonal. The outcome of the Trojan War seems irrelevant to Odysseus, the fatigued and forgetful traveller who admits that "[T]o a wanderer, the faces of all islands/ resemble one another"⁴¹⁵. The desolation brought about in Odysseus is due to his unwitting admission of sanity and participation in the Trojan War at "Palamedes' trick", a feat of guile where the infant Telemachus was placed in the path of Odysseus's plow to test him. It was "Palamedes' trick" which exposed the wily Odysseus's plan of not participating in the Trojan War, during which, his separation from his son Telemachus becomes an inviolable one. However, as Liudmila Zubova has claimed in her reading of the poem, the tone Brodsky adopts is "emotionally detached, and the picture he paints is more of a deflation of the literary Odysseus figure than an aggrandizement of his own"⁴¹⁶. The poem also addresses a riddle which had always fascinated Brodsky—the effect of time on space and the bending of the latter to the former's laws, even to the point of non-recognition. Embedded within this thematic is also the lyric subject's estrangement and loneliness, "the tragic instability and disintegration of personal relationships, resulting in separation, betrayal, departures"⁴¹⁷. Yet, it is impossible to miss the wry humour Odysseus employs:

...away from me
you are quite safe from all Oedipal passions,
and your dreams, Telemachus, are blameless.⁴¹⁸

Brodsky's 'New Life', part of *So Forth*, may be seen as a companion-piece to the previous poem and instead begins on the threshold of a second life

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Liudmilla Zubova, "Odysseus to Telemachus", in *Joseph Brodsky: The Art of a Poem* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), 29.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. 30.

⁴¹⁸ Brodsky, 'Odysseus to Telemachus', 64.

whose contours begin with the end of the Trojan War. The focal theme of the poem, yet again, seems to be the effect of time in devouring human achievement, and Odysseus, a spectre of the man he once was, finds himself on “the very threshold” of a new life where “peace has resumed his reign” after the ravages of war.⁴¹⁹ An important element in this particular stanza concerns the device of framing, employed both in its literal and metaphoric connotations, through two similarly shaped objects—the mirror and the window. The mirror, acting as a surface of reflection, serves as a means to identify the self. In Odysseus’s case, this fact is significant because time has wrought countless changes to his material body and his physical appearance so as to prevent easy identification with his older self. The window, on the other hand, “frames not a town’s rubble but its rococo;/ palms, magnolias, pine trees, tenacious ivy, grass,/ laurel”⁴²⁰ and becomes a substitute for the mirror, providing more insight on the state of things at the moment—a time of peace that is easily identifiable by those objects that it frames. As we have already observed in a previous section of this chapter, Brodsky’s conflict-ridden mediation between “things” and the effect of time in altering not merely themselves, but the very receptacle of their being that is space, leads him to conceive of the eventual destruction of objects as immanent to their very being, which is a dynamic state as well, of their becoming. Shifting his gaze from “things” from his old life that turn out to be vulnerable, the lyric hero contemplates their inherent changeability, which allows them to metamorphose into yet newer shapes and contours:

... Things are, in truth, the leeches
of thought. Hence their shapes—each one is a brain’s
cutout—
their attachment to place, their Penelope features.⁴²¹

For Zubova, the “Trojan War” that serves as the backdrop of the poem has a number of historical associations, connoting variably, as per critical speculation, the Second World War, “an ironic code for the “war with the state machine”, or, perhaps more convincingly, “the Civil War which, beginning in 1917, continued, in various forms, throughout all the years of the Soviet regime, and as an ideological struggle, continues to this day”⁴²². But while we may accept the

⁴¹⁹ Brodsky, “New Life”, in *Collected Poems in English*, 352.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*

⁴²² Liudmilla Zubova, “Odysseus to Telemachus”, 30.

partial veracity of all of these interpretations, we must concede that the hermeneutic impulse to correlate historical events and deduce biographical motivation from them in order to understand the poem better runs counter to the poem's open disavowal of Odysseus's older self. In fact, by showing the reader the vision of this "new life" facing Odysseus, the poem invites us to speculate on the transitory nature of all of these different "lives", while nevertheless maintaining that some part of the epic hero does indeed, survive across such change. In a move that seeks to justify the ethical posture Brodsky assumes in relation to the exile, the narrator of the poem insists that he "survived intact" because the "flame's long tongues", presumably the physical tribulations of exile, "found it difficult to determine/ your worth, not to mention warmth"⁴²³. It is only because Odysseus "can stomach apathy"⁴²⁴ that he is not troubled at the spectre of the death of "things" embedded in their very existence.

The essentially Stoic posture adopted by the nameless narrator refuses to dramatize his own loss and tries to arrive at the position where "the more sincere the voice, the less in it is the trace/ of love for no matter what, of anger, of tears, of terror"⁴²⁵. In advancing such a proposition where the lyric 'I' becomes an enabling mask anticipating the figure of the poet as a vehicle of language, Brodsky is also hinting at language's antecedent status to both space and time, imparting to the poet, "its mouthpiece, its wisdom and the knowledge of future alike"⁴²⁶. This is likely to produce "a deepening of his humility before the force that he surmises behind those insights and revelations"⁴²⁷. Here, Odysseus, cannot but catch his "old anthem's hum" and compare the letters on the page, each

...trailed by a weaning
retinue of its likes, forming blindly now "betsy", now
"ibrahim,"
dragging the pen past the limits of alphabet and meaning.
⁴²⁸

⁴²³ Brodsky, "New Life", in *Collected Poems in English*, 353.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid. 353.

⁴²⁶ Brodsky, "Altra Ego", in *On Grief and Reason*, 86.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Brodsky, "New Life", 353.

Thus Odysseus also comes to fathom the inherent futility of wanting to stall time. The fleeting moment, conceived through the mind “quickly succumbs to dotage”⁴²⁹. The relative permanence of language thus corresponds to the “glazed” features of Odysseus, which scratch “their matte side with “Hi””. Brodsky next image involves the “white stuccoed walls of a room” which turn whiter through “the spectrum’s lack of their self-negating tincture”⁴³⁰, re-echoing how, in another essay on the poet’s self-effacing tendencies, he had posited that, through prolonged apprenticeship to the poetic craft, a poet is “boxed out” of his own historicity, “which desperately tries to reclaim him by running its common denominator through his groin”⁴³¹. Odysseus thus sums up that the object of all art is to harbour:

...one’s unbound
curiosity about these empty zones,
about these objectless vistas...⁴³²

The final stanza of the poem therefore, is dedicated to dispelling illusions which Odysseus, in the course of his own meanderings, discover to be ephemeral. His metaphors, which illustrate such ephemera, consist in pitting the murkiness of “a cloud” over “the bright sun”, for it gives birth to self-knowledge, the constant awareness of which “appears perpetual”, like rain.⁴³³ The temporary, and solitary sail passes “its judgement on the horizon’s lie”⁴³⁴. Finally, at the end of the poem, the identity if the poetic enunciator is challenged by ironic self-negation:

And should anyone ask you “Who are you?” you reply,
“Who—I?
I am Nobody,” as Ulysses once uttered to Polyphemus.⁴³⁵

The allusion to the Homeric and post-Homeric myths of Odysseus’s slaying of Polyphemus, one of the Cyclopes, links this form of ironic self-negation to the abandoning of hubris, as is revealed when Odysseus, the following morning,

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Brodsky, “Altra Ego”, in *On Grief and Reason*, 86.

⁴³² Brodsky, “New Life”, 354.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid. 354.

haughtily declares his real name to the monster, only to be sworn revenge at, and to have Polyphemus cast huge rocks at his ship, which he only escapes barely. Thus only when Odysseus performed his own self-negation through language could he continue surviving, confirming Brodsky's posturing and performance of an anonymity through exile.

The final poem worth looking at is 'Ithaca', where Brodsky re-enacts the ritual of an imaginary homecoming where the exiled Odysseus is on the verge of returning to his native island, estranged to his own people to the point of non-recognition. However, it is also a journey of self-discovery and a measure for locating his "own barefoot trace"⁴³⁶ on the sands of his native island. Odysseus realises that his island, as he once knew it, has changed for good—even if he now throws off "those sweat-soaked rags", the servant who would recognise his scar is long dead, and the language of his own island "seems to be vain labour"⁴³⁷. Change is discernible to him through the figures of Penelope and Telemachus:

And, the one, they say, who waited for you,
is nowhere to be found for she gave herself to all.
Your boy has grown tall: he himself is a sailor,
and he looks at you as if you were scum.⁴³⁸

However, Brodsky's Odysseus in the poem also adopts an ambivalent posture towards the certainty of 'return' itself, where he too is unable to ascertain if this indeed, is his native Ithaca. Since the returning Odysseus can no more understand the language of his island after twenty years and be understood, in turn, he begins to contemplate on change and is ridden with existential doubt:

Whether it's not that island or it is indeed, inundating
a dark-blue pupil, your eye becomes fastidious:
from a patch earth the horizon waves
will not forget, evidently, dashing on.⁴³⁹

The poem thus hearkens back to a lost life, made intelligible only via language, the living matrix of which Odysseus has lost, and this is the reason why he is likely to view his return as "vain labour". Zubova specifically notes how the

⁴³⁶ Brodsky, 'Ithaca', in *Joseph Brodsky: The Art of a Poem*, eds. Lev Loseff & Valentina Polukhina (Basingstone, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1999), 38.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

poem acknowledges the destruction wrought by water (the waves) which itself becomes a metaphor of time, the force that “overcomes the last bulwark of existence—language—whose ruins can be seen in the poem’s final stanza”⁴⁴⁰. In the absence of language, Odysseus, assuming he really did return to Ithaca, becomes the “Nobody” that he had once declared himself to be in answering Polyphemus. His return is thus, in an effective sense, as good as a non-return.

The poem also strongly recalls another poem, composed in 1994, titled “Robinsonade”, which Brodsky finally resolved not to include in *So Forth*. As discernible from the title itself, the poem recounts Brodsky’s engagement with the Robinson Crusoe-myth. Brodsky’s Crusoe, having been a “victim of shipwreck”, feels that

...in twenty years I’ve sufficiently domesticated
this island (though perhaps it’s a continent),
and the lips move all on their own, as while reading,
muttering:
“Tropical vegetation, tropical vegetation”.⁴⁴¹

The explicit reference to a “continent” reinforces direct parallels with Brodsky’s own exile to the United States, and the time of composition of the poem, in 1994, would mean Brodsky was already living about twenty-two years in exile. These biographical parallels notwithstanding, the poem arrives at the same point of non-recognition of the speaker and protagonist in terms of his older self. The erasure of difference between Crusoe and Friday, his “other” is explicitly depicted in the poem:

...the already glazed
eye no longer distinguishes the print of one’s own flat sole
in the sand from Friday’s. This is the real beginning
of *écriture*. Or its very end.⁴⁴²

These lines re-iterate Rimbaud’s “*Je est une autre*” (“I is an other”) motif, reminding the reader of the seemingly irrepressible psychosis haunting Crusoe, cast here in the mould of a poet, who begins to think of himself as Friday. Following Kristeva, as we have seen in the chapter on Walcott, “the possibility or necessity to be foreign and to live in a foreign country” allows the exiled poet to

⁴⁴⁰ Liudmilla Zubova, “Odysseus to Telemachus”, 39-40.

⁴⁴¹ Brodsky, “Robinsonade”, in *Collected Poems in English*, 493.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*

provide himself “with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins”, the pleasure of being able to see oneself as others.⁴⁴³ In the last stanza of his poem “At Carel Willink’s Exhibition”, Brodsky directly agrees with Kristeva’s postulation. Poetry, the craft of language, entails that “self-portraiture” can only be achieved when one takes

A step aside from one’s own flesh and frame,
the profile of a footstool kicked toward
you, a long view on life when dues are paid.
This, then, is “mastery”: ability
to not take fright at the procedure of
nonbeing—as another form of one’s
own absence, having drawn it straight from life.⁴⁴⁴

The “procedure of/ nonbeing” and “one’s/ own absence” are expressions which re-affirm the anonymity aimed at through writing already demonstrated across the poems analysed, and thus becomes the only means of preserving identity to the exiled poet who strives relentless to achieve this “mastery”, and this self-effacing tendency on his part constitutes the ethical posture adopted by Brodsky towards his own exile.

3.7 The Quest for ‘Significance’: Tragicomedy and the Metaphysical Dimension of Exile

In the final section of this chapter, I propose to read Brodsky’s essay ‘The Condition We Call Exile’ to analyse some of the key ideas pertaining to the state of exile that Brodsky advances, and read his well-known poem of exile, ‘May 24, 1980’ in the light of those assertions. My intent would be to illustrate how exile is transmuted from being condition of terminal loss to facilitate the reclamation of an agency that is rooted in both aesthetics and ethics. This particular essay is significant in understanding what Brodsky calls the metaphysical dimensions of the exilic condition. He begins, in a tone replete with verbal irony, by describing ordinary refugees and exiles of various nationalities: “Turkish Gastarbeiters prowling the streets of West Germany”, Vietnamese boat-people, Mexican wetbacks, “shiploads of Pakistanis disembarking somewhere in Kuwait or Saudi

⁴⁴³ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 13.

⁴⁴⁴ Brodsky, “At Carel Willink’s Exhibition”, in *Collected Poems in English*, 335.

Arabia, hungry for menial jobs the oil-rich locals won't do."⁴⁴⁵ These dispossessed masses, being less fortunate and more prone to anonymity than the exiled writer "make it very difficult to talk with a straight face about the plight of the writer in exile", and "they effectively pluck the orchid out of an exiled writer's lapel"⁴⁴⁶. This statement reveals that Brodsky is well-aware of the differences between an émigré poet or intellectual and the multitudes of nameless human populations who undercut the seemingly exalted proportions attributed to the exilic experience of the former. Indeed, Edward Said seems to concur with Brodsky when he writes,

During the twentieth century, exile has been transformed from the exquisite, and sometimes exclusive, punishment of special individuals—such as Ovid, who was banished from Rome to a remote town on the Black Sea—into a cruel punishment of whole communities and peoples, often as the inadvertent result of impersonal forces such as war, famine, and disease.⁴⁴⁷

Brodsky seems to point towards a similar perspective. Even as he acknowledges the plight of "displacement and misplacement", he suggests that the condition of exile seems to have undergone a transformation in the twentieth century: "It isn't leaving civilised Rome for savage Sarmatia anymore...as a rule what takes place is a transition from a political and economic backwater to an industrially advanced society with the latest word on individual liberty on its lips"⁴⁴⁸. Disregarding realities of forced displacement that may not always conform to this formula of exile that he devises, Brodsky seems to be projecting his own experience onto others: "perhaps taking this route is for an exiled writer, in many ways, is like going home—because he gets closer to the seat of the ideals that inspired him all along"⁴⁴⁹. However, this proves to be a rather 'strange homing' (reiterating, as it were, Said's description of exile as 'contrapuntal'), because finding himself within the social security of a democratic society, he faces the risk of anonymity, an obliteration of his previous 'significance'. Therefore, he is aptly characterised by contradictory impulses. Driven on the one hand by his "appetite

⁴⁴⁵ Brodsky, 'The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh', in *On Grief and Reason* (London: Penguin, 1995), 20.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 21.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

for recognition”⁴⁵⁰., he conveniently forgets the relative superiority of his own condition over that of the “average refugee”, and therefore, “our man is a bit corrupt, almost by definition”⁴⁵¹. Yet, Brodsky realises that this symptomatic self-deception that the exiled writer cultivates is undercut by the realities of exile, reinforcing in him the quality of “humility”. The unresolved and protracted struggle to “restore his significance, his leading role, his authority”, is thus pitted against his fallacious misjudgement of himself as a significant being⁴⁵².

Brodsky’s poem ‘May 24, 1980’ begins his second English-language volume of poems *To Urania* (1988) with the nameless poetic persona describing the numerous trials encountered in his life. Composed on his fortieth birthday, the poem broadly recounts events significant to Brodsky’s life in an aphoristic style that borders on passive reportage. The widely known autobiographical contours of Brodsky’s life are alluded to in the poem:

I have braved, for want of wild beasts, steel cages,
carved my term and nickname on bunks and rafters,
lived by the sea, flashed acres in an oasis,
dined with the-devil-knows-whom, in tails, on truffles. ⁴⁵³

He has beheld “half a world” from “the height of a glacier”, drowned twice, “[q]uit the country that bore” him and “[m]unched the bread of exile: it’s stale and warty”⁴⁵⁴. Despite his preference for the art of poetry over the historical details of his life, the poem does, “following in the footsteps of Horace, Derzhavin and Pushkin” in fact offer a “summing-up” of “both Brodsky the man and Brodsky the poet”⁴⁵⁵, as Valentina Polukhina has commented:

A summing-up, above all, in biographical terms: everything
recounted in the poem is factual, there is nothing invented
here, nothing ‘romantic’. ⁴⁵⁶

Indeed, the poem may be taken as an answer to the riddle of Brodsky’s exile and to what extent it shaped him as a poet. The major events of life such as his arrest, imprisonment, exile to Norenskaia are of course introduced in the

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid. 22.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Brodsky, ‘May 24, 1980’, in *Collected Poems in English*, 211.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Valentina Polukhina, ‘I, Instead of a Wild Beast...’, in *Joseph Brodsky: The Art of a Poem*, eds. Lev Loseff & Valentina Polukhina (Basingstone, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1999), 71.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

beginning, and the poem gradually moves back in time to touch upon his vocation as a poet in Soviet Russia before his internal exile, especially during the phase 1962 to 1965, and even further back to the period 1959-1962, when “he participated in geological expeditions and tourist excursions, travelling...from the Baltic marshes to the Siberian taiga, from northern Yakutia to the mountains of Tian-Shan, where he did ‘drown’”⁴⁵⁷. It was these geological expeditions, chosen in spite of “this sort of gruelling, “unregulated” physical labour” over the regular factory job, did satisfy, his biographer Loseff comments, “a certain youthful Wanderlust”⁴⁵⁸. It was from here, “the height of a glacier” that he had beheld ‘half a word’ and “saw yelling Huns in saddles”⁴⁵⁹. The poem then goes on to concentrate on his internal exile and banishment:

Quit the country that bore and nursed me.
Those who forgot me would make a city.
I have waded in steppes that saw yelling Huns in saddles,
worn the clothes nowadays back in fashion in every
quarter,
planted rye, tarred the roofs of pigsties and stables,
guzzled everything save dry water.⁴⁶⁰

What is striking is the inversion of agency in the assertion that Brodsky “quit the country” himself, hinting at active volition on his part in the event, despite the fact that his exile was most definitely, a forced penal banishment imposed on him by the State. The strategy of inverting agency, that is, the refusal to consider himself as a passive victim of his exile, is also part of Brodsky’s ethical posture towards exile, playing it only in a “low key”. The reference to planting rye obliquely alludes to his working as an ‘agricultural labourer’ in Norenskaia, just as tarring “the roofs of pigsties and stables”⁴⁶¹ are broadly indicative of menial labour. The phrasing of the next line, “guzzled everything save dry water” explains, by negation, what indeed he *has* guzzled, which is *everything* he could lay his hands upon—food, water and poetry. Brodsky also mentions his experience of

⁴⁵⁷ See Valentina Polukhina, “I, Instead of a Wild Beast...”, 72. Polukhina’s source for this is Brodsky’s friend, Georgii Ginzburg-Voskov, as well as his companion on his trip to the Tian-Shan mountains, who had told her that “Brodsky did indeed nearly drown twice in the course of one summer”.

⁴⁵⁸ Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, 26.

⁴⁵⁹ Brodsky, ‘May 24, 1980’, in *Collected Poems in English*, 211

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

surveillance by the state machine through the expression that he has “admitted the sentries’ third eye into his wet and foul dreams”, a reference probably intended to capture the horrors of incarceration and forced psychiatric ‘therapy’. And yet, as the following lines will reveal, the subtle art of switching to a “whisper”, preventing one’s descent into the “howl” is something Brodsky is claiming to have mastered in the process:

...Munched the bread of exile: it’s stale and warty.
Granted my lungs all sounds except the howl;
switched to a whisper.⁴⁶²

This is precisely the reason why Brodsky advocates, in his essay on the condition of exile, that the reality of the condition “consists of an exiled writer constantly fighting and conspiring to restore his significance, his leading role, his authority”⁴⁶³. While reading this long catalogue of his tribulations, the speaker’s self-estrangement is immediately apparent—the poetic voice of Brodsky can segregate itself from myth of ‘Brodsky the exile’ that American readers were likely to be familiar with. Nevertheless, the poetic voice seems subdued and stoically poised, intent at offering no simplistic answers to the experience of survival. It also invites the reader from an American context to look beyond the spectre of his exile and to realise the ambivalent propensities of a life that is not only marked by passivity but active participation, not to be condemned “to remaining forever at the receiving end of things, to ossify into an uncomprehending victim”⁴⁶⁴. This essentially involves “playing ostrich to the metaphysics of his situation”⁴⁶⁵, and letting his ego inflate, and is capable of lifting him from reality. In a passage that aptly captures the “dissident” exile’s political co-option by the order of politics, Brodsky writes:

Travelling by balloon in precipitous and, above all unpredictable: too easily one becomes a plaything of the winds, in this case, political winds. Small wonder, then, that our navigator keenly listens to all the forecasts, and on occasion venture to predict the weather himself.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Brodsky, ‘The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh’, in *On Grief and Reason*, 26.

⁴⁶⁴ Brodsky, ‘The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh’, 23.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

Brodsky also adds that “our balloonist is invariably homeward bound”⁴⁶⁷, as if providing a personal gloss over Said’s comment that the exile “exists in the median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half involvements and half detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another...”⁴⁶⁸

Let us turn now to the final few lines of “May 24, 1980”. Having recounted his past adequately, and having established his place to speak as one who has braved it all, the narrator has realised that life is “long and abhors transience”. The other assertions he makes are:

Broken eggs make me grieve; the omelette, though, makes
me vomit.
Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx,
only gratitude will be gushing from it.⁴⁶⁹

The first line (“Broken eggs make me grieve...”) is undoubtedly, a tongue-in-cheek reply intended to challenge the appropriation of poetic metaphor in a statement regarding Stalin’s atrocities by New York Times reporter Walter Duranty, who, in defense of Stalinist governance, wrote in an article in 1932, ““Russians may be hungry and short of clothes and comfort, but you can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs”⁴⁷⁰. This quote, usually mistakenly attributed to Stalin himself, was used again by Stalin’s close associate, Lazar Kaganovich, speaking of the expulsion of Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev from the Communist Party: “Why wail over broken eggs when we are trying to make an omelette!”⁴⁷¹. Brodsky thus ironically exposes this reductive reasoning, challenging thereby the objectification of the sufferings of nay-sayers to Stalin’s regime to an everyday activity such as making breakfast. By reserving “grief” for those “broken

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Edward Said, “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals”, *Grand Street* 47 (Autumn, 1993), 114.

⁴⁶⁹ Brodsky, ‘May 24, 1980’, in *Collected Poems in English*, 211

⁴⁷⁰ Walter Duranty, “Red Square: Russia’s Pulsing Heart: Ancient and Modern, Ugly and Fantastic, Here in the Shadows of Kremlin Tower and Lenin’s Tomb Is Found the Harmony of the Old Russia and the New Faith”, *New York Times*, September 18, 1932, <https://www.nytimes.com/1932/09/18/archives/red-square-russias-pulsing-heart-ancient-and-modern-ugly-and.html> (accessed January 8, 2021).

⁴⁷¹ Lazar Kaganovich quoted in “Russia: Stalin’s Omelette”, *Time*, Oct 24, 1932, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090618154733/http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,753448-2,00.html> (accessed January 9, 2021).

eggs”, and by sounding his utter distaste at the “omelette”, Brodsky rejects this form of reasoning. The final two lines resonate with a pointed affirmation of agency on part of the exiled poet. In the speaker’s concluding assertion “Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx,/only gratitude will be gushing from it”⁴⁷², there is also the hint at significant, if not adequate recompense, for the trauma of exile that he has endured, through the service to the Russian, and thereafter, the English language. Since Brodsky sees exile as a fitting description of, “at best, the very moment of departure” and what follows “is both too comfortable and too autonomous to be called by this name”⁴⁷³, it ceases to be an unambiguously tragic experience connoting terminal loss. This interpretation seems to accord with Brodsky’s assertion in his essay that “[i]f one were to assign the life of an exiled writer a genre, it would have to be tragicomedy”⁴⁷⁴. Exile, not merely as spatial displacement from one’s home, but as a “metaphysical condition” seems to be a double-edged sword: a condition of loss which recuperates into an enabling matrix of retrospection and retroaction “that gets unwittingly triggered within an individual by the least suggestion of his surroundings’ strangeness”.⁴⁷⁵ It is this retrospective machinery that allows Brodsky to recount a catalogue of his tribulations in the poem in relation to his now exilic status in United States, one that interminably tries to delay “the arrival of the present”⁴⁷⁶. This drive to stall the present “translates itself into the repetitiveness of nostalgia” and thus, “slows down one’s stylistic evolution, it makes him more conservative”⁴⁷⁷. Exile is also synonymous to a “linguistic event”, with a poet’s “professional flight—or drift—into isolation...into the condition at which all one is left with is oneself and one’s language, with nobody or nothing in between”⁴⁷⁸. As soon as one is “thrust off” from his ‘home’, one ‘retreats into his mother tongue: “[f]rom being his, so to speak, sword, it turns into his shield, into his capsule”⁴⁷⁹. Thus the mother-tongue proves to be the insular space of security sought after by the exiled poet beyond the personal hardships and tribulations of exile. Moreover, Brodsky observes, this retreat into the mother

⁴⁷² Brodsky, ‘May 24, 1980’, 211.

⁴⁷³ Brodsky, ‘The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh’, 28.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 22.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 26.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 27.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 28.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 29.

tongue invariably leads the exiled poet to write of absences, because a “living language, by definition, has a centrifugal propensity—and propulsion; it tries to cover as much ground as possible—and as much emptiness as possible”⁴⁸⁰. But this retreat into isolation is ultimately, for Brodsky, not the most ethical choice. Exile, more well-known for the traumas it induces in its subjects, “should also be known for its pain-dulling infinity, for its forgetfulness, detachment, indifference” which often obscures the ethical responsibility to affirm a powerful agency of one’s own “to set the next man...a bit more free”⁴⁸¹.

In the course of this particular chapter therefore, I have tried to chart the progression in Brodsky’s attitude towards the condition of exile beginning from his isolation in Soviet society and the world of letters as a Jew, the ideological import of whose poetry was not easy to categorise and label, to strategies of passivity, self-effacement, estrangement and self-deprecation in his poems and finally, to an acknowledgement of the need for a more active intervention into the political and historical realities of exile, where “in the great causal chain of things, we may as well stop being its rattling effects and try to play causes”⁴⁸². For Brodsky, the exiled poet who never returned, such an active role consists in advancing the ethically envisaged alternative of literature, “and poetry in particular” as the “highest form of locution...to put it bluntly, the goal of our species”⁴⁸³. Brodsky’s formulation of “aesthetics” as “the mother of ethics”⁴⁸⁴ is also consistent with this position, as is his idea that “[a]esthetic choice is a highly individual matter, and aesthetic experience is always a private one”⁴⁸⁵. His poetry is built upon an eternally expansive idea of individual freedom where “liberation is just the means of attaining freedom and is not synonymous with it”⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.,

⁴⁸¹ Ibid. 30.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Brodsky, “Uncommon Visage: The Nobel Lecture”, in *On Grief and Reason*, 50.

⁴⁸⁴ Brodsky, “An Immodest Proposal”, in *On Grief and Reason*, 208

⁴⁸⁵ Brodsky, “Uncommon Visage: The Nobel Lecture”, in *On Grief and Reason*, 49.

⁴⁸⁶ Brodsky, “The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh”, 30.

Chapter 4

“An inner émigré”: Exile, Aesthetic Distance and Poetic Responsibility in Seamus Heaney

Artistic activity, explained in relation to the artist’s historical experience, has the potential to mould the inevitably political positioning he or she has to assume through the act of writing. In the case of Seamus Heaney, born and raised in County Derry, Mossbawn in Ulster, Northern Ireland, such artistic positioning was the result of a gradual evolution in his poetics: a movement from the ‘Ulster-poet’ identity that characterizes Heaney’s first two published volumes of verse *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969) towards a conception of the “placeless haven”¹, including but not limited to his own voluntary “exile” in 1972 from Belfast to Wicklow and his final resettlement in Dublin, Republic of Ireland. Exilic subjectivity, as assumed and conceived by Heaney in the course of this movement therefore, necessarily constitutes a significant part of his oeuvre. As Carmen Bugar, in her seminal work on Seamus Heaney’s poetics of exile and its connections to East-European poetry has chosen to call it, Heaney’s “exile”, even if not replete with the hardships of forced displacement, can be aptly called a “metaphorical experience”². In particular, Bugar emphasizes the deliberate self-distancing of Heaney’s gradually developing artistic stance in relation to his reading of four East-European poets—Osip Mandelstam, Joseph Brodsky, Czeslaw Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert—set against the political context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. While there is no denying that certain parts of her work do indeed overlap with mine, the objectives that set apart this chapter and Bugar’s work are easily traceable. Whereas she has limited the scope of her study to the “influence” of East-European poets on Heaney’s poetics, where “influence” is “seen through

¹ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh’, in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), Kindle edition.

² Carmen Bugar, “Introduction,” in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation: Poetics of Exile* (London: Legenda, 2013), 6.

metaphors of ‘debt’, or ‘profound awareness’ or ‘immersion’, or ‘taking possession’³”, my inquiry would like to trace the trajectory of a much larger movement in Heaney’s oeuvre, beginning from the cultivation of a poetics laden with close attachment to the particular landscape of Mossbawn in Co. Derry and the eventual outgrowing of it, an event further compounded by Heaney’s decision to move out of Belfast in 1972, resigning from his teaching job at Queen’s University. The political context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, in which an ‘Ulster poet’ was inevitably riven apart by the demands of two opposed camps—Nationalist and Unionist—is famously described as the “tight gag of place”⁴ in the poem “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing” in *North* (1975). Heaney specifically emphasizes that the seductions and coercions of political demagoguery must be resisted by the poet, who ought to assume an active role in articulating the poet’s responsibility to account for the degree of “redress” that his work is able to achieve. The notion of “redress” is here used in the particular sense in which Heaney understands it: “the tendency to place a counter-reality in the scales” through poetry, which actively fulfils its “counterweighting function”⁵, and whereby it becomes “a glimpsed alternative” and achieves a “transcendent equilibrium” that balances out the forces of historical inequality⁶. Heaney’s exilic poetics thus has to be understood through his complicated relationship to both Ulster and the greater ‘Irish’ identity, as well as the English literary tradition to which he was deeply indebted to.

The notion of this “turn” therefore, wherein Heaney’s stance of explicit disavowal to make poetry perform overtly political functions, and his deliberate cultivation of an aesthetics of withdrawal and self-distancing becomes more pronounced, is directly addressed in the course of this particular chapter. In his study on the shaping of Seamus Heaney as a poet, Michael Parker acknowledges this movement thus:

The seven years from 1961-68 were years of plenty for Seamus Heaney in both his personal and his literary life. The next seven

³ Ibid. 5.

⁴ Heaney, ‘Whatever You Say, Say Nothing’, in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition,

⁵ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Redress of Poetry’, in *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 13.

⁶ Ibid.

would prove to be years of pain and adjustment to pain, years in which the 'larger drama of our politics ' would preoccupy the private imagination. Though at times geographically distant from the bombs and bullets, for Heaney they were always close at hand. Hearing the reports of guns and of each new 'neighbourly murder', the poet endeavoured to find perspectives which might enable him to face the horror. Although 'the politics of polarisation', and the 'agony and injustice' of events, increasingly compelled him towards adopting a Catholic stance, he struggled for a long time to restrain his feelings of 'race and resentment'.⁷

Heaney's deliberate stance of self-distancing, connoted by the use of the provincial Ulster phrasal verb "wintering out" as the title of his 1972 book, meaning "to see through and survive a crisis"⁸, is rhetorically laden with possibilities where poetry is envisioned as a "a glimpsed alternative" that achieves "transcendent equilibrium"⁹, balancing out the forces of historical inequality. Although his assumption of such a self-distancing posture has historically earned him much critical rancour, including allegations of deliberate desertion of the cause of the Nationalist Catholic minority in Unionist Ulster¹⁰, Heaney has nevertheless remained steadfast to his calling as a poet, an articulator of "redress", commenting from a metaphorical distance on the never-ending cycles of violence during the years of the Troubles, but refusing to be entrapped within a framework where the weight of demands of political affiliation far exceeds the individual allegiance the poet has to his body of work. Indeed, one encounters, while grappling with Heaney's theorisation of the function of "redress" through poetry, the idea of writing poetry as a balancing act, an instance of which Heaney discovers in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, "a mind that is unembittered but still unappeased"¹¹. I shall argue, in the course of this chapter, that the quoted phrase in the last sentence applies equally well to Heaney's poetic career and his evolution as a poet forever in bilocation—at home in Ulster and yet away from it through his imbibing of the cultural legacy of the English language and his poetic apprenticeship to the same.

⁷ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), 89.

⁸ *Ibid.* 89-90.

⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'The Redress of Poetry', in *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 13

¹⁰ See, for example, Edna Longley, "North: 'Inner Emigre' or 'Artful Voyeur'", in *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986),

¹¹ Heaney, "Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop", in *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 135.

By proclaiming that poetry “offers a response to reality which has a liberating and verifying effect on the individual spirit”¹², Heaney seems to be pointedly indicating towards the ultimately non-conformist side of poetry. Since poetry can but only envisage an order “which is comprehensive of events but not in itself productive of new events”¹³, it is of little use to either the “activist” or the “engaged parties”, pitted against each other in a decidedly political battle:

Engaged parties are not going to be grateful for a mere image—no matter how inventive or original—of the field of force of which they are a part. They will always want the redress of poetry to be an exercise of leverage on behalf of their point of view; they will require the entire weight of the thing to come down on their side of the scales.

So, if you are an English poet at the Front during World War I, the pressure will be on you to contribute to the war effort, preferably by dehumanizing the face of the enemy. If you are an Irish poet in the wake of the 1916 executions, the pressure will be to revile the tyranny of the executing power. If you are an American poet at the height of the Vietnam War, the official expectation will be for you to wave the flag rhetorically. In these cases, to see the German soldier as a friend and secret sharer, to see the British government as a body who might keep faith, to see the South-East Asian expedition as an imperial betrayal, to do any of these things is to add a complication where the general desire is for a simplification.¹⁴

Heaney’s exilic imperative can be located therefore in his desire to perform, through poetry, “countervailing gestures” that “frustrate the common expectation of solidarity”¹⁵. By deliberately choosing to disobey “the force of gravity” that dictates identifiable political action, poetic utterance posits the “tendency to place a counter-reality in the scales—a reality which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation”¹⁶. Against the backdrop of such a counterweighting function, the poet must “submit to the strain of bearing witness in his or her own life to the plane of consciousness established in the poem”¹⁷. “Exile” therefore,

¹² Heaney, “The Redress of Poetry”, in *The Redress of Poetry*, 13.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

embodies a deliberately adopted stance towards writing, and, as Bugan writes, “is embraced as part of the creative process”¹⁸. The retrospective distance gained from peculiarly specific historical contingencies that the poet finds himself embedded in allows Heaney to conceive of a poetics of exile built on keen contemplation and self-reflection. In his essay “Feeling into Words” for example, Heaney conceives of the art of poetry as a form of “...divination, as a restoration of the culture to itself”¹⁹. He carefully separates “technique” and “craft” in the essay, claiming that while the latter is merely “the skill of making” verse, the former “...involves not only a poet’s way with words, his management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality”²⁰. Technique then, for Heaney, bears that indelible imprint of personal experience that allows the poet to “forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of the race”²¹ as Stephen Dedalus put it. “Technique” demands that the poet be able to see from without, and through the retrospective distance gained from a direct immersion into historical circumstances, culminating in the artist’s fuller conception of his own self. Carmen Bugan thus demonstrates, having found a common denominator between Joyce’s alter-ego Stephen Daedalus and Heaney’s exilic imperative for the “responsible” poet:

Stephen is saying here that in order to know himself as an artist, so that he would be able to ‘forge in the smithy’ of his ‘soul’ the essence of his culture, the artist must leave his homeland. This is the crux of self-imposed exile, this thirst for self-knowledge that takes one beyond the preoccupations of the self and into the realm in which, by achieving a sense of self-identity, he at the same time becomes a representative of his culture. Exile, self-chosen, here functions both as a cause and as an effect of artistic creation...Exile is turned into a poetics, a mode of feeling and writing poetry: you must go away, Joyce says, so that you will know yourself as an Irishman, an Irish artist.²²

¹⁸ Carmen Bugan, “Introduction”, in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation* (London: Legenda, 2013), 11.

¹⁹ Seamus Heaney, “Feeling into Words”, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 60.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 47

²¹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Signet Classic, 1991), 253.

²² Carmen Bugan, “Introduction,” in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation*, 12.

The intent of this chapter is precisely to address this dynamic, and gradually evolving relationship Heaney maintains with “exile”. Ironized through its articulation only in between a pair of inverted commas, the term “exile” here does not mean expulsion or immigration by force but bears an active volition on part of Heaney to maintain a form of aesthetic distance from assuming a poetic voice that directly appeases the Catholic minority in Ulster or ends up espousing the Unionist cause. Typified in Heaney’s pointed rejection of the varied roles of “internee” or “informer”, it tries to focus on the gradual consolidation of his “inner émigré”²³ identity over the three decades of his poetic career from the early 1960s to the late-1980s. I have, for fulfilling the criterion of contemporaneity that the comparative framework of my dissertation demands, limited the scope of my analysis to the poetic volumes till *The Haw Lantern* (1987), although I have used some of his later works as secondary references to support my arguments, as indeed I have extensively made use of Heaney’s prose anthologies *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (1980), *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), *The Redress of Poetry* (1995) and *Finders Keepers* (2002) and his translation *Sweeney Astray* (1983). The poetic anthologies directly under the scope of my analysis thus include the first seven volumes of Heaney’s poetry that were published during the phase 1966-1987. These years demonstrate, as my analysis shall hope to reveal, Heaney’s appearance as an Ulster-poet inextricably bound to the particular place of his origin that was Mossbawn in Co. Derry and his outgrowing of the same, first by cultivating a measured refusal to speak for either the Nationalist or the Unionist side through *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975), his voluntary exile at Glanmore in Co. Wicklow, and thereafter, through his adoption of the Sweeney-myth through his translations and poems during the 1980s, culminating finally in his re-appropriations of the motifs of “creative exile” from Dante and Joyce in *Station Island* (1984) and through positing a conception of ‘imagined spaces’ in *The Haw Lantern* (1987). To be more specific, this chapter concentrates on:

- (a) The trajectory, in Heaney’s oeuvre from the emphasis on place to placelessness over two decades, as revealed not just through his verse but also his critical essays on Patrick Kavanagh and Elizabeth Bishop.

²³ Heaney, “Exposure,” in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 84.

- (b) The deliberate cultivation of a poetic posture aimed at furthering aesthetic distance in the poetic anthologies of the 1970s, which directly deal with the never-ending cycles of violence during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The biographical events which shall be probed into during this phase concerns Heaney's self-imposed "exile" from Belfast to Wicklow, his resettlement in Dublin, Republic of Ireland and finally his moving to and fro between Boston, United States and Dublin.
- (c) The emphasis, in Heaney's oeuvre on bilocation, and the extent to which Heaney's own bilocation directly contributes to his '*exilic imperative*', a term by which I mean his deliberate assumption of the "inner émigré" role with respect to Irish culture and the active espousal of the exilic position in order to demonstrate what poetry *ought to do*.
- (d) The extent to which Heaney constructs his own apologia for poetry while living in migrant solitude in Glanmore, Co. Wicklow through resolving his inner anxieties and ethical dilemmas about the former life that he had distanced himself from.
- (e) The re-appropriations of exilic subjectivity Heaney found in his readings of Dante and Joyce, as evidenced in *Station Island* (1984) and his translations of the Irish epic concerning the mythical mad king, Sweeney.
- (f) The metaphors of frontier-crossing and imagined spaces *The Haw Lantern* (1987).

4.1. Widening out from the *omphalos*: The Ulster Renaissance and the Importance of "Place" in Heaney's Oeuvre

Beginning with the publication of his first two volumes of poetry *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), Seamus Heaney's poetry was characterised by a profound attachment to Mossbawn in Co. Derry where he was born, in Ulster, Northern Ireland. In the decade of the 1960s, when British poetry appeared to be atrophied, Heaney, along with poets Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Michael Longley, Seamus Deane and James Simmons was seen as part of the group of poets from Northern Ireland who initiated the "Ulster Renaissance", a phenomenon otherwise known as the Northern-Irish Literary Revival.²⁴

²⁴ See Heather Clark, "Introduction", in *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-72* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.

Notwithstanding the views of Thomas Kinsella, editor of the *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, who dismissed the historically documented phenomenon of a pointed collaboration between the aforementioned poets as merely “a journalistic entity”²⁵, scholars such as Heather Clark have unearthed a wide variety of documentary and epistolary evidence to suggest that it is valid to think of a self-conscious coterie of Northern Irish poets²⁶. Clark hastens to add, all the while however, that while the grouping of the above poets is not an uncontested claim owing to the very nature of the inherited subjectivity of the “Ulster” poet to distrust labels as a somewhat pretentious phenomenon. She specifically cites a 1953 issue of *Rann*, where the BBC producer and writer John Boyd wrote:

...there is certainly no definite ‘Ulster’ school: our writers are by nature too independent, too individualistic. They don’t form literary cliques; indeed they don’t seek one another out at all but prefer to go their own way, to write as they please, to solve their own problems, and, incidentally, to mind their own business.²⁷

Heaney concurs with this nonplussed attitude of the members of the literary circles in Belfast in a collaborative set of articles he published in the *Frontier*, with fellow Belfast literary figures such as Derek Mahon, Paddy Devlin, Michael Foley, Martin Lynch and Michael Longley. Heaney’s article describes Botanic Avenue, one of the minor streets of Belfast which he considered “more than just a thoroughfare” despite there being “something indomitably ordinary about its appearance”²⁸. He discovers an enduring feature common to the street and its literary circles:

It was almost self-consciously *déclassé*, although too self-consciously Belfast to admit a word like *déclassé* into its vocabulary. It was still more a place for catching yourself on than for being carried away, where it was all right to carry the *New Statesman* but a bit risky to be caught with the *New Yorker*²⁹.

²⁵ Thomas Kinsella (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. xxx.

²⁶ See Heather Clark, “Introduction”, in *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-72* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.

²⁷ John Boyd, ‘The Ulster Novel’, *Rann* 20 (1953): 35.

²⁸ Heaney, “The Boule Miche of the North”, in Derek Mahon, Seamus Heaney, Paddy Devlin, Michael Foley, Martin Lynch and Michael Longley, “The Beauty of Belfast”, *Forntnight* 207 (Sep., 1984): 19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Historically, this unease of literary artists in Belfast to be identified under the label of a group—“the Ulster Movement, the Honest Ulsterman School, the Belfast Group, the Mutual Admiration Society of Northern Poets”³⁰—has persisted through repeated disavowals of belonging to a specific literary clique or coterie³¹. Nevertheless, Heather Clark has argued that “...the Ulster Renaissance, the Northern Ireland Literary Revival—that occurred between Philip Hobsbaum’s arrival in 1962 and Seamus Heaney’s departure ten years later”³² is a phenomenon that refused to die down in critical parlance, often founded upon Hobsbaum’s now-famous poetry workshop in Belfast after he arrived and began to live there in 1962. The Belfast Group, modelled on an earlier discussion group Hobsbaum had founded in London (known simply as The Group) rehabilitated regionalism in poetry that was decried by the Movement poets, and derived much of its native vitality by means of an attachment to place. It was a significant attempt in cultivating a shared poetics, “an essential forum for critical approbation, appropriation, and dissent”³³. But gradually, the idea of a ‘group’ or ‘school’ of poets began to permeate in critical parlance, though arguments to the contrary have also been observed, among others, from Norman Dugdale: “The Group had no manifesto, no corporate identity, no programme beyond providing a forum in which writers... could produce their wares and have them discussed”³⁴. It therefore becomes necessary, from the point-of-view of a dissertation largely concerned with the individual growth of poets inhabiting exilic subjectivity, to stick to historically verifiable evidence concerning the *modus operandi* of the poetry sessions conducted during the phase 1963-66 during the meetings of the Belfast Group. As Brian Croxall and Rebecca Sutton Koeser have argued in their work, the Group crystallised around the semi-academic environment

³⁰ Heather Clark, “Introduction”, in *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-72*, 1.

³¹ Clark has gone to show that these refusals and disavowals have been protracted, especially by Mahon and Longley who refused to apply any such labels to themselves. Mahon, when asked whether there was indeed such a thing as the “Northern Irish Renaissance”, had replied in the negative, adding that “You can’t renaece something that was never nasce” [*sic*]. See James J. Murphy, Lucy McDiarmid, and Michael J. Durkan, ‘Q & A with Derek Mahon’, *Irish Literary Supplement* 10, no. 2 (1991): 28. Nevertheless, at least one particular instance of Mahon’s acknowledgement of the group is also provided here.

In Longley’s view, there was not much importance to be ascribed to Hobsbaum’s workshop, because “The poetry would have happened anyway—that is, without the impetus of Hobsbaum’s workshop”. See Norman Dugdale et al., ‘The Belfast Group: A Symposium’, *Honest Ulsterman* 53 (1976): 57.

³² Heather Clark, “Introduction”, in *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-72*, 1.

³³ *Ibid.* 7.

³⁴ Norman Dugdale et al., ‘The Belfast Group: A Symposium’, *Honest Ulsterman* 53 (1976): 54.

of Queen's University, Belfast, including, in its composition, many academics³⁵. Mahon's 1970 article, "Poetry in Northern Ireland" comes across as an important source in acknowledging the group where he admits that the "Hobsbaum seminar (known as the Group)...was probably the first to crystallise the sense of a new Northern poetry"³⁶. Clark also highlights the reminiscences of Michael Longley in a BBC radio programme titled 'Hobsbaum's Choice' where the latter commented:

Culturally in the early '60s, Belfast was a 40-watt bulb. There was hardly anything going on. If a continental film came to Belfast, we queued up in the cold at 11 o'clock at night. So there was this 40-watt bulb which you might call Belfast culture, and this hot spot, which was the Hobsbaum house.³⁷

Clark also quotes from Heaney's tribute –piece to Hobsbaum's legacy, first published in *The Honest Ulsterman Group Symposium* in 1976, where he pays homage to Hobsbaum's debt: "...to give a generation a sense of themselves in two ways: it allowed us to get to grips with one another within the group, to move from critical comment to creative friendship at our own pace, and it allowed a small public to think of us as The Group, a single, even singular phenomenon"³⁸. It is also remarkable that a little while later in the same piece, Heaney uses the phrase "craven provincials" to describe the emerging and young group of poets of Northern Ireland in the early 1960s, adding that Hobsbaum "helped the unknown locals by creating something of a mystique around them..."³⁹

Hobsbaum, upon his arrival at Belfast (when he had accepted a teaching position at Queen's University) soon discovered that the literary life of the city had been largely stagnant and riven apart by sectarian impulses. "I was told by more than one person", he wrote in a recollection piece for the Group in 1997, "that

³⁵ Brian Croxall and Rebecca Sutton Koeser, "What Do We Mean When We Say "Belfast Group"?", *Digital Humanists* (2015), <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:29091> (accessed February 14, 2021), 2. Pakenham also thought that the group was too "academic and University-orientated"[sic] because "the majority of the Group [...] were either University Lecturers or their students". See Norman Dugdale et al., 'The Belfast Group: A Symposium', *Honest Ulsterman* 53 (1976): 57.

³⁶ Derek Mahon, "Poetry in Northern Ireland," *Twentieth-Century Studies* 4 (1970): 91.

³⁷ Michael Longley, 'Hobsbaum's Choice', BBC Radio 3 programme, produced by Neal Acheson, written and presented by Roisin McAuley for Zinzan Productions, first aired 30 Jan. 2000.

³⁸ Norman Dugdale et al., "The Belfast Group: A Symposium", *Honest Ulsterman* 53 (1976): 62–63. Richard Kirkland reads this statement as a clear endorsement, on Heaney's part, of the Belfast Group. See also Richard Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965: Moments of Danger* (London: Longman, 1996), 78.

³⁹ Norman Dugdale 'et al.', "The Belfast Group: A Symposium", 62-63.

Catholics and Protestants would never meet under one roof—for any purpose”⁴⁰. The Belfast Group had, among its other achievements, “proved these well-wishers wrong”⁴¹. Heather Clark also cites the young Heaney’s keen interest in Hobsbaum’s workshop, observable specifically in his favourable review of Hobsbaum’s *A Group Anthology for Hibernia*.⁴² In the review, Heaney lauds Hobsbaum’s project of fostering local talent and bringing their work before a wider audience. It was Heaney’s poem ‘October Thought’, published in *Q*, the Queen’s University literary magazine, which brought him directly to Hobsbaum’s attention, and he received a formal invitation to Hobsbaum’s writing workshop in 1963. The workshop commenced, “...in October 1963, a few months after Heaney met Hobsbaum; it met on Tuesdays (later Mondays) in Hobsbaum’s flat at 5 Fitzwilliam Street”⁴³. In these weekly meetings, “usually about ten participants listened to the featured writer read his or her work, and then discussed the writing with ‘Leavisite rigour’”⁴⁴. The Group, founded by the Hobsbaums (Philip and Hannah), the Heaneys (Seamus and Marie), Edna Longley, Stewart Parker, Harry Chambers, John Newmann, James Simmons and a few others. Michael Longley, Norman Dugdale and Derek Mahon were some of the others who joined at later sessions, followed by Ciaran Carson and Paul Muldoon. Hobsbaum led the Group from October 1963 to March 1966. The Belfast Group also saw a growing friendship between the Heaneys and the Longleys, an unlikely friendship because ordinarily in sectarian Belfast, friendship between Catholic and Protestant families was indeed a rarity.

Clark also mentions that in 1964, Hobsbaum published *The Place’s Fault and Other Poems*, most of which had been written during his graduate years in Sheffield. She explicitly identifies the poem “Provincial Undergraduate” in this collection as expressing “feelings of marginalization in a class-obsessed culture that makes little room for a Jewish scholarship boy from Yorkshire”⁴⁵. This “trust in the

⁴⁰ Philip Hobsbaum, ‘The Belfast Group: A Recollection’, *Eire-Ireland* 32: 2–3(1997): 173.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Seamus Heaney, quoted in Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-72*, 53.

⁴³ Seamus Heaney, ‘October Thought’, *Q*, Michaelmas Term, Queen’s University Belfast (1959), 27

⁴⁴ See Michael Longley (ed.), *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster* (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1971), 96. This is also quoted in Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-72*, 54.

⁴⁵ Heather Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-72*, 59.

parochial” was one of the elements that had attracted poets from Belfast to Hobsbaum’s writing workshop, not the least because of Hobsbaum’s status as an “outsider” as a Jew in the cultural centre that was London⁴⁶. It is also Clark’s contention that the character of the common, underlying Group aesthetic was “Leavisite”, a text-centric approach where a subjective and personalised nexus of meaning-formation was discouraged, in order to prioritise a common, shared dimension which would allow the reader to go beyond grasping for arbitrary meanings: “... abstract work based upon a writer’s private code of language—and hence inaccessible to the common reader—was discouraged”⁴⁷. This led to a preference for Heaney’s direct, down-to-earth Ulster-bred style over the more elegant, soaring and fanciful themes attempted by others. In an interview to Randall for example, Heaney said, specifically referring to the work of Longley and Mahon by the use of “others” in his statement that:

They had more a sense of controversy with Hobsbaum and Hobsbaum didn’t go for their work because he thought it was too elegant. He was a strong believer in the bleeding hunk of experience. So there was an edginess therefore and I was favoured and they weren’t.⁴⁸

In another interview with Kinahan, Heaney readily admits to his status as a novice when he joined Hobsbaum’s workshop, contrasting himself to Longley and Mahon, who already had achieved some considerable literary success by this time: “I had absolutely no confidence as a writer qua writer, I was hopeful, tentative, and—you know—wide-eyed with expectation”⁴⁹. While Heaney admits that himself, Longley and Mahon were called the “tight-arsed trio”, emphasizing on the shared aspect of formalism that characterised their poetry, although he hastens to add that:

We're a school insofar as that original grouping was the first literary place; but I think that Mahon's procedures, Longley's procedures, my procedures, Simmons' procedures are very different. I suppose we shared traditional beliefs about whatever

⁴⁶ Dugdale et al., ‘The Belfast Group: A Symposium’, *Honest Ulsterman* 53 (1976): 62

⁴⁷ Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-72*, 62.

⁴⁸ James Randall, “From the Archive: An Interview with Seamus Heaney”, *Ploughshares* 37 no. 1 (Spring 2011): 175.

⁴⁹ Frank Kinahan, “Interview with Seamus Heaney”, *Critical Inquiry* 8 no. 3 (1982): 407.

good writing is-it wasn't the let-it-all-hang-out school, it was the well-made school⁵⁰.

For the relatively inexperienced Heaney, this concentration of literary activity around the Group and Hobsbaum's role in mentoring it was very significant. Clark has also judiciously pointed out Heaney's readiness to be apprenticed to Hobsbaum's method of reading poetry, the fruits of which came out in the form of collaborative "group sheets" on different poems the poets had tried to read together.⁵¹ Heaney's essay "Belfast" also provides the reader an overview of activities concerning Hobsbaum's writing workshop. In the first section of the essay, the section entitled "The Group", Heaney applauds Hobsbaum's ability to unite "disparate elements into a single action"⁵². While he acknowledges that Hobsbaum "drove some people mad with his absolutes and hurt others with his overbearing, he confirmed as many with his enthusiasms", Heaney also credits him for his introduction of a number of poets who participated in the writing workshop to the press, expressly mentioning articles in *The Telegraph* and *The Observer*, covered by Mary Holland.⁵³ After Hobsbaum had left, the Group began to convene at the residence of the Heaneys, "after interludes in the back room of the English Department and the upper room of a pub".⁵⁴

As many as forty-nine poems composed by Heaney were read, discussed and analysed in the course of this writing workshop, a fact which becomes more meaningful when seen in the light of Heaney's later statement in an interview to Randall, that "Philip Hobsbaum was really the one who gave me the trust in what I was doing and he urged me to send poems out—and it's easy to forget

⁵⁰ Ibid. 408.

⁵¹ See *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-72*, 39-40. See also Seamus Deane, "The Famous Seamus", *New Yorker*, 20 Mar. 2000, 54, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2000/03/20/the-famous-seamus#:~:text=He%20began%20to%20be%20famous,appeared%20on%20examination%20lists%20at> (accessed February 13, 2021) where Deane admits that he felt dejection and embarrassment in Heaney's presence, whom he considered a superior talent. He notes that while "Heaney was serving an apprenticeship, I was just being an undergraduate", underlining Heaney's dedication and participation in group readings.

⁵² Heaney, "Belfast," in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, 28-29.

⁵³ Ibid. 29.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 29-30.

how callow and unknowing you are about these things in the beginning”⁵⁵. Heaney’s dedicatory poem to Hobsbaum, “Blackberry Picking”, captures the growing disillusionments, elucidated through the contrast between the raw freshness of the berries while in the bush, and the stinking fermenting of them once picked, can certainly be read as an allegory on the Belfast Group, comprising of “regional” talents freshly culled by Hobsbaum whose interactions, nevertheless, having run their full course, turned “sour”. While it is certainly true that neither Longley nor Mahon ever won the same degree of approval from Hobsbaum as Heaney did in the course of the writing workshop (and therefore were more inclined to disavow their links to it later), these poets map, in the words of Sarah Bufkin, a “collective assemblage of enunciation... their poems emerge out of a particular historical arrangement of shared social relations, utilize the same implicit vocabulary, and share a common problematic of locating identity against and through nationalist iterations of place”⁵⁶. The seductions of choosing one or the other of the two camps during the two decades of the Troubles in Northern Ireland—Unionist or Nationalist—affected all of their poetics and was directly responsible in producing variations in their political choices with respect to their evolving identity as poets. It is important therefore, to read Mahon and Longley’s choice of remaining in Northern Ireland against Heaney’s choice of resigning from his position as a lecturer from Queen’s and embracing self-imposed exile to Wicklow, Republic of Ireland. But I feel that this iconic event of self-imposed exile in Heaney’s career needs to be devoted a section of its own in the later parts of this chapter.

The importance of “place” in Heaney’s early poetry need not be overstated here since Heaney himself points it out in “Mossbawn”. In the essay, he finds a personal equivalent of the Greek word *omphalos*, “meaning the navel, and

⁵⁵ James Randall, “From the Archive: An Interview with Seamus Heaney”, *Ploughshares* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 181.

⁵⁶ Sarah Bufkin, “At the Frontiers of Writing: Exploring the Productive Encounter Between the Poetic and the Political in Northern Ireland during the Troubles” (Hons. diss.; n.a, 2013), 7, <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/downloads/b8515s79b> (accessed February 16, 2021).

Bufkin uses “assemblage of enunciations” in the sense used by Deleuze and Guattari, of a collection “of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies” (See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987, 88)

hence the stone that marked the centre of the world”⁵⁷ in the hand pump in the yard of his ancestral house in Mossbawn. Here he also stresses on the nature on the aural resonance of the word, equating the sound to that of the hand pump outside their back door in Mossbawn, Co. Derry. Heaney describes the hand pump in intricate detail, using very much the same language he uses in the first poem “Sunlight” from the “Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication” sequence in *North* (1975). In the essay, Heaney depicts it thus:

There the pump stands, a slender, iron idol, snouted, helmeted, dressed down with a sweeping handle, painted a dark green and set on a concrete plinth, marking the centre of another world. Five households drew water from it. Women came and went, came rattling between empty enamel buckets, went evenly away, weighed down by silent water. The horses came home to it in those first lengthening evenings of spring, and in a single draught emptied one bucket and then another as the man pumped and pumped, the plunger slugging up and down, *omphalos, omphalos, omphalos*.⁵⁸

Now we could compare it to his depiction of the pump in “Sunlight”:

There was a sunlit absence.
The helmeted pump in the yard
heated its iron,
water honeyed

In the slung bucket
and the sun stood
like a griddle cooling
against the wall

Of each long afternoon”.⁵⁹

Heaney identifies his “secret nest” in the essay, recalling how he had discovered, as a child, “the throat of an old willow tree at the end of the farmyard”⁶⁰. Being a “hollow tree”, its “mouth was like the fat and solid opening in a horse’s

⁵⁷ Heaney, “Mossbawn,” in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, 17.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Heaney, “Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication,” in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), Kindle edition, 101.

⁶⁰ Heaney, “Mossbawn,” in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, 17-18.

collar, and, once you squeezed in through it, you were at the heart of different life, looking out on the familiar yard as if it were suddenly behind a pale of strangeness”⁶¹. However, Mossbawn, “the first place”⁶² began to widen in Heaney’s imagination through the dichotomous relationship he held with the English language and the act of reading. In the third section of his essay ‘Belfast’ for example, Heaney identifies the act of writing poetry as “a kind of somnambulist encounter between masculine will and intelligence and feminine clusters of image and emotion”⁶³. In his mind, the ‘feminine’ element of his inheritance “involves the matter of Ireland” and the “masculine strain is drawn from the involvement with English literature”⁶⁴. Despite teaching English literature and writing in English, Heaney has no qualms in admitting that “the English tradition is not ultimately home”⁶⁵. Therefore, the poet’s sensibility is split into two halves: the first half emerging out of “a cast of mind that comes from belonging to a place”, while the second consists in the conscious engagement with the English literary tradition which the poet, quoting Lawrence, calls the “voices of my education”⁶⁶. Heaney’s cultural inheritance thus is notably plural, simultaneously acknowledging the influence of “the Gaelic literature of Ireland as well as the literature of English” and all the while insisting a “notion” of himself “as Irish in a province that insists that it is British”⁶⁷. An exemplary instance he provides regarding the “split culture of Ulster” concerns the pluralistic origins of the word “Mossbawn”:

Our farm was called Mossbawn. *Moss*, a Scots word probably carried to Ulster by the Planters, and *bawn*, the name English colonists gave to their fortified farmhouses. Mossbawn, the planter’s house on the bog. Yet in spite of this Ordnance Survey spelling, we pronounced it Moss *bann*, and *ban* is the Gaelic word for white. So might not the thing mean the white moss, the moss of bog cotton?⁶⁸

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid. 18.

⁶³ Heaney, ‘Belfast’, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, 34.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 35.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

His attachment to the English lyric is marked as much by a sense of indebtedness to the English Romantic poets Wordsworth and Keats, as well as to the Irish poets Hopkins and W.B. Yeats. This dichotomy symbolically ‘places’ the poet “between the marks of English influence and the lure of native experience”⁶⁹. Towards the end of his essay, Heaney invites us to think of “the personal and Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awareness nourished on English as consonants”, hoping that his poems be read as “vocables adequate to my whole experience”⁷⁰. In another essay, ‘The Sense of Place’, Heaney elaborates further on this dichotomy by introducing the two ways in which ‘place’ may be conceived and cherished: “One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious”⁷¹. What he seeks to demonstrate in this essay concerns the question of “how the different senses of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and of specific places on our island have affected poets over these last hundred years”. Heaney specifically cites the genre of writing called *dinnseanchas*, “poems and tales which relate the original meanings of place names and constitute a form of mythological etymology”⁷². Literally meaning “the breath of old lore” or the “lore of place names”⁷³, the genre retrospectively links the continued tradition of the past to the living present of these place names in a form of, what Andrew Murphy chooses to call “etymologised geography”⁷⁴. The best examples of Heaney’s conscious engagement with the traditions and generic conventions of the *dinnseanchas* genre occurs in poems such as “Anahorish” and “Broagh” from *Wintering Out* (1972). In the first poem, Anahorish, the anglicised equivalent of the Gaelic *anach fhíor uisce* is literally translated by Heaney as ‘place of clear water’, preceded by the possessive pronoun “[M]y”, signifying a personal relationship held by the poet to his place. It therefore becomes, within his imagination, “the first hill in the world”, the place where he had grown up as a child:

My ‘place of clear water’,
the first hill in the world

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 37.

⁷¹ Heaney, “The Sense of Place”, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, 131. .

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “The Pleasures of Translation: Dinnseanchas”, March 6, 2012,

<http://atriptoireland.com/2012/03/06/the-pleasures-of-translation-dinnseanchas/#comments> (accessed February 27, 2021).

⁷⁴ Andrew Murphy, *Writers and their Work: Seamus Heaney*, 3rd ed. (Devon: Northcote House, 2009), 25.

where springs washed into
the shiny grass

And darkened cobbles
in the bed of the lane.
Anahorish, soft gradient
of consonant, vowel-meadow,

after-image of lamps
swung through the yards
on winter evenings.⁷⁵

It is in the conception of this ‘place’ of his upbringing through language that such ‘etymologised geographies’ come into play, as evident in “soft gradient/of consonant, vowel-meadow”⁷⁶ providing, as it were, a doorway to the image of “those mound-dwellers” of fossilized mythic and shared cultural memory. In “Broagh”, the named place, through its immersion in the tradition of the *dinnseanchas*, does connote a real place abounding in a local and topical history of its own. It does bring in however, an unstated criterion of authenticity that confirms Heaney’s authority as a commentator on rural Irish experience. As Thomas O’Grady has argued, “Broagh”, being “a contracted variant of the Irish phrase *bruach abhana*”, becomes somewhat a etymological riddle to the reader who is also a “stranger” to this place (even if the “stranger” is not exclusively British)⁷⁷. In trying to approximate the light, guttural “gh” at the end of the word, coupled with the clipped vowel “o” before it, transforming this deceptively simple two-syllable word into a riddle:

Tellingly, however, “Broagh” begins to operate as “a verbal contraption” (W. H. Auden’s fine phrase) fueled by local specifics long before that tricky vowel. In fact, each line of the first stanza concludes with a word that, almost as much as the name Broagh itself, grounds the poem in Heaney’s particular world: “rigs” is a regional term for ploughed furrows; “docken” is a local variation on the deep-rooted weed known elsewhere as burdock; “pad” approximates the local pronunciation of “path”; and “ford,” deriving from the Old Norse word *fjord* (found as a suffix in Irish placenames like Waterford and Wexford) and referring to a shallow point in the river that would allow one to wade across, has clearly been retained in the vernacular from the time of the

⁷⁵ Heaney, “Anahorish,” in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996*, Kindle edition, 57.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Thomas O’Grady, “Heaney’s “Broagh”: The World Made Word”, *The Boston Irish Reporter* 17 no.5 (May 2006): 25, <http://irishmatters.blogspot.com/2008/10/heaneys-broagh-world-made-word.html> (accessed March 2, 2021).

Viking invasions of Ireland in the 9th and 10th centuries. (The Viking legacy would of course be Heaney's central fascination in his 1975 volume *North*.) In a similar fashion, the word "boortrees" in the third stanza resonates as the local pronunciation of "bower trees"—that is, elderberry trees.⁷⁸

The verbal tendency to bring together etymology and geography in the genre of the *dinnseanchas* provides, in a paradoxical sense, a framework for understanding better the nature of place names within the tradition. Patrick Sheeran's work on the Irish 'sense' of place throws adequate light on the nature of such naming, as well as the dissociation the place-name holds against the lived materiality of geography. In specific, Sheeran's work is directed against the "depredations of history" (the phrase here serving merely as shorthand for evils of a colonial past and heritage) which have only a nominal role, in his opinion, in clarifying the nature of the relationship between geography and place-names.⁷⁹ What is striking, Sheeran argues, is the seeming disjuncture between the immortalisation of place-names (a tendency towards "topomania" or overt and near-obsessive idealisation of place) and "...that it has little or nothing to do with tending, cultivating, enhancing, or otherwise materially affecting the immediate environment"⁸⁰. He elaborates, "[F]or while we Irish credit ourselves with a strong sense of place, the places themselves are allowed to go to wrack and ruin"⁸¹. Sheeran tries to elucidate his point by analysing one of John Montague's poems from *The Rough Field*, a book which "maps the terrain of a rural Ulster upbringing where it trails off into the blasted topography of Irish historical disappointment and betrayal".⁸² Montague, born to immigrant Ulster Catholic parents from Co. Tyrone in Brooklyn, New York, returned (at the age of four) in 1933 to his father's ancestral home in Garvaghey, Co. Tyrone, primarily owing to the financial difficulties faced by the family living in New York during the Great Depression. He was educated in Ireland, at University College, Dublin before finally leaving for Yale on a Fullbright Fellowship in 1953. Montague was thus, in a sense, a "double-

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Patrick Sheeran, "Genius Fabulae: The Irish Sense of Place", *Irish University Review* 18 no. 2 (Autumn 1988), 192..

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid. 194.

exile”⁸³, inasmuch as the to and fro movement from Northern Ireland to the United States was repeated more than once in the course of his life. For Montague, the fate of his own father, emasculated and undone by his exile to New York, typified a failure. Hence, as Seth M Martin has aptly pointed out, Montague’s poems from *The Rough Field*, contrary to the literary strategy of constructing encomia, “...demythologize the figure of the heroic exiled republican freedom fighter so glorified in patriotic ballads and songs popular on both sides of the Atlantic – a figure perhaps most embodied at the time by republican revolutionary, internee, hunger striker, and writer Ernie O’Malley”⁸⁴. The heady republican idealism of the 1920s gives way to a tired resignation in the face of a new, second-life of terrible economic depression and poverty: “[w]hatever patriotic fervor for their homeland or new passion for the “American dream” they might have held gives way to a weary acquiescence to the realities of immigrant life in Depression-era New York”⁸⁵.

In terms of its negotiation with the particularities of different “places” outside Ireland—notably Australia, the United States and Rome—Montague’s first published volume of poems *Forms of Exile* (1958) becomes an important link in the transition from “place” to “placelessness” that we shall come across in Heaney’s oeuvre. In Montague’s case, however (unlike Heaney’s), much of the disruptive effects of exile on his father and himself *are forced*. One recalls Montague’s poem “Emigrants”, where the Irish immigrants enter the United States more as actors, with their conception of the new place more as an alien “stage”⁸⁶. Claudia Sybille Schattmann emphasizes the aspect of “strangeness” implicit within the image of the emigrants, “[S]ad faced against the rails, / Suitcases clasped in *awkward* hands” :

Like the actor they are self and other, whole and split. These emigrants become “[t]he stranger”, who in the words of sociologist Alfred Schtitz, might be “able to share the present and future with the approached group in vivid and immediate experience; under all circumstances, however, he remains excluded from such experience of its past. Seen

⁸³ See Elizabeth Grubgeld, “Topography, Memory, and John Montague’s *The Rough Field*”, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 14 no.2 (January 1989): 26. Grubgeld talks about a form of hyphenation which had become a part of Montague’s identity, his seeming “double-birth”.

⁸⁴ Seth M Martin, “The Poetics of Return: Five Contemporary Irish Poets in America” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of North Carolina, 2013), 20-21.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 12.

⁸⁶ John Montague, “Emigrants,” in *Forms of Exile* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1958), 12.

from the point of view of the approached group, he is a man without history.⁸⁷

It should now be possible to draw the connection between the mystique of “exile” that Montague was aiming to undercut, even if he was very much a witness to its induced schisms within the self, and the “topomania” identified in Sheeran’s work. Even if Montague did translate, the Gaelic phrase *Garbh acaidh* in the place name “Garvaghey” as the “rough field” of the title, and even as his work is circumscribed within the genre of the *dinnseanchas*, he does not merely return to the Ireland of his childhood Co. Tyrone but undertakes parallel journeys that link Irish identity to the world outside, complicating simpler schemas of rootedness to one particular “place”. What Sheeran highlights, and what will be essential for the purposes of establishing Heaney’s exilic subjectivity in this chapter, is this nominal conception of “place” (as opposed to the materiality of perceived, geographical “place”) that has been an enduring aspect of Irish culture, and has thus dictated the individual Irish writer’s attitude to “home”⁸⁸. This “invisible landscape”, bearing all the marks of a “symbolic space and its associational aspects” is defined gradually over time, “not so much by erecting enclosures and buildings, as by being known and talked about”⁸⁹.

This “sense of place” that Sheeran tries to define in his work, specifically involves a “special faculty or a mode of perception”, one that “may well be fostered by displacement”:

The awareness of a particular place qua place is especially acute in those who have left it as is shown by Joyce’s Dublin, Yeats’s Sligo, O’Flaherty and Ó Direáin’s Aran, Ó Cadhain’s Iar Chonnacht, Kavanagh’s Monaghan, Montague’s Tyrone and Heaney’s Co. Derry. It is a quality of awareness that occurs at a fracture point; between being rooted and being alienated, being an insider and an outsider.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Claudia Sybille Schattmann, “The Emerging Order of the Poem: A Critical Study of John Montague’s poetry, 1958-1999” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Durham, 2001), 24-45.

⁸⁸ Patrick Sheeran, “Genius Fabulae: The Irish Sense of Place”, *Irish University Review* 18 no. 2 (Autumn 1988): 197-98.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 198.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

The insistence on bilocation, the state of being “neither here nor there” is therefore grafted within the Irish literary consciousness, perhaps best exemplified in Leopold Bloom’s succinct conclusion at Paddy Dignam’s funeral: “The Irishman’s house is his coffin”⁹¹. This connotes for Sheeran, “the funereal sense” of Irish place names whereby place names are inextricably associated with death and indeed, serve to commemorate it. In his analysis, graveyards become spaces highly prioritized within Irish culture, the etymology of the word *dinnseanchas* pointing towards *Senchas na Relec* (“The History of Burial Places”).⁹² Both Montague and Heaney’s part-archaeological project of cultural “digging”, so often addressed in criticism, may be therefore seen as part of the same drive: to ascribe to graveyards their status as “focal points in the landscape”, functioning as “inverse *omphali*, sacred places which link this world to one above and below”⁹³. In Nina Witoszek’s work on the “funerary” nature of Irish society and culture too, *Theatrum Mortis*, the ‘land below’ (the realm of the dead) is understood to watch over the ‘land above’⁹⁴. Instead of constituting “a remote world elsewhere”, the dead “have an almost tangible existence which bears upon the life of the living”⁹⁵. The connections between this nominal notion of place in Irish literature and culture and its intricate intertwining with the theme of death and verbal immortality attained through the “place name” in the *dinnseanchas* genre are advanced, in Sheeran’s work, through “reference to the medieval *de natura locorum* literature and the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville who thought to find in the etymologies of the names of things a clue to their essential nature”⁹⁶.

