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Going Native, the White Man and the Primitive: A Reading of Seven Postcolonial Novels

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“The reaches opened before us and closed behind,
as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water
to bar the way of our return. We penetrated deeper
and deeper into the heart of darkness.”
(Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*)

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INTRODUCTION

'Going native' = The term indicates the colonizers' fear of contamination by absorption into native life and customs. The construction of native cultures as either primitive or degenerate in a binary discourse of colonizer/colonized led, especially at the turn of the century, to a widespread fear of 'going native' amongst the colonizers in many colonial societies. Variants occur such as 'going Fantee' (West Africa) and 'going troppo' (Australian), which suggest that both the associations with other races and even the mere climate of colonies in hot areas can lead to moral and even physical degeneracy. The threat is particularly associated with the temptation posed by inter-racial sex, where sexual liaisons with 'native' peoples were supposed to result in a contamination of the colonizer's pure stock and thus their degeneracy and demise as a vigorous and civilized (as opposed to savage or degenerate) race. But 'going native' can also encompass lapses from European behaviour, the participation in 'native' ceremonies, or the adoption or even enjoyment of local customs in terms of dress, food, recreation and entertainment. Perhaps the best known canonical example of the perils of going native is Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a character who seems to embody the very complex sense of vulnerability, primitivism and horror of the process.[1]

Hence, according to Ashcroft *et al*'s definition, the phrase "going native" denotes a "contamination by absorption into native life." 'Contamination.' The "going native," then, is regarded as a kind of illness which the colonizer can contract by the mere contact with the colonized. The symptoms of this illness are: the withdrawal to a primitive life, the rejection of culture in favour of nature, the adoption of native habits to the detriment of cultivated manners, the assimilation of the colonizer within the colonized's environment, miscegenation. The process of "going native" can be either involuntary or voluntary, either feared or fancied. It can result from the contact with native people but also from the mere plunging into an unsullied place.

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In 2011 I read a postcolonial novel for the first time in my life: *The Ventriloquist's Tale* by Pauline Melville, a Guyanese writer. Besides the amazing story it tells, and besides the

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[1] B. ASHCROFT, G. GRIFFITHS, H. TIFFIN, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge 1998, p. 115.

writer’s marvellous style, I was immediately fascinated by one of the characters, namely, a middle-class Scottish man who leaves a European settlement in Jamaica in order to settle in a remote village in the heart of Guyana. Some questions entered spontaneously my mind: what drives a European man to renounce a secure and decent life and to plunge into the dangerous wilderness? If the white man’s burden, then, was to bring light, culture, language, law, and a true Christian morality, why does this Scottish man long to get lost both physically and mentally in a savage region? Why is he enjoying what he has been taught to repudiate?

The purpose of my thesis is to try to give an answer to these questions. In particular, I will draw my arguments from the analysis of seven postcolonial novels which present one or more characters who go native. Hence, the reader is warned, my focus will be on fictional characters, I will not dictate over mankind. Nevertheless, everybody knows literature is a human production which puts on paper human feelings…

Now, before venturing into the maze of the “going native” process, I should try to define some related basic concepts: the concept of “otherness” in relationship to postcolonial literature, and the ideas of “native”, “primitive”, and “savage”.

I

1.1 THE “OTHER”

Who is the “other”? Well, this is a very difficult question. Thousands of books have been written in an attempt to define the “other,” and actually it is impossible to give an absolute and exhaustive answer. Indeed, the “other” is other in relationship to somebody else: all the matter is based on a relative point of view. In order to clarify this idea, I will borrow a racist joke I read in Frantz Fanon’s famous essay *Black Skin, White Masks*:

One day St. Peter saw three men arrive at the gate of heaven: a white man, a mulatto, and a Negro.
"What do you want most?" he asked the white man.
"Money."
"And you?" he asked the mulatto.
"Fame."
St. Peter turned than to the Negro, who said with a wide smile: "I'm just carrying these gentlemen's bags."[2]

The joke is openly racist, I beg the reader's pardon. Nevertheless, I am quite sure that every white man and woman would at least smile when told it. Maybe, some blacks would smile too, since, as Fanon argues, they are slaves of whiteness, they long to be white and if they grasp a morsel of whiteness they will rather perceive themselves as white. But if in the joke we substitute the "Negro" with the "white man," nobody would smile, the joke would be nonsense. Briefly, no matter how much one declares to be anti-racist, the joke is somehow funny and will always be because there is something so deeply rooted in our mind that no anti-racist struggle, no breaking-down of mental barriers will ever erase. And what is this 'something so deeply rooted in our minds'? It is the feeling that there exists a difference among human beings, a difference which establishes the superiority of a group in relationship to the other. Let us, then, go further in the definition of the "other" in the field of postcolonial studies.

Generally, the "other" is anyone different from one's self. The concept of "otherness" was deeply investigated by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) who describes the "other" as essential to the definition of the subjectivity. This because through the recognition of separate beings, man becomes aware of his own identity, of his "self."[3] In postcolonial theory, the "other" is the colonized as opposed to the colonizer, an inferior subject, destined to be subjugated.[4] The colonizer perceives himself as the rule, and who else is physically different or displays different customs is labelled as "other."

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[2] F. FANON, *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press 1967, p. 49.
[3] ASHCROFT, p. 170.
[4] ASHCROFT, p. 169.

In ancient times the “other” was the barbarian, who came from Eastern Europe and spoke a strange and incomprehensible language. In the Middle Ages the “others” were the Moors, the pagans who were spoiling the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and who were threatening to invade Europe from Spain. And then, the Age of Discoveries and the consequent spread of colonialism provided the opportunity for the observation of completely different peoples: thanks to the first explorations in the interior of Africa, and thanks to the discovery of a whole continent past the Atlantic Ocean, the range of known otherness widened. The strangest people ever seen on earth inhabited these lands: “This is a strange thing as e’er I look’d on,” Alonso claims in reference to Caliban. “He is as disproportion’d in his manners / As in shape,” Prospero replies.[5] This quote from *The Tempest* – one of the literary masterpieces which best describes the early relationship between colonizer and colonized – perfectly clarifies that from the European point of view, the West Indies’ natives – and the Africans as well – were classified as the “others” *par excellence*; their appearance was so different, their habits and customs were so primitive, that they were more likely to be identified as beasts than as human beings.

Indeed, in *The Tempest*, some characters mistake Caliban for a fish, and Miranda does not even consider him a man since she says to Ferdinando “nor have I seen / More that I may call men than you, good friend, / And my dear father,”[6] although she had been living on the island with both her father and Caliban. That Caliban should be submitted to Prospero is then straightforward. His status of a “servant-monster” (III.2.4), of an “abhorred slave” (I.2.353) is inscribed in his “vile race” (I.2.360). The white man has the right to seize the black man’s land and to subjugate him, namely, to enslave him. He derives this right from his claimed cultural superiority. According to Prospero, Caliban is born a savage and he will always stay a

[5] W. SHAKESPEARE, *The Tempest*, ed. by F. KERMODE. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd 1954, p. 130.
[6] SHAKESPEARE, p. 74.

savage despite any attempt to cultivate his mind. His nature precludes him the possibility to develop any intellectual ability:

PROSPERO
A devil, a born devil, on whose nature
Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains,
Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost;
And as with age his body uglier grows,
So his mind cankers.
(IV.1 188-92)[7]

Eventually, with the discovery of Australia, the Aborigines were held by the same standard as Amerindians and Africans.