Heaney’s archaeological bent in his first two volumes of poetry introduces a metaphoric form of cultural excavation which, as Blake Morrison has identified it, involves

...presenting his poetry as a form of agriculture. His own digging instrument is voluble, not ‘curt’ like his father’s, but it performs many of the same functions, passing on

⁹¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 2000), 139. Bloom’s reflections at Paddy Dignam’s funeral consolidates the ‘funerary’ sense of place in Irish culture, as shown by both Sheeran and Witoszek.

⁹² Patrick Sheeran, “Genius Fabulae: The Irish Sense of Place”, 199.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 203.

⁹⁴ Nina Witoszek, “Ireland: A Funerary Culture?”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 76, no. 302 (Summer, 1987): 207.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Patrick Sheeran, “Genius Fabulae: The Irish Sense of Place”, 199.

tradition, extracting ‘new’ produce (poems, not potatoes) out of old furrows, and enjoying an intimacy with the earth.⁹⁷

However, a sustained development of the archaeological bent in Heaney is strongly perceptible only from his third volume, *North* (1975). By taking detours into the fossilized terrain where landscape, myth and history are intertwined, and through a pledge to “follow into the mud” a “worm of thought”, Heaney reimagines himself as Hamlet the Dane, “skull-handler, parablist/smeller of rot”⁹⁸. He painstakingly has to come to terms with the strained complexities of political affiliation in the context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland:

in the state, infused
with its poisons,
pinioned by ghosts
and affections,

Murders and pieties,
coming to consciousness
by jumping in graves,
dithering, blathering.⁹⁹

The evolution of the idea of metaphoric excavation into an archaeological project however, also involves Heaney’s encounter with the cultural Other(s) of Irish history—the “Northern” roots of the bog-people in the Vikings, who appear, according to Ruth Niel as “not museum pieces transfigured by their remoteness from the present, but seem no different from Irish of today”¹⁰⁰, riven by “neighbourly, scoretaking/ killers, haggars/ and hagglers, gombeen-men/ hoarders of grudges and gain”¹⁰¹. Heaney’s emphasis on the extent to which these “[o]ld cunning assessors/of feuds”¹⁰² continue to live in the cultural matrix of Ireland also seems to assert a pluralist, multifoliate sense of cultural belonging where the past of these ancestors and the present of the landscape are intricately interlaced in the nationalist imaginary. In the essay “Feeling into Words”, Heaney admits that the bogland became such a landscape that had “a strange, assuaging effect” on him:

⁹⁷ Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London & New York: Methuen, 1982), 27.

⁹⁸ Heaney, “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces IV,” in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 22.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Ruth Niel, “Digging into History: A Reading of Brian Friel’s “Volunteers” and Seamus Heaney’s “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces”, *Irish University Review* 16 no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 44.

¹⁰¹ Heaney, “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces V,” in *North*, 23

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

So I began to get an idea of the bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it...since memory was the faculty that supplied me with the first quickening of my own poetry, I had a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness.¹⁰³

In response to “the frontier and the west as an important myth in the American consciousness”, Heaney tried to set up “the bog as an answering Irish myth”¹⁰⁴. As he tries to recollect his strategies in trying to unearth structures of collective memory invested in the mythology of the landscape, he identifies “something lying beneath the very floor of memory, something I only connected with the poem months after it was written”¹⁰⁵. The poetic and metaphoric dimensions of the near-mythical adage that “there was no bottom in the bog-holes”¹⁰⁶ were something Heaney had consciously attempted to map through his poems, and these ruminations were also matched by his reading of P.V. Glob’s *The Bog People*, first published in English translation in 1969¹⁰⁷. “The Tollund Man”, an iconic excavation poem from *North* (1975), was a direct artistic response to reading Glob’s book. But what remains of significant import to us, as we conclude this section, lies in the gradually evolving negotiations between these two conceptions of place and in the “equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind”¹⁰⁸ that many of Heaney’s mid-career poetic anthologies during the 1970s and 80s were witness to. The repeated stress on the twofold sense of “place” is noteworthy, since only through a gradual defamiliarisation of the geographical sense of place into a “country of the mind” can one better understand Heaney’s gradual movement towards “placelessness”, a culmination of several dilemmas of allegiance Heaney had faced as a Catholic in Unionist Ulster in the years of his identity formation.

¹⁰³ Heaney, “Feeling into Words,” in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, 54-55.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 55.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 56.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ See Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), 7.

¹⁰⁸ Heaney, “The Sense of Place”, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, 132.

4.2. Towards the “Placeless Heaven” : The Paradoxes of Identity as an Ulster Poet

His cultural inheritance of the English poetic tradition, and his position as a member of the Catholic minority in Unionist Ulster points towards Heaney’s paradoxical nature of identification as “Irish in a province that insists that it is British”¹⁰⁹. As Heaney points out in a much later interview, the name Ulster “was used by people of a Unionist persuasion as a kind of signal that for them, Ulster was British”¹¹⁰. At the same time, the nationalist cause of an independent, and unified Ireland triggered a pull in the opposite direction in a manner that dictated that Northern Irish writers were under the “strain of being in two places at once, of needing to accommodate the two opposing conditions of truthfulness simultaneously”¹¹¹. Thus, for Heaney every inhabitant of the place was riven by the parallel, yet often contradictory experiences of surviving in “Ulster of the actual present, and then in one or other Ulster of the mind”¹¹². The essay discusses the work of a number of Northern Irish poets, who “belong to a place that is patently riven between notions of belonging to other places”.¹¹³ Neither the Unionist nor the Nationalist is completely at ease under such circumstances—while for the former the emblems of the British crown and subjectivity are challenged by the geographical fact “that Ireland is his insular home”, the latter “lives in an exile from his ideal place”, the “idea of an integral Ireland”¹¹⁴. Needless to say, when Heaney uses the word ‘exile’ in this context, it has the double import of physical and metaphoric displacement from one’s imagined idea of ‘home’. Heaney’s model of identification in this sort of displacement happens to be Wordsworth, whose sympathies for the egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution were confronted by England going to war with France shortly after. Surrounded by patriotic neighbours, Wordsworth finds himself displaced:

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Heaney, “Interview with Mark Carruthers” in *Alternative Ulsters: Conversations on Identity* (Ireland: Liberties Press, 2014), Kindle edition, n.a.

¹¹¹ Seamus Heaney, “Place and Displacement: Reflections on Some Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland”, *The Agni Review* no. 22 (1985): 160.

¹¹² Ibid. 161.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

The good place where Wordsworth's nurture happened and to which his habitual feelings are most naturally attuned has become, for the revolutionary poet, the wrong place... He is displaced from his own affections by a vision of the good that is located elsewhere. His political, Utopian aspirations deracinate him from the beloved actuality of his surroundings so that his instinctive being and his appetitive intelligence are knocked out of alignment. He feels like a traitor among those he knows and loves. To be true to one part of himself, he must betray another part. The inner state of man is thus shaken and the shock waves in the consciousness reflect the upheavals in the surrounding world.¹¹⁵

The predicament of these Northern Irish poets Heaney discusses mirrors this metaphoric displacement of Wordsworth in his own country. The northern Nationalist, he writes, “conducts his daily social life among Unionist neighbors...to whom his Nationalist principles, his hankering for a different flag and different anthem, are as traitorous as Wordsworth's revolutionary sympathies”¹¹⁶. Yet, as Heaney emphasizes, for poets such as Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, James Simmons, the conscious political choice of refusing to respond to the subtleties of explicit political affiliation was a matter of great importance: these “writers did not feel the need to address themselves to the specific questions of politics because they assumed that the subtleties and tolerances of their art were precisely what they had to contribute to the coarseness and intolerance of the public life”¹¹⁷. Ideas from Jung regarding the nature of the relationship between an “affect” and the “higher consciousness” that transcends the former are reused in the essay, applying the aforesaid schema to the Northern Irish context. Here, Heaney defines “the affect” to be prejudiced, consisting in “a disturbance, a warp in the emotional glass which is in danger of narrowing the range of the mind's responses to the terms of the disturbance itself, refracting everything through the warp”¹¹⁸. He also repeatedly emphasizes that Ulster poets in the political climate of the 1960s, long before the beginning of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, were therefore deliberately attuned towards the achieving of a ‘higher consciousness’, which allowed their poetic voices to transcend the ‘affect’ and trauma of the

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 159.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 161.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 162.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Troubles and become an ‘alibi’ or a ‘glimpsed alternative’ from “the surge of disruptive feelings which sprang too readily in the collective life, rebellious on the nationalist minority side, overbearing and punitive on the majority side”¹¹⁹. To be a poet from Northern Ireland during the Troubles was therefore to contend with the possibility of ‘entrapment’ within a “self-diagnosing frame of reference”, one where the particulars of one’s historical circumstance overshadow the idea of poetry as its only possible form of ‘appeasement’, a moment of release for the poet where he makes contact with the plane of ‘higher consciousness’ “where he is at once intensified in his being and detached from his predicaments”¹²⁰.

It is important to note in this context that Heaney does not disregard the fact that poetic expression is in itself a political act. And yet, in his conception of poetry as a symbolic resolution between opposing truths—politics and transcendence—he argues that the poem can thought of as having been written in a realm extraneous to the demands of politics:

...the idea of poetry as a symbolic resolution of opposing truths, the idea of the poem as having its existence in a realm separate from the discourse of politics, does not absolve it or the poet from political status. Nobody is going to advocate an ivory tower address for the poet nor a holier-than-thou attitude. "Pure" poetry is perfectly justifiable in earshot of the car bomb but it still implies a politics, depending on the nature of the poetry.¹²¹

Poetry abounds in political implications, but ultimately, “the reading of these political implications is in itself a political activity, separate from the processes that produced the poems”. The artistic endeavour “is not obliged to have any intention beyond its own proper completion”¹²². Nevertheless, the poet, being a part of the socio-political fabric of society is still riven apart by the contradictory demands of politics and transcendence. In case of these Northern Irish poets, “a great spatial and temporal distance”¹²³ in vantage point is observed. In Heaney’s view therefore, a spatio-temporal displacement from the physical geography of ‘place’ is enabling for the Northern Irish poet, and in this case, his reading of the poetry of Derek Mahon’s ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ reveals how Mahon

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 163.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid. 164.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid. 164-65.

assumes the role of a ‘capable uprooted visitor’ who is paradoxically called upon the perilous task of speaking for “those rooted helplessly to place”¹²⁴. For Mahon, “the poet of metropolitan allusion, of ironical and cultivated manners”, the depiction of the desolate remains of a shed owned by a landowner after Irish independence becomes a way to commemorate his origin, “his unlived life among the familiar shades of Belfast”¹²⁵. The mushrooms growing inside the space of the disused shade of Mahon’s poem cry out for acknowledgement from this “uprooted visitor” whose very distance from “home” allows him best to accentuate their pleas in his poem. In other words, Heaney is claiming that Mahon’s self-distancing and alienation, “this dominant mood of being on the outside (where one has labored spiritually to arrive) only to end up looking back nostalgically at what one knows are well-nigh intolerable conditions on the inside”¹²⁶, allows him the artistic freedom necessary to transcend his place-bound origins. Heaney’s sympathies are clearly in favour of this “displaced perspective”, but as the essay progresses, his phrasing grows more elliptical and enigmatic. Heaney recognises, in the poem “Blemish” by Paul Muldoon, the latter’s clever use of a conditional that pivots between certainty and uncertainty, between two different forms of socio-cultural affiliation:

Were it indeed an accident of birth
That she looks on the gentle earth
And the seemingly gentle sky
Through one brown and one blue eye¹²⁷

The insistence on the efficacy of cultural bilocation becoming a form of enabling disguise in Muldoon’s consciousness within the poem, is however, neither driven home with certainty nor completely disclaimed through the rhetorical form of the question that equivocates on both sides. Muldoon’s poetic voice here, being alive and respondent to the Joycean fondness for “verbal opportunism”, performs “a form of native kenning, a northern doubling, a kind of daedal fiddling to keep the home fires burning”.

¹²⁴ Ibid. 166.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 168.

¹²⁷ Paul Muldoon, “Blemish,” quoted in Heaney, “Place and Displacement: Reflections on Some Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland”, 171.

In his essay on the late work of Patrick Kavanagh, Heaney underlines the usefulness of an “imagined realm” which Kavanagh forges in his poetry, a realm which is no longer dependent for its existence on the particulars of a geographical space, “a real topographical presence”(like the Co. Monaghan of the early Kavanagh) but is able to distance itself into that space of “luminous emptiness”¹²⁸. Kavanagh’s late poetry for Heaney outgrows its old attachment to a specific place, becoming “luminous spaces within his mind”. He identifies this propensity in the later Kavanagh to reconstruct a ‘placeless heaven’ rather than a ‘heavenly place’¹²⁹. In the essay, Heaney associates a chestnut tree that had been planted by an aunt of his on the year of his birth with his own life. When the new owners of the house moved in, they cut the tree down. The absence of the actual tree however did not disturb him as much as his conception of the “space where the tree had been or would have been”¹³⁰. This “new place” was ideational rather than topographic: “...it was generated out of my experience of the old place but it was not a topographical location”¹³¹. Heaney’s reading of Kavanagh’s poems in the essay contends that there decidedly occurs a movement in the poetic career of the latter in course of which—whereas his early poetry was marked by a profound attachment to Co. Monaghan, “symbolic of affections rooted in a community life and has behind it an imagination which is not yet weaned from its origin”, in his later poetry, “the world is more pervious to his vision than he is pervious to the world”¹³². In this later phase, Heaney explicates that

[W]hen he writes about places now, they are luminous spaces within his mind. They have been evacuated of their status as background, as documentary geography, and exist instead as transfigured images, sites where the mind projects its own force¹³³.

Kavanagh, a dogged realist who shied away from the Romantic legacy of Yeats, his fabled Co. Sligo and the Irish Literary Revival in poetry, had worked

¹²⁸ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh’, in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), Kindle edition, 17.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.* 18.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

as a cobbler's apprentice to his own father, as a farmer, and was intimately familiar with the working class populace—primarily farmers and artisans—of Co. Monaghan. Although he had tried to pose as something of a “peasant-poet” in his memoir *The Green Fool*, Kavanagh later rejected this role that he had thrust upon himself. Moving out of his farm life in Co. Monaghan, Kavanagh had relocated to Dublin, but was yet not able to achieve the poetic recognition that he felt was his due. Kavanagh's biographer Darcy O'Brien has noted that during the late 1930s and early 1940s, there was growing disillusionment in Irish life and literature, “the sort of psychological slump that most nations emerging from colonial rule experience after the revival of the past fails and people become aware that they have to make do with the rubble left behind by the departed conqueror.”¹³⁴ His rejection of Yeats was typified in the following stanza from his poem on the latter:

Yes, Yeats, it was damn easy for you, protected
By the middle classes and the Big Houses,
To talk about the sixty-year-old public protected
Man sheltered by the dim Victorian Muses.¹³⁵

Even if Kavanagh does write about Co. Monaghan of his childhood in his later poems, Heaney specifically singles out ‘Canal Bank Walk’, a poem which bespeaks “the mind's adequacy to the task of making this place—or any place—into an ‘important place’”¹³⁶. In Heaney's reading of the final stanza of Kavanagh's poem ‘Auditors In’ however, overt emphasis is laid on the poet's “turn” from depicting the external, topographical particulars of ‘place’ into a country of the mind. In trying to analyse Kavanagh's desire to turn away from “the sour soil of a town where all roots canker” into “where the Self reposes/ The placeless Heaven that's under all our noses”¹³⁷ in the poem, Heaney notes how the subject of his early verse, Co. Monaghan is here replaced by “the self” where the poet, commits “an abandonment of a life in order to find more abundant life”¹³⁸. His attachment to the lyric, more than “a matter of temperament, a habit of style”, developed into “a

¹³⁴ Darcy O'Brien, *Patrick Kavanagh* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 1975), 18.

¹³⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, “Yeats,” in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1984), 349.

¹³⁶ Heaney, “The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh,” in *The Government of the Tongue*, 19.

¹³⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, “Auditors In”, quoted in Heaney, “The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh”, 22-23.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* 23.

matter of redemptive force, a resource that maintained the artist's freedom in the face of worldly disappointments"¹³⁹. Heaney's larger argument is that the active assertion of this "inner freedom" on part of the artist could be traced "in a single, simple command"—the pledge to change one's life¹⁴⁰.

In another essay on the relationship between the artist's individual will and the demands of the political circumstances imposed upon the former, Heaney begins with an anecdote from life in Belfast in 1972. He mentions that he had arranged to meet his friend "the singer David Hammond" for the purpose of putting together "a tape of songs and poems for a mutual friend in Michigan"¹⁴¹. He mentions that "the whole point of the tape was to promote that happiness and expansiveness which song, meaning both poetry and music, exists to promote in the first place"¹⁴². But on the way to the studio, "a number of explosions occurred in the city and the air was full of the sirens of ambulances and fire engines...news of casualties"¹⁴³. This event leads Heaney to postulate "a tension to which all artists are susceptible, just as the children of temperamentally opposed parents—a tension between "Art and Life", or alternatively, "Song and Suffering"¹⁴⁴. As he goes on to explain, what "David Hammond and I were experiencing...was a feeling that song constituted a betrayal of suffering"¹⁴⁵. The near-mythical figure of the Emperor Nero, "who notoriously fiddled while Rome burned" becomes the archetypal example of this form of betrayal, "an abdication from the usual instinctive need which a human being feels in such situations to lament, if not try to prevent, the fate of the stricken"¹⁴⁶. This admission of "the mystification which Art can involve" in order to conceal suffering, was a form of truth that had dawned on a poet such as Wilfred Owen, who had realised, through his own experiences at the front in Flanders, that "radiant and unperturbed certitudes about the consonance between the true and the beautiful became suspect"¹⁴⁷. Heaney therefore concludes that Owen's poems "have the potency of human testimony, of martyr's relics, so that

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 25.

¹⁴¹ Heaney, "The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker," in *The Government of the Tongue*, 7.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 8.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

any intrusion of the aesthetic can feel like impropriety”¹⁴⁸. For Heaney, Owen’s life and experiences at the front in Flanders during World War I elucidate his reasons for choosing poetic composition:

The shorthand name we have evolved for this figure is the ‘poet as witness’, and he represents poetry’s solidarity with the doomed, the deprived, the victimized, the under-privileged. The writer is any figure in whom the truth-telling urge and the compulsion to identify with the oppressed becomes necessarily integral with the act of writing itself.¹⁴⁹

The adoption of a deliberate stance where “the poet’s expiatory, committed action”¹⁵⁰ can help in demystifying the balmy obfuscation whereby Song belittles the truth of suffering can also be observed through Heaney’s reading of the figure of Chekhov who chose to visit a penal colony on the island of Sakhalin in the 1890s. That Chekhov had chosen to undertake this visit, that he had thought of preparing a sociological report (and thereof a book) to “record the conditions under which the prisoners lived, to live with them, to interview them” was attributed to his “debt to medicine”¹⁵¹. Chekhov was thus subject to “a characteristic modesty and prophetically modern guilt about the act of creative writing itself”¹⁵². As a man of the nineteenth century inhabiting a society which was working its way slowly towards the transition from tradition to modernity, the “medical man in him was obviously the one whom he somehow regarded as possessing rights to a space in the world, while the writer had to earn that space, had to earn the right to the luxury of practising his art”¹⁵³. Here, Heaney alludes to a gift Chekhov had received from his friends in the Moscow *literati*, a bottle of cognac which he had preserved, and tasted only on the first night he had arrived in Sakhalin:

I have often thought of that as an emblematic moment: the writer taking his pleasure in the amber cognac, savouring a fume of intoxication and a waft of luxury in the stink of oppression and the music of cruelty—on Sakhalin he could literally hear the chink of convicts’ chains. Let the cognac represent not just the gift of his friends but the gift of his art, and here we have an image of the poet appeared;

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 9.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 10.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 10-11.

¹⁵² Ibid. 11.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

justified and unabashed by the suffering which surrounds him because he is unflinchingly responsible to it.¹⁵⁴

In Heaney's poem "Chekhov on Sakhalin", written for Derek Mahon, this sense of unflinching responsibility reappears as Chekhov's ability to fully awaken to absolute freedom while at the same time, tending to the lives of the convicts he meets there. The exemplary nature of Chekhov's departure from the glitter of the Moscow literary establishment where he had spent his youth is highlighted in the poem. As Heaney had mentioned in his essay, Chekhov in the poem also finds himself riven apart by the guilt regarding the indulgence he allowed himself as a poet, drinking fine cognac from the bottle gifted to him by his friends at Moscow:

So far away, Moscow was like lost youth,
And who was he, to savour in his mouth
Fine spirits that the puzzled literati
Packed off with him to a penal colony—

Him, born, you may say, under the counter?
At least that meant he knew its worth. No cantor
In full throat by the iconostasis
Got holier joy than he got from that glass

That shone and warmed like diamonds, warming
On some pert young cleavage in a salon,
Inviolable and affronting.
He felt the glass go cold in the midnight sun.

When he staggered up and smashed it on the stones
It rang as clearly as the convicts' chains
That haunted him. In the months to come
It rang on like the burden of his freedom.¹⁵⁵

Tellingly, Chekhov did not feel the urge for a "tract" or "thesis", but for "the right tone"¹⁵⁶. He felt that the condition of liberty was itself the "burden" of a responsibility many poets had abjured, a responsibility not just to face the injustices of the world but to assume a conscious (and necessarily 'political') posture towards redress by this urge to assume responsibility and to try one's gift at truth-telling. The tendency of poetry fearlessly articulating and admitting the iniquities of the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Heaney, "Chekhov on Sakhalin," in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), Kindle edition, 211.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

world had occurred to Chekhov. Heaney also observed and located in the poets of the East-European bloc this same tendency, poets who saw that as “survivors of Nazi horror and Holocaust, and Soviet cynicism”¹⁵⁷, their task was, in the words of the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, “to salvage out of the catastrophe of history at least two words, without which all poetry is an empty play of meanings and appearances, namely: justice and truth”¹⁵⁸. Herbert’s explicit commitment to truth-telling consists in “an abjuration of poetry as a self-indulgent ornament”¹⁵⁹. And yet, it is crucial to mention here that for Heaney, Herbert’s ethical posture outdoes that of his more “embarrassed” predecessors—Chekhov, Owen or Sorley MacLean—because of its evolved understanding of the problem of poetry and historical responsibility assumed in relation to the world. Heaney is tempted to think that while Chekhov or Owen both typify the embarrassed reluctance that had caused David Hammond to abandon the recording session on that momentous day in Belfast in 1972, “if Herbert had been in the studio with us...he would have encouraged us to stay and make the tape”¹⁶⁰. In other words, once the poet is conscious of his responsibilities as a social and political being alert to the problem of injustice in the world, “Herbert is content enough to allow art its rights provided it knows its limitations”¹⁶¹.

Mandelstam, who sang “in the Stalinist night, affirming the essential humanism of the act of poetry”¹⁶² had, in a similar vein, emphasised the sense of freedom asserted by the lyric poet in the face of debilitating injustice and fallacious political propaganda. Through his explicit refusal to subscribe to propagandistic standards that demanded he “write odes not just to Stalin but to hydroelectric dams”, he had asserted that “it was the poet’s responsibility to allow poems to form in language inside him”, and that the most essential quality of the lyric “was its unlooked-for joy in being itself”¹⁶³. The lyric poet thus embodied a condition where “he was in thrall to no party or programme, but truly and freely and utterly himself”,

¹⁵⁷ Heaney, “The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Knocker,” in *The Government of the Tongue*, 12.

¹⁵⁸ Zbigniew Herbert, quoted in Heaney, “The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Knocker”, 12.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

his allegiance and responsibility “was to sound rather than to the state, to phonetics rather than to five-year plans, to etymology rather than to economics”¹⁶⁴. For Heaney, what was exemplary in Mandelstam’s poetic career was his being awake and responsive to the possibility that “lyric action constituted radical witness”¹⁶⁵. It was enough to ensure his singular commitment, “even at the price of his death; to the art of poetry as an unharnessed, non-didactic, non-party-dictated, inspiring act”¹⁶⁶. It seems, at this juncture, that Heaney’s resolution of the problem of artistic freedom and social responsibility has come to a full circle: whereas the essay had begun with Owen’s propensity “to rebuke beauty in favour of truth”, Mandelstam, typifying the other extremity of spectrum, and “at an equally high price, sponsors all over again the Keatsian proposition that beauty *is* truth, truth beauty”¹⁶⁷.

It is enlightening to see how Heaney’s attitude towards the Troubles in Northern Ireland is a product of these very meditations on individual poetic responsibility and the limits of artistic freedom, if any. The word “beauty” however, would not be tantamount to just an abstraction in this case, it serves as “a reminder that humanity is served by the purely poetic fidelity of the poet to all words in their pristine being”¹⁶⁸. Mandelstam, famously credited in Heaney’s poem “M” from *The Spirit Level* for his “steadfast Russian”¹⁶⁹, had defined the will to poetry as the “steadfastness of speech articulation”¹⁷⁰. In his Nobel lecture, Heaney further explains that this “steadfastness” was the outcome of “the energy released by linguistic fusion and fission”¹⁷¹, but also came into being through Mandelstam’s willingness to rigorously abide by standards of spiritual, aesthetic and moral

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 13.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Heaney, “M,” in *The Spirit Level* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 68.

This poem is a much later engagement with the Mandelstam-myth in Heaney, but is marked by notable difference in intent from earlier poems such as “Exposure”. Instead of foregrounding Mandelstam’s sacrificial side, Heaney is focussing more specifically on the aural nature of speech articulation by a poet, so as to allow poetry to be accessible to deaf or mute human beings. The fact that this poem was previously titled “Articulation of Siberia” in a previous draft version of his manuscripts only suggests the associational nexus Heaney sought between “speech-articulation” and particular geographies. See also Alia V. Kononova, “Osip Mandelstam in the Poetry and Prose of Seamus Heaney”, *Tyumen State University Herald Humanities Research: Humanitates* 2, no. 4 (2016): 82.

¹⁷⁰ Heaney, “Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture,” in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), Kindle edition, 439.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

integrity in a totalitarian state that routinely falsified lived experience. For Heaney, the credit of poetry lies in “the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it”¹⁷². Mandelstam “therefore stands for the efficacy of song itself, an emblem of the poet as potent sound-wave”¹⁷³. The pitch of his song, comparable to “the note of the soprano which cracks glass”, was a rare instance of the event where a “purely artistic utterance can put a crack into the officially moulded shape of truth in a totalitarian society”¹⁷⁴.

Mandelstam’s example thereafter leads Heaney to define artistic intent in the context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. He mentions John Hewitt and John Montague, who toured Northern Ireland in 1970 with readings from their poems called *The Planter and the Gael*.¹⁷⁵ These poets bore poetic witness, “in the official language of Unionist Ulster”, to the fact that “there was a Gaelic dimension to Ulsterness—something that would have been taboo in the six counties of Lord Brookborough where I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s”¹⁷⁶. Although sectarian violence, arising from the prejudice (the result of “discrimination in jobs and housing, gerrymandering by the majority, a shared understanding that the police was a paramilitary force”¹⁷⁷) was frequent, there was a shared hope for change and better times. During the 1960s, poets from Northern Ireland such as Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, James Simmons and Heaney began what he calls a form of “outgrowing” of the need to respond to the specific events of Northern Irish political life:

The fact that a literary action was afoot was itself a new political condition, and poets did not feel the need to address themselves to the specifics of politics because they assumed that the tolerances and subtleties of their art were precisely what they had to set against the repetitive intolerance of public life...Paisley was already in full

¹⁷² Ibid. 440.

¹⁷³ Heaney, “The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Knocker”, 13.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ This particular reading tour, featuring Hewitt and Montague, typified the two poles of Ulster subjectivity, with the rubric on the accompanying booklet to the event stating, “Montague defines the culture of the Gael

...Hewitt that of the Planter”. See Sarah Ferris, “An Exemplary Protestant: A Study of the Myth of John Hewitt and its Place in Contemporary Literary Debate in Northern Ireland” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Newcastle, 1998), 28.

¹⁷⁶ Heaney, “The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Knocker”, 13.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 14.

sectarian cry and Northern Ireland's cabinet ministers regularly massaged the atavisms of Orangemen on the Twelfth of July. Hair-raising bigotries were propounded and reported to the press as a matter of course and not a matter for comment. Nothing in the situation needed to be exposed since it was all entirely barefaced. It seemed rather, that conditions had to be outstripped and it is tempting to view the whole syndrome in the light of Jung's thesis that an insoluble conflict is overcome by outgrowing it, developing in the process, a 'new level of consciousness.'¹⁷⁸

Thus these poets, in Heaney's view, practised a deliberate detachment from the "affect" generated by the intensity of specific events, aspiring, as Jung had formulated, to a "higher consciousness" whereby "the lyric discovers its buoyant completion and timeless formal pleasure comes to fullness and exhaustion"¹⁷⁹. The specific form of transcendence he hints at here, is achieved through the attainment of lyric poise, a plane "equidistant from self-justification and self-obliteration"¹⁸⁰ that is fleetingly established as the lyric nears its completion. The poet, even if only within this brief interval, finds his tongue suddenly free and "ungoverned", free from "considerations of tact and fidelity, by nice obeisances to one's origin within the minority or the majority"¹⁸¹. The "unconstrained" nature of poetic articulation achieved is born out of a form of distancing that makes one outgrow their origins. As we attempt close readings of a few poems from Heaney's *North* in the subsequent section, we can better understand this form of self-distancing.

4.3. 'The bleb of the icicle': 'The Troubles', Voluntary Exile and Heaney's Aesthetics of Spatio-Temporal Distancing in *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975)

The year 1972 marked a watershed moment in Heaney's life and poetic career because it marked his voluntary exile from Belfast in Northern Ireland to Co. Wicklow in Glanmore, Republic of Ireland. Resigning from his teaching job at Queen's University, Belfast, Heaney chose a life of relative uncertainty by moving to Wicklow. He notes his early years at Wicklow as "the most intense phase"¹⁸² of

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 14-15.

¹⁸² Dennis O' Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), Kindle edition, 197.

his writing life and saw the move to Wicklow as conditioned by the need to “get away from the consensus culture” that had built up among the Ulster poets, a “party line” of sorts.¹⁸³

The growing dissatisfaction with matters in Northern Ireland was never properly allayed within the public consciousness towards the final years of the decade of the 1960s. As Michael Parker has aptly pointed out in elucidating Heaney’s response to the crisis of the Troubles with respect to the title *Wintering Out*:

In Ulster, the verb 'to winter out' means to see through and survive a crisis, and is derived from a farming custom which involved taking cattle to a sheltered area, feeding them on a minimum diet throughout the winter, before fattening them in the spring and summer.¹⁸⁴

Heaney’s article “Mother Ireland” also draws attention to this sense of the word, adding to it a second connection to *Richard II*’s famous opening, “Now is the winter of our discontent”, a sense of urgency intensified by a quickening of political events.¹⁸⁵ He identified the title of this volume as “a gesture towards the distresses that we are all undergoing in this country at the moment”¹⁸⁶. In his interviews with Dennis O’ Driscoll, Heaney also admitted that a “conscious sense” of “the poet as spokesman” was a “role” which was deliberated upon by Northern Irish poets such as Longley, Mahon and himself¹⁸⁷. But Heaney also insists that despite acknowledging this need, “the question was...to what extent the role of the spokesman can or should be exercised in poetry”¹⁸⁸. These poets were aware “that a good poem was ‘a paradigm of good politics’, a site of energy and tension and possibility, a truth-telling arena but not a killing field”¹⁸⁹. The events between 1966 and 1969, during which sectarian violence erupted in Northern Ireland, surfaced with the Northern Irish Civil Rights movement which decided to tackle housing, job and electoral practice discrimination through a political and legal campaign

¹⁸³ Ibid. 202.

¹⁸⁴ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), 89-90.

¹⁸⁵ Heaney, “Mother Ireland”, *The Listener*, 7 December 1972: 790.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Dennis O’ Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, 159.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 160.

geared to highlight the unfairness of the political system in the region, especially in comparison with the democratic standards adopted in the rest of the United Kingdom.¹⁹⁰ The discontents voiced by the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland particularly had to do with the injustices suffered by the Catholic minority who were indirectly expected to conform to discriminatory policies which unilaterally favoured the Unionist Protestants in the region. Niall Ó Dochartaigh's account of these discriminatory policies demonstrate that:

Catholics were excluded from the exercise of political power at virtually every level in Northern Ireland. No Catholic was ever included in the government based at Stormont. Virtually everyone who ever served in a Stormont government was a member of the Orange Order, an exclusively and determinedly Protestant organisation. At local government level, Catholic electoral majorities had been neutralised in many areas. The fact that the state's second city, Derry, had a large Catholic majority and a Protestant-controlled corporation was only the most blatant example of this. Particularly gratuitous was the gross underrepresentation or exclusion of Catholics from public bodies or committees. This singular policy of the almost total exclusion from political power and influence of such a large minority was inherently unstable.¹⁹¹

The six counties comprising Northern Ireland, united in their Unionist allegiance, as Lorenzo Bosi and Gianluca De Fazio have tried to demonstrate in their work, typified a regime which “basically embodied a confessional state with institutionalized partiality, without the necessary checks and balances to limit systemic excesses and biases and no oversight from the central British government”¹⁹². On the other hand, the British government “rarely showed interest towards Northern Ireland politics and avoided interfering with what was perceived as a peripheral and troublesome region of the United Kingdom.”¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ See Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 77.

¹⁹¹ Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles*, 2nd ed. (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 26.

¹⁹² Lorenzo Bosi and Gianluca De Fazio (eds.), *The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univ. Press, 2017), 18.

¹⁹³ Richard Rose, *Governing without Consensus: An Irish Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 72.

Inspired by the example of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement (CRM) sought to address these very practices of institutionalised discrimination by pressuring the government instituted at Stormont. Although the rhetoric of the CRM leadership in the mid-1960s were aimed more towards furthering legal and constitutional reform, They now decided to resort to “[t]ransgressive tactics of non-violent civil disobedience and demonstration”¹⁹⁴. On 5th October, 1968, responding to a ban against a civil disobedience march in Co. Derry imposed by the Unionist Minister of Home Affairs, the movement took a new turn when the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) decided to enforce law and order with “excessive and indiscriminate use of force against peaceful marchers as well as bystanders”¹⁹⁵. Images of police brutality upon peaceful protest-marchers reached all corners of the world, inciting new waves of mass civil rights demonstrations, which began “immediately colliding with the dominant majority community and ‘its’ institutions”¹⁹⁶.

Unionist leadership in the late 1960s comprised mostly of Protestant wealthy farmers and businessmen who were often invited to preside over local self-governance bodies such as the Londonderry Corporation. The local Protestant working class populace with Unionist sympathies, who had heretofore not thought of organising themselves in counties where their numbers were only marginally higher than the Catholics lest the Unionist administration of the government at Stormont be in anyway hindered, now thought better of these inhibitions. Bosi and De Fazio identify “the Orange Order and the Apprentice Boys, the Young Unionists, and the youth of the Protestant public-housing estates”¹⁹⁷ as some of these bodies. The Orange Order began as an international Protestant fraternal order founded in 1795 in Co. Armagh that sought to commemorate the victories of the Parliament-backed Protestant King William III of Orange over the deposed Catholic monarch James II in order to maintain Protestant Ascendancy, the social and political domination of Ireland from the late 17th to early 20th century by a

¹⁹⁴ Lorenzo Bosi and Gianluca De Fazio (eds.), *The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements*, 19.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 231.

minority of landowners, the Protestant clergy and members of various professions affiliated to the Church of England.¹⁹⁸ The radicalisation of the Protestant working-class, triggered by chaos within the Unionist party ranks, veered towards the right as the traditional “Protestant respect for law and order” was gradually abandoned in favour of more violent methods.¹⁹⁹ Despite the reconciliatory tactics adopted by Prime Minister Terence O’Neill in trying to placate the Unionist Right Wing as well as to combine reforms demanded by the Civil Rights Movement as a matter of official policy, the dismissal of the stubborn and Protestant-sympathiser Home Minister William Craig caused a major setback to the attempts at peace-keeping. Many senior right wing Unionists, feeling that they had been tricked into supporting the O’Neill government, adhered to “outrageous conspiracy theories built around the reality of considerable Communist and Republican involvement in the civil rights movement”²⁰⁰. The Cameron Commission, established under indirect pressure from the British government, sought to investigate the causes of the rioting. One of the objectives of this commission was “to investigate allegations of RUC misconduct in Derry after the Burntollet march”²⁰¹. Right-wing Unionists, mobilising more and more in numbers as the “no-go areas” (such as ‘Free Derry’) were being established, were now convinced of a “Republican conspiracy manipulating the civil rights campaign”²⁰². In such circumstances, they believed that “to concede further reforms would simply be to feed the conspiracy”²⁰³. Loyalist paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), led by former British soldier Gusto Spence had already sporadically used violence as a strategy, having expressly declared “war” against the IRA. Petrol-bombing, indiscriminate shooting down of Catholic civilians in public spaces were some of these acts. On New Year’s Day in 1969, the Belfast-based students’ civil rights activist group ‘People’s Democracy’ led a protest march from Belfast to Derry when they were stopped at Burntollet Bridge by about two-hundred Loyalists, some

¹⁹⁸ See Marc Mulholland, *The Longest War: Northern Ireland’s Troubled History* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 8.

¹⁹⁹ Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles*, 64.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 66.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

of them being off-duty police officers, armed with iron bars and bricks²⁰⁴. Once the marchers reached Derry City they were again attacked.

Apart from the “British rights for British citizens” slogan²⁰⁵ which sounded in the protest marches in Derry in 1968, the Civil Rights campaign also concentrated on local and civic developments in Derry, and finally towards the dissolution of its Unionist corporation. Typical Unionist responses to the movement considered it as a covert form of disguise through which the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland were trying to realise their long cherished dream of a united Ireland.²⁰⁶ Violence erupted during a particularly provoking move made by the Unionist government and police allowing the Loyalist group, the Apprentice Boys of Derry to march along the Bogside. Rioting continued unabated in Derry from 12th to 16th August 1969, in what later became known as the “Battle of the Bogside”²⁰⁷, a bloody conflict between the residents of the Bogside area and the RUC. Fighting continued in the streets of Derry for two days before the British Army was deployed to restore order at the request of the Unionist government, an event which began the thirty-seven year old Operation Banner²⁰⁸, a military operation directed at the express purpose of restoring “normalcy” in Northern Ireland. The events of August 1969 led to the surfacing of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, informally known as the Provos, whose objective was to end British rule in Northern Ireland and to facilitate an Irish unification.²⁰⁹

The phase 1970-1972 was marked by unrestrained violence. Events such as the McGurk’s Bar bombing, where the UVF detonated a car bomb at a Belfast pub frequented by Irish Catholics and Nationalists²¹⁰ and the Falls Curfew

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 50.

²⁰⁵ See Marc Mulholland, *The Longest War: Northern Ireland’s Troubled History*, 61.

²⁰⁶ See Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles*, 53.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. 104-113.

²⁰⁸ “Operation Banner: The British Army in Northern Ireland”, Alpha History, <https://alphahistory.com/northernireland/operation-banner/> (accessed April 24, 2021).

²⁰⁹ See Peter Taylor, *Provos: The IRA and Sinn Féin* (Bloomsbury, London, 1997), 166–72

²¹⁰ The bombing of McGurk’s Bar in Northern Belfast was a political assassination programme undertaken by the UVF loyalists who doubted the army’s ability to defeat, or even contain the IRA. See David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002), 75.

incident²¹¹ in 1970 only prepared the ground for further bloodshed. After a raid and search for arms in the Lower Falls area of Belfast, the army imposed a strict curfew for two days during which door-to-door searching of residents took place and over 1,500 rounds of ammunition were fired, killing four people. The Provisional IRA and the Official IRA now responded by heavily barricading off 'Free Derry' from the heavy-armoured vehicles deployed by the British army. Operation Demetrius was launched in August 1971 by the British Army where over a two-day period, mass arrests and internment without trial of over 340 people suspected of having links to the IRA took place.²¹² The "Bloody Sunday" killings, in which thirteen unarmed men and boys were shot dead by the Parachute Regiment of the British Army²¹³, and the retaliation by the Provisional IRA through the infamous "Bloody Friday" bombings²¹⁴ thereafter triggered the infamous Operation Motorman, an all-out British paramilitary operation that aimed at crushing the insurgent power symbolised through 'Free Derry'²¹⁵. In the dawn of 31st July, 1972, British paramilitary forces, in bulldozers and Centurion AVREs broke through the barricades and stormed into 'Free Derry'. The streets of the erstwhile "no-go areas" were flooded with troops. Little resistance was offered by the IRA, who found themselves disproportionately outnumbered by the British army. By the end of the

²¹¹ The **Falls Curfew incident** of **July, 1970** was an incident where after a confrontation between soldiers of the British Army and the locals of the Lower Falls area of Belfast. It involved door-to-door searching of all houses in the area and uncovered more than a hundred weapons, but also incurring the antagonism of local residents as soldiers prised up floorboards and ransacked rooms in order to do so. See David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002), 61.

²¹² See Robert C. Cottrell, *Northern Ireland and England: The Troubles* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), 21.22.

²¹³ The "**Bloody Sunday**" killings, also known as the "**Bogside Massacre**", took place on January 30, 1972 in the Bogside area of Derry, Northern Ireland. British paramilitary troops opened fire on unarmed, protesting Catholic civilians at a march organised by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA). The firings left fourteen dead and twelve wounded. See Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles*, 2nd ed. (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 269-87 for a detailed account.

²¹⁴ The "**Bloody Friday**" bombings, often thought as a response to the "Bloody Sunday" massacre, took place on June 21, 1972 where the Provisional IRA detonated more than twenty car bombs around Belfast within the space of half an hour, causing nine casualties and leaving more than 130 people wounded. See David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002), 87-88.

²¹⁵ Operation Motorman was carried out by the British Army (HQ Northern Ireland) in order to regain administrative and military control over the "no-go" areas of "Free Derry" in the early hours of July 31, 1972. See David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland*, 87

day, blockades in Belfast and Derry were cleared²¹⁶. However, on the same day, three car bombs exploded in quick succession in Claudy, Co. Londonderry killing nine civilians.²¹⁷ News of these bombs were relayed in advance to the British army, but the telephone lines had gone out of order due to a previous explosion. The Provisional IRA denied responsibility of these attacks, stating that local IRA units and operations staff had denied any involvement in them.

In the second section of the essay ‘Belfast’, titled “Christmas 1971”, Heaney writes of the fatigue that arises out of “a continuous adjudication between agony and injustice, swung at one moment by the long tail of race and resentment”²¹⁸, riven between the conflicting demands of the two camps. In the essay he also recounts an anecdote from personal experience, an incident where he was “stopped on the Falls Road and marched to the nearest police barracks” with his three-year old son, for the reason that his “car tax was out of date”²¹⁹. Michael Parker notes that from the autumn of 1970 till September 1971, Heaney had been granted a sabbatical from Queen’s, and he joined as a Guest Lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley²²⁰. In an interview to Caroline Walsh published in the *Irish Times* in December, 1975, he identifies a “compulsion to reverence the primitive kind of life” among undergraduates in university campuses.²²¹ The repressed voices in American society—notably African Americans, Hispanics and Indians—who had historically been victims of white supremacy were now demanding their rightful place in American society and the struggles of these aforementioned communities inevitably reminded him of “the political and cultural

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ The “**Claudy bombings**” took place on the same day on which Operation Motorman was carried out, where three IRA bombs detonated in Claudy, Co. Londonderry. The provisional IRA had denied responsibility of these attacks, but on the thirtieth anniversary of the bombing, in 2002, new evidence was uncovered, suggesting the IRA’s orchestration of the same. For more details see Samuel Morrison, “Claudy bombing: ‘Police suspension of investigation beggars belief given wealth of evidence uncovered’”, *The Belfast Telegraph*, October 21, 2013, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/archive/samuel-morrison/claudy-bombing-police-suspension-of-investigation-beggars-belief-given-wealth-of-evidence-uncovered-29677754.html> (accessed April 30, 2021).

²¹⁸ Heaney, “Christmas 1971’ section of ‘Belfast’, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, 30.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), 92.

²²¹ Heaney, “Interview with Caroline Walsh”, *Irish Times*, 6 December 1975, 5,

assertions being made at that time by the minority”²²² in Northern Ireland. It was also around this time that Heaney had befriended the American poets Gary Snyder and Robert Bly. In assessing the American influences that seeped into the increasing politicisation of Heaney’s poetry during this particular period, Michael Parker mentions that Heaney’s stay coincided with a period of unparalleled tension on university campuses throughout the United States. These campuses had become deeply politicized as a result of the government’s military involvement in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.”²²³

Parker also notes how Heaney’s stay in the United States “accelerated the ‘politicisation’ of his poetry”, leading him to re-evaluate his standing as a poet in the face of crisis.²²⁴ In particular, Parker maintains that Heaney’s initiation to the work of Gary Snyder and Robert Bly, along with that of William Carlos Williams was partially responsible for his decision to turn away from the “intellectual, ironical, sociological idiom of poetry” and to delve into the depths of the ‘mythological’²²⁵. In his interviews to Dennis O’ Driscoll, Heaney also admitted that “the place was counter-cultural and anti-establishment”, with “Hare Krishna and hard rockers singing from the one hymn sheet”²²⁶. A very significant link in the ensuing chain of connections that may have motivated this ‘turn’ was a review of Thomas Pakenham’s novel *The Year of Liberty* (1969)—an account of the unsuccessful Irish rebellion of 1798. In the review, he noted, as John Hobbs points out, how the “incidents and observations keep one’s mind shuttling between the United Irishmen’s *annus mirabilis*”²²⁷ that was 1798 and the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland. After his return to Belfast in September, 1971 Heaney lived through the heightened panic of the Troubles for the next few months, before he would decide to relocate to Glanmore in Co. Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland. It was during this phase when he submitted the manuscript for *Wintering Out* (1972) to Faber and Faber. Two poems from *Wintering Out*, ‘Servant Boy’ and its companion-piece ‘The Last Mummer’ are particularly significant in revealing

²²² “Heaney, Interview with James Randall”, *Ploughshares* 5 no. 3 (1979), 20.

²²³ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 92-93.

²²⁴ *Ibid.* 92.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ Dennis O’ Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), Kindle edition, 176.

²²⁷ Heaney, “Delirium of the Brave”, review of *The Year of Liberty* by Thomas Pakenham, *Listener*, November 27, 1969. 757.

Heaney's self-assessment as a poet from a subjugated community in Northern Ireland. A better-known poem, 'The Other Side' reveals the deeply fractured nature of belonging and affiliation among Catholic and Protestant neighbours, concentrating more on the silences and absences of communication among the two. In the central figure of the 'Servant Boy', Heaney introduced tones of a national servitude, "wintering out/ the back-end of a bad year"²²⁸. The nature of his tepid, near-inconsequential existence is indicated by the taunts he is likely to receive from superiors:

Old work-whore, slave-
blood, who stepped fair-hills
under each bidder's eye

and kept your patience
and your counsel, how
you draw me into
your trail.²²⁹

'The Last Mummer' conjures up images of a lonesome Irish 'mummer'—an actor disguising himself as others—"a stone in his pocket,/an ash-plant under his arm"²³⁰. He attempts to lure the dwellers within through the charm of his "luminous screen" but fails, and frustrated, "starts beating/ the bars of the gate"²³¹. The second part of the poem then goes on describing the 'mummer' thus, through a description that mirrors Heaney's own predicament of a poet from the minority Catholic community trapped within never-ending cycles of violence:

He came trammelled
in the taboos of the country

picking a nice way through
the long toils of blood

and feuding.
His tongue went whoring

among the civil tongues,
he had an eye for weather-eyes

²²⁸ Heaney, "Servant Boy," in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), Kindle edition, 58.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ Heaney, "The Last Mummer," in *Wintering Out* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 14. ,

²³¹ *Ibid.*

at cross-roads and lane-ends
and could don manners
at a flutter of curtains.²³²

Likewise “trammelled by taboos”, the poet finds himself against a backdrop hostile to his vocation and craft unless he be a Catholic spokesperson, and thus, implicate himself within these cycles of civil war and bloodshed. The pointed reference to “whoring” articulates the popular perception within the ‘mummer’s’ own community of him having betrayed their trust and shamelessly picking up “the civil tongues” (in Heaney’s case, it would be the English language) for subsistence. Nevertheless, the third part of the poem dispels such easy certainties about the ‘mummer’—although it seems that this figure has left “in peace”, he “makes dark tracks”²³³ in the mind, trying to mingle, through ceremony and priestly candour, the disparate parts of the fissured society he finds himself in. Michael Parker thus concludes that despite the apparent distaste for the art of the ‘mummer’ among the populace, he becomes a mouthpiece Heaney adopts for defending the poetic vocation itself:

Although the mummer / poet may seem an obsolete relic, and hardly more substantial than the fog from which he appears, nevertheless, he fulfils an essential priestly function. At a time when 'the centre cannot hold', he attempts to restore ceremony, communion, communication. Through him, with him, in him, reconciliation and order are possible, as the mingling of Celtic ('holly trees ') and Catholic symbols ('host', monstrance') indicates. Like the 'dark tracks' on the dewy grass which point towards 'summer grazing', his words promise renewal²³⁴.

Themes of division and difference persist in a poem such as ‘The Other Side’ where the relationship between the Heaneys and a neighbouring Protestant family is depicted over a stretch of time. The poem begins with an image of the neighbour standing “[t]high-deep in sedge and marigolds” cursing the bit of “Catholic” ground adjacent to his plot: “It’s as poor as Lazarus, that ground”²³⁵. The following lines also alerts the readers towards Heaney’s careful distinction

²³² Ibid. 15.

²³³ Ibid. 16.

²³⁴ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 97.

²³⁵ Heaney, “The Other Side,” in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996*, Kindle edition, 69.

between the “promised furrows” of the neighbouring Protestant farmer and the “scraggy acres” of their own:

I lay where his lea sloped
to meet our fallow,
nested on moss and rushes,

My ear swallowing
his fabulous, biblical dismissal,
that tongue of chosen people.²³⁶

What is hinted at by the phrase “chosen people” is the social and political ascendancy of the Protestants over the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. In the second part of the poem, the poet concedes to having grown up amongst the Biblical tales of “Lazarus, the Pharaoh, Solomon/ and David and Goliath”²³⁷ amidst this strange segregation, sometimes rudely interrupted by the over-zealous neighbour’s judgement

Your side of the house, I believe,
hardly rule by the Book at all.²³⁸

Irony is latent in the next few lines as this neighbour’s brain is depicted as “a whitewashed kitchen/hung with texts, swept tidy/as the body o’the kirk”²³⁹. Devoid of any capability to think for himself the Protestant neighbour seems to meaninglessly keep at mouthing empty insults and curses, his behaviour dictated, by his partial reading of religious ‘texts’. But interestingly, the poem does not conclude with the seeming impassability of the sectarian divide. In the third section, the neighbour’s footsteps, heard “round the gable” during the long sessions of prayer, seems to collapse the very notion of an ‘other side’²⁴⁰. The awaited ‘knock’ on the door, followed by the friendly yet inconclusive admission of thinking to call at the adjoining Catholic door merely because he had been “dandering by” and that it was a “right-looking night” betrays, despite his best efforts, this neighbour’s gradually friendly demeanour towards the Heaneys.²⁴¹ The neighbour’s hesitation is signalled by his putting his hand inside his pocket, or tapping “a little tune with

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid. 69-70.

²³⁸ Ibid. 70.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

the blackthorn/shyly, as if he were party to/lovemaking or a stranger's weeping"²⁴². A parallel dilemma however, occurs to the poet too, who finds himself suddenly surrounded by a now-friendly, yet unknown neighbour:

Should I slip away, I wonder,
or go up and touch his shoulder
and talk about the weather
Or the price of grass-seed?²⁴³

The idealistic—if not 'naïve'—hope that some "common ground" could be sought and established between the two antagonistic communities that Heaney holds on to by the end of this poem ran contrary to the attitudes and dispositions of most Catholics from Northern Ireland. It is at this crucial juncture that he came across P.V. Glob's *The Bog People*, an archaeological study of Iron Age Jutland which provided him the iconic figure of the Tollund Man, a naturally mummified corpse of a man from the 4th century B.C. in a bog, killed possibly in a form of human sacrifice. In an excerpt from a radio interview quoted by Helen Vendler, Heaney admits to his imagination and his energies

...quickened more when contemplating a victim, strangely, from 2,000 years ago than they did from contemplating a man at the end of a road being swept up into a plastic bag – I mean the barman at the end of our road tried to carry out a bomb and it blew up.²⁴⁴

Part of the representational strategy in the poem attempted what Vendler has referred to as "a binocular view of the past and present: on the left, so to speak, the exhumed Iron Age body; on the right the four murdered brothers and other "stockinged corpses / Laid out in the farmyards' after being ambushed"²⁴⁵. Thus present violence of the Troubles, seen in context of past violence that seeps into the layered detritus of history and Irishness, provides Heaney with a "sense of continuity, kinship, affirmation at a time of social and political disintegration"²⁴⁶. However, as we examine poems from *North* (1975), we will find out that this

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Seamus Heaney, interviewed by Brian Donnelly, in Broadridge, ed., *Seamus Heaney* (Copenhagen: Denmark's Radio, 1977), p. 60; quoted in Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), Kindle edition, 46.

²⁴⁵ Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), Kindle edition, 46.

²⁴⁶ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 91.

telescopic conflation of past and present violence did not go down well with all literary commentators.

Heaney's *North* (1975), split into two parts, examines Ulster from two different poetic perspectives, both emerging out of Heaney's physical, as well as metaphorical displacement from the critical consensus of his early poetry as deeply attached to Co. Derry and Ulster. The first part of *North*, as David Lloyd has argued, "examines Ulster in terms of historical and geographical connections to the Vikings and to the "bog-people", while the second adopts a more conversational cadence and a "personal" association for the poet²⁴⁷. My purpose, in this section, would be to examine the poems 'Belderg', the titular 'North', the four poems from the 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' sequence and the six poems from the 'Singing School' sequence to elaborate on Heaney's self-distancing from the need to speak for one or the other party during the Troubles in Northern Ireland and his deliberate espousal of a poetics of exile to initiate an archaeological foray into his pluralist inheritance of "Irishness".

The anthology *North* plays on the ambiguous connotations of the word 'north' to arrive at a pluralist conception of Irishness that is rooted as much to the history of Ireland's 'Viking' period, when the tracts of Ulster were run over by tribes of Norsemen, as it is to the atavism of sectarian violence in Belfast during the Troubles. By identifying the potential of comparison between these two distinctly different loci of associations, he endeavours to highlight a pluralist lineage of "Irishness" by choosing to accommodate 'other' perspectives that open up a more dialogic space of intercultural dialogue. In 'North', Heaney faces "the unmagical/ invitations of Iceland/the pathetic colonies/of Greenland" and "those fabulous raiders,/those lying in Orkney and Dublin"²⁴⁸. Such a tendency in Heaney was already apparent in the hybrid etymologies of his place-name poems (the 'dinnseanchas' poems) from *Wintering Out*: 'Mossbawn', 'Anahorish and 'Broagh'. The iron-age bog victims Heaney read of in P.V. Glob's *The Bog People* are thus conflated with violent deaths of victims during the Troubles as part of an ongoing sacrificial rite to Ireland. As a member of the Catholic minority in Ulster, Heaney's conflation of present and past violence was objected to by Ciaran Carson

²⁴⁷ David Lloyd, "The Two Voices of Seamus Heaney's North", *Ariel* 10, no. 6 (1979): 5

²⁴⁸ Heaney, 'North', in *New Selected Poems: 1966-1987* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 56.

in his particularly harsh review of *North* in *The Honest Ulsterman*. Carson accused Heaney's poetic voice as that of a "...laureate of violence - a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for 'the situation, in the last resort, a mystifier'"²⁴⁹. However, the "ocean-deafened voices" of the poet's Viking forefathers advise him to "[L]ie down in the word hoard" in his "furrowed brain" and to "keep [his] eye clear/ as the bleb of the icicle"²⁵⁰ without expecting any "cascade of light" to enlighten him. It is this resolve to 'compose in darkness' that leads him on this solitary quest to find sanctuary in a notion of "Irishness" that is capable of crossing over intercultural borders and their consequent categories of inner segregation—Protestant, Catholic, Unionist or Nationalist.

In the poem 'Belderg' for example, as Heaney excavates through these fossilized relics of Norse culture in Irish history, he encounters archaeological relics of the 'foreign' that complicate "one-eyed and benign"²⁵¹ resolutions of the question of Irish identity. Yet the "pupil" of the mummified bog bodies can only dream of "neolithic wheat", far removed in time by two millennia from the poem's present:

To lift the lid of the peat
And find this pupil dreaming
Of neolithic wheat!
When he stripped off blanket bog
The soft-piled centuries

Fell open like a glib:
There were the first plough-marks,
The stone-age fields, the tomb
Corbelled, turfed and chambered,
Floored with dry turf-coomb.²⁵²

Seeking "a congruence of lives", he meets an ancestral voice from the mythopoeic past who crosses his native bog-place Mossbawn's "old home's music/ With older strains of Norse"²⁵³. The poet knows he can derive "[a] forked root from that ground/ And make bawn an English fort"²⁵⁴. By calling attention towards the

²⁴⁹ Ciaran Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?", review of *North*, by Seamus Heaney, *The Honest Ulsterman* 50 (1975): 183.

²⁵⁰ Heaney, 'North', in *New Selected Poems: 1966-1987*, 57.

²⁵¹ Heaney, 'Belderg', in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 10.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ *Ibid.* 11.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

history of the Plantation of Ulster established in 1606 under the reign of James I, he complicates any monolithic view of Irishness that seeks to understand itself strictly in terms of its opposition to British culture. Heaney also invokes here the two halves of his sensibility: while one half of it consists “in a cast of mind that comes from belonging to a place, an ancestry, a history, a culture”, the other half indicates a contrary pull introduced by the “voices” of his “education”²⁵⁵. As Heaney elaborates, through analysing the diverse etymologies of the word “Mossbawn”, his family farm: “In the syllables of my home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster”.²⁵⁶ It now becomes apparent why in ‘Belderg’, the (etymological) foundations of the word ‘Mossbawn’ is treated as “mutable”²⁵⁷, connoting meanings as per the variability of these pronunciations. The question of “finding sanctuary” in uncomplicated, and singular notions of Irishness appears “[p]ersistent if outworn”²⁵⁸.

Heaney’s first direct poetic engagement with the Troubles occurs in ‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’, a sequence of poems replete with Heaney’s ironic rendition of a typical ‘Northern’ reticence regarding sectarian violence so as to not betray one’s sympathies in public life. The ‘tight gag of place’²⁵⁹ conditions utterance, marked by journalistic clichés that point to a habitually growing indifference in public life towards sectarian violence, and the poet’s role as truth-teller in those very trying circumstances. The poem is framed after “an encounter” the poet has with “an English journalist in search of ‘views/ On the Irish thing’”²⁶⁰. The poem recounts the failure of journalistic clichés to capture the full extent of the political dilemma of the ‘wee six’ counties of Northern Ireland:

Where media-men and stringers sniff and point,
Where zoom lenses, recorders and coiled leads
Litter the hotels. The times are out of joint
But I incline as much to rosary beads

As to the jottings and analyses
Of politicians and newspapermen

²⁵⁵ Heaney, “Belfast,” in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, 35.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ Heaney, ‘Belderg’, in *North*, 11.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ Heaney, “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing III”, in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 69

²⁶⁰ Heaney, “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing I”, in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 65.

Who've scribbled down the long campaign from gas
And protest to gelignite and sten.²⁶¹

Hollow journalistic clichés are repeated at each new turn in the long-standing civil war:

'Backlash' and 'crack down', 'the provisional wing',
'Polarization' and 'long-standing hate'
Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing.²⁶²

The first poem of the sequence deals with the violence of the Troubles as it might appear to outsiders who repeat those oft-quoted clichés but can actually know very little about the troubled history of sectarian division. The first hint towards Heaney's religious affiliation is given through his inclination towards "rosary beads"²⁶³. As a citizen, Heaney certainly wanted to address the discriminatory policies in Northern Irish public life that was responsible for the Civil Rights movement. Nevertheless, the voicing of this form of poetic dissent consists in versifying rather than endorsing violence perpetrated by the Unionist Majority over the Nationalists, or, by extension, the retaliatory violence unleashed by the Provisional IRA. The second part of the poem begins with the ubiquity of violence gradually becoming an accepted rule:

Men die at hand. In blasted street and home
The gelignite's a common sound effect:
As the man said when Celtic won, 'The Pope of Rome's
a happy man this night.' His flock suspect

In their deepest heart of hearts the heretic
Has come at last to heel and to the stake.²⁶⁴

The never-ending cycles of sectarian hatred initiate a passive disavowal on part of the minority who find themselves "[l]ong sucking the hind tit/ Cold as witch's and hard to swallow"²⁶⁵. Those who espouse the seemingly 'moderate' eschewal of violence therefore can only hope to "tremble near the flames but want no truck/ With the actual firing"²⁶⁶. However, Heaney sees the potential of the poetic utterance to offer a form of "resistance" towards the easy

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Heaney, "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing II", in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 67.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

naturalisation of such violence. The duty of the poet is identified as the resolve to “lure the tribal shoals to epigram/ And order” and to draw the right line “between bigotry and sham” through it²⁶⁷. The importance of craft is driven home in the final line of the second poem: “Given the right line, *aere perennius*”²⁶⁸. The Horatian subtext is indicated through the use of the Latin phrase “*aere perennius*”, meaning “a monument more lasting than bronze” and recalling the first stanza of Horace’s Ode 3.30: “*Exegi monumentem aere perennius, regalique situ pyramidum altius*”²⁶⁹ (‘I have crafted a monument more lasting than bronze, and loftier than the pyramids’).

Carmen Bagan, in elucidating on Heaney’s ‘Horatian *ars poetica*’ traces how he “achieves a poetry that equally delights and instructs, precisely guiding the writing process through a ‘movement’ which “is from delight to wisdom and not vice versa”²⁷⁰. Bagan differentiates between the *utile* aspects of Heaney’s versification and the *dulce* aspects—while “*utile* means the truth or the reality about the historical situation in his country through the poet’s eyes”, *dulce* refers to “the pleasurable, delighting (or the aesthetic or ‘craft’)”²⁷¹. Bagan’s distinction, when applied to this particular poem, shows pointed examples of both these dimensions. An instance of the prominence of the *dulce* dimension occurs in third poem of the sequence when Heaney compares the nature of public silence among the Catholic minority in the ‘wee six’ counties that make up Northern Ireland to the treacherous device of the Trojan horse:

Where tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks,
Where half of us, as in a wooden horse
Were cabin'd and confined like wily Greeks,
Besieged within the siege, whispering morse²⁷².

²⁶⁷ Ibid. 68.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ See Horace, “Ode 3.30,” trans. A.Z. Foreman, <http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2014/08/horace-ode-330-from-latin.html> (accessed May 1, 2021).

²⁷⁰ Heaney, “The Redress of Poetry,” in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 5, quoted in Carmen Bagan, “Introduction,” in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation* (London: Legenda, 2013), 3.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Heaney, “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing III,” in North (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 69-70

The cryptic and elliptical modes of communication—“password, handgrip, wink and nod”²⁷³, indicative of the same “tight gag of place”—thus continue among all civilians.. The reputation of taciturnity that precedes Ulstermen meant that reluctance to speak of specific political positions in public was widespread. Yet paradoxically, what enables the poet to speak of the ‘tight gag of place’ is his pent-up urge towards truth-telling. The question of a self-imposed exilic subjectivity becomes significant at this juncture. It is precisely the poet’s spatial distance (from the immediacy of the Troubles in Belfast) which enables him to abjure the imposed silence he describes in the poems. As Heaney admits in another essay, this moment of liberation ‘ungoverns’ the tongue, “governed for so long in the social sphere by the considerations of tact and fidelity, by nice obeisances to one’s origin within the minority or majority”²⁷⁴. Self-imposed exile, through spatio-temporal distancing from the ‘Irish thing’²⁷⁵ allows the poet to search for images and symbols “adequate to [our] predicament.”²⁷⁶

The final poem of the sequence seems to complete a circle of futility where the poet, having discovered the “new camp for the internees” from “a dewy motorway” and despite giving starkly realistic descriptions of yet another blast, nevertheless proceeds to undermine his own veracity by subverting his erstwhile tone of reportage:

And it was déjà-vu, some film made
Of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound.²⁷⁷

The intertextual reference inserted to underline the inadequacy of language to capture the violence of the Troubles is significant. *Stalag 17*, a 1953 American war drama directed by Billy Wilder, recounts the story of captured American airmen in a German POW camp during the wake of World War II.²⁷⁸ To re-inscribe the immediacy of lived experience into a counter-mimetic schema where historical reality (“Suffering”) begins to mirror “Song” (Art) seems to be Heaney’s

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Heaney, ‘The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and A Knocker’, in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), Kindle edition, 14.

²⁷⁵ Heaney, ‘Whatever You Say, Say Nothing I’, in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 65.

²⁷⁶ Heaney, ‘Feeling into Words’ in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, 56.

²⁷⁷ Heaney, ‘Whatever You Say, Say Nothing IV’, in *North*, 71.

²⁷⁸ See Lee Pfeiffer, “*Stalag 17*: film by Wilder [1953]”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Stalag-17> (accessed May 2, 2021).

chosen mode of self-mockery in this line. Nevertheless, the textual performance of this self-mockery is also predicated on his quiet distancing from accepting the inevitability of violence. Finally, the poem proceeds to question whether the lived experience in Belfast in the wake of the Troubles is indeed a “life”. Deriving his cue from a handwritten slogan “chalked up” in Ballymurphy, he concludes the poem on a note of futility, as the populace has to keep content and carry on living despite the nagging violence of retribution and counter-retribution:

Is there a life before death? That’s chalked up
In Ballymurphy. Competence with pain,
Coherent miseries, a bit and sup,
We hug our little destiny again.²⁷⁹

I next propose to turn to the ‘Singing School’ sequence which concludes *North*, and pertains more closely to Heaney’s personal crisis in adjudicating his responsibility towards his identity as an Irish poet. The sequence uses two epigraphs, the first from Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, alluding to his conflicting sympathies for his English home, as well as revolutionary France. The second epigraph, from Yeats, reveals the young boy’s romantic wish of dying fighting the Fenians.²⁸⁰ The first poem of the sequence, ‘The Ministry of Fear’ is dedicated to Heaney’s friend and classmate at St. Columb’s College, Seamus Deane. Exile, both metaphoric and physical, runs as the common denominator of several forms of alienation Heaney has to go through in order to attain his self-discovery as a poet. The poem recounts first-person reminiscences about Heaney’s days at a boarder in St. Columb’s College, where he felt distinctly out of place as a boy from the Catholic minority in Ulster. He was subjected to routine discrimination and punishment, and was made to feel “so homesick [I] couldn’t even eat/ The biscuits left to sweeten my exile”²⁸¹. The oppressive and overbearing nature of the experience at St. Columb’s however, serves only as a microcosmic dimension to the larger problem of exilic identity Heaney addresses in the sequence, that of his position as a poet in relation to his position in Northern-Irish society and his stance towards the Troubles. The memory of exile at St. Columb’s becomes the miniature

²⁷⁹ Heaney, ‘Whatever You Say, Say Nothing IV’, in *North*, 71.

²⁸⁰ The use of these epigraphs consolidate the sense of Heaney’s pluralistic inheritance of Irishness, stressing on the “feminine element” in him as “the matter of Ireland”, while also acknowledging the “masculine strain” that is “drawn from the involvement with English literature”. See Heaney, “Belfast,” in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, 34.

²⁸¹ Heaney, ‘The Ministry of Fear’, in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 75.

of not only the poet's metaphoric remove from Protestant Ulster, but also his present exile and displacement to Wicklow. Seamus Deane's "poems in longhand"²⁸² becomes the important mnemonic trigger in this reminiscence, appearing to be the poet's only consolation in St. Columb's and during vacations, inspiring him to compose poems. In particular Heaney writes about how in innovating "a South Derry rhyme", he feels more of an intruder in the hallowed canon of English verse:

...a South Derry rhyme
With hushed and lulled full chimes for pushed and pulled,
Those hobnailed boots from beyond the mountain
Were walking, by God, all over the fine
Laws of elocution²⁸³

The boarder's life at St. Columb's, replete with discrimination, prejudice and casually ostracising remarks about Catholics serves as a metonym for the exclusion of Catholic minorities even in public life and state policy. Violence witnessed in childhood, the first day at St. Columb's when "the leather strap/ Went epileptic in the Big Study" thus becomes internalised as repressed grievance as the young Heaney lies while writing home "that a boarder's life/ Was not so bad"²⁸⁴. In a later interview to Dennis Driscoll, this "leather strap" is identified as the "doaker...stitched leather, deep in the soutane pocket like a sword in a scabbard"²⁸⁵. This episode is followed by the image of a torch shining on these letters sent from Deane in a roadblock during the Troubles, with their torchlights glaring over Deane's "'Svelte dictions' in a very florid hand". The shadowy presence of Stephen Daedalus hovers around the poem, connecting the poet's personal experience of exile to a collective dispossession of Ulster. The unstated paranoia and discriminatory prejudices of public life and state policy are now correlated to the subtle prejudices of British canon-formation which carefully excludes Northern Irish interventions into the 'English lyric through the cultural auspices of a metaphoric 'ministry of fear' and silencing:

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. 76.

²⁸⁵ Dennis O' Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, Kindle edition, 229.

Ulster was British, but with no rights on
The English lyric: all around us, though
We hadn't named it, the ministry of fear.²⁸⁶

The second poem, 'A Constable Calls' foregrounds the English stranglehold of Northern Ireland, with a British officer coming to the narrator's farm for maintaining a record of the crops grown. The child-narrator of the poem stares at the "polished holster" of the officer's revolver, suffering from "small guilts" and imagining a life in the "black hole of the barracks" for failing to report the one row of turnips his father had planted among the potato "where the seed ran out"²⁸⁷. The ignorant officer however leaves on his bicycle which keeps ticking like a metonymic time-bomb by the end of the poem. The third poem "Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966" reveals a parade of Protestants honouring the triumph of William of Orange over James II in the Battle of Boyne in 1690. The subject of the poem is the difficulty faced by an over-enthusiastic drummer who "balloons at his belly"²⁸⁸ under the weight of the drum he carries. The Catholic minority are passive, with the political situation rapidly on the verge of turning volatile. By the next poem titled 'Summer 1969', violence has already erupted in Northern Ireland at Falls Road, but Heaney finds himself guilty of "suffering/ Only the bullying sun of Madrid"²⁸⁹, retreating into the life of Joyce, neither an active participant nor a witness of the Troubles. In what seems to be a withdrawal from the actuality of the Troubles, he finds himself in the "casserole heat" of a lonely flat, reading the Ellman biography of Joyce and meditating on the situation in Northern Ireland²⁹⁰. While talking to his friends while they take an evening stroll over "starlit plains", the poet encounters a variety of opinions regarding the extremely volatile circumstances in Belfast:

'Go back', one said, 'try to touch the people'
Another conjured Lorca from his hill.
We sat through death counts and bullfight reports
On the television, celebrities
Arrived from where the real thing still happened.²⁹¹

Lorca had always figured as an example of "writers 'under pressure'", a victim as well as "a figure of the poet as free spirit, committed to the cause of

²⁸⁶ Heaney, 'The Ministry of Fear', in *North*, 77.

²⁸⁷ Heaney, 'A Constable Calls', in *North*, 78.

²⁸⁸ Heaney, 'Orange Drums, Tyrone 1966', in *North*, 80.

²⁸⁹ Heaney, 'Summer 1969', in *North*, 81.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

liberation; left-leaning but not propagandist, yet in the end enough of a taunt to the reactionary right to be conceived of as the enemy”²⁹². The poet now turns to the work of Goya at the Museo del Prado, studying varied representations of violence that appears almost as threatening:

Goya’s ‘Shootings of the Third of May’
Covered a wall—...the thrown-up arms
And spasm of the rebel, the helmeted
And knapsacked military, the efficient
Rake of the fusillade.²⁹³

Goya’s painting, while commemorating the Spanish resistance to Napoleon’s forces during the Peninsular War and the 1808 occupation of Spain, served also to remember the ‘Second of May Uprising’ of 1808, a rebellion by common civilians of Madrid against the oppressive French occupation.²⁹⁴ This historical subtext of resistance, typified in Goya’s stark realism within the painting, connects the possibility of a poetic redress that actively seeks to examine the violence of the Troubles in the light of these earlier instances of civil resistance offered, in the face of institutional slaughter unleashed by Napoleon’s invading forces and the bloodshed of the Spanish Civil War. The grotesque yet unflinching depictions of cruelty in “Saturn/ Jewelled in the blood of his own children” or “that holmgang/Where two berserks club each other to death / For honour’s sake”²⁹⁵ (images depicted originally in Goya’s paintings “Saturn Devouring his Son” and “Fight with Cudgels” respectively) connect the themes of violence erupting in Northern Ireland to the present of the poem in Madrid. Spain, while still reeling under the right-wing dictatorial regime of General Francisco Franco, nevertheless was going through an economic boom that would last till the mid-1970s.²⁹⁶ Against such a political backdrop where the tyranny of Franco’s government had wilfully disguised itself as being more ‘tolerable’, Heaney decidedly turns to two of Goya’s

²⁹² Dennis O’ Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, Kindle edition, 226.

²⁹³ Heaney, ‘Summer 1969’, in *North*, 81.

²⁹⁴ See “Black Paintings”, Francisco de Goya, <http://www.francisco-de-goya.com/black-paintings/> (accessed May 3, 2021).

²⁹⁵ Heaney, ‘Summer 1969’, in *North*, 81-82.

²⁹⁶ “The Spanish Miracle” is the popular name for this phenomenon where there was exceptionally rapid industrialisation and growth of different sectors of the Spanish economy, spanning, very broadly the period 1959-74, the latter part of the Francoist regime. For an account, see Leandro Prados de la Escosura, Joan R. Rosés and Isabel Sanz-Villarroya, “Economic Reforms and Growth in Franco’s Spain”, *Revista de Historia Económica / Journal of Iberian and Latin American Economic History* 30 no. 1 (March 2012), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0212610911000152> (accessed May 5, 2021).

fabled *Black Paintings* for artistic inspiration, another intertextual link that connects his own self-distancing in Madrid and that of Goya. The *Black Paintings* (*Pinturas negras*), a sub-group of fourteen paintings by Goya during the later years of his life (1819-23) are famous for their hauntingly intense and reflective themes that meditate on the unnecessary spillage of human blood.²⁹⁷ In Goya's "Saturn Devouring his Son", the bloodied Titan Cronus (romanized as 'Saturn') is shown, as per traditional Greek mythology, digging his knuckles into the body of his Son Chaos, and devouring him. Inasmuch as the megalomania of Cronus was proved futile by the trickery of his wife Ops (who hid his third son Zeus (Jupiter) on the island of Crete, only to realise the prophesied fall of Cronus from power), Goya's painting strives to show that all megalomaniac tyrants such as Napoleon or Ferdinand VII merely strove towards an ultimately temporary and trifling flash of power.²⁹⁸ In "Fight with Cudgels", the "two berserks" mindlessly keep fighting each knee-deep in mud for some frail and self-defeating sense of "honour"²⁹⁹. The latter painting certainly has thematic overlaps with the problem of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, with rising mutual distrust and paranoia among the Unionist and Nationalist factions.

But we might also enumerate certain similarities between Goya's and Heaney's voluntary withdrawals from public life at this particular phase in their respective artistic careers. Goya's imposed isolation in the newly acquired estate and villa of *Quinta del Sordo* in 1819, on the walls of which he painted his Black Paintings is thus comparable to Heaney's self-distancing from the Troubles in Madrid. However, by looking at Goya's paintings, Heaney also seems to applaud the relentless honesty with which Goya tackles the problem of human suffering by choosing not to shirk from his responsibility to represent such violence in striking detail, even if civil strife in Spain during the tumultuous Napoleonic Wars induced

²⁹⁷ See, for example, Juan José Junquera, "The Meaning of the Black Paintings" in *The Black Paintings of Goya* (London: Scala, 2003), 55.

²⁹⁸ Much as he lived through the years when Napoleon had insurmountable political and military might, Goya also witnessed the abdication of the latter in 1814 and the resumption of the reign of Ferdinand VII, who arbitrarily scrapped the liberal Constitution that had been voted for in 1812. He also made an official request to the returning Spanish monarch "to commemorate with my paintbrush the most notable and heroic actions of our glorious rebellion against the tyrant of Europe". See Jeannine Baticle, *Goya: Painter of Terrible Splendor* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 112.

²⁹⁹ Heaney, 'Summer 1969', in *North*, 82.

panic, fear and hysteria in him. The “private” nature of these paintings conveyed, by way of allegory, Goya’s ideal vision of the defeat of arbitrary tyrants (captured through the Biblical story of Judith beheading the general Holofernes, possibly a clever cipher for the Bourbon monarch Fernando VII) to no one but himself. Goya painted them on the walls of his villa *Quinta del Sordo* and was surrounded by them during these years. Robert Hughes, a biographer of Goya elaborates thus on the unique position of the *Black Paintings* in Goya’s oeuvre owing to the lack of a supposed “audience” to judge them:

One should remember that these were not only among the most dramatic painted images Goya ever made; they were the most private by far. He had no audience in mind. He was talking to himself. He never imagined that the Black Paintings would be seen anywhere except where he was. Therefore, he could bypass explicit symbolism, and all narrative connections could stay in his own head.³⁰⁰

Licht has also designated the *Black Paintings* as being “as close to being hermetically private as any that have ever been produced in the history of Western art”³⁰¹. Heaney thus concludes the poem, depicting Goya as an artist who chose truth-telling in the face of violence and bloodshed:

He painted with his fists and elbows, flourished
The stained cape of his heart as history charged.³⁰²

In the fifth poem ‘Fosterage’, Heaney turns to the imagined voice of his principal at St. Thomas’ Secondary School in Ballymurphy, Belfast where he once taught, the Irish novelist Michael McLaverty, acknowledging his debts to the former as he defines their relationship as a form of artistic fosterage. He recalls McLaverty’s encouragement to find his own unique poetic voice, advising him to “[G]o your own way”³⁰³. Heaney also seems to define his artistic method through McLaverty’s imagined advice to him out of Wallace Stevens: “Description is revelation!”³⁰⁴. The poem recounts Heaney’s first meeting with McLaverty and now seeks to elucidate this very dictum in practice.

³⁰⁰ Robert Hughes, *Goya* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 379. .

³⁰¹ Fred Licht, *Goya: The Origins of the Modern Temper in Art* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1979), 159. .

³⁰² Heaney, ‘Summer 1969’, in *North*, 82.

³⁰³ Heaney, ‘Fosterage’, in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 83

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

...Royal
Avenue, Belfast, 1962,
A Saturday afternoon, glad to meet
Me, newly cubbed in language, he gripped
My elbow...³⁰⁵

However, despite his distance from the Troubles and his pointed assertion of artistic freedom, Heaney is loath to overstate ‘the note of exile’, although he acknowledges its presence in forming his emergent subjectivity as a poet.³⁰⁶ Through McLaverty’s pointed rejoinder “Don’t have the veins bulging in your biro”³⁰⁷, he draws attention to their mutual admiration of a seemingly anti-heroic and “pared down” poetic vocabulary. McLaverty had also introduced the young Heaney to a list of authors he considered his personal favourites—Joyce, Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield and Patrick Kavanagh. The Hopkins journals that McLaverty gave him when Heaney left for Belfast to take up his teaching job at Queen’s are fondly recalled, and the artistic fosterage received is thereafter paid tribute, especially for his mentor’s acute discernment of the “lineaments of patience everywhere”³⁰⁸.

Finally, the last poem of the sequence, ‘Exposure’ is the poet’s most memorable engagement with the theme of self-assertion and voluntary exile. Beginning with images of a rainy December night at Wicklow with “dripping” alders, the poem tacitly compares the figure of the exiled poet to a “comet that was lost” and “a falling star”³⁰⁹. The promise to find a plane of transcendence, realised in the image of the “meteorite” of the poem is, however, contrasted against the mundaneness of “damp leaves,/ Husks, the spent flukes of autumn”³¹⁰. As Heaney takes a walk through tracks of wet leaves and foliage, he imagines an exemplary “hero” who typifies the struggles of the poet to articulate the truth in the face of political repression and tyranny:

Imagining a hero
On some muddy compound,

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.,

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Heaney, ‘Exposure’, in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 84.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

His gift like a slingstone
Whirled for the desperate.³¹¹

In a later interview, Heaney expressly identified this figure as the shadow of Osip Mandelstam who served as a “reminder that the anchor of poetry had to be lifted off the bottom of the ear and should drag a certain amount of your inwardness along with it”³¹². Mandelstam served as Heaney’s model of the ‘insouciant’ poet, and as Carmen Bugar in her study of the influence of the East-European poets on Heaney’s poetics has pointed out, “provided encouragement for Heaney in his self-imposed migration from Belfast to the Republic in that it gave meaning in his self-marginalisation” to go and write “for the joy of it”³¹³. Mandelstam’s delineation of poetry as the “steadfastness of speech articulation”³¹⁴ also reinforces within Heaney the inclination towards using poetry for the purpose of truth-telling without allowing it to be deteriorated into “a diagram of political attitudes”³¹⁵. Mandelstam’s refusal to fall in line when faced against the immensity of Stalinist might makes him appear, for Heaney, as “a David of poetry facing the Goliath of power”³¹⁶. In ‘Exposure’ too, this vision corresponds to Mandelstam’s “gift like a slingstone” which “[w]hirled for the desperate”³¹⁷. The contemplation of Mandelstam’s defiance leads Heaney to a greater need for scrutinising his exile, alternating between his friends’ “Beautiful prismatic counselling” and “the anvil brains of some who hate me”, while weighing his “responsible tristia”³¹⁸. Heaney’s use of the phrase “responsible tristia” in fact, serves as a double reference to Ovid’s Black Sea exile, as well as that of Mandelstam, alluding specifically to the latter’s poem ‘Tristia’. If we go back to the image of the lyrically “appeased” artist Heaney describes in the image of Chekhov on Sakhalin earlier in this chapter, the questions of poetic freedom and responsibility intertwined within ‘Exposure’ become clearer:

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Dennis O’ Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), Kindle edition, 175-76.

³¹³ See Carmen Bugar, “Writing ‘for the Joy of It’: Seamus Heaney and Osip Mandelstam”, in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation* (London: Legenda, 2013), 24-58.

³¹⁴ Osip Mandelstam, quoted in Heaney, ‘Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam’, in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), Kindle edition, 73.

³¹⁵ Heaney, ‘Faith, Hope and Poetry’, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, 219-20.

³¹⁶ Dennis O’ Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), Kindle edition, 219.

³¹⁷ Heaney, ‘Exposure’, in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 84.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

As I sit weighing and weighing
My responsible tristia.
For what? For the ear? For the people?
For what is said behind backs?³¹⁹

Michael Parker recounts a few of the comments published in notable Northern Irish dailies at the departure of Heaney for Co. Wicklow in 1972 which may have been tacitly alluded to within the poem. For instance, while the Paisleyite paper *Protestant Telegraph* “welcomed the departure of the well-known papist propagandist’ at last heading for ‘his spiritual home in the popish republic”, in Dublin the *Irish Times* rejoiced at his arrival with the headline ‘Ulster Poet Moves South’³²⁰. However, in interviews to Dennis Driscoll, Heaney said that this form adversely blinded journalism gave him “not much of a pause”³²¹ at the time. He had, for the first time recognised that he was in a critical juncture in his poetic career and “[t]he motive for the move...was writerly”³²². He is in fact, candid enough to also admit that the decision to quit his job at Queen’s was not out of any motivations of “rejecting the system” or the more lofty radicalism of having “joined a commune”³²³. He was content, despite having given up quite a substantial salary at Queen’s, to do freelance work for income. Taking up writing as a full-time career now in his cottage at Co. Wicklow, he concedes that he was convinced about the timeliness of the move and was content with little:

Horace says: *vivitur parvo bene*. You can live well on a little. Our rent was a token rent and our outgoings were small. We did have a car, and we needed food and drink and heat and light, but, believe it or not, we had an appetite for frugality. We’d both grown up in the country, so for us there was something rich and unstrange about bathing the kids by firelight, having them play around in the farmyard next door, giving them an experience of the dark country nights. It was more than nostalgic. It seemed right to supply them with memories of hedgebacks and hayfields and an open fire.³²⁴

The phrase “responsible tristia” in “Exposure” also serves to situate Heaney’s voluntary self-distancing and metaphoric “exile” in relation to the penal

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 136.

³²¹ Dennis O’ Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, 189.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid. 191.

³²⁴ Ibid.

nature of Mandelstam's exile. Mandelstam's poem "Tristia" opens with the speaker having "studied the science of separations"³²⁵. Exiled from his beloved St. Petersburg, Mandelstam was forced to lead an itinerant way of life before and during his Voronezh exile. If we consider a poem from his *Voronezh Notebooks*, we can locate at least two poems that connect Mandelstam's delight in lyric joy in his newfound frozen landscape. A poem composed on January 20, 1937 reads:

As, somewhere, the sky's stone wakes the earth,
Knowing no father, falls the fallen verse.
The inexorable is, for the artist, innovation,
Could not be different; and he is judged by no one.³²⁶

In the claim to be "judged by no one", Mandelstam locates the lyric poet's insouciant joy. Another Voronezh poem brings out Mandelstam's unwavering faith in the lyric muse, despite the hardships of exile in the 'labour camp':

You're still alive, you're not alone yet -
she's still beside you, with her empty hands,
and a joy reaches you both across immense plains
through mists and hunger and flying snow.

...

Opulent poverty, regal indigence!
Live in it calmly, be at peace.
Blessed are these days, these nights,
and innocent in the labour's singing sweetness.

Miserable is the man who runs from a dog
in his shadow, whom a wind reaps at the knees,
and poor the one who holds out his rag of life
to beg mercy of a shadow.³²⁷

Mandelstam's refusal "to beg mercy of a shadow" made him, in Freidin's words, "the focal point of a complex cultural phenomenon—perhaps a cult—in which art extends effortlessly into biography, history, politics, and above all to the sphere of communal values held sacred by the poet's readers"³²⁸. As a

³²⁵ Osip Mandelstam, "Tristia," in *Selected Poems* trans. James Greene (London: Penguin, 1991), Kindle edition, 66.

³²⁶ Osip Mandelstam, "January 20, 1937", trans John High & Matvei Yankelevich, *Voronezh Notebook*, <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/osip-mandelstam-voronezh-notebook/> (accessed May 4, 2021).

³²⁷ Osip Mandelstam, "354a", in *Selected Poems*, trans. Clarence Brown & W.S. Merwin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 120.

³²⁸ Gregory Freidin, "Preface," in *A Coat of Many Colors: Osip Mandelstam and his Mythologies of Self-Presentation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), ix.

“persecuted outcast, an exile, a prisoner, a victim, and in the end a martyr to Stalinist terror”³²⁹, he becomes the model for Heaney’s “inner émigré” persona adopted in “Exposure”. What appealed to Heaney in Mandelstam’s single-minded devotion to the poetic vocation “because of an element of contrariness” in them: “What I found compelling was the conflict between his bent as a lyric writer nurtured on a pre-revolutionary, non-utilitarian aesthetic, and his discovery of himself in a Soviet world where there were indeed officials from the Ministry interrogating him in the Lubianka”³³⁰. . . Heaney’s subjectivity in the poem may be construed as “an exilic mode in which one looks into the future with uncertainty and with the weary, if not also nostalgic, eye of the past”³³¹. While his predicament is in no way comparable to Mandelstam’s persecution in Stalinist Russia, Heaney certainly comes to a better understanding of how to cope with the contrary pulls of allegiance to his “people” and that of the “ear” through him. Alla V. Kononova, while estimating the extent to which Mandelstam’s example inspired Heaney, notes that he had come across the former’s life and works through Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoir *Hope against Hope*, published from Harvill Press in 1971.³³² While reviewing Nadezhda Mandelstam’s book for *Hibernia* in 1974, Heaney called him “the Lazarus of modern Russian poetry”³³³, a genius who sprung into a miraculous literary afterlife. In a later review on the lives of the Mandelstam couple, Heaney specifically builds on Mandelstam’s ‘Fourth Prose’, a group of short, numbered and polemical prose-pieces regurgitating with his polemical refusal to fall in line with the official Stalinist formula for literature: “National in form, Socialist in content”³³⁴. In Mandelstam’s essay, the public defamation directed against him is identified as a “ritual” named “literary pruning or dishonoring, and it is performed in accordance with the customs and the calendrical needs of the writers’ tribe, the victim being selected by vote of the elders”³³⁵. His diatribe was directed against the “race of

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Dennis O’ Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, 218.

³³¹ Carmen Bagan, “Writing ‘for the Joy of It’: Seamus Heaney and Osip Mandelstam”, in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation* (London: Legenda, 2013), 32.

³³² Alla V. Kononova, “Osip Mandelstam in the Poetry and Prose of Seamus Heaney”, *Tyumen State University Herald Humanities Research: Humanitates* 2, no. 4 (2016): 78-79.

³³³ Heaney, ‘Faith, Hope and Poetry’, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, 217.

³³⁴ Heaney, “Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam,” in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), Kindle edition, 73.

³³⁵ Osip Mandelstam, “Fourth Prose XIII,” in *The Noise of Time: The Prose of Osip Mandelstam*, trans. Clarence Brown (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), 186.

professional writers” who served, through their natural obeisance, as watchdogs of the Writers’ Union and his depiction of the symbolic “fur coat” of their privileges gained in return sought to expose the very purpose of state-sanctioned literature under totalitarianism: “For literature is forever fulfilling a single assignment: it helps the rulers keep the soldiers in line and it helps the judges arbitrarily dispose of the condemned”³³⁶. For Mandelstam, who now “felt himself to be a ‘double-dealer with a divided soul’”³³⁷ in the Soviet Union by the late 1920s, “literary pruning” was committed when after “gruelling court-hearings and interrogations”, the literary establishment (a commission of the Federation of Soviet Writers’ Organisations) decried him as a plagiarist in a wilful sleight-of-hand by a publisher who “neglected to put the name of the original translators on the title page of a work Mandelstam had revised”³³⁸. When this so-called “pruning” was complete, Mandelstam chose to openly rebel by declaring, with pointed irony:

I tear off my literary fur coat and trample it under foot. In nothing but my jacket and in a thirty-degree frost I shall run three times around the boulevard rings of Moscow. I shall escape from the yellow hospital of the Komsomol arcade straight into a fatal chill...if only not to hear the clinking of the pieces of silver and the counting of the printer’s sheets.³³⁹

Mandelstam’s persecution and Voronezh exile, followed by his death in Vladivostok in a transit camp resonated with Heaney who saw in his example a confirmation “that a certain price must be paid by the poet in order to ‘credit’ poetry”³⁴⁰. The question of the correlation between art and civic responsibility which Heaney faced during his experience of the Troubles is thus answered through Mandelstam’s choice. It implied that the poet’s responsibility was to become a “vessel of language”, that his responsibility “was to sound rather than to the state, to phonetics rather than five-year plans, to etymology rather than economics”³⁴¹. This knowledge leads to Heaney’s explicit disavowal of the roles necessarily

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Heaney, “Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam,” in *The Government of the Tongue*, 72.

³³⁸ Ibid. See also Mandelstam, *The Noise of Time: The Prose of Osip Mandelstam*, trans. Clarence Brown (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), 166.

³³⁹ Mandelstam, “Fourth Prose XIV,” in *The Noise of Time: The Prose of Osip Mandelstam*, trans. Clarence Brown (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), 187.

³⁴⁰ Carmen Bugar, “Writing ‘for the Joy of It’: Seamus Heaney and Osip Mandelstam”, in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation* (London: Legenda, 2013), 51.

³⁴¹ Carmen Bugar, “Writing ‘for the Joy of It’: Seamus Heaney and Osip Mandelstam”, in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation* (London: Legenda, 2013), 12.

imposed upon him by the language of political demagoguery, that of either being “internee” (a political activist for presumably, the Nationalist camp) or “informer” (a spy or double agent for the Unionists). His desire to locate his present self as a “wood-kerne”, a role Heaney fashions for himself out of Edmund Spenser’s description of starving Irish soldiers near Cork, the ‘wood-kerne’, seeming like “the anatomies of death [who] spake like ghosts crying out of their graves”³⁴² has also attracted much critical attention. A ‘wood-kerne’, Corcoran argues, is “one of those rebels who, during the earlier course of Irish history, took to the woods, when defeated, for further resistance”³⁴³. This assumption of this role therefore brings out, for him, Heaney’s doggedness in trying to forge an autonomous terrain of motivation for versification:

I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long-haired
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows.³⁴⁴

The final role Heaney chooses for himself is that of an ‘inner émigré’³⁴⁵, a phrase perhaps more significant to the experience of ‘internal exile’ that Mandelstam (and in his footsteps, Brodsky, in a later era) suffered. Nevertheless, it would certainly be unfair to miss the nuanced sense of (un)belonging faced by a Catholic poet with Nationalist sympathies as Heaney in Unionist Northern Ireland. Therefore, the poet becomes conscious of his “inner émigré” role that he has performed in Belfast, the role being made available to him at the very moment of having to step out of his *omphalos* in Mossbawn. The poem ends on a tragic note, as Heaney compares himself to a mere falling star, one whose

...sparks
For their meagre heat, have missed

³⁴² Edmund Spenser, quoted in Heaney, ‘Belfast’ in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*, 34-35.

³⁴³ Neil Corcoran, *Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 80.

³⁴⁴ Heaney, ‘Exposure’, in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 84.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The once-in-a-lifetime portent,
The comet's pulsing rose.³⁴⁶

Thus, he is also admitting to his inability to live up to Mandelstam's lofty example in which a poet can "turn his resistance into an offensive". Terence Brown therefore observes that in "Heaney's poetry of that difficult decade, there are suggestions of guilty fear that he has betrayed his art to the gross conditions of a squalid conflict, and, conversely, that he has stood idly by as others have suffered"³⁴⁷. The honest admission of this guilt is responsible for the overtly self-accusative tone of the poem. The string of questions directed at the anxieties, uncertainties and insecurities closely related to his self-definition as a poet at this new turn in his poetic career are ultimately left only partially answered. However, as Heaney had stated, following Milosz's dictum "[w]hat is articulated strengthens itself"³⁴⁸, that poetry, once complete in its terseness, was capable to bear the weight of human experience. "Exposure", insofar as it directly proclaims the birth of the "inner émigré" subjectivity within Heaney, is a fitting instance of such a verbal testimony.

4.4. "What is my apology for poetry?": Remembered Absences and the Anxieties of Creative Exile in the "Glanmore Sonnets"

Field Work (1979), the next major poetic anthology of Heaney is mostly comprised of poetry written in between 1972 and 1976, the four-year period during which the Heaneys lived in their country cottage at Glanmore, Co. Wicklow. The collection celebrates snippets of shared domesticity between the Heaney couple and includes references to the evolving companionship between them while at a remove from city life. The remoteness of the Glanmore Cottage was one of the major reasons that had drawn them there. The fortuitous offer to rent a cottage at Glanmore had come from the Canadian academic and Synge scholar, Ann Saddlemeier, who becomes the dedicatee of the "Glanmore Sonnets"³⁴⁹. As Dennis O'Driscoll has shown in his interviews of Heaney, this new 'place' was replete with connections that led him to his old place, Mossbawn. Certain physical aspects of

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Terence Brown, "The Witnessing Eye and the Speaking Tongue," in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Andrews (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 184-85.

³⁴⁸ Dennis O' Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, 190.

³⁴⁹ See Heaney, "Glanmore Sonnets," in *Field Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979, 2010), Kindle edition, 34.

the Glanmore cottage—the “cold cement floor in the living room, latches slapping up and down on the doors”³⁵⁰ marked this figurative return of sorts. Nevertheless, the place also provided Heaney with an enabling, and much needed, distance from Belfast. The fact that there was “no heating, apart from the open grate and those miserable little two-bar electric fires” may have made the experience bleak, but “the stand-off of our situation—the distance from Dublin, never mind from Belfast—produced a kind of empowerment”³⁵¹. Glanmore thus marked the transition, as it were, from the more constrained tone of the poems in *North* to ‘smooth numbers’—more musical, iambic lines started pouring forth. It was also due to the seclusion of Glanmore that this enabling distance was forged. As Heaney admitted to O’Driscoll, Glanmore was “the first place where my immediate experience got into my work”³⁵². In the course of the next two years, the cottage “changed from being just living quarters to a locus that was being written into poems”³⁵³. Glanmore Castle, originally built by Francis Synge in 1804 around a spot called the Devil’s Glen, had been broken up and resold as apartments, so that when the Heaneys arrived there in August, 1972, it had “an equestrian village and various ‘desirable residences’ hidden in the environs”³⁵⁴. From the window of the room where Heaney worked, he caught a glimpse of a “big field sweeping up to this hill topping stone wall”³⁵⁵, surrounded by the Devil’s Glen woods. The place was “a far cry from Ashley Avenue and the Ashley Arms at the corner where the landlord, Mr. Lavery, had been blown up as he tried to carry a parcel bomb out of the lounge bar”³⁵⁶. It served as a “spiritual retreat”, and the move was a “renewed espousal” of the both the poetic vocation and the family life of the Heaneys who withdrew themselves completely from “a thriving poetry scene” in Belfast.³⁵⁷

The “Glanmore Sonnets” in *Field Work* constitute a direct transition from Heaney’s engagement with the Troubles to a renewed commitment towards poetry, with the perhaps conflicted hope that a close proximity to nature would partly absolve his guilt at having left Belfast. Michael Parker has succinctly noticed

³⁵⁰ Dennis O’ Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, 243.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.* 244.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 245.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 254.

therefore, that his “aim had been to change the rhythms of his life and verse, to ‘displace’ himself in order to develop as a man and writer”³⁵⁸. Yet the representational course taken by him is far from the genre of the pastoral, inviting a merging of the meanings of seclusion, a private contemplative life and the outside world. The anxious “inner émigré” subjectivity which appears at the end of “Exposure” gives way to an acceptance of a life removed from the immediacy of political violence but Heaney steers clear of adopting the highly stylised, literary language of the ‘pastoral’, imbuing his verse with tangible reminders of the labours of agriculture and farm life. The first sonnet begins by suggesting a parallel between ploughing the ground and versifying, going back to the etymology of the word “verse” (from Anglo-French “*vers*” and Old English “*fers*”, both derived from Latin *versus* meaning a “furrow” at the end of which, the plough was turned). The poet’s metaphoric tilling constitutes ploughing “vowels” into the “open ground”, joining foot to foot which leads to images of growth and fertility:

The mildest February for twenty years
Is mist bands over furrows, a deep no sound
Vulnerable to distant gargling tractors.
Our road is steaming, the turned-up acres breathe.³⁵⁹

Heaney emphasizes on a Bunyanesque vision of the “good life”, the motive of which “could be to cross a field”³⁶⁰. Art is defined here as “a paradigm of earth new from the lathe” that needs constant tilling and makes up the poet’s “lea” (grassland or meadow). The accumulated weight of his literary gleanings till this point conduct a thorough tilling where “[o]ld ploughsocks gorge the subsoil of each sense”³⁶¹. The “redolence” or trace of such tilling “quickens” the poet, who visualises this metaphoric farmland “as a dark unblown rose”³⁶². Yet, this seemingly fulfilling sequence of actions are threatened by the “ghosts” of his earlier life, who come, in their “sowers’ aprons” into “their spring stations”³⁶³. The “dream grain” of sowed lines, whirling “like freakish Easter snows”³⁶⁴ by the end of the poem does not disavow them. The second sonnet begins with the poet rediscovering

³⁵⁸ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 152.

³⁵⁹ Heaney, “Glanmore Sonnets I,” in *Field Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979, 2010), Kindle edition, 34.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² *Ibid.*

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

some of his “mountings from the hiding places”³⁶⁵ of his consciousness. The first of these “sensings” comes from the voice of Oisín Kelly, the sculptor who advises the poet that these “things are not secrets but mysteries”³⁶⁶. Kelly is pictured as the sculptor spurred by a creative urge, “hankering after stone/ That connived with the chisel”³⁶⁷. Interestingly, the transcendence of art that makes it stand beyond the scope of human reasoning is touched by both Kelly’s word “mysteries” as well as positing, as it were, an autonomous plain of mutual exchange between “stone” and “chisel”, as well as “mallet” and “grain”³⁶⁸. Heaney finds himself “in the hedge-school of Glanmore” from whence he encounters a “voice caught back off slug-horn and slow chanter”³⁶⁹. As Neil Corcoran points out, the ‘hedge-schools’ were little makeshift schools, illegally erected for the primary education of Catholic children in the wake of the Penal Laws which forced dissenters to accept the authority of the Anglican Order across the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries.³⁷⁰ By using this allusion then for his poem, Heaney tries to unite his Catholic roots with his dogged desire to take up the poetic vocation, even if at the cost of slander and hostile criticism from his fellow-poets. The ‘voice’ he meets helps him to “hold, dispel, appease”³⁷¹—to “hold on” to his calling as a poet, to “dispel” his doubts and to “appease” his lyric bent in the face of the human suffering that surrounds him. The concluding couplet enacts the self-fulfilling routine of lyric verse to derive creative sustenance from itself:

Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground
Each verse returning, like the plough turned round.³⁷²

Sonnet III muses on the relationship between pastoral life and artistic activity, as well as the mutual companionship between the poet and his wife Marie. Against the sylvan backdrop of “the cuckoo and the corncrake” consorting mellifluously in the fields, the “baby rabbit” and deer, Heaney contemplates on this

³⁶⁵ Heaney, “Glanmore Sonnets II,” in *Field Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979, 2010), Kindle edition, 34.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 35.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁰ Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 146-48.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² Heaney, “Glanmore Sonnets II,” in *Field Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979, 2010), Kindle edition, 35.

“strange loneliness” to which he has subjected himself and Marie³⁷³. Nevertheless, when the poet in him goes on to compare their conjugal life to Wordsworth’s seclusion in the Lake District with his sister Dorothy, Marie seems to humorously intervene: “You’re not going to compare us two...?”³⁷⁴ The fourth sonnet approaches the visionary power of the poet to intuit and foretell, despite seeming failures, the course of the future. The poem begins with the advice the poet had received (presumably from elders) “to lie with an ear to the line” in order to catch the “iron tune/Of flange and piston pitched along the ground”³⁷⁵. These metallic clangings become reminders of a world of mundaneness and merely empirical sensibility which although he might have sensed, the poet chooses not to hear:

I used to lie with an ear to the line
For that way, they said, there should come a sound
Escaping ahead, an iron tune
Of flange and piston pitched along the ground, But I never
heard that. Always, instead,
Struck couplings and shuntings two miles away.³⁷⁶

Instead of the “iron tune” of the railway carriage, Heaney posits his childhood vision of “a horse swirled back from a gate, a grey/Turnover of haunch and mane” escaping across the fields, and eager to catch it through its circuitous journey, he looks, in an anticipating way “to the cutting where she’d soon appear”.³⁷⁷ The distant vision of “small ripples” in the water of a pool becomes a harbinger of childhood mysteries that now serve to consolidate his commitment to his craft. The Romantic “sensings” of a transcendent plane of existence quite different from the intrusions of historical injustices and personal sufferings that were going on in Northern Ireland are affirmed, without necessarily disregarding the epistemological validity of the latter. As Sidney Burris writes,

Faced with the political implications of his domestic exile, Heaney calls upon a childhood experience, a nostalgic vision, to assure him of his intuitive powers. Because they seem pristinely aboriginal, these intuitive powers provide a cogent response to the political conundrums plaguing both Heaney’s life and poetry. It is as if Heaney were searching

³⁷³ Heaney, “Glanmore Sonnets III,” in *Field Work*, 35.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ Heaney, “Glanmore Sonnets IV,” in *Field Work*, 35.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 36.

for an unimpeachable authority, a place from which to begin again...³⁷⁸

Sonnet V dwells on the poet's musings on the "boortree", trying to forge an impossible return to its "bower", even as the tree becomes "a greenish, dank/ And snapping memory as I get older"³⁷⁹. The "boortree" serves as the poet's first home and hiding place, as he imaginatively goes back to an old game, 'touching tongues'³⁸⁰. As he grows older, Heaney learns to call it 'elderberry', the word being the English counterpart to 'boortree'. This change firstly points towards his "forked root", of having gradually moved into a space of 'in-betweenness' that looms in the overlap of his 'Irish' identity and his apprenticeship to the English language. Uttering the word "boortree" however, opens up his memory of the "soft corrugations" on its trunk and the redolent sensuality of its flowers and fruits:

I love its blooms like saucers brimmed with meal,
Its berries a swart caviar of shot,
Elderberry? It is shires dreaming wine.
Boortree is bower tree, where I played 'touching tongues'
And felt another's texture quick on mine.³⁸¹

The poet now calls himself "etymologist of roots and graftings"³⁸², illustrating, through his verse, the linguistic act of "grafting" words culled out of the substrata of English and Gaelic culture. "Elderberry" resounds with English longing for foreign exotica ("shires dreaming wine"), contrasted to the innate homeliness of "boortree". But while his nostalgic preference for 'boortree' is indicated through the poem, it also foregrounds his desire to go beyond a single, totalising "root". Michael Parker thus argues:

The poem is itself an act of grafting, setting into sensual 'Irish' stock linguistic slivers from his 'English' education, 'cultivated' words such as 'corrugations', 'swart', 'caviar', 'etymologist'. Exile, after all, provided him with the words and forms with which to articulate his *desiderium nostrorum*.³⁸³

³⁷⁸ Sidney Burris, *The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1990), 128-29.

³⁷⁹ Heaney, "Glanmore Sonnets V," in *Field Work*, 36.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

³⁸² *Ibid.*

³⁸³ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 169.

Parker's use of the Latin phrase *desiderium nostrorum* suggests literally 'our desire' in English, thus underlining a collective form of desire to return to 'Irishness' while still in Ireland. Evidently the "exile" identified by Parker cannot be taken in the literal sense owing to active volition on part of the poet in choosing to leave Northern Ireland, his 'home' where he did not feel "at home". And paradoxically, Glanmore, conventionally regarded as the place of his 'exile', also becomes the site of remembered 'return' to his metaphoric "tree-house" of this lost 'Irishness'³⁸⁴. The childhood "boortree" of the past, remembered only on the occasion of encountering the present "elderberry" thus becomes the site of remembered absence in 'exile'. Thus the desire to 'return' is only to a space congealed forever in the poet's memory that shelters him in his guilt of having abandoned his 'first place'³⁸⁵ in memory that was Mossbawn.

In the sixth sonnet, an anonymous man "who dared the ice/ And raced his bike across the Moyola River"³⁸⁶ becomes the inspiration for tackling the strained weight of bilocation in the poet. Heaney seems to border on self-reproach regarding his timid negotiation of his erstwhile conflicts. The textual clue to the "Moyola River" may be found in Heaney's essay "Something to Write Home About" where Heaney recalls, in the 1940s, "a ford at Lower Broagh and a trail of big stepping-stones" which "led across from one bank to the other"³⁸⁷. Heaney recalls "a feeling of daring" when, as a child, he would try to cross over to the other side against the flow of the water current.³⁸⁸ This gave him the feeling of being "giddy and rooted to the spot at one and the same time"³⁸⁹. This paradoxical image of the child rooted to the stones midstream allows him to think of himself as "a little version of the god of the Romans called Terminus, the god of boundaries"³⁹⁰. He writes of the shrine of Terminus in the Temple of Jupiter on Capitol Hill where "the roof above the place where the image sat was open to the sky"³⁹¹, reinforcing the

³⁸⁴ It is doubtlessly true that this paradoxical homing while in 'exile' has been seamlessly possible in Heaney's case owing to the cultural continuity and stability offered by a greater conception of 'Irishness'. Banished or exiled poets, it should be pointed out, rarely have the privilege of this continuity and usually experience a form of rift or separation from home.

³⁸⁵ Heaney, "Mossbawn," in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, 18.

³⁸⁶ Heaney, "Glanmore Sonnets VI," in *Field Work*, 36.

³⁸⁷ Heaney, "Something to Write Home About," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 59 no. 3 (Spring 1998):621.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 622.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

god's access to the boundless heavens. Terminus symbolically embodies for the poet "that double capacity we possess as human beings—the capacity to be attracted at one and the same time to the security of what is intimately known and to the challenges and entrancements of what is beyond us"³⁹². In the course of the essay, he goes on to explain how the word 'terminus' reappears as "tearmann" in Irish place-names, "meaning the glebe land belonging to an abbey or a church"³⁹³. The Moyola river seems to appear, in his mind as "a very definite terminus, a marker off of one place from another"³⁹⁴. In the sonnet, the man who had dared to race his bike across the frozen Moyola River in "that winter/Of nineteen-forty seven"³⁹⁵ becomes an emblematic example of someone who had "crossed over" from one place to another. The poet re-imagines the man "in the unsayable lights", looking on to the changing landscape at this terminal point where the "green fields" gradually grey on to the "windswept heights"³⁹⁶. The images of the snow which "[k]ept the country bright as a studio" finally coalesce, by the end of the poem, into the dazzling whiteness of a wild goose cackle could be "[h]eard after dark above the drifted house"³⁹⁷. The story of this man's daring 'quickens' the poet, giving him the necessary courage to go beyond the constraints imposed by boundaries in future, which in themselves, are arbitrary.

The next poem opens with remembered names and the "beautiful sprung rhythms of the old BBC weather forecast"³⁹⁸ that were partly responsible for arousing a love for poetry in the young Heaney. The articulation of these alien syllables and their "verbal music" had mystified him during his Mossbawn childhood. These faraway coasts, with their "[g]reen swift upsurges" evoked by "that strong gale-warming voice" of the newsreader had conveyed to him the arcane joys of mentally inhabiting landscapes different from his own.³⁹⁹ Now, they form interesting counterpoints to his lived experience in "the lee of Wicklow"⁴⁰⁰. The distinct aural quality of the 'foreign' is conveyed by the mention of the news

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Heaney, "Glanmore Sonnets VI," in *Field Work*, 36

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid. 37.

³⁹⁸ Heaney, "Feeling into Words," in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, 45.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Heaney, "Glanmore Sonnets VII," in *Field Work*, 37.

reader's voice collapsing "into a sibilant penumbra" that leads to the onset of midnight:

Midnight and closedown. Sirens of the tundra,
Of eel-road, seal-road, keel-road, whale-road, raise
Their wind-compounded keen behind the baize
And drive the trawlers to the lee of Wicklow.
L'Etoile, Le Guillemot, La Belle Hélène
Nursed their bright names this morning in the bay
That toiled like mortar.⁴⁰¹

These proper nouns, designating different English and French bays respectively, become landscapes of the mind in their perceived immediacy and are therefore, contrasted to the Bay of Wicklow which "toiled like mortar" and turned out as his "haven"⁴⁰²—a place of safety and refuge sheltering him from the sanguine disturbances of the Troubles. Nevertheless, it is not the materiality of Wicklow that seems to be Heaney's focus in the poem. The articulation of the sound "haven" seems to bring other bays and coasts to his mind: "Minches, Cromarty, The Faroes"⁴⁰³, signalling the opening up of a verbal terrain that transports Heaney to landscapes of the mind. The 'haven' of the poem thus, may be likened, by means of a pun, to his idea of the "placeless heaven" that he had encountered in the later work of Patrick Kavanagh. One may recall Heaney's instance of the chestnut tree planted in a jam jar by one of his aunts in this particular context. The tree, which had thereafter been felled by the new owners of the place after the Heaneys had moved out of it, suddenly begins to inhabit a space of "luminous emptiness, a warp and a waver of light"⁴⁰⁴ that Heaney finds difficult to define. His identification with such a space of absence instead of the tree bespeaks of the phenomenon being

...not so much a matter of attaching oneself to a living symbol of being rooted in the native ground; it was more a matter of preparing to be unrooted, to be spirited away into some transparent, yet indigenous afterlife. The new place was all idea, if you like; it was generated out of my experience of the old place but it was not a topographical location. It was and remains an imagined realm, even if it

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Heaney, 'The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh', in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), Kindle edition, 17.

can be located at an earthly spot, a placeless heaven rather than a heavenly place.⁴⁰⁵

Sonnet VIII begins with images of thunder and rain which becomes symbols of ominous foreboding creeping into the seemingly serene sanctuary he finds at Glanmore. “Splattering dark on the hatchet iron”⁴⁰⁶. Heaney introduces three figures which function as omens. The manoeuvres of “a magpie with jerky steps” inspecting “a horse asleep beside the wood” convince him of a sinister opportunism to which he too, at some level, must hold himself guilty.⁴⁰⁷ The sense of terrible menace is conveyed as the repressed guilt of having abandoned his compatriots and friends in the North amidst the never-ending bloodshed of the Troubles metamorphoses into paranoia:

What would I meet, blood-boltered, on the road?
How deep into the woodpile sat the toad?
What welters through this dark hush on the crops?⁴⁰⁸

The binary between “song” and “suffering” that has been already explicated before becomes operative at this juncture. The destructive intensity of the Troubles had not abated even after Heaney had left the North, in contrast to the spiritual and artistic growth that he experienced personally at Glanmore. Parker notes that killings escalated during 1975 and 1976, with about 247 and 297 casualties respectively, along with about 5000 people injured.⁴⁰⁹ The poet’s second cousin, Colum McCartney was an unwitting victim of such sectarian violence. On 24th August, 1975 McCartney and Sean Farmer were shot dead shortly after they were kidnapped from their car in Newhamilton while returning home from a Gaelic football match by another loyalist group, the Protestant Action Force (PAF)⁴¹⁰. The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) also conducted bombings, as well as gun and grenade attacks on Catholic civilians despite a temporary truce forged by the Provisional IRA with the British government. The Miami Showband massacre was another important link in this chain, an incident in which three members from the musical group were shot dead in July, 1975.⁴¹¹ This attack was responded to by the

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Heaney, “Glanmore Sonnets VIII,” in *Field Work*, 37.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 153.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ The “Miami Showband Massacre” was an attack launched by the loyalist paramilitary organisation, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) on July 31, 1975 at Bushkill in Co. Down,

Provisional IRA in a series of shootings and bombings in pubs, inns and public spaces. When a Provisional IRA volunteer Danny Lennon was shot dead by the British police while driving his car along a road in Belfast, the vehicle went on to run over three children.⁴¹² This nefarious incident sparked off peace rallies, led primarily by peace activists Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams whose organisation later became known as the “Peace People”⁴¹³. But even though a perceived unity among Catholic and Protestant civilians were felt during the peace marches—the numbers of which rose at times to as many as 20,000—violence did not reduce significantly. These instances of “suffering” in the North compounded Heaney’s guilt at choosing the path of lyric ‘truancy’ (following Mandelstam’s example) and “song”. Nevertheless, the episode from “that pension in Les Landes” serves as a counterweighing of scales and an awareness of “suffering” is reinforced over the lyric appeasement of the “song” :

Do you remember that *pension* in Les Landes,
Where the old one rocked and rocked and rocked
A mongol in her lap, to little songs?⁴¹⁴

The concluding lines depict the poet sublimating his pent-up grief through the hope of possible sexual consummation, as he lies “upstairs shaking”, with his body being likened to a “birchwood in lightning”⁴¹⁵. Sonnet IX enacts a displacement of repressed guilt from Heaney to his wife Marie as she notices “a black rat” outside the kitchen window swaying “on the briar like infected fruit”⁴¹⁶. Her tendency to invest the phenomenon with supernatural significance signals a bad omen, a spectre of guilt from the past. The quiet life of the recluse is haunted by a series of remembered absences and a rejoinder to kill the rat by his wife: “Go you

Northern Ireland. Three members of the Miami Showband were killed when the band was travelling home to Dublin at night, after a performance at Banbridge. The bus was stopped at Newry, followed by a premature explosion of a bomb already planted beforehand by the UVF. See David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002), 256-57.

⁴¹² See Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 154. The death of the Maguire children led to surge in the numbers of protesters against this ever-ending strain of sectarian violence.

⁴¹³ See David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002), 258.

⁴¹⁴ Heaney, “Glanmore Sonnets VIII,” in *Field Work*, 37

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.* 38. .

⁴¹⁶ Heaney, “Glanmore Sonnets IX,” in *Field Work*, 38.

out to it”⁴¹⁷. Heaney now sets up an antithetical relationship between the “reek of silage”, a reminder of his mundane responsibilities as a husband and the “burnished bay tree” of poetry, a metonymy for the lyric autonomy for which he had chosen ‘exile’⁴¹⁸. However he cannot disregard his commitment to the former and therefore craves a form of lyric appeasement that could serve as a strong apologia for poetry’s continued survival through the wars and bloodbaths of history. Having been reminded of suffering and mortality through the imagined death of the rat, the poet nevertheless is witness to an image of startling beauty:

What is my apology for poetry?
The empty briar is swishing
When I come down, and beyond, inside, your face
Haunts like a new moon glimpsed through tangled
glass.⁴¹⁹

The final sonnet marks the consummation of the marriage through the seeming recollection of sleeping “in a moss inn Donegal/ On turf banks under blankets”⁴²⁰. As we have seen before, Heaney had partially steered clear of the pastoral mode, imbuing the sonnets with images that strongly convey sensory impressions. He imagines them lying on the mossy floor of the turf, alluding to two pairs of lovers. The first of these, Lorenzo and Jessica, from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, suggest an independent attitude in love and courtship, defying seemingly inescapable authority and social conservatism. The second pair of lovers, Diarmuid and Grainne, come from stories in the Fenian cycle of Irish mythology in the 16th century prose narrative *The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne* which was translated by Lady Gregory and thereafter, adapted for the stage by W.B. Yeats and George Moore in 1901. Even while dealing with the theme of conjugal love therefore, Heaney points towards his divided allegiance to the English and Irish literary traditions, as well as his cultural bilocation. He also draws from the tradition of the Elizabethan ‘love-lyric’, popularised by the English courtier-poet Sir Thomas Wyatt in the sonnet form. The specific allusion advanced in the ninth line is to Wyatt’s “They flee from me...” where “how like you this?” serves as a reminder of past seductions and sexual consummation to Wyatt.⁴²¹ In Heaney’s poem however,

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Heaney, “Glanmore Sonnets X,” in *Field Work*, 38.

⁴²¹ See Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 171.

much of the sinister charge of Wyatt's language is side-stepped, as the memory of the first night of sexual fulfilment in a hotel brings back the couple coming face to face with the "lovely and painful Covenants of/ flesh; our separateness"⁴²².

In his interviews to Dennis Driscoll, Heaney, when asked whether he was "aware of any resentment" towards him "among Southern Irish writers" as he arrived in the Republic of Ireland, answers that while no "writing environment is ever free of resentment", he did not perceive himself "as a trespasser"⁴²³. Instead, he refers to a "Southern dimension" as "something that I myself belonged to and that belonged to me"⁴²⁴. He refers to his arrival in the Southern Irish literary scene as an event in which he "would have felt more like a homecomer"⁴²⁵. By the summer of 1975, the Heaneys had three children, and the responsibilities towards their education, as well as the offer for a teaching job in the English Department of Carysfort College made the move to Dublin imminent. The stay at Glanmore thus became for Heaney therapeutic, in order to resolve, in a sense, the contrary pulls of creative liberty and political responsibility. The "Glanmore Sonnets" record the laborious process that effected this transformation and provide him—even if sometimes on feeble footing—with enough artistic recompense to allow for his poetry to perform its "counterweighing function"⁴²⁶.

4.5. "I will live content elsewhere": *Sweeney Astray* (1983) and the Poetics of Withdrawal

While he was working as a freelancer at Glanmore, Seamus Heaney's trysts with translation commenced with his attempt to render, in English, *Buile Suibhne* ("The Frenzy of Sweeney"), the ninth century Middle-Irish stories and poems relating to the myth of a seventh century mad Irish king of Ulster named Sweeney who lost his mental composure at the Battle of Moira (637 CE) and was

⁴²² Heaney, "Glanmore Sonnets X," in *Field Work*, 38

⁴²³ Dennis O' Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), Kindle edition, 256.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁶ Heaney, "The Redress of Poetry," in *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 16. Heaney's phrase "A pause for po-ethics" in the poem "W.H. Auden 1907-73" from *Electric Light* (2001) initiates a "strong imbrication of ethics and poetics in his work" where poetic language becomes an epistemological tool to achieve redress. See also Eugene O'Brien, "A Pause for Po-ethics": Seamus Heaney and the Ethics of Aesthetics", *Humanities* 8 no. 3 (2019), 138-53, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h8030138> (accessed May 6, 2021).

transformed into a bird in fulfilment of St. Ronan's curse: "He shall roam Ireland, mad and bare/ He shall find death on the point of a spear"⁴²⁷. Sweeney had, in his rashness, attacked the Saint and had thrown his psalter-book into the river, misdeeds for which he was thus cursed. Heaney began translating the text and developing a 'version' of it from the bilingual edition translated by J.G. O'Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Sweeney), being The Adventures of Sweeney Geilt: A Middle-Irish Romance*, published in 1913.⁴²⁸ Heaney notes in the introduction to his translation of the text that "the literary imagination that fastened upon him as an image" was marked by a conflict between "a newly dominant Christian ethos" and the "older, recalcitrant Celtic temperament"⁴²⁹, marking Sweeney himself as a being inhabiting an airy and liminal space, doomed forever to pine for his lost kingdom of Dal-Arie, his family and his people. What adds to the significance of Sweeney's exile for Heaney consists in projecting the former as "a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance"⁴³⁰, and this admission on his part invites us to read the figure of Sweeney as a poetic alter-ego for the poet himself. In fact, Helen Vendler has already drawn attention to the figure of Sweeney as "one of Heaney's most successful alter-egos"⁴³¹, but she does not attempt a detailed reading of *Sweeney Astray*, which I shall hope to do.

My objective in this section would be to read Sweeney's poems to locate the space of alterity that Heaney constructs in his version of the mad Ulster king, and to trace its relationship to Heaney's personal predicament of voluntary exile. In particular, I want to follow Heaney's lead to a possibility laden in critical readings of *Sweeney Astray* "to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political, and domestic obligations"⁴³². Heaney also adds that it was possible, "in a more opportunistic spirit, to dwell upon Sweeney's easy sense of cultural affinity with both western Scotland and southern Ireland as exemplary for all men and women in

⁴²⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 11.

⁴²⁸ Heaney, 'Introduction', in *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 6.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴³¹ Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 75.

⁴³² Heaney, 'Introduction', in *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 6

contemporary Ulster”⁴³³. What he wanted to underline here is the broad hint of the ‘Ulster predicament’ in not just poets but inhabitants, who are caught up within their divided allegiances to the ‘Irish/Scottish’ (Celtic) and English cultural terrains. This divided allegiance, perceptible in Heaney’s reference to a speculation “that this Irish invention (the tale of Sweeney) may well have been a development of a British original, vestigially present in the tale of the madman called Alan”. The “strange migrations” Sweeney dreams of when Ronan’s curse is fulfilled leads Sweeney to admit “God has exiled me from myself”⁴³⁴ which was similar to the crisis of poetic identity and cultural displacement Heaney himself was undergoing during his initial years at Glanmore, Wicklow, when he had started the translation. Heaney however, chose to edit large parts of his initial translation of the story that he had completed in 1973 and it was only six years later, in 1979, while he was at Harvard, that he attempted to put together a second translation.⁴³⁵ In a later essay, Heaney himself admitted, in his initial attempt at translating Sweeney’s story, he “was using *Buile Suibhne* as a trampoline. I should have been showing it off, but instead it was being pressed into service to show me off”⁴³⁶.

It is therefore fit to consider Heaney’s poetic engagement with *Sweeney Astray* in terms of a journey that spanned from 1973 to 1983, consisting in a willingness on his part to acknowledge a “going astray”, through his taking up, through Robert Lowell’s example, an “unabashed readiness to subdue the otherness of the original to his own autobiographical neediness”⁴³⁷. While Heaney’s initial arrogation of Sweeney’s story in 1973 rests on his express identification of his personal predicament and the exiled Sweeney’s plight by the time *Sweeney Astray* came out, he had become fed up with his own “mournful bondings to the ‘matter of Ulster’” and had started to value the “otherness” of *Buile Suibhne* as a poem from beyond”⁴³⁸. The span of ten years in the interim also saw Heaney gradually coming to terms with his migration to the Republic and thereby freeing himself from the narrow constraints of being tied down to Ulster, gradually arriving at an ‘elsewhere’

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish*, Kindle edition, 15.

⁴³⁵ See Seamus Heaney, ‘Earning a Rhyme’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 56

⁴³⁶ Ibid. 57.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Ibid. 59.

of contentment which is born out of a middle path between Sweeney's story and his own. Out of this withdrawal from explicit personal identification are born the 'Sweeney Redivivus' poems from *Station Island* (1984) where Sweeney is credited for having opened up the poet's path "to a kingdom/ of such scope and neuter allegiance/ my emptiness reigns at its whim"⁴³⁹. Such "scope" and "neuter allegiance" can paradoxically come only when Heaney withdraws from superficial self-projections of his voluntary exile onto Sweeney's original story and instead uses him as a point of departure to articulate his progression into his 'empty place'.

The translation begins by briefly recounting the circumstances under which the action takes place. Sweeney, hearing the ringing of the bell of Ronan Finn, the devout Christian monk who was "marking his site" near a church at Killarney. In a fit of rashness, Sweeney arrives stark naked at Killarney to evict Ronan Finn from his kingdom:

When Sweeney heard my bell ringing
he came all of a sudden hurtling
in terrible rage against me
to drive me off and banish me.

Outrage like that, and eviction
from the first place I had chosen,
were too much for me to bear.
Therefore, God answered my prayer⁴⁴⁰.

Ronan's prayer is a timely one, and Sweeney receives the divine command on join forces with Donal, son of Aodh on the plain of Moira. Ronan Finn, the cleric also comes to Moira to try to forge a truce between Donal and his enemy, Congal Claon, son of Scannlan; but instead is appointed, by agreement of both sides, to act "as a seal and guarantee of the rules of battle"⁴⁴¹. However, Sweeney consciously violates all such truces which were ratified by the cleric. He sets out to the battlefield pompously dressed in his finely embroidered tunic "bordered in gemstones and gold" and his "satin girdle" and comes face to face with eight psalmists from Ronan's community who, as a mark of their blessing, sprinkled

⁴³⁹ Heaney, 'The Cleric', Sweeney Redivivus, in *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 108. Heaney acknowledges the biographical parallel between himself and Sweeney also in Heaney, 'Earning a Rhyme', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, Kindle edition, 59

⁴⁴⁰ Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish*, Kindle edition, 11.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.* 12.

holy water on the gathering army. However, the haughty Sweeney sees this act of benediction as a personal affront, because “Sweeney thought they had done it just to mock him”⁴⁴². He hurls his spear at Ronan and it pierces and breaks the bell that hung from the cleric’s neck. Enraged by this display of hubris, Ronan curses Sweeney:

My curse fall on Sweeney
for his great offence.
His smooth spear profaned
my bell’s holiness,

cracked bell hoarding grace
since the first saint rang it—
it will curse you to the trees,
bird-brain among branches.

Just as the spear-shaft broke
and sprang into the air
may the mad spasms strike
you, Sweeney, forever.⁴⁴³

As soon as the battle begins, Sweeney is seized by a fit of “[v]ertigo, hysteria, lurchings” which begins his gradual transformation from a human being to “a bird of the air”⁴⁴⁴, fulfilling Ronan’s curse. When a kinsman of Sweeney, Aongus the Stout comes fleeing from battle with his men into Glen Arkin looking for him, Sweeney, now a bird “roosting” on a tree, admits “God has exiled me from myself”⁴⁴⁵ to his soldiers. The symbolic expunging by which Sweeney loses his human identity also makes him “revolted at the thought of known places” and dream of “strange migrations”⁴⁴⁶. Tellingly, the sense of internal exile that Sweeney goes through while flying over the known places in Ireland points towards a de-familiarisation of known spaces through a change in subjectivity and vantage point:

A long time he went faring all through Ireland,
poking his way into hard rocky clefts,
shouldering through ivy bushes,
unsettling falls of pebbles in narrow defiles,
wading estuaries,
breasting summits,

⁴⁴² Ibid. 13.

⁴⁴³ Ibid. 13-14

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid. 14.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid. 15.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid. 14.

trekking through glens,
until he found the pleasures of Glen Bolcain.⁴⁴⁷

During his stay at Glen Bolcain, Sweeney, yet unaccustomed to the life and ways of a bird, tries to take shelter in an “ivy-grown hawthorn” and “every time he twisted or turned, the thorny twigs would flail him so that he was prickled and cut and bleeding all over”⁴⁴⁸. The exhausted and wounded Sweeney realises that a “great gulf” now separates him from his former condition as king, as well as between “craziness and reason”⁴⁴⁹. Glen Bolcain, “a natural asylum where all the madmen of Ireland used to assemble once their year in madness was complete”⁴⁵⁰ becomes the allegorical place of Sweeney’s exile from now on. Having parallels to the Irish countryside at Glenmore, it is represented with strongly sensual imagery that is reminiscent of Keats, a poet whom Stephen Regan identifies as having been a major topical influence on the first draft of Heaney’s translation. Working on the basis of primary evidence he discovers in Heaney’s notebooks, Regan concluded that a “fundamental conviction throughout Heaney’s sustained engagement with *Buile Suibhne* was the idea that Sweeney was a type of the exiled artist, a sorrowful singer and poet”⁴⁵¹. Several Irish musicians, notably “Edward Bunting, Thomas Moore, John Field, and Sean O Riada” feature as possible models for Heaney of such an artist, but at the top of this list is “Keats in Ireland”⁴⁵². Heaney seems to be alluding to Keats’s letter to his brother Tom during his brief visit to Ireland in the summer of 1818, in which he describes himself as “had too much opportunity to see the worse than nakedness, the rags, the dirt and misery of the poor common Irish”⁴⁵³. As he made his way through turf-cutters, the squalid Irish labourers “cutting or carting peat” and the “wretched suburbs” around Belfast, the tragic sensibility in Keats manifested itself in its most sublime form in his description of two poor Irish commoners. Within the scope of *Sweeney Astray*, Regan argues that Heaney tries to emulate the luscious and sensual descriptions of landscape in

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid. 16-17.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid. 17.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid. 18.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid. 17.

⁴⁵¹ Stephen Regan, “Seamus Heaney and the Making of “Sweeney Astray”, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 21 no. 2, Commemorating Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) (Fall, 2015), 324.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ John Keats, *Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. Grant F. Scott (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), 151 quoted in Stephen Regan, “Seamus Heaney and the Making of “Sweeney Astray”, 324.

Keats's poem "To Autumn", partly in order to perform a version of poetic redress, "to mitigate the sorrow and melancholy of Sweeney's predicament with the pleasures of sensuous, natural beauty"⁴⁵⁴. A passage illustrative of such sensuousness is the description provided of Glen Bolcain:

Glen Bolcain is like this:
it has four gaps to the wind,
pleasant woods, clean-banked wells,
cold springs and clear sandy streams
where green-topped watercress and languid brooklime
philander over the surface.
It is nature's pantry
with its sorrels, its wood-sorrels,
its berries, its wild garlic,
its black sloes and its brown acorns ⁴⁵⁵

Heaney's allusive reference to a recalcitrant Celtic strain in Sweeney pitted against the more ordered life of spiritual discipline offered by the emergent Christian ethos finds confirmation in his consideration of early Irish nature poetry in his essay "The God in the Tree". Here, Heaney considers examples from early Irish nature poetry that display two different imaginative tendencies—the *pagus*, associated with the pagan delight of unrestrained indulgence in the natural beauty of the wilderness and the Christian *disciplina* that operates as a regulating force in life, acting through spiritual discipline and religious vocation.⁴⁵⁶ The possibility of awakening to a different kind of life, which, though unfettered in principle, nevertheless involves a "strange migration" in which the exiled or displaced artist undertakes a form of penitential peregrination, is the trajectory Heaney follows in describing Sweeney's metaphoric flight. As Regan has shown, following Heaney in the said essay, that early Irish Christians performed a particular kind of penitential peregrination or pilgrimage (*peregrinatio*) to deliberately practise a life of expiation and wandering as Sweeney did, "exposed to the hardships and delights

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish*, Kindle edition, 17.

⁴⁵⁶ Heaney, "The God in the Tree: Early Irish Nature Poetry," in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 183. See also Stephen Regan, "Seamus Heaney and the Making of "Sweeney Astray", *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 21 no. 2, Commemorating Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) (Fall, 2015), 329.

of the seasons”⁴⁵⁷. His final redemption arrives when “he is retrieved for the church by St. Moling who records his history and his poems”⁴⁵⁸.

The biographical parallels between Heaney and Sweeney’s story have been made apparent by O’Donoghue who discovers, in the first notebook draft of Heaney’s translation, marginal and infrapaginal notes that emphasize the allegorical nature of the tale. Donoghue notes that Heaney had written, on the top of a particular page, “in sprawling, green-ink capitals”⁴⁵⁹:

“LEFT ULSTER MYSELF/ ALLEGORY”⁴⁶⁰

The associations Sweeney evoked within the poet are likewise noted in some detail elsewhere in the notebook, where the story of the mad Ulster king makes him appear, “as at once the snarl of the fallen establishment tormented with hindsight” and the “implacable baying of the downtrodden”. A few pages later, O’Donoghue notes Heaney’s explication:

Sweeney is at once Lear and Poor Tom [...] He is paranoiac and schizophrenic. In one way he completely possesses the landscapes he inhabits, in another way he defines himself against them. He is a prism to refract many aspects of the Ulster experience.⁴⁶¹

Nevertheless, the initial plans he had adopted for his translation involved a trade-off between the impulse to remain faithful to the source text he used, in this case, O’Keefe’s rendition *The Frenzy of Sweeney*, and the overpowering impulse to make Sweeney’s story allegorical, responding to contemporary political events in Ulster and Northern Ireland. In “Earning a Rhyme”, he writes of this initial arrogation of the Sweeney story, closely following the chain of events which led to his decision to migrate from Belfast to Wicklow:

I began to inflate myself and my situation into Sweeney's,
to make analogies between the early medieval Ulsterman

⁴⁵⁷ Stephen Regan, “Seamus Heaney and the Making of “Sweeney Astray”, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 21 no. 2, Commemorating Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) (Fall, 2015), 329-30.

⁴⁵⁸ Heaney, “The God in the Tree: Early Irish Nature Poetry,” in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 187.

⁴⁵⁹ Josie O’Donoghue, “The Politics of Metaphor in Heaney’s Sweeney Astray”, *Irish University Review* 47 Supplement (November 2017): 451, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/iur.2017.0303> (accessed May 9, 2021).

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

who rocketed out of the north as a result of vehement squabbles there among the petty dynasties, and this poet from Co. Derry who had only recently come south to Co. Wicklow for purposes of retreat and composure.⁴⁶²

Carmen Bugar has considered Heaney's aggressive forays of the imagination in appropriating Sweeney's tale to his own anguish and guilt for having chosen his voluntary exile. Driven by the "historical duress" he faced as a Catholic in Ulster during the Troubles, it was "precisely at this moment that Heaney felt a strong sense of exile and assimilated Sweeney's image into his own"⁴⁶³. Bugar, in her chapter on Heaney's reading of Mandelstam, also points out that Heaney's image of Mad Sweeney now transformed into a bird, who undertakes a form of expiation of guilt through "assuaging himself by utterance", has parallels to Mandelstam's lyric freedom, his "exuberant rhythm" or "display of metrical virtuosity"⁴⁶⁴. She quotes Clarence Brown, who in his introduction to the English translations of Mandelstam's *Selected Poems* remarks that Mandelstam's

...whole physical appearance—and even some of the impressions produced by his personality—can be summed up in a word, some version of which occurs in practically every memoir...birdlike. Mandelstam is repeatedly called a *bezdomnaia ptitsa*, 'homeless bird'.⁴⁶⁵

The Sweeney-Heaney-Mandelstam triangulation which Bugar elaborates on her work focusses on this very birdlike appearance of Mandelstam and Heaney's subsequent romanticisation of it into a symbol for the poet who writes for the joy of lyric utterance. In the legendary Celtic tale of 'Suibne Geilt', which made itself amenable to an interpretation by the poet Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*, Suibne becomes "a symbol of the poet's plight in a society where art is judged inconsequential and the artist ridiculous"⁴⁶⁶. *The Field Day Anthology of*

⁴⁶² See Seamus Heaney, 'Earning a Rhyme', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 63.

⁴⁶³ Carmen Bugar, 'Introduction,' in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation* (London: Legenda, 2013), 10.

⁴⁶⁴ Heaney, "Extending the Alphabet," in *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 36-37, quoted in Carmen Bugar, "Writing 'for the Joy of it': Seamus Heaney and Osip Mandelstam," in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation* (London: Legenda, 2013), 26.

⁴⁶⁵ Clarence Brown, *Mandelstam* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), 50, quoted in Bugar, "Writing 'for the Joy of it': Seamus Heaney and Osip Mandelstam", 29.

⁴⁶⁶ Robert Graves, quoted in Josie O'Donoghue, "The Politics of Metaphor in Heaney's Sweeney Astray", *Irish University Review* 47 Supplement (November 2017): 452, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/iur.2017.0303> (accessed May 9, 2021).

Irish Writing also chooses to describe the Sweeney legend as “one of the great formulations of the plight of the artist who earns his gift at the cost of alienation and dispossession”⁴⁶⁷. Sweeney’s paradoxical gift therefore allows Heaney to consider him as a vehicle to voice his own divided allegiances, insecurities regarding his vocation as a poet as well as to credit his poetry for its assuaging function. The redemptive aspect of this creatively enabling exile and alienation is also Sweeney’s gift of poetry, one that demonstrates, through his expiatory tale, the greatness of the Catholic Christian God. Sweeney’s lines addressed to Lynchseachan, his foster-brother is illustrative of similar paradoxes between the teeming multitudes of battle-worn soldiers at Moira and Sweeney’s present loneliness, between the seeming harshness of his present penitence and the all-conquering love of God;

God of Heaven! Why did I go
battling out that famous Tuesday
to end up changed into Mad Sweeney,
roosting alone up in the ivy?

From the well of Drum Cirb, watercress
supplies my bite and sup at terce;
its juices that have greened my chin
are Sweeney’s markings and birth-stain.

And the manhunt is an expiation.
Mad Sweeney is on the run
and sleeps curled beneath a rag
under the shadow of Slieve League—

long cut off from the happy time
when I lived apart, an honoured name;
long exiled from those rushy hillsides,
far from my home among the reeds.

I give thanks to the King above
whose harshness only proves His love
which was outraged by my offence
and shaped my new shape for my sins.⁴⁶⁸

In his essay on the translation of *Buile Suibhne*, Heaney drew attention to the interconnections he had attempted to draw out between the medieval tale of the mad bird-king Sweeney and the repetitive cycles of sectarian hatred in Northern

⁴⁶⁷ *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. 4, ed. Angela Bourke (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 226-27.

⁴⁶⁸ Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish*, Kindle edition, 23-24.

Ireland during the Troubles. His cautious answer to the series of rhetorical questions he asks in this essay indicates in-betweenness and complicated notions of belonging which has, in his opinion, symptomatic of Ulster subjectivity:

My hope was that that book might render a Unionist audience more pervious to the notion that Ulster was Irish, without coercing them out of their cherished conviction that it was British. [...] I hoped the book might complicate the sense of entitlement to the land of Ulster which had developed so overbearingly in the Protestant majority [...]. I wanted to deliver a work of imagination that could be read universally as the thing-in-itself but which would also sustain those extensions of meaning that our disastrously complicated predicament at home made both urgent and desirable.⁴⁶⁹

It is crucial, as has been already mentioned before in this section, to concentrate on the subtle distinction that Heaney makes between the “thing-in-itself” (i.e. a poem in its primary status as literary artefact) and the more topical, “extensions of meaning” that pertain to the historical particularities of the present (i.e. The Troubles in Northern Ireland). While the former is more “universal”, the latter are more “topical”, attuned by the effects of contemporary events. Early reviewers of *Sweeney Astray*, O’Donoghue writes, were also conscious of the tension “between local linguistic metaphors in the text and what might be considered its overarching metaphorical significance”⁴⁷⁰. Notably, John Montague, while appreciative of Heaney’s efforts to render the Irish masterpiece, maintained that Heaney seemed not to possess “the crucial gift or wound of a grafted tongue”⁴⁷¹. Among other reviewers, Eavan Boland in the *Irish Times* commented that “if anything mars this otherwise fine sequence by Seamus Heaney it is the self-consciousness”, adding further that the “cavil” resorted to in the translation, whereby Sweeney is “presented all the time in a densely literary way” affects the degree of its fidelity to O’Keefe’s text.⁴⁷² But notwithstanding their respective positions and reservations about the first translation, in his second attempt, Heaney restructured his vocabulary and metrical schemes so that “the stanzas should be

⁴⁶⁹ Heaney, “Earning a Rhyme,” in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972, 2010), Kindle edition, 56.

⁴⁷⁰ Josie O’Donoghue, “The Politics of Metaphor in Heaney’s *Sweeney Astray*”, *Irish University Review* 47 Supplement (November 2017): 454.

⁴⁷¹ John Montague, ‘Tarzan among the Nightingales’, *Fortnight* 200 (1983): 27.

⁴⁷² Eavan Boland, ‘Heaney’s *Sweeney*’, *The Irish Times*, 10 December 1983

recast in a more hard-edged, pointed way...that they should be colder, more articulated; should be tuned to a bleaker note”⁴⁷³. Through the deliberate pruning of his lines in order to reach a bare asceticism, Heaney thus formally enacts a form of homecoming through the casting of his stanzas in the image of hedges, a topographical detail that gets transformed into the orthographic space of poetic representation.⁴⁷⁴ By making this second translation “more obedient to the metrical containments and battened-down verbal procedures of the Irish itself”⁴⁷⁵, Heaney readjusts his lyric truancy, his tendency to drift ‘astray’ by a possible excess of self-projection, to a more metrically contained approach:

The closer, line by line, stanza by stanza, end-stopped, obedient, literal approach finally yielded more. I had a sense of accumulation rather than of truancy—a different satisfaction, not necessarily superior but more consoling in the execution of a long piece of composition. I had also forgotten about the political extensions that were originally intended.⁴⁷⁶

He rounds off this section by adding that by the time of its publication, he had “got fed up” with his “mournful bondings to the ‘matter of Ulster’ and valued the otherness of *Buile Suibhne* as a poem from beyond”⁴⁷⁷. Despite this instance of deliberate self-distancing, while abandoned to the sylvan surroundings of Glen Bolcain, Sweeney’s newly found poetic voice emerges as an adequate form of redress for his descent into a space of alterity. As Tom Herron and Anna Pilz have shown in their work, two of the consequences of Sweeney’s extensive wanderings during the course of his madness involve the opening up of spatial and temporal expanses.⁴⁷⁸ The first among these involves Sweeney’s gaining of encyclopaedic knowledge of different place names in Ireland, its “topography, toponymy and inhabitants”, so that “he always appears to be in known territory: in other words, he is never lost”⁴⁷⁹. Secondly, although Sweeney knows, through Ronan’s curse, that the occasion of his death would take place at Moling’s monastery at St. Mullins, he

⁴⁷³ Heaney, “Earning a Rhyme,” in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972, 2010), Kindle edition, 57.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 59.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁸ Tom Herron and Anna Pilz, “Cursed to the Trees: Enchanted by the Woods: Sweeney Astray”, *Études irlandaises*, 44 no. 1 (2019), 87-99, <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.7136> (accessed May 11, 2021)

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

is left unaware of the circumstances that would cause the same. This leaves him in a peculiar, “surprise-state” where he encounters, according to Jane Bennett, “a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one’s default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition”⁴⁸⁰ as he awaits his inevitable demise.