Let us make another step in defining the "other." As I wrote above, the "other" is other in relationship to somebody else. Therefore, the concept is implicitly relative. The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), making reference to the Amerindians, clearly explains the idea:

Or, je trouve, […]qu'il n'y a rien de *barbare* et de *sauvage* en cette nation, à ce qu'on m'en a rapporté, sinon que *chaqun appelle barbarie ce qui n'est pas de son usage*; comme de vray il semble que nous n'avons autre mire de la verité et de la raison que l'exemple et idée des opinions et usances du païs où nous sommes. Là est toujours la perfaicte religion, la perfaicte police, perfaict et accomply usage de toutes choses.[8] (my emphasis)

J'ay veu autrefois parmy nous, des hommes amenez par mer de loingtain pays, desquels parce que nous n'entendions aucunement le langage, et que leur façon au demeurant et leur contenance, et leurs vestements estoient du tout esloignez des notres, qui de nous ne les estimoit *et sauvages et brutes* ? qui n'attribuoit à la stupidité et à la bestise, de les voir muets, ignorants de la langue Françoise, ignorants nos baise-mains, et nos inclinations serpentées, nostre port et nostre maintien, sur lequel sans faillir, doit prendre son patron la nature humaine? *Tout ce qui nous semble estrange, nous le condamnons, et ce que nous n'entendons pas*.[9] (my emphasis)

Briefly, the colonized other is defined in relationship to the colonizer. He is a savage because his counterpoint is the civilized European; he is a barbarian because the European cannot understand his language; he is a brute because he cannot behave accordingly to the

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[7] SHAKESPEARE, pp. 105-6.

[8] M. DE MONTAIGNE, 'Des Cannibales' in *Les Essais*, ed. by P. VILLEY. Paris : F. Alcan 1922, p. 265.

[9] M. DE MONTAIGNE, 'Apologie de Remond Sebond' in *Les Essais*, ed. by M. MAGNIEN, C. MAGNIEN-SIMONIN, J. BALSAMO, A. LEGROS. Paris: Gallimard - La Pléiade 2007, pp. 490-91.

European *savoir-faire*. Therefore, the white, civilized, European man is the standard; the black, uncivilized, non-European man is evidently a diversion from the standard.

However, if the colonized "other" is defined through the colonizer "self," it is also true that the colonizer "self" needs the colonized "other" in order to define himself. "The bourgeois subject continuously defined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as low – as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating."[10] As Catherine Hall points out in her famous essay *White, Male and Middle-Class*, "English national identity […] cannot be understood outside of England's colonial dependencies."[11] The colonial experience is such an important aspect in English history that it contributes to define some characteristics pertaining to that much praised "Englishness": authority and power.[12] "In characterizing, defining and identifying those others, [the English] characterized, defined and identified themselves."[13]

Furthermore, since the white man feels he is the bearer of culture, he believes his duty – in a quite parental attitude – is to help the black child to raise from a state of wilderness to a state of civilization: this is the well-known white man's burden. But besides the white's man efforts, the black man will always be an inferior subject: "almost the same but not quite."[14] Indeed, behind the white man's philanthropy, lies cultural racism: the black man cannot raise himself on his own, he needs to be led. As a consequence, missionaries

> went to the colonies not for the more traditional prizes of wealth, or land, not for excitement or because they wanted to be tourists enjoying the wonders of nature; rather their noble task, commanded from above, was to save sinners.[15]

They believed

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[10] P. STALLYBRASS and A. WHITE, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London: Methuen 1986, p. 191.
[11] C. HALL, *White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations In Feminism and History*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1992, p. 209.
[12] HALL, 209.
[13] HALL, p. 208.
[14] H. BHABHA, 'Of Mimicry and Man' in *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge 1994, p. 86.
[15] HALL, pp. 220-21.

that it was only through the agency of men and women such as themselves that the new moral world would be created. The savagery and barbarism, as they constructed it, of the societies they went to, justified their intervention. In bringing Christianity they were bringing civilization, for the two were equated in their discourse.[16]

But what happens if the white man realizes that his own civilization is spoiled and corrupt? What if he aspires to gain back a primordial purity? As a matter of fact, Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden because they wanted to attain knowledge. So, what if the whole Western civilization of rationality was a diversion from the right path? In his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1754), Jean Jacques Rousseau criticised civil society, praised the *bon sauvage*, and professed a return to "the state of nature." According to the French philosopher and writer, civil society is the source of all evils, since it creates a disparity between rulers and ruled; for this reason, man can only be happy if he breaks the bondages of community life.

The counterpoint to Rousseau's attack on civil man is his praise of the savage. The superiority of the savage's way of life, as Rousseau presents it, consists above all in its greater freedom. […] The freedom of the savage lies in an almost total *independence* from all other men, and the consequent license to act however he wishes and always to follow his own inclinations. In the name of this absolute freedom and of nature, Rousseau praises the most primitive men.[17] (emphasis in the original)

To conlude, I admit that it is easy to get lost: at the beginning of the section I wrote that the colonized was overtly despised as an inferior subject and, as a consequence, enslaved; then I went on claiming that the European man took his hand and helped him to enter the world of Western civilization; and now I argue that the white man rejects his own world and longs for that life which the colonized was forced to leave. Briefly, this is exactly that kind of ambivalence about which Homi Bhabha speaks in his essay 'Of Mimicry and

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[16] HALL, pp. 225.

[17] M. F. PLATTER, *Rosseau's State of Nature: An Interpretation of the* Discourse on Inequality. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press 1979, p. 12.

Man.'[18] An ambivalance which lies in the ambiguous and contradictory feeling of attraction towards and repulsion for the "other." Marianna Torgovnik perfectly puts the idea into words:

> They exist for us in a cherished series of dichotomies: By turns gentle, in tune with nature, paradisal, ideal – or violent, in need of control; what we should emulate or, alternatively, what we should fear; noble savages or cannibals.[19]

1.2 "NATIVE", "PRIMITIVE", "SAVAGE"

In relation to the topic of my thesis, the three terms are quite similar and often interchangeable. For this reason, I will mostly use them as synonyms, though they are not. Indeed the three of them make reference to an early stage of mankind, when man was living a life in contact with nature. Despite the wide spread of the Euro-American *Weltanschauung*, this kind of life is still possible today; especially, it was possible during the Colonial Age.

According to this premise, the title of my thesis could be "Going Native", as well as "Going Primitive" or "Going Savage". Marianna Torgovnik entitled her essay *Gone Primitive*. Despite her book being a primary source for my arguments, my preference goes to the phrase employed in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, partly because it is there that I first came into contact with a definition of the process of merging into the wilderness, and partly because the modern use of "native", adds to the term the connotation of "non-European." Let us give a look at some meanings – pertinent to the topic of my thesis – of the entries of "native", "primitive", and "savage" in the *OED*:

native, *sb*. L. *nativus*
4.a. One of the original or usual inhabitants of a country, as distinguished from strangers or foreigners; now *esp*. one belonging to a non-European race in a country in which Europeans hold political power.
b. A coloured person; a Black.

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[18] BHABHA, pp. 85-92.
[19] M. TORGOVNIK, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1990, p. 3.

native, *adj.*
I.2.a. Left or remaining in a natural state; *esp.* free from, or untouched by, art; unadorned, simple, plain, unaffected.
III.12.a. Born in a particular place or country; belonging to a particular race, district, etc., by birth. In mod. use *spec.* with connotation of non-European.

primitive, *adj.* L. *primitiv-us*
I.1.a. Of or belonging to the first age, period, or stage; pertaining to early times; earliest, original; early, ancient.
I.2.b. *Anthrop.* That relates to a group, or to persons, whose culture, through isolation, has remained at a simple level of social and economic organization.
primitive, *sb.*
I.1.b. An original inhabitant; a man of primitive (esp. prehistoric) times. Also *transf.*, someone uncivilized, uncultured.

savage, *adj.* L. *silvaticus*.
I. That is in a state of nature, wild.
I.5. Of peoples or (now somewhat *rarely*) individual persons: Uncivilized; existing in the lowest stage of culture.
savage, *sb.*
2. A person living in the lowest state of development or cultivation; an uncivilized, wild person.[20]

As we can draw from these definitions, the three terms convey ideas of simplicity, unaffectedness, uncivilized people, wilderness, life in contact with nature; to all this, "native" adds the further suggestion of "belonging to a non-European race in a country in which Europeans hold political power," and my thesis being about postcolonial novels, I believe the utterance "going native" better suits my title.

According to colonial discourse, a set of images describe the natives: they are untamed, irrational, libidinous, violent, free, in tune with nature, at the lowest cultural level, like children.[21] The picture drawn by anthropologists is quite more detailed. In primitive societies: economy is communal, leadership roles are conveyed through a traditional base, laws derive from customs, conflicts tend to be resolved, all aspects of life are related to each other, all members have an active role inside the community, the organization is tribal, modes of thinking are concrete and nominalistic, ritual ceremonies have an important role.[22]

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[20] J.A SIMPSON and E.S.C. WEINER, Eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989.
[21] TORGOVNIK, *Gone Primitive*, p. 8.
[22] S. DIAMOND, *In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books 1981, pp.131-68.

However, in a way, both colonial discourse and anthropological analysis define the native as "them", as opposed to the civilized "us":

> philosophers, writers, travelers and historians have been […] deeply concerned with uncivilized people. Their descriptions vary immensely, and many are clearly projective or otherwise distorted, but what runs through them all, whether drawn by Herodotus or Tacitus, Ovid, Seneca or Horace, Columbus or Camöens, Montaigne or Gide, Rousseau or Monboddo, de Bouganville, or Melville or Conrad, is the sense of contrast. Civilized men are here confronting what they presume to be primordial; they are saying, "this is the way we were before we became what we are, this is the other side of our humanity."[23]

To conclude, I would like to spend a few words on a major but often neglected point: even the most objective anthropological research on supposed primitive peoples cannot be really objective. It is a matter of culture: the idea of the primitive – as well as those of the native and the savage – is a construction of the European man; therefore, it cannot be considered true. It is a product of a precise civilization, a precise way of thinking, a well-established *Weltanschauung* which is taken as norm and defines the rest as different, inferior, subordinate, "other". "A few make history. The rest are witness,"[24] Derek Walcott writes. In our case those "few" are clearly white.

> The primitive does what we ask it to do: Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our Ventriloquist's dummy – or so we like to think. […] The primitive can be – has been, will be (?) – whatever Euro-Americans want it to be. It tells us what we want it to tell us.[25]

II

2.1 REAL EXPERIENCES: MARIANNA TORGOVNIK'S *PRIMITIVE PASSIONS*

Marianna Torgovnik's *Primitive Passions* has deeply influenced my work. In her book she analyses some real life "going native" cases. Precisely, she analyses men's cases as opposed

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[23] DIAMOND, pp. 121-22.
[24] D. WALCOTT, *Omeros*. London: Faber and Faber 1990, p. 104.
[25] TORGOVNIK, *Gone Primitive*, p. 9.

to women's cases. Her point, indeed, is that while women are prone to merge totally with the wilderness, men stand on the very verge of it but do not dare to make the decisive step, due to the fact that they have a place inside the society from which they come from. Hence, they have something to lose, there is a lot at stake. The need for self-preservation wins over their quest for renewal and revitalization, so, facing the lure of the primitive they finally recoil. "Seeking the primitive and submitting to it come to be recognised as threats to one's individual wholeness and well-being."[26] On the contrary, women do not have anything to lose since their place in society will always be a marginal one. For this reason, they plunge completely into the unknown, conscious that they cannot but improve their status.

Above all, what I owe Torgovnik are some of her ideas about the reasons which bring the civilized man to let himself get lost in savage places. Among her claims is that:

> The West has been engaged, almost continuously, in defining itself against a series of "primitive" Others. Differentiation from the Other is a response to the disruptive effects of identification with the Other. It has amounted to a rejection of certain "irrational" or "mystical" aspects of the Western self, expressed in the attempt to project them either onto groups marginalized in the West (Gypsies and women, for example) or onto primitives abroad. Fascination with the primitive thus involves a dialectic between, on the one hand, a loathing and demonizing of certain rejected parts of the Western self and, on the other, the urge to reclaim them. […] The primitive is the sign and symbol of desires the West has sought to repress – desires for direct correspondences between bodies and things, direct correspondences between experience and language, direct correspondences between individual beings and the collective life force. It is the sign and symbol of desire for a full and sated sense of the universe.[27]

As stated above, there is an ambivalence in the Western man's relationship to the "other." On the one hand, the savage other is feared due to his uncouthness and violence; on the other hand, it excites interest and admiration thanks to his "communal life and idyllic closeness to nature."[28] The primitive becomes the site of Western desire, especially for those people who feel ill at ease, constrained, trapped in a hypocritical society, and want to re-discover pure life. It is considered as a sort of *locus amenus*, a utopian place of open

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[26] M. TORGOVNIK, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women and the Quest for Extasy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1998, p. 24.
[27] TORGOVNIK, *Primitive Passions*, p. 8.
[28] TORGOVNIK, *Primitive Passions*, p. 13.

possibilities, where the "self" can re-define itself through merging and through the realization of those forbidden desires who had been banished by the Western civilization. In Western thinking such desires were defined by Freud as "pre-Oedipal" or "oceanic," namely, fetal, infantile, regressive states in which the individual's mind does not work through subject-object relations and does not perceive the boundaries of the "self." This is the "pan-individual" thinking.[29] According to Stallybrass and White, the civilized man apparently expels his lowest passions and allocates them in the "other." But at the same time that "other" becomes "the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination." Places such as the forest, the fair, the slum, the circus, the "savage," and the sea-side resort, that is, places at the limit of civil life, become symbols of bourgeois desire.[30]