Herron and Pilz have further shown that Sweeney’s descent into exile and madness from his erstwhile condition as a merely strong-willed and headstrong king lacking in wisdom is strongly interwoven with the arboreal references used in the poem. In particular, Herron and Pilz have drawn our attention to associational aspects between the yew tree and sacred wisdom in both Christian lore and Celtic mythology. The yew tree’s “association with death, eternity and the afterlife, indicates the half-pagan layer in the narrative that gestures towards Sweeney’s liminal state: caught between pagan and Christian dispensations”⁴⁸¹. By choosing to call each of Sweeney’s resting places as “stations”, Heaney emphasizes the penitential backdrop to Sweeney’s tribulations, identifying his experience of metaphoric ‘exile’ as also a form of peregrination. In fact, Sweeney closely observes fasts on Fridays, and gradually finds his loved ones, including even his wife Eorann, deserting and forgetting him. His “station” at Glen Bolcain, through the ambiguity it embodies (“...though it is a lovely, lofty station, it is still uncomfortable and uneasy...without shelter from the storm or the shower”⁴⁸²) makes his penitence arduous but desirable:

Astray no more east or west,
blizzards whipping my bare face,
not shivering in some drifted den,
a starved, pinched, raving madman,

but sheltered in that lovely glen,
my winter harbour, my haven,
my refuge from the bare heath,
my royal fort, my king’s rath.

...

Keep me here, Christ, far away
from open ground and flat country.

⁴⁸⁰ See Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001,) 5.

⁴⁸¹ Tom Herron and Anna Pilz, “Cursed to the Trees: Enchanted by the Woods: Sweeney Astray”, *Études irlandaises*, 44 no. 1 (2019), 87-99, <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.7136> (accessed May 11, 2021)

⁴⁸² Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish*, Kindle edition, 54.

Let me suffer the cold of glens
I dread the cold space of plains.⁴⁸³

Both the themes of spatial expansion that allows Sweeney to acquaint himself to the whole of Ireland in the course of his wandering from “station” to “station”, and his penitential pilgrimage has strong connections to Heaney’s deliberate choice of exile. Through Sweeney’s all-encompassing catalogue of place names in Ireland, Heaney seems to reiterate the desire of Stephen Dedalus to “fly” by the nets of constraints such as “nationality, language, religion” that entangle an artist born in Ireland.⁴⁸⁴ By choosing to distance himself from the “matter of Ireland”, both Heaney (following Stephen) and Sweeney manage to provide the reader with an all-encompassing circuit of place-names in Ireland. Secondly, the emphasis on Sweeney’s penitential peregrination has important elements common with Heaney’s *Station Island* (1984), a volume in which he would revisit, after the space of more than a decade, the inner anxiety and guilt which were the consequences of his choice to relocate to the Republic of Ireland. Bugan therefore argues that in “being away from home and in taking an emotional distance from the troubles of Ulster, in other words, by developing a poetics of exile, Seamus Heaney, through the translation of this medieval poem, managed to ‘forge the conscience of his race’ in the ‘smithy of his soul’⁴⁸⁵. The unbounded lyric “freedom and peremptoriness” which Heaney had abandoned in order to reach the ‘verbal asceticism’ in the second version of the translated poem also “returned in a burst of confidence”⁴⁸⁶ as he went back to the figure of Sweeney in the ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ poems of *Station Island*. In one of these poems, ‘The Cleric’, Sweeney pays his tribute to Ronan in these following lines:

History that planted its standards
on his gables and spires
ousted me to the marches

⁴⁸³ Ibid. 54-55.

⁴⁸⁴ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 171. Stephen is here alluding to the nets of “nationality, language, religion” which are flung at the Irish artist’s soul “to hold it back from flight”. He further compares Ireland to “the old sow that eats her farrow”, thus establishing that Davin’s parochial nationalist fervour, which elevates one’s nation above everything else stunts the development of the Irish artist’s soul.

⁴⁸⁵ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 213, quoted in See Carmen Bugan, ‘Audenesque’, in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation* (London: Legenda, 2013), 72.

⁴⁸⁶ Heaney, “Earning a Rhyme,” in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972, 2010), Kindle edition, 59.

of skulking and whingeing.
Or did I desert?
Give him his due, in the end

He opened up my path to a kingdom
of such scope and neuter allegiance
my emptiness reigns at its whim.⁴⁸⁷

The transition to such ‘emptiness’ allowed Heaney from beginning with wanting to transform *Sweeney Astray* in his own image to transforming himself, paring down his subjectivity to the point at which he would be able to dissociate himself from the figure of Sweeney. Translating this medieval Irish poem also helped restore his faith and confidence in artistic integrity, its application and the dogged sincerity it entailed. When Heaney had collaborated later with the photographer Rachel Giese on a revised version of *Sweeney Astray*, he added a new supplementary sequence of poems called *Sweeney’s Flight*, where the seeming aimlessness of Sweeney was given a purpose and direction by Heaney’s suggestive re-titling.⁴⁸⁸

4.6. To “write for the joy of it”: Exile, Re-appropriations of Dante and Heaney’s Penitential Peregrination in *Station Island* (1984)

As this chapter has tried to demonstrate, the trajectory of Seamus Heaney’s poetic career, through the successive stages of its evolution gradually distanced itself from the identity of an ‘Ulster poet’ through his deliberate self-distancing from the Northern Irish political turmoil. Yet, as Michael Parker has pointed out, the composition of the poems of his next volume, *Station Island* “coincided with a period of extreme political tension in the province”⁴⁸⁹. Despite Heaney’s withdrawal from the ‘North’, the violence of the Troubles had continued unabated on both Unionist and Republican camps. In March 1976, The British

⁴⁸⁷ Heaney, ‘The Cleric’, *Sweeney Redivivus*, in *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 108.

⁴⁸⁸ See *Sweeney’s Flight* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992). Michael Nott, for example, surmises that the “original title, *Sweeney Astray*, suggests aimlessness, a rambling without beginning or end, whereas *Sweeney’s Flight*, naming Sweeney’s endeavour rather than describing his state, suggests a fleeing from danger, a departure or retreat, and implies a sense of purpose. [...] Heaney’s retitling acknowledges, if not a specific destination to Sweeney’s roaming, a different experiential relationship with the natural world”. See Michael Nott, *Photopoetry, 1845-2015: A Critical History* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 220.

⁴⁸⁹ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), 178.

government had withdrawn the Special Category status of prisoners convicted in paramilitary armed conflict. Rather than being considered as ‘prisoners of war’, their status was now reduced to being ordinary criminals. The escalation of turmoil was perceived in 1978, with the ‘dirty protests’, where the convicted prisoners refused to leave their cells to wash and covered the walls of their cells with their excreta.⁴⁹⁰ Seven prisoners had participated in the first hunger strike of 1980, and a second hunger strike in 1981 now became a tussle between the adamant Margaret Thatcher’s government and the hunger-strikers. Led by Provisional IRA member Bobby Sands who also managed to be elected a Member of the Parliament, the hunger-strikers managed to capture the attention of the international press. Sands died on May 5, 1981, becoming a martyr for the hunger strikers who finally were compelled to temporarily halt their venture. In the same year, Heaney resigned from his teaching post at Carysford College, Dublin “having secured a five-year contract to teach at Harvard University for one term a year, beginning in January 1982”. He also edited, along with Ted Hughes, a critically acclaimed poetic anthology, *The Rattle Bog*. But despite these instances of personal success, he did feel a sense of responsibility towards his community. Parker writes:

Exile in Dublin, 'migrant solitude' in Harvard had brought him fame and financial security, but also sharpened an already acute moral consciousness and "made his own anxieties seem both insignificant by contrast and yet also more intense."⁴⁹¹

In this section, I propose to read the twelve parts of ‘Station Island’ from *Station Island* (1984) as a heteroglossic text constructed around Heaney’s pilgrimage to Lough Derg, St. Patrick’s Island in Co. Donegal. In the poem Heaney creatively reimagines the scattered voices of his past, spoken through various personae significant to his development as a poet. The structure of the poem, as most commentators have noted, owes its existence to Dante’s *Commedia*. I intend to illustrate Heaney’s borrowings from Dante in the poem in the light of his readings on Dante in an essay titled ‘Envy and Identifications’ (1985)⁴⁹² and connect it to

⁴⁹⁰ See Melanie McFadyean, “The legacy of the hunger strikes”, *The Guardian*, March 4, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/mar/04/northernireland.northernireland> (accessed May 14, 2021).

⁴⁹¹ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), 180.

⁴⁹² Heaney, ‘Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, Kindle edition, 143-152.

the theme of exile and displacement which operates as a lasting strain in the poem. In the essay, Heaney begins with Eliot's borrowings from Dante in the *Four Quartets*, pointing out that they were influenced "less with the strictly verbal and technical aspects of poetry, more with the philosophical and religious significances which could be drawn from and relied upon within a work of poetic art"⁴⁹³. This, he argued had more to do with Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism and found it "curious" that "this born-again Anglican and monarchist did not make more of the political Dante, the dreamer of a world obedient to the spiritual authority of a cleansed Papacy and under the sway of a just emperor, where, without bitterness or corruption, Christ and Caesar would be hand in glove"⁴⁹⁴. In contrast, Heaney finds it far more resourceful, to use, for his own purposes, how Osip Mandelstam reuses Dante as an essentially lyric poet, "stripped of the robes of commentary" and brings him back "from the pantheon back to the palate"⁴⁹⁵. The reason behind this difference, Heaney points out, may be adduced to the fact that Mandelstam "came to Dante not as an undergraduate, but as an exile in his thirties"⁴⁹⁶. Mandelstam, whose "subjective, humanist vision of poetry" was at odds with the demands upon him by the state to compose art "as a service, a socialist realist cog in the revolutionary machine"⁴⁹⁷. Thus Mandelstam's tryst with the contrary demands of self-willed lyric freedom and the restrictive demands of the state allowed him to see Dante "as an apotheosis of free, natural, biological process"⁴⁹⁸. For Heaney, the "way in which Dante could place himself in an historical world and yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history, the way he could accommodate the political and the transcendent" encouraged him to compose the 'Station Island' sequence, "which would explore the typical strains which the consciousness labours under in this country"⁴⁹⁹. The open-ended rhetorical questions and the rather timid resolution of 'Exposure' are replaced by a wider variety of social, cultural and political perspectives on the poet's responsibility to enable him to resolve the conflict between the artistic freedom offered by creative exile and the historical attachment to Ulster as the 'old first place'. Through the

⁴⁹³ Ibid. 144.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid. 150.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid. 151.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid. 152.

textual medley of the distinctly identifiable voices of Simon Sweeney, William Carleton, Terry Keenan, the Irish priest in exile, Patrick Kavanagh, the archaeologist Tom Delaney, the hunger-striker Francis Hughes, the poet's second cousin Colum McCartney, and finally that of Joyce, the poem presents a rationalisation of Heaney's desire to be "detrribalized and free from national and religious obligation"⁵⁰⁰. Throughout the purgatorial journey, the Dantean shades from Heaney's past visit him across the length of his walk through the nine stations of Lough Derg and advise him, for the greater part, to be not "mired in attachments"⁵⁰¹ to Ulster and continue in his newly found trajectory of self-discovery in the Republic, as well as at Harvard. In Heaney's own words, 'Station Island' "is a *purgatorio* in itself...involving a dark night and a bright morning, a departure from the world and a return to it."⁵⁰² Dante's *Divine Comedy* was composed while he was in exile from Florence on charges of corruption and financial mismanagement as one of the Priors of the city. But although Dante's perpetual exile to Ravenna was however, not the only exilic backdrop to the *Commedia*. As Anne Paolucci has rightfully pointed out,

For the damned souls in Dante's Hell, man's temporary exile from God on earth becomes an everlasting exile. The sum and substance of that Hell is an exile's endlessly frustrated longing for the light and love of God... The great poetic paradox of the *Divine Comedy*—read as an exile's epic journey back to God—is that, the closer its Christian hero gets to God, the more poignant is his expression of anguish as a Florentine expatriate". The irrevocable nature of Dante's exile is communicated to him by his ancestor Cacciaguda, whose vision reveals that Dante "is thus destined to become an exile among the exiled"—partisans of different order whom he deemed "fools and rogues and ingrates".⁵⁰³

Dante's disillusionment with, and hatred of, the different orders of partisanship he saw around him makes him "constitute himself a party of one against them all and count upon the high inspiration of his poetry, rather than upon

⁵⁰⁰ Michael Cavanagh, 'Seamus Heaney's Dante: Making a Party of Oneself', *Lectura Dantis* no. 12 (Spring 1993): 11

⁵⁰¹ Heaney, 'The First Flight', Sweeney Redivivus, in *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 103.

⁵⁰² Heaney, quoted in Elmer Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 156.

⁵⁰³ Anne Paolucci, "Exile among Exiles: Dante's Party of One", *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 8 no. 3 The Literature of Exile (Spring 1975): 118.

their partisan stratagems, to overcome the cruelty of his banishment”⁵⁰⁴. This is the crucial link between Dante’s and Heaney’s exile in ‘Station Island’, where Joyce acts as an able guide to help Heaney overcome parochial affiliations. Heaney’s resolve to reconcile the historical and political contingencies of the Troubles and the partial alleviation offered by poetry as a possible remedy to it is worked out

...by meeting shades from my own dream- life who had also been inhabitants of the actual Irish world. They could perhaps voice the claims of orthodoxy and the necessity to refuse those claims. They could probe the validity of one’s commitment.⁵⁰⁵

Station Island, situated on Lough Derg (“the lake of the cave”) in Co. Donegal, a popular Catholic site of pilgrimage that owed its origin to the 5th century site ‘St. Patrick’s Purgatory’, a narrow cave where Christ showed St. Patrick the entrance to Purgatory. In a fast that is traditionally supposed to have lasted for about forty days, St. Patrick had purgatorial visions of the Otherworld. One of his disciples, St. Davog, “established a penitential retreat on the island, which from medieval times onwards was referred to as ‘St Patrick’s Purgatory’”.⁵⁰⁶ Lough Derg became a very popular pilgrimage site for Catholics in medieval Europe and, Parker surmises, “may have influenced Dante in his conception of the first book of *The Divine Comedy*”⁵⁰⁷. The pilgrimage involves rigorous spiritual exercises which are undertaken to replicate the tribulations of Christ bearing his own Cross across various “stations”, and may be taken as a symbolic rite of passage during which , “through prayer and fasting, penitents ‘die to the world’, like Christ at Easter, in order to rise again”⁵⁰⁸. A description of the tribulations voluntarily embraced by the pilgrims is provided from Parker:

Barefoot and hungry, they must complete nine circuits of the island’s holy places, kneeling before crosses dedicated to St. Patrick and St Brigid and within six rings of stone, or ‘beds’. The paths around the beds contain jagged stones which serve as a reminder of the suffering endured by

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ Heaney, ‘Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, Kindle edition, 147.

⁵⁰⁶ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), 181.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid. 182.

Christ on his 'stations', and how physical pain and difficulty can help purify the soul.⁵⁰⁹

The strategy of juxtaposing historical events belonging to different temporalities through their association with a particular site (Lough Derg) initiates a series of intertextual dialogues that the poet holds with important figures of Irish history. In the first section, on a Sunday morning, Simon Sweeney, a neighbour from his Co. Derry childhood, re-emerges as the poet's "mystery man"⁵¹⁰. However, very pointedly, Heaney is also making a double-reference to the legend of the mad bird-king Sweeney. Scenes from the poet's childhood are invested with a proleptic and visionary significance. Helen Vendler, in her analysis of 'Station Island' makes the suggestion that the poem presents to us "a collection of lives the poet might have led" making it possible to see "its dramatis personae as a series of alter egos – men whose lives the poet, under other circumstances, might have found himself living"⁵¹¹. I concur with her in my reading of the poem, looking at these voices from Heaney's past as engaged in a continuing dialogue between each other. The problematic relationship between the unbounded lyric freedom in creative exile and the need to remain faithful to the "collective historical experience"⁵¹² is resolved, in the course of the poem through such a dialogue. By using Dante's *Commedia* as his model, Heaney admits that he was "encouraged to make an advantage of what could otherwise be regarded as a disadvantage, namely, that other writers had been to Lough Derg before me—William Carleton, Sean O'Faolain, Patrick Kavanagh, Denis Devlin, to mention only the English language forerunners"⁵¹³. In the first poem, Simon Sweeney's advice to the poet to 'Stay clear of all processions!'"⁵¹⁴ resonates with his own resolve, voiced earlier in "Exposure" regarding artistic autonomy. The second poem turns to *terza rima*, the metre used by Dante in his *Commedia*, and through twenty-two stanzas, Heaney continues his dialogue with William Carleton (1794-1865), whose book *The Lough Derg Pilgrim* (1828) becomes an important intertextual link for the poem. Carleton, who had

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ Heaney, 'Station Island I', in *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 61.

⁵¹¹ Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), Kindle edition, 96.

⁵¹² Heaney, 'Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, Kindle edition, 145.

⁵¹³ Ibid. 151.

⁵¹⁴ Heaney, 'Station Island I', in *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 61.

converted to Anglicanism as a strategic move and was now eager “to find grace with his new Protestant masters”⁵¹⁵ (without the patronage of whom a literary career was difficult to pursue in Ireland), explicitly intended his book to become a vehicle of anti-Papist propaganda. Much of Carleton’s rendition of the pilgrimage he undertook launched an acerbic attack “specimens of Irish superstition”⁵¹⁶. As Heaney finds himself in his parked car, “listening/ to peewits and the wind blowing round the car”⁵¹⁷, he reimagines Carleton along the mountainous tracks leading up to the pilgrimage site. The reader may initially feel puzzled as to why the poet feels:

...Your Lough Derg Pilgrim

Haunts me every time I cross this mountain—
as if I am being followed, or following.⁵¹⁸

However, the answer to this riddle of identification he feels with Carleton is provided a little later in the poem in Carleton’s own voice:

I who learned to read in the reek of flax
and smelled hanged bodies rotting on their gibbets
and saw their looped slime gleaming from the sacks—

Hard-mouthed Ribbonmen and Orange bigots
made me into the old fork-tongued turncoat
who mucked the byre of their politics.⁵¹⁹

However, despite this initial level of identification, Heaney also disavows the “angry role”, emphasizing instead that while both of them may have been labelled “fork-tongued turncoats”⁵²⁰ (Irish intellectuals who were nevertheless, not well-accommodated in their Irishness owing to unresolved tensions due to their religious or communal affiliation), he has taken his provincial roots and “the shaky local voice of education”⁵²¹ with far less disdain than the latter. Against Carleton’s retort that there was something in his smile which struck him as “defensive”, Heaney embraces the conditions of his Catholic upbringing, perhaps more so because of the newly found distance between his present “stations” (in Dublin, as well as in the United States) and his cultural roots. Carleton however,

⁵¹⁵ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 183.

⁵¹⁶ Daniel J. Casey, “Lough Derg’s Infamous Pilgrim”, *Clogher Record* 7 no. 3 (1971/1972): 456.

⁵¹⁷ Heaney, ‘Station Island II’, in *Station Island*, 64.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.* 65.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵²¹ *Ibid.* 66.

maintains that these childhood memories are like “maggots sown in wounds”⁵²². He emphasizes the transitory nature of socio-cultural affiliations, reducing human variety to “earthworms of the earth”⁵²³. In Carleton’s view, as Henry Hart has pointed out, all rites of purification (the objective of pilgrimage) are eventually sealed by the “rites of putrefaction”⁵²⁴. Nevertheless, through the admission that “all that/ has gone through us is what will be our trace”⁵²⁵, Carleton’s figure also underlines the differences in their creative subjectivity. In his essay “Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet”, Heaney outlines his initial plan where he had thought that “Carleton could be sort of a Tyrone Virgil, and Kavanagh a latter-day County Monaghan Cavalcanti”⁵²⁶. However, one presumes, as Maria Cristina Fumagalli has also concluded, that Carleton “is only a potential master and guide, who, instead of escorting the poet as Virgil does with Dante, abandons him to his own destiny”.⁵²⁷

The third poem begins with the poet revisiting the diverse sights and sounds of his Catholic childhood—“confessionals”, “side-altars”, “intimate smells of wax”—which opens up to him the memory of a “seaside trinket”⁵²⁸. In his interviews to Dennis O’Driscoll, Heaney glosses over his personal memory of the trinket which “had the status of relic in the house”⁵²⁹. It was “a little grotto shaped like a sentry box, clad in tiny iridescent sea-shells” which had belonged to his Aunt Agnes who had died in her teenage years from tuberculosis.⁵³⁰ The description of the grotto “with seedling mussel shells/and cockles glued in patterns over it”⁵³¹ however, recalls “Cockles and Mussels”, a 19th century folk song about the ill-fated girl Molly Malone who was a street-hawker working near the docks of Dublin.⁵³²

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1993), 160.

⁵²⁵ Heaney, ‘Station Island II’, in *Station Island*, 66.

⁵²⁶ Heaney, ‘Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet’, *Irish University Review* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 18.

⁵²⁷ Maria Cristina Fumagalli, “Station Island”: Seamus Heaney’s “Divina Commedia”, *Irish University Review* 26, no. 1 (Spring - Summer, 1996): 129.

⁵²⁸ Heaney, ‘Station Island II’, in *Station Island*, 67.

⁵²⁹ Dennis O’ Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), Kindle edition, 297.

⁵³⁰ Ibid. 298.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² See “Irish Historical Mysteries: Molly Malone”, <http://homepage.eircom.net/~seanjmurphy/irhismys/molly.htm> (accessed May 15, 2021).

While there is no clear scholarly consensus about the historical veracity of Molly, the personal memory of encountering death is amplified into a collectively shared song that bemoans death. However, the poem also recounts a gradual outgrowing of childhood innocence. The absence of his aunt leaves a vacant space within the mind of the poet as he speculates on

...walking round
and round a space utterly empty,
utterly a source, like the idea of sound.⁵³³

In the last stanza, the “bad carcass and scraggs of hair” of their disappeared dog serve as reminders of its presence.⁵³⁴ The episode also signals the poet’s outgrowing of the natural enchantments of his childhood to a more mature understanding of the world and its challenges.

Section IV sees a resurfacing of the priest Terry Keenan, known to Heaney during his childhood years, who becomes a foil to his lyric truancy and exilic desire. As a clergyman, he is sent away to foreign missions in a tropical rain forest region. The regret of the priest who had reason to choose exile for pursuing his vocation as he muses over his afflictions leads to the poet to state “I’m older now than you when you went away”⁵³⁵. Heaney also feels “a strange reversal”⁵³⁶ as he is led to re-examine his stereotypical memory of the priest as a young cleric. The priest’s departure and exile however, inevitably point towards Heaney’s own choice of self-distancing as the former asks him,

And you,’ he faltered, ‘what are you doing here
but the same thing? What possessed you?
I at least was young and unaware

That what I thought was chosen was convention.
But all this you were clear of you walked into
over again...⁵³⁷

The final revelation the priest has concerns the discovery that probably the poet is completing the Lough Derg pilgrimage for “taking the last look”⁵³⁸ at

⁵³³ Heaney, ‘Station Island III’, in *Station Island*, 68.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁵ Heaney, ‘Station Island IV’, in *Station Island*, 70.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.* 71.

his Irish Catholic roots and upbringing before he proceeds to outgrow them. The poet's silence at this statement only confirms his tacit assent to the same position.

The fifth poem introduces two of Heaney's masters from secondary school who appear before him. The first of them, Barney Murphy, is described as "a man lifting swathes at a mower's heels"⁵³⁹. Master Murphy, whose "sockless feet were like the dried broad bean", utters in a husky voice "Good man,/good man yourself"⁵⁴⁰. The use of the reflexive pronoun "yourself" betrays his typically Irish diction as he faces the poet with a "helpless smile"⁵⁴¹. In Master Murphy's view, "...Anahorish School/ was purgatory enough for any man"⁵⁴². The poet also concurs with him, stating that he has already done his "station" at Anahorish School. The presence of the master brings back to him memories of Latin conjugation lessons: "*Mensa, mensa, mensam/* sang on the air like a busy sharpening-stone"⁵⁴³. The second master, "in his belted gabardine", tries to convey the deeply affective power of poetry to move the human spirit by quoting a letter from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges:

...For what is the great
moving power and spring of verse? Feeling, and
in particular, love.⁵⁴⁴

The "third fosterer" mentioned in the poem refers to the spectre of Patrick Kavanagh, who with his characteristically brusque tone chastises Heaney for being stuck to issues pertaining to Ulster identity. His scorn and derision is apparent as he mocks Heaney's choice to leave Northern Ireland:

...Forty-two years on
and you've got no farther! But, after that again,
where else would you go? Iceland, maybe? Maybe the
Dordogne?⁵⁴⁵

⁵³⁹ Heaney, 'Station Island IV', in *Station Island*, 72.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² Heaney, 'Station Island V', in *Station Island*, 73.

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, quoted in Ibid. Hopkins had written to Bridges, "Feeling, love in particular, is the great moving power and spring of verse...". See also *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, C.C. Abbott (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 65.

⁵⁴⁵ Heaney, 'Station Island V', in *Station Island*, 73-74.

The ghost of Kavanagh leaves with the mocking admission that in his day, “the odd one came here on the hunt for women”⁵⁴⁶. His sardonic comment prepares the way for the revelation of pent-up guilt in the poet regarding his exile as well as past sexual experiences. In the sixth poem his memory of a childhood sweetheart with her pixie-cut hair leads him to a loaded euphemism of sexual awakening as he “was sunstruck at the basilica door”⁵⁴⁷. Heaney also quotes a line from Ode 3.21 by Horace to evoke the idea of poetry as a medium for revelry and delight.⁵⁴⁸ The memory of an “old pang” which familiar objects such as “bags of grain” and the “sloped shafts of forks and hoes”⁵⁴⁹, with their usual phallic and mammary undertones, appear as reminders of secret sexual awakening, Heaney returns to the theme of Catholic guilt as his displaced sexual desires are sublimated only by “[h]aunting the granaries of words like breasts”⁵⁵⁰. The image of the sexually curious young poet, peeping at a keyhole to catch a chance glimpse of the woman’s body finally culminates into presumably his first sexual experience. However, Heaney’s desire to find new horizons through exile is apparent in the similes he draws between geographical terrain and the revelatory vision of the woman’s body, with her “honey-skinned/ Shoulder-blades” and “the wheatlands of her back”⁵⁵¹. The metaphorical “window” which faces “the deep south of luck”—a veiled reference to the poet’s exile southwards towards the Republic of Ireland—opens and the poet finds himself in “the land of kindness”⁵⁵². The poem concludes with Heaney’s translation of a passage from Dante’s *Inferno II*: 127-32 which “refers to Dante’s feelings after Virgil tells him that he has been rescued from the dark wood because of Beatrice’s intercession”⁵⁵³. The link to Beatrice’s intercession is intended to affirm the transformative redemption that allows Heaney to proceed in his pilgrimage.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid. 74.

⁵⁴⁷ Heaney, ‘Station Island V’, in *Station Island*, 75.

⁵⁴⁸ The lines from Horace are “Loosen the toga for wine and poetry/Till Phoebus returning routs the morning star”, suggestive of the sexual awakening the narrator is about to experience. .

⁵⁴⁹ Heaney, ‘Station Island V’, in *Station Island*, 75.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid. 76.

⁵⁵² Ibid. These lines compare Heaney’s voluntary exile to the Republic to his experience of sexual awakening. In both events, there remains the suggestion of the poet being transported from the mundane world of limitations to a transcendental plane.

⁵⁵³ Maria Cristina Fumagalli, “Station Island”: Seamus Heaney’s “Divina Commedia”, *Irish University Review* 26, no. 1 (Spring - Summer, 1996): 132.

Poems VII, VIII and IX directly deal with the unabated violence of the Troubles, and Heaney's self-chastisement of himself at having been negligent of his historical responsibilities in the crisis. Poem VII directly involves the arrival of the spectre of the shopkeeper William Starthearn who "had been called down in the middle of the night from his bedroom above the lock-up shop by two RUC men and shot on his own doorstep"⁵⁵⁴. While the shopkeeper is left deliberately unnamed in order to render him "anonymous and representative", it was widely known, among people in the Bann Valley area "that he was based on a known figure"⁵⁵⁵. Starthearn, who was also "a footballing companion of Heaney's youth"⁵⁵⁶ is described in terms that render him relatively ageless, untouched by death:

Through life and death he had hardly aged.
There always was an athlete's cleanliness
shining off him and except for the ravaged
forehead and the blood, he was still that same
rangy midfielder in a blue jersey
and starched pants, the one stylist on the team.⁵⁵⁷

Yet, Heaney struggles to be completely disaffected with his responsibilities towards his old place, and he projects his anxieties and his retrospective guilt at having abandoned Northern Ireland at the height of civil strife in his apology to William Starthearn: "Forgive the way I have lived indifferent/ forgive my timid circumspect involvement"⁵⁵⁸. In a similar vein, the eighth poem adds to the poet's guilt at having been indifferent to sectarian violence by the ghosts of Tom Delaney, the archaeologist and through Colum McCartney's accusations levelled against him for confusing "evasion and artistic tact"⁵⁵⁹. Delaney, an assistant keeper in the Antiquities Department of the Ulster Museum, died of tuberculosis, at the age of thirty-two, in 1979.⁵⁶⁰ The image of the magpie which "staggered in the granite airy space" becomes a metaphor for the self-isolating poet who encounters the ghost of Delaney, with a "wing/ of woodkerne's hair fanned down over his brow"⁵⁶¹. The poet, who remembers their last ever meeting in a

⁵⁵⁴ Dennis O' Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), Kindle edition, 299.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 298-99.

⁵⁵⁶ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 198.

⁵⁵⁷ Heaney, 'Station Island VI', in *Station Island*, 79.

⁵⁵⁸ Heaney, 'Station Island: VII', in *Station Island*, 80.

⁵⁵⁹ Heaney, 'Station Island VIII', in *Station Island*, 83.

⁵⁶⁰ See Dennis O' Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, 580.

⁵⁶¹ Heaney, 'Station Island VIII', in *Station Island*, 81.

hospital ward, staring motionlessly at the lines representing the archaeologist's heartbeat on the electrocardiogram, had to leave for Dublin with an overwhelming sense of guilt at not being able to attend Delaney's funeral in Bellaghy. The implacable and rather mysterious nature of death, duly brought out through characteristically Irish "banter", haunts the poet as he comes to realise the powerlessness of his craft in the face of familiar personal loss:

I felt that I should have seen far more of you
and maybe would have—but dead at thirty-two!
Ah poet, lucky poet, tell me why
what seemed deserved and promised passed me by?⁵⁶²

But the inner pangs of guilt immediately conjure up, for the poet, the image of "a bleeding, pale-faced boy, plastered in mud" to remind him of his failings as a poet to represent, with fidelity, the violence of his second cousin Colum McCartney's assassination.⁵⁶³ The scathing retort and allegations that McCartney levels at him concern passivity and lack of intent on part of the poet who conveniently abjures his responsibility at the cost of others. This is most apparent in Colum's allegations that while he was shot by sectarian gunmen, Heaney was spending time with his fellow-poets at Jerpoint Abbey, Co. Kilkenny.⁵⁶⁴ The turmoil intensifies within Heaney who now veers towards a more sceptical scrutiny of his own prioritisation of aesthetic and political obligations. His own attempt at rationalising his conduct seems weak. Heaney also alludes to his poem 'The Strand at Lough Beg' from *Field Work* (1979), written in memory of his cousin Colum. He continues his pleadings with his cousin about his disarming silence as he was "encountering what was destined"⁵⁶⁵. The subjective, interiorised, private vision of the poet, of "a grey stretch of Lough Beg"⁵⁶⁶, now becomes pitted against the obstinate 'fact' of death as Heaney makes the spirit of McCartney chastise his political choices:

⁵⁶² Ibid. 82.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid. See also Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 200.

⁵⁶⁵ Heaney, 'Station Island VIII', in *Station Island*, 83. The fatalism of this line seems to be directed towards coping with Heaney's guilt at not having returned to Bellaghy after receiving the news of McCartney's death.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

You confused evasion and artistic tact.
The Protestant who shot me through the head
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you...⁵⁶⁷

McCartney's allegations are levelled against Heaney not only for his supposed indifference to violence, but also towards his apparent complicity with his untimely victimhood and death. This section also shows Heaney's acute awareness of a possible discursive counterpoint to his idea of poetry to envision a "glimpsed alternative". It comes across as an example of courageous self-examination where he holds himself (in Colum's voice) accountable for having "whitewashed ugliness" and drawn "the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*"⁵⁶⁸ to obfuscate and mystify tangibly real violence. Given Heaney's predisposition to argue persuasively for the effectiveness of the lyric in his critical prose throughout his career, it may seem plausible, as Michael Parker has gone on to argue, that "one should perhaps be on one's guard when rhetoric is wielded to whip the lyric"⁵⁶⁹. He suggests that it would be an exaggeration to suppose that Heaney is, in fact, repudiating the earlier poem. However, even as one may agree with Parker, the poem without doubt, as Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação has argued, "displays his personal dilemma of not addressing the Northern Irish situation in a clearer way"⁵⁷⁰. The ninth poem begins with hard-hitting images of a hunger striker in the 1981 strikes, who after continuous fasting has his "brain dried like spread turf", his stomach shrunken "to a cinder"⁵⁷¹. The effects of internal haemorrhage and dehydration owing to prolonged fasting are also discernible in Heaney's portrayal of him. There is widespread critical consensus that this figure is modelled upon Francis Hughes, a member of the Provisional IRA who operated from the Bellaghy area.⁵⁷² The poem is presented through five successive sonnets, in the familiar form of an open-ended dialogue between the starved hunger-striker's subjectivity and the

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid. McCartney's acerbic retort at Heaney for having aestheticized violence is however, best read as simply a counterpoint to Heaney's own estimate of the poetic craft, and a jarring note in the medley of voices that comprise "Station Island". Barry Goldensohn, for example, maintains that it is remarkable that Heaney should denounce his previous work for "aestheticizing and trivialising the ethical". See Barry Goldensohn, "The Recantation of Beauty", *Salmagundi* 80, (Fall 1980), 77.

⁵⁶⁹ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 201.

⁵⁷⁰ Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação, "Seamus Heaney's Station Island: The Polyphonic Poetics of Exile", *ABEI Journal: The Brazilian Journal for Irish Studies* 15 (November 2013): 43.

⁵⁷¹ Heaney, 'Station Island IX', in *Station Island*, 84.

⁵⁷² See Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 180.

poet's own. As the dead hunger striker's voice fades away, Heaney re-imagines his death "with a drift of mass cards/At his shrouded feet"⁵⁷³. The scene of Hughes' death in the second stanza, however leads to a nightmarish and surreal episode where the poet is washed "down a swirl of mucky, glittering flood" and being swerved from his rational side, he comes face to face with his "blanching self-disgust"⁵⁷⁴. As he begins to rave and repent his "unweaned life", "a lighted candle" (standing in, presumably for the redemptive and transformative potential of poetry) steadies up "like a pistil growing from the polyp"⁵⁷⁵. With this newly found spiritual anchor,

...No more adrift,
My feet touched bottom and my heart revived.⁵⁷⁶

Heaney now explicitly states his disgust for the historical burden he is compelled to share as a Catholic from Northern Ireland. The bitterness of tone in this disillusioned voice hastens to self-directed hatred, identifies his split subjectivity as something that makes him "biddable and unforthcoming"⁵⁷⁷ and finally attempts to get rid of those historical constraints. In fact, the ninth poem seems to be his deliverance from the afflictions of historical injustice. The fifth and final sonnet of the poem demonstrates Heaney's partial acceptance of his split subjectivity and restores his belief in the efficacy of lyric autonomy and the power of Art to heal the wounds of historical injustice:

Then I thought of the tribe whose dances never fail
For they keep dancing till the sight the deer.⁵⁷⁸

Section X inaugurates the last day of the Lough Derg pilgrimage, and depicts the poet having his breakfast at the hostel, after two days of fasting. The poet is drawn towards a mug "patterned with blue cornflowers" on the "high shelf"⁵⁷⁹ and contemplates a time when it was displaced, being used instead as a prop in a play. The new context in which the "mug" was used suggests a "translation" from its status as a mere material object to being a relic invested with

⁵⁷³ Heaney, 'Station Island IX', in *Station Island*, 84.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 85.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 86.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁹ Heaney, 'Station Island X', in *Station Island*, 87.

aesthetic, and thereafter, sacramental significance.⁵⁸⁰ The same “mug” transmutes, before the poet’s vision, to “Ronan’s psalter/ miraculously unharmed, that had been lost/a day and a night under lough water”⁵⁸¹. This epiphany not only prepares the way for Joyce to appear in Section XII, but also surfaces as a way of Heaney to “credit” poetry for its radiant “dazzle of the impossible”⁵⁸². At this point, he also directly identifies himself with the “recalcitrant” Sweeney, a lyric artist “assuaging himself by utterance”⁵⁸³.

Section XI introduces the poet’s musings through “the prisms of the kaleidoscope” a “marvellous lightship”⁵⁸⁴, a moment of revelation in its resplendent glory. It brings back to him the memory of a past confession and “a monk’s face/that had spoken years ago from behind a grille”⁵⁸⁵. The memory of the monk allows him to attempt to salvage “the zenith and glimpsed jewels” of the poetic craft, which is, by detractors, “mistakenly abased”⁵⁸⁶. Dante’s penitence in exile is thus mirrored by Heaney’s conception of translation as a form of penance. He translates, at the monk’s behest, a poem by “Juan de la Cruz” (“John of the Cross”), the “Song of the Soul that Delights in Knowing God by Faith”, a lyric that declares the restorative value of faith through its lyric joy.⁵⁸⁷

St. John of the Cross, a key figure of the Catholic Counter-Reformation in Spain was captured by force, from his home at Ávila, by monks of the Carmelite order who were opposed to the reforms he had introduced. He was taken to the Carmelite monastery at Toledo, where he had been held captive in a stifling, and scantily lit room of about sixty square feet.⁵⁸⁸ He also received frequently lashings in public view of the Friars at the monastery of Toledo, and was given only the penitential diet of water, stale bread crumbs and salt fish. In the lyric, these penitential privations seem petty when compared to the immense joy felt by the

⁵⁸⁰ Heaney seems to be suggesting different orders of ‘translation’ where the same object metamorphoses from its primary status as a material object of convenience to secondly, an aesthetic object, and finally, a sacramental relic such as “Ronan’s psalter”

⁵⁸¹ Heaney, ‘Station Island X’, in *Station Island*, 87.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.* 88.

⁵⁸³ Heaney, ‘Introduction’, in *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 6.

⁵⁸⁴ Heaney, ‘Station Island XI’, in *Station Island*, 89.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁷ See “St. John of the Cross”, *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08480a.htm> (accessed May 18, 2021)

⁵⁸⁸ See C. P. Thompson, *St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night* (London: SPCK, 2002), 48.

soul as it perceives “this living fountain”⁵⁸⁹ of Divine Joy. Heaney makes the structure of the translated song adhere to his pre-existing scheme of the tercet form borrowed from Dante, but now uses the phrase “although it is the night” as a refrain in the final lines. The “eternal fountain” of faith in God amidst inhospitable and bleak circumstances referred to in the translated poem is however, duly transmuted into a fountainhead of aesthetic inspiration for the poet.

However, the climactic moment in the poem arrives in the final section, when Heaney is visited by the familiar shade of Joyce, an Irish fellow exile, serving as a modern parallel to Dante’s ancestor Cacciaguida. Just as Cacciaguida had advised Dante to “make a party of oneself”, Joyce leaves his lasting judgement in favour of lyric delight, freedom and buoyancy: “The main thing is to write/for the joy of it”⁵⁹⁰. Heaney has Joyce advise him to “Take off from here” and to “Keep at a tangent”, for the “subject people stuff is a cod’s game,/infantile, like this peasant pilgrimage”⁵⁹¹. Joyce also advises Heaney to abandon “raking at dead fires” and to cultivate

...a work-lust
that imagines its haven like your hands at night
dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast.⁵⁹²

Despite his profound respect for the “truth seeking dimension of poetry”, the *utile* (in a reformulation of the Horatian *ars poetica*), in a 1988 interview to Randy Brandes, Heaney places a greater emphasis on the *dulce*, its ‘pleasurable’ aspect, which can only arise out of an assertion of “freedom from history and partisanship, but a faith in the power of the imagination to sustain itself when culture and history fail.”⁵⁹³. Thus, Michael Cavanagh compares Heaney’s resolve to free himself in terms of Cacciaguida’s phrase, “making a party of oneself”, an oxymoronic expression which “means not merely rejection of the claims of various parties, but purposeful self-isolation and determination”⁵⁹⁴. This also accords with Heaney’s reading of Mandelstam’s conception of the essence of lyric poetry: its “unlooked-for joy in being itself” and that of the lyric poet, who

⁵⁸⁹ Heaney, ‘Station Island XI’, in *Station Island*, 89

⁵⁹⁰ Heaney, ‘Station Island: XII’, in *Station Island*, Kindle edition, 92.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*

⁵⁹³ Randy Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, *Salmagundi*, 80 (1988): 11.

⁵⁹⁴ See Michael Cavanagh, ‘Seamus Heaney’s Dante: Making a Party of Oneself’, *Lectura Dantis* no. 12 (Spring 1993): 7

“was in thrall to no party or programme, but truly and freely and utterly himself”⁵⁹⁵. It is this ability to “stay clear of all procession” that allows the Heaney/Sweeney persona in the ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ poems, which comprise the third section of *Station Island* to find his “airy listening post” of “neuter allegiance”⁵⁹⁶.

In his 1985 essay on Dante, Heaney had identified the central conflict in ‘Station Island’, identifying that “the main tension is between two often contradictory commands: to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self”⁵⁹⁷. As the poem concludes, he has successfully resolved this conflict by avoiding the pitfalls of thought that relegates the poet to an otherworldly recluse, but, at the same time acknowledges “poetry’s covenant with life”⁵⁹⁸, as exemplified through the heroic postures adopted by Mandelstam and Lowell in their respective responses to the political terrors they faced. ‘Station Island’ thus successfully manages to circumscribe and re-appropriate both the exilic and penitential subtexts of Dante’s *Commedia* for the purposes of Heaney’s poetic career, marking his liberation from the shackles of the ‘Ulster-poet’ identity. Elaborating further on the work of Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação, we can also trace, within Heaney’s poetic schema in this work, an intent to imbue it with ‘heteroglossic’ refraction of his own exilic desire. Heteroglossic speech, Bakhtin had formulated, “constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse”, serving two speakers at the same time, who have different intentions: “the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author”⁵⁹⁹. If ‘heteroglossia’, going by Bakhtin’s definition, is “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions, but in a refracted way”⁶⁰⁰, then it is possible to look at the work as a medley of voices across space and time, all of which ultimately provide a justification for his choice of voluntary ‘exile’.

⁵⁹⁵ Heaney, ‘The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and A Knocker’, in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), Kindle edition, 12.

⁵⁹⁶ Heaney, ‘In the Beech’, Sweeney Redivivus, in *Station Island*, Kindle edition, 100.

⁵⁹⁷ Heaney, ‘Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, Kindle edition, 145.

⁵⁹⁸ Heaney, “Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture,” in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), Kindle edition, 441.

⁵⁹⁹ M.M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1982), 324.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

4.7. “A bright nowhere”: Exile, Imagined Spaces and Metaphors of Frontier-Crossing in *The Haw Lantern* (1987)

The “luminous spaces” of Kavanagh’s mind that Heaney alludes to in his essay on the former become manifestly realised in Heaney’s *The Haw Lantern* (1987). In the essay, Heaney suggests the late poetry of Patrick Kavanagh struck a chord with him due to a willingness he experienced in “preparing to be unrooted, to be spirited away into some transparent, yet indigenous afterlife”⁶⁰¹. Heaney transcends the particular experience of having lived at a specific “topographical location” to a more abstract conception of an imagined realm, a “placeless heaven”⁶⁰². In the interview to Randy Brandes already cited before, Heaney, on being asked whether one could suggest an analogy between himself and his critical re-evaluation of Kavanagh, replied that the essay on Kavanagh is “really about the way one would like to be able to do it oneself”⁶⁰³. My intent, in this final section, would be to explore such “imagined realms” in poems from *The Haw Lantern*, and, in doing so, I hope to connect exilic desire, the problem of bilocation and a concerted movement, within Heaney’s oeuvre, to go beyond the frontiers of sense, perception and language to a transcendent realm of poetic enunciation.

In his essay ‘Frontiers of Writing’, Heaney alludes to the problem of bilocation significant to the question of Irish identity, affecting the “Irish political leader operating between two systems of loyalty, the Irish writer responsive to two cultural milieux, the Irish place invoked under two different systems of naming”⁶⁰⁴. The problem, Heaney argues, emerges due to the presence of the “border in Ireland, a frontier which has entered the imagination definitively...which continues to divide Britain’s Ireland from Ireland’s Ireland”⁶⁰⁵. Nevertheless, the physical presence of the frontier is transformed via the act of writing into a “constructed destination, an interim place whose foundations straddle the areas of self-division, a place of resolved contradiction, beyond confusion”⁶⁰⁶. This ‘interim place’ of

⁶⁰¹ Heaney, ‘The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh’, in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), Kindle edition, 17

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*

⁶⁰³ Randy Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, *Salmagundi*, 80 (1988): 9.

⁶⁰⁴ Heaney, ‘Frontiers of Writing’, in *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 139.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 140.

course, does not refer to a physical space, it is a place “which does not exist, a place that is but a dream, since this promised land of durable coherence and perpetual homecoming is not somewhere that is ultimately attainable by constitutional reform or territorial integration”, it is “an elsewhere beyond the frontier of writing where ‘the imagination presses back against the pressure of reality’”⁶⁰⁷. The physical presence of a territorial frontier is thus transformed into a frontier that separates, and acts as the gateway between “two orders of knowledge which we might call the practical and the poetic”, with the realisation that “each form of knowledge redresses the other and that the frontier between them is there for the crossing”⁶⁰⁸.

The importance of bilocation and division in asserting a sense of identity built on metaphoric crossing-overs are made visible in ‘Terminus’, a poem named after the Roman god of boundaries. The poem presents, through setting up oppositional binaries pertaining to the visual, aural and tactile realms, the indeterminacy and bilocation. It begins with the child-Heaney playing in a field in Mossbawn, where he “hoked” and dug out an “acorn and a rusted bolt”, reminders of renewal and decay.⁶⁰⁹ Again, when he looked up, another binary opposition is played out between “a factory chimney” (probably a reference to the chimney of Clark’s Linen Works Factory in Castledawson village) and the dormant volcanic plug of Slemish mountain. The tactile imagery then offered in the poem alternates between the sounds of “an engine shunting” and “a trotting horse”, finally providing a justification for the poet’s propensity to have “second thoughts”⁶¹⁰. Heaney writes about Terminus in another essay, describing how the Romans kept the image of Terminus in the Temple of Jupiter on Capitol Hill, and “the roof above the place where the image sat was open to the sky, as if to that a god of the boundaries and borders of the earth needed to have access to the boundless”, as if to assert that “all boundaries are necessary evils and that the truly desirable condition is the feeling of being unbounded, of being king of infinite space”⁶¹¹. In the essay with the same title, Heaney states that the word ‘terminus’ still survived “as tearmann in many

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid. 148.

⁶⁰⁹ Heaney, ‘Terminus’, in *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 10.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid

⁶¹¹ Heaney, ‘Something to Write Home About’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, Kindle edition, 47.

Irish place-names, meaning the glebe land belonging to an abbey or a church”⁶¹². He further describes his experience of standing on the few stepping-stones of the River Moyola, keenly perceptive of the differences between its two sides, embodied in the images of “...a factory chimney/ And a dormant mountain”, “...an engine shunting/ And a trotting horse”⁶¹³. The presence of these boundaries around him in his childhood forces him to have ‘second thoughts’ about his identity: “Second thoughts are an acknowledgement that the truth is bounded by different tearmanns, that it has to take cognizance of opposing claims”⁶¹⁴. Heaney also compares his childhood experience of having to step out of his cot and to step onto the cold cement floor beneath him, aware of being “at two places at once”, and stepping, for the first time, into the confines of a “knowledgeable space I had stepped into deep inside myself”, into “poetic discovery”⁶¹⁵. This desire to escape boundaries, Carmen Bugan argues, “is ‘exilic’ because it shows a desire for someplace else, an emergent conception of the poetic self that seeks to escape historical limitations:

’Being ‘in two places at once’ is also a very typical way to describe the experience of traditional exile; it means living simultaneously in the place from which one was exiled (through vivid memories) and in the place to which one is exiled (through one’s present perceptions). Consequently, this particular phrase complicates both our notion of what ‘exile’ is and Heaney’s articulation of his experience of living in his native land.⁶¹⁶

The freedom Heaney seeks resides within the space of the lyric itself, the unbounded space of liberation yearned for by the Roman god. Although the deity “lives inside walls”, it “aspires and has access to the heavens”⁶¹⁷. The image of Terminus therefore, typifies the poet’s desire to outgrow the constraints imposed upon his identity by the boundaries of Ulster. The metaphor of the “two buckets”⁶¹⁸, standing in to represent the host of contrary pulls he has experienced as an Ulster poet, connotes strategic poise and artistic tact gained at the cost of rigorous self-scrutiny. The poem becomes a successful foray into resolving tensions between

⁶¹² Ibid.

⁶¹³ Heaney, ‘Terminus’, in *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 10.

⁶¹⁴ Heaney, ‘Something to Write Home About’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, Kindle edition, 48.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ See Carmen Bugan, ‘Audenesque’, in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation* (London: Legenda, 2013), 63.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid.

⁶¹⁸ Heaney, ‘Terminus’, in *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 10-11.

artistic freedom and political responsibility thus far laid out in this chapter, underlining a thinly fraught balance between the desire for self-liberation offered by exile, while at the same time, being sufficiently rooted in the history of his community. Parker thus writes, that while “education and literary success may have set him on the road to exile, into a ‘migrant solitude’”, they “have also ennobled him and enabled him to remain ‘in earshot of his peers’⁶¹⁹.”

The notion of an invisible frontier is made apparent the poem ‘Parable Island’ where, despite enough hints that he is writing of the ‘Ulster predicament’ and the rift between militant Ulster Protestants and the passive Catholic minority, Heaney turns away from specifically contingent and sectarian historical divisions to imagine an island with an inland border. Both the Unionists and the Nationalists, despite all of their differences, maintain their belief in a united Ireland, even though the lines of cultural and sectarian division, most apparent in the process of linguistic nomenclature, keep affirming themselves. The “mountain of the shifting names”, situated north of the island, is variously called Cape Basalt by the occupiers, the Sun’s Headstone by “farmers in the east” and the Orphan’s Tit by “drunken Westerners”⁶²⁰. For the traveller who is new to this space, the border “he knows he must have crossed”⁶²¹ is not represented in a map but is instead drawn through the various names he has to keep listening to. The “forked-tongued” natives of the place however “pretend not to believe/ about a point where all names converge”, that “ore of truth” at which they are likely to start mining someday.⁶²² In Part II, the bemused tourist—who in all probability represents the poet’s own sceptical subjectivity—becomes witness to a variety of archaeological views regarding the supposed originary oneness of this particular space. The doubt-ridden tourist, allowing for the conflicting claims to truth by different parties, drily mocks such a quest for such an unproblematic unification:

...you can’t be sure that parable is not
at work already retrospectively,
since all their early manuscripts are full

⁶¹⁹ Ibid. 11.

⁶²⁰ Heaney, ‘Parable Island’, in *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 16.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

⁶²² Ibid.

of stylized eye-shapes and recurrent glosses
in which those old revisionists derive
the word island from roots in eye and land.⁶²³

While one school of archaeologists, determined to retrace originary myths regarding the island, choose to interpret them figuratively (“a post-hole in an ancient floor/stands first of all for a pupil in an iris”), the other group insists on literal interpretations of the same, “always vying with a fierce possessiveness/ for the right to set ‘the island story’ straight”⁶²⁴. But in marked contrast to these learned equivocators of both camps, the “elders dream of boat-journeys and havens” beyond the stifling boundaries of their island, yet remaining securely “home” where they are. The concluding parable of the poem, where Heaney recounts his version of a tale of a Donegal nationalist “who died convinced that when the Panama Canal was completed in 1914, it would drain the Atlantic Ocean and the Irish Sea”⁶²⁵, and Ireland would be reunited, through a geographical accident, with the rest of Britain. While ‘Parable Island’ takes a disenchanting and critical look at the repressed anxieties of such parochial claims towards self-definition, Section IV of the poem carefully refrains from providing readers with an adequate gloss on the opinion of the ‘elders’, inviting them instead to form their own opinions about the lines of fracture that run deep within the community. Thus, through their selective versions of self-aggrandizement, the inhabitants of the island would rather have “the island disappear” than accept its oneness. In fact, the orthographical design of the poem replicates the pattern of this disappearance, with Parts I, II, III, IV respectively containing five, four, three and two stanzas.

The crossing over of the symbolic threshold where the act of writing becomes a doorway into a ‘glimpsed alternative’ is revealed in a poem such as ‘From the Frontier of Writing’ which replays two versions of the same event—“an encounter at a roadblock, a kind of archetypal Ulster Catholic situation”⁶²⁶—to contrast the sense of subjugation and obedience forced in the driver as he is made to stop for “pure interrogation”⁶²⁷. The “tightness and nilness round that space” of

⁶²³ Ibid. 17.

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ Seamus Heaney, quoted in John Hobbs, “‘The Island Story’: Revising Irish History in Heaney’s *The Haw Lantern*”, *Études irlandaises* 23 no. 2 (1998): 74.

⁶²⁶ Thomas Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: O’Brien Press, 1989), 32-33.

⁶²⁷ Heaney, ‘From the Frontier of Writing’, in *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 12.

exacerbated human subjugation as the interrogation goes on leaves the poet with “a quiver in the self” and a sense of self-diminution. Heaney’s alternative to this everyday scene in Ulster is given through the space of writing itself, which provides the justification of an imagined alternative, a plane where “suddenly you’re through, arraigned yet freed/ as if you’d passed from behind a waterfall/ on the black current of a tarmac road”⁶²⁸. As Helen Vendler writes of the poems in *The Haw Lantern*, “[w]riting is used to efface the pangs of immediate experience; universal timeless “nature” or “necessity” soothes the irritability of the ungovernable personal present”.⁶²⁹

In ‘From the Canon of Expectation’, Heaney uses three grammatical moods—the ‘optative’ (indicating a wish or hope), the ‘imperative’ (echoing a command or exhortation) and finally, the calm ‘indicative’—to characterise the “moods” of two generations, and a possible recourse to a third variety. The older one of them, sparsely educated, resigned to the inevitability of “the humiliations/ we always took for granted”, chooses passivity to cope with the violence they experienced around them.⁶³⁰ The younger generation, typified in their preference for “imperatives”, “would banish the conditional for ever”, eager to wrest for themselves an active agency built on “intelligences/ brightened and unmannerly as crowbars”⁶³¹. It is however, in the third possibility of the ‘indicative’ that Heaney hopes to find a new direction, one which calmly states facts and asks questions of a given reality. The possibility of poetic redress is most manifestly realised in the third alternative. The interior mental landscape of the speaking subject is given allegorical, yet identifiable geographic dimensions in the poem ‘From the Republic of Conscience’ where the domain of conscience is envisioned as a country in itself, “noiseless” and carried inwardly by the poet. Heaney’s vision of the Republic is marked by what he has earlier identified as the ‘truth-telling’ characteristic of poetry, brought out most effectively by the use of the parabolic mode, for which he is indebted to the poetry of East-European poets like Miroslav Holub, Czeslaw Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert. Quite appropriately, the “sacred symbol” of the

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Helen Vendler, ‘On Three Poems by Seamus Heaney’, *Salmagundi*, no. 80 (Fall 1988): 67.

⁶³⁰ Heaney, ‘From the Canon of Expectation’, in *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 52.

⁶³¹ Ibid. 53.

Republic is “a stylized boat” where the “sail is an ear, the mast a sloping pen,/ The hull a mouth-shape, the keel an open eye”, the instruments of articulating poetry.⁶³² The connection between poetic articulation and suffering is established in the faith of the inhabitants in the symbolic Republic “that all life sprang/ from salt in tears which the sky-god wept/ after he dreamt his solitude was endless”⁶³³. After he comes back from the ‘frugal republic’ the poet becomes a ‘dual citizen’, presumably to both his attachment to his personal origins as a poet as well as to the obligations of being a poet amidst a world of imperfections and human sufferings. As Heaney is entrusted to discharge this dual responsibility, he sees himself as a ‘representative’ of this figurative country; resolving to “speak on their behalf in my own tongue”⁶³⁴.

‘From the Land of the Unspoken’ enacts the opposition between the empiricism of “a logical and talkative nation” (the French) who have kept “a bar of platinum” as their “standard of measurement”⁶³⁵ and the mythical accounts of Druidic life that connotes, for most Irish people, the mythic, glorious, and now displaced, national past. The poet’s explicit identification (even if he is sceptical of the claims of an all-pervasive vision of Irishness) is with his own people, who obstinately adhere, even in the face of irrevocable change, to a “sensation of opaque fidelity”⁶³⁶. Heaney now sees his people collectively ‘exiled’ among the “speech-ridden”, a parabolic reference to the political ascendancy which the English language has enjoyed in Ireland ever since the Plantation of Ulster and the days of the Protestant Ascendancy. Although the welling up of the proverbial Irish heart at the mention of fabulous tales of infants “floating in coracles towards destiny” provides occasions for stirring up the herd instinct to be ‘Irish’, he observes that a deeper scrutiny of these “unspoken assumptions have the force/ of revelation”⁶³⁷. The refusal to “seek/ assent and votes in a rich democracy”⁶³⁸ is linked to a free assertion of poetic will, which Heaney sees as essential in sustaining a poet, who,

⁶³² Heaney, ‘From the Republic of Conscience’, in *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 18.

⁶³³ Heaney, ‘From the Republic of Conscience’, in *The Haw Lantern*, 18-19.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.* 19.

⁶³⁵ Heaney, ‘From the Land of the Unspoken’, in *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 24.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*,

by the use of language, adequately ‘credits’ poetry by acknowledging its ability to permit the lyric poet a buoyant airiness and freedom. In his Nobel Lecture, Heaney identifies a tendency within himself in his younger years, as he kept listening to “short bursts of foreign languages” and accents on the radio to begin “a journey into the wideness of the world”—a journey coterminous, in case of a poet, with “a journey into the wideness of language”⁶³⁹. Since the Nobel Lecture was a culmination of a poetic life acutely responsive to the demands of being faithful to historical reality and the individual needs of lyric freedom, Heaney considered the platform “more like a space station than a stepping stone”, permitting himself—if only for once—“the luxury of walking on air”⁶⁴⁰. Heaney’s poem ‘A Daylight Art’ seems an enlightening example of this form of poetic ‘crediting’, conveyed through metaphors of “taking possession” of an “extraterritorial poetics” he found exemplified in the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert.⁶⁴¹ In the poem, through a parable where Socrates “told his friends he had been writing:/putting Aesop’s fables into verse”, Heaney conducts a thorough examination of his poetic vocation, reiterating the necessity to “[p]ractice the art”⁶⁴². Poetry, whose “deep-sunk panoramas rise and pass/like daylight through the rod’s eye or the nib’s eye”⁶⁴³, introduces a transformative change in the posture he begins to adopt towards the historical constraints faced as a Northern-Irish poet. Heaney’s reference to the story of St. Kevin in his Nobel Lecture is instructive here, bringing out a valiant “posture of endurance”⁶⁴⁴ against the weight of circumstances. St. Kevin, who “was kneeling with his arms stretched out in the form of a cross” in the monastic site of Glendalough in Co. Wicklow, found a blackbird mistake his outstretched hand as a kind of nest and took shelter in it, laying “a clutch of eggs” and resting in it, thinking of it as home.⁶⁴⁵ He stayed “immobile for hours and days and nights and weeks, holding out his hand until the eggs hatched and the fledglings grew wings”⁶⁴⁶. This form of restorative endurance, practised by the monk, occur “at the intersection of

⁶³⁹ Heaney, “Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture,” in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), Kindle edition, 428.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Carmen Bugan, “Taking Possession of “Extraterritorial” Poetics: Seamus Heaney and Eastern European Poetry in Translation”, *EnterText* 4 no. 3 Supplement (2005): 84.

⁶⁴² Heaney, “A Daylight Art,” in *The Haw Lantern*, 15.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ Heaney, “Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture,” in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996*, 434.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

natural process and the glimpsed ideal”, becoming “a signpost and a reminder” of the alleviations offered by poetry.⁶⁴⁷ St. Kevin’s endurance and potential to nurture life also coincides with the life-affirming propensities of poetry.

What seems a definite progression in this particular volume is Heaney’s gradual abjuration of concrete geographical ‘places’ to more abstract and transcendental spaces and “imagined realms”. The justification behind such a movement lies partly within the biographical events of the death of his mother in the autumn of 1984, and that of his father two years later.⁶⁴⁸ These spaces occur in ‘Clearances’, the sonnet-sequence Heaney dedicated to his deceased mother, most notably in ‘Clearances VII’ where the death of the poet’s mother makes the last lived space of togetherness seem as if it had been “emptied/ Into us to keep, it penetrated/ Clearances that suddenly stood open”⁶⁴⁹. Similarly, in ‘Clearances VIII’, Heaney contemplates “walking round and round a space/ Utterly empty, utterly a source”, ‘clearance’ now occupying the space of his “coeval” chestnut tree “from a jam jar in a hole”⁶⁵⁰. Heaney meditates on imaginatively recovering the lost presence of the chestnut tree as its “heft and hush” metamorphoses into “a bright nowhere” of his memory: “A soul ramifying and forever/Silent, beyond silence listened for”⁶⁵¹. In ‘The Wishing Tree’ too, Heaney links the memory of his departed mother with his favourite, and now felled, chestnut tree which was “lifted, root and branch, to heaven”, shedding all of its earthly inheritances, “all that had been driven/ Need by need into its hale/ Sap-wood and bark, coin and pin and nail”⁶⁵². As in the previous instances that I have enumerated, it is the absence of the material tree that brings it back more manifestly into imagination, while the poet broods aerially on the vision “Of an airy branch-head rising through damp cloud/ Of turned-up faces where the tree had stood”.⁶⁵³

These transcendental spaces of the mind often hint at the idea of a metaphoric remove from the delimiting forces of history that shackle the poet down

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ See Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, 178.

⁶⁴⁹ Heaney, ‘Clearances VII’, in *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 37

⁶⁵⁰ Heaney, ‘Clearances VIII’, in *The Haw Lantern*, 38.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵² Heaney, ‘The Wishing Tree’, in *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 42.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

to his parochial sense of ‘home’. Writing of Louis MacNeice, another illustrious precursor from Northern Ireland who distanced himself from his ‘home’, Heaney notes that the former provides an example of how distance, either of the actual, exilic, cross-channel variety or the imaginary, self-renewing, trans-historical and trans-cultural sort can be used as an enabling factor in the work of art in Ulster”⁶⁵⁴. What seems “intractable” at proximity, “becomes tractable when addressed from a distance”⁶⁵⁵. Heaney’s gradually evolving poetics of exile thus may be considered as a quest towards transcending ‘place’ to ‘placelessness’, where both physical and symbolic distancing from ‘home’ becomes conducive to forge a de-familiarisation of the known. As Heaney has admitted to in an interview to George Morgan, writing itself becomes the activity where “you are displaced to a distance and insulated within an elsewhere that gives you an exiled perspective on the usual”⁶⁵⁶. Heaney’s illustrative image for this form of poetic identification is given through the image of the ripple:

I think of consciousness as a starting at a small centre and then widening out and widening out. What are we? Are we the centre where the ripple begins or are we the circumference to which the ripple extends? I think we are the negotiation between that first stirring of infant consciousness and the ultimate reach of our own recognitions.⁶⁵⁷

Heaney’s creative “spacewalk” for which he credits poetry in his Nobel Lecture, also makes “possible a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind’s centre and circumference, between the child gazing at the word ‘Stockholm’ on the face of the radio dial and a man facing the faces that he meets in Stockholm at this most privileged moment”⁶⁵⁸, uniting oppositions we have already enumerated before. Exilic desire and self-distanced awareness, as we have observed in this account of Heaney’s poetic evolution since the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, act as enabling manoeuvres which allow him to outgrow his attachment to the ‘Ulster poet’ identity and to write poetry as an “active escape”⁶⁵⁹ from the captivity

⁶⁵⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1989), 46.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁶ George Morgan, ‘Interview with Seamus Heaney’, *Cycnos* 15 no. 4(2008), <http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/?id=1594>

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁸ Heaney, “Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture,” in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996*, 428.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 430.

of history. While it is certainly true that Heaney's 'exile' does not have to contend with forced displacement, voluntary exercises of self-distancing certainly occur across his oeuvre during the period: through the de-familiarisation of 'Irishness' attempted in *North*, choosing 'migrant solitude' in Wicklow, through his self-projections as a guilty artist trying to "assuage himself by utterance" in *Sweeney Astray*, and through a deliberate recourse to the parabolic mode in *The Haw Lantern* to transcend the forces of materiality. Most significantly, the deep-seated embarrassment in Heaney about the inherent 'artfulness' of his poetry is largely resolved as he comes to a fuller realisation of his potential to go beyond the identities inherited by him through birth and historical circumstances.

Chapter 5

“I Scream, Therefore I am”: Exile and the Political, Sexual and Aesthetic Dissidences of Reinaldo Arenas

The tragedies of exile and dislocation which the Cuban-born gay dissident poet and novelist Reinaldo Arenas had to experience were, in fact, the only courses viable for him to continue his literary work at that historical point of time in post-revolutionary Cuba. Homosexual subjectivity was an inseparable part of the personality of Arenas, an ethico-political choice which was concerned “above all with maintaining integrity of sexual articulation against the anxieties and afflictions of living in a repressive regime”¹. In May, 1980, Reinaldo Arenas arrived in Key West, Florida in the United States after an excruciating five-day voyage from the Mariel harbour in Cuba on the craft San Lazaro.² The literary oeuvre of Arenas is multi-faceted and eludes, to an extent, the constraints of usual generic divisions such as “prose” and “poetry”. Expressions of his sexuality and the use of language to posit the homosexual self was at the centre of the life-long literary project undertaken by Arenas. When seen in the context of post-revolutionary Cuba under the Castro regime, the systematic expunging, extraction of penal labour in work camps, repression and incarceration of homosexuals in the name of “rehabilitation” were among the direct causes of Arenas’s exile. It, therefore, is a condition that is born out of the history of inevitable marginalisation and invisibilisation on several different fronts that he had faced in Cuba.

Edward W. Said, in his work *Culture and Imperialism* had contended that the struggle for liberation can be conceived of as “an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism...now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation is today the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual

¹ Daphne Grace, “The Uneasy Masculinities of Dissidence and Exile: Reinaldo Arenas’s Fight for Textual-Sexual Freedom”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45, no. 3 (September 2009): 309.

² Thomas Colchie, “Introduction,” in Reinaldo Arenas, *Farewell to the Sea: A Novel of Cuba* trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1987), xi.

and the artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages”³. The intermediate position of the exiled artist-intellectual, who straddles across radically different socio-cultural legacies of belonging is however, fraught what Bruce Robbins has called “different modalities of situatedness-in-displacement”⁴, as conceptions of stable ethnicity are increasingly rendered suspect in the wake of the realities of forced displacement, globalisation, migration and exile. In post-revolutionary Cuba, the conflation between the pre-existing and dominant culture of *machismo*, Catholic Christian morality and Communist ideology created a repressive and dictatorial state-machinery which routinely persecuted homosexuals and treated them as “unworthy” of the nation’s official histories.⁵ Homosexuality was seen as an aberration, indicative of a sexual “excess” that was the result of bourgeois decadence.⁶ By recounting the disruptive effects of Castro’s regime and revealing the victims of state persecution, Arenas’ work unearths alternative histories of Cuba silenced and obliterated by state-sanctioned official accounts. His *pentagonia* (pentagon) of five novels—*Singing from the Well*, *The Palace of the White Skunks*, *Farewell to the Sea*, *The Color of Summer* and *The Assault*—“underscores the *agonia* suffered by the characters of this quintet, who find themselves pressured and persecuted by abusive authoritarian systems and discourses of power”⁷. As Laurie Vickroy has written, the emotionally debilitating experience of exile was responsible for Arenas’s deployment of literary techniques that projected acute self-

³ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 332.

⁴ Bruce Robbins, “Comparative Cosmopolitanism” (1992), in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, eds. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 309-328.

⁵ For a detailed overview of the systematic persecution of homosexuals in Cuba, see Allen Young, *Gays under the Cuban Revolution* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1981) and Rafael Ocasio, “Gays and the Cuban Revolution: The Case of Reinaldo Arenas”, *Latin American Perspectives* 29 no. 2, “Gender, Sexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Latin America” (March 2002): 78-98.

⁶ See, for example, the mainstream view of “institutionalized Communism” regarding homosexuality at the time, according to which “homosexuality, along with capitalism, will “wither away”” in Brad Epps, “Proper Conduct: Reinaldo Arenas, Fidel Castro and the Politics of Homosexuality”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 2 (Oct 1995): 238.

⁷ Francisco Soto, *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia* (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994), 19.

deprecation and a fragmented sense of identity.⁸ The project Arenas undertakes is thus a subversive one, exposing the many disillusionments with the Castro regime and its repressive measures meted out towards homosexuals—an utter mockery of the principles of liberty with which the Cuban Revolution was once inspired. This meant that just like Brodsky, who found himself pitted against the Soviet “empire”, Arenas too, had to go through deep-rooted traumas of un-belonging within Cuba, if not internal exile. Through his experiences of enduring constant state surveillance, ostracism and eventual incarceration at the El Morro prison in Havana in 1974 under charges of “corrupting two minors”, Arenas discovered manifold horrors and violations of human rights unleashed upon homosexuals confined in state security prisons under a totalitarian dictatorship.⁹ Convicted of “ideological deviation” and for publishing his second novel *El mundo aluciante* (*The Hallucinatory World*, later republished as *The Ill-fated Peregrinations of Fray Servando*) abroad without official consent, Arenas managed to escape from prison and made an unsuccessful attempt to leave Cuba by putting a tire “inner tube” around him.¹⁰ After forty-five days, he was re-arrested near Lenin Park in Havana and imprisoned at the El Morro prison.¹¹ Desperate to make himself heard, Arenas attempted to smuggle his work outside prison and was forced, under the threat of immediate death, to renounce his work, his identity as a homosexual and to promise to “rehabilitate” himself within the scope of the Revolution.¹² Although Arenas temporarily gave the appearance of conforming to what was demanded of him, he continued his ideological resistance to the Castro regime, braving its perils through his writing which became for him a recuperative act, narrating thereby “a secret history of Cuba”¹³. Arriving in the United States, Arenas lived in Miami for a brief period, after which he settled in a rat-infested apartment on 43rd Street, New York City. It was only during his exile in the United States that he managed to complete the last two novels of his

⁸ Laurie Vickroy, “The Traumas of Unbelonging: Reinaldo Arenas’s Recuperations of Cuba”, *MELUS* 30 no. 4, Home: Forged or Forged? (Winter 2005), 112.

⁹ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, trans. Dolores M. Koch (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2001), Kindle edition, 86-87.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 89-90

¹¹ *Ibid.* 95.

¹² *Ibid.* 102.

¹³ Francisco Soto, *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia* (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994), 40.

pentalogy (*pentagonia*), with the fourth novel *The Color of Summer* being completed when Arenas was admitted to the hospital for his treatment of AIDS.

Born in the town of Aguas Claras, Oriente Province, Cuba in 1943, Reinaldo Arenas came from a peasant family living in dire poverty. After being abandoned by his father, the young Arenas and his mother somehow survived as unwelcome intruders at his grandfather's household.¹⁴ Since it was nearly impossible to support themselves with agriculture, Arenas' grandfather had sold the family farm and moved to the dreary little town of Holguin where they ran a grocery store.¹⁵ Arenas took a job at a guava paste factory at the age of twelve, working a twelve-hour shift a day for a peso.¹⁶ In December, 1956 Fulgencio Batista's special forces exterminated twenty-six volunteers associated with Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement—an incident that may have radicalised the young Arenas to join the rebels at the age of fourteen.¹⁷ The repressive regime of the family (which was uneasy with Arenas' effeminacy and his penchant for writing) was also something that he had wished to escape during his early years. His support for the Revolution gained him access to free education, at the *Instituto Politecnico* in Havana. Arenas graduated as an agricultural accountant from the institute. He moved to Havana in 1961 and became a researcher for the Jose Marti National Library.¹⁸ It was in Havana that Arenas immersed himself in the thriving gay-subculture of the city. In 1965, he submitted the manuscript of his first novel, *Singing from the Well* (*Celestino antes des alba*) to a literary competition organised by the National Union of Writers and Artists in Cuba (UNEAC) where his book earned the second prize and an honourable mention. However, since the judges could not come to an agreement, no first prize was awarded that year.¹⁹

The 'novel' offers the free-flowing narrative of a sensitive and impressionable child against an impoverished and rural backdrop of the Cuban countryside, whose love of poetry is deemed scandalous by his illiterate and

¹⁴ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, trans. Dolores M. Koch (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001), Kindle edition, 9-10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See Jorge Olivares, *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas: Family, Sexuality and the Cuban Revolution* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2013), 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 16.

¹⁹ Jorge Olivares, *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas: Family, Sexuality and the Cuban Revolution*, 22.

repressive family, who spare no efforts to strangle this spirit of creativity in him. For its supposed lack of realism, and its sympathetic authorial view of the latent homosexuality of the nameless child-narrator, only 2,000 copies of the novel were printed, after which the book was banned in Cuba, restricting Arenas's literary reputation within only a handful of Cubans.²⁰ Again, in 1966, Arenas was awarded the second-prize at the UNEAC competition, but as if following a pattern too obvious, once again no first prize was awarded.²¹ His second novel, *The Hallucinatory World* (later republished as *The Ill-fated Peregrinations of Fray Servando* (*El mundo aluciante*) was first published in French by Editions de Seuil in 1968 and won him international acclaim. But it was the publication of this book abroad without prior authorisation by the UNEAC, coupled with Arenas' openly homosexual lifestyle, which tightened the grip of state surveillance around him and later were responsible for his imprisonment.

The object of this chapter is to offer sustained readings of the poetry of Reinaldo Arenas across the various phases of his literary career in Cuba (and thereafter the United States of America after his Mariel exodus and exile) in order to assess the possible dimensions of his political, literary and sexual dissidence against the general context of post-revolutionary Cuba of the Castro regime. Exile, the homosexual self and political dissidence are inextricably bound up in Arenas' case, culminating in his relentless advocacy of individual human rights in a totalitarian society and the assertion of his dissident literary stance against state censorship and enforced silencing. Just as he subverted the officially endorsed histories of Cuba, even at the cost of imprisonment, his exile in New York was also spent on the margins, and in isolation—"not a citizen, not the kind of Cuban intellectual some U.S. scholars desired, not the kind of exile a conservative Cuban-American society would accept, at times impoverished, and forever longing for a return to a Cuba that no longer existed"²². As Camilly Cruz-Martes has commented in her prologue to *Autoepitaph*, an anthology of English translations to poems by Arenas, "[t]he ethical conflicts Arenas endured in exile included his repudiation of

²⁰ Francisco Soto, *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia* (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994), 38.

²¹ See Jorge Olivares, *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas*, 15.

²² Stacey Van Dahm, "Translator's Afterword," in Enrique Del Risco, "Strategic Rebellions: Reinaldo Arenas has the Last Word", *Latin American Review* 44 no. 87 (2017): 62.

the U.S. leftist intellectual classes that from their ivory towers supported socialism in Cuba”, as well as “the anti-Castro rightist groups for their conservative values, antigay stance, and class privilege”²³. Thus fractured belonging, and exilic loss were constant reminders to Arenas that his personal bond with Cuba had been forcibly severed. In order to recuperate from this interminable loss, Arenas and a few other “*Marielitos*” (such as Juan Abreu, Carlos Victoria, Luz de la Paz, Roberto Valero, Rene Cifuentes, Reinaldo Ramos and a few others) decided to bring out the magazine *Mariel* (1983-85) which was undeterred in its critique of “the bourgeois morality so prevalent in Miami” as well as the repressive, totalitarian society under Castro.²⁴

The chapter will thus, trace the gradual evolution of Arenas’ literary oeuvre from its early phase of winning official acclaim in post-revolutionary Cuba to gradually crystallising itself as a voice of dissent silenced and marginalised by state censorship and imprisonment, and finally being forced to choose exile as the only possible alternative in order to carry on living a life of personal integrity and sexual freedom. The problems of compiling a chapter on the work of Arenas, especially to the research scholar formally trained in reading Anglophone literature, are many. Since I have no formal training in Spanish, the language central to Arenas’ oeuvre, I have had to depend on the available English translations of his poetry which are generally scarce and difficult to locate. Since the literary achievements of Arenas are constituted of not just by his poetry, but primarily his fictional prose (the *Pentagonia*, *The Doorman*, short stories) as well as his autobiographical memoir *Before Night Falls* (1993), I have made, as far as possible, extensive use of them in my readings of his poetry. However, it should also be stated at the outset that the usual generic classifications which allow a separation between prose and poetry are also subverted and debunked by Arenas (most memorably, in Part Two of *Farewell to the Sea*, written in six cantos and narrated by Hector, the now-ostracized and disenchanted poet and homosexual who leaves his testimony against the systematic marginalisations suffered at the hands of the traditional

²³ Camelly Cruz-Martens, “Prologue: “The Will to Live Manifesting Itself”, in Reinaldo Arenas, *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems* trans. Kelly Washbourne ((Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 2014), 9.

²⁴ See “Review of *Before Night Falls* by Reinaldo Arenas”, *Encyclopaedia.com*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/night-falls-0> (accessed February 24, 2022).

patriarchal society and the totalitarian state), who also proposes a problematisation of the institution of “literature” itself²⁵, an institution nurtured on selective canonisation and, in a politically polarised world in the wake of the Cold War, based largely on narrow political propaganda. To summarise, this chapter will focus on:

- (a) The early phase of Reinaldo Arenas’ literary career, including his rural and impoverished background from which he grew to be a young protégé of the Cuban Revolution, settling in Havana and contributing to the literary discourse in Cuba with the publication of his first two novels.
- (b) The political dissidence enacted by Arenas through writing which constituted itself in his deliberate refusal to conform to the demands of Soviet-style Socialist Realism that merely sang paeans of the Revolution. Arenas’ refusal to write literature that could be deemed ‘useful’ to the Revolution eventually led to his marginalisation and imposed state censorship on his works.
- (c) The interconnections, within Arenas’ oeuvre, between the homosexual ‘self’ and the writing it produces, with particular attention to his reclamation and reconstruction of an ethical self by providing testimonial narratives of the persecution and silencing of homosexuals in Castro’s Cuba. Arenas’ contribution to the genre of testimonial literature will be approached, enumerating the diverse ways in which he departs from Socialist Realism to counteract, as Laurie Vickroy has phrased it, the “silence and forgetting imposed by powerful interests”²⁶.
- (d) Arenas’ conception of the island of Cuba, with its carceral structure of state surveillance as a veritable prison, from which, seemingly, no escape is possible.
- (e) Literary strategies of fragmentation and dispersion in Arenas, whereby the stable ‘self’ gets splintered into many competing selves, sarcastically

²⁵ Several commentators such as Francisco Soto, Joey Whitfield, Maureen Spillane-Murov and Rafael Ocasio have illustrated Arenas’s anti-institutional stance with regard to “literature” as an officially sanctioned body of works within the purview of the dictatorial Castro regime. Insofar as the institution of “literature” is built on selective canonisation i.e. forms of censorship and epistemic violence which must necessarily exclude “seditious” or dissenting literature in order to preserve the *status quo* guaranteed by existing power structures and relations, Arenas remained one of its most vocal critics.

²⁶ Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2002), 27.

drawing attention to the fact that such splitting of an integrative wholeness intrinsic to human personality becomes inevitable for social survival in an inherently discriminatory and repugnant system of totalitarian governance.

- (f) The trauma of exile experienced by Arenas in the United States, being riven apart between the demands of an alien society (which, to him, seemed like one driven largely by anti-intellectualism, material incentives, mercantile interests) and the impossible nostalgia of return to Cuba—despite which, he manages to resist a “eulogy of the victim” with which the North-American intelligentsia had dubbed his non-conformism.
- (g) Arenas’ conception of the ethical imperative and mission of the artist as a political rebel and social outcast, who, despite being faced with poverty, isolation, ostracism, forced labour and imprisonment, resists oppression and appropriation by state authority by foregrounding the individual right to free creative expression.

5.1. A Voice from the Margins: A Mysterious Childhood and the Early Years

Born in 1943 into abject poverty in the Oriente province of Cuba, Arenas was the child of unmarried peasant parents. His mother, Oneida Fuentes, after having been abandoned by her lover, took refuge, with the young Arenas, at her parents’ house.²⁷ Although his maternal grandparents had tried to keep the identity of his father from the young Arenas, he unexpectedly met the former on a riverbank while he was five years old. Reared on stories and songs which recounted the tribulations of “fallen” women such as his abandoned and unmarried mother, the young Arenas saw his mother suddenly enraged upon sighting his father. In *Before Night Falls*, his autobiographical memoir, Arenas has described the episode thus:

...she began picking up stones from the riverbank and throwing them at his head, while the man, in spite of the shower of rocks, came coming toward us. When he was close to me, he put his hand into his pocket, pulled out two pesos and gave them to me. He then patted me on the head and ran away to avoid getting hit by one of the stones.²⁸

²⁷ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, trans. Dolores M. Koch (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2001), Kindle edition, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

The episode brings out the desolation and abandonment Arenas had felt as a child but also illustrates the half-fondness with which he remembers his father. Left to fend for themselves as “freeloaders” in a “large typical Cuban *bohio*, a hut with a thatched roof and a dirt floor” managed by his grandparents, Arenas lived as a poor and neglected child in the rural countryside of Oriente province.²⁹ He recalls having to eat dirt to keep his stomach filled in order to escape the pangs of hunger.³⁰ Yet, at the same time, he has conceded that the “absolute poverty” of his childhood was also matched by “absolute freedom”³¹. He delighted in the steady drizzle of the tropical downpour trickling down his naked body, embracing the trees and rolling down on grass. The lush green countryside offered him “an incredible opportunity to escape it all without anyone worrying about where I was or when I would return”³². Being a naturally imaginative child, he was intrigued by the mysteries of the countryside and thought it was laden with magical qualities. His childhood “was a world of pure creativity”³³.

Arenas also recalls his sombre encounter with a dead foetus of a child, abandoned by an unknown mother who had resolved to get rid of it. This incident intrigued the child Arenas and made him think of “it as my lost cousin, with whom I would never be able to play”³⁴. It is this metaphorically absent figure of a “lost cousin” which Arenas had tried to project in his first novel through the character of Celestino in his first novel. He further goes on to describe his early forays into sexuality at school, corroborating his individual experiences of masturbation with those of the other boys, and finding sexual release a way of escaping the drudgeries of living in a household filled with constantly bickering grandparents and many aunts.³⁵ His early sexual activities were with farm animals such as hens, goats and the sows; and, as he grew up to be an adolescent, mares.³⁶ However, his account of his first mutually penetrative sexual intercourse with his cousin Orlando deeply impresses upon the reader the empathetic relationship Arenas shared with his mother. His mother, stigmatised within the rural and patriarchal countryside as a

²⁹ Ibid. 9-10.

³⁰ Ibid. 13.

³¹ Ibid. 11.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. 13.

‘fallen woman’, grew naturally mistrustful of men and lived in enforced chastity.³⁷ While the sexual act was being consummated, Arenas kept thinking about his mother, “and of all the things that during all those years she never did with a man, which I was doing right there in the bushes within earshot of her voice, already calling me for dinner”³⁸. Further, Arenas suggests a powerful link between human sexuality and forces of nature, debunking “the theory, held by some, about the sexual innocence of peasants”³⁹. This point will be particularly relevant at a later point in this chapter, when we seek to understand the relationship between the cult of *machismo* and homosexuality in the context of Cuban nation-formation.

When Arenas turned twelve, his family moved to Holguin, the nearest city.⁴⁰ Under the Batista regime, the economy of Cuba had suffered considerably, leading to widespread unemployment in the countryside. He writes that neither his grandfather nor his uncles could find work at the nearby sugar mills of Oriente province as cane-cutters.⁴¹ Under such circumstances, Arenas’ grandfather sold the farm and moved to Holguin where he planned to open a small fruit and vegetable stand. Holguin was a town that seemed unbearable in its dreariness and monotony to him. In his memoir, he describes the town as “flat, commercial, square, with absolutely no mystery and personality”⁴². Holguin was also hotter than the Cuban countryside, and, according to Arenas, resembled a “gigantic tomb”, with its low houses looking “like pantheons punished by the sun”⁴³. Arenas took up a job at a guava paste factory, working “up to twelve hours a day for one peso”⁴⁴. He made wooden boxes into which the boiling guava jam would be poured, and thereafter cooled “to harden into bars that were later labelled “La Caridad Guava Paste””⁴⁵. Despite his hard labours at the guava paste factory, Arenas did find time to write, although the “novels” he produced during this phase were deemed by him to be sentimental and not deserving of publication. During the time, the young Arenas also tried to condition himself into following the code of *machismo*, conforming to

³⁷ Ibid. 13

³⁸ Ibid. 13-14

³⁹ Ibid. 21.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 30.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

the typical societal expectations of ‘masculine’ behaviour.⁴⁶ He recalls falling in love with Carlos, a fellow worker at the guava paste factory with whom he went out to the movies, but (as if only to live up to the prevalent culture of *machismo* in a traditional and patriarchal society) ended up making several girlfriends: “Irene, Irma, Lourdes, Marlene; and I had fistfights with other boys who were after them, or with the ones whose girlfriends I had taken away”⁴⁷. Arenas never refuses to acknowledge these attempts to fit within the strictures of societal ‘normalcy’, yet the experience of betrayal in adolescent love revealed to him his sexual orientation without doubt. As Carlos, his teenage lover fell in love with his cousin Dulce Maria (who had come to visit them in Holguin from Miami) and had a brief relationship with her, Arenas narrates how his sexuality came to be publicly acknowledged, by one of his classmates at school, in a dismissive and slighting manner:

In those days I made my voice sound deeper, pretended to be tough, and increased the number of my girlfriends. I even managed, I think, to convince myself that I liked one or another of the girls. In school I courted them all and took pains to keep anyone from even imagining that I did not like women. But one day, while the anatomy teacher was repeating her litany, one of my classmates sat next to me and with absolutely diabolic sincerity said “Look Reinaldo, you are a faggot. Do you know what a faggot is? It’s a man who like other men. A faggot, that’s what you are.”⁴⁸

By Christmas, 1957, “numerous political murders” were committed by the Batista dictatorship, commencing a brief reign of terror. In Oriente province, the rebels of the 26th of July Movement had found favourable terrain as anti-Batista sentiment was high. According to the scholar Jorge Olivares, the fifteen-year old Arenas had concluded that as a fatherless and poor boy “he had nothing to lose except his life” and therefore, joined Castro’s guerrillas in 1958.⁴⁹ However, in his biographical memoir, Arenas takes a particularly acerbic view of the way revolutionary propaganda presented an exaggerated version of the struggle. He explicitly denies that “one can really speak of a battlefield between Fidel Castro’s guerrillas and Batista’s troops”⁵⁰. While it is certainly true, he argues, that Castro-

⁴⁶ Ibid. 31.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 31.

⁴⁹ Jorge Olivares, *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas: Family, Sexuality and the Cuban Revolution*, 16.

⁵⁰ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 33.

sympathisers and followers of the 26th of July movement were captured, imprisoned, tortured and murdered by the Batista dictatorship, “among Castro’s troops there were not many casualties, nor were there in Batista’s army”.⁵¹ However, after the success of the Cuban Revolution, “Castro talked about twenty thousand dead, and that became a sort of mythical, symbolic number”⁵². Arenas contends that the “names of those twenty thousand casualties were never published, and never will be, because that many deaths just did not occur in the war”⁵³. Anti-Batista sentiment in the region however, was ubiquitous, as the major support of the Cuban middle class veered towards Castro, “the white son of a Spanish sugar-mill owner and the product of a Jesuit school”⁵⁴. Arenas also does not fail to notice, in his autobiographical memoir, how the perception of Fidel Castro as an iconic fighter and a rebel, in the eyes of the global media concealed the fact that his “brother-in-law had held a position of power with Batista—that of minister, no less”⁵⁵. Thus, taking a distanced, and carefully nuanced view of the Cuban Revolution, the mature Arenas was able to re-examine the events of the revolution, which, he had once joined as an idealistic adolescent boy. Waking up at dawn, he left the house from Holguin and walked for an entire day to reach a town called Velasco, which was rumoured to be in rebel hands. However, neither the rebels nor Batista’s army were conspicuously present there. Famished and exhausted, the young adolescent bought himself pastries with the forty-seven cents he had.⁵⁶ Cuco Sanchez, a forty-year old rebel gave him shelter for the night.⁵⁷ However, the young Arenas was advised to go back to Holguin as he did not have a weapon with him. But by this time, a note he had left at home, stating his intention to join the rebels in the Sierra Maestra hills, had been discovered and “[t]he loud voices of those ten women in the house spread the news all over the neighbourhood”⁵⁸. Arenas, now a suspect to have joined the rebel encampment hunted down by Batista’s army, was turned out from the door by his grandfather and he “bushwhacked” his way again

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 35.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 34.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 34.

back to Velasco to the rebels.⁵⁹ Jorge Olivares has written that during the six months that he served as “an *alzado*”—as the rebels were called— Arenas “performed menial tasks, such as cooking and washing for the troops”⁶⁰. During his stay with the rebels, the arbitrary execution of local peasants who were suspected of being double-agents and informers for Batista’s police and army moved the young Arenas, who find himself faced with the enigma of the word “traitor” conveniently used against the 26th of July Movement, or against those who had been forced, against their security, to give in to the demands of a police state.⁶¹ With Batista fleeing Cuba on December 31st, 1958, the victorious rebel army came down from the Sierra Maestra hills and reached the cities of Cuba, where they were usually given a hero’s welcome.⁶² However, the identification of new “traitors” were carried out usually “against supposed informers, against military men of the fallen regime, and against the Masferrer “tigers””⁶³. Rolando Arcadio Masferrer Rojas, a Cuban Senator under the Batista regime and a gangster and henchman, had raised a private army to continue the dictatorial terror unleashed by the government. Most of his soldiers were now “killed on the streets or in their homes, or on the Hill of the Cross, where many had fled in a desperate attempt to get out of town”⁶⁴. In these early days in post-revolutionary Cuba, , the so-called “enemies of the Revolution” were identified and executed without any trial and later, “the so-called Revolutionary Tribunals were set up and people were executed; an informer’s accusation before a provisional judge of the new regime was enough”.⁶⁵ They offered the people “a kind of theatrical entertainment” and were frequently held to vilify the “traitors” in their eyes.⁶⁶

As a result of his contributions to the revolutionary cause, Arenas was awarded a scholarship at La Pantoja, “the Batista-military camp that had been converted into a polytechnic institute”.⁶⁷ Plans were already afoot “to confiscate all

⁵⁹ Ibid. 34-35.

⁶⁰ Jorge Olivares, *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas: Family, Sexuality and the Cuban Revolution*, 16.

⁶¹ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 35.

⁶² Ibid. 36.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 37.

land”, and the government was in need of a newly graduated batch of agricultural accountants to shoulder these responsibilities.⁶⁸ Much of the educational programme was directed at ideological indoctrination to Marxist-Leninist principles. Arenas recounts that the students “had to master the *Manual of the USSR Academy of Sciences*, the *Manual of Political Economy* by Nikhtin, *Foundations of Socialism in Cuba* by Bias Roca”⁶⁹. Apart from classes on accounting, “six climbs on Turquino Peak were required, and those who were unable to do it because of a physical handicap or for any other reason, were considered lacking in character and could not graduate”⁷⁰. This pedagogical approach was the result of governmental initiatives to prioritise physical capabilities in its future bureaucrats. Governmental objectives to channelize the hyper-masculine code of *machismo* (which had been inherent to large sections of Cuban society since the Cuban War of Independence) within education consisted in raising an indoctrinated generation of dedicated Cubans, who would not only become a productive work-force but also comprise the governmental ranks for the safeguard of national interests in the future. Arenas carefully highlights the discrepancy between Castro’s explicit public distancing of the Cuban Revolution from Soviet-line Communism and the ideological indoctrination of the Cuban youth:

...in 1960, while Castro was assuring the world that he was no communist and that the Revolution was “as green as our palm trees”, Cuban youth was already receiving communist indoctrination in addition to military training. We were also given classes in military matters and were even taught how to handle long-range weapons.⁷¹

Unsure of the international support he was likely to receive towards the beginning, Castro had not objected to the support of the Cuban Catholic Church, which still exerted a considerable influence on the illiterate and destitute population of the nation. Silvia Pedraza, in her work on the role of the Church and the state in the Cuban Revolutions, has pointed out that Archbishop Enrique Pérez-Serantes had sent “a message to all regarding the “Vida Nueva,” the new life that was about

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

to begin in Cuba, full of enthusiasm for Fidel Castro”⁷². José Ignacio Rasco, the Cuban lawyer, intellectual and politician founded the *Movimiento Democrático Cristiano* (Movement of Democratic Christians), an organisation aimed at introducing structural social reforms, in tune with the Christian spirit of social service.⁷³ Pedraza has also shown how, during his diplomatic visit to the United States in April 1959, Castro had defined the revolution as essentially humanistic in character:

Neither bread without liberty, nor liberty without bread; neither dictatorships of men nor classes; the government of the people without oligarchies; liberty with bread and without terror: that is humanism.⁷⁴

When the early Agrarian Reform Laws (1959-63) were signed, Castro had taken utmost care to distance the revolution from a decidedly Communist line, declaring that the revolution “will solve Cuba’s problems, because this revolution is not red, this revolution is olive green”—as green as the palm trees of the country.⁷⁵ He had assured that soon, elections would be held in Cuba. By October, 1959 however, many within the ranks of the rebel army started resenting the decidedly Communist turn the revolution was taking. Huber Matos, ex-Commander of the rebel army had openly denounced the growing Communist influence on the government in speeches delivered at Camaguey province.⁷⁶ Castro had also manoeuvred to replace President Manuel Urrutia Lleó with the more radical Osvaldo Dorticós Torrado, an event which prompted Matos to submit his resignation to Castro as the tendencies of the state to veer towards a Communist dictatorship grew more and more pronounced.⁷⁷ Matos was arrested by his own rebel associate Commandante Cienfuegos, and thereafter openly proclaimed and

⁷² Silvia Pedraza, “Church and State in Cuba’s Revolution”, The Cuban Research Institute, Florida International University (May 2009), 3. <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/commissioned-reports/church-state-cuba-edraza.pdf> (accessed Feb 28, 2022).

⁷³ Ibid. 5.

⁷⁴ Fidel Castro, quoted in Pedraza, “Church and State in Cuba’s Revolution”, 3.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See “American Experience: Fidel Castro. People and Events: Huber Matos, a Moderate in the Cuban Revolution”, *PBS: Public Broadcasting Service*, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/castro-huber-matos-moderate-cuban-revolution/> (accessed March 1, 2022).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

denounced a “traitor” to the revolutionary cause in October, 1959.⁷⁸ During the same time, the former-chief of the Cuban Air Force, Pedro Diaz Lanz, flew from Havana to Miami dropping “provocative” leaflets which urged upon Castro to eliminate Communists from his regime.⁷⁹ In response to these events, Castro and his faction within the Cuban government organised a mass rally where he publicly condemned the “traitors” and demanded the re-introduction of Revolutionary Tribunals to judge and punish those who were attempting to conspire against the revolutionary government.⁸⁰ Philip K. Bonsal (the U.S. Ambassador to Cuba at the time), recounts these events in his estimation of the early years of the Castro regime, where it seemed more of a rhetorical war fought with words:

The government, after a fleeting moment of honesty in a soon suppressed *communiqué* describing what had actually happened, lashed itself into a towering artificial passion over the alleged bombing of Havana with American connivance. A pamphlet put out by the foreign office described the incident as another Pearl Harbour. At the end of the week, Castro, addressing a mammoth gathering on this imaginary bombing bellowed, shook his fist and foamed at the mouth to the roaring applause of the mob.⁸¹

In 1961, the Cuban Revolution took a definitive turn when Castro aligned the nation with the Soviet-bloc and publicly proclaimed the revolution as Marxist-Leninist in character. The Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961⁸² was the major event that led to this proclamation. Fearing further CIA-backed attempts to topple the revolutionary government, Castro resolved to strengthen diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union on ideological, as well as economic grounds. This public

⁷⁸ See Jo Thomas, "Freed Cuban Tells of Time Spent in a 'Concrete Box' Underground", https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1979/10/24/113923992.html?pdf_redirect=true&site=false (accessed March 1, 2022).

⁷⁹ See Philip K. Bonsal, Cuba, “Castro and the United States”, *Foreign Affairs* 45 no. 2 (Jan 1967), 270.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 271.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 270.

⁸² **Bay of Pigs' Invasion:** The Bay of Pigs' Invasion was a failed landing operation carried out by CIA-backed Cuban exiles opposed to the Castro regime, fought on the south-western coast of Cuba from April 17-20, 1961. The armed wing of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (DRF), with funding and military training from the CIA, led the operation which was thwarted by the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces. Faced with an international scandal, U.S. President John F. Kennedy decided to withhold air support and the invading army was forced to surrender. The failed invasion was crucial in moulding Castro's foreign policy in the years that followed, as he veered towards the Soviet camp and U.S.-Cuba diplomatic ties entered an all-time low.

admittance to Marxism-Leninism also led to the growth of mass-based organisations such as “Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), the Central Organization of Cuban Trade Unions, the Associations of Rebels Youths, and the National Association of Small Peasants”⁸³. These organisations aimed at “developing the link between the Cuban revolutionary government and the popular bases of support”⁸⁴.

In the summer of 1960, Arenas visited Havana, a trip undertaken to join a mass rally organised on July 26 to commemorate the Cuban Revolution by the Castro regime. The life of a “real city”, where people were, for the most part, unknown to each other had a special charm on him, who had felt “that Havana was my city that somehow I had to return”⁸⁵. The optimism surrounding the Cuban Revolution was widely shared among the Cuban youth who were idealistic, unselfish and noble. An excerpt from Arenas’ autobiographical memoir will illustrate this point:

When I was sixteen I sang the hymns of the Revolution and certainly studied Marxism; I even got to be one of the directors of Marxist study groups and was, of course, a fledgling communist. I thought then that all those men who took up arms against Fidel were either wrong or crazy. I believed, or wanted to believe, that the Revolution was something noble and beautiful. I could not imagine that the Revolution which was giving me a free education could be sinister.⁸⁶

However, the mature Arenas, while writing his memoir, did not fail to see the discrepancies between the diverse strategies of systematic indoctrination to Marxist literature and the public disavowal of it till the Bay of Pigs invasion. He describes the hypnotic frenzy that had swept over the nation after the successful defence of Cuba in the Bay of Pigs invasion, directed “against “Yankee imperialism” and against untold thousands of enemies suddenly discovered”⁸⁷. He

⁸³ See William M. LeoGrande, “Party Development in Revolutionary Cuba”, *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 21 no. 4 (Nov 1979):457-58

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 458.

⁸⁵ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 39.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 41.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

sees this form of indoctrination as comparable to being locked up in a monastery before being sent on an evangelical mission to find new converts:

We had been indoctrinated in a new religion and after graduation we were to spread that new religion all over the Island. We were the ideological guides of a new kind of repression, we were the missionaries who would spread the new official ideology among all the state farms in the Island. The new religion had its new monks and priests, and also its new secret police.⁸⁸

Having graduated as an agricultural accountant, Arenas was assigned to the “William Soler farm near Manzanillo, inn the southernmost part of Oriente province”⁸⁹. Here, while making seventy-nine pesos a month, Arenas worked “amid the egg-laying hens and the incessant crowing of roosters”⁹⁰. He describes the prevailing mood in these State Farms as “one of tedium, typical of people working for miserable wages”⁹¹. He noted with irony that farmers who had once been owners were now reduced to being “day labourers who did not care about the efficiency or quality of their work”⁹². Arenas also notes how the very government officials who ran these State Farms committed acts of constant pilferage that “made it impossible to update the books, whose figures ever balanced”, the profits made being far outweighed by the losses incurred.⁹³ Work at the State Farms offered a dull and monotonous life to Arenas, who applied to enrol himself to a planning course at the University of Havana. However, in order to pay for the expenses of higher education, the government arranged for a clerical post for him at the National Institute for Agrarian reform (INRA), a job which provided him the typewriters with which he started drafting his poems.⁹⁴

Arenas’s literary endeavours started coming to fruition when in 1963, he won a story-telling competition at the National Library (*Biblioteca Nacional*). Participants had to memorise a story by a well-known author and tell it under five

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 44.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 48.

minutes, a task which Arenas had found difficult to accomplish. So instead of turning to established authors for stories, he decided to write a short story himself, titled “The Empty Shoes” (“*Los zapatos vacíos*”) which he memorised and narrated at the competition.⁹⁵ He had impressed the jurors, among whom was the established poet Elisco Diego, who was also Head of the Department of Juvenile and Children’s Literature.⁹⁶ Diego recommended hiring Arenas as an assistant at the National Library and redirected him to María Teresa Freyre de Andrade, the library’s director. As Jorge Olivares writes, “[t]he bored clerk at the *Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria* soon became an assistant in the library’s circulation ‘department’⁹⁷. This transfer, as Arenas has recounted, “was decisive for [my] literary education”⁹⁸. Under the mentorship of Elisco Diego and Cintio Vintier, he was introduced to not just children’s literature, but a vast array of books. While he was on guard duty on some nights, by then a requirement in most Cuban governmental offices, he “enjoyed the magical pleasure of picking any book at random”⁹⁹. Since the “magnanimous” director of the library, María Teresa Freyre de Andrade, “required only five hours of work”, Arenas found enough leisure to write his first novel *Celestino antes des alba* (*Celestino Before Dawn*, later republished as *Singing from the Well*)¹⁰⁰. Arriving at eight o’clock to work, five hours before his shift started, Arenas took advantage of empty halls in the library and managed to finish his manuscript for the novel in a meagre “fifteen-day period”¹⁰¹. He submitted the manuscript to the inaugural National Literary Competition (*Premio Nacional de Novela Cirilo Villaverde*), organised and sponsored by the Union of Writers and Artists in Cuba (UNEAC) in 1965. As Camelly Cruz-Martes has written, “[T]he book was not well received by the Castro regime due to the work’s narrative style and homosexual content; the authorities promoted a literature in the social realist vein and rooted in Communist ideology”¹⁰². The book won the second prize and an honourable mention, but as the

⁹⁵ Jorge Olivares, *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas: Family, Sexuality and the Cuban Revolution*, 15-16.

⁹⁶ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 48.

⁹⁷ Jorge Olivares, *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas*, 16.

⁹⁸ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 48.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Jorge Olivares, *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas*, 17.

¹⁰² Camelly Cruz-Martes, “Prologue: “The Will to Live Manifesting Itself,” in Reinaldo Arenas, *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 5.

judges failed to come to an agreement regarding their decision, no first prize was awarded that year.

While it was true that literature with Marxist underpinnings would generally be favoured by the organisation, there was still enough space within its scope of functioning to accommodate literature that did not strictly conform to the dictates of Socialist Realism. Castro's famous speech directed at the artists and intellectuals of Cuba, delivered on June 30, 1961 to the first Congress of Cuban Writers and Artists, directly takes up this "the problem of freedom for artistic creation", addressing specifically the issues of formal freedom and freedom of content permissible within the scope of the Revolution.¹⁰³ Whereas with regard to formal freedom, Castro had no problems in admitting to absolute creative license on part of the artist, with regard to freedom of content; he was more careful in pointing out that any doubts regarding possible censorship from the government should arise only "to the writers and artists who are not counterrevolutionary, but who do not feel themselves to be revolutionary either"¹⁰⁴. He added that the revolutionary artist would be someone who "puts the Revolution above everything else, and the most revolutionary artist will be that one who is prepared to sacrifice even his own artistic vocation for the Revolution"¹⁰⁵. He emphasized repeatedly that the Revolution was committed primarily to the cultural needs of "the people", but also did not fail to pose its scope as widely inclusive—accommodating even those writers and artists who were in agreement with the Revolution on social and economic matters, but who "had a philosophical position different from the philosophy of the Revolution"¹⁰⁶. He also proposed that the Revolution had no obligations to artists and intellectuals who were "counterrevolutionary"; that is, opposed to this great historical change, which had an *a priori* right to be and to exist"¹⁰⁷. Thus, he summed up the rights of artists and intellectuals in post-revolutionary Cuba by a singular remark: "What are the rights of revolutionary or

¹⁰³ Fidel Castro, "Words to the Intellectuals" ("*Palabras a los Intelectuales*"), speech delivered on June 30, 1961, *Castro Speech Data Base: Speeches, Interviews, Articles*, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1961/19610630.html> (accessed March 2, 2022).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

non-revolutionary writers and artists? Within the Revolution, everything against the Revolution, no rights at all.”¹⁰⁸

The National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC) was founded in 1961 to inquire into the status of new Cuban literature, and to ascertain the role of Cuban writers and intellectuals in a post-revolutionary society. Seymour Menton, in his study of the prose fiction spurred on by the Revolution, attempts an extensive survey of prose literature published within the first three decades after the Revolution.¹⁰⁹ Menton classifies and analyses more than two hundred novels and volumes or anthologies of short stories to gauge the impact of the Revolution on the growth and dissemination of Cuban prose literature till 1973. He specifically classifies these works, published in different time periods, into four groups: 1959-61, 1961-65, 1966-70 and 1971-73 to document the changing policies of the Castro regime towards the growth of post-revolutionary Cuban literature.¹¹⁰ In the first phase, which Menton defines as “The Struggle against Tyranny: 1959-61”, he enumerates seven novels which historically document the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship, without regard to much formal experimentation.¹¹¹ Although the general trajectory of the Revolution revealed Marxist undertones (or perhaps, overtones, if we go by Arenas’ account of an education for the Cuban youth to indoctrinate them), they were concealed or disavowed by the government. However, the most crucial event which changed this trajectory was, as Francisco Soto has described, “Fidel Castro’s declaration on April 16, 1961 that the revolution was Marxist-Leninist”¹¹². Thus, the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship would be no longer posited as the main goal of the Revolution, which had now altered into “the establishment of a socialist state that required a Marxist-Leninist perspective in addressing the problems of creating revolutionary consciousness”.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Seymour Menton, *Prose Fiction of the Cuban Revolution* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1975), 7-10.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 11.

¹¹² Francisco Soto, *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia* (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994), 15-16.

¹¹³ Ibid. 16.

The years 1961-65 also commenced an ideological debate in the realm of Cuban literature and the arts over the role of the artist-intellectual in fostering revolutionary consciousness. Whereas novels published during the first phase 1959-61 had heavily depended upon Socialist Realism and the testimonial narrative to represent the paradigm shift that had entered Cuban society with the Revolution, Francisco Soto writes that there was “[d]issatisfaction over the quality of literature produced”, and a literary style was widely sought that foregrounded “formal experimentation that did not compromise the Revolution”¹¹⁴. A crucial voice in this debate was that of Ernesto “Che” Guevara whose much-celebrated essay ‘Socialism and Man in Cuba’ (1965) also addressed the issues of formal experimentation and fostering of revolutionary consciousness.¹¹⁵ Guevara argued that while it was undeniable that Socialist Realism was an outdated mode of literary expression that will, in all probability, produce a monotonous and sterile literature in Cuba, he also cautioned against the tendency towards mere formal experimentation that compromised the writer’s commitment to the Revolution. He proposed not condemning “all post-mid-nineteenth century art forms from the pontifical throne of realism- at all costs”, because it entailed “committing the Proudhonian error of the return of to the past, and straitjacketing the artistic expression of the man who is born and being formed today”¹¹⁶. Guevara stated that the “original sin” of many of Cuba’s writers and intellectuals lay in the fact that “they are not authentically revolutionary”¹¹⁷. He advised finding a balance between the needs of formal experimentation that would suit the literature of the present and finding an authentic revolutionary voice, without imitating foreign models which merely showed the decadence of the Capitalist order. While Guevara’s thoughts on artistic expression were mostly in favour of espousing literature which actively promoted and fostered revolutionary consciousness, the essay also reveals the willingness to debate questions of artistic theme and form in post-revolutionary Cuba during this phase.

During the phase 1961-65, such a close adherence to Socialist Realism was not demanded of the authors. But the advent of “Super-Stalinism”, as Arenas

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ernesto “Che” Guevara, “Socialism and Man in Cuba”, *Marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1965/03/man-socialism.htm> (accessed March 2, 2022).

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

has called it, commenced a repressive phase in 1968, wherein "[F]orced voluntary work was intensified", and the time for leisure was cut down for Cuban writers and intellectuals"¹¹⁸. These developments occurred just "at the time when the entire nation was gearing up for the ten million-ton sugar harvest"¹¹⁹.

In 1966, Arenas submitted the manuscript of his second novel *El mundo aluciante* (*The Hallucinatory World*, later republished as *The Ill-fated Peregrinations of Fray Servando*) to the second National Literary Competition organised by the UNEAC. The novel was awarded first honourable mention, although the judges (one of whom were Alejo Carpentier) awarded no first prize.¹²⁰ The book was never published in Cuba, presumably owing to the refusal by Arenas to conform to the dictates of Socialist Realism. *El mundo aluciante* is a creative retelling of the life of Servando Teresa de Mier, a Catholic priest in "New Spain" during the late eighteenth century. Servando Teresa de Mier had delivered a blasphemous sermon on December 12, 1794 during the commemorations held in honour of the Marian apparition, "Virgin of Guadalupe". In the sermon, Mier had asserted that contrary to chronicled colonial history that locates it in 1531, apparitions of the Virgin had been seen 1750 years ago in Mexico.¹²¹ He had also proclaimed that the original painting of the Lady of Guadalupe was on the cloak of St. Thomas the Apostle who had preached in the Americas long before its colonisation by the Spanish. As J. Whitfield has shown, by preaching this sermon, Servando Teresa de Mier had "invoked the wrath of the Inquisition by undermining the religious legitimisation of the conquest of the New World".¹²² Mier was sentenced to exile for ten years at a convent in Cantabria, Spain.¹²³ He spent the rest of his life constantly in movement, running from the religious and political enmity that he had contracted through his revolutionary proclamation. Escaping repeated

¹¹⁸ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 72-73

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* 73.

¹²⁰ See Joey Whitfield, "Forms of Dissidence: "Celestino antes del alba" and "El mundo aluciante" by Reinaldo Arenas", *New Readings* 17 no. 1 (November 2020): 7, <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/120697/14/111-227-1-PB%20%281%29.pdf> (accessed March 4, 2022).

¹²¹ See Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, *The Memoirs of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier* trans. Helen Lane, ed. Susana Rotker (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), xii. The section xi-xix provides a chronology of events in the priest's life.

¹²² Joey Whitfield, "Forms of Dissidence: "Celestino antes del alba" and "El mundo aluciante" by Reinaldo Arenas", 8.

¹²³ Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, *The Memoirs of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier*, xiv.

arrests and incarceration, he found his way in Paris, serving as an interpreter for the rich Peruvian José Sarea, Count of Gijón.¹²⁴ He joined the Mexican War of Independence, joining the Spanish revolutionary Francisco Javier Mina, and was captured by Spanish royalists. Imprisoned first in the castle of San Carlos de Perote, Mier was transported to Havana, from whence he escaped yet again to Philadelphia in 1821.¹²⁵ Even after managing to reach independent Mexico in 1822, the priest was imprisoned and held captive at the castle of San Juan de Ulúa and later at the convent of San Domingo, from where he escaped, for a seventh time in his life.¹²⁶ Elected as a deputy to the second constituent Congress of independent Mexico, he delivered his famous “Prophetic Discourse” where he argued in favour of the adoption of a centralised republican system in Mexico.¹²⁷ In Arenas’s version of Fray Servando’s life, the priest encounters several historical figures, although anachronistically used, and literary figures such as Orlando from Virginia Woolf’s novel. By the end of the novel, although Fray Servando “manages to return to Mexico to take part in the successful War of Independence”, he “becomes disillusioned that power is still in the hands of the same privileged minority and feels Mexico itself has become a giant prison”¹²⁸. Joey Whitfield thus appropriately comments that the literary tribute paid by Arenas towards Fray Servando unabashedly uses the historical figure to bring out Arenas’s “own subjective position and projected desires—not so much blurring the line between history and fiction but asking whether history is ever, to recall Michel Foucault’s dictum, anything other than the history of the present”¹²⁹. Arenas’s epigraph to the novel openly admits that the novel narrates only a version of the life of the controversial 18th century Catholic priest, a version “[s]uch as it was, and could have been; such as I should have liked it to have been”¹³⁰. Thus Arenas makes a conscious attempt to remind the reader that the writing of history cannot happen completely

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid. xvii.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ See Santa Arias, “Fray Servando Teresa de Mier’s Patriotic Cosmopolitanism: Paris, London, and Philadelphia,” *Vanderbilt E-Journal of Luso-Hispanic Studies* 9 (2013):16, <https://doi.org/10.15695/vejlhs.v9i0.3941>. (accessed March 9, 2022).

¹²⁸ Joey Whitfield, “Forms of Dissidence: “Celestino antes del alba” and “El mundo alucinante” by Reinaldo Arenas”, 9.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Reinaldo Arenas, *Hallucinations: Being an Account of the Life and Adventures of Friar Servando Teresa de Mier* trans. Gordon Brotherston (New York: Penguin, 1976), 9.

unmediated by the subjectivity of its author, or his relationship to the language. At the same time, Whitfield has asserted, his choice of a truly “revolutionary” protagonist in Fray Servando Teresa de Mier serves to unmask “how in Cuba the term revolutionary has come to mean precisely its opposite...to conform to all its (the Cuban state’s) pre and proscriptions”¹³¹. Fray Servando’s claim to be a true revolutionary lay in his adoption of an ethical posture towards the dominant colonial ideology of his time. Arenas thus prioritises the spirit of dissidence and non-conformism as the cardinal facets of the true revolutionary, emphasizing “that true revolutionary thinking will always be in excess of attempts to institutionalise it”.¹³² In the novel, when Fray Servando finds himself in Paris at the time of Napoleon’s second entry into the city, and eschewing his initial admiration for the great leader, comes to realise that the people “had in fact, only changed tyrants”¹³³. He also notices that people and officials, who had held “high positions before the revolution, and those who had used it to their advantage, were being reinstated [...]the dregs coming back up to the surface” and that “everything is a fraud in the world of politics”.¹³⁴ The novel thus becomes a thinly veiled allegorical representation of the present in Cuba, replete with its manifold exclusions, bans and censorships, silencing of dissent, incarceration and enslavement in forced work camps. Through it, Arenas decries and rejects—Whitfield points out—“the grand narrative of the emancipation of the working class, and aims to give voice to the oppressed of history”.¹³⁵

With the start of the Revolutionary Offensive Campaign of 1968, Cuba sought to nationalise all privately-owned businesses and provide impetus to sugar production all over the island. However, instead of following the usual Soviet-policy of providing material incentives to workers for working overtime to increase the nation’s production, Castro’s government followed a policy of motivating them

¹³¹ Joey Whitfield, “Forms of Dissidence: “Celestino antes del alba” and “El mundo alucinante” by Reinaldo Arenas”, 9

¹³² *Ibid.* 12.

¹³³ Reinaldo Arenas, *Hallucinations*, 144.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* 144-45.

¹³⁵ Joey Whitfield, “Forms of Dissidence: “Celestino antes del alba” and “El mundo alucinante” by Reinaldo Arenas”, 13.

“without material incentives to work for the collective, the common good”¹³⁶. Already since November 1965, Military Units to Aid Production (UMAPs) had set up to aid economic production through agricultural labour camps in the Camaguey province. These camps imprisoned and detained “thousands of self-acknowledged, closeted and presumed homosexuals for up to three years without charge”¹³⁷. Arenas himself was also sent to the Manuel Sanguily Sugar Mill in 1970 “to cut sugarcane and to write a book praising that odyssey as well as the ten million-ton harvest”¹³⁸. The experience of forced labour at the sugar mill seemed to him “like entering the last circle of hell”, where the recruits were expected to get up before dawn and cut sugarcane all day long under the blazing, tropical mid-day sun.¹³⁹ Arenas’ experience of the forced-labour camp inspired his long poem ‘El Central’, which explicitly denounced the arbitrary and repressive nature of the totalitarian state, which, in the name of supposed “rehabilitation”, forcefully expropriated labour from a section of its own citizens. The next section will address the literary and political dissidence performed by Arenas through poems written during the phase 1969-1971.

5.2. “A Kind of Mire is Falling”: Decoding Literary and Political Dissidence under a Totalitarian Regime

The political and literary dissidence performed by Arenas through his poetry presents itself through the commitment to truth and the indomitable urge to testify to instances of state-endorsed repression meted out to the homosexuals (the sexual dissident)—clubbing them together with those other elements of society such as delinquents, criminals and ‘social parasites’, expropriating forced labour in UMAP camps and subjecting them to imprisonment.¹⁴⁰ His dissidence may be located in not only his strong motivation to write independently, but also in his

¹³⁶ Gary Prevost, “Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution”, *Headwaters* 24 (2007): 25, <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=headwaters> (accessed March 9, 2022).

¹³⁷ Lillian Guerra, “Gender Policing, Homosexuality and the New Patriarchy of the Cuban Revolution, 1965–70”, *Social History* 35 no. 3 (August 2010): 268, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27866661> (accessed March 5, 2022).

¹³⁸ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 74.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* 74-75.

¹⁴⁰ See Ian Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia, 1996), 65-71 and Allen Young, *Gays under the Cuban Revolution* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1981), 43-48.

subjectivity as a homosexual, which gradually became (as per Whitfield), “the essence of Arenas’s ontological consistency as an oppositional writer”¹⁴¹. His re-writing of the life of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier’s life creatively uses the essence of Servando’s “revolutionary” line of thinking to advance issues pertinent to his position on the economy of pleasure and its selective repression by the authority of the totalitarian state. In *El mundo aluciante* Arenas depicts Fray Servando’s visit through a series of different “lands of love”: in the first, multitudes of men and women copulate “in a giant lake of semen”¹⁴², while in the second, hordes of women in a desert were “writhing around in the sand, caressing each other with liberal accuracy until their orgasm came”¹⁴³. The third “land of love” again, contains exclusively men who partake of the pleasures of an orgy. Arenas makes Servando make the radical claim that “pleasure is divorced from sin and sex has nothing to do with ethics”¹⁴⁴. This dissociation of the sexual economy of pleasure from ethics constitutes Arenas’s ardent questioning of public policies in Cuba since the mid-sixties which associated homosexuality with extravagance, corruption and decadence.¹⁴⁵ To purge the supposedly sanctified body politic of a totalitarian state that (having manipulated the already existent strain of uber-masculine behaviour called *machismo*) asserted the dubious model of the “new man” (*el hombre nuevo*), forced labour camps were instituted, with a bid to eliminate homosexuals from public state policy.¹⁴⁶ However, Arenas’s veiled allegory of post-revolutionary realities in Cuba in *El mundo aluciante* may have had less to do with its censoring. Fernandez Robaina, in an interview to Joey Whitfield, has claimed “that it was Arenas’s refusal to cut the homoerotic descriptions and his favouring of sex between men” within the novel that ended his literary career in Cuba.¹⁴⁷

It is necessary, at this point, to inquire into the structural features of a totalitarian system in order to understand to what extent post-revolutionary Cuba

¹⁴¹ Joey Whitfield, “Forms of Dissidence: “Celestino antes del alba” and “El mundo alucinante” by Reinaldo Arenas”, 14.

¹⁴² Reinaldo Arenas, *Hallucinations*, 99.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* 111.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 112.

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, Marvin Leiner, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality and AIDS* (London & New York: Routledge, 2019 (1994)), 25, 32.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 32-33

¹⁴⁷ Fernandez Robaina, paraphrased in Joey Whitfield, “Forms of Dissidence: “Celestino antes del alba” and “El mundo alucinante” by Reinaldo Arenas”, 13.

qualifies as a totalitarian dictatorship. The theoretical model I have chosen to hollow here comes from Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brezinski, who in their work *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* have identified six such tendencies.¹⁴⁸ In defining totalitarianism Brezinski designates it a system in which

...technologically advanced instruments of political power are wielded without restraint by centralised leadership of an elite movement for the purpose of effecting a total social revolution including the conditioning of man, on the basis of certain arbitrary ideological assumptions proclaimed by the leadership, in an atmosphere of coerced unanimity of the entire population.¹⁴⁹

From this largely inclusive and astute definition, it is possible, following Friedrich and Brezinski, to identify these cardinal features. The authors combine these six traits as a “syndrome” and identify them as typical of totalitarianism across the world, especially in the context of late twentieth century totalitarian systems.¹⁵⁰ The components of this syndrome consist of an ideology, a single party typically led by one man, a terroristic police, a communications monopoly, a weapons monopoly, and a centrally directed economy.¹⁵¹ When we turn to the first trait identified by the authors, it is defined as “[a]n elaborate ideology, consisting of an official body of doctrine covering all vital aspects of man's existence to which everyone living in that society is supposed to adhere, at least passively”¹⁵². Based “upon a more or less elaborate criticism of what is wrong with the existing or antecedent society”, an ideology provides a succinct blueprint of reconstituting a society by destroying the antecedent order and the creation of the new, becoming also an all-encompassing doctrine affecting every significant facet of public life.¹⁵³ It usually is engaged with advancing a “chiliastic claim”, projecting “a perfect and final state of mankind”¹⁵⁴.

The second characteristic identified by Friedrich and Brezinski is the existence of a single mass party typically led by one man, “the dictator”¹⁵⁵. Often,

¹⁴⁸ See “The General Characteristics of Totalitarian Dictatorship” in Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 15-27.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 53.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 21.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid. 22.

¹⁵³ Ibid. 88.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 22.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

the leadership of the single mass party is confined to a “relatively small percentage of the total population (up to 10 percent)”.¹⁵⁶ This little faction is often “passionately and unquestioningly dedicated to the ideology and prepared to assist in every way in promoting its general acceptance”¹⁵⁷. The party ranks are usually constituted of hierarchically and administration is carried out by an elite and powerful oligarchy who exert complete control over all institutions or events of public life.

The third characteristic identified by the authors is the presence of a terroristic police system and an all-pervasive system of surveillance.¹⁵⁸ This system may be “physical or psychic”, effected through party ranks, and designed towards the projected goal of breaking away completely with the past. Any challenge to the supposed teleology of “revolutionary change” cannot usually be tolerated and dissenting voices are often repressed, banned and censored.¹⁵⁹ Thus it is typical of totalitarian regimes to try to re-direct public outrage against its “demonstrable enemies”, and “against more or less arbitrarily selected sections of the population”¹⁶⁰. As a consequence of this, “[g]overnmental terror seeks to frighten those under its sway into conformity and obedience”¹⁶¹. This is a significant point because supposed “unanimity” of the entire population is also what provides totalitarian regimes with their greatest strength. As Sharon Marie Smith comments, the apex of such terroristic control is realised through “a system based upon informers, purges, and public confessions, and it is capped with the existence of concentration camps”.¹⁶²

The fourth feature which the authors have identified is the “technologically controlled monopoly” over all forms and modes of communication within a particular society, in the hands of the government and by extension, the single mass party.¹⁶³ Preserving this form of monopolistic control is

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 21.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 22.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 21.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. 309.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 22.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 129.

¹⁶² Sharon Marie Smith, “Theory and practice of totalitarian dictatorship, a case study of Castro's Cuba” (M.A. diss., Univ. of Montana, 1965), 9, <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3869> (accessed March 7, 2022).

¹⁶³ Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 368.

essential for a totalitarian regime to weed out dissent, effected through a near-absolute control over all channels of public communication such as the postal services, the telephone and the telegraph, along with mass media such as newspapers and the press, as broadcasting channels on radio and television.¹⁶⁴ The ubiquitous and extensive use of propaganda is repeatedly carried out through these channels, with the government also reserving the right to open private mail in the interest of preventing “counter-revolutionary plots”¹⁶⁵. However, such monopolistic control over the press and mass media often breeds growing distrust among the citizens towards governmental propaganda. To combat this problem within totalitarian regimes, the monopoly over the system of public education is chiefly used for the purpose of systematic political indoctrination; and to direct, as far as possible, its citizens to achieve certain “desired values” which prioritise loyalty towards the regime.¹⁶⁶

The fifth hallmark of totalitarian regimes is the monopoly over force exerted by the state, usually through technologically conditioned complete control over the “effective use of all weapons of armed combat”.¹⁶⁷ Since the newly instituted government has the sole right to legalised violence, it is careful to liquidate even part of this monopoly over arms trade. An effective “weapons monopoly” thus, weeds out the possibility of any resistance burgeoning from any section of the population, no matter what internal and external political conditions are.¹⁶⁸

The final element designated by Friedrich and Brezinski to be a feature of totalitarian regimes is a centrally directed economy, often directed against the “expropriation of the exploiters” or towards the “common good”¹⁶⁹. In order to run this centrally directed economy smoothly, totalitarian regimes take recourse to employing public servants and bureaucrats. But even beyond the restricted ambit of governmental administration, there takes place a gradual “bureaucratization of large segments of organizational activity”.¹⁷⁰ All organisational bodies, whether

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 135.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 130.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 362.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 9.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 24.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 205.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

comprised of workers' unions, or other superior bodies, are subjected to the same centralised hierarchy of supervision and surveillance. Leaders of these organisational bodies thus become simply "public bureaucrats" even if they do not have the status of government employees; as in their role as executors of governmental decision-making bodies in a directed economy, they are merely "dependent functionaries of a vast governmentally controlled apparatus"¹⁷¹.

If the totalitarian regime happens to lay its foundations in a traditionally "underdeveloped" economy, often rapid and immediate industrialisation, it seeks to immediately promote entire, or partial, nationalisation of all the productive sectors of the economy. In a centrally directed economy, state appointed directors and managers act as overseers, heading their respective factories, labour unions and are "are transformed into instruments and branches of the state machine"¹⁷².

Pitting the recalcitrant "individual" against the interests of the collective appears to be an enduring feature of totalitarian regimes. As William Ebenstein has pointed out, the control of the individual by the state appears to be objective of most of such regimes, leaving "no area of human activity—political, economic, social, religious and educational—that is exempt from government control and domination"¹⁷³. In the Cuban example, after the seizure of power in January, 1959 (as it has been demonstrated before) the new revolutionary government did not openly proclaim its adhesion to the Marxist-Leninist line till the Bay of Pigs' invasion of 1961. However, the Marxist-Leninist ideological underpinnings of the Revolution were always apparent, especially through the systematic indoctrination of youth through education, as recounted in Arenas's memoir. The centrally directed character of the Cuban economy revealed itself almost immediately through the acquisition of land through the Agrarian Reforms of 1959-63 and the nationalisation of agriculture and industries, including even public utilities and the banking system.¹⁷⁴ State companies which manufactured similar products were classified and grouped together into "Consolidated

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 206.

¹⁷² Ibid. 212.

¹⁷³ William Ebenstein, *Totalitarianism: New Perspectives* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and VJinston, 1962), 6.

¹⁷⁴ See Sharon Marie Smith, "Theory and practice of totalitarian dictatorship, a case study of Castro's Cuba" (M.A. diss., Univ. of Montana, 1965), 87-88.

Enterprises” (*empresas consolidas*)¹⁷⁵. The newly instituted Ministry of Industry (with Ernesto “Che” Guevara as its first minister), the *empresas consolidas* and the controlled operation of state-appointed directors became the regulating principles of the directed Cuban economy. These were topped by a Central Planning Board (JUCEPLAN) which prepared long-range economic plans and regulated all economic operations, maintaining liaison with provincial co-ordinating agencies, the *Junta de Coordinacion* (JUCEJ)¹⁷⁶. Castro’s government also monopolised all channels of public communication including mass media. *Granma*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, was founded by the merger of two previously published (and rival) newspapers, *Revolución* (“Revolution”) and *Hoy* (“Today”), and commenced publication in February, 1966.¹⁷⁷ As Juan Orlando Pérez has pointed out, “*Granma* acquired a semi-normative role within the Cuban press”, publishing “the *communiqués* of party and the government, and Castro’s speeches, marking the political line other media have to follow”¹⁷⁸. Similarly, another newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, official organ of the Young Communist League, was also founded by the merger of *Diario de la Tarde* and the magazine *Mello*¹⁷⁹. Regarding the gradually diminishing freedom of the press, Castro repeated Lenin’s aversion towards its role in a “bourgeois” democracy: “The bourgeois freedom of the press ... is the freedom of the rich to be the owners of most of the means of thinking, which they use to defend their interests as a class against the exploited”¹⁸⁰.

In February, 1968 a resistant group of older pro-Soviet communists within the ranks of the Popular Socialist Party (PSP)—popularly known as the “micro-faction”—was purged by the Castro regime, through levelling, against

¹⁷⁵ See Max Nolff, “Industrial Organization in Cuba” in *Cuba: The Economic and Social Revolution* ed. Dudley Seers (North Carolina: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1964), 301.

¹⁷⁶ See Wyatt MacGaffey and Clifford R. Barnett, *Twentieth Century Cuba: The Background of the Castro Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 276

¹⁷⁷ “Granma”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Granma-Cuban-newspaper> (accessed March 7, 2022).

¹⁷⁸ Juan Orlando Pérez, “The Media in Castro’s Cuba; Every Word Counts” in *The Media in Latin America* ed. Jairo Lugo-Ocando (Berkshire, UK: Open University Press, 2008), 122.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Fidel Castro, “Reply to Statements made by Chilean President Frei”, speech delivered in 1966, *Castro Speech Data Base: Speeches, Interviews, Articles 1959-66*, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1966/19660320.html> (accessed March 7, 2022)

them, accusations of conspiracy against the state¹⁸¹. The divergence had occurred owing to the differences, between the government and the stated faction within the PSP, over the ideological controversy within the “Socialist world” on the question of whether providing material, or moral incentive to workers were more effective as an economic measure against poverty and unemployment in the late 1960s.¹⁸² Carmelo Mesa-Lago has provided a succinct account of the international ideological controversy. She identifies three major tendencies within Socialist nations on this question: “...Yugoslavia, as the leading proponent of material incentives; the Soviet Union and most of Eastern Europe, also in favour of material incentives but in a more moderate position; and Cuba and the Chinese group, stressing moral incentives”¹⁸³. For countries such as Yugoslavia who were strongly in favour of providing material incentives, the primary objective was to ensure economic over ideological development, a higher productivity of labour and capital and the partial tolerance of unemployment. The Sino-Guevarist line of economic planning and implementation did not altogether the importance of providing material incentives to workers but “relegated these to a secondary position, giving priority to moral incentives”¹⁸⁴. The primary exponent of this line of thinking was Ernesto “Che” Guevara, the first Minister of Industry in post-revolutionary Cuba, who propounded the concept of the “new man” (*hombre nuevo*) in Cuba, a being endowed “with a superior consciousness” who would typify the transition from a crony-capitalist dictatorship under Batista to a liberated and emancipated society infused with Communist ideals, a society in transition which ought to “liquidate its old ties in order to enter quickly into the new stage”¹⁸⁵. Guevara criticised the Soviet line on the ground of excessive use of material incentives to increase productivity, because the system “takes unto itself special powers and afterward imposes its own force on social relations”¹⁸⁶. The extensive use of such a strategy, he deemed, would thus be detrimental to the growth of a strong ideological consciousness. On the

¹⁸¹ See Carmelo Mesa-Lago, “Ideological, Political, and Economic Factors in the Cuban Controversy on Material Versus Moral Incentives”, *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 14 no.1 (February 1972), 71, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/174981> (accessed March 8, 2022)

¹⁸² Ibid. 50

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid 61.

¹⁸⁵ Ernesto “Che” Guevara, quoted in Mesa-Lago, “Ideological, Political, and Economic Factors in the Cuban Controversy on Material Versus Moral Incentives”, 62.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

other hand, providing impetus to production through providing moral incentives (which included “medals, flags, pennants, and diplomas, earned through socialist emulation and granted by the CTC and the Council of Ministers”, as well as honorary titles such as “National Worker” or “Vanguard Hero”) was believed to promote solidarity among the proletariat¹⁸⁷. It focussed on “enterprise financed through the state budget (instead of the accounting system of self-financing), education through unpaid labour, and strict administrative centralization”¹⁸⁸. As a consequence of the Castro regime opting for this particular line, unpaid labour was recompensed through an “increase in social services conferred gratuitously by the state (social salary), such as education, housing, medical attention, and social security”¹⁸⁹.

Castro labelled the ‘micro-faction’ as “a reformist, reactionary, and right-wing tendency which propagated the idea that the government's policy of moral incentives would end in categorical failure”¹⁹⁰. As many as forty officials of the ‘micro-faction’ were tried, imprisoned or executed as a part of this systematic purge of dissenting voices within the governmental machinery. Mesa-Lago further demonstrates, as a result of the adoption of the line of providing moral incentives by the state in the form of “gratuitous gifts, unpaid labour “is realized in a good number of cases by force-e.g., recruits for the compulsory military service, political prisoners, and re-educating bureaucrats”¹⁹¹. A decisive turn came in Cuban politics with regard to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by four countries of the Warsaw Pact—the Soviet Union, Poland, Bulgaria and Hungary on the night of 21st August, 1968. This joint invasion was, in fact, a response towards the Prague Spring liberalisation reforms attempted by Alexander Dubček.¹⁹² Greater de-centralisation of the Czechoslovakian economy was attempted and additional freedoms granted, pertaining to media, speech and travel. Fidel Castro’s speech, delivered on 24th August, 1968 had, rather predictably, criticised the liberalisation reforms and

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 62-63.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 98.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid 71.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 63.

¹⁹² See Lawrence E. Joseph, “International: Prague’s Spring into Capitalism”, *New York Times* (December 2, 1990),

<https://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CEEDF1338F931A35751C1A966958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1> (accessed March 9, 2022).

concluded that the Cuban government “considered Czechoslovakia to be heading toward a counterrevolutionary situation, toward capitalism and into the arms of imperialism”.¹⁹³ He was however, careful and diplomatic when he pointed out that it would be “fiction and a lie” to state that “the sovereignty of the Czechoslovak state was not violated”¹⁹⁴. Thus although he acknowledged, rather obliquely, that the invasion had no “legality”, Castro saw the possibility of “Western economic aid” behind the Prague Spring reforms and decried the “Yugoslav League of Communists”:

They applauded with both hands all those liberal reforms, that whole concept of the party ceasing to be the instrument of revolutionary power, of power ceasing to be a function of the party—because this is very closely linked to the entire outlook of the Yugoslav League of Communists. All those criteria of political nature that completely deviate from Marxism, those criteria of an economic nature, are intimately linked with the Yugoslav League of Communists' ideology.¹⁹⁵

What was more alarming was the readiness with which Castro had posited the hypothetical possibility that should “a group of honest revolutionaries” in Cuba be faced with the “prospects of an advance, or better said, of a retrogression toward counterrevolutionary positions”, they should not hesitate to seek “the aid of friendly armies to prevent such a situation from occurring”¹⁹⁶. Castro was, of course, aware of the possible threat posed by the United States during the Bay of Pigs’ invasion in 1961, and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962¹⁹⁷. Arenas has recounted, in his autobiographical memoir, the political events of 1968 and their repercussions on him. His friend Evelio Cabiedes (nicknamed “EL Beny”) had been “chosen as coordinator” of a few lectures organised at the Cultural Centre at Pinar del Rio and he “was travelling in a steamy bus” to deliver a lecture there¹⁹⁸. Arenas notes how, for two or three days before Fidel Castro’s speech of 24th August, *Granma* reported the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia “without taking a position,

¹⁹³ Fidel Castro, “Comments on Czechoslovakia”, speech delivered on August 24, 1968, *Castro Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1968/08/24.htm> (accessed March 10, 2022).

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ Cuban Missile Crisis:

¹⁹⁸ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 72.

merely quoting other opinions from different newspapers”¹⁹⁹. The mature Arenas then describes this journalistic inconsistency with dry irony:

If *Granma* was publishing all the news without taking a position, it was undoubtedly because Fidel Castro was awaiting the pertinent guidelines from the Soviet Union and its “heroes” who had crossed the Czech border with tanks; he asked that the Soviet Union invade Cuba should the United States threaten his regime.
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I intend to read Arenas’s poem “A Kind of Mire is Falling” from 1969 against the political backdrop of totalitarian rule in Cuba. In the poem, Arenas ascribes symbolic significance to “mire” as a sullyng agent to gestures and dreams, in the wake of a “timeless horror” that gulps down all optimism and hope:

Horror joins horror, poised
to stamp out all hope
until leaving us only the bothersome,
pointless resort to go on living.²⁰¹

The symbolic “mire” of hopeless subjugation to authoritarian measures, of the constant anxiety of state surveillance experienced by the individual citizen under such a government is alluded to, where fresh horrors make older ones look ordinary in comparison. Under the benumbing threat of such a darkening cloud of “horrors blanketing the horizon, dissenting noise is “unleashed in vain”²⁰². Arenas however, points towards a form of commitment to truth through poetry, where “memory may hark back all it will”²⁰³. He concludes the poem with the threatening image, where,

I forever see my body up in smoke
and only the image of horror slowly gives it shape. ²⁰⁴

The abstraction used through “horror” here may be read against the backdrop of the gradually tightening grip of “Super-Stalinism” over Cuban public life. The 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, and Castro’s approval of such a move within the global order of politics had signalled for Arenas that “[t]he leader who

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Reinaldo Arenas, “A Kind of Mire is Falling,” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems* trans. Kelly Washbourne ((Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 2014), 109.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

had fought against Batista was now a dictator much worse than Batista, as well as a mere puppet of the Stalinist Soviet Union”²⁰⁵. This event, and the political repercussions it had on Cuban public life, was a moment of rude awakening which unequivocally communicated to the younger generation of poets and artists in Cuba that “[o]ur only choice was to live under a despotic regime, in a despotic colony, which was, no doubt, more despotic than the metropolis from which all our orders emanated”²⁰⁶. Thus, he discovered, much to his chagrin, that the Revolution, which was supposed to be a harbinger of liberty had in fact, turned Cuba into a satellite-state of the Soviet Union. This was the historical moment from which the aesthetic and ethical resistance offered by Arenas towards the arbitrariness of the Castro regime began to take shape. He admits to having taken part in “a protest march in front of the Czechoslovak embassy... a march joined by a great number of Havana’s youth”—a march where, “Soviet imperialism was openly condemned”²⁰⁷. The march ended with the police interfering, and arresting many of the participants. Arenas and his friends, “El Beny” and Hiram Prado still somehow managed to evade the seemingly inescapable “dragnet” of state surveillance and fled “through the bushes at Coppelia”²⁰⁸. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia also ended any possibility of exposure to films produced during the Prague Spring, available at the Czechoslovak Cultural Affairs building in Havana which the communist regime considered as ideologically “diversionist”²⁰⁹. During this phase, Arenas recounts, “[f]orced “voluntary” work was intensified” and the amount of leisure available to writers and artists were reduced.²¹⁰

The Revolutionary Offensive campaign was certainly another step advanced by the Castro regime for greater socio-political control of the masses where it sought to eliminate the urban *petit-bourgeois* class in Cuba. Although larger Cuban enterprises had already been nationalised, during the Revolutionary Offensive campaign, “[a]ll small private businesses were lumped in the same sack

²⁰⁵ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 72.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

and eliminated”²¹¹. The campaign also sought to maximise sugar production in the island, even if at the cost of under-producing other essential consumer goods, the scant supply of which forced the regime to introduce a system of rationing. Carmelo Mesa-Lago’s estimation of the Cuban market in 1967-68 notes “a new decrease in production of milk and the extension of rationing to other consumer goods that formerly were sold on the open market, such as bread and sugar”.²¹² Additional difficulties were experienced owing to the scant supply of “meat, beans, and cooking oils”²¹³. She has demonstrated with figures, that notwithstanding the Castro regime’s overt claims to have introduced agrarian reforms, “agricultural output in Cuba increased fifteen percent between 1958 and 1961 but declined by twenty-three percent between 1961 and 1969”²¹⁴. Agricultural production in crops other than sugarcane rapidly deteriorated, and (as Castro admitted in one of his public speeches in March, 1968) “the deficiencies in supplies were causing dissatisfaction, discontent, confusion, uneasiness, and protest”²¹⁵. Greater socio-political control of the Cuban masses was aimed at, through “more intense indoctrination”²¹⁶. The Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR) had vowed to “increase their vigilance and to organize meetings for the political orientation of the people”²¹⁷. In September, 1968, Castro declared that more than eighty acts of “sabotage” had been committed in the preceding six months, pertaining to “industries producing fertilizers, fodder, and automobile tires; warehouses for sugar, coffee, tobacco, wood, fertilizers, leather, and clothing; state stores, hotels, vessels, schools, other government buildings, and so on”, causing a loss of millions of dollars.²¹⁸ He announced the need for more severe laws to punish these offences: “...before the Revolution ceases to be, not one single counter-revolutionary will remain with his head on his shoulders in this country”²¹⁹. This was immediately followed by the

²¹¹ Haroldo Dilla Alfonso, “Recalling the Revolutionary Offensive of 1968”, *Havana Times* (July 10, 2012), <https://havanatimes.org/opinion/recalling-the-revolutionary-offensive-of-1968/> (accessed March 10, 2022).

²¹² Carmelo Mesa-Lago, “Ideological, Political, and Economic Factors in the Cuban Controversy on Material Versus Moral Incentives”, *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 14 no.1 (February 1972), 97.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Ibid.* 99.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.* 100.

enactment of a decree “establishing the death penalty for those who inflict intentional damages during the sugar harvest” in the wake of an unrealistic targeted sugar production quota of ten million tons for 1970.²²⁰ The Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) and the Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR) were deployed “to guard the cane fields and to prevent acts of sabotage”²²¹. In November, 1968 greater indoctrination programmes, closely monitored by members of the FAR and the Ministry of the Interior (MININ), were broadcast over the Cuban radio. Programmes such as “A Week of Homage” were “organized in honour of the army and internal police with participation of all the mass organizations”²²². The sociologist Maurice Zeitlin, in his account of his visit to Cuba in 1969, noted that in order to achieve the dream of the “New Man” (*hombre nuevo*) hypothesized by Guevara, a new political form of participatory democratic socialism had to be conceived. However, in his view, the Castro regime failed to institute such democratisation:

...despite their experimentalism and originality in many areas, the Cuban revolutionaries have so far done little to establish institutions to guarantee that competing points of view can be heard within the revolutionary socialist consensus; that meaningful alternatives are debated; that policies are initiated, as well as implemented, by the citizenry at large.²²³

Likewise, both Rene Dumont and K. S. Karol, after their visits to Cuba in 1970, had also noted that “the Revolution is becoming increasingly autocratic and militarized: there is a lack of democratic discussion, production is organized along militaristic lines, army officers are being appointed to all key posts, and so on”²²⁴. Arenas confirms this growing militarisation as work camps, set up across the countryside demanded participation from all writers and intellectuals who discovered that they “could no longer enjoy a free weekend to read in Lenin Park or go to the beach”²²⁵. He also recalls constant meetings held at the UNEAC, “to

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Maurice Zeitlin, “Inside Cuba: workers and revolution”, *Ramparts* 8 (March 1970): 77-78.

²²⁴ Rene Dumont (1970) and K. S. Karol (1970), paraphrased in Carmelo Mesa-Lago, “Ideological, Political, and Economic Factors in the Cuban Controversy on Material Versus Moral Incentives”, 101.

²²⁵ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 72.

force us to participate in the [ten million ton] harvest”²²⁶. With the widespread use of forced labour disguised as “voluntary”, “[t]he Island became an enormous sugarcane plantation, sugarcane that we all had to help to cut down”²²⁷.