One of the cases presented by Torgovnik is that of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) – one of the fathers of modern anthropology. While he was carrying out his research among natives in the Trobriand Islands, he felt "enthralled" and "confused."[31] Indeed, besides the worry to lose control due to the lust which the naked bodies of islanders excited in him, Malinowski feared to get dissolved in the landscape and to lose hold of objective reality. However, when he felt the impulse of merging, he plunged back into his research: he did not let himself get lost. Something similar happened to Gide, Jung and Lawrence. They were all standing on the very verge of merging with the primitives, but they could somehow manage to make a step back. They could resist the immensely powerful and seductive impulse to "go black under the skin."[32]

Men like Gide, Young, Lawrence […] travelled to Africa […] because they felt ill at ease in the West and resisted certain conventional notions of manhood. In exotic locales, they felt the lure of the oceanic impulse

[29] TORGOVNIK, *Primitive Passions*, p. 15.
[30] STALLYBRASS and WHITE, p. 191.
[31] TORGOVNIK, *Primitive Passions*, p. 3.
[32] C. G. JUNG, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. by Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston. New York: Vintage 1989, in M. TORGOVNIK, *Primitive Passions*, p. 34.

towards the dissolution of boundaries, but ultimately they resisted it strongly as too threatening to the "mature European self."[33]

2.2 FICTION: CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS* AND LAWRENCE'S 'THE WOMAN WHO RODE AWAY' AS FORERUNNERS

As Torgovnik claims, in Western literature, the first *exemplum* of encounters with the "other" is in Homer's *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus meets Polyphemus. From the very first moment, that the Cyclops are uncivilized and inferior people is obvious to Odysseus. Therefore, he will use the weapons of civilized man (language, astuteness, deceit) in order to escape from the brutes. Most of the characters I will analyse in my thesis do the opposite: they escape civilization and they embrace the wilderness, namely, they go native. Kurtz from Joseph Conrad's famous novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902) cannot but be considered the father of all literary characters I will deal with.

The title of the novel is self-explanatory. The "heart of darkness" is the interior of Africa which is inhabited by native peoples. But it is also the most hidden side of Western people, a side buried under layers of civilization but still there, at the bottom of everyone's heart. It is a core made of natural and primordial insticts, a core free from social constructions, which can come back to the surface when the man faces the wilderness. Kurtz's heart of darkness has overcome him. His living among the natives has turned him into a native as well. Here is Marlow first impression of Kurtz:

> And the lofty frontal bone of Mr Kurtz! They say the hair goes on growing sometimes, but this – ah – specimen, was impressively bald. The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball – an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and – lo! – he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite.[34]

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[33] TORGOVNIK, *Primitive Passions*, p. 170.
[34] J. CONRAD, *Heart of Darkness*. London: Harper Collins 2010, p. 61.

From this splendid passage, the reader understands that Kurtz's merging with the wilderness is total. He surrendered to it and got "irretrievably lost" into it.[35] By contrast with Marlow, he did not learn "to clap [his] teeth smartly before [his] heart flew out."[36] Since the natives possess something that civilization has lost, "we cannot abandon the primitive; we can only outgrow it by letting it grow within us."[37] And Kurtz gave the primitive a green light. The "spell of wilderness" has awoken in him some "forgotten and brutal instincts," and gratified some "monstrous passions":

This alone […] had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. […] But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and […] it had gone mad.[38]

In Freudian terms, Kurtz's id forces have overwhelmed his ego. His staying in the core of Africa among the natives has wiped out his links with the civilization of rationality, morality and restraint; therefore, abandoned to pure instinct he has gone mad. His diseased mind slowly drives him to death. "The Horror! The Horror!" are his last words, words which echo across the last part of the novel. But what is "the Horror"? Well, thousands of interpretations have been offered by critics. I would interpret it has a final cry stating the ultimate incompatibility of civilization and primitivism. As Conrad states through Marlow's voice:

'The horror!' He was a remarkable man. After all, This was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candor, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth – *the strange commingling of desire and hate*.[39]

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[35] CONRAD, p. 85.
[36] CONRAD, p. 42
[37] DIAMOND, p. 173.
[38] CONRAD, pp.85-6.
[39] CONRAD, p. 91.

Despite the Western man's desire towards the wilderness, the inevitable outcome of the encounter between the two worlds is negative. Indeed, the civilized Kurtz exploits and leads the natives to death; contrariwise, primitivism leads Kurtz do death since he cannot bear the devastating power of the wilderness.

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Another forerunner of the topic of my thesis is Lawrence's tale 'The Woman Who Rode Away' (1925), which tells about a wealthy European woman escaping from a life she cannot bear any more. At home, in Mexico, she feels suffocating and she desperately longs to experience something new: "Gradually her nerves began to go wrong: she must get out. She must get out."[40] Hence, when she hears a young gentleman speaking about the Chilchuis Indians and wondering about their mysteries, their "secret villages," and their "savage customs and religion," she is immediately fascinated and excited. The lure of the savage is powerful and the idea to get in touch with those Indians enters her mind.

> And his peculiar vague enthusiasm for unknown Indians found a full echo in the woman's heart. She was overcome by a foolish romanticism more unreal than a girl's. She felt it was her destiny to wander into secret haunts of these timeless, mysterious, marvellous Indians of the mountains.[41]

So, in order to "break the monotony of her life," she flees. She eventually meets those Indians and when one of them asks her what she is looking for in that place she answers: "I? Nothing! I only came to see what it was like." In opposition to Kurtz, the woman does not come among the savages with a purpose, her escape is naïve and quite mischievous.

Kurtz goes to Africa to build his fortune through the exploitation of natives. The woman, instead, renounces her fortune to share a new life with the Indians. Both, however, are destined to die. The woman cannot endure the wilderness and agrees to be a human

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[40] D. H. LAWRENCE, *The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories*. A Project Gutemberg of Australia 2004.
[41] LAWRENCE, *The Woman Who Rode Away*.

sacrifice to the Indians' god. "I am dead already. What difference does it make, the transition from the dead I am to the dead I shall be, very soon!" As it happens to Kurtz (who is "hollow at the core"), life among the savages has emptied the woman's soul to the point that she feels dead. Psychically destroyed, she resigns herself to be sacrificed.

For the sun cannot mate with darkness, nor the white with the black.[42]

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Over the course of my thesis I will analyse a set of characters which go native and I will argue upon the reasons which drove them towards the wilderness. Some characters can be white, some others mulatto; some can be wealthy, some others can have nothing to lose; some go spontaneously, some others are forced; some can go back to civilization, some can stay among the natives, and some must die.

In Chapter 1 I will discuss two cases of "going native": that of a Scottish man – McKinnon – who escapes society and settles in the interior of Guyana, and that of a catholic priest whose aim is to evangelize the interior regions of South America (*The Ventriloquist's Tale*). In Chapter 2 I will focus on Hector, a wealthy mulatto boy from Georgetown who is forced by his father to live in a small village on the Guyanese coast (*The Wild Coast*). In Chapter 3 I will talk over Donne, a ruthless colonizer in search of Amerindian labour for his estate (*Palace of The Peacock*). In chapter 4 I will deal with a background character from *Paradise*: a legendary German man who settles in the interior of Africa. In Chapter 5 I will analyse a German man who dies during an exploration in the interior of Australia (*Voss*). In Chapter 6 a Cornish woman – Mrs. Ellen Roxburgh – who is captured by the Aborigines (*A*

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[42] H. R. HAGGARD, *King Solomon's Mines*. New York: Black's Reader Service 1998, p. 114.

Fringe of Leaves). Finally, in Chapter 7 I will deal with an English boy – Gemmy – who got lost in the interior of Australia, started a life among the Aborigines, and eventually reaches a European settlement (*Remembering Babylon*). All these novels can be classified as postcolonial novels; moreover, all of them were written in the second half of the 20th century, and all of them are by authors born in the English ex-colonies.

Fig. 1: PAUL GAUGUIN, *Aha oe feii? (Are You Jealous?)*, 1892
Oil on canvas. Moscow: State Museum of Fine Arts.

CHAPTER 1

THE VENTRILOQUIST'S TALE

I think it appropriate to start my analysis by dealing with the novel which inspired the topic of my thesis. *The Ventriloquist's Tale*[1] is the first novel by Pauline Melville (born 1948), a Guyanese writer and actress of mixed Amerindian and European ancestry. Author of two collections of stories – *Shape-Shifter* (1990) and *The Migration of Ghosts* (1998) – and one more novel – *Eating Air* (2009) –, Pauline Melville was born in the British Guiana but spent much of her life in London. Published in London in 1997, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* won the Whitbread First Novel Award and was much praised by the critics.

The novel is structured on three different narratives. The first narrative stretches in the Prologue and in the Epilogue where the trickster narrator Chico speculates upon the nature of writing in a postmodernist perspective and introduces the main story. The second narrative is articulated in Part One and Part Three of the novel and tells a realist story which takes place in the 1990s. It is about Chofy McKinnon, a man of Amerindian and European origins who is forced to leave his family and his village in the Guyanese savannahs in order to look for a job in multicultural Georgetown. There he begins an inter-racial affair with a British scholar – Rosa Mendelson – who is investigating over Evelyn Waugh's travels into the interior of Guyana. Finally, the third and main story intertwines myth with history in a supposed realist narrative which takes place in the first decades of the 20th century in the Rupununi region, close to Kanaku Mountains. The story is about the incestuous affair between Chofy's uncle and aunt – Danny and Beatrice – and their eventual forced separation, enacted by their

[1] P. MELVILLE, *The Ventriloquist's Tale*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc 1998.

European father and Father Napier, a catholic missionary with the ambitious project to evangelise the most remote regions of the empire.[2]

The critical review given by the *Scotland on Sunday* and which is printed on the back cover of the book perfectly summarizes the content of the novel:

Melville interlocks the warp of the personal with the weft of miscegenation and its endlessly mutating consequences. She evokes the extraordinarily melting pot of races, cultures, religions and superstitions that is modern Guyana, the only English-speaking country in South America.

In this chapter I will focus my attention on two characters who go native: Alexander McKinnon and Father Napier.

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Alexander McKinnon is a "lean and energetic Scotsman" who, at the age of thirty, leaves Jamaica where he was living with his father and where he was raised. "Rejecting the Church and *determined to get as far away from civilization* as possible, he struck off into the interior of Guyana with a group of Atorad Indians who had come to Georgetown to trade" (my emphasis).[3] Therefore, McKinnon is running away from civilization and he is searching for the primitive, that is, the "essentialized archaic and primordial entity that has been thrust upon indigenous communities worldwide."[4] The interior of Guyana exerts an extraordinary fascination: suffice it to think about the mythical El Dorado hidden somewhere in the middle of the rain forest which had been chanted by Walter Raleigh. Interior Guyana is a mysterious and unadulterated place, still inhabited by a great deal of Amerindian populations which had not been erased by European colonization:[5]

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[2] J. MISRAHI-BARAK, 'Amerindian Ante-Coloniality in Contemporary Caribbean Writing: Crossing Borders With Jan Carew, Cyril Dabydeen and Pauline Melville' in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 47.3. London: Routledge 2001, pp. 309-19.

[3] MELVILLE, p. 96.

[4] A. SHEMAK, 'Alter/Natives: Myth, Translation and the Native Informant in Pauline Melville's *The Venriloquist's Tale*' in *Textual Practice*, vol. 19.3. London: Routledge 2005, p. 353.

[5] H. SCOTT, *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalization: Fictions of Independence*. Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing Group 2006, p. 86.

The Guyanese hinterland, an ecologically diverse interior region of rainforest, wetlands and savannahs that is primarily occupied by Amerindian peoples (seven per cent of Guyana's population), has functioned as an ideological space-time of precolonial origins, bracketed off from modernity and its epistemological offshoot, hybridity.[6]

Priding himself on "being a free-thinker,"[7] McKinnon answers the call of the primitive and decides to join the first group of natives he meets and to follow them into the hinterland. However, he falls ill and the group abandones him, lost in the wilderness and close to death. Eventually, he manages to reach the Wapisiana village of Katiwau where he sets himself up and marries two native Amerindian women, namely – according to tradition – two sisters. Indeed, the attractive and naked bodies of natives raise an immense relentless lust in the white man who, far from the Western moral and social constraints, feels free to enjoy the pleasures which the primitive can offer.

McKinnon's story reminded me of a famous painting by Paul Gauguin: *Aha oe fei?* (1892). The painting represents two Tahitian woman, naked on the shore. Their intertwined brown bodies seem to fuse together. They are attractive; their glance is dreamy and lazy, the erotic power they exude is extremely potent. The title of the painting translated into English is: *Are you Jealous?* However, there seems to be no antagonism between the two Thaitian woman; rather, the question could be an address to the viewer standing in front of the painting with no possibility to join those sensual women. Taking into account Gauguin's experience – his withdrawal from civilization, his search for the primitive, his quest for the origins –, the message revealed by the painting is clear: primitive societies can offer an authentic, simple, passionate life and put man back into contact with his own nature. The association between the two Thaitian women and McKinnon's Amerindian wives, Maba and Zuna, is no sooner said than done. As Gauguin did, McKinnon escaped Western society, sought refuge in a

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[6] E. DELOUGHREY, 'Quantum Lanscapes: a "Ventriloquism of spirit"' in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. by G. Huggam and H. Tiffin, vol. 9.1. London: Routledge 2007, p. 66.
[7] MELVILLE, p. 96.

primitive society and enjoyed the gifts of nature, among which the bodies of native women. Polygamy is allowed, Western social relationships lose their validity in the wilderness. As the painting and McKinnon story's suggest, life among the primitives is based on the enjoyment of the present.