Two poems by Arenas, composed in 1971 therefore, lament the loss of individual liberty under a dictatorial regime which seeks to justify its continuation by tacitly gaining collective attention through the use of coercive techniques of subjugation. The first of these, “Between You and I Always Comes” is specifically linked to Arenas’s identity as a gay man in post-revolutionary Cuba, marginalised and persecuted by the state. Engaging in sexual activity with other men, although widely prevalent in Cuba, was a criminal offence which was liable to be punished with imprisonment, forced labour in work camps and in extreme cases, even executions. Thus Arenas posits a meddling “ancient tradition” that decrees, “[a]ll impertinent resentments must be silenced”, preventing the possibility of union with his lover.²²⁸ The perpetual anxiety of evading arrest, imprisonment and eventual persecution plagues the poet who finds himself contemplating:

Between you and I always comes
the battle cry: That one—destroy him!
Thus our love presupposes from the start
the bonfire that will come to blot it out.²²⁹

Arenas mentions the “unnameable gamuts of insult,/ endless harassment, death and falling out of memory” as the inescapable consequences of choosing one’s sexual orientation and identity²³⁰. Yet, what is more deadening to the poet by the end of the poem is the probable loss of his lover and their relationship in near future. This breeds within him a “tedious fury”, where the poet realises that “terror is not knowing if I’ll find you”²³¹.

The second poem, “You and I are Condemned” revisits similar themes of extreme alienation, anxiety and foreboding reserved for the homosexual in a society driven by *machismo* and brazen displays of stereotypical masculinity

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Reinaldo Arenas, “Between You and I Always Comes,” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems* trans. Kelly Washbourne (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 2014), 113.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

through acts of bravado. The faceless and sprawling ire of the dictatorial state is described as “the wrath of a lord who does not show his face”²³². The invisibilisation of the homosexual is made immediately apparent by Arenas’s use of the language of self-debasement, positing the idea of the homosexual body as somehow less than its material manifestation. He imagines himself and his lover as “prisoners forever”, waiting for the blight of an “unknown curse” to befall them:

You and I, prisoners forever
of this unknown curse.
Without living, fighting for life.
Without heads, putting on hats.²³³

Arenas imagines the pair of lovers as “[d]rifters without time, without space” who are condemned to live under “a relentless night” which envelopes them.²³⁴ He skilfully shows the opposition between dreams and lived experience where although the lovers may “dream of a grand palace”, the revelatory light of the sun, “...shines back to us its broken image/ transformed into a prison that gives us shelter”²³⁵.

The totalitarian nature of the Castro regime was demonstrated even more with the infamous Heberto Padilla case, a series of events which began to raise serious doubts about the supposedly ‘democratic’ participation of the Cuban populace that Castro had used as a justification for his regime. Heberto Padilla, the veteran poet of Cuba had initially supported the Revolution, but towards the end of the 1960s, he grew wary of its totalitarian tendencies and started to criticise it.²³⁶ His critical attitude towards the changing role of the writer in Cuba—whereby the regime wanted to regulate the content of artistic representations and weed out dissenting voices that depicted Cuban society in a manner not approved by it—had Padilla lock horns with it. When the avant-garde short film, *P.M.* (depicting night life in Cuba) was banned from release in 1961, Padilla went into direct confrontation with the government. Directed by Alberto Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal, the film was aired on a television platform sponsored by

²³² Reinaldo Arenas, “You and I are Condemned,” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 114.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ See Alfredo Fernandez, “Cuba’s “Padilla Affair” 40 Years On”, *Havana Times* (April 26, 2021), <https://havanatimes.org/diaries/alfe/cubas-padilla-affair-40-years-on/> (accessed March 8, 2022).

Lunes de Revolución, the weekly supplement of the newspaper *Revolución*.²³⁷ Following the crisis, a series of discussions were held between members of the Popular Socialist Party (PSP) and the writers of *Lunes de Revolución* at the National Library, in which the former accused the latter of being divisive and not being sufficiently “socialist” in nature.²³⁸ Following the breakdown of the series of discussions, Padilla had continued to harbour his frustration towards the growing governmental influence on cultural affairs. In 1968, in a debate published in the magazine *El Caimán Barbudo*, Padilla wrote a scathing critique of Lisandro Otero’s novel *Pasión de Urbino* (*Urbino’s Passion*) where he compared Otero’s novel to *Tres tristes tigres* (*Three Sad Tigers*) by his friend Guillermo Cabrera Infante, which he considered brilliant, ingenious and one of the most profoundly Cuban novels.²³⁹ Cabrera Infante “had been dismissed from his post of Cultural Attache in the Cuban embassy in 1965 under somewhat mysterious circumstances, and in October that year, after returning to Cuba, had immigrated legally to London”²⁴⁰. Padilla’s critique of Otero’s work was especially significant because Otero was a Vice-Minister and Cabrera Infante, whose work Padilla so exhorted, was an exile forced out of the country. Cabrera Infante had become a *persona non grata* in Cuba by 1968.²⁴¹ Controversy further erupted when the officials of the UNEAC, headed by Lisandro Otero himself, tried everything within their power to prevent Padilla’s collection of critical poems, *Fuera del juego* (*Out of the Game*) from being published.²⁴² But despite these attempts, an international jury recommended Padilla’s book for the annual UNEAC award of poetry. Padilla’s polemical attack was not ignored and even though the international jury felt that the book’s “revolutionary significance, lies precisely in the fact that it is not apologetic but critical, polemical, and is connected in its essence to the idea that revolution is the only possible solution for the problems that obsess its author”²⁴³, Cuban authorities

²³⁷ Roberto González Echevarría, “Heberto Padilla”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Heberto-Padilla> (accessed March 8, 2022).

²³⁸ See Lourdes Casal, “Literature and Society,” in *Revolutionary Change in Cuba* ed. Carmelo Mesa-Lago (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 456.

²³⁹ *Ibid.* 459.

²⁴⁰ See “Cuba: Revolution and the Intellectual—The Strange Case of Heberto Padilla”, *Index on Censorship* 1 Issue 2: Northern Ireland/Cuba (1972): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03064227208532175> (accessed March 8, 2022).

²⁴¹ Lourdes Casal, “Literature and Society,” in *Revolutionary Change in Cuba*, 459.

²⁴² *Ibid.* 458.

²⁴³ See “Cuba: Revolution and the Intellectual—The Strange Case of Heberto Padilla”, *Index on Censorship* 1 Issue 2: Northern Ireland/Cuba (1972): 68,

and officials did not take kindly to Padilla's sceptical, and fiercely independent demeanour. He was sacked from his job at *Granma* and had his passport confiscated while attempting to visit Italy on the invitation of his publishers Feltrinelli.²⁴⁴ The editorial board of *El Caimán Barbudo* were also promptly fired. David Gallagher, in an exchange of letters with Margaret Randall over his essay "Literary Life in Cuba" reports that Padilla became the the subject of the "Kick Padilla" issue "sinisterly introduced by the editors as marking the 'end of the bout.'"²⁴⁵, in which Lisandro Otero attacked him with murderous slander.

UNEAC heavily criticised the decision of the international jury and although the book was published, it was done so with a political disclaimer published on their end.²⁴⁶ Padilla began to come increasingly under attack from the Cuban literary establishment through a series of articles, published in *Verde Olivo* (the magazine of the armed forces) under the name of Leopoldo Avila that argued for stricter governmental prescriptions towards its cultural policy.²⁴⁷ At the Congress of Writers and Artists in 1968, such a declaration of principles was created, and instituted, which stipulated not just the passive support of writers and intellectuals towards the Revolution, but the active use of literature as a "weapon against weakness and problems which, directly or indirectly, could hinder this advance" to a further stage of Communist society.²⁴⁸

Following such an explicit declaration of principles, the dictatorial Castro regime redoubled vigilance and began a system of state surveillance which did not hesitate to intrude into the private lives of individuals, holding them guilty even if they were found deviating a bit from Castro's stated line of communist praxis. On March 20, 1971, Heberto Padilla was arrested and jailed for his collection of poems *Fuera del juego (Out of the Game)* and being critical of the revolutionary government before an international audience.²⁴⁹ An illustration of the arbitrariness and triviality of allegations levelled at Padilla and his work shows forth

²⁴⁴ Lourdes Casal, "Literature and Society," in *Revolutionary Change in Cuba*, 468.

²⁴⁵ David Gallagher, quoted in Margaret Randall, "Literary Life in Cuba", *The New York Review* (November 7, 1968), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1968/11/07/literary-life-in-cuba/?pagination=false> (accessed March 9, 2022).

²⁴⁶ See Lourdes Casal, "Literature and Society," in *Revolutionary Change in Cuba*, 462.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

in the UNEAC's objections to his conception of history as a circular trajectory.²⁵⁰ The official UNEAC line accused Padilla of having "expressed his anti-historical attitude by means of exalting individualism in opposition to collective demands of a country in the midst of historical development and by also stating his idea of time as a reoccurring a repeating circle instead of an ascending line"²⁵¹. Padilla's autobiographical memoir *La Mala Memoria* records that after he was arrested, his "counterrevolutionary mischief" was characteristically reprimanded by State Security officials, who had further threatened him with the First Military Tribunal at La Cabaña", a prison where thousands of "counter-revolutionaries" were kept in confinement, under sub-human condition, only to be executed at a later stage.²⁵²

Padilla spent an excruciating thirty-seven days of imprisonment in a narrow cell, usually lit with a single bulb and was repeatedly interrogated at midnight—a tortuous ordeal in which he was insulted, intimidated and dragged.²⁵³ Using excerpts from Padilla's autobiographical memoir, Alfred G. Cuzán provides a harrowing account of the state-terror that was unleashed upon him during his imprisonment:

He was left completely alone for five consecutive days in total darkness, after which he became delirious. In one especially ghastly session, a "macabre rite," several muscular henchmen took turns reciting his verses as they pushed, punched, kicked and slammed him onto a wooden floor. "The head, the forehead, the legs, all my body became a hodgepodge of pain. The last thing I remember was a bump against my nose and temples. . . ." He regained consciousness as a "fat and ruddy-faced doctor" forced him to submerge his head into a pan of icy cold water. Taken to the emergency room of a military hospital, he was drugged and began to hallucinate. He saw scenes from his past—from childhood, New York City, airports through which he had passed.

²⁵⁰ Luis M. Quesada, "'Fuera del juego': A Poet's Appraisal of the Cuban Revolution", *Latin American Literary Review* 3 no. 6 (Spring 1975): 96

²⁵¹ *Ibid.* 95.

²⁵² Heberto Padilla, quoted in Luis M. Quesada, "'Fuera del juego': A Poet's Appraisal of the Cuban Revolution", 34. Although Padilla's autobiographical memoir *La Mala Memoria* has been translated into English as *Self-Portrait of the Other: A Memoir* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), I have used Quesada's references to the Spanish original *La Mala Memoria* (Madrid: Plaza & Janés Editoriales, 1989), 149-50; 158 here.

²⁵³ Alfred G. Cuzán, "Totalitarianism in the Tropics: Cuba's "Padilla Case" Revisited", *Cuban Affairs: Quarterly Electronic Journal* 7 Issue 3 (2012): 26, <https://uwf.edu/media/university-of-west-florida/colleges/cassh/departments/government/cdocs/III.A.11.-Cuzan-2012-Totalitariansim-in-the-Tropics-Cubas-Padilla-Case-Revisited.CubanAffairs.Quarterly-Electronic-Journal-Vol.7-Issue32012.pdf> (accessed March 10, 2022).

Waking up in his cell, he cried in shame. “Oh God, nothing has happened to me,” he cried out. “Everything has been the effect of a transgression of what is real. True suffering is that of those who struggled on behalf of a liberty that was betrayed.”²⁵⁴

Padilla was forcibly made to compose a statement of self-criticism while in confinement and recite it from memory before important members of the UNEAC. It was an event during which he would confess to his “errors” and “ideological weaknesses”²⁵⁵. This statement would be used as the basis of a (forced) “Letter of Repentance” from him “that would justify official clemency”²⁵⁶. But unexpectedly, halfway through Padilla’s detention, an open letter of protest—addressed directly to Fidel Castro by prominent European and Latin American intellectuals such as Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Carlos Franqui, Octavio Paz and Maria Vargas Llosa—expressed concern about Padilla’s arrest and detention. They implored Castro to “re-examine the situation that this arrest has created”, warning him that “the use of repressive measures against intellectuals and writers who have exercised the right to criticize within the Revolution can only have extremely negative repercussions among anti-imperialist forces the world over and, very especially in Latin America, where the Cuban Revolution represents a symbol and a banner”²⁵⁷. From Padilla’s subjective viewpoint however, he had figured that “[A]gainst the thug, there is no weapon other than intelligence or astuteness”²⁵⁸. His speech and confession before the members of the UNEAC thus parodied the banality with which seeming “justice” was being delivered by the revolutionary bandwagon. The self-debasement and mock-repudiation of his own work, performed by Padilla through his confession, served to widen the gap between the Castro regime and the international literati and drive home the point that his tribulations in confinement were indications—as expressed in the concern of the above mentioned signatories— “that the dogmatic obscurantism, the cultural xenophobia, and the repressive system that Stalinism imposed in socialist countries,

²⁵⁴ Ibid. 26-27.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. 28.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid. 29. Alfred G. Cuzán, citing Lourdes Casal’s account of the “Padilla Case” writes that, “The letter was originally published in the French newspaper *Le Monde* on April 9, 1971 and received “ample dissemination in the Western press”.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

flagrant manifestations of which were events similar to those that are taking place in Cuba”²⁵⁹.

Roger Alan Reed observes that in the Padilla case, “Castro’s intolerance was put on full display, and the New Left intellectuals who had fawned over him discovered that they had been worshipping a petty tyrant instead of a new messiah”²⁶⁰. In his opinion, following the Padilla case, the artistic and intellectual word of letters in Cuba descended into a “dark age”, a world so beset with the evils of state surveillance and terroristic police control that even “intellectuals qua intellectuals were suspect. . . . Contempt for independent judgment was institutionalized”²⁶¹. Whereas the last vestiges of creative expression were systematically silenced, “crude specimens of “socialist realism” were awarded prizes”²⁶². For the generation to which Arenas belonged, Padilla had become “a sort of hero”²⁶³, but it was evident that the totalitarian dictatorship of Castro was not to tolerate dissent and criticism. What followed was opportunistic “conversion rites” where writers and intellectuals formerly critical of the government now turned “more revolutionary than Castro himself”²⁶⁴. One such case was “the conversion of Cintio Vintier”, who now agreed to “read long poems inspired by the coffee harvest and the cutting of the sugarcane”²⁶⁵.

In the subsequent section, I have tried to read and analyse excerpts from Arenas’s *El central*, the long poem inspired by his experiences of having worked in the Manuel Sanguily sugar plantation in Pinar del Rio, which foregrounds his rebellion and ethical resistance against the forceful expropriation of agricultural labour by the totalitarian state in the wake of the “Ten Million Ton Harvest” of 1970.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ See Roger Alan Reed, *The Cultural Revolution in Cuba* (Geneva, Latin American Roundtable: University of Geneva Press, 1991), 100.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² See Roger Alan Reed, *The Cultural Revolution in Cuba*, “Chapter 3. The Dark Age (1968-1976),” in *The Cultural Revolution in Cuba* for an account of arrests, detentions, and legal charges brought against publications allegedly disseminating “enemy propaganda” and the subsequent recantations and betrayals which followed, where “a few writers even testified against their fellows at their “trials”.

²⁶³ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 78.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. 73.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

5.3. “What waters join/ the teller of terror/ to the terror told?” : Forced Expropriation of Labour by the State, the Ten-Million- Ton Sugar Harvest and *El central*

The strategy of using “moral incentives” to build “socialist” consciousness among the masses, posited by the Sino-Guevarist line affected all productive sectors of the Cuban economy. By “moral incentives”, Castro specified a range of amenities to be provided by the government in his speech on July 26, 1969: the granting of scholarships to thousands of students in addition to free housing, food, clothing, medical attention, recreation and books, the compulsory establishment of elementary schools at the regional level to boost education from the grassroots, extension of child day care centres to tend to the children of labourers, the expansion of the medical sector fully financed by public money, the development of sports and recreation facilities.²⁶⁶ This plan of action also aimed at providing “gratuitous concession” to workers in the form of food, clothing and shoes and reduced transportation fares across the country. But these promises were made keeping in mind the future plan of the gradual elimination of money and salaries, which the Castro regime saw as fitting in an advanced stage of “communist (superior) consciousness”²⁶⁷. As Carmelo Mesa-Lago points out, the wilful adoption of the Sino-Guevarist line allowed the regime “with an ingenious mechanism to eliminate additional pay for overtime hours and to obtain greater productive effort from the worker”²⁶⁸. In response to the adoption of these plans, the official press, by 1968 also “began to publish news about enterprises in which workers renounced payment for extra hours”²⁶⁹.

In the aforementioned speech, Castro had alluded to “40,000 young workers in Camaguey province”, who, supposedly were being paid “a salary worked out in each case according to needs” in exchange for their “voluntary” participation in agricultural labour.²⁷⁰ Yet, he had also taken care to ensure that he concealed more than he revealed in his speech. In fact, forced labour camps had

²⁶⁶ Fidel Castro, speech delivered on July 26, 1969, paraphrased in Mesa-Lago, “Ideological, Political, and Economic Factors in the Cuban Controversy on Material Versus Moral Incentives”, 72.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid. 73-74.

²⁶⁹ Ibid. 74

²⁷⁰ Ibid. 73.

already been set up in 1964 through the mobilisation of the *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción* (UMAP)²⁷¹ (“Military Units to Aid Production”), in Camaguey province, to detain all conscientious objectors to the regime, as well as “sexual deviants” (homosexuals), social delinquents, hardened criminals and the “purged” political adversaries of Castro.²⁷² The historian Abel Sierra Madero has therefore stated that “[t]he hybrid structure of work camps cum military units served to camouflage the true objectives of the recruitment effort and to distance the UMAPs from the legacy of forced labour”²⁷³. This would further justify the militarisation and the discipline implemented in these labour camps to boost production, regardless of what detainees were subjected to.

The “Ten Million Ton Harvest” of 1970 was part of the “Revolutionary Offensive” campaign, and was launched by Castro in August, 1969. It projected an unrealistic sugar production of ten million tons by the end of the year. From the perspective of the more pragmatist members of the purged “microfaction” within the PSP, the adoption of the Sino-Guevarist line was, in fact, to the advantage of the Soviet-bloc, as this would “allow a grave economic dislocation to take place;

²⁷¹ **UMAP Camps:** The UMAP (Military Units to Aid Production) camps were forced agricultural labour camps (November 1965-July 1968) operated by the Castro government, detaining all conscientious objectors to Obligatory Military Service (SMO) under the revolutionary government including, but not limited to, religious groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Catholics, Pentecostal Christians, priests, dissident artists, *marihuaneros* (“potheads”), drug addicts, governmental officers under trial for corruption, pimps, farmers who refused collectivization and homosexuals (primarily “gay” men). Internees were forced to perform a variety of menial agricultural jobs such as planting and harvesting sugarcane, “picking *boniato* (sweet potato), yucca, and fruit to tearing down *marabú* (*mimosa* bushes), applying fertilizer, and weeding. Although disbanded in 1968 owing to international pressure created through the agitation of Human Rights’ agencies and groups, the significance of the UMAP camps has frequently been underestimated by left-leaning groups as merely “reactionary propaganda”. However, as per the work of Carmelo Mesa-Lago, in 1967, “state-sponsored unpaid labor constituted between 8 to 12 percent of the labour force and between 1962 and 1967, totalled approximately 1.4 percent of the national income” (See Carmelo Mesa-Lago, “Economic Significance of Unpaid Labor in Socialist Cuba”, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 22 no. 3 (1969): 354-55). Even after the formal disbanding of the UMAP camps, the legacy of forced expropriation of labour by the state would be carried on further, by disguising forced labour (labour extracted through coercion) as “voluntary”. Arenas’s own experiences at the Manuel Sanguily Sugar Mill at Pinar del Rio in 1970 was such an instance of forced labour.

²⁷² See Joseph Tahbaz, “Demystifying las UMAP: The Politics of Sugar, Gender, and Religion in 1960s Cuba”, *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies* 14 no. 2 (December 31, 2013), https://www1.udel.edu/LAS/Vol14-2Tahbaz.html#_ednref4 (accessed March 11, 2022).

²⁷³ Abel Sierra Madero, “Academies to Produce Macho-Men in Cuba” trans. Alicia Barraqué Ellison, *Translating Cuba: English Translations of Cubans Writing from the Island* (February 19, 2016), <https://translatingcuba.com/academies-to-produce-macho-men-in-cuba-abel-sierra-madero/> (accessed March 11, 2022).

this would deliver a definite blow to Sino-Guevarism and would erode Castro's strength and struggle for independence"²⁷⁴. Thus, they did not object to it. In 1970, as has been already stated before, Reinaldo Arenas was sent to the Manuel Sanguily Sugar Mill in Pinar del Rio to assist in agricultural labour, "and to write a book praising that odyssey as well as the ten-million ton harvest"²⁷⁵. As he further elucidates in his autobiographical memoir, "[i]t was part of a scheme by the Castro regime to use the compulsory military service personnel in peacetime as an army of forced labourers, which would supply farmhands to agriculture"²⁷⁶. After the formal disbanding of the UMAP camps, other camps of the same nature (which had already been prepared by 1969-70) were mobilised to employ all civilians between ages 16 to 45—regardless of their skill or prior experience in agricultural labour—to assist in the projected sugar harvest.²⁷⁷

Arenas goes on to describe the "intolerable" conditions which existed in the Manuel Sanguily sugar mill in Pinar del Rio. The recruits were expected to "get up at four in the morning", and, with a machete in hand and a water bottle, they were "taken by cart to the fields to work all day under a blistering sun, among the sharp leaves of the sugarcane"²⁷⁸. For Arenas, the experience of the camps seemed almost a retrogression to the ignominy of working under the plantation system of colonial times, suffered by "the Indian" and the "black slave"²⁷⁹. Thus, he

²⁷⁴ Carmelo Mesa-Lago, "Conversion of the Cuban Economy into Soviet Orthodoxy", *Journal of Economic Issues* 8 no. 1 (March 1974):43-44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4224286> (accessed March 11, 2022).

²⁷⁵ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 74.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ Much like the onset of indentured labour (in the context of the Caribbean) after the end of slavery in the plantation economy, regularisation of such "voluntary" labour in Cuba was formally attempted in the 1976 Constitution, where "non-paid voluntary labor, done for the benefit of all society in industrial, agricultural, technical, artistic, and service activities, is recognized as forger of the communist conscience of our people" (Article 44). As the Seventh Report on the situation of Human Rights in Cuba (1983), published by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, has argued, "It is a matter of debate whether this work is truly voluntary; there is no doubt that part of the population is strongly motivated by ideology (the so-called "vanguard workers" of the sixties) and contributes this additional effort totally of their own will. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence that a significant part of the labour force performs this labour due to the strong social pressure brought to bear by the Government, the party, the management of enterprises and the labour union; in addition, voluntary work constitutes a "merit" that is recorded on one's work record, and is important in obtaining the option to buy the scarce consumer durables that are allocated to the enterprises". See "Chapter X: The Right to Work" in "The Situation of Human Rights in Cuba Seventh Report", Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (October 4, 1983), <http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/Cuba83eng/chap.10.htm> (accessed March 12, 2022).

²⁷⁸ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 74.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

empathizes with these two enslaved and marginalised figures from Cuba's history and reimagines their plight through the tribulations he saw around him:

I came to understand why the Indians had preferred suicide to working there as slaves; I understood why so many black men had killed themselves by suffocation. Now I was the Indian, I was the black slave, and I was not alone, I was one among hundreds of recruits...those young men, sixteen and seventeen years old, were treated like beasts, had no future to hope for, nor a past to remember. Many would hack their legs or cut their fingers off with their machetes...the vision of all that enslaved youth inspired my long poem *El central*. I wrote the poem right there; I could not remain a silent witness to such horror.²⁸⁰

Steven White, in his review of *El central*, comments that “the book is much more than a testimonial work protesting the author's loss of individual freedom and the conditions he must endure in order to benefit a State with which he is not in ideological agreement”²⁸¹. He specifically applauds Arenas's “survey of Cuban history” attempted in the work, and the syncretism of vision in the successful juxtaposition of past instances of injustice and oppression with the ignominies of the present.²⁸² Arenas's syncretic imagination allows the reader to transcend the temporal boundaries which mark off the “present” against the history of the plantation economy of sugar introduced by the Spanish conquistadores and the history of slavery of Afro-Caribbean populations in them. Dedicated to his friend “R”—who could manage to salvage for the poet, “87 blank sheets of paper”—Arenas's *El central* is a moving testimony of the forced expropriation of labour from conscientious objectors and marginalised groups in post-revolutionary Cuba, the benefits of which are usurped by the totalitarian State.²⁸³

The first excerpt I have chosen to analyse, titled “Slave Hands” directly draws attention to this forced expropriation:

Slave hands polish the sphere
where sometimes the gaze of a king
is wont to pause.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Steven White, review of *El central*, *Northwest Review* 23 Issue 2 (January 1985): 106-7, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/7e00e484a3cc1592d7efa5c1ca6491f9/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=1821054> (accessed March 12, 2022).

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ See “Dedication” in Reinaldo Arenas, *El central: A Cuban Sugar Mill* trans. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Avon Books, 1981), vii.

Slave hands have polished those crystals
so the queen solemn and meticulous,
can bestow the grace on you all of dissolving them
on her tongue.²⁸⁴

Arenas deliberately contrasts the toilsome ordeals of planting sugarcane in the fields to the suave and affected glances of “the illustrious foreigner, armed with/ the idiom and trappings of his day”, obeisant to official historical prerogatives demanded of them by the regime.²⁸⁵ The “illustrious foreigner” shakes his “slender sugar spoon” to stir the “delectable lump” of sugar produced by the detainees of the work camp.²⁸⁶ Arenas posits a causal connection between the two, pitting the privilege enjoyed by the “boaster”, the “great dictator” Fidel against the desolation of “slave hands” who have to tirelessly keep at “clawing” the fields. He directs his rage against the misplaced idealism latent in Sino-Guevarist thought, which supposed that “[t]he successful development of consciousness (in advance of the material base development) may permit a country to skip the transitional stage of development between capitalism and communism (that is, socialism) or, as the Cubans express it, to build socialism and communism simultaneously”²⁸⁷. Besides highlighting the glaring inequalities of shouldering collective responsibility immediately made apparent in the execution of such an economic strategy, Arenas also recounts strict disciplinary and penal action undertaken in the administration of these work camps: the mock trials “where young men were condemned to twenty or thirty years in jail, their only crime being that on a weekend they had gone to see their families, their mother, their girlfriend”²⁸⁸. These mock trials, designed in such a way that the “only way out for these boys was to accept the “rehabilitation” plan, which meant returning to the sugarcane fields, but now in an undefined category, as slaves”²⁸⁹. Thus, the camps made a mockery of liberty, especially since these acts of infringement on human rights were taking place “in the country proclaiming itself the First Free Territory of the Americas”²⁹⁰.

²⁸⁴ Reinaldo Arenas, “Slave Hands” (Excerpt from *El central*) in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 48.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁷ Carmelo Mesa-Lago, “Conversion of the Cuban Economy into Soviet Orthodoxy”, 44.

²⁸⁸ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 74.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Although the “airy landscape” at the mountainous Pinar del Rio region offered Arenas some temporary relief amidst the terrible suffering and repression he saw around him, he intricately recorded the sub-human living conditions in a diary he kept during this time through interviews and personal reminiscences of unfortunate recruits who had to cut their foot to get “five days of rest”, or were “sentenced to ten years”²⁹¹. He recounts that during the day, “the only people allowed to stay there (the barracks) were the sick and the head of the barracks”²⁹². But these injured “patients” (only the seriously ill) who were residing in the barracks had to wait for an unspecified period of time before they would be transferred to “a clinic or a hospital, which sometimes took months, if it came at all”²⁹³. As the deadline for the harvest kept getting closer, “the possibility of reaching the goal was becoming more and more remote” and work was accelerated; where the recruits not only had to cut down the sugarcane all day by the scorching tropical sun, they also “had to help them burn down at night”²⁹⁴. This newly introduced and physically grinding double-shift of agricultural labour was forcibly thrust upon the recruits. Rain in the sugarcane fields set forth “clouds of mosquitos” and other insects which made the barracks “even more unbearable” at night.²⁹⁵

One therefore can contextualise Arenas’s choice of using the synecdoche of “hands” to designate forced labourers, who, in the eyes of the totalitarian state, were merely dismembered organs to be exploited for more productivity. He parodies, with caustic irony, Castro’s well-ornamented lie that “40,000 young workers” were voluntarily contributing for the economic future of Cuba by replacing them with “80,000 hands”:

Here, here.
80,000 hands here, in the western zone
that has to be replanted, fertilized, harvested, packed
and exported.
Abroad, abroad.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid. 75

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

Let them water, let them fertilize this new variety
that I propose, that I order, that I command
be sown, grown and worshipped.²⁹⁶

Arenas now travels back to the past, into the painful betrayals, humiliations and injustices of slavery and forced work under the plantation economy that form a part of Cuba's colonial history. As he had once chosen to retell Fray Servando Teresa de Mier's life to dissociate the nefarious scheme of colonisation by the Spanish *conquistadores* from the religious justification (the spreading of God's word) often provided for the same, Arenas now allocates the same role to Marxist ideology in perpetuating totalitarian tyranny. Arenas notes the complicity of the Catholic Church in the larger economic project of colonising the New World as well as the co-option of the Iberian code of honour, *machismo*, into the larger discourses of emergent nationalism and the anti-colonial freedom struggle of Cuba:

Here, here.
(majestic fingers)
a strong man for destroying, a friar for
indoctrinating. And our men. Men white
and brave; men hairy and foul-smelling; men
of hard and gnashing manliness, tough and divine.
Save those lost souls, spare no violence.
They are blessed by the Pope's grace.²⁹⁷

At the same time, he initiates a comparison between the religious justifications provided for colonising indigenous populations and the constant ideological indoctrination carried out by the Castro regime to conceal its flagrant contraventions of individual human rights and civil liberties in Cuba. Arenas had recounted, in his memoir, that the experience of being a recruit at any of the sugar plantations was life-altering and deadening for the thousands of adolescent youths who were sent there: "[t]hese adolescents were changed for life; after all the forced labour and constant vigilance, they turned into enslaved ghosts"²⁹⁸. In particular, he portrays, with scathing irony, the massively publicised rallies of Castro supposedly demonstrating "spontaneous" participation of the Cuban people, and often known for the collective frenzy they tried to generate against an unknown enemy, "Yankee

²⁹⁶ Reinaldo Arenas, "Slave Hands" (excerpt from *El central*) in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 49.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 50.

²⁹⁸ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 74

imperialism”.²⁹⁹ In Arenas’s description, “the discourse of the new emotion peddler”, Castro, appears to be

Elemental and crushing
countrified and screamed
threatening and furious
barbaric and flashy-farcical³⁰⁰

The dictator himself is described as “voluminous and hairy”³⁰¹ as Arenas ridicules the behavioural code of *machismo* which evolved, in post-revolutionary Cuba, into a dogmatic and militaristic form within the rhetoric of the Revolution, leading to state intervention on the public appearances of citizens. The wanderings of the dictator, are however, caustically rendered as “libidinous and rough”, mocking the exclusion of the homosexual subject within the discursive paradigms of the “New Man” (*hombre nuevo*) of a projected Communist future by exaggerating Castro’s “manliness”³⁰². He goes on to denounce the utopian future heralded as “progress” within the totalitarian system of complete control, misplaced promises and the blatant falsification of truth by the state-propaganda machine:

His promises, mammoth and stupid.
His laws, inflexible and arbitrary.

Only thus, oh chosen ones, can you establish absolute rule.

Only thus, oh chosen ones, will you be truly worshipped.³⁰³

The subtle manipulations that lead to a totalitarian regime’s gaining of coerced consent from its citizens, as well as its violations of civil liberties in “the name of obligatory, sacred principles” confounds Arenas who notes “the unanimous applause of the bald man, the housewife, the frustrated queer, the civil servant with dyspnea” at the hunting down of “hundreds of young boys running down parapets, walls, high columns, and sugar cane plots”³⁰⁴. His denunciation of forced “voluntary” agricultural labour camps thus, is informed with the foreknowledge that “the usual befuddled mob” would continue to let itself be manipulated by the

²⁹⁹ Ibid. 75.

³⁰⁰ Reinaldo Arenas, “Slave Hands” (excerpt from *El central*)” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 50.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid. 50-51.

³⁰⁴ Reinaldo Arenas, “Under the Trees” (excerpt from *El central*)” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 54-55.

regime.³⁰⁵ Yet, Arenas's ethical commitments to the act of truth-telling through poetry compels him to "run"—away from the surveillance networks deployed by the regime, and against the "metal face" of a punitive army that forces all dissenters into submission, expropriating labour from "deviants"³⁰⁶. As much as he is aware of his inevitable silencing by the manoeuvres of the dictatorial regime, he offers his ideological resistance on behalf of the "enslaved ghosts" he found at the Pinar del Rio sugar mill:

Can arrows, pious genuflections, neck collars or I.D. cards from Basic Secondary Education, lewd, liturgical or war songs, *bayadere* gestures³⁰⁷ by an adolescent or a certificate testifying scientifically to a spinal deformity, a black woman miscarrying in the waves (someone trampled on her belly), children smashing their heads into the pavement, or the protest of a friar or an imperial secretary (the other empire, of course), can any of these stop the hunt, the fury of the new dictator who looks like a wizard, who rides Faustian beats, who bears shiny decorations, who, besides, is tall, who can freeze the past and manipulate the springs of hope in the usual befuddled mob?... No, there's no way out, there's no way out. Don't expect the masses to help; don't expect consolation from one who is dying in some other way, they are consoled by seeing you die. Run, just run for it.³⁰⁸

The tongue-in-cheek causticity of tone which Arenas deploys in the excerpt "Ah, but do you know...?" from *El central* reveals the extreme hardships and tribulations undergone by the work camp recruits to produce one metric ton of sugar. Through intricately detailed passages that describe the four successive stages of sugar production, Arenas evokes a stunned disdain within the reader who discovers an affinity between the laborious and painfully slow process of extracting sugar and the tightening grip of "Super-Stalinism" curtailing civil liberties in the work camps, and by extension, the Cuba of 1970-71.³⁰⁹ Thus, as "[t]he cane passes along a slat conveyor", is crushed, and the juice extracted, the arbitrariness of totalitarian tyranny ensures that "permissions are denied, schedules are overloaded,

³⁰⁵ Ibid. 55.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ "bayadere gestures": "bayadere" from the Spanish verb "bailar" (to dance), thus literally, "dancer-like" gestures, indicative of the said adolescent's categorisation as a *maricon*.

³⁰⁸ Reinaldo Arenas, "Under the Trees" (excerpt from *El central*) in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 55.

³⁰⁹ Reinaldo Arenas, "Ah, but do you know..." (excerpt from *El central*) in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 62.

court-martials convened” and urgent meetings are called.³¹⁰ The silent, yet implacable signs of violence that bespeak of forced labour, humiliation and human subjugation in the work camps are driven home through the use of the refrain “And violence festers like a machete wound in the days of rain” at the end of every stanza.³¹¹ Arenas describes the second stage of sugar production, “the process of imbibition”—where the juice is boiled, thickened and purified. At the same time, he goes back to the litany of beatings, punishments and verbal abuse endured by the recruits: “the screws are tightened, the whippings and the surveillance redoubled; one is punished for not having made the cut low enough; another twenty-five pound production load per day is demanded”³¹². In addition to forced work, he unanimously decries the banalities of ideological indoctrination the inmates were subjected to, thus exposing the hypocrisies of a Janus-faced totalitarian dictatorship which continues to flog the proverbial dead horse of “ideology” to indoctrinate its “masses”—after a grinding “double shift”, the exhausted inmates “walk toward the *barracoon* where tonight we’ll study Lenin’s biography”³¹³. The “purified” cane juice is thereafter sent to the boilers, evaporated and, forming molasses that, in the fourth and last stage, are shot “into the machines for it to crystallize”³¹⁴. Meanwhile, Arenas shows the nameless deserter from the camps, who after their futile attempt to escape from the camps, are further imprisoned and penalised. The excruciating pain and humiliation of this “fallen” recruit is rendered with painstaking detail and compared to the final phase of sugar-production, the “exact” measure given by the weighing scale:

...someone shouts, someone hides behind every sugar-cane top and someone takes him captive. And the red liquid runs down into the immense cauldrons, and the howling man is dragged back. And the immense cauldron collects the generous molasses. The drums are silent, the rifles blast. He falls, but he cannot cry out damn; he falls, unable to cry out My God; he falls, unable to say enough, enough, *massah*. With a final gurgle the funnel opens and a flood pours into the sack. The scale gives the exact weight: one metric ton of sugar.³¹⁵

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

At this juncture, it is helpful to turn to work of Maria A. Cabrera Arús, who, in her examination of the ways in which fashion emerged as a mechanism of domination and an assertion of political legitimacy in Cuba of the 1960s, concentrates upon the “production of denotative logistics that associated clothes with political values”³¹⁶. Thus Cabrera Arús notes the emergence of a “sartorial system of symbols and meanings” establishing proper “revolutionary etiquette”—discarding the civilian dress code of the traditional *guayabera* shirt and long hair for men as codes for “counterrevolution” and “ideological deviancy” in favour of olive-green fatigues and shortly cropped hair.³¹⁷ Therefore, for many people, “getting your hair cut, wearing grey *khaki* pants, and getting blisters from hoeing the fields” sufficed to turn them into proper “revolutionaries”³¹⁸. Cabrera Arús specifically refers to the testimony of a female volunteer cane-cutter from 1970, published in *Granma*, which declared “a blister on the hand was more beautiful than a sapphire”³¹⁹. It was especially necessary for the Castro regime, with its arcane formulations of the “New Man” to envision—and thereafter, project—a “figured world” of Communist values, opposed to the “worms” and “counterrevolutionary dregs” who participated in “contemporary capitalist fashion fads”³²⁰. The 1964 article “The “Indolents” Disguise Themselves as “Invalids”, published in the magazine *Mella* (issue 293) shows the denotative logistics involved, in the eyes of state officials, in equating fashion with ideology:

Striped t-shirts and plus-sized shirts. Hair that is dishevelled or dyed different colours. Miniskirts that show bare legs. Locketts on long necklaces. Thin sideburns. Books under the arm. Everything can be combined, according to the gender. It is not that the cowl always makes the monk, but those that are “sick”, unlike the young workers, the peasants, the soldiers, or the students, can always be identified by one thing: their extravagant clothes³²¹

³¹⁶ See Maria A. Cabrera Arús, “Thinking politics and fashion in 1960s Cuba: How not to judge a book by its cover”, *Theory and Society* 46 no. 5 (November 2017): 413-15.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.* 412.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.* 418.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ *Ibid.* 419.

³²¹ Excerpt from E.J. Castellanos, “El diversionismo ideológico del rock, la moda y los enfermitos. Centro Teórico- Cultural Criterios”, 12, <http://www.criterios.es/pdf79castellanosdive> (2008) trans. Maria A. Cabrera Arús in “Thinking politics and fashion in 1960s Cuba: How not to judge a book by its cover”, 419.

Arenas recounts that the labour camps, which forced social “deviants” (identifiable to public officials through their long hair or tight-fitted denims) to work in the fields signalled “the end of an era, underground and defiant, but still full of creativity, eroticism, intelligence and beauty”³²². In the excerpt “Only One, One Mind”, he mourns the humiliation and disillusionment of teenagers forced to work in the sugarcane fields before the projected Ten Million Ton harvest. This is a particularly significant excerpt with regard to the theme of exilic desire already latent in Arenas by 1971, although it would still be nine more years till he could avail himself of the opportunity to leave his country. The hopelessness and desperation awaiting these thousands of “enslaved” youth is poignantly brought out through the exclamation of “one of us” at the constancy of the moon amidst the series of arbitrary “changes” forced on citizens: “*At least it exists, at least it’s still the same*”.³²³ He envisions a bleak future for the doomed youth, stripped of their individual volition:

What can you expect of these young people
made out of persecution,
out of the inviolable order,
out of long, high-flown speeches,
out of forced, pointless work,
out of one insecurity after another.

Nothing, nothing can be expected of these young people.³²⁴

The ideological indoctrination of youth, as we have already seen before, becomes an important tool used by totalitarian regimes to coerce consent from their citizens. Arenas critiques this process, asserting his disagreement with the institutionalisation of Marxism-Leninism in the public education system and directing his empathy at the unfortunate Cuban youth

who go to a university where they don’t teach languages
but dreadful texts,
who inhabit a place where they are told
why they must die constantly,
why they must be ready to renounce everything—
even the bliss of renunciation itself

³²² Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 73.

³²³ Reinaldo Arenas, “Ah, but do you know...” (excerpt from *El central*)” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 63.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

What can you expect of these young people, who are told
You have to become an agricultural labourer,
and are ordered, You have to become a soldier,
who are commanded to live in servitude and their despair.³²⁵

Yet, despite this desolate vision of a depressing future, he asserts the collective Cuban desire to voluntarily choose exile as an alternative to the monotony of repression, not pausing to look at “the empty display windows” and passing fruitless time “in the endless lines”.

We will cross the devastated city.
We will cross the city in ruins.
We’ll cross the city in abiding erosion³²⁶

The sea remains the site of ultimate refuge for Arenas, who seeks solace and comfort in the vastness of the ocean surrounding his island. The sea provides the necessary repose where “we open our eyes” and “breathe in for a moment”.³²⁷

In “At Night the Blacks”, another excerpt from *El central*, he depicts the long-drawn, repetitive rituals of the sugarcane harvest during the night. The inmates, after a long and sapping day of cutting cane in the fields, were expected to burn the cane at night. Arenas presents the labouring bodies of black men, engrossed in the dreary monotony of overwork: “they are whirling beasts, violent and torpid; hungry and torpid; enslaved and hungry”³²⁸. He decries the litany of “the siren from the mill...spreading its contagion”, and the “lewd songs, the liturgical songs, the war songs, the untiring howl of the dogs” in the work camps.³²⁹ As he compares two different historical systems of oppression—slavery in the colonial plantation economy and virtual “slavery” which the Castro regime was subjecting the inmates—Arenas identifies similar machinations of power which dehumanizes its army of free labourers and usurps the fruits of their labours at will:

At night.

At night.

At night.

At night the encounters between brigades are held.

At night the public trials are held.

³²⁵ Ibid. 64.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid. 65.

³²⁸ Reinaldo Arenas, “At Night the Blacks” (excerpt from *El central*)” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 59.

³²⁹ Ibid. 58.

At night an inmate is sentenced to 30 years for
shooting himself in the leg
because he couldn't take it anymore.³³⁰

Arenas concludes the sequence with the disarming honesty of a caustic and disillusioned observer who chooses to not speak about “freedom” under a regime “where everyone has the obligation to shut their mouths or the right to be shot to death”³³¹. In his understanding, neither “humanity” nor “the sacred principles of justice” merit words under a repressive regime where the price of dissent and disagreement would be penal labour and the threat of execution.³³² He also posits the need for poetic articulation through its commitment to truth-telling—the adoption of “a testimonial approach to bear witness for a suppressed past”³³³:

(How plain to see, how plain to see it all is: neither lofty words,
nor fancy philosophical speculations, nor hermetic poems.
Against terror, the simplicity of epic verse suffices: *telling*)

We must tell.

We must tell.

A place where nothing can be told is where we most
need to tell.

We must tell.

We must tell everything.³³⁴

The need to bear witness through poetry is also intricately linked to the “testimonial” quality of works such as *El central*. As John Beverley has pointed out, these narrative accounts “have characteristics of *testimonio* or testimonial narrative that seeks to create a feeling of lived experience and expresses a “problematic collective social situation” through a representative individual”³³⁵. This poetic approach typifies embedded strategies of resistance to prevent personal, or collective memories from “assimilation, repressions or misrepresentations” committed by official histories that omit these instances of grave injustice.³³⁶

³³⁰ Ibid. 60.

³³¹ Ibid. 61.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Laurie Vickroy, “The Traumas of Unbelonging: Reinaldo Arenas’s Recuperations of Cuba”, *MELUS* 30 no. 4, Home: Forged or Forged? (Winter 2005), 113-14.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ John Beverley, “The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative),” in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1992), 94-95.

³³⁶ See Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2002), 1.

Arenas also presents the idea of an everlasting quest, undergone by the repressed individual subject, in which they go on looking for the “hoped-for-land” of their dreams. In the excerpt titled “Introduction to the Symbol of Faith” he advances symbols of optimism and faith which continue to affirm the belief in the possibility of freedom amidst state-repression, double-dealing spies, censorship and false propaganda. In Arenas’s vision, “freedom”, the condition yearned for before and during the Revolution, was betrayed without remorse by a megalomaniac and power-hungry despot. However, the *possibility* of freedom, imbued in the act of poetic utterance, is also thereby affirmed:

I know the place of rest does not exist
that there is not food enough to dream,
that there are no doors out of terror...

I know
that there is a torrent of crimes still kept hidden
and arsenals of strategic weapons,
that there are accursed words, that there are prisons
and that the tree that does not exist grows nowhere.

But
we will go on looking for you, tree,
in the breadline dawns
and in the dreamline nights
...

We will go on working on you, poem,
above the hysteria of the crowds
and after the slogans from the loudspeakers,
beyond the bogus pomp and promises.³³⁷

In *Before Night Falls*, Arenas writes that the failure of the projected ten million ton- sugar-quota had ensured that “[t]he country had been devastated, being now depleted of those “thousands upon thousands of fruit trees and royal palms, and even forests” in the attempt.³³⁸ The forced overproduction in the sugar mills irreparably damaged the machinery and left the nation as “the poorest province of the Soviet Union”³³⁹. In order to deflect attention from this failure, Castro obviously shifted the blame “to other areas, such as his hatred of the United States”.³⁴⁰ In

³³⁷ Reinaldo Arenas “Introduction to the Symbol of Faith (excerpt from El central)” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 73.

³³⁸ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 75.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

1970, eleven Cuban fishermen disappeared, an event which was misleadingly dubbed as a kidnapping “by CIA agents on some Caribbean island”³⁴¹. In fact, the Castro administration was looking for an opportunity to stir up a nationwide frenzy and hatred of “Yankee imperialism”, and “millions of people who had been cutting sugarcane for a year had to reassemble in Revolutionary Square, or in front of what used to be the U.S. embassy in Havana, to protest the alleged kidnapping of the fishermen”³⁴². He describes the mind-numbing sloganeering at the mass rally and the conclusion to the tiresome ordeal through the eruption of the carnivalesque, mocking Castro’s “flair for theatrical strategies”:

The drama ended, as do most Cuban tragedies, in a sort of *rumba*; likenesses of President Nixon were burned to the beating of bongo drums. There was food and beer you could not buy at any market; the masses gathered in order to be able to eat a Cuban burger. Many had been assembled by the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution [CDR]. And so, all of a sudden, the populace forgot the failure of the harvest...there were great carnival celebrations...huge floats with all kinds of animals; some were big tanks full of tropical fish, topped by half-naked women dancing to the beat of drums...it was absolutely necessary to forget, by any means, that we had been the butt of a bad joke, that the efforts of all those years had been useless, that we were a completely underdeveloped country, more and more enslaved every day.³⁴³

The poetic condemnation of the nefarious atrocities committed by the Castro government through the “preparation” for the “Ten-Million Ton” harvest can however, only be complete through Arenas’s dogged espousal of “symbols of faith” that—even if on a purely hypothetical level—help one to sustain their optimism amidst these blatant violations of human rights. The debilitating histories of colonialism and the plantation economy are connected to the string of agonies and humiliations undergone in the name of obligatory service to the nation. Arenas initiates a tacit comparison between the “wearied gesture” of his forefathers and their own “legs’ forced jog”, surrounded

in the elemental lust
in yesterday’s hunger that, hungrily , we condemn today

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

in past humiliation that, humiliated, we denounce today.
In yesterday's censorship that muzzled, we point out today.³⁴⁴

Arenas thus concludes *El central*, positing the quest for “freedom” to be infinite, even if metaphysical subjunctives such as “the longed-for-land” do not exist.³⁴⁵ Instead, he celebrates the resilience of life-affirming human qualities and values which keeps some optimism alive in the face of terror.

5.4. “To Die in June with your Tongue Out”: *Machismo*, the “New Man” and the Invisibilisation of the Homosexual in Post-revolutionary Cuba

The marginalisation and invisibilisation suffered by Arenas as a homosexual are intricately connected to the already-existent discourses of *machismo* in Cuban society and the state-endorsed attitudes adopted towards homosexuality after the Revolution. Any discussion on homosexuality in Cuba is, however, fraught with political nuances which make the mere broaching of the topic itself difficult, and controversial. Brad Epps points out that homosexuality “has become closely, all too closely, bound to the image, especially abroad, of the revolution itself”³⁴⁶. It is often cast, he has shown, “as a telling symptom or a diversionary detail, as a sign of communist oppression or capitalist exploitation” and is, more often than not, fated to “signify something forever beneath, beside or beyond it”³⁴⁷. Therefore, any attempts to raise questions regarding the state-endorsed repression of homosexuals in post-revolutionary Cuba is often met with suspicion, especially since it is “refracted by an intense dynamic of international politics and ideology, personalities and positions”³⁴⁸. This has partly to do with the fact that the de-legitimisation of homosexuality at different levels of State policy is only a culmination of already embedded attitudes, in the public psyche, towards it—attitudes which reduce it, “even before the revolution, as a mere matter of appearance”³⁴⁹.

³⁴⁴ Reinaldo Arenas “Introduction to the Symbol of Faith (excerpt from *El central*),” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 74.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 73.

³⁴⁶ Brad Epps, “Proper Conduct: Reinaldo Arenas, Fidel Castro, and the Politics of Homosexuality”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6 no. 2 (Oct. 1995): 231, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704123> (accessed March 12, 2022).

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 232.

The importance ascribed to “appearance” in Epps’s analysis points towards a variance between two different and contending models—between “homosexuality of identity” (practised in Europe and North America, where “identity” is reinforced “regardless of the positions therein assumed”) and “homosexuality of positionality” as understood, and experienced in, Latin America and the Middle East.³⁵⁰ In the latter model, “a phallic principle remains firmly in place, centering, controlling, and all but reducing performance to a question of whether one “gives” or “receives” the phallus in anal intercourse”³⁵¹. Penetrative activity is overtly prioritised, and “any man who is penetrated is taken to assume an “unnatural” or antinatural” position”³⁵². According to Roger Lancaster, whereas, in Europe and North America, “a (heterosexual) man gains sexual status and honour among other men through and only through his sexual transactions with women” and “[h]omosexuals appear as active refuseniks of that system”, in most Latin American societies, “a man gains sexual status and honour among other men through his active role in sexual intercourse (either with a woman or with other men”³⁵³. In his words, the norm of sexual positionality followed in Nicaragua may serve as the springboard for “generalisations” within Latin America, with its internalised “active-honour and passive shame dichotomy”.³⁵⁴ Thus Lancaster also provides an explanation as to why the phenomenon of anal intercourse among Latin American men is fixated upon by an entire culture. “Unlike oral intercourse”, he writes, “which may lead itself to reciprocal sexual practices, anal intercourse inevitably produces an active partner and a passive partner” and is thus favoured over other forms of sexual activity among Latin American men³⁵⁵. To be in possession of the phallus and yet to wilfully “surrender” penetrative activity (and the more symbolic power associated with it) in Cuba is thus to appear in a certain way that contravenes the conventions of masculinity. The “passive” *maricón* (the “faggot”, or “receiver” of the phallus in intercourse) is thus pitted against the muscular, rough, “active/insertive” *bugarrón*, a figure not necessarily labelled or

³⁵⁰ Ibid. 233.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Roger N. Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley, California: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 250.

³⁵⁴ Ibid. 270.

³⁵⁵ Ibid. 240.

stigmatised as homosexual, but one “who may even find his masculinity reinforced by penetrating other men”³⁵⁶. However, appearances played a far more significant role in the state’s determination of who was a homosexual and who was not. Epps writes that the binary dualism played out between body and soul, surface and depth works within this selective revelation and concealment of the self. This is a form of “re-fashioning” where “[o]ne is, or rather always becomes, what one appears to be”—through their gait, deep voice, sartorial customs and fashion.³⁵⁷ Carlos Alberto Montaner writes:

The government did not seek—it never seeks—realities, but only appearances. It wanted virile men, with short hair, loose pants and a straight-looking jacket (*‘guayabera’*), even though this getup may hide an effeminate creature. The important thing is the damned image of the revolution.³⁵⁸

Unlike oral intercourse, anal penetrative sexual intercourse among men in Latin American societies speaks the language of “activity” and “passivity”, and thus forecloses “the possibility of an equal sign between partners”³⁵⁹. This one-sided investment of power and symbolic authority within the phallic principle is a consequence of the traditional importance ascribed to “*hombria*” (manliness) in Cuban society. The Cuban ethnologist Alberto Pedro notes the importance of “*hombria*” in Latin American societies, identifying it with “honour, dignity, chivalry”³⁶⁰. The culture of *machismo* is often thought of as “part of the continent’s Iberian heritage”, having originated from nineteenth-century Andalusia.³⁶¹ Marvin Leiner, in his book *Sexual Politics in Cuba*, points out that for most Cubans, “a man is homosexual only if his behaviour is not *macho*: if he does not show interest in

³⁵⁶ See, for example, Marvin Leiner, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality and AIDS* (London & New York: Routledge, 2019 (1994)), 22 where Leiner writes, “To have sex with another man is not what identifies one as homosexual [in Cuba]. For many Cubans, a man is homosexual only if he takes the passive, receiving role. And a man is suspected of being homosexual only if his behavior is not *macho*: if he does not show interest in rough games, or is not physically strong and muscular”

³⁵⁷ Brad Epps, “Proper Conduct: Reinaldo Arenas, Fidel Castro, and the Politics of Homosexuality”, 244.

³⁵⁸ Carlos Alberto Montaner, quoted in Lillian Guerra, “Gender Policing, Homosexuality and the New Patriarchy of the Cuban Revolution, 1965–70”, *Social History* 35 no. 3 (August 2010): 270.

³⁵⁹ Roger N. Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*, 240.

³⁶⁰ Alberto Pedro, quoted in Marvin Leiner, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality and AIDS*, 21.

³⁶¹ See Bruce Lambert, “Koch’s Record on AIDS: Fighting a Battle Without a Precedent,” *New York Times* (August 27, 1989), 30.

rough games, or is not physically strong and muscular; if he is gentle or quiet or perhaps has a nurturing sensibility to other people's feelings..."³⁶². For the most part, the marginalisation and invisibilisation of the homosexual in Cuba originates in this first demarcation of those codes of behaviour which do not qualify as *macho*; those which are deemed, from the predominant social point of view, as "inferior, inadequate and deficient"³⁶³. Ileana Fuentes, in her study *Cuba sin caudillos*, points out that through the Cuban Revolution, the transformation of *machismo* in a new ideological (Marxist) guise was attempted. In her view, through the revolution, the Castro regime attempted "a new iteration of the old heroic culture, the old *macho* militarism in revolutionary guise: Marx plus testosterone"³⁶⁴. However, there are also other contextual factors, from the pre-revolutionary days, troubling any simplistic reduction of the "problem" of homosexuality in Cuba—the overlap of homosexuality and the growing underworld of gambling, drugs and prostitution (officially disguised as "tourism") being the most significant of them. Tourists from the United States had always been an important source of revenue for the Cuban economy during the phase 1945-59, with Havana becoming "a favourite place for honeymooners from all over the country and for shopping trips from nearby Florida"³⁶⁵. With the coming of U.S. based organised crime networks in the 1950s, "the city's reputation as a sordid cesspool of sin took hold"³⁶⁶. This led to the much-disseminated—but ultimately erroneous—view that the cities, primarily Havana, were the "locus of immoral and criminal behaviour in contrast to a pure and unspoiled countryside"³⁶⁷. In such a context, planning within the ranks of bureaucrats of the Castro regime was marked by a moralism that sought to "rehabilitate" homosexuals from "the darkness of the cabarets" and "the 'special meeting' salons"³⁶⁸. The sexual revolution of the 1960s, which sought to project individual and public attitudes towards sexuality in the Western world as "self-expression" and "a measure of identity and happiness" did not apply to Cuban

³⁶² See Marvin Leiner, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality and AIDS* (London & New York: Routledge, 2019 (1994), 22.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁴ Ileana Fuentes, quoted in Alfred Padula, "Review: Gender, Sexuality, and Revolution in Cuba", *Latin American Research Review* 31 no. 2 (1996): 229.

³⁶⁵ Marvin Leiner, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality and AIDS*, 23.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

society at large.³⁶⁹ The tense years of the 1960s, replete with attacks and coups attempted by CIA-supported groups gave rise to “an atmosphere of mistrust and fear” of homosexuals, who were accused of being “counterrevolutionary”, imbibing misdirected ideas and lifestyles from the ideological decadence of advanced, Western bourgeois democracies.³⁷⁰

The work of Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich may be cited to understand the antagonistic, and thereafter, criminalising attitude the Castro-regime adopted towards homosexuality in post-revolutionary Cuba. The authors describe Havana’s economy of the 1950s under the Batista regime, where “[t]he only occupational sector showing substantial growth was that connected to tourism, drug distribution, gambling and prostitution”³⁷¹. “[H]omosexual desire”, in the context of severe repression of deviant sexuality in advanced capitalist nations of the 1940s and 1950s, “was often channelled into illegal and lucrative off-shore markets like the Havana underworld”, where “Cuban homosexuals had preferential hiring treatment in the Havana tourist sector in order to meet the demands of American visitors and servicemen for homoerotic experiences”³⁷². Sections of the Cuban bourgeoisie also became customers of this underground market, feeling free “to partake of homosexual practices without being considered homosexual as long as they did not take the passive, so-called female role in sexual relations”³⁷³. However, this underground sub-culture, persisting in and around bars such as the St. Michel, the Dirty Dick and *El Gato Tuerto*, “was isolated from the mainstream of social life”³⁷⁴. The apparent partial tolerance of the Havana gay community had been conveniently clubbed with the commercialisation of sex. This meant that although “legal sanctions and official harassment” were rarely used against the gay community in order to ensure stability in business, “[i]n the larger society gay

³⁶⁹ See Martin Baumi Duberman, "Past Experience," *The Nation* (May 14, 1988), 684-685 and Marvin Leiner, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality and AIDS*, 13.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 25.

³⁷¹ Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich, “Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience, Part I”, *Signs* 9 no. 4, The Lesbian Issue (Summer 1984): 686, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173617> (accessed March 14, 2022).

³⁷² *Ibid.* 686-87.

³⁷³ *Ibid.* 687.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

people were not tolerated nor was there much in the way of self-defined gay identities”³⁷⁵.

Arguelles and Rich’s study of Cuban gay and lesbian communities, however, discredits testimonies offered by Cuban émigrés, citing political counter-propaganda by U.S. foreign policy, exerting “the pressures on émigrés to testify to political persecution in their country of origin in order to attain the legal and economic advantages of refugee status in their new country”³⁷⁶. Despite their purported claims to portray “the changing realities and subtleties of everyday gay life on the island as part of the ongoing revolutionary process itself”, conducted in order to problematize “the continual scapegoating of Cuban revolutionary homophobia”³⁷⁷ by U.S.-based Cuban gay émigré communities, the authors resort to the traditional Marxist framework on class relations within society to adduce reasons for the social dissidence performed by homosexuals. In their analysis, they argue that in the wake of being declared a Marxist-Leninist state, “homosexual survival strategies of the time were largely private, individual and lacked effective oppositional qualities”³⁷⁸. While Arguelles and Rich do accept the state-endorsed persecution of homosexuals throughout the 1960s through the UMAP camps, they are prompt enough to provide an apologia for the change in official Cuban government stance on homosexuals, who were now no longer seen as “criminals” but only “sexual deviates”³⁷⁹ (“to be cured, not condemned”, apparently). Such uninhibited pathologisation of homosexuality by the state is (quite paradoxically) seen by Arguelles and Rich as partially “progressive”—a “bold” stance which, in their opinion, represents “a certain relaxation in the parameters of permissible sexual behaviour in the international communist world”³⁸⁰. What seems all the more befuddling in the work of Arguelles and Rich are their repeated attempts at defending the Castro regime against charges of ‘homophobia’ levelled against it by the émigré Cuban gay communities in the United States by flogging, as it were, the

³⁷⁵ See *Ibid.* 688, where Arguelles and Rich write, “...in this pre-revolutionary setting, discrete lesbian or gay male identities in the modern sense—identities that are based on self-definition and involve emotional as well as physical aspects of same sex relations—were rare”.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 684.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 691.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 692.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

dead horses of Marxist theory and teleology in trying to advance a critique of the “acritical nature of bourgeois thought”³⁸¹ on the problem of gay immigration.

Roger N. Lancaster has pointed out in his book *Life is Hard* that the use of the word “homophobia”, to indicate “a fear of homosexuals or homosexual intercourse”, is not quite appropriate in a socio-cultural context and milieu where “unlabelled men desire and actively seek intercourse with labelled men”³⁸². However, fear and suspicion towards the unmanly *maricón* certainly did exist, as evidenced through the collective self-construction and assertion of a powerful model of *machismo*, of which the Revolution had also made strategic use to invoke Cuban nationalism during the 1960s and 1970s. As Brad Epps so succinctly points out in his essay, “homophobia” in Cuba can be seen as “an (in)appropriate sign of a double bind” where *macho* men desire their “opposites” (*maricóns*, *locas*, or “fairies”) and yet are ashamed, as part of the code of *hombria*, to accept the existence of “unmanliness” in these identities so much as to persecute them.³⁸³ In Arenas’s case, Epps very rightly draws attention to this ‘double bind’ of sorts, especially during the poet’s experiences at the El Morro prison in Havana after his arrest in 1974, where *macho* men simultaneously desired and feared him.³⁸⁴ Arenas’s writing may be seen as a concerted attempt to reveal this “double-bind”, exposing and critiquing the hypocrisies of cis-gendered and “heterosexual” (although only in “appearance”) men in the Cuban context. The instances where Arenas faced invisibilisation as a homosexual are apparent in his autobiographical memoir *Before Night Falls*, where he recounts that although he still received his salary from the UNEAC, he was neither allowed to be published by the UNEAC, nor allowed to do editorial work for *La Gaceta de Cuba*, the magazine he was “supposed” to co-edit.³⁸⁵ Neither could he find a room to himself, it being by then

³⁸¹ Ibid. 684.

³⁸² Roger N. Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley, California: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 269.

³⁸³ Brad Epps, “Proper Conduct: Reinaldo Arenas, Fidel Castro, and the Politics of Homosexuality”, 240.

³⁸⁴ A particularly vivid instance of this “double bind” appears in Julian Schnabel’s film adaptation of Arenas’s autobiographical memoir, *Before Night Falls*, where a captive Arenas is interrogated at state security by a macho lieutenant, who keeps fondling his penis and his testicles while doing so, revealing the hardened outline of his erect member over his (military) *khaki* trousers. See *Before Night Falls*, directed by Julian Schnabel (Fine Line Features, 2000).

³⁸⁵ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 84.

widely known that he was a *maricón*. When he requested for a room in an abandoned house, Arenas realised that “the Revolution was not going to give the room to a homosexual for him to bring men there...I had to find a woman, get married and submit a formal request for the room”.³⁸⁶

Arenas entered a marriage of convenience with Ingravida Felix, a divorced and talented actress famous for her role in the play *La noche de los asesinos* (*The Night of the Murderers*). Her independent demeanour and her relatively free sex life were among the reasons she had been “parametrized and fired from her job, in spite of her enormous acting talent”³⁸⁷. The moral puritanism of the Castro regime is brought out through Arenas’s accounts in his autobiographical memoir. He recounts “notorious arrests of women at try sting hotels” which had been created and maintained so that “heterosexuals could rent a room for a few hours to make love”³⁸⁸. However, internal surveillance mechanisms within the ranks of the government also needed to find out “which women were committing adultery” under this pretext, “especially if any happened to be the wife of some Communist Party stalwart”³⁸⁹. As a marginalised gay man in Castro’s Cuba, Arenas does not hesitate to extend his solidarity towards heterosexual women who were thought of, by the Castro regime, as “inferior beings”³⁹⁰. Sexual promiscuity among *macho* men was seen as a sign of virility, but similar privileges could not be extended to women and homosexuals by the State. Therefore, attitudes of empathy and mutual protection evolved between the two, since they “suffered persecution for the same weakness”— the preference of men as sexual partners.³⁹¹ Their marriage was testimony to the fact that these two sections of the Cuban population were ostracised (albeit in varying degrees) by the continuation of *machismo* after the Revolution, and were explicitly excluded from the utopian concept of the “New Man” (*hombre nuevo*) supposed to emerge in future with a “superior consciousness”.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

The moral puritanism endorsed by the Castro regime aimed at preserving the traditional institution of the family which, through biological reproduction, ensures continual supply of labour in the workforce for future generations. The libidinal economy of homosexuality, on the other hand was viewed as “unproductive, inclined more to waste and dissipation than to socially relevant creation and generation”³⁹². Traditional Marxist-Leninist line of thought thus viewed homosexuals as narcissists who could be made “men” through “hard work”³⁹³. This extolled cult of militant *uber-machismo*, aimed at fostering homosociality between overtly “masculine” men, justified the UMAP camps and the state’s forceful expropriation of penal labour from its “sexual deviants”. Even after the camps were disbanded under pressure from the international literati, “the ideology that instituted them has been more resistant to alteration”³⁹⁴. While elaborating on Guevara’s concept of the “New Man” of superior Communist consciousness, Castro noted in a later interview to Italian journalist Gianni Mina: “We postulate something to which the Christian doctrine also subscribes: the brotherhood of all people, solidarity, selflessness and generosity, to which we add a high education, advanced technical training, national dignity, and an internationalist approach”³⁹⁵. Yet, for all its purported extolling of brotherhood, the regime’s ostracisation of its non-*macho* “others” becomes immediately visible in Castro’s exclusion of the homosexual from the ideal, projected vision of the true “revolutionary”:

Nothing prevents a homosexual from professing revolutionary ideology and, consequently, exhibiting a correct political position...And yet, we would never come to believe that a homosexual could embody the conditions and requirements of conduct that would enable us to consider him a true revolutionary, a true Communist militant. A deviation of that nature clashes with the concept we have of what a militant Communist should be...[b]ut I will be frank and say that homosexuals should not be

³⁹² Brad Epps, “Proper Conduct: Reinaldo Arenas, Fidel Castro, and the Politics of Homosexuality”, 241.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Ibid. 242. The international literati included figures such as Allen Ginsberg, Jean-Paul Sartre, Graham Greene and many others who expressed their anxiety and disagreement with the treatment meted out to homosexuals in post-revolutionary Cuba.

³⁹⁵ See Gianni Mina, *An Encounter with Fidel* trans. Mary Todd (Ocean Press: Melbourne, 1991), 143.

allowed in positions where they are able to exert influence upon young people.³⁹⁶

By explicitly pointing out that a homosexual was (in and as of themselves), somehow “less” than, or socially “inferior” to the Communist ideal of the “New Man”, Castro’s comments also directs our attention to the graded rights available to homosexuals in post-revolutionary Cuba, turning them into second-class citizens. As more and more stringent and repressive measures were adopted, the homosexual was not only excluded from all “positions of influence”, but also from the mainstream of Cuban public life.

I now wish to analyse a few excerpts from Arenas’s novel *Farewell to the Sea* to illustrate his aesthetic and ideological resistance to the organised repression of homosexuality, and his critique of the concept of the “New Man” in the Cuba of the 1970s. Often dismissed as “flighty, frivolous and wild”, the homosexual was, as per the regime, a self-styled epitome of “bourgeois decadence”, someone who made “a mockery of stability, seriousness and sociability itself”³⁹⁷. The riotous proclivity of Arenas’s imagination mocks the established socio-political order of *machismo* as well as the utilitarian principles of socialist production which deaden the individual by denying him life-affirming refuge in art, sexual freedom and impractical flight. The “aesthetic distance” that often conditions the writing of fiction however, in no way reduces its “authenticity”³⁹⁸. Francisco Soto has thus written that Arenas’s novels give adequate voice to “those individuals who value the imaginative over the historical or who do not represent the ideal *hombre nuevo* (New Man) of the Revolution”³⁹⁹

Farewell to the Sea, a novel that had to be written thrice because of state-censorship and repression—first in 1969, “when it was destroyed by a friend

³⁹⁶ Fidel Castro, quoted in Marvin Leiner, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality and AIDS* (London & New York: Routledge, 2019 (1994), 26.

³⁹⁷ Brad Epps, “Proper Conduct: Reinaldo Arenas, Fidel Castro, and the Politics of Homosexuality”, 245.

³⁹⁸ Ibid. 274. Epps writes that the “fate of authenticity, rage, suffering and terror” is instrumental in “Arenas’s, conception of individual freedom and creativity, a conception that clashes not only with the collectivity of communism but with the solidarity of homosexual (or gay) identity as well.”. Thus Epps, although somewhat contentiously, directs our attention to the dichotomy between the individual and the “collective”, and Arenas’s preference for the former.

³⁹⁹ Francisco Soto, *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia* (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994), 41.

who was supposed to be hiding it away”, the second time in 1972, when state authorities confiscated the manuscript and finally in 1974, when Arenas, from prison, managed to smuggle it out Cuba for publication⁴⁰⁰—recounts the tale of a young married couple going to the sea from Havana on a six-day trip. It is the third novel in Arenas’s *pentagonia*—a quintet of five novels in which he tried to narrate “the secret history of Cuba”⁴⁰¹. The novel is neatly segregated into two parts—the first half recounting the experience of the vacation spent at the beach house from the narratorial point-of-view of the wife, while the second part is, in the words of Thomas Colchie, “composed of six furious cantos, sung in silence to the ocean by Hector, a poet who no longer writes, or is no longer allowed to”⁴⁰². Hector’s cantos describe his past; his experience of “voluntary” labour at a work camp, his invisibilisation from public life as a homosexual, his alienation, angst and desperation at the internal surveillance network spread over the entire island and his personal frustrations at having entered a “sham-marriage” and having fathered a child out of it, “in order to avoid the charge of homosexuality”⁴⁰³. Even though the marriage does not seem to be devoid of an empathetic bond between Hector and his wife, their essential loneliness is pitted against the backdrop of a vast, mind-numbing sea which appears to be the solace within the “death-in-life that totalitarianism has imposed upon them both”⁴⁰⁴. During the six-day trip, Hector pursues the attention of a handsome and exuberant youth, who, mysteriously, is drowned on the sixth day. Set in 1969, the novel anticipates and captures events and happenings before projected the Ten-Million-Ton sugar harvest of 1970, an event of momentous significance in Cuban history that also marked its complete transition into a Marxist-Leninist state.

I specifically wish to focus upon two excerpts from Hector’s cantos in the second half of the novel, especially since they suit the generic domain of literature pertinent to my dissertation: “poetry”. Part of Arenas’s anti-authoritarian disposition consists in rejecting stable generic classifications that separate “fiction” from “poetry”. Although Arenas chose the novel as the most dominant form of

⁴⁰⁰ See Thomas Colchie, “Introduction” in Reinaldo Arenas, *Farewell to the Sea: A Novel of Cuba* trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1987), xvi.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.* xv.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.* xvii.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

narrative fiction that he would write, he nevertheless intersperses free-flowing, unpunctuated prose with snippets of lyrical beauty and musicality. The second canto in Hector's narrative may be treated as his poignant denunciation of the injustices of the repressive regime and an incitement to the artist-intellectuals to abandon their indifference towards such instances of violation. It also records the distressing trauma and painful desolation of Hector, whose metaphoric expulsion from the mainstream of public life heightens his desire "to leave", to choose exile as a way of escape from his island-prison. Canto Two of *Farewell to the Sea* begins with a procession of indoctrinated youths, followed by a "line of strange monsters" playing music.⁴⁰⁵ Arenas employs a witty paratextual clue of "[Marxism erupting]" to caricature the state-instituted indoctrination programmes perpetually in operation to coax and coerce consent from the masses. His deep disillusionment with Marxist ideology reveals itself as he feels estranged and alienated from indoctrinated youngsters, who pass him by with their "never-halting hope" for a utopian future free of all forms of oppression. Yet, Arenas follows the descending trajectory outlined through the movement from the "never-halting hope" of youth to "[h]ope plucked of feathers" of middle age and finally to the "[s]hattered, dusty hope" in which Hector, the now-disillusioned poet finds himself. As Cesar A. Salgado writes, Hector's bitter complaints about the fate that awaits homosexuals reaches its climax where he "prophesizes, in a science fiction interlude, Castro's transformation into a despotic, galactic Mother God"⁴⁰⁶.