As soon as he is welcomed in the Amerindian settlement, McKinnon answers the lure of the two sisters' seductive and sensual bodies; he embraces Wapisiana traditions and violates the Christian prohibition of polygamy. He has children with both women and "nobody could remember very well who belonged to which mother."[8] Gradually the Scotsman learns the Wapisiana language and takes up the native modes to the point that:

> In Georgetown, the gossip was that McKinnon was now more Indian than European. The upper classes of the colony despised him when he arrived from the bush in a leather vaqueiro hat. They reserved for him that particular hatred which colonists have for one who they feel has betrayed his race and class.[9]

In other words, by living among the natives, the European McKinnon has lost interest in his own civilization and has gone native. Little by little, he conforms to Wapisiana traditions and he gives up Western modes.

Nevertheless, his "going native" is never totally accomplished since on several occasions he shows he cannot renounce certain European habits. Indeed, he even builds a ranch-house for himself and his Amerindian family, he buys cattle and he provides his house with beds, tables and plates, he reads newspapers and he often travels to Georgetown. As Helen Scott points out, Alexander McKinnon "represents the mentality of the colonizer in his desire for capitalist accumulation."[10] There is still something, then, which bounds him to the Western civilization. Briefly, McKinnon runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds and the result of his ambivalence is a hybrid family taking up both European and Amerindian modes.

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[8] MELVILLE, p. 103.
[9] MELVILLE, p. 100.
[10] SCOTT, p. 103.

For anybody surrounding them it is strange to watch "the McKinnons sitting down to eat in European clothes, but talking Wapisiana and with their feet bare under the table and bows and arrows slung over the backs of the chairs."[11]

At any rate, there is a specific event which makes Alexander McKinnon fear the primitive and which drives him back to civilization and its codes. When his wife Maba tells him about the incestuous affair between their son and daughter, in fact, something clicks inside McKinnon's head:

> As soon as he had left, McKinnon felt as he were *suffocating*. Driven by an urge to go outside and walk on the savannahs, he left the house.
>
> The sun flashed off the pond behind the house. The air burned all round him. He took one of the trails leading in the direction of the Kanaku Mountains. Here and there rose dead trees stripped of bark. The countryside all round was pure desert, dotted with termite nests. As he walked he could see no living thing, not even a blade of grass, just the charred remains of lifeless trees and withered twigs. Every hundred yards or so he had to stop because *a blackness seemed to be gathering inside his head* and he could hear the explosive banging of his heart. He stood still on the savannahs.
>
> After a few minutes he turned to face the house. The ranch and settlement of houses round it lay in the bright sunlight. The Rupununi River glinted behind them. One of the dog stood halfway along the trail wondering whether to follow him or not. The dog moved off on its own.
>
> *And then, quite out of the blue, McKinnon knew that he would leave the savannahs*, that *he did not belong*, however much of his life had been spent there. He was not sure exactly when he would go. There was no rush, but eventually he would leave. He was astounded to think he had been there so long. The whole of the last twenty-five years felt like a dream.[12] (my emphasis)

This long passage is self-explanatory. Suddenly, after 25 years spent among natives, McKinnon decides to go back to civilization, namely, to Scotland. After the shocking news, he takes a walk in the mountains where he can observe the savannahs from above. And even if the 'Europamerindian island' composed of the ranch and the settlement he had created glints and is submerged by sunlight, the environment surrounding it is unattractive, desert, dead. This sight arises in him a feeling of displacement: he senses he does not belong to the place. He cannot believe he has spent so many years there. He feels he had been sleeping and dreaming for 25 years, he cannot think about his life in the savannahs as real. Eventually, he

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[11] MELVILLE, p. 73.
[12] MELVILLE, p. 209-10.

sails for England and he settles permanently in Scotland where he conforms back to Western customs and he marries "officially."[13]

The trigger for his sudden decision to leave is the revelation of his children's incestuous relationship. His mind cannot bear the weight of the upsetting news. The only thought of the break of the oldest taboo ever makes him suffocate, he is filled with a sense of nausea. He himself went against Western rules by marrying two sister, and having intercourse with both; he himself had been leading a promiscuous life fathering a big family which shirked every Western definition of family. But the idea of incest disgusts him; why? Because incest is *the* greatest taboo not only of Western civilization, but of all civilizations all over the world and of all ages. According to the structuralist anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009):

> the prohibition of incest […] is the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, *the transition from nature to culture is accomplished*. In one sense, it belongs to nature, for it is a general condition of culture. Consequently, we should not be surprised that its formal characteristic, universality, has been taken from nature. However, in another sense, it is already culture, exercising and imposing its rule on phenomena which initially are not subjected to it. [It is] *a transformation or transition*. Before it, culture is still non existent; with it, *nature's sovereignty over man is ended*. The prohibition of incest is where nature transcends itself. It sparks the formation of a new and more complex type of structure and is superimposed upon the simpler structures of physical life through integration, just as these themselves are superimposed upon simpler structures of animal life. It brings about and it is in itself *the advent of a new order*.[14] (my emphasis)

Briefly, the prohibition of incest marks the threshold which leads from a state of nature to a state of culture. The prohibition cannot be explained in biological terms since, as happens among animals, the copulation between blood relatives is fruitful; it cannot even be explained in psychological terms – namely, as a natural repulsion for close relatives – since it would be useless to prohibit so strongly what is already spontaneously refused. Therefore the taboo is socio-cultural.[15] And where there is society there is civilization.

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[13] MELVILLE, p. 267.
[14] C. LEVI-STRAUSS, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. London: Tavistock Publications 1970, pp 24-5.
[15] A. SIGNORELLI, *Antropologia Culturale*. Milano: McGraw-Hill Companies 2011, pp. 141-42.

Hence, Beatrice and Danny perpetrated the worst crime. This is the reason why McKinnon cannot stand the situation. Facing too much wilderness, he has to take a step back. As Wilson Harris claims:

> There is a tendency that is all too natural for us to overlook a complex linkage between the dread of violence and desire for purification. Something terrible happens – some horrible deed is performed – and our first reaction quite naturally is to seek immunity by expressing the most extreme revulsion or loathing for the person or persons concerned. Thus dread of the world, dread of the terrible things happening in the world, the sense of menace to our security, incurs an investment in a fortress of psychology, so to speak, that preserves us, we believe, from contamination, not only by violence but by apparently alien ideas, apparently alien cultures, or impure reality.[16]

In other words, McKinnon's reaction is natural. He has to get as far as he can from the persons who committed such a terrible crime and as a consequence he denies his life among the Amerindians. The Wapisiana appear now to him closer to animals than to human beings. Moreover, the culprits are his own flesh and blood. He fears to be contaminated by such a negative environment and he wishes to be purified. "His return to Scotland signals his reversion to his European roots as well as the eventual failure of his engagement in cross-cultural dialogue."[17]

In this perspective, Beatrice and Danny's endogamy can be interpreted as a counterpart to McKinnon, Maba and Zuna's exogamy. "Incestuous purity" is opposed here to "racial hybridity."[18] It is a metaphor for the refusal to mix. Indeed, Danny is ashamed of his European father, he refuses to look him in the face and he would like him to disappear;[19] when his mates mock him for his hybrid appearance, he is hurt since he feels a Wapisiana, a 'buck.' I agree with Elizabeth Deloughrey when in her essay she claims that Danny's hate for his father "mirrors his rejection of the hybridity of colonialism, which is then displaced as

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[16] W. HARRIS, 'Oedipus and the Middle Passage' in *Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English*. Ed. by G. DAVIS and H. MAES-JELINEK. Amsterdam: Rodopi 1990, p. 10.
[17] V. BRAGARD, '"Uncouth sounds" of Resistance: Conradian Tropes and Hybrid Epistemologies in Pauline Melville's *The Ventrioquist's Tale*' in *Journal of Postcolonial Writings*, vol. 44.4. London: Routledge 2008, p. 417.
[18] DELOUGHREY, p. 65.
[19] MELVILLE, p. 105.

endogamous sexual desire onto the body of his sister."[20] The opposition purity / hybridity is here at stake. With which party Melville sides it is difficult to tell. On the one side both inter-racial relationships told about in the novel – Chofy and Rosa's and McKinnon, Maba and Zuna's – fail. On the other side Beatrice and Danny's incestuous affair gives birth to Sonny, who is described as "compelling purity."[21] In the novel, according to Wormoal, an anthropologist researching on Amerindian myths related to eclipse:

> People want to be with their own kind. Everyone nowadays is retreating into their own homogeneous group. Black with black. Serb with Serb. Muslim with Muslim. Look at me. I'm a Czech. First of all we got rid of the Soviet Union and then we parted from the Slovaks. Now we're happy.[22]

In other words, Wormoal believes Amerindians should not be contaminated by Western civilization. Hence, incest can be considered the utmost act to preserve racial purity. Nevertheless, in our case what springs from it is a hybrid entity: in fact, Sonny has European and Amerindian blood running in his veins, being Alexander McKinnon his grandfather and Maba his grandmother. I could venture the suggestion that Melville is challenging, here, the idea of purity itself. Purity, then, is never pure "but always contains some contaminated elements, some 'hybridization.'"[23] As a consequence, cultures are inevitably impure.

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In the novel, a second character goes native: Father Napier. Father Napier is a Jesuit missionary, whose mission is to spread the Catholic faith among the Amerindian populations inhabiting the interior of South America.[24] Like a "cancer-virus"[25] he criss-crosses the savannahs, building churches, founding villages and converting peoples. What drives him

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[20] DELOUGHREY, p. 75.
[21] MELVILLE, p. 282.
[22] MELVILLE, P. 78.
[23] BRAGARD, p. 419.
[24] S. LAWSON WELSH, 'Imposing Narratives: European Incursions and Intertexts in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*,' in *Missions of Interdependence: a Literary Directory*. Ed by G. STILZ. Amsterdam: Rodopi 2002, p. 111.
[25] MELVILLE, p. 150.

native is Beatrice's poisoned food. Irate with him, because he is the main responsible for her forced separation from Danny, Beatrice decides to kill him by poisoning his food. However, her attempt results not in his death but in his madness. Indeed, he starts wandering in the hinterland, his mind is haunted by the heat of the sun and he starts setting fire to the missions he has created. He burns down sixteen of the twenty-two missions he has founded in fourteen years. As Shemak points out, we could say Indian modes have overtaken him "since he behaves in the same way as the Amerindians who set fire to their dwellings and move on to a new location."[26]

Father Napier's madness has something 'Kurtzian' in it, in that both characters have crazy plans. Kurtz's eagerness for ivory leads him to terrible deeds: "exterminate all the brutes!" he writes in his report. He would do anything in order to achieve his purposes. "I had immense plans,"[27] he tells Marlow. His soul is "satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power."[28] The spell of wilderness has run him into madness and changed him deeply. He is creating his own empire in the core of wild Africa, an empire of which he is the undisputed emperor: "everything belonged to him – but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many power of darkness claimed him for their own."[29]

Father Napier's plans are in a way as devastating as Kurtz's but, instead, they are not put into practice. The Jesuit missionary aims to build the "Pope's railway." In order to do this savannahs and rain forests would have to be destroyed. His projects are magnificent, he wants to build a gigantic Catholic network in South America. Hence, both characters have obsessive colonial ambitions; both want to uproot Western ways in savage places. As Father Napier

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[26] SHEMAK, p. 363.
[27] CONRAD, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 85.
[28] CONRAD, p. 88.
[29] CONRAD, p. 61.

walks through the night, thoughts “headed for realms of revelation and glory”[30] take possession of his sick mind, he figures out the Pope leading a procession towards the interior thanks to his railway. He even performs “a *short and ecstatic dance* in the middle of the savannah night” (my emphasis).

> Father Napier continued to walk until the moon shifted over to the north-east. Then, sweating but cool, he sat on the earth and gazed up at the brilliant stars. After a few minutes, *ecstasy took hold of him* again and filled him with enough energy to resume his journey at twice the pace.[31] (my emphasis)

Clearly, the poisoned food makes Father Napier lose contact with objective reality. He is disoriented and the wilderness overwhelms him. The boundaries of his mind spread open and myth manages to enter his world[32]:

> Every so often a tremendous roaring engulfed him on all sides, as if the sun has turned into a jaguar on the attack. Each time this happened, he lifted his hand involuntarily as if to fend something off. However hard he tried to pray and keep the image of Christ before him, the stories told to him by the boys always surfaced in his mind: the sun dressing the jaguar in yellow to represent him on earth; the sun disguised as a red macaw; the sun selecting a brown wife from those offered by the water spirit because the white one and the black one both melted. The jaguar sun roared and slashed at his skin again.[33]

Father Napier’s point of reference – Christ – fades and makes place for Amerindian mythology to enter his mind. Reality and imagination fuse together in a powerful mix. The Jesuit missionary will be eventually committed to an asylum in Georgetown and then sent back to England. As Kurtz, therefore, it seems he cannot stand too much wilderness and as a consequence, he is defeated by it.

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Lastly, I would like to spend a few words about a historical figure present in the novel who embarks on a voyage from England towards the interior of Guyana in order to find new inspiration. As many artists and writers had done before him and would have done after him –

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[30] MELVILLE, p. 251.
[31] MELVILLE, p 251.
[32] SHEMAK, p. 363.
[33] MELVILLE, p. 256-57.

suffice it to think about Gaugin, Chateaubriand, Flaubert, Gide, Lawrence, just to name some of them –, Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) sets off for British Guiana in search for new material for his writing and on the run from a complicated domestic situation. Indeed, in England he leaves a failed marriage and a multiple love affair. He arrives in Guyana in December 1932, he stays in Georgetown and he travels to a number of Amerindian villages. In his diaries he records that he even encounters members of the Melville family. He sails back to England in April 1933.[34] The fictional Waugh, instead of the Melville family, meets the McKinnon family and stays with them.