Hector's predicament is complicated by the desire to leave Cuba, asserted as an individual choice. It is however, an impossible and unrealisable one, especially since the carceral structure of the prison has pervaded all over the island, which is now compared to "the letter from a friend in exile"⁴⁰⁷. As his familiar surroundings get more and more unfamiliar with each passing day, Hector experiences the contradictory pulls of "home" and "exile" simultaneously. He longs for the lost Cuba of his youth, but having discovered it to be irretrievable except in memory, he is ready for the "leap" latent within the etymology of the word "exile".

⁴⁰⁵ Reinaldo Arenas, *Farewell to the Sea: A Novel of Cuba* trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1987), 187.

⁴⁰⁶ Cesar A. Salgado, "Reinaldo Arenas (1943-1990)," in *Latin American Writers: Supplement I* eds. Carlos A. Sole and Klaus Muller-Bergh (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 2001), 64.

⁴⁰⁷ Reinaldo Arenas, *Farewell to the Sea: A Novel of Cuba*, 188.

Derived from the Latin verb *exsilire* (to leap out)⁴⁰⁸, the condition of “exile” entails a sense of being abandoned in the country once known and experienced as “home”, in order that such a “leap” takes place, whether through forced expulsion or voluntary migration:

Island,
on you all flights of daring crash, and burn.
You are sad, like the letter from a friend in exile,
like the figure of an old fag
with dyed hair,
like the voice of a man calling to the creatures in the garden
of his childhood,
With your year-round meadows where a starving cow grazes
on your monotony, you are sad.
With your houses built for other climes,
with your over-seasoned seasons,
with your avenues, shorn of trees and hedges,
which once had signs and now have slogans,
with your women now strictly imbecile
(bovine, oxlike),
with your cynical rumba-ing men
(big kids),
with your exhibitionist youth,
with your philosophy of bread-and-guava for everybody,
with your grab-assing and backside swinging,
with your crushing collection of shrieking fags,
with your immense dusty summer
with your single river
your single highway
your single product
your symbolic tree
your highly touted *joie de vivre*:

You are sad.
And yet, this is the place you love best—
more than anything else in the world.
And yet this is the place that will haunt you forever
and that you’ll always want to hold...⁴⁰⁹

The marriage of convenience Arenas had entered with Ingravida Felix seems to be the autobiographical link to Arenas’s portrait of Hector’s failing, loveless marriage. The wife, depicted as “foolish”, nevertheless loves Hector, who

⁴⁰⁸ The verb *exsilire* (Latin), meaning “to spring, bound or leap out” is indicative of an active agency on part of the exile in choosing to leave the country of their origin. Arenas’s urge to leave Cuba (in order that he could live and write with freedom) also indicates active volition on his part, even if this desire is conditioned by state-repression, persecution, imprisonment and censorship.

⁴⁰⁹ Reinaldo Arenas, *Farewell to the Sea: A Novel of Cuba*, 188-89.

finds the growing silence between them unbearable. We are informed that “he goes out alone/ and visits a depraved beach”⁴¹⁰. The “muted sadness” and “quiet desperation” in the eyes of the silent wife touches Hector, who nevertheless cannot prevent the breakdown of all effective communication between the two.⁴¹¹ Both Hector and his wife resent the additional responsibility thrust on themselves in the form of their baby, and the wife is aware of his infidelity when a taciturn teenager arrives with his loquacious mother at the cottage next to theirs.⁴¹²

Arenas takes the reader into the depths of Hector’s past, into the diegetic domain of the second novel in the *pentagonia*—*The Palace of White Skunks*, where he had portrayed an idealistic adolescent Fortunato who ran away from the repressively restrictive regime of patriarchy in his rural, impoverished household.⁴¹³ Yet, contrasted to Fortunato’s youthful idealism and his faith in Communist ideals of the Revolution, Hector finds himself “confronted with the thousand futile gestures” which one must obligatorily repeat, day after day.⁴¹⁴ He is well-aware that despite the cover of a sham-marriage and a baby, his secret life as a homosexual remains under the all-pervasive internal surveillance system instituted by the state, and that he might simply disappear from all public records as a condemned and excluded man. The “era’s standard adornments—bombs, shots, arguments, shouts, threats, torture, humiliation, fear, hunger” lie in waiting for Hector to yield to them.⁴¹⁵ In a particularly moving section of the canto, Arenas designates literature as “the consequence of a traditional and well-established hypocrisy” because it involves a stalling of raw emotions experienced by individuals in encountering injustices, humiliations and “day-to-day beauty or terror”⁴¹⁶. Literary expression, inasmuch as it provides a shelter and a refuge, “behind the secret, heart-breaking and false confession which a book always is”, shields the ostracised artist-intellectual, who is forced to embrace his cowardice and “imbecility” before the

⁴¹⁰ Ibid. 190.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid. 193-94.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid. 198.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid. 202.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid. 203-04.

wrath of a stifling, dictatorial state.⁴¹⁷ Hector surmises that “we attempt to make up for the betrayal of our life: We, traitors, write the book”⁴¹⁸.

But although “literature” appears to be a feeble tool against the litany of organised repressions and injustices, it nevertheless managed to script a testimonial history for those who are “without a history” (*la gente sin historia*)⁴¹⁹. In Arenas’s case, as Francisco Soto has pointed out, “dissidents, “extravagants”, dreamers, free-thinkers, homosexuals” happen to be those sections of the Cuban populace “not welcomed into the new revolutionary regime, for they fail to contribute, in the government’s eyes, to the political and socio-historical legitimacy of a revolutionary consciousness”⁴²⁰.

Arenas’s poetic trilogy, *Leprosorio: Trilogia Poetica*, usually less talked about in Anglo-American academic circles owing to the lack of sustained translation, was written during the most repressive phase of governmental terror (1970-76), comprised of *El central*, *Morir en junio y con la lengua afuera* (“To Die in June with Your Tongue Out”) and “*Leprosorium*”. In the second poem of this trilogy, Arenas describes the cityscape of Havana, interspersed with tourists (mostly “Frenchmen, middle class, intelligent people, “progressives”, we might say”) who are drawn to historical relics and monuments, couched in the air-conditioned comfort of their hotel rooms and smoking “the exclusive cigarettes made by the locals, who sometimes have the privilege of getting their hands on an empty pack carelessly tossed by some fair-haired big-timer”⁴²¹. The tourists pay in dollars, and are conveniently “led around” Havana by the chosen emissaries of the Castro regime, exoticising the tropical Cuban beaches and niceties.⁴²² Arenas notes the careful complicity between these tourists, and the Castro regime’s continuing popularity among sections of the “progressive” middle class in developed nations, insulated by their protected rights and freedom in their own country. Despite being aware of the countless violations of individual human rights in Cuba, they act as

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. 204.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Francisco Soto, *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia* (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994), 41

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Reinaldo Arenas, “In the City, the Tourists (excerpt from *Morir en junio y con la lengua afuera*),” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 82.

⁴²² Ibid.

active agents lobbying for the Castro regime in the international media, remaining “politically convinced of the good intentions hidden behind the man who, with submachine in hand, leads a squadron of thousand men”⁴²³. The stamping out of all dissent is carried out with threats of expulsion towards the marginalised sections who do not approve of the Castro-dictatorship:

*They can leave
They are the “others”, the ones that have to be wiped out.
Those that sooner or later (so much venom has been vented)
Will slip their necks in triumph
Into the noose.*⁴²⁴

The “others” identified here point explicitly towards the homosexual men, who continue, through their “discreet blasphemy” to be invisibilised from public life.⁴²⁵ The all-too familiar “not looking when they pass by” and the “being ever alert” are reserved for the ostracised homosexual, who is also disallowed by rule within the conceptualisation of the “New Man”⁴²⁶. Arenas deploys corrosive irony to critique this utopian ideal, directing attention to the countless instances the “New Man” subjugates his ordinary individual subjectivity and tribulations (the ‘I’) naively, to move closer to an elusive collective (“We”), only to be betrayed by false promises, and to be confronted with negligent governance on part of the State.⁴²⁷ By passively assenting to his own oppression and those around him, the “New Man” becomes complicit to state-endorsed exploitation. Arenas also highlights the

⁴²³ Ibid. 83.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid. 84.

⁴²⁶ **“New Man”**: The “New Man” (*hombre nuevo*) was the postulation and endorsement of a hypothetical future man by Ernesto “Che” Guevara, infused with a “superior” (and Communist) consciousness who facilitated the transition from capitalism to communism. The ideal “New Man” deliberately rejected the use of material incentives in the building of a (supposedly) communitarian society. Crucial to Guevara’s conception of the “New Man” was his rejection of class hierarchies caused by money and market relations and his vision of a “classless society” at a future stage of Communism.. The disjuncture between the “humanitarian” rhetoric used in the endorsement of this concept and the fierce indoctrination and social engineering promoted by this economic scheme was never properly bridged. Despite its claims to “liberty”, this concept conveniently co-opted the already entrenched masculinist bias inherent in *machismo*, and reduced women and homosexuals to “inferior” and marginalised subjects. For a detailed overview of the concept, see Ernesto “Che” Guevara, “Socialism and Man,” in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics* eds. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, Alfredo Prieto and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff (New York: Duke University Press, 2019), 343-347. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478004561-071> (accessed March 20, 2021).

⁴²⁷Reinaldo Arenas, “In the City, the Tourists (excerpt from *Morir en junio y con la lengua afuera*),” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 84.

sustained distortion of collective memory through constant fallacious propaganda undertaken by the State through a monopoly of all media and communication channels. This routine falsification, an everyday occurrence in the dictatorship, robs the “New Man” of his autonomous vision and reasoning, making him simply a slave to tyranny:

The new man beats his old *yarey* hat (the tropical glare is unbearable)
and gets ready to take off his boots under the trunk of the *yuraguana*, the silver thatch palm.

The new man waves a mosquito with his torpid hands...

The new man is sprouting grappling irons from his hands.
They are the natural gloves God the merciful always grants the slave.

Discolorations are breaking out on the new man’s face.
They are the hearty colours God the merciful always grants the slave.

Strange armour-plated shells are emerging on the feet of the new man.
They are the magnificent irons God the merciful always grants the slave.

The new man is losing speech, memory, he no longer can see.
They are the invariable privileges God the merciful
always
grants
the slave.⁴²⁸

The title “To Die in June with Your Tongue Out” reinforces a mockery of the “social view of the homosexual subject...seen as criminal, immoral, unproductive and inhuman”⁴²⁹. The repression of the homosexual and the expunging of this figure outside the limits of acceptable discourse therefore become the conditions of possibility for the homosexual subject’s self-determination and assertion, through language. As we have already noticed in our chapter on Brodsky, sustained marginalisation can often produce strategies of self-deprecation in poetic description. Here, the homosexual subject (not without a hint of irony and Arenas’s love for the carnivalesque), embraces the self-deprecatory and hypersexual labels that are thrust on him, visualising his tongue “growing in size”, “festering against

⁴²⁸ Ibid. 84-85.

⁴²⁹ Camelly Cruz-Martes, “Prologue: “The Will to Live Manifesting Itself,” in Reinaldo Arenas, *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 11.

the heavens”.⁴³⁰ The repeated, incantatory tone of Arenas’s lines performs a retaliatory self-assertion where the homosexual, pushed to the limits of “no-place”, reclaims and affirms his desire with positive connotations. The search for the lost father, a recurrent trope in Arenas’s poetry and fiction, is here re-invented through a symbolic dispossession of the exile from his *patria* and the imminent threat of self-dissolution:

They are knocking. They’re coming to find us.
How tremendously tiring to snuff out divine furor,
what countryside I loved do I gaze upon no more?⁴³¹

In another excerpt, Arenas predicts imminent persecution as he surmises “We’re dead”⁴³². Yet, as part of his aesthetic and ethical obligations to the truth, he does not forget to reserve the “endless dead howl” that “rings timeless down the highway/of the dead” for those silenced by the iniquities of history.⁴³³ Later, in 1983, Arenas stated with characteristic defiance:

In every country, and especially in totalitarian countries, there exists an official history, which is generally what gets published, but the real history that people suffer through can only be told by its victims...I prefer history told by its interpreters rather than by the historians.⁴³⁴

His arrest, imprisonment and Mariel exodus (events which will be the subject of the next two sections of this chapter respectively) only serve to reinforce this ideological resistance he offers, for “[a]lthough the poet might perish, the testimony of writing he leaves behind is a testimony of his triumph in the face of repression and legal persecution”⁴³⁵. This triumph ennoble not only the poet himself, but also becomes “patrimony of the human condition”⁴³⁶.

⁴³⁰ Reinaldo Arenas, “In the City, the Tourists (excerpt from *Morir en junio y con la lengua afuera*),” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 85-86.

⁴³¹ Ibid. 87.

⁴³² Reinaldo Arenas, “Oh, God, You’re Cold and Perplexed” (excerpt from *Morir en junio y con la lengua afuera*),” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 89.

⁴³³ Ibid. 90.

⁴³⁴ See the original Spanish language-interview in Monica Morley and Enrico Mario Santi, “Reinaldo Arenas y su mundo alucinante: una entrevista,” *Hispania* 66 (1983): 118. I have used Francisco Soto’s translation of this particular section from Francisco Soto, “Reinaldo Arenas: The ‘Pentagonía’ and the Cuban Documentary Novel”, *Cuban Studies* 23 (1993): 145, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24487022> (accessed March 20, 2022).

⁴³⁵ Reinaldo Arenas, quoted in Ibid. 143.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

5.5. “The Will to Live Manifesting Itself”: Arrest, Imprisonment and the Poetry of Captivity

Despite having entered into a marriage of convenience with Ingravida Felix, Arenas could not conceal his homosexuality before the eyes of the Cuban state. He recounts that “[i]n the summer of 1973”, he and his friend Pepe Malas had “sex in the mangroves with some young guys”⁴³⁷. After love-making, they had left their “beach bags” on the sand and had dived into the sea for a swim. On returning, they discovered that they had been robbed, and that “our recent lovers had taken our bags”⁴³⁸. Pepe Malas informed the police of the theft. The collective, entrenched bias against the homosexual is carefully highlighted as Arenas, as an afterthought, admits “this should never have been done in our case”⁴³⁹. Seeking police help was always dangerous for citizens engaged in “dubious” moral behaviour. The police did find the thieving adolescents, and the bags were also found, but now they levelled a counter-accusation at Arenas and Malas as homosexuals who had tried to make sexual advances towards them. Despite being implicated in a case where the clear proof of theft was on their side, Arenas realised that “I had overlooked a Castroist article of law stating that in case of a homosexual committing a sexual crime, anyone’s accusations were enough grounds for persecution”⁴⁴⁰. As if like a bolt from the blue, he discovered “[a]ll of a sudden, everything positive had disappeared from my file, and I was nothing but a homosexual counter-revolutionary who had dared to publish books abroad”⁴⁴¹. Even after being released on bail, when Arenas returned to his workplace at the UNEAC, he found that suddenly “it seemed I had become invisible”⁴⁴².

The lengthy UNEAC report and the extended “dossier of evidence” available on him to the State accused him of “being a counter-revolutionary who had smuggled his books out of Cuba without the UNEAC’s authorization”⁴⁴³. It was signed by notable Cuban literati such as “Nicolás Guillén, Otto Fernandez, Jose

⁴³⁷ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 86.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*

Martinez Matos and Bienvenido Suarez”⁴⁴⁴. His desire to embrace exile grew more and more desperate, and he hatched an outrageous plan “to leave the country in a boat via the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo”⁴⁴⁵. However, he was immediately arrested and taken to the Miramar police station, from whence he again attempted a heroic escape. Arenas’s escape from a solitary cell at the Miramar Police Station happened purely on the stroke of good luck, but it was an event which nevertheless summed up the socio-economic context of deprivation in which Cuba remained at the time. Thus, as soon as an officer had announced that he had brought “hot espresso, a privilege in Cuba, where coffee is rationed at three ounces a month per person”, all officers left their stations to gather towards him.⁴⁴⁶ Seizing his opportunity, Arenas ran away through the open gate “which led to the shore”, took off his clothes and dived into the water.⁴⁴⁷ He was, by then, a good swimmer and thus managed to reach Patricio Lumumba Beach, where, with the help of a former lover, he reached his aunt’s house to tell her the fabricated story that it had all been “a mistake and I only needed to pay a fine”⁴⁴⁸. The scheming aunt, who had resolved to steal the whole sum of money that Arenas had managed to save till that point, had to be intimidated into paying him back half of it. Thereafter, Arenas’s perseverance in evading arrest reached its pinnacle, as he accomplished the near-Herculean feat of swimming in an “inner tube” (buoy), with only a bottle of rum and a can of black beans given to him by a friend, and reached the nearby coast of Jaimanitas.⁴⁴⁹ Although his plan to escape via the sea had failed, Arenas managed to reach Guantanamo by train. However, since he was being constantly pursued by Cuban soldiers and policemen, he had to hide in a tree for two whole days. He finally managed to reach Holguin, his hometown and left again for Havana. He hid himself in Lenin Park, Havana and with the help of his friends Juan and Olga Abreu, started to make arrangements to leave Cuba.⁴⁵⁰

Surprisingly enough, Arenas managed to evade arrest for ten more days, hiding himself behind a few bushes in Lenin Park with only a copy of *The Iliad*

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid. 87.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid. 88.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid. 88-89

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid. 91.

which his friend had given him. He had almost finished reading it, being at the point “when Achilles, deeply moved, finally delivers Hector’s body to Priam”⁴⁵¹ when he was cornered and arrested by the police. Misinformation and propaganda against Arenas had already been on the loose, and “[w]ithin a few hours the whole town was gathered in front of the police station... word had spread that the CIA agent, the rapist, the murderer of the old day, had been captured by the Revolutionary Police”⁴⁵². Under false charges of rape. Arenas was transferred to the notorious “El Morro” castle, now turned into a prison, in Havana. The geographical location of Morro Castle owes its existence to the strategic importance of the mansion for the Spanish, who had built it to defend the Port of Havana against “corsair and pirate attacks”. It was a “dank place”, blocked off from any passage or outlet to let in adequate air, especially under the blazing tropical sun. Arenas realised the documentary import of his autobiographical memoir, and thus, provides the reader detailed descriptions of his new acquaintances in prison and the conversations he could recall with them. He had entered El Morro prison with “an infamous reputation not as a political prisoner or a writer but as a rapist, a murderer, and a CIA agent; all this gave me an aura of respectability, even among the real murderers”. He had a compass (which he immediately disposed of following the advice of a fellow-prisoner), some hallucinogenic drugs (some of which he had consumed just before getting arrested) and the copy of *The Iliad* with him.⁴⁵³ The sub-human living conditions in El Morro prison are brought out in *Before Night Falls*:

The stench and the heat were unbearable. Going to the bathroom was an odyssey, the bathroom was just a hole in which everybody defecated; it was impossible to get there without having your feet and your ankles full of shit, and there was no water to clean up. Poor body, the soul could do nothing for it under those circumstances.⁴⁵⁴

However, the false charges brought against Arenas appeared to be a blessing in disguise for him as he could avoid incarceration in the “homosexual” wards of El Morro prison: “these wards were below ground at the lowest level, and

⁴⁵¹ Ibid. 94.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid. 96.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid. 95-96.

water seeped into the cells at high tide...a sweltering place without a bathroom”⁴⁵⁵. Gay prisoners did not get human treatment at El Morro, “they were treated like beasts...were the last to come out for meals...and the most insignificant incident was an excuse to beat them up mercilessly”⁴⁵⁶. But Arenas’s life-affirming personality sought creative and nurturing occupations, even in the midst of the chaos and din he witnessed in prison. He started giving French lessons to a few inmates after meals.⁴⁵⁷ Rape was also a frequent happening at El Morro prison, where the “ward chiefs” behaved like “thugs, pouncing upon young adolescent boys who were called “fresh meat”⁴⁵⁸. To defend themselves against the oppressive *machismo* around them, the queers and “fairies” acted unpredictably, and were prone to violence; they had made themselves “a very effective weapon which consisted of a stick studded with razor blades”⁴⁵⁹.

Arenas earned quite a reputation as a letter-writer within the wards of El Morro prison. The marginalisation endured in his earlier life, in which he must have felt excruciating loneliness and alienation was now replaced with the affirmative assertions of the condemned and incarcerated poet paradoxically representing his co-inmates, whose agonies he has been an active witness to. Being one of the few educated people within the inmates, he managed “set up a sort of desk in my ward, and they would all come to have me write their letters”⁴⁶⁰. Literary crafting through imagination, in which the voice of the creative artist must perform a necessary self-dissolution in order to be able to “be” those he represented, became his sole diversion. He had become, as he amusingly calls it in his autobiographical memoir, “the literary boyfriend or husband for all the prisoners at El Morro”⁴⁶¹. It was during his incarceration at El Morro prison that Arenas noticed the uncanny correlation between his rewriting of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier’s series of incarcerations (one of which was the El Morro prison) and his own future imprisonment there. He discovered his writing proleptically foreboded his future

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid. 96.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid. 97

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid. 98.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

subjectivity and experiences: “I seemed destined to live through whatever I had written”⁴⁶².

Arenas’s poems written during his tenure at the El Morro prison bring out his resilience against the oppressive system which had once ostracised him, and now held him captive. Two poems from this phase are significant, insofar as they reveal bipolar emotions of extreme despondency and physical desolation on the one hand and the life-affirming, retaliatory spirit of resistance (which makes the poet-writer sympathise with the plight of his fellow-sufferers in prison and allows him to become their representative “voice”) on the other. The first of these poems, “Who will Remember our Dead Gestures?” depicts the mental instability of the poet who is unable to discern significant points of difference between the “dead” and the “living”⁴⁶³. The experience of prison, the condition where the free individual is stripped of their will, appears to him a symbolic “death” of sorts.⁴⁶⁴ He is aware that his writing is as susceptible to obliteration by oppressive security measures of prison (a fate Arenas was only too familiar with in case of his third novel of the *pentagonia*) and may be regarded as a “dead gesture”:

Who will remember our dead gestures?
What is the song of the dead?
What did we not say because we died?
What to do if we’re all dead?⁴⁶⁵

The world of the living understandably has no experiential knowledge of “death”. Yet the loss of individual freedom impels Arenas to attempt “to compose a panegyric to a dead man”⁴⁶⁶. He witnesses the stifling death, bit by bit, of youth in captivity. He recounts, in particular, the tale of “El Nino” (the kid), a mere boy at El Morro “who was beauty personified”⁴⁶⁷. Although accused of rape, “El Nino” was the epitome of boyish beauty and Arenas “found great pleasure in being able to look at his body”, since he occupied an opposite bunk to him.⁴⁶⁸ Neither was the boy sexually active, nor did he deliberately do anything to attract

⁴⁶² Ibid. 101.

⁴⁶³ Reinaldo Arenas, “Who will Remember our Dead Gestures?”, in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 139.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 100.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

attention towards himself, but “the prisoners could not tolerate so much beauty in the midst of all that horror”⁴⁶⁹. “El Nino” was brutally murdered: “...while he was sleeping, someone had shoved a metal rod into his back and it came out through his stomach”⁴⁷⁰. It was the terrible fate of being a silent witness to such horrors that conditions the string of rhetorical questions posed by the imprisoned poet in the poem “Who will Remember our Dead Gestures?”. When the poet-narrator implodes with the question, “Do you know how much shock a dead man retains?”⁴⁷¹, he is obliquely alluding to pent up trauma within his experiential horizon in prison. He also realises, without hope, that accusations of the dead have no “legal weight”⁴⁷². For Arenas, the freedom to express his sexuality and active volition in sex were essential for initiating any form of sexual intimacy. He therefore refrained from any sexual activity while he was in prison.⁴⁷³ As he famously mentions in his autobiographical memoir, “love has to be free, and prison is a monstrosity where love turns into bestiality”⁴⁷⁴. The poem ends on a desolate note, where the slow transition from the metaphorical death-in-life of a prisoner to their literal death is perceived as seemingly endless. And since the collective weight of the dead does not matter to the oppressive state-machine, “What is one more dead among the dead?”⁴⁷⁵.

Arenas was subjected to further horrors in captivity as, unable to break his resolve and make him renounce his literary works, he was moved to a tiny “penalty cell”—“the worst place in the whole jailhouse”⁴⁷⁶. In fact, imprisoning him at El Morro was a camouflaged move by the Cuban state, because “State Security wanted to confuse foreign public opinion by labelling me a common criminal”⁴⁷⁷. He was called up for questioning and came to learn that State Security had come to be in possession of a few “automobile tires and inner tubes” in his room (led duly by his aunt): “Merely to own a floating object was proof enough

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Reinaldo Arenas, “Who will Remember our Dead Gestures?”, in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 139.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 95, 98.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid. 98.

⁴⁷⁵ Arenas, “Who will Remember our Dead Gestures?”, in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 139.

⁴⁷⁶ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 101.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

that one wanted to leave Cuba, and this could mean eight years of jail”⁴⁷⁸. The utter hopelessness compelled Arenas to attempt suicide for a second time by trying to hang himself in the “penalty cell” with torn rags of his own uniform.⁴⁷⁹ He failed again, and had to be admitted to the hospital to be “given IVs and medication.”⁴⁸⁰. This attempt to commit suicide hastened measures on part of State Security to secretly transport Arenas on gunpoint to Villa Marista, “headquarters of State Security”, into single cell “lit at all times”⁴⁸¹. He was threatened with literal invisibilisation by one of the officers in charge:

Do you know what this means? It means that here we can make you disappear, we can wipe you out, and nobody will know; everybody thinks you are at El Morro, and there are many ways you could die there, you could easily get stabbed.⁴⁸²

He was interrogated, day and night, at Villa Marista, with abrupt periods of protracted, silent captivity interspersed in between. He defiantly recounts the blood-curdling methods of torture devised at State Security, one of which was letting in steam through a hole into the tiny cell of the prisoners incessantly till the prisoner was just about to suffer a cardiac arrest: “...[e]very now and then a doctor would come in, take the prisoner’s blood-pressure, check his heart and say “You can give him a little more””⁴⁸³. Owing to their already fatigued state of semi-starvation, it was almost impossible to “resist those incessant steam-baths”⁴⁸⁴. After a harrowing three months at State Security, Arenas could not endure the torture any longer and agreed to sign a confession tantamount to recanting from his erstwhile resistant position. The confession statement ran that Arenas “regretted the ideological weakness” apparent in his published works and “that the Revolution had been extraordinarily fair” with him.⁴⁸⁵ He also had to accept what the State saw as “correctional rehabilitation” and renounce his homosexuality.⁴⁸⁶ But Arenas had already been able to foresee such an outcome. Even as he signed the confession, the clever Arenas knew that he had already written a communique before his arrest

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid. 102.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid. 103.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid. 104.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

from Lenin Park, to a host of international organisations such as the International Red Cross, the UN, UNESCO—that his “accusations against the regime of Fidel Castro were absolutely true to fact, even if, at some point, I denied it”⁴⁸⁷. Although Arenas surmised that by signing the confession he had lost his “dignity” and “rebellious spirit”⁴⁸⁸, this act should not warrant the censure or judgement of most readers, who (in most cases) are cushioned by better opportunities and political security than the poet ever faced.

“The Will to Live Manifesting Itself”, a poem written in El Morro prison in 1975, depicts the powerlessness of the poet, now labelled as a “traitor” and a “counter-revolutionary” by the State, against the gargantuan oppression unleashed against him:

Now they are devouring me.
Now I feel them coming higher, yanking out my nails.
I feel their gnawing coming right up to my balls.
Dirt, they are throwing dirt on me.⁴⁸⁹

Cornered on all sides, the poet now describes the mad frenzy of bloodthirsty henchmen and rabble-rousers who keep “dancing on this mound of dirt”, grinding him to bits.⁴⁹⁰ Yet, the poet’s courage consists in being able (as far as possible) to record and narrate the minutest detail of persecution faced for future generations, leaving his testimony of having lived through the retaliatory ire of the Cuba state. His resistant demeanour renders the State incapable of breaking down his resolve even after a series of humiliations, persecutions and exploitative measures. The “condemned” prisoner asserts and reclaims the present moment by the very fact of his existence despite everything:

They are mashing down and condemning me
repeating some unspeakable judgement against me.
They have buried me.

They have danced on top of me.
They have tamped down the ground.
They have gone away, leaving me good and dead, and buried.

Now it’s my time.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Reinaldo Arenas, “The Will to Live Manifesting Itself,” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 141.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

As Vek Lewis has justly pointed out, Arenas's uncompromising stance in standing in favour of a "*maricóneria* (active assertion of one's politics and identity as a *maricón*) as a point of oppositional militancy principally for himself and other homosexual artists and intellectuals" emerges as "a counter-questioning of the *macho*'s claims to naturalness and authenticity"⁴⁹². He does so, however, not just from within the prison, for prison itself is "an exaggeration of the kinds of condition in Cuba on the outside"⁴⁹³. Vek Lewis thus writes:

In the prison, as in Cuban culture, a convincing performance of masculinity buys symbolic capital. Indeed, the close-up view provided of the prison bears a metonymical relation to the punitive, panopticon methods of the state generally at the time. Cuba itself is like a prison: in El Morro the techniques of repression are only more intense and hidden from national and international view.⁴⁹⁴

Despite Arenas's imprisonment, the adolescents who had testified against Arenas recanted on their previous statement at his trial, and now refused to admit that any sexual encounter had ever taken place between them.⁴⁹⁵ After having spent more than a year at El Morro, He was moved to the "*prision abierta*" (open prison) and forced labour camp in Flores, Miramar.⁴⁹⁶ Among poems written during his captivity during the period 1974-76, *Leprosorio* ("Leprosarium") remains Arenas's greatest poetic achievement. Here, he observes, with painstaking detail, the Janus-faced state's dogged pursuance of its dissidents. He now figures the island as an infernal space, where the spontaneous camaraderie between human beings remain "infected" by rampant corruption, disease and selfishness.⁴⁹⁷ Any form of dissidence, political and aesthetic is seen as a pestilence and a scourge by the State, "a germ that corrupts and infects the organs of the system itself"⁴⁹⁸. I will attempt

⁴⁹² See Vek Lewis, "Grotesque Spectacles: The Janus Face of the State and Gender Variant Bodies in Reinaldo Arenas", *Chasqui* 38 no. 1 (May, 2009): 108.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.* 111.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁵ See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 106-7. This was a strange turn of events, as State Security had effectively set up the witnesses to incriminate Arenas. A variety of reasons could be adduced for the adolescent's recantation of his previous statement, among them being "his *machismo*, his not wanting such information in his record".

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 110.

⁴⁹⁷ Camelly Cruz-Martes, "Prologue: "The Will to Live Manifesting Itself," in Reinaldo Arenas, *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 11

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

to read two excerpts from the long poem to locate their importance within the larger discourse and objectives of testimonial literature.

In his monograph on Arenas's *pentagonia* and its place within the tradition of the Cuban documentary novel, Francisco Soto discusses the significance of "real" witnesses, "a person with a more or less verifiable history who can guarantee the authenticity of what is being told"⁴⁹⁹. Soto posits that the criterion of "authenticity" which draws from the material presence of the witness in their experiences, is a path Arenas's *pentagonia* refuses to follow, even as he attempts to appropriate some of the essential hallmarks of *testimonio* in the fictional world of the novels.⁵⁰⁰ However, in poetic works such as *Leprosorio*, such fictive self-distancing is largely absent, as the historical reality of having been (unfortunately) a witness to state-induced terror and repression is foregrounded to mount a form of aesthetic resistance to such nefarious schemes.⁵⁰¹ The forceful assertion of "I have seen", repeated as a refrain across the length of the excerpt "I have seen, I have seen" drives home the reliability of the voice of the author-witness.⁵⁰² The discrete instances of state-terror such as "psychological torture", "sophisticated biochemical experiments" or the "super-swift (its name alone says it all) electric chair" perturb the narrator greatly, but his real discomfiture lies in the fact that "we're in a tropical prison that is also the first free territory in the Americas"⁵⁰³. The acerbic satire of the poetic voice proceeds with disdain, denouncing without pause the machinations of the Castro regime and its long catalogue of horrors the poet has been a witness to. With each successive stanza in this excerpt, Arenas describes the carefully planned and executed political assassinations in prison by planted spies and henchmen employed by the State, the

⁴⁹⁹ Francisco Soto, *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia* (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994), 75.

⁵⁰⁰ See *Ibid.* 75-88 for a detailed account of Arenas's deliberate subversion of the criterion of "real witnesses" in providing an alternative, anti-institutional and essentially "fictive" mediation between authorial subjectivity and the criterion of "authenticity" within the tradition of the Cuban documentary novel.

⁵⁰¹ Unlike his novels, Arenas's poems often take, as their starting point, verifiably "real" biographical events of the poet's life. This strategy seems like a deliberate reduction of "fictive" distance, where the poetic narrator and the 'historical' Reinaldo Arenas come reasonably close to each other.

⁵⁰² Reinaldo Arenas, "I Have Seen, I Have Seen (excerpt from *Leprosorio*)," in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 96.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*

horrific suicide of a prisoner who slit his own throat by using a sharpened “hunk of iron” that he himself had taken care to whet for a long time, the state-sanctioned murder of a group of “Jehovah’s Witnesses”, and, most significantly, the essential distance of the ruling class (coterie) from the lot of its persecuted prisoners, which prolongs this dictatorial regime.⁵⁰⁴ He invests his descriptions of these phenomena with a scathing directness and oppressive minuteness in rendering them from memory. In the instance of the man who committed suicide, “like a veritable fountain, he was whirling around us as he wielded the weapon”⁵⁰⁵. As the beheaded man drops to the prison floor, his spilt blood stains the poet’s uniform. Yet, the terror does not stop here, as the rodents in prison, having smelled the blood, “came in droves and began to feast”⁵⁰⁶. By next morning however, the trauma of this suicide seemed forgotten, as the “stretcher-bearers” carried off only “jumbled bits of filth” from the prison.⁵⁰⁷

After listing a long catalogue of terrors in each stanza, the poet-narrator caustically refutes the disclaimers that deny the existence of state-induced terror and persecution in post-revolutionary Cuba: “But naturally, as you weren’t there it’s as if none of this had happened”⁵⁰⁸. But although verbal depiction is at best, an approximated way of “showing”, this is precisely the function performed by testimonial literature: “to bear witness for a suppressed past”⁵⁰⁹. The importance of the testimony provided by the “witness” lies in the exposition of a “problematic collective social situation” by a representative individual.⁵¹⁰ The third instance of intimidation, torture and humiliation in the poem, where “fifteen to eighteen year old youths, accused of being “Jehovah’s Witnesses” are brought to “examination” in prison, attempts to replicate the sheer directness with which such monstrosities were meted out to dissident groups.⁵¹¹ The restorationist Christian group was declared illegal in post-revolutionary Cuba, owing to their stance of conscientious

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid. 96-98.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid. 96.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2002), 5.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ Arenas, “I Have Seen, I Have Seen (excerpt from *Leprosorio*),” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 96-97.

objection towards compulsory military service. Arenas describes the blood-curdling horror unleashed upon the suspected youth during inspection, if only to arouse fear and servile obedience in the next person in queue. He artfully employs irony in his depiction of state-torture, to ridicule the incredulous “activist” who denies its existence altogether:

I have seen them form a long line, ordered by the lieutenant, who then opens the Circle of Political Instruction. One by one the inmates have to read aloud Castro’s latest speech, beatifically printed in the newspaper, *Granma*. I have seen how the first prisoner refuses to read, alleging religious principles. I have seen the lieutenant set upon the young man with blows from a club and kicks, knocking him to the ground. The rest of the garrison rushes over to shatter the body of the boy, who, terrorized, screams for them not to kill him. I have seen the second young man in line slowly begin to read the long speech, always at attention while his tears fall on the paper.

All this I saw while raising my eyebrows discretely, washing the officials’ clothes without stopping.

Truly, Jehovah was no witness to this event (not even *The New York Times*, His financial agent on Earth) but I, a simple, ordinary prisoner, clothes washer and “rehabilitant”, was. Thus don’t be uneasy: you have no reason to believe me.⁵¹²

Arenas lashes out against the prototypical “progressive, insightful, even revolutionary, man” who would rather not choose to “stain” his “clear conscience” by admitting of these instances of state-induced crime.⁵¹³ Moreover, what is emphasized in the poem is a causal connection between necessary distancing of the indoctrinated cultural ideologues of the Castro regime (in the national and international press mass-media) from the tangible, and inordinate sufferings in prison. He pointedly asks, “...why sow in your heart the immortal herb of disillusionment, its purest poison, if there we have you, impeccably dressed, only passing through, right up there in the grand-stand watching the parade and listening to the hymns after arriving from an intensive day trip to the model farms?”⁵¹⁴

In a second excerpt titled “But if He Still Resists”, Arenas represents the symbolic expulsion of the “traitor”, the “counter-revolutionary” through a

⁵¹² Ibid. 97.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

parodied rendition of a loquacious Castro, who, was known for the verbal exuberance of his speeches delivered at public rallies.⁵¹⁵ The excerpt begins with allegations levelled against the “traitor”, of slyly eluding “serious government charges”, and being re-iterated as a “traitor” again and again before the masses.⁵¹⁶ He is then hounded by the flora and fauna of the island, not to mention even the geographical specificities of the island (“ferns, reeds and marshes, eddies and emanations, thunderbolts, nuns and sewage, centipedes, whores and climbing plants, political activists and rocky ground, bishops and rotten pumpkins, half-dressed duchesses and union bosses, wastelands, CDR presidents, marchionesses and swarms of mosquitoes, buttercups, phlegm and admirals...”) all of which wait for his inglorious “fall”⁵¹⁷. The wily dictator is shown capable of raising up a mad frenzy in which the complete denouncement and decrying of the “traitor” upon whom all possible ills are wished.

In another excerpt, “And When You’re Not Around Anymore”, Arenas posits the intense desire of escape from the tedium of prison-life as he portrays the flushed face of the dissident-prisoner, staring at its own reflection in the mirror.⁵¹⁸ As he stares at his over-exerted, strained body—“his hands riddled with oozing moles; his arms criss-crossed with burning arteries, his fingers contorted and weak to the point of collapsing”—he thinks of a possible plan of escape.⁵¹⁹ The flight of the individual dissident prisoner is thus connected, (through a metonymic relationship that extends the condition of captivity within the whole “tropical prison”) to an intense longing for exilic flight outside the borders of Cuba. The conditional nature of the relationship between exclusions, repressions and marginalisations and the desire for departure is highlighted here. The deep-rooted ambivalence of exile re-asserts itself as the moment of departure draws near and the poet, even while falling back on the sole optimism in exilic flight encounters a self-defeating futility embedded in this very possibility:

⁵¹⁵ Reinaldo Arenas, “But if He Still Resists (excerpt from *Leprosorio*),” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 99-102.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.* 99.

⁵¹⁸ Reinaldo Arenas, “And When You’re not around Anymore” (excerpt from *Leprosorio*),” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 105.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Ha ha: Yes, departing, but to the ecstatic slabs,
escorted by a gloomy commiseration
sparse and according to regulation.

Ha ha: Yes, departing. But into the open maw of the
granite without a sea for dreaming.

Ha ha: Yes, departing, but to the place established
by the inexorable codes of the gigantic polluted pond to which
you belong and know well.⁵²⁰

The ethical resolve of the dissident becomes symptomatic of his daring, as he “bounds past the room, hospital, lounge, hallway, castle, prison, ward, cell, cave or prison tower”⁵²¹. Arenas shows the traitor running away desperately, amid the declamatory shouts, “hurling taunts and moral recriminations”⁵²². Rebellious and insolent, the “traitor” has to be courageous enough to be able to face the hateful blasphemies of “the monsters from the monumental barred windows” in the “colossal downpour”⁵²³. He runs through “the pipe-clay quagmire of the gunfire and the lightning bolts; standing up to the thunderbolts”⁵²⁴. The ensuing flight is depicted as toilsome but allows the dissident to elude all the machinations of the totalitarian state that has condemned him to anonymity. The dogged resilience of the dissident “traitor” allows him to survive despite the long arm of the state, and Arenas does not hesitate to confer victory upon him:

To go on running, faster, faster, the monsters aiming at me with all their contrivances, rifles, axes, catapults, flamethrowers, rockets, crossbows, arrows, bombs, bazookas, pikes, cudgels, arquebuses, guns and Lombard cannons. While the heavens continue hurling fireballs and hurricanes, and the earth, like an offended matron, threatens with its millions of vermin to deal me the final blow...To go on creeping along, crawling, and once again rush headlong against the current, slapping tree and bog, lightning bolt and flood. They can't handle me. They won't be able to destroy e. You'll see. You see how I defy them. And by defying them, I betray and defeat them.⁵²⁵

Although the looming shadow of departure and the plight of ensuing exile cloud the mental horizon of the dissident homosexual, he nevertheless

⁵²⁰ Ibid. 104.

⁵²¹ Ibid. 105.

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Ibid. 105-6.

manages to assert his human dignity against the Janus-faced state against whom he is pitted in an unequal battle. Arenas realises that the emotional rift likely to be caused by the physical dislocation entailing exile will open up “wounds and swellings”, but the dissident does not stop himself from “digging up venerable skeletons and pounding them to dust, swearing off all the forgiveness, reconciliation or solace”⁵²⁶. Thus, he vows to depart, to leave behind for good “the inalienable configuration of the 11,111 kilometres” of the island, which is also directly called “our leprosarium” by the end of the poem⁵²⁷.

Arenas was released from prison in 1976, but would go on to live in Cuba for only four more years. He reports that in early 1980, his life had been already irrevocably altered by the deaths of his grandmother and his mentor Jose Lezama Lima.⁵²⁸ He was “surrounded by spies” and he regretted seeing his “youth vanish without ever having been a free person”⁵²⁹. The lasting trauma of his years of imprisonment in different Cuban jails never went away. In April 1980, a series of political events took place which led to thousands of Cubans seeking political asylum in the Peruvian embassy in Havana. This act of collective defiance finally sparked off “the first mass rebellion by the Cuban people against the Castro dictatorship”⁵³⁰. This led to the famous Mariel boatlift, where the Cuban port of Mariel was opened for a short period of time to allow what the Cuban government regarded as the “riffraff”⁵³¹—in short dissidents, conscientious objectors to the dictatorship, the mentally ill and the homosexuals—to immigrate to Miami on the southern coast of the United States.

5.6. “I Have Two Homelands, Cuba and the Night”: Exile, the Poetic Legacy of Jose Marti and the Mariel Boatlift

The collective desire to leave Cuba and immigrate to a more favourable place among the Cuban working-class was propelled by a gradually stagnating economy which heavily depended on Soviet economic aid for its survival. The general stagnation of the Soviet economy during the Brezhnev era also contributed

⁵²⁶ Ibid. 106.

⁵²⁷ Ibid. 107.

⁵²⁸ See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 114-15.

⁵²⁹ Ibid. 115.

⁵³⁰ Ibid. 132.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

to it.⁵³² On March 28, 1980, “a driver on the number 32 bus route drove a bus full of passengers through the doors of the Peruvian embassy seeking political asylum”⁵³³. The first phase of emigrations (which were quite orderly) “involved air flights to Costa Rica and eventual resettlement in several countries, including Costa Rica, Peru, Spain, and the United States”⁵³⁴. The boatlift phase of the emigration began when Castro announced that “all Cubans wishing to leave the island would be allowed to depart through the port of Mariel and invited their Cuban American relatives to pick them up”⁵³⁵. This was a move that was deemed especially important by the Castro administration after due consultation with the KGB, in context of the rising civil disobedience among dissidents and “non-conformists” who flocked to the Peruvian embassy. Castro’s initial attempts at intimidation through police violence were ineffective and he delivered “a desperate and angry speech” where he “accused those poor people at the embassy of being antisocial and socially deprived”⁵³⁶. On a speech delivered on May 1, 1980, Castro “discredited those who wanted to leave and characterized them as undesirables, antisocials, lumpen proletariat, and *escoria* (scum)”⁵³⁷, adding sarcastically “that the United States was “performing a tremendous sanitary service” by accepting them”⁵³⁸. It was important for the Castro administration to vilify the immigrants, and therefore, Cubans who had been relatively indifferent to this exodus were actively encouraged to participate in “*actos de repudio* (acts of repudiation) against the *escoria*”⁵³⁹. But of course, such demonstrations would be far from spontaneous and had to be carefully orchestrated by Communist Youth organisations who were left to mobilise people.

⁵³² See “Mariel Boatlift of 1980”, *Immigration History*, <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/mariel-boatlift/> (accessed March 25, 2022).

⁵³³ See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 132.

⁵³⁴ Craig S. Simpson, “Voices from Mariel: Oral Histories of the 1980 Cuban Boatlift”, *The Oral History Review* (2020): 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2020.1771932> (accessed March 25, 2022).

⁵³⁵ See “Mariel Boatlift of 1980”, *Immigration History*, <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/mariel-boatlift/>

⁵³⁶ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 132.

⁵³⁷ Susana Peña, ““Obvious Gays” and the State Gaze: Cuban Gay Visibility and U.S. Immigration Policy during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16 no. 3, Latin American Sexualities (September 2007): 485, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30114194> (accessed March 26, 2022).

⁵³⁸ See Fidel Castro, “Speech to a Fighting People,” speech delivered on May 1, 1980, in *Fidel Castro Speeches: Cuba’s Internationalist Foreign Policy, 1975-80* ed. Michael Taber (New York: Pathfinder, 1981), 278.

⁵³⁹ Susana Peña, ““Obvious Gays” and the State Gaze: Cuban Gay Visibility and U.S. Immigration Policy during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift”, 485.

Although the bipolar world during this final phase of the Cold War created a political context where U.S. foreign policy would be especially accommodative of Cuban exile communities, Castro's deliberate vilification of the Mariel immigrants was picked up by sections of the U.S. media and south Florida's Cuban-American communities who began to point out "demographic and cultural differences between the Mariel immigrants and the previous wave of Cuban immigrants". Susana Peña thus points out that an attempt at derogatory diminution can thus be perceived through the use of the Spanish suffix "*-ito*" to refer to the Cuban Mariel entrants. *Marielitos*, as the immigrants were called by the already settled community of Cuban-American exiles, was undoubtedly a classist slur aimed at letting know the newcomers their place. Susana Peña writes, "[i]n the period during and immediately after the boatlift, the derogatory connotations of the term were most common and reflected the negative perception of this migrant group".⁵⁴⁰

But as Arenas writes in his autobiographical memoir, to get out of Cuba was still difficult for him, considering he was an author convicted of having published outside Cuba in an unauthorised manner. It was detrimental for the international image of the Castro regime to let him leave Cuba. However, "since the order of the day was to allow all undesirables to go"—particularly the mentally ill, homosexuals, the prostitutes and the hardened criminals—Castro's "trick was simply to let go the ones who posed no danger to the image of his government"⁵⁴¹. Arenas thus presented himself at the nearest police station and took necessary care to declare that he was a "passive" homosexual, especially since the already established Cuban context of machismo ensured that "the Cuban government did not look upon those who took the active male role as real homosexuals"⁵⁴². Upon a preliminary examination of his statement, his clothes and public appearance, as well as his gait, Arenas was able to satisfy his inquisitors at the police station and his "exit permit had been negotiated at the neighbourhood level"⁵⁴³. Fortunately for him, "[t]he mechanisms of persecution in Cuba were not yet technically sophisticated", and this allowed him to be classified merely as one of the thousands

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁴¹ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 132.

⁵⁴² Ibid. 133.

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

of queer people choosing to emigrate.⁵⁴⁴ His final exit from Cuba took place under dramatic circumstances, as after waiting through a sleepless week locked up in his “unbearably hot room”, he was directed one morning by the police “to get ready and show up at a place called Cuatro Ruedas to leave the country”⁵⁴⁵. He managed to reach the camp at El Mosquito reserved for the Mariel immigrants where, in order to escape the prying eyes of state security, Arenas altered the “closed e” in his name on his hand-written passport to an “I” to become “Reinaldo Arinas”⁵⁴⁶. Although both the Cuban State Security and the UNEAC had been alerted within a few hours (and later Arenas learnt that than “intensive search” had been organised at El Mosquito camp to prevent him from leaving) he barely managed to elude the authorities and left Cuba for good.

In exile, Reinaldo Arenas lived under greater personal freedom but constantly came under attack, especially from the left-leaning “progressive” U.S. based intellectual classes who “from their ivory towers supported socialism in Cuba”⁵⁴⁷. He was combative in his resilience to denounce outright the repressive measures of the Castro regime in Cuba. Yet, at the same time, Camelly Cruz-Martes points out, he also “quarrelled with the anti-Castro rightist groups with their conservative values”, denouncing their anti-homosexual stance without equivocation.⁵⁴⁸ Along with his friends and compatriot-writers such as Juan Abreu, Rene Cienfuegos, Luis de la Paz, Roberto Valero, Carlos Victoria and a few others, Arenas published the journal *Mariel* to represent the voice of the *Marielitos* in the American world of letters.⁵⁴⁹ In 1980, the International University of Florida invited him to speak at a conference in Miami, and Arenas titled his talk “The Sea is Our Jungle and our Hope”.⁵⁵⁰ During the conference, Arenas noticed the painful transformation of his fellow-exile and dissident Heberto Padilla who “was completely drunk and stumbling” and he tottered to sorry attempts at failed improvisation before a hostile audience. Arenas realised that “[t]he system managed

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid. 134.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Camelly Cruz-Martes, “Prologue: “The Will to Live Manifesting Itself,” in Reinaldo Arenas, *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 9.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid. 9

⁵⁵⁰ See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 137.

to destroy him in the most perfect way, and even now seemed to make use of him for its own benefit”.⁵⁵¹

As soon as Arenas started denouncing the arbitrary tyranny of the Castro regime, “even my own publishers, who had made enough money from my books, covertly turned against me”⁵⁵². He alleged accusations at Emmanuel Carballo (his Mexican publisher of *El mundo aluciante*) of having never paid him anything despite publishing five editions of the book. In reply, Carballo wrote him “an indignant letter saying I should have never left Cuba, while at the same time, refusing to make any payment”⁵⁵³. Arenas sarcastically phrases the entire episode as “a very profitable way of exercising his (Carballo’s) communist militancy”⁵⁵⁴. In another instance he provides of his verbal altercations with his publishers, Angel Rama, who had formerly published a collection of short stories authored by Arenas in Uruguay, wrote “a lengthy newspaper article for *El Universal* (published from Caracas) which he entitled “Reinaldo Arenas on His Way to Ostracism”⁵⁵⁵. Rama argued that Arenas’s decision to leave Cuba “was a mistake”, and that all his problems had merely been “bureaucratic”⁵⁵⁶. This seemed especially cynical and sinister of Rama, who had met Arenas before Havana in 1969, and knew of the constant censorship the latter had faced within Cuba. Arenas witnessed, as part of the global war of propaganda and counter-propaganda (which was a result of Cold War diplomatic tensions), the well-rehearsed vacillations and circumlocutions which ultimately ended up trivialising the material difficulties he had endured both before and after his exile. Considering Arenas had been already subjected to so much invisibilisation and ostracism already, to assert that he would, yet again, be condemned to them seemed like a motivated response: “I realised that the war had started all over again, now in a much underhanded manner”, and although “it was less terrible than Fidel’s war against the intellectuals in Cuba”, it was “no less sinister”⁵⁵⁷. Severo Sarduy, Arenas’s French publisher, paid him “a mere thousand dollars” for all of his editions.⁵⁵⁸ Thus as soon as he arrived in Miami, Arenas

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵⁵² Ibid.

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

realised first-hand what he already had known before, that the “capitalist system was also sordid and money-hungry”⁵⁵⁹. However, an important difference was posited by him between the so-called “free-market” economies of the liberal, democratic countries and a country under a quasi-military dictatorship such as Cuba: “the difference between the communist and capitalist systems is that, although both give you a kick in the ass, in the communist system you have to stand and applaud, while in the capitalist system you can scream”⁵⁶⁰. And thus he directly announces his agendum of “screaming” in a space where he could assert, unapologetically, his rights to free speech. Elsewhere, he writes:

...I have never considered myself as belonging to the “left” or to the “right”, nor do I want to be included under any opportunistic or political label. I tell my truth, as does the Jew who has suffered racism or the Russian who has been in the Gulag, or any human being who has eyes to see the way things really are. I scream, therefore I exist.⁵⁶¹

The poem “White Little Shit” vents out the poet’s accumulated rage built up against the coterie of American academics who, without having ever experienced any of the repressive persecutions under the Castro regime themselves, continued to take sides with Communism and what was more—romanticised the notion of a militant Communist dictatorship. In Arenas’s estimation, this amounted to little more than simply “feeding off” Communism for the duplicitous pursuit of self-aggrandisement, practised by “a variety of creature unknown in Cuba: the Communist Deluxe”⁵⁶². Directed against “an American professor from Tulane University, New Orleans”, the poem builds upon the rifts between blatant consumerism within the mainstream U.S. society and the easy opportunism of taking political sides to reap personal benefits by privileged first-world academics.⁵⁶³ Having once been permitted the right “to scream”, Arenas’s poetic voice decimates such figures through constantly juxtaposing the oppositions between the wish-fulfilling fantasies projected by Castro- sympathisers and the never-ending litany of their consumer products, ranging from cosmetics, shoes,

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid. 143.

⁵⁶² Ibid. 138.

⁵⁶³ Reinaldo Arenas, “White Little Shit,” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 165.

“posh” air-conditioning systems, room-fresheners and “after-bath lotions”⁵⁶⁴. In the format of an open letter directed towards this coterie of elite but “radicalised” white-Caucasian academics, he reserves little sympathy for their blatant hypocrisies. The poem is best quoted in full to communicate its literary schemes of juxtaposition and rigorous intercutting of instances to highlight the yawning gap between their standards of living within the so-called “first” world and that which most Cubans living under the Castro dictatorship could not even dream of having:

White little shit,
you’d like to be a guerrilla-fighter, but how to give up your
Shaklee products, your after-bath lotion, your well-stocked
refrigerator, or (oh, no way) your reading of the New York
Times, which arrives so regularly at your doorstep?

White little shit,
military parades and multitudinous marches send you into
raptures, but your foot prefers comfortable Adidas and not the
Russian boot, and your ass would never trade in (despite its
ironclad ideology) its smooth toilet-paper for the four sheets of
the *Granma*, the ink of which (incidentally) would set your
haemorrhoids flaring.

White little shit,
you admire the vast communal plantation (*kolkhoz* or collective
farms?) where the young no longer have to think or dream, but
you stay here in your spacious, air-conditioned room
harmoniously overrun by ornamental plants that stop at the well-
stocked library where a sign, THE FUTURE BELONGS TO
COMMUNISM, rules the whole.

White little shit,
slightly tan, consistent and neat, moderate and sepulchral, the
nearly final product of a diet rich in proteins and jogs around the
park in shorts, however much Baron Dandy or Air Freshener
(“Shake well before each use”) you sprinkle in your impeccable
apartment no one will keep your stink from condemning you.

White little shit,
in your mind, everything’s going well as long as that theory you
defend and that feeds you so well (I’m told you even have
tenure now!) does not apply to you in practice, starving you to
death.⁵⁶⁵

During his years in exile, Arenas wrote a series of essays in Spanish for the *Mariel* magazine, taking considerable time to elaborate on the genealogy of

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

Cuban literature written in exile. These essays not only enumerate a number of fictional works and anthologies by Cuban authors in exile—such as Lino Novas Calvo, Carlos Montenegro, Lydia Cabrera, Enrique Labrador Ruiz, Hilda Perera, Carlos A. Diaz and Miguel Correa—they introduce the Spanish reader to the history of the Mariel exodus and the Mariel generation.⁵⁶⁶ However, the legitimisation of ‘revolutionary’ stance adopted by the dissident intellectual in exile, especially in relation to the State, is drawn from the figure of Jose Marti, the Cuban poet-patriot who through his selfless dedication to the cause of the Cuban anti-colonial independence movement became a historical symbol of freedom across Latin America.⁵⁶⁷ Marti had been exiled to Spain in 1879 on charges of sedition, but relentlessly continued to seek support to the Cuban nationalist cause, braving the perils of displacement to travel to France, and thereafter to New York.⁵⁶⁸ Arenas’s historical re-evaluation of the literature Marti composed in exile serves to establish the presence of Cuban literature in exile *itself*—against the protestations of an article in the *Arefto* magazine (“the organ of the Castro tyranny in the United States”)—“that there cannot be a Cuban exile literature (nor any type of artistic manifestation); that the artist must remain attached to his soil and write from there”⁵⁶⁹. He urges the reader to look beyond those “bourgeois and medieval postulates of attachment to the land, obedience to the family and the State and to the “normal sexual development of the family and of youth””⁵⁷⁰. He satirises this “laughable” proposition advanced by the Castro-Marxist camp which very conveniently dismisses all possible claims to legitimacy of a Cuban literature of exile. He thus carefully reminds the reader “that a Jose Marti or a Jose Maria Heredia would be nothing less than some stateless people, incapable of reflecting

⁵⁶⁶ See Reinaldo Arenas, “Mariel,” in *Libro de Arenas (Prosa Dispersa, 1965-1990)* (Yucatan, Mexico: Equilibrista, 2013), 253-274.

⁵⁶⁷ See Reinaldo Arenas, “Jose Marti, Intellectual in Exile”(translated using Google Translate Beta) in *Libro de Arenas (Prosa Dispersa, 1965-1990)*, 140-44.

⁵⁶⁸ See “Jose Marti, Cuban Patriot”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jose-Marti> (accessed March 28, 2022).

⁵⁶⁹ See Reinaldo Arenas, “Jose Marti, Intellectual in Exile” (“*Jose Marti, intelectual del exilio*”), translated using Google Translate Beta) in *Libro de Arenas (Prosa Dispersa, 1965-1990)*, 142. Arenas is specifically reacting against the political stance adopted by the pro-Castro *Arefto* magazine, which was engaged in discrediting the vastly expanding oeuvre of Cuban émigré and Diaspora literatures.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 141.

Cuban reality (art) in their works because they do not live within the insular periphery”⁵⁷¹.

Arenas points towards a probable reason why the pro-Castro media in the United States were so intent on disqualifying the very presence of a Cuban literature produced by displaced émigré Cubans: “the cultural boom with which the Cuban exile has been enriching itself”⁵⁷². He directs attention to the excessive militarisation of Cuba under the Castro regime, highlighting the distance between literary production in Cuba in the 1980s (which only helped to re-confirm the unquestionable version of official history) and the sentiments of a great many of Cuba’s “genuine” artists and intellectuals who had already left the country for good:

...the island has already been left literally empty of true writers and artists in general and there, the "artistic creation" (in some way you have to call it) has become a dependency of the Ministry of the Interior and the Armed Forces. Armed Forces, who, in addition to imprisoning and executing the true intellectuals and people in general, are now also the ones entrusted, by the grace of the “Commander in Chief”, to award the literary prizes.⁵⁷³

Since he insists on establishing legitimacy for the literature produced by Cuban exiles and émigré authors, Arenas goes so far as to state that “the true Cuba - not the Soviet military base administered by a bully government - only exists outside of Cuba, its geographical boundaries”⁵⁷⁴. Moreover, Arenas invites a historical comparison between the 19th century, when the Cuban struggle for nationhood and self-determination was in operation, and the countless forced displacements and quasi-banishments of his own time, asserting boldly that “Cubans in exile are protected by the true history, the true tradition, of Cuban dignity”⁵⁷⁵. In defining and sketching out a tradition that saw Jose Marti as its greatest exponent, Arenas cites “The Future Slavery”, an essay written by Marti while in exile in New York in 1884 where the latter cautions against allowing excessive intervention from a dictatorial State into the private lives of ordinary citizens—against the false security of guaranteed employment:

⁵⁷¹ Ibid. 142.

⁵⁷² Ibid. 141.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid. 143.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid.

The man who now wants the state to take care of him so as not to have to take care of himself, would have to work alone as long as the time and in the work that the State pleased, he would assign more than the State than is due... From being a servant of himself, man would become a servant of the State. From being a slave to the capitalists, as he is now called, he would go on to be a slave to the officials.⁵⁷⁶

Marti's telling prophecy, hypothetically applied to the present (Arenas does not hesitate to add), would only be met with scorn and derision in Castro's Cuba. If Marti had lived in the contemporary era, Arenas argues, he would have faced "the maximum penalty for the crime of "ideological diversionism"⁵⁷⁷. Marti's historical legacy consists in providing a legitimate context for anti-authoritarian literature in Cuba, becoming a spearhead in the aspirations of Cuban artists and intellectuals of successive generations, motivating them to live a life of passionate artistic integrity despite state repression. His work is thus proof for Arenas "that our anti-totalitarian tradition is protected by our greatest literary figure, and that the capacity for creation, love and criticism (and therefore the patriotic capacity) are only attributes of the free man or who wants to be".⁵⁷⁸ Arenas's poem "I Have Two Homelands: Cuba and the Night" is a creative reworking of Jose Marti's famous poem "*Dos patrias*" ("Two Homelands") and retains many of the central features of its textual precursor.⁵⁷⁹ In Marti's poem, the experience of the living in the fatherland is compared to the night, where "with a carnation in hand/ Cuba, like a sad widow appears to me"⁵⁸⁰. The poem depicts the withdrawal of the "majesty" of the Spanish colonial sun, comparing it to the collective Cuban desire for independence from Spanish colonial rule. But whereas Marti had suggested only a representative connection between the two *patrias* ("Cuba and the night") mentioned in his poem, Arenas coalesces them into one, "both plunged in a single

⁵⁷⁶ Jose Marti, quoted in *Ibid.* 140.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 142-43.

⁵⁷⁹ Reinaldo Arenas, "I Have Two Homelands: Cuba and the Night," in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 161. This creative re-working of Marti's original poem "*Dos patrias*" perform a temporal translation of the "proto-text" ("*Dos patrias*") to a more contemporary, post-revolutionary Cuban reality.

⁵⁸⁰ See Jose Marti, "Two Homelands" ("*Dos patrias*") trans. Sam Linstead, *UMass Lowell*, <https://www.uml.edu/fahss/languages-cultures/canal/2019/sam-linstead.aspx#:~:text=I%20have%20two%20homelands%3A%20Cuba%20and%20the%20night.&text=Cuba%20like%20a%20sad%20widow%20appears%20to%20me.&text=speaks%20better%20than%20man.&text=that%20enshrouds%20the%20sky%2C%20Cuba%2C%20the%20widow%2C%20passes%E2%80%A6> (accessed March 28, 2022).

abyss”⁵⁸¹. For to the persecuted poet, both the *patrias* gave him back “the same reproach”.⁵⁸²

Marti’s heartfelt anguish at the pain of his fellow Cuban *compadres* who silently cry for freedom here metamorphoses into a ghastly “puppet of ghosts”⁵⁸³. The exiled dissident, once persecuted in his own country, finds that “even your own terror is a mirage”⁵⁸⁴. The ill-accommodated exile is then aptly likened to “the wheel lost off a weird car/hurling toward disaster”⁵⁸⁵. In the veritable, all-pervading prison that Cuba had become for the poet, “breathing is itself defeat”⁵⁸⁶. Arenas’s poem concludes with denouncing the ignominious histories of slavery, surveillance, forced labour, executions and tyranny that are conveniently dubbed, as part of propaganda, as the ideal “homeland”. The poet however, staunchly announces his refusal to regard this captive “homeland” as his own “homeland”:

If that is the homeland (homeland, night)
that centuries of self-interest have handed down to us,
I’ll wait for another homeland —that of my madness.⁵⁸⁷

The poem “Voices” may be read as Arenas’s account of the Mariel exodus, locating the ardent desire in most Cubans to leave and designating those that succeeded to immigrate to the United States as “the most blessed—the fortunate ones”⁵⁸⁸. The poem recounts the successive stages of the Mariel boatlift, listing the many tribulations undergone by the émigré Cuban community. It foregrounds the relentless will of the exiled dissidents in their immense mental fortitude and forbearance:

We came by air
We came by sea
We came lashed to inner tubes
We came bound to airplane wheels
We came starving off sharks and Coast Guard boats
...
We swam ashore, vomiting bile, gasping our lungs out,

⁵⁸¹ Arenas, “I Have Two Homelands: Cuba and the Night,” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 161

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁸ Reinaldo Arenas, “Voices,” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 162.

bones exposed to the sun, dehydrated,
hearts wasted away.⁵⁸⁹

Arenas states that Cubans who dissented to the autocratic Castro regime were subjected to executions and enforced disappearances and were silenced, as they now “lie timeless, under the sea”⁵⁹⁰. He is undeterred by those Cubans within the island who criticise or condemn this voluntary choice of exile because he knows only too well that part of their distaste was derived from the frustrations of their own inability to avail themselves of the same destiny: “secretly, desperately, they long to leave”⁵⁹¹. In his essay on the Mariel generation, Arenas wrote that the best writers of Cuban origin “have written their works in helpless exile or in desperate harassment”⁵⁹². To him, the central hallmark of the Mariel generation of authors and intellectuals was their stubborn resistance to organised repression, and their doggedly disciplined work-ethic:

...these authors continued to work — like many others — clandestinely, cautiously reading and hiding their writings among a group of friends that was becoming smaller and more terrified every day... They, like others, form what might well be called the Mariel generation...the generation of Cuban exiles who have suffered twenty years of dictatorship. Twenty years of high-sounding and offensive slogans and speeches, humiliating and arbitrary laws, compulsory and forced labour, solitary confinement, purges, expulsions and incessant shootings, in addition, naturally, to the meticulous repression and the most extreme misery suffered throughout the years...Twenty years of repression have made them accomplices in the difficult task of circumventing terror by creating.⁵⁹³

Arenas took care to meticulously itemise the introductory particulars of a number of émigré Cuban artists of the Mariel generation. Among them the names of Miguel Correa, Carlos A. Diaz, Reinaldo Garcia Ramos, Lazaro Gomez Carriles and Roberto Valero are significant⁵⁹⁴, although it is well beyond the scope of this chapter to accommodate a detailed discussion on their literary contributions. In another essay titled “Mariel: the Beginning of the End”, Arenas also hailed the

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

⁵⁹² Reinaldo Arenas, “The Mariel Generation” (“*La generacion del Mariel*”), translated using Google Translate Beta, in *Libro de Arenas (Prosa Dispersa, 1965-1990)*, 253-54.

⁵⁹³ Ibid. 254.

⁵⁹⁴ See Ibid. 253.

Mariel exodus as a political event replete with immense repercussions as it destabilised the image of the Castro government before the international media and the press.⁵⁹⁵ Although Castro and his government, brought to the brink of mass rebellion in April-May 1980, used the exodus of the Mariel exiles as a safety-valve to relieve the steam of accumulating public unrest in Cuba, the fact which united members of the Mariel generation was that they brought their “indignant memory like luggage”—of state-induced terror and naturally, “for some of us it had to be very difficult for us to adapt to a place where, to a great extent, measure, the human being only depends on his own efforts”⁵⁹⁶. He takes great pains to revisit “the tragedy of a people who suddenly abandon their country of origin, leaving behind families, affections, landscapes, accomplices and their own vital tradition, throwing themselves into the sea in search of an uncertain but at least hopeful destiny...”⁵⁹⁷ But despite these hardships and tribulations, Arenas extols the spirit of freedom embodied in the active volition within the Cuban émigré community to choose their exile: “...the desire for freedom and the need to enjoy that freedom unites us, the desire for our country to take a democratic course”⁵⁹⁸. This fight for self-assertion, dearly won at the cost of many personal sacrifices, thus culminates in an earnest pledge to defend the memory of the fatherland against the oblivion ushered in by time, “so that our country, which only exists largely in our memory, does not disappear”⁵⁹⁹.

5.7. “Autoepitaph”: A Self-Reflexive Literary Subjectivity Resisting the “Eulogy of the Victim”

In the concluding section to this particular chapter, I intend to analyse the final phase of Arenas’s literary career, to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the political and ethical stance of resistance he had adopted towards his homosexuality and his exile in New York. I wish to take up a few poems composed by him during his exile at New York (in his Hell’s Kitchen apartment) that concentrate upon themes of exilic memory and loss, culminating in a self-

⁵⁹⁵ Reinaldo Arenas, “Mariel: Beginning of the End” (“*Mariel: el principio del fin*”), translated using Google Translate Beta, in *Libro de Arenas (Prosa Dispersa, 1965-1990)*, 264.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 265.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 266.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

reflexive literary subjectivity where Arenas himself guides the reader through his life and ethical choices. As I conclude the chapter, I intend to follow up my analysis with a brief discussion on the cultural dynamics that condition the reception of Arenas's literary oeuvre among North American academic communities and the resistance he poses to any easy resolution to the problem of political victimhood.

Enrique Del Risco, in his essay on Arenas, approaches the problem through identifying genre and tonality as the defining characteristics of Arenas's autobiographical memoir *Before Night Falls*, an enduring historical "metatext" against which the victimhood of the author is judged.⁶⁰⁰ Regarding the overtly sentimental canonisation of Arenas as a poet-martyr-victim, Del Risco affirms that "within the dominant multicultural framework of American universities, minorities take their place, pre-eminently, as victims"⁶⁰¹. Yet this marginal representation "does not manage to conceal the character of the subordination that is conferred on the minority-victim"⁶⁰². Within such an unequally fraught dynamics of cultural reception and transmission, Arenas was marginalised by left-leaning mainstream U.S. academic circles "as an anti-Castroist writer" and was brought back to the canon "as gay author, as victim".⁶⁰³ For Del Risco, the example of the most "victimised" reading of *Before Night Falls* occurs in the film of the same name, directed by Julian Schnabel—a text which conveniently leaves out the fact of Arenas's active volition in his sexual encounter with the adolescents before his first arrest, and thus, indirectly disavows his sexual agency.⁶⁰⁴ It was perhaps deemed as a "counter-productive" excess best left out, lest ascribing sexual agency to Arenas might deter "the presentation of martyr-Arenas"⁶⁰⁵. In its attempt to be politically correct and to fit within the aforementioned scheme of victimhood, the film also denies Arenas "that aggressive and impudent laughter"; his acerbic sarcasm and his undaunted refusal to budge before institutions which deny freedom are thus conveniently obfuscated.⁶⁰⁶ This form of reception complicates the eager reception of Arenas within North-American academic circles, which initiates, for all symbolic

⁶⁰⁰ Enrique Del Risco, "Strategic Rebellions: Reinaldo Arenas has the Last Word", *Latin American Review* 44 no. 87 (2017): 53.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.* 54.

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*

⁶⁰³ *Ibid.* 53.

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 54.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

and practical purposes, “a pact...between the political convenience of the exile community and the political correctness of the North American academy and culture”⁶⁰⁷.

I agree with Del Risco’s suggestion that to read Arenas “against the grain” is to highlight his anti-authoritarian discursivity and his rebellion against the codes of “bourgeois” and Christian morality, as well as the deeply biased stigmatisation of the *maricón* in Cuban society. One ought not to attempt to take away from Arenas’s lifelong critique of the tyranny on sexual conduct imposed by moralistic strictures of Christianity and Marxism, which he found reduced a quasi-religious faith under a totalitarian dictatorship. Arenas survived in a staunchly traditional patriarchal culture that now projected a refashioned version of Cuban *machismo* in an increasingly militarised society, and therefore his resistance consists in choosing not to deny his identity as a *maricón*, even if such ethical integrity has to be demonstrated against state-terror and repression.