‘One day this Englishman turned up out of the blue on horseback. He said he was a writer and looking for material. Later we heard that he had come that far because he had trouble with a woman. […] Poor man. He was so out of place. He sat out in the open that first day and that was when I gave him haircut. Nobody really knew what the hell he was doing there.[35]

To sum up, in the novel, the white European man asks always something to native peoples. McKinnon takes advantage from Amerindian polygamy. Father Napier imposes his own faith on peoples which have nothing to do with it. And Evelyn Waugh makes use of the primitive for his writings. For this reason, Tenga – Chofy’s cousin – claims with great resolution:

“We Amerindian people are fools, you know. We’ve been colonised twice. First by the Europeans and then by the coastlanders. I don’t know which is worse. Big companies come to mine gold or cut timber. Scholars come and worm their way into our communities, studying us and grabbing our knowledge for their own benefit. Aid agencies come and interfere with us. Tourists stare at us. Politicians crawl round us at election times. […] Amerindians have no chance in this country.”[36]

[34] LAWSON WELSH, pp. 112-13.
[35] MELVILLE, pp. 48-9.
[36] MELVILLE, p. 54.

CHAPTER 2

THE WILD COAST

Also the second novel I will speculate about springs from the Guyanese context. Jan Rynveld Carew was born in the village of Agricola, in Berbice, in 1920. He attended Berbice High School and at the age of 25 he left Guyana in order to pursue tertiary studies at several universities in the United States and in Europe. In Europe he met many well-known intellectuals such as Sartre, Gide, Wright and Picasso. His first novels were published in the 50s, when many West Indian writers – Edgar Mittelholzer, Samuel Selvon, George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, to mention some – were breaking into the literary scene. Carew's *Black Midas* (1958) and *The Wild Coast*[1] (1958) were accepted as part of this new emerging literature and let him enter the record of West Indian writers. During the 60s, he travelled and lived in Jamaica, Canada and Guyana. Here, in 1962 he was recruited as Director of Culture by the newly elected Marxist government. Between 1969 and 1972 he was professor of Third World literature and Black Studies at Princeton University. Afterwards, he taught in a number of Universities, including the Northwestern University, the University of London, and the Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He died on the 6th December 2012.

Jan Carew is a multifaceted intellectual: he is a poet, a dramatist, an essayist, a critic, an editor and a broadcaster, even though he is best known for his novels. Besides the two cited above, *The Last Barbarian* (1961) and *Moscow is not My Mecca* (1964) are among his

[1] J. CAREW, *The Wild Coast*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press Ltd 2009.

most famous ones. He also published a collection of short stories, *Save the Last Dance for Me* (1976), and some illustrated books for children.[2]

The Wild Coast is a *Bildungsroman* and tells the story of Hector Bradshaw, "the son of a rich brown man from the city."[3] Due to his sickly disposition, at the age of nine the young boy is sent by his father to Tarlogie, the small village of his ancestors, set between the Corentyne and Canje rivers. So, he is forced to leave his father's house in Georgetown and to start a new life on the swampy wild coast housing the sugar estate of his ancestors. Here he is brought up by Sister, an old housemaid with a strong Christian faith who has authority over the villagers; Teacher La Rose, a frustrated black Guyanese, takes care of his education and prepares him for those exams which will allow him to pursue his studies in Europe.

Although his daily life on the wild coast is quite different from the one he used to lead in town, Hector is brought up as a landowner's son. He is treated with respect and he is given a complete education. He quickly grows fond of the place and of the people surrounding him. With his spirit split between the inherited role of master and the wish to share life with the subordinates, he lets himself into a quest for his identity. He finally realizes his place is in Tarlogie, among those people who "lived life by the moment," because "the past and the future belonged to those who had much and expected much."[4] In Tarlogie, Hector feels the earth living under his feet, he strikes up a friendship with the villagers, he even enters the mysterious Black Bush to hunt; he attends a pagan wind-dance, he discovers his sexuality, he enjoys the small pleasures that a life in tune with nature can offer. In Tarlogie he grows into

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[2] F. M. BIRBALSINGH, 'Jan Carew' in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 157, Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers*, Third Series. Ed. by B. LINDFORS and R. SANDER. Detroit: Gale Research Inc 1996, pp. 27-35; K. DAWES, 'Jan Carew' in *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. by D. CUMBER DANCE. Westport: Greenwood Press 1986, pp. 96-107.
[3] CAREW, p. 69.
[4] CAREW, p. 74.

manhood. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel he suits the role allocated to him by his birth and sets off for England in order to pursue his education.

I would now like to explain the reasons which led me to count this novel among those dealt with in my thesis. Indeed, two main objections could be raised to my choice of this novel: first, the protagonist is not white as all the other characters taken into account; second, the environment in which I claim he goes native cannot be said to be primitive or savage. Tarlogie is clearly no lost village in Rupununi or in some other region in the Guyanese hinterland. On the contrary, it is quite Europeanized; namely, its inhabitants are said to be Christian and Hector's education there is of the Western type. So, why should I devote an entire chapter to a novel telling the story of a mulatto moving in a civilized country village, if my topic is the white man "going native" in savage places?

With respect to the first objection, my point is that Hector – although brown-skinned – has a dominant position in colonial British Guiana. His great grandfather was Dutch ("your great grandpa plant plenty seeds in the slave gals belly and is so you come to be here"[5]). True, he is not white; however, he has white blood running in his veins and he is the descendant of masters. Mainly, he is a master in relationship to black people. With respect to the second objection, then, my claim is that Tarlogie is the place which drives him native, in the sense that it is there that he re-discovers his black roots; it is there that he comes into contact with unaffected life; it is there that the savage in him bursts out.

My reasons stated, I will now analyse the "going native" process to which Hector Bradshaw is subjected.

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[5] CAREW, p. 55.

Hector Bradshow is the youngest child of Fitz Bradshaw – a wealthy mulatto landowner on his late forties – and of a "fine looking samba woman"[6] who has died. Being the only son, at his father's death Hector will inherit his fortune and social position. However, in Georgetown he feels not at ease and at the beginning of the novel he even tries to run away from home. This is due to the fact that he feels trapped among the walls of constraints and restrictions raised by his rigorous aunt. In his father's house he has no experience of neither love nor affection. Carew characterizes him like "a motherless stranger in his father's house – sickliness […], silence and fear were his only defences against his aunt, his father, his sisters and the servants."[7]

Fitz Bradshaw is a rude master well aware of the superiority which his white Dutch ancestors have handed down on him. According to Doorne, an old hunter acquainted with the Bradshaws, Fitz is trying to forget about his black origins and he acts like he is a white man. "I'm a black nobody and you is a big-shot brown-man. You never make me forget my place,"[8] his kept-woman Elsa says to him. In point of fact, his brownish skin gives him the right to stand on the side of masters in relationship to black people. He wants to be distinguished from the mass of colonized people, he wants to state openly his superior status. That is why, in Tarlogie, "the Bradshaw clan" was feeling the need

> to dress with elaborate care, to build their house like a feudal castle, to cling fiercely to outmoded customs. The