As has been already demonstrated before in this chapter, Arenas often deploys acerbic sarcasm and induces riotous laughter through his works. As he had stated in an interview, he “would want to be remembered not as a writer in the conventional sense of the word, but more as a kind of mischievous goblin—a type of spirit trickster”⁶⁰⁸. To deny Arenas this nonchalant laughter is also one of the strategies deployed in both gay and exilic academic readings of his work “that excludes all possible laughter because his laughter dangerously undermines his condition as a victim”⁶⁰⁹. Laughter then, admittedly, “raises suspicions about the veracity of the pain, even when dealing with a cruel and bitter laughter like Arenas”⁶¹⁰. *The Color of Summer*, the fourth novel in the *pentagonia*, uses laughter and the carnivalesque to mock the dictatorial government ruled by Fifo, the all-powerful absolute dictator who is about to commemorate the “fiftieth” (however, in reality, only the fortieth) year of his governance. Arenas admitted to this

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Arenas, interview with Roberto Valero, *El desamparado humor de Reinaldo Arenas* (Miami: North-South Center, Univ. of Miami, 1991), 337.

⁶⁰⁹ Enrique Del Risco, “Strategic Rebellions: Reinaldo Arenas has the Last Word”, 55.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

deliberate and combative use of laughter in his works, set against the context of a gradually aging tyranny that seeks to expunge humour altogether:

One of the most nefarious characteristics of tyrannies is that they take everything too seriously and destroy all sense of humour. Historically, Cubans have found escape from reality through satire and mockery, but with the coming of Fidel Castro, the sense of humour gradually disappeared until it became illegal. With it, the Cuban people lost one of their few means of survival; by taking away their laughter, the Revolution took away from them their deepest sense of the nature of things. Yes, dictatorships are prudish, pompous, and utterly dreary.⁶¹¹

In *The Color of Summer*, Arenas presents an aging totalitarian dictator Fifo (a thinly disguised Castro) and a repressive rule that introduces a “double life” within ordinary citizens, one where “publicly, there was not a moment they did not praise and laud the tyrant, while secretly they loathed him and prayed in desperation for him to die—preferably a horrible death”⁶¹². Arenas induces mocking laughter when he shows Fifo’s government to bring back Gertrudis Gomez de Avallaneda, the 19th century Cuban-born Spanish writer, “back to life...so that she will be able to take part in the festivities honouring Fifo’s fiftieth year in power”⁶¹³. The trope of choosing exile yet again—leaving Cuba in order to avoid being a party to Fifo’s rule—dominates the novel, as news of Avallaneda’s escape is not taken well by the aging dictator who orders her arrest, but having realised that such an action would cause an international scandal, “he orders the people of Cuba to stage an act of repudiation against the poetess, while secretly ordering his trained sharks and diligent midgets to do everything in their power to block her flight”⁶¹⁴. Meanwhile Arenas has “the Cuban poets in exile, including some brought back to life for this event, decide to have a huge demonstration on the southernmost tip of the United States”⁶¹⁵ (at Key West), cheering for Avallaneda and showing their moral support towards her flight from Cuba.

The first-person narrative voice employed by Arenas is split into three different figures—Gabriel, the “dutiful” son, Reinaldo, a writer who cannot hope

⁶¹¹ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 117.

⁶¹² Reinaldo Arenas, *The Color of Summer, or The New Garden of Earthly Delights* trans. Andrew Hurley (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 2000), 112.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.* 5.

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*

to publish within Cuba and Skunk in a Funk (*Tetrica mofeta*), the first-person protagonist's "vital homosexual spirit"⁶¹⁶. The splitting of one narratorial voice into three different figures serves as a historical allusion (as well as cross-cultural reference) hinted at in the alternative title to the novel, *The New Garden of Earthly Delights*. The title alludes to Hieronymous Bosch's triptych *The Garden of Delights*, a painting which combines three panels: the creation of Adam and Eve, the sensual world of fleshly delights and finally "the anguish of Hell"⁶¹⁷. This schism applies perfectly to each of the figures introduced in the novel. Gabriel, the reminiscing son who recalls the experiences that shaped him—a childhood in Holguin and an aged mother whom he thinks he has failed by turning out to be a homosexual—corresponds to the "creation" panel, Skunk in a Funk to the middle panel of carnal delights and Reinaldo, the aging writer in exile, suffering from the terminal disease of AIDS to the panel on Hell.⁶¹⁸ Arenas thus introduces a dialogic schism within the tradition of "the omniscient or heterodiegetic narrator" and instead liquates "the position of dominance or authority" usually ascribed to such a figure.⁶¹⁹ As Francisco Soto has demonstrated, the first-person narrative voice, in the course of *The Color of Summer*, appears "contradictory, unreliable, split and permutated"⁶²⁰, deliberately crafted to uncover the "secret life" of its protagonists which challenge the fallacious projection of an official, indubitable and monolithic version of "truth" in the Cuban context.

One must not forget the mischievous "trickster spirit" figure which Arenas chose to call himself. In *The Color of Summer*, Arenas freely permutes a series of literary "tongue-twisters" loaded with literary allusions, quasi-dramatic scenes of mock repudiation and the eruption of the carnivalesque in Fifo's grand celebrations, several metatextual re-tellings of the plot of the novel as it gradually develops through its various stages, as well as a striking "Foreword" where the author speaks through his *loca* persona, celebrating chaos and impromptu improvisations that challenge the established order of literary straitjacketing in

⁶¹⁶ See Francisco Soto, *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia* (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994), 69.

⁶¹⁷ See Vek Lewis, "Grotesque Spectacles: The Janus Face of the State and Gender Variant Bodies in Reinaldo Arenas", *Chasqui* 38 no. 1 (May, 2009): 105

⁶¹⁸ See Francisco Soto, *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia* (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994), 70.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.* 70-71.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.* 73.

Cuba. He further informs the reader that instead of being linear, his novel is “circular, and therefore, cyclonic, with a vortex or eye—the Carnival—toward which all the vectors whirl”⁶²¹. Apart from providing the reader with a fresh account of his invisibilisation and censorship in Cuba, he offers a declaration of literary intent when he writes:

In some way this novel is an attempt to reflect, without idealising or investing the story with high-sounding principles, the half-picaresque, half-heartbreaking life of a large percentage of Cuban youth, their desire to be young, to live the life of young people. This novel presents a vision of an underground homosexual world that will surely never appear in any newspaper or journal in the world, much less in Cuba ...*The Color of Summer* is a world which, if I do not put it down on paper, will be lost, fragmented and dispersed as it is in the memories of those who knew it.⁶²²

During that phase of Arenas’s exile when he lived in Miami (April-August, 1980), he had left no stone unturned to facilitate the publication of the literary productions of a generation of émigré Cuban authors, proposing to create a publishing house devoted exclusively for them.⁶²³ But although he tried his best to convince “bankers and business owners” to consider investing in the project, they did not agree, stating that although an author such as Lydia Cabrera could sell in Miami, as a business the publishing house had little prospect.⁶²⁴ The literary environment of Miami was “flat, envious, mercenary” and Arenas found himself stifled there.⁶²⁵ But in New York, Arenas found echoes of a “glorified Havana, with great sidewalks, fabulous theatres, a transportation system that worked marvellously, streets that were really lively, all kinds of people who spoke many different languages”⁶²⁶. He did not feel like a “stranger” in New York, even as he was aware of glorifying his present in the light of past loss and trauma: “[T]he exile is a person, who, having lost a loved one, keeps searching for the face he loves in every new face and forever deceiving himself, thinks he has found it”⁶²⁷. Arenas’s comment on the nature of the exilic condition directs our attention to the relative

⁶²¹ Reinaldo Arenas, “Foreword,” in *The Color of Summer, or The New Garden of Earthly Delights* trans. Andrew Hurley (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 2000), 228.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 138.

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ Ibid. 139.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

pliability of exilic memory to suit the new place and circumstance the exile find themselves in, only if in order to carry out the arduous coping embedded within this arbitrary and partially connived “homing”. The sense of being haunted by the loss of his homeland never deserted the poet, even as he tried his best to accommodate himself to his environment in New York. The poem “Autumn Gives Me a Leaf”, composed in 1985, touches upon these themes of exilic loss and troubled memory, condensing the accumulated longing for “home” which, paradoxically, has only “condemned” him. Arenas illustrates this essential ambivalence of his exile in New York—marked by the contrary pulls of longing for his *patria* and the desire for “freedom”— in an interview given to Ann Tashi Slater:

Frankly, since I was born in Cuba and lived there, I think I would have to live there if reality did not condemn me not to live there. Every person who lives outside his context is always a bit of a ghost, because I am here, but at the same time I remember a person who walked those streets, who is there, and that same person is me. So sometimes I really don’t know if I am here or there. And at times, the longing to be there is greater than the necessity of being here.⁶²⁸

The poem “Autumn Gives Me a Leaf” begins with the aimless flutter of a leaf in Ithaca, New York which falls beside the poet in a faint quiver, compared here to the awkward “quivering of a beggar”.⁶²⁹ The flaming, red leaf allows Arenas to delve into nostalgia as it reminds him of a “faraway fragrance” and a “final blush”⁶³⁰. But although the longing for “home” runs strongly through the poem, Arenas is well-aware that a literal return to Cuba would be impossible, especially in view of the fact that his manifold persecutions there had resulted in his desire for exile. Thus, the poet acknowledges that “my good-bye is its only salvation”⁶³¹. The falling off and the aimless drifting of the loose autumn leaf is thereafter described in terms of a series of similarities to the displaced poet, who underlines the strong contrast between his life in Cuba and his life in exile:

A leaf
is trying desperately to take up in my chest.

⁶²⁸ Reinaldo Arenas, interview with Ann Tashi-Slater, “The Literature of Uprootedness: An Interview with Reinaldo Arenas”, *The New Yorker* (December 5, 2013), <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-literature-of-uprootedness-an-interview-with-reinaldo-arenas> (accessed March 30, 2022).

⁶²⁹ Reinaldo Arenas, “Autumn Gives Me a Leaf,” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 168.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶³¹ *Ibid.*

It wants the drifter's subtle greeting,
the brotherly gaze of the condemned,
the warm complicity of damnation.

But what can I do with it
if my daredevil visiting professor life
barely lets me collect textbooks? ⁶³²

Arenas depicts the aging, solitary leaf as a “spectre/turning pale before me, and loose from the life-giving tree”.⁶³³ However, he also foregrounds his vocation as a wordsmith, who, not knowing anything about botany, can only use the leaf as a blank “piece of paper”, ready to be re-inscribed with the memory of the lost “home”⁶³⁴. The poet can only attempt to “sketch [my] self-portrait on it”, retracing, with fond remembrance, his severed attachment to Cuba.⁶³⁵ The poem concludes through a subtle transmutation of the leaf to a “blank loose leaf page”, a metonymy for “the exile’s infinite homeland/ where all the furies storm”⁶³⁶. Thus, although the inexorable rift from his “home” is apparent in the poem, the memory of “home” also induces traumatising and partly repressed memories of forced labour, imprisonment, ostracism, censorship and the lack of freedom. This double-faced nature of exile equivocates between pain and the tribulations of coping with a relatively alien society and emotionally debilitating loss of the fatherland—even if Arenas’s memories of Cuba were a witness to “all the furies”. A close reading of his autobiographical memoir *Before Night Falls* reveals the alienation and self-dislocation experienced by the poet, caught up in a legal battle with his landlord in 1983, who “wanted to empty the building in order to remodel it and raise the rents”⁶³⁷. Faced with many challenges all at once, Arenas was evicted from his one-room apartment and was re-instated “to an old building”⁶³⁸. This “new hovel”, where he found forced himself into, seemed to convey his essential homelessness to Arenas in a country ruled pre-dominantly by capitalist greed and a mercantile consciousness: “[M]y new world was ruled not by political power but by another power, also sinister: the power of money”⁶³⁹. New York, despite its enabling

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ Ibid. 169.

⁶³⁴ Ibid.

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

⁶³⁷ See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 147.

⁶³⁸ Ibid.

⁶³⁹ Ibid.

circumstances that guarantee the poet's freedom, appears to him as "a huge, soulless factory with no place for the pedestrian to rest, no place where one can simply be without dishing out dollars for a breath of air or a chair on which to sit down and relax"⁶⁴⁰. Thus, lost memories of the life in Cuba he had to leave behind, having been long repressed, frequently surface in the poems of this period.

Nevertheless, as Kelly Washbourne has commented, the loss of the *patria* is adequately recompensed for through writing, a textual space where Arenas "sought to create and re-create *patria*—home, homeland, native land, motherland, country, nation"⁶⁴¹. By exalting the space of the "blank, loose leaf", Arenas also challenges the unilateral materiality of geographical terrain, and instead rephrases a belief (shared by Jose Lezama Lima, his mentor) "in writing as a promised land"⁶⁴². Lezama's instructions to Arenas (equally artists and intellectuals in Cuba of the same generation) was to write relentlessly, because "our only salvation lies in words"⁶⁴³. While the poet is enduring exile, the space of writing thus also becomes a testament of lived history with the *patria*.

I now wish to turn to "Impossible Dreams", an excerpt from *The Color of Summer*, where Arenas provides the reader a list of his unrealised dreams and laments the essential transitoriness of life itself—culminating in a bleak tomorrow plagued by the AIDS epidemic and his final illness. I correlate my reading of this particular excerpt to sections from the penultimate chapter of *Before Night Falls*, titled "Dreams". Arenas hints at the repressed and pent-up trauma of state persecution endured in Cuba through recounting, in great detail, his dreams. The sense of dispossession triggered by exile, the stifling claustrophobia associated with his memory of internal surveillance and personal betrayals surface repeatedly in his reminiscences of this period. He dreamed "that although I had been in the United States, I was back in Cuba, I do not know why, perhaps because my plane was hijacked or because someone had deceived me by telling I could return without any

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Kelly Washbourne, "Introduction: "Against Terror, the Simplicity of Epic Verse Suffices," in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 30.

⁶⁴² Ibid.

⁶⁴³ See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 115.

problem”⁶⁴⁴. Arenas’s nightmares were centred on his trauma of incarceration—literally within prison, and metonymically, within the borders of Cuba:

I was in my hot room again, but now I could never leave; I was condemned to stay there forever. I needed to receive a special notification to go to the airport, someone had to pick me up in a car that never came; I knew I could never leave that place, and that the police would come any moment and arrest me. I had already travelled the world and learned what freedom was, but due to some strange circumstance I was back in Cuba and could not escape.⁶⁴⁵

The excerpt “Impossible Dreams” foregrounds a literary exercise where the unrealised dreams of the poet-narrator are listed, in their intricate variegation—ranging from mundane needs for useful consumer products which he could never lay his hands upon while in Cuba, to more eclectic and transcendental “dreams” concerning his gendered subjectivity and aesthetics.⁶⁴⁶ Arenas’s poet-narrator suffers from marginalisation across several fronts—the political, the sexual and the aesthetic—which creates for him a long catalogue of “desired” ‘objects’, both material and ideological. His desire to rejuvenate his severed connection to the memory of a rural communal life surrounded by his family reveals itself in his “dream of a giant castle where I could live with my whole family and in each room, loved ones did trivial, domestic things”⁶⁴⁷. Consumer products such as “comfortable shoes”, “an electric fan made in China”, “comfortable false teeth”, “a pressure cooker” freely metamorphose into non-existent but desired objects (such as “a typewriter with an ñ”) and finally into yearning for the lost city of Havana, the city lost and yearned for: “I used to dream of a city just like the one I lost, only free”⁶⁴⁸. But among this seemingly inexhaustible list of “impossible dreams” are also the sexual insecurities experienced within an oppressive paradigm of masculinity, which, despite partaking of the pleasures of homosexuality, relegates the *maricón* to an inferior, undesirable position within sexual intercourse and forecloses the possibility of a stable, secure relationship as usually experienced

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid. 149.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Reinaldo Arenas, “Impossible Dreams (excerpt from *El color de verano*),” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 174.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

among cis-gendered heterosexual lovers: “I used to dream of having a single, stable husband”⁶⁴⁹.

The desire for exilic flight outside Cuba manifests itself through the poet’s “dream of a huge hot air balloon pulled by all the *toti* blackbirds in Parque Central”, with the help of which, he would “go far, far, farther than far away...”⁶⁵⁰. Arenas offers a form of reclamation where one of the derogatory slangs in Cuba for homosexuals, “*pdjaros*” (birds) is re-invoked for its enabling of such a metaphorical flight.⁶⁵¹ He projects an endless flight away from Cuba, beyond the confines a life now painfully afflicted by the terminal illness of AIDS. The seeming naïveté in his next dream, where “a plague as terrible as AIDS could not be true and pleasure did not spell doom”⁶⁵² is undercut by more mature and sinister realisations. As he concludes the poem, Arenas invokes a strange verbal coping mechanism, where his “dreams” perform the work of double-negation in relation to “all the horror in the world”, affirming the witnessed “truth” such silent horrors⁶⁵³.

The final portions of *Before Night Falls* introduce an ominous “bursting of an empty glass” to signal the end of a protective relationship extended to Arenas by his “deity”—the Moon.⁶⁵⁴ In a manner that may be considered counter-hegemonic, Arenas does not attempt to refute the traditional connection (dating back to Roman geographers such as Pliny the Elder) asserted between the Moon (*luna*) and “lunacy” but instead reclaims it through his voluntary subjectification as

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 149.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid. “*pdjaros*” (or “*pajaros*”): Literally meaning “birds”, the term served as a slang for effeminate homosexuals, denigrating their flighty and frivolous demeanour. In Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s account of “The Night of the Three P’s”, police raids in 1961 targeted “prostitutes, pimps and “*pajaros*”, grouping them together for their vice and immorality. See Rafael Ocasio, “Gays and the Cuban Revolution: The Case of Reinaldo Arenas”, *Latin American Perspectives* 29 no. 2, “Gender, Sexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Latin America” (March 2002): 80.

⁶⁵² Reinaldo Arenas, “Impossible Dreams (excerpt from *El color de verano*),” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 175. .

⁶⁵³ . Dreams are a convenient coping mechanism, whereby one (even if for a limited period of time) negates the order of reality. The striking simplicity of the concluding line, “I used to dream that all the horror in the world was a dream” is asserted by the means of a periphrastic double-negation (a *mise-en-abyme* where two negations, having cancelled each other out, leave only an assertion which was hiding in plain sight. The line thus becomes tantamount to acknowledging that “real”, lived horrors do exist, even if we try to find escape from them through dreaming.

⁶⁵⁴ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 150.

the *loca*, who embraces chaos as a form of creative escape from the tyranny of order.⁶⁵⁵ The Moon is thus exhorted as a patron-goddess of the *loca*:

My great goddess, my true goddess, you who have protected me through so many calamities; I used to look up toward you and behold you; up to you rising above the sea, toward you at the shore, toward you among the rocks of my desolate Island, I would lift my gaze and behold you, always the same; in your face I saw an expression of pain, of suffering, of compassion for me.⁶⁵⁶

I intend to conclude this chapter with a reading of Arenas's poem "Autoepitaph" as an example of "transtextual" encodings, where "transtextuality", following Gerard Genette, is "all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts"⁶⁵⁷. In this particular case, the poem "Autoepitaph" may be considered as a summary of the life endured by the narrator-persona, who has provided a testimonial account of his marginalisation, ostracism, imprisonment and exile in Cuba. Like Brodsky's famous poem "May 24, 1980", Arenas also resorts to linguistic strategies of passive reportage to allude to all significant events in his life, making the poem work like a metatextual commentary on Arenas's autobiographical memoir. The poem is also a thinly disguised self-portrait of Reinaldo Arenas, "a will and testament, biography and suicide note giving evidence of who the poet was, how he was treated by the world, how his poetry was received, and what he desired after death"⁶⁵⁸. The narrator of the poem is introduced as "[a] bad poet in love with the moon" who was subjected to circumstances where he felt that "his only lot in life was terror"⁶⁵⁹. The poet-narrator is described as

⁶⁵⁵ "**La loca**": *Loca*, derived from the classical Arabic word for stupid, usually connotes "crazy" as an adjective in Spanish. Used as a noun (*la loca*), it can mean a "crazy" woman, or an effeminate (and usually, homosexual) man who does not conform to the codes of *machismo*. The exact connotative force of the noun can vary with context across Latin America, variedly referring to trans or cis-women sex workers (Uruguay and Argentina) or even "promiscuous cis-women" (Cuba). But regardless of its specific application, the term has been historically used to subjugate the gender non-conforming "woman" as an "inferior" marginal other. Melissa M. González writes that "the term *loca* reflects parallels in the biopolitical management of both craziness and homosexuality, two subjectivities that have been historically relegated to a position of otherness". See Melissa M. González, "La Loca", *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 no. 1-2 (2014): 123-25, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399794> (accessed April 2, 2022).

⁶⁵⁶ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 150.

⁶⁵⁷ See Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 83-84

⁶⁵⁸ Camelly Cruz-Martes, "Prologue: 'The Will to Live Manifesting Itself'", in Reinaldo Arenas, *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems* trans. Kelly Washbourne (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 2014), 14.

⁶⁵⁹ Reinaldo Arenas, "Autoepitaph," in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 170.

unconventional and a non-conformist, who “knew that life is risk or abstinence” and “that all great ambitions are great lunacy”⁶⁶⁰. A close reading of “Autoepitaph” thus reveals Arenas’s courageous self-assertion rather than concealment, and his affinity to live dangerously amidst widespread surveillance and repression. The poem verbally showcases a series of oppositions—between “risk” and “abstinence”, “ambitions” and “lunacy”, the “most sordid horror” and its paradoxical “charms” (of inexhaustible optimism and life-affirmation), in order to arrive at a personality which actively engages with this dialectical duality.⁶⁶¹ An instance of how the next series of oppositions (between “life” and “death”, the fondness for “home” during its actual absence in exile, and between the quotidian and the exceptional) is worked out in the poem may be provided below:

He lived to live, which is to see death
as something everyday on which we stake
a fabulous body or all our luck.

He knew that the best is what we leave behind
—for no other reason than we’re leaving.
All the everyday is loathsome after all,
there is only one place to live: the impossible.⁶⁶²

Del Risco has drawn attention to the fact that a conception of Arenas as a “martyred victim of Fidel Castro’s revolution” was a deliberate strategic textual ploy by the poet in constructing *Before Night Falls*, the general tone of certain passages in which “cry out for the reader’s compassion”⁶⁶³. But when one contrasts the ardent pleadings of the supposedly “historical” Reinaldo Arenas and the trickster narratorial persona employed in *The Color of Summer*, the choice to invest the former text with strains of performative victimhood appear to be, as Del Risco

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁶¹ Despite Arenas’s stated distaste for a Marxist teleology, it seemed to me that the “dialectic”, in its very basic sense of “existence of contradictory forces” or “a complementary duality” was a concept that appealed very much to Arenas. Apart from the cataloguing of the stated pair of oppositions in the poem “Autoepitaph”, one recalls his unease and dissatisfaction with the sameness of same-sex relations between men in American society. Arenas specifically mentions that he found sexual relations within the rules of the gay communities in the U.S. “tedious and unrewarding”. Even as he defied the traditional gender roles within a patriarchal society, he found himself constrained by his (rather Platonic) belief, in the union of opposites: “What we are really looking for is our opposite. The beauty of our relationships then was that we had met our opposites”. See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 63.

⁶⁶² Reinaldo Arenas, “Autoepitaph,” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 170.

⁶⁶³ Enrique Del Risco, “Strategic Rebellions: Reinaldo Arenas has the Last Word”, *Latin American Review* 44 no. 87 (2017): 58.

rightly suggests, “a conscious and premeditated decision”⁶⁶⁴. One must not also forget that during the three years immediately after his exile to the United States, Arenas was an actively committed gay-rights activist who believed in the urgency of political action in exposing the pro-Castro sections of the U.S.-based left-leaning academics. He “had taken part in three international films: *In His Own Words* (1980) by Jorge Ulla; *The Other Cuba* (1983) by Carlos Franqui and *Improper Conduct* (1983) by Nestor Alemendros and Orlando Jimminez-Neal”⁶⁶⁵. Thus, when read against the biographical context of Arenas’s resistance and his anti-institutional subjectivity, his refusal to be co-opted into passive victimhood becomes especially relevant. The “impossible”, after all, is only made “possible” through an active and voluntary agency which, by transgressing the boundaries of what is socially permissible, infringes the law and challenges the state of imposed normalcy.

Arenas now admits to having known “prison, ostracism,/exile, the many crimes/typical of human vice” but also acknowledges the saving grace of “a certain Stoicism” that “was always with him”⁶⁶⁶. Thus by drawing attention to the typical Stoic virtues of self-control and relentless mental fortitude in order to escape self-destructive strains in himself, he also foregrounds active volition on his part to struggle (against not only the Castro dictatorship, but also in favour of the political right of the homosexual to co-habit in an equal and just society. However, the ensuing stanza enacts the poet glancing over his own imminent suicide and death. Death, described as a “window” through which the poet “hurled himself into the infinite”, prefigures as a looming presence in the following lines, as the poet refuses and rejects any attempt at a vainglorious eulogisation of his victimhood:

He refused pomp, speeches, mourning and cries,
and a sandy, barren burial mound where his skeleton could rest
(not even when dead did he wish to live quietly).⁶⁶⁷

The concluding stanza to the poem reveals the poet’s resistance to an imposed or assumed tranquil disposition, potently building on the sense of restlessness and mocking those rites of death which may make a historical relic out

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁵ See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 145.

⁶⁶⁶ Reinaldo Arenas, “Autoepitaph,” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 170.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid. 171.

of his poetic legacy. Rejecting the preservation of his own mortal remains, the poet seeks his long-deferred union with the sea, a restive and calming presence which seems to cradle the poet in its bosom.⁶⁶⁸ The poet envisions a hypothetical “place” or “situated-ness” which he ascribes to his lyrical, literary self, even if such a “place” is ultimately constituted of an absence—that of the material existence of the historical Reinaldo Arenas. His “auto-epitaph” thus ends by expressing the desire to be revisited by “some young man” who, through his curiosity and his imaginative pursuits, would agree to “dive down in his waters”⁶⁶⁹. The sexual undertones of the concluding line also impresses the reader with Arenas’s resistant subjectivity—insofar as he is able to see both the act of writing and the act of gay sexual intercourse— as acts of disobedience against established orders of social convention and convenience.

Arenas refuses to see himself merely as a passive victim. He upholds his struggle against implacable tyranny that reduced him to a *persona non grata* in post-revolutionary Cuba but also violates the generic conventions of writing an epitaph, for “the epitaph is a genre that belongs always to the other, the one who is left behind after death”⁶⁷⁰. However, this essential dependence on the ‘other’ (who decidedly, outlives the dedicatee of the epitaph) is negated through Arenas’s deployment of a third-person omniscient narrator who disqualifies other voices that seek to depict him, undercutting their discourses about him and simultaneously, assuming the necessary authority to adequately subvert the genre of the conventional “epitaph”⁶⁷¹. Thus Kelly Washbourne has fittingly pointed out that “Autoepitaph” “is a demythification of the epitaph genre, wherein the acts and attributes of the dead are usually exaggerated”⁶⁷². But even as the omniscient narrator claims to possess authority over self-portraiture, he does not rule out the primacy of imagination (“dreaming”) and sexuality. As he seeks the young man to “dive down in his waters”, Arenas tacitly references the copulative act, even if he is speaking through a poetic voice that is, by definition, devoid of the body. Thus

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁰ Camelly Cruz-Martes, “Prologue: “The Will to Live Manifesting Itself,” in Reinaldo Arenas, *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 15.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Kelly Washbourne, “Introduction: “Against Terror, the Simplicity of Epic Verse Suffices,” in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 29-30.

he dissociates the assertion of a sexual death-wish from the corporeality of the body—entering an entirely fictive space that he has engendered through his writing—and which is realised *only within* the space of the poem.

By choosing death through suicide over a slowly deteriorating terminal illness such as AIDS, Arenas encounters the uncertainty of death and makes it “certain”. His farewell note, which comprises the last chapter of *Before Night Falls*, expresses contentment that despite the tragedies of exile and dislocation, the poet had managed (in a “delicate state of health” and a “terrible emotional depression”) to finish his “literary work, to which I have devoted almost thirty years”⁶⁷³. Arenas’s strategic rebellion consists in personally holding the dictator accountable for his displacement and misfortunes: “Persons near me are in no way responsible for my decision...[t]here is only one person I hold accountable: Fidel Castro”⁶⁷⁴. Brad Epps, in his essay on Arenas, directs our attention to this ascription of historical responsibility on Castro, and suggests that “Arenas’s writing is so suffused with the struggle against suppression, and for publication, that suppression becomes the condition of possibility of Arenas’s writing itself”⁶⁷⁵. In a similar vein, Castro is also perpetually present within any analysis on the poet, as “the phantasmic co-author of Arenas’s writing, the authority who by striving to disauthorize Arenas ultimately only authorizes him all the more”⁶⁷⁶. Since Arenas’s literary self-fashioning was inextricably linked to his aberrant or “improper” conduct under a totalitarian regime, the exile ultimately freed him. However, the directness with which Arenas’s accusations against the dictator are levelled also hint at a strategic abjuration of responsibility on part of the former, who cites his perceived sense of injustice (the marginalisations forced upon the dissident homosexual) to be the root cause of his exile and displacement: “[t]he sufferings of exile, the pain of being banished from my country, the loneliness, and the diseases contracted in exile would probably never have happened if I had been able to enjoy freedom in my country”⁶⁷⁷. After considering a significant part of Arenas’s literary oeuvre, I conclude that this tendency to ascribe complete historical responsibility

⁶⁷³ See Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 151.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁵ Brad Epps, “Proper Conduct: Reinaldo Arenas, Fidel Castro and the Politics of Homosexuality”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 2 (Oct 1995): 246.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁷ Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, 151.

to Castro emerges as part of his rebellious *maricón*, a counter-discourse to the hegemony of *uber-machismo* which Castro embodied through his public appearance. The *maricón* (who strategically embraces the stigma of “passivity” traditionally thrust upon him, only in order to turn it into a counter-discourse through the use of the rhetorical devices of irony) thus becomes akin to a trickster-figure; he subverts his invisibilisation by mocking the entrenched discrimination to which he is subjected to. Del Risco thus comments that “[i]n Arenas, autonomy not only means constructing a different reality, an escape, it also means responding to and undermining the supposed coherency and weight of the transformative discursive power that the world imposes upon him”⁶⁷⁸. By repeatedly emphasizing that his exile *came to be because* he was denied civil and sexual liberties in Cuba, Arenas strives to question the legitimacy of his historical dispossession. “I scream, therefore I am”, he had written, underlining the fact that he wished, at the very least, to be permitted the “scream”. It is paradoxical that despite its emotionally debilitating effects on Arenas, his exile had ultimately enabled him to make his “scream” audible.

⁶⁷⁸ Enrique Del Risco, “Strategic Rebellions: Reinaldo Arenas has the Last Word”, 56.

Conclusion

Having made use of dominantly textual and historical research methodologies, this dissertation has attempted a comparative study of the poetic oeuvres of four poets writing broadly during the second half of the twentieth century—Derek Walcott from St. Lucia, Joseph Brodsky from the Soviet Union, Seamus Heaney from Northern Ireland and Reinaldo Arenas from Cuba—and has tried to analyse and interpret how the themes, motifs and tropes of exile recur across their work. In doing so, the project has also tried to excavate the respective exilic subjectivities of the aforementioned poets. Broadly speaking, it has tried to address the following, closely interrelated research questions:

- (i) How does “exile” as an experience peculiar to the vast demographic and geopolitical shifts in the twentieth century get represented in varying specimens of twentieth century poetry across the globe?
- (ii) Is it apt, in context of the ubiquity of exilic dislocations in the second half of the twentieth century, to regard “exile” as an experience specific to the circumstances of material estrangement from one’s country, or is it more of an ideological question (leading invariably, to an informed, but nevertheless individual choice) related to the exiled poet’s own sense of ‘home’?
- (iii) Is the “space” of exile—inscribed in the *exsul*’s memory—subject to modification through historical time, or is it rather an insular space inscribed within their subjective consciousness?
- (iv) To what extent does the dialectic of the ‘reality’ and the ‘fiction’ of the exilic experience colour the ‘aesthetics of exile’? Is the ‘real’/ ‘fictive’ binary sufficient to encompass the complexities of twentieth century exilic poetry?
- (v) Can the writing of poetry—against the ravages of war, dislocation and forced banishment—be considered as an alleviating force in exacerbating the trauma of exilic separation?

In each of the individual chapters dedicated to Walcott, Brodsky, Heaney and Arenas, this dissertation has used context-specific theoretical models to address the peculiarities of the exilic experience across ethno-political and socio-culturally diverse contexts. However, it should be mentioned that this dissertation is primarily committed to contributing towards existing scholarship in the domain of Exile and Diaspora literatures of the twentieth century. We shall briefly enumerate its research findings below:

(a) Brief Review of Research Findings

My chapter on Derek Walcott begins with William Logan's review of his *Selected Poems*, where Logan, using the phrase "the poet of exile" in an ironic vein, nevertheless ends up introducing the tropes of nomadism and perpetual wandering present across Walcott's poetic oeuvre. Using methodological insights from theorists such as Franz Fanon, Octave Mannoni, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, I tried to evaluate the historical conditions that facilitate the growth of an exilic subjectivity in Caribbean authors, who attempt a "re-territorialisation" of actual as well as cultural spaces. I followed the conceptual models of Eleanora Natalia Ravizza and Michael J. Dash to delve into the hermeneutics of "exile" and "return" for Caribbean artist-intellectuals. In addition, I attempted to contextualise Walcott's early poems from *Selected Poems* (1964), *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965) and *The Gulf and Other Poems* (1969) against a body of texts on West Indian exile by authors such as George Lamming, C.L.R. James and V.S. Naipaul and St, John Perse. I thereafter went on to provide readings of a few poems from *Sea Grapes* (1976) which engage with the work of Osip Mandelstam. The chapter then provided a detailed reading of the long narrative poem "The Schooner Flight" from *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979) using methodological support from Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*. The subsequent section of the chapter offered readings of numerous poems from Walcott's poetry written in Boston, where he had voluntarily emigrated to in the early 1980s. *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), I have gone on to demonstrate, foregrounds travel, peregrination, exilic performativity and displacement. Finally, I concluded the chapter with Walcott's metapoetic dialogue with fellow poet and exile Joseph Brodsky, across

the poetic volumes *Midsummer* (1984) and *The Bounty* (1997), in order to provide an appraisal of the transcultural affinities sought by Walcott to understand his own separation from St. Lucia.

In the chapter on Brodsky, I first tried to look at Brodsky's marginalisation as a Jew (*yevrei*) in post-War Soviet society and went on to situate Brodsky's espousal of "estrangement" against theoretical models appropriate for his Russian context, advanced by Viktor Shkolvsky and Svetlana Boym respectively. I then attempted a historical overview of the Khrushchev era and the "Thaw" years in Russian poetry, trying to situate the "Avvakumite" group within it as a medley of dissenting voices which attempted to restore truth-telling to poetry, and to revive the Russian language from its systematic debasement in the Stalin era. The attraction of the "Avakuumites" towards the "foreignness" emanating out of American Jazz music and Hollywood music is then explained. I then turn to the context of Existentialism and its overlaps with exile, exploring the work of Lev Shestov and Soren Kierkegaard which were available to Brodsky at the time. Using critical insights from David M. Bethea, this chapter then discusses Brodsky's internal exile to Norenskaiya and his adoption of "foreign" and "hybridised" influences through his appropriation of the model of the 'Audenesque' elegy into Russian poetry. The chapter then looks at Brodsky's foregrounding of themes such as banishment, self-deprecation and ironic reminiscence in dealing with the exilic plight. I have tried to use poems from all of the major English language translations of Brodsky's work, notably *Selected Poems* (1965) *A Part of Speech* (1980), *To Urania* (1988), *So Forth* (1996) and *Collected Poems in English* (2000). I have also tried to read Brodsky's "December in Florence" as a palimpsest text which provides poetic commentary on Dante's exile from, and non-return to, his native Florence by means of a conversation between Brodsky and two of his notable Russian poetic precursors from the Silver Age—Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam. I have finally provided a reading of Brodsky's poem "May 24, 1980" and considered it in conjunction with his ideas on the 'metaphysical' dimensions of exile in his essay "The Condition We Call Exile". Throughout the chapter, I have made use of Brodsky's critical prose in *Less than One* (1986) and *On Grief and Reason* (1995) to complement my understanding and evaluation of the primary texts.

In the fourth chapter of this dissertation, which concentrates upon the poetry of Seamus Heaney, I have tried to approach Heaney's exilic subjectivity through his initial identification as an 'Ulster poet', tied to his origins in Mossbawn, County Derry and his gradual outgrowing of such an identity in the ensuing years. I drew attention to the schisms in Heaney's self-construction, trapped within the antagonistic relationships between his 'Irish' identity and his apprenticeship to British poetry. Heaney's refusal to plead on behalf of either the Unionists or the Nationalists in the context of the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland is then approached, and aspects of his self-distancing apparent in the poetic volumes *Wintering Out* (1973) and *North* (1975) are discussed. In the ensuing section, I offered dense historical research on the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland and the coercive demands of such an ethno-religious conflict on artists and intellectuals in Northern Ireland. The chapter then analysed "The Glanmore Sonnets" from *Field Work* (1979) to explore themes of inner guilt and conflict in Heaney, who provides his apologia for poetry from isolation and self-exile at Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland. I then traced, through biographical probing, Heaney's superimposition of his own exilic choice through his poetic adaptation of the myth of Suibhne, the mad, exiled bird-king with a recalcitrant Celtic temperament in *Sweeney Astray* (1983). Proceeding from thence, I provided a detailed reading of the twelve-part long poem "Station Island" to understand Heaney's creative use of the pilgrimage to Lough Derg as a form of "penitential peregrination". I also demonstrated the links between the poem and his readings of Dante, the paradigmatic *exsul* and an important European poetic-precursor on exile. Lastly, I looked at metaphors of frontier-crossing and projections of imagined spaces in *The Haw Lantern* to understand several forms of "border-crossing" in Heaney.

Finally, in my fifth chapter, I have introduced my reader to the poetry of Reinaldo Arenas, a dissident homosexual poet from post-Revolutionary Cuba, whose literary interventions defied state-sanctioned norms of Socialist Realism. I have followed a chronological trajectory in demonstrating Arenas's gradual growth as a poet and a writer in post-revolutionary Cuba, writing from the margins because of his homosexuality and his departure from realist modes of narration. I tried to read Arenas's poems from *El central* (1981) and *Leprosorio: trilogia poetica* (1990) as

verbal denunciations and mockery of the arbitrary and dictatorial Castro regime's intolerance of dissenting or seditious literature and attempted to correlate them against a theoretical model of totalitarianism proposed by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski. Drawing upon the work of scholars such as Carmelo Mesa-Lago, I next explored the socio-political and economic consequences of the adoption of Sino-Guevarism, the "Revolutionary Offensive" campaign (1968) and the projected Ten Million Ton Sugar Harvest (1970) and their ramifications on Cuban politics and elaborated on the history of forced expropriation of labour through the UMAP camps and later, forced labour camps. I also used the work of scholars such as Alan Young, Marvin Leiner, Roger Lancaster, Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich, Lillian Guerra and Brad Epps to understand Arenas's marginalisation as a *maricon* against the backdrop of the patriarchal Cuban code of *machismo* and his projections of homosexual alterity in his poems, notably in Hector's lyrical cantos addressed to the sea, in the second half of the novel *Farewell to the Sea*, which defies easy categorisation into the generic domains of either "prose" or "poetry". In the subsequent sub-section, the arrest, torture and incarceration of Arenas is discussed, with references to many of his poems written from captivity. The chapter then proceeded to consider the Mariel Boatlift of 1980 as a historical phenomenon and tried to correlate the nuances of coerced exile to Arenas's poetic representations of the exodus. I concluded the final chapter through my evaluation of Arenas's strategic resistance to co-option within the official histories of post-Revolutionary Cuba, his life as a gay rights activist in New York and the ways in which he elides a model of passive victimhood.

(b) Analysis of Research Findings: Similarities and Dissonances

We must try to answer the research questions that we had framed at the beginning of this dissertation. The nature of the first question is demonstrative and descriptive, and concentrates upon the poetic representation of political exile in the twentieth century. We have already investigated a large cross-section of twentieth century exilic poetry in the introduction that are relevant to our discussion here. In comparison to ancient, medieval and pre-twentieth century instances of exile, we can undoubtedly say that the transformation of exile as banishment for specially significant

individuals such as Ovid or Dante, into many variants—internal exile (Mandelstam and Brodsky), enabling self-exile (Joyce, Heaney or Milosz), historical exile, alienation and voluntary emigration (Walcott), forced deportation (Brodsky), the ravages of war and ethnic genocide (Mahmoud Darwish and Paul Celan) and coerced exile (Arenas)—have widened the scope of poetic representations of exilic dislocations. As Brodsky had written, “[d]isplacement and misplacement are this century’s commonplace”¹. The ubiquity of exilic displacement as a condition in the twentieth century allows us to consider this ancient condition in a new light, where thronging multitudes of displaced populations are denied even the dignity of this word and are reduced to mere “migrants”, important not for their own, but only for their collective identities:

Nobody has ever counted these people and nobody including the UN relief organizations, ever will: coming in millions, they elude computation and constitute what is called—for want of a better term or a higher degree of compassion—migration.²

But one needs to stress that the concept of “poetry” itself has undergone a similarly radical transformation from its ancient or medieval conceptions. Thus, Sven Birkerts argues in his essay “The Poet in an Age of Distraction” that when Auden had written that “poetry makes nothing happen”³, he was, in fact, referring more about the poetry of recent centuries and not about the grand performances of Homer, Virgil, Dante and Milton, which shaped and directed the imagination of Western man and die-stamped his languages permanently. In our era, Birkerts reasons, “[p]oetry is now largely a face-saving operation”⁴ where poets are “preening themselves on their own uselessness”⁵. Birkerts attributes great and abstract historical changes to this radical alteration in the status of poetry in the contemporary era: “[t]he race is busily standardizing itself and turning its attention outward; sciences, technologies and the mass-processing of information are the order of the day”⁶. Technologically advanced

¹ Joseph Brodsky, “The Condition We Call Exile,” *The New York Review*, January 21, 1988, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1988/01/21/the-condition-we-call-exile/> (accessed June 09, 2022).

² Ibid.

³ W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”, *Poets.org*, <https://poets.org/poem/memory-w-b-yeats> (accessed June 09, 2022).

⁴ Sven Birkerts, “The Poet in an Age of Distraction,” *Ploughshares* 10, no. 1 (1984): 193, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40349254> (accessed June 09, 2022)

⁵ Ibid. 192.

⁶ Ibid.

“Western” societies therefore, live amidst a great “distractedness”, amidst a host of “[m]aterialistic” biases, ascribing value only to the tangible, “along a hierarchy of size and palpability”⁷. In the face of such emphasis on exteriority (which must come at the cost of diminishing interiority), Birkerts wonders why poets write at all. But despite all of these odds, poetry has survived, primarily owing to the fact that “[t]he poet, in the perversity of his disposition, works in language and attempts to subvert time: he arranges imperishable (because immaterial) signs into pattern”⁸. Being a deft craftsman and manipulator of words, the poet manages to free words from the denotative, “menial tasks” and opens up firstly “a specific sound-shape, and second a suggestive emblem”⁹. This fact becomes even clearer when we understand that the uniqueness of poetry as a genre does not consist in its subject matter, but in the language in which its fabric is woven, and the contextually coded “inner space” of the poem:

Poetry cannot but build itself up from the tension between meaning and sound. Indeed, conventional kinds of meaning - as in "What is this poem about?" - are generally pretext. They provide a rudimentary structure, a stage upon which language can perform its strip-tease, discarding its designatory veils. To the extent that we are profound, our language is profound, for we have made it. When we experience that language intimately, touching the layers of emotion behind the sign, the deepest and most ancient elements of the psyche are activated. "Meanings" and "messages" are as nothing in the face of the chthonic vibration.¹⁰

With regard to the poetry of exile that this dissertation has worked with, we can say that the political differences between the forms of twentieth century ‘exile’ in poets such as Walcott, Brodsky, Heaney and Arenas do not figure conspicuously within the “inner space” of their poems. When for example, Walcott refers to “the disfiguring exile of divorce”¹¹ in the poem “The Hotel Normandie Pool”, he is, in fact, defamiliarising the word “exile” from its narrow and denotative political sense.

⁷ Ibid. 195.

⁸ Ibid. 196.

⁹ Ibid. 198.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Derek Walcott, “The Hotel Normandie Pool,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 439.

Similarly, when a poet such as Brodsky uses the word “*Lebensraum*”¹² to mean his own “space” in his essay “A Room and a Half”, he is practically stripping down a politically charged concept of the twentieth century of its history of ethnocentric nationalism, to denote a naturalised “living space or habitat”¹³. What the word does here is to expand the breadth of its connotative force, and becomes meaningful only when it suggests an inversely analogical relationship between Brodsky’s “half-room” and the elusive Social Darwinist idea promoted by German geographer Friedrich Ratzel in the nineteenth century, which foregrounded the desirability of a gradually expanding conception of “Pan-Germanism” that would justify Germany’s military conquest of Slavic Eastern Europe in the course of the two World Wars¹⁴. Whereas, “pan-Germanism” suggested an expansion of habitable territory, Brodsky paradoxically means a gradually shrinking room, which now appeared safe behind a “barricade” of books. Comparably, when Heaney uses the phrase “inner émigré” to refer to his own self-distancing from the cyclical violence of the “Troubles”, he is, in fact, re-fashioning his own circumstances of “metaphoric exile” into that of Mandelstam’s, for whom the phrase had a distinct political sense¹⁵. Arenas also insinuates at such a defamiliarisation from the mundane and the tangible as he posits “a blank loose leaf page”, awaiting to be inscribed with language as “the exile’s infinite homeland”¹⁶. Therefore, whatever may be the political ramifications for a widely connotative use of the word “exile”, we can surmise, with Brodsky “that the real soil, real ground for the writer is language”¹⁷.

This brings us directly to the second of our questions posed: to what extent it is proper to regard the circumstances of material estrangement from one’s country as

¹² Joseph Brodsky, “A Room and a Half” in *Less than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), 474.

¹³ See “*Lebensraum*”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lebensraum> (accessed June 09, 2022).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Seamus Heaney, “Exposure”, in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 84

¹⁶ Reinaldo Arenas, “Autumn Gives Me a Leaf,” in , *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems* trans. Kelly Washbourne ((Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 2014), 169.

¹⁷ Joseph Brodsky quoted in Zakhar Ishov, “Joseph Brodsky’s ‘December in Florence: Reinterpreting Exile with the Shadow of Dante”, 17, https://www.academia.edu/35502979/Joseph_Brodskys_December_in_Florence_Re-interpreting_exile_with_the_shadow_of_Dante (accessed June 90, 2022).

constitutive of exile. In order to answer this question we have to once again go back to Said, who, in his essay “Expatriates and Marginals”, considers exile also as a “metaphorical one”, a statement by which he means that while his “diagnosis of the intellectual in exile derives from the social and political history of dislocation and migration”, it is by no means “limited to it”¹⁸. Said here focusses on “dissonance and dissent” and the “nay-sayers” who, even without experiencing physical separation from their respective countries, can function as “outsiders and exiles so far as privileges, powers and honours are concerned”¹⁹. The role of the twentieth century intellectual, insofar as they remain “unaccommodated” and in “the state of never being fully adjusted”²⁰ can also engender an exilic subjectivity. All of the poets I have studied as part of this dissertation, regardless of whether they have been forced or coerced into exile, or chose self-exile, conform to this trope of the “outsider”. For Walcott, as we have already seen, the tropes of estrangement and isolation, both from a sense of historical dispossession from the canon of British literature, and as a colonially educated poet in “backward” St. Lucia, are very prominently visible from the poetry of the 1970s. This transmutes into a paradoxical form of “homing” in a poem such as “The Gulf”, where Walcott, reflecting on the fact that “the South felt like home”, feels the burden of the guilt of abandoning his actual home, St. Lucia²¹. Brodsky’s emphasis on the art of “estrangement”, notably in his essays “Less than One” and “A Guide to a Renamed City” and in his poems such as “The month of January has flown past” or “Nature Morte” emphasizes on the notion of an “inner life” set against the context of state-surveillance in a dictatorial state. Brodsky’s Jewishness, his belonging to the “Avakuumites” and the circulation of his poetry only through unauthorised *samizdat* copies, and his profoundly anti-Marxist aesthetics also buttress his alienation within the mainstream of Soviet society.

Heaney’s Catholic identity in Northern Ireland and his refusal to employ his poetic craft in advancing the demands of either Unionist or Nationalist camps make

¹⁸ Edward W. Said, ‘Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals’, *Grand Street* 47 (Autumn 1993): 116.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 117.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Derek Walcott, “The Gulf” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 107.

him serve as an “outsider” to mainstream ‘Irish’ identities, in the backdrop of the politically charged context of the Troubles²². The exilic fates of Mandelstam, Brodsky and Milosz provided for him the “inner émigré” persona so famously used in “Exposure”, as well as a rationale for his own artistic self-distancing, and gradual dissociation from cycles of sectarian hatred and violence. His essays “The Government of the Tongue”, and “Chekhov on Sakhalin” also present an affirmation that although “the corrective pressures of social, moral, political and historical reality”²³ may weigh the lyric poet down, “the ultimate fidelity must be to the demands and promise of the artistic event”²⁴. Reinaldo Arenas, despite having taken part in the Cuban Revolution, gradually grew disillusioned with it. For his homosexuality, and his dissident masculinity and aesthetics, Arenas always figured as an “outsider” to officially sanctioned versions of Cuban history, suffering sustained marginalisation and ostracism for his openly homosexual life in Havana, and for artistic projections of such a homosexual subjectivity, which privileged the “the imaginative over the historical”²⁵.

While it may be argued that the marginalisations of Brodsky and Arenas are not comparable in their depth or scale to the marginalisations of Walcott and Heaney, the mutually shared states of alienation, estrangement and self-isolation experienced by the four poets who are discussed within this dissertation suggest their “unaccommodated” status within the respective societies they inhabited. Therefore, within the scope of this dissertation, one can infer, without necessarily equating the nature or degrees of their marginalisation, that they all conform to the paradigm of “intellectual exile” established by Said. Thus, it may also be said that while material estrangement from one’s “home” may aggravate the tribulations of exilic separation, all of these four poets were, in varied senses, “intellectual exiles” in their respective geo-political and socio-cultural contexts, even before the events of their physical

²² See Carmen Bugan, “Introduction,” in *Seamus Heaney and East-European Poetry in Translation* (London: Legenda, 2013), 3.

²³ Seamus Heaney, “The Government of the Tongue,” in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 101.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Francisco Soto, *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia* (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994), 41.

dislocation came to take place. This inference also suggests that the breadth of the concept of “exile” can encompass their literary oeuvres, even if such forms of “exile” are not compounded by the event of physical separation.

This brings us to the third of the research questions enumerated at the beginning of this study, which seeks to ask if the “space” of exile is dynamic and changeable, or static and insular. We might try to answer this question by first explicating what we mean by the “space” of exile. The experience of exile resembles, as John D. Barbour has aptly pointed out, “a way of dwelling in space with a constant awareness that one is not at home”²⁶. This happens primarily because “[t]he exile is oriented to a distant place and feels that he does not belong where he lives”²⁷. Simultaneously “[e]xile is also an orientation to time, a plotting of one’s life story around a pivotal event of departure and a present condition of absence from one’s native land”²⁸. The exilic orientation then, consists in “being pointed toward something distant”, while parallel feelings of “disorientation, or feeling lost and at odds with one’s immediate environment”²⁹ also arise within the mind of the exile. The exile’s own “contrapuntal awareness”³⁰ of these simultaneous dimensions of reality ushers in the notion of an exilic “space” in its tangibly real and metaphoric dimensions. Yet the nature in which each poet responds to this “space” varies greatly. Since Walcott, even after his emigration to Boston in the early 1980s, kept coming back to his native St. Lucia till his death, his memory of “home” cannot be held as insular or static. In fact, Walcott was quite honest when he pointed out, in an interview with Nancy Schoenberger, that

... Any writer from the colonies or the provinces or the outskirts of an empire—if he is cut off, severed from his roots, politically or culturally, well, that’s a pain I don’t know because I don’t have that situation. I’m not a political exile. And “exile” is a good word, but

²⁶ See John D. Barbour, “Edward Said and the Space of Exile”, *Literature and Theology* 21, No. 3 (September 2007): 293, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23927126> (accessed June 09, 2022).

²⁷ *Ibid.* 294.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.* 293-94.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 295.

we use the word in a very romantic sense. By exile, we only mean an extended vacation, in a sense.³¹

But even as he admits that he has never literally been severed from “home” the same way a political exile does, he does talk about “the Wordsworthian sense that you don’t return to what you once were, so even if you are home, you are not back to what you were”³². Thus, Walcott illustrates on a disjuncture between the mental growth of the artist-intellectual and that of their home, emphasizing the temporal changes wrought by absence to both. He refers to Joyce, who is “an exile from Ireland in a mental sense”³³ but ultimately, had the freedom to return there had he so wanted. In Walcott’s estimation, Joyce found Ireland “too provincial, too tiring, too catholic, too hidebound”³⁴. While Walcott does initiate a comparison between his own exilic subjectivity and that of Joyce, he is quick to point out the difference between his own political reality and that of the latter, “an Irishman living in Paris or Trieste or Zurich”³⁵. But even as tries to foreground his returns to St. Lucia he cannot but acknowledge that such a return could only be “spiritual”, a “recreation of the homeland in the interior landscape” of the imagination: “[w]hat is achieved when a writer reaches that stage is, first, a bleakness beyond nostalgia, and then a radiant serenity”³⁶.

Seamus Heaney, in the essay “Mossbawn”, directs us to the motifs of such a “spiritual return”, to “the first place” of his birth³⁷. His “secret nest” happened to be “an old willow tree at the end of the farmyard”³⁸. He describes it as a tree with a hollow trunk, and “[i]ts mouth was like the fat and solid opening in a horse’s collar, and once you squeezed in through it, you were at the heart of different life, looking out on the familiar yard as if it were suddenly behind a pane of strangeness”³⁹. What Heaney is able to envision through his imagination is a return to his most significant childhood

³¹ See Nancy Schoenberger and Derek Walcott, “An Interview with Derek Walcott”, *The Threepenny Review* 15 (Autumn 1983): 16-17, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/4383239> (accessed June 09, 2022).

³² *Ibid.* 17.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Heaney, “Mossbawn,” in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

memory, his own subjective *omphalos*, which, by virtue of its repetitiveness, makes the poet capable of such an imaginative return. Significantly, the essay was written in 1974, when Heaney could afford a relatively detached perspective on the paradoxes of his identity as an “Ulster poet”. The repetition of the word “*omphalos*” suggests also an aural re-enactment of return for Heaney, which “blunt and failing music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door”⁴⁰.

One also notices strong affinities between Walcott’s and Heaney’s conceptualisations demonstrated above, with the thematics of a “Wordsworthian return”⁴¹ being the important link between the two. We have already seen Walcott’s reference to this particular thematic in the preceding paragraphs. In his introduction to *The Essential Wordsworth*, Heaney alludes to Wordsworth’s attempts “to retrieve for the chastened adult consciousness the spontaneous, trustful energies unconsciously available in the world of childhood”⁴². Wordsworth’s hold on later poets “stems from the manifest strength of his efforts to integrate several strenuous and politically contradictory efforts”⁴³. Heaney appraises Wordsworth as “a finder and keeper of the self as subject”⁴⁴, something which may be rightfully extended to Heaney’s own trajectories of self-distancing and imaginative return to the County Derry of his childhood. In Heaney’s *Seeing Things* (1991), a poetic volume kept outside the immediate scope of this dissertation, he keeps collapsing the distinctions between “real” and the “transcendent” realms, re-enacting, in order to face the future, the “heartland of the ordinary” enshrined in the past⁴⁵. As Michael Cavanagh summarises:

... the world offers transcendent-realistic experiences to those who can leave and re-encounter reality, who can keep returning to “the heartland of the ordinary”, which is both “historical” (it is where we started) and “ahistorical” (it is where we can return with renewed vision). It is as if Heaney were saying that we must go our belief that

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See Nancy Schoenberger and Derek Walcott, “An Interview with Derek Walcott”, *The Threepenny Review* 15 (Autumn 1983):17.

⁴² Seamus Heaney, “Introduction,” in *The Essential Wordsworth* (New York: Ecco Press, 1988), 6.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Seamus Heaney, “The Journey Back,” in *New Selected Poems: 1988-2013* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014), 164-65.

we needn't go anywhere at all. Everything we know can be “recycled” into freshness. *Nostos* is forever.⁴⁶

As the similarities between the Caribbean and the Irish contexts of exilic subjectification we had discussed in our introduction also suggest, for both Walcott and Heaney, leaving their respective “first places” was paradoxically, a way to reclaim and renew the bonds of their own identification with their source cultures. But whereas for Walcott attachment to the Caribbean is such a profound bond because it consists in the inexplicable “strength and pull of longing”⁴⁷, for Heaney the spiritual return consists much more in going back to the “space” of the lived and personal memory of a lost childhood in County Derry. Despite this dissonance, their endeavours to project this exilic subjectification in their poems enables them as artists whose foremost commitment lies to their craft.

On the contrary, the exilic fates of Brodsky and Arenas are united by the events of their non-return to their respective native realms. Brodsky’s yearning for the lost homeland, we have seen, manifests itself as an impossible desire to return to the Soviet Russia that he left behind. Yet, an ironic detachment from reconstructive nostalgia prevents Brodsky from enacting that return. As we saw in our analysis of “December in Florence”, Brodsky poetically conceives of a unilinear trajectory of departure and non-return where one simply “raises the collar to disengage”⁴⁸. But this form of disengagement can take place when the wounds and traumas of separation from the native land is adequately recompensed for through the poet’s symbolic repatriation into the Russian language and the Russian poetic tradition. The emphasis on travel in Brodsky’s poetic oeuvre also allows him to forge a meaningful form of attachment with Italian cities such as Rome, Florence and Venice, places he felt at home in. This alternative form of homing surfaces in poems such as “Venetian Stanzas I and II”, “In Italy”, “Venice: Lido” and his travel-memoir *Watermark*. It is worth quoting a section

⁴⁶ Michael Cavanagh, “Seamus Heaney Returning”, *Journal of Modern Literature* 22, No. 1 (Autumn, 1998): 120, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3831754> (accessed June 09, 2022).

⁴⁷ Nancy Schoenberger and Derek Walcott, “An Interview with Derek Walcott”, *The Threepenny Review* 15 (Autumn 1983):17.

⁴⁸ Joseph Brodsky, “December in Florence”, in *Collected Poems in English* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 130

of “In Italy” to demonstrate how, for Brodsky, an implicit comparison between St. Petersburg, his lost city and Venice is initiated in memory, reinforcing the “*topos* of Petersburg as Northern Venice”⁴⁹:

I, too, once lived in a city where cornices used to court
Clouds with statues, and where a local *penseur*, with his shrill
“Pervért!
Pervért!” and the trembling goatee, was mopping
Avenues; and an infinite quay was rendering life myopic.⁵⁰

For Arenas, the choice of emigrating to the United States through the Mariel exodus was conditioned by ostracism, censorship, imprisonment and invisibilisation that he faced at “home”. Yet, the paradoxical nature of exilic severance would bring not just feelings of liberation, joy or exultation. Writing in 1990 at the time of finishing his autobiographical memoir *Before Night Falls*, ten years into his exile to the United States, he writes:

...I have realized that an exile has no place anywhere, because there is no place, because the place we started to dream, where we discovered the natural world around us, read our first book, loved for the first time, is always the world of our dreams. In exile one is nothing but a ghost, the shadow of someone who never achieves full reality. I ceased to exist.⁵¹

New York, the city of Arenas’s uneasy homing had a similar function to play in his life—in the same way Venice, and Ann Arbor did for Brodsky—appearing forever as “a glorified Havana”⁵². He was aware that this form of identification was actually a form of nostalgic self-deception where “the exile...having lost a loved one, keeps searching for the face he loves in every new face”⁵³.

Thus, one can infer that the major divergence between the exilic “spaces” inhabited by the Walcott-Heaney pair and the Brodsky-Arenas pair consists in their

⁴⁹ Silvia Panicieri, “Brodsky’s Travelling Exile Pays Homage to Italy”, *e-Samizdat* 2016 (XI): 118, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315657268> (accessed June 09, 2022).

⁵⁰ See Joseph Brodsky, “In Italy”, trans. Joseph Brodsky, *Genius.com*, <https://genius.com/Joseph-brodsky-in-italy-annotated> (accessed June 09, 2022).

⁵¹ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, trans. Dolores M. Koch (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2001), 139.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

ability or inability to return to their respective origins. While the exilic themes connected to a trajectory of “return” (even if only at a “metaphorical” or “spiritual” level as visible in the Walcott-Heaney pairing) can be described as those of “necessary departure in order to return”, their counterparts in the Brodsky-Arenas pair are those concerning “impossible nostalgia and paradoxical ‘homing’”.

We might turn to the fourth question posed towards the beginning of this study. The question concerns ascertaining the extent to which the “reality” and “fiction” of exilic experience combine to condition an aesthetics of exile. In view of the poetic works discussed within the scope of this dissertation, I find that no clear resolution of the question can be possible, considering the diverseness of exilic representations approached in this dissertation. This is because all of the four poets—Walcott, Brodsky Heaney or Arenas—also implicate their exilic representations within the larger tradition of exilic poetry. Through their poetry, they try to refashion the peculiarities of their experience through their re-appropriation of the poetic masks of exilic literary precursors such as Ovid, Dante, Pushkin, Mandelstam or Jose Marti. In such a context, it is almost impossible to carefully separate the domain of the “real” from the “fictive” in a study of their poetic works. Although all of the poets I have approached in the course of this dissertation did experience a form of physical separation from their “homes”, the shape-shifting, protean nature of exilic subjectivity introduces perverse and amorphous literary representations that collapse the boundaries between the “real” and the “fictive”. Poetry, despite this dissertation’s textual and historicist tendencies, is ultimately not the best ground for separating the two, because language produces a shady incomprehensibility that steadily resists simplistic reductions of artistry into pedantic occasions for “unpacking” their biographical dimensions.

Therefore, I find myself more inclined to Michael Ugarte’s delineation of a “shifting ground” between the “real” and the “fictive”, which he explores in his work on the body of Spanish Exile literature during the Second World War⁵⁴. As Ugarte understands “exile” as an “untameable” phenomenon that resists, by its very

⁵⁴See Michael Ugarte, *Shifting Ground: Spanish Civil War Exile Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 1989).

ambiguities, a clearly resolved definition. As a result, Ugarte can only conclude with a solipsism: "...exile literature lays bare the workings of literature itself"⁵⁵. Without necessarily explicating a restrictive schema to answer the interrelationship between the 'real' and 'fictive' aspects of the exilic experiences explored here, he also recognises the exiled writer's "difficulty in perceiving reality because of the need to focus on a shifting scenery"⁵⁶, coupled with the "desire to recreate a former reality"⁵⁷. The event of exile induces a deep foundational rupture, which "intensifies the tenuousness of the relationship between language and reality, for the life of exile, is, in many ways, the life of fiction"⁵⁸. Adopting a mixture of textual-historicist and deconstructive research methodologies, Ugarte figuratively re-enacts the inherent ambivalence of the exilic experience when he considers the Derridean concept of *differance* as a "peculiarly appropriate allegory for exile . . . the exilic journey mirrors this process of deferral by the constant reliance of relations to assimilate a new reality", and, like the sign, "is groundless"⁵⁹. He adds that for the exiled writer "[n]othing is apprehended without the grid screen of memory and comparison...[a]ll the signifieds within the land of exile keep slipping away as they are subjected to a process of mediation between the new land and the old"⁶⁰. In my analysis for the four poets in this dissertation, I have also tried to demonstrate, in varied ways, the ways in which they take recourse to 'fictionalising' the lived, material realities of their estrangement from "home", often choosing to appraise their own literary subjectivities with the poetic impersonations of Ulysses, Ovid and Dante, as well as a host of other Romantic and modern exiled poets. In literary sub-genres such as the exilic retrospective memoirs discussed here (such as Brodsky's select essays from *Less than One* and *On Grief and Reason*, or Arenas's *Before Night Falls*), the subjective report of the victimised Brodsky or Arenas also attest to a form of bearing witness, to lay bare the inconsistencies of the officially approved narratives of state-sanctioned history which exclude them. The writing of dissent conditions their pre-exilic and post-exilic severance from the mainstream of

⁵⁵ Ibid. 20.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 17-18.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 27.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 26.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

accepted socio-cultural relations within the Soviet Union or Cuba respectively. In order to represent a “textual self” within these narrations, both Brodsky and Arenas had to take recourse to ‘fictionalisation’ and re-encode the stories and accounts of their exile with counter-hegemonic import, often by deliberately having to employ themes of divided or schismatic allegiances between two cultures, a desire to dwell in bi-location or in a cosmopolitan “world of letters” that prioritises language as the new *patria* into which one must be re-assimilated. For Walcott and Heaney too, the constant critical appraisals of exiled authors such as V.S. Naipaul, George Lamming, C.L.R. James, Joseph Brodsky, Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Patrick Kavanagh and John Montague echo this self-same idea and attest to the literary conceptualisation of language as a symbolic patria for exiled poets and artists: a “tributary of emigrants”⁶¹ now made “classless” by their common citizenry to “language”.

Fortunately, this brings us finally to addressing our fifth question, which asks whether the writing of poetry exacerbates, to an extent, the trauma of exilic separation. With regard to the poetry of Derek Walcott, Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney and Reinaldo Arenas, one might answer this question resoundingly in the affirmative. As has been already, and adequately demonstrated in the case of each of these poets, their foremost commitment to writing as their vocations allowed them to produce a body of literature that serves as the existential link between their exiled selves and the native realms they left behind. Walcott and Heaney’s artistic mediations on the English language, which they inherited through their shared experience of British colonialism, and their articulations of their Irish or West Indian “difference” through it, bespeak of their tendencies to use poetry as an alleviating force to contend with the manifold sufferings associated to self-distancing, alienation, inner conflicts and unresolved guilt regarding voluntary emigration. Walcott, in a poem such as “The Hotel Normandie Pool” has his imagined persona of Ovid end his dialogue with the poetic incitement that “art obeys its own order”⁶². Similarly, Heaney’s prioritisation of aesthetic objectives over others shows forth when, towards the end of the poem “Station Island”, he uses another exiled literary precursor, James Joyce’s persona to advise him

⁶¹ Derek Walcott, “Forest of Europe,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 377.

⁶² Derek Walcott, “The Hotel Normandie Pool,” in *Collected Poems: 1948-84*, 442.

to cultivate “a work-lust that imagines its haven like your hands at night/dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast” over the “subject people stuff” that is a “cod’s game”⁶³. Thus, among the indecisions and unresolved antagonisms of the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland, Heaney dovetails his own dissociation from the ‘Ulster poet’ identity by following the advice of Cacciaguda, the exiled Dante’s ancestor who advises him to “make a party of oneself” by purposeful self-isolation. However, Heaney’s prioritisation of aesthetic ends does not automatically indicate a separation of the poet’s lyric “insouciance” and his greater responsibilities towards his community, through a conceptualisation of poetic “redress” that offers a “counterweighing” of historical scales, having been able to envision a “glimpsed alternative”⁶⁴.

For Brodsky, gaining a glimpse of the “uncommon visage” of poetry consisted in acknowledging that “aesthetics is the mother of ethics”⁶⁵. He describes “aesthetic reality” as an inherently “private experience” available to the poet, which turns out to be, “if not a guarantee, then a form of defense against enslavement”⁶⁶. Arenas similarly used poetry as a form of testimony or witness to lived experiences of persecution, marginalisation, incarceration and coerced exile from the post-revolutionary Cuba of the dictatorial Castro regime. In a comparable form of artistic defence of poetry to that of Brodsky, Arenas, in a speech delivered on August 30, 1980 at the Second Intellectual Dissidents Conference at Columbia University, posited the lifelong project of dissident- artistic testimony as a form of counter-militancy against the ravages of vulgar propaganda and oblivion:

Once universal barbarism—highly paid barbarism spurred on by its propagandizers—has swallowed up every bastion of freedom, what may be left in some far-off and (hopefully) overlooked archive or shelf, is the desperate but not therefore less objective testimony of those of us who, having suffered this barbarism, having been its

⁶³ Seamus Heaney, ‘Station Island: XII’, in *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 92.

⁶⁴ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Redress of Poetry’, in *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Kindle edition, 13.

⁶⁵ Joseph Brodsky, “Uncommon Visage: The Nobel Lecture,” in *On Grief and Reason* (London: Penguin, 1995), 42.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

victims, were able to denounce it, were able to send up this cry of alarm and warning.⁶⁷

All of the above instances are constitutive of their common idealisation and appraisals of literature, and more specifically, poetry as a form of partial alleviation against the traumas of systematic exclusion, political disenfranchisement, exile and dislocation.

(c) Prospects for Future Research

Since the primary focus of this dissertation has been on four instances of the poetry of exile in the second half of the twentieth century, I feel obliged to indicate some of the possible areas where future research may be attempted and successfully carried out, within the poetic oeuvres of Walcott, Brodsky, Heaney and Arenas. In particular, there are other textual regions within their respective literary oeuvres that deserve closer theoretical scrutiny. Among these are Walcott's epic *Omeros* (1999)⁶⁸ and *The Prodigal* (2004)⁶⁹ and latter-day interdisciplinary collaborations such as *Morning, Paramin* (2016)⁷⁰ with the renowned Scottish-Canadian figurative painter, Peter Doig, a long-time resident on the island of Trinidad. There is, moreover, lots of literary ground that could be explored through comparative studies that focus on the exilic overlap between Walcott's dramatic oeuvre and their interrelationship to plays by Brodsky (*Marbles*⁷¹ and *Democracy*⁷²) and Heaney's dramatic rewritings of Sophocles (*The Cure at Troy*⁷³ and *The Burial at Thebes*⁷⁴). Within Arenas's literary oeuvre, I have mostly ignored his collections of short stories, translated to and

⁶⁷ Reinaldo Arenas, speech delivered at Columbia University, New York, August 30, 1980, Second Intellectual Dissidents' Conference, quoted in Kelly Washbourne, "Introduction: "Against Terror, the Simplicity of Epic Verse Suffices," in *Autoepitaph: Selected Poems*, 28.

⁶⁸ Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990).

⁶⁹ Derek Walcott, *The Prodigal: A Poem* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004).

⁷⁰ Derek Walcott and Peter Doig, *Morning, Paramin* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016).

⁷¹ Joseph Brodsky, *Marbles: A Play in Three Acts* trans. Alan Meyers and Joseph Brodsky (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989).

⁷² Joseph Brodsky and Alan Meyers, "Democracy", *Performing Arts Journal* 13, No. 1 (Jan 1991): 64-93, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3245504> (accessed June 09, 2022).

⁷³ Seamus Heaney, "Choruses from "The Cure" at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' "Philoctetes"", *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 1, No. 2 (Spring, 1991): 131-138, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20163473> (accessed June 09, 2022).

⁷⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Burial at Thebes: A Version of Sophocles' Antigone* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

anthologised in English as *Mona and Other Tales* (2001)⁷⁵, and his novel, *The Doorman* (1991)⁷⁶, which can become fertile textual grounds of schematising his exilic identifications and self-distancing. If there are more translations available from Spanish, Arenas's *Prosa Dispersa (1965-1990)*⁷⁷ into English in future, it would greatly benefit textual-historical research on Arenas within the broader domains of Anglo-American criticism. Similarly, textual-historical studies that concentrate on the exilic overlaps between Brodsky's retrospective essays on travel, exile and the distant "home", in his prose anthologies *Less than One* (1986), *On Grief and Reason* (1995) and *Watermark: An Essay on Venice* (1992)⁷⁸ may be attempted in conjunction with their typically "exilic" affinities to Arenas's autobiographical memoir *Before Night Falls* (1993) . These areas, however, may only be critically mapped by a future researcher, towards whose work the present dissertation hopes to make a tiny, but kindred, contribution.

⁷⁵ Reinaldo Arenas, *Mona and Other Tales*, trans. Dolores M. Koch (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

⁷⁶ Reinaldo Arenas, *The Doorman*, trans. Dolores M. Koch (New York: Grove Press, 1991)

⁷⁷ Reinaldo Arenas, *Libro de Arenas (Prosa Dispersa, 1965-1990)* (Yucatan, Mexico: Equilibrista, 2013)

⁷⁸ Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark: An Essay on Venice* (London: Penguin, 2013).

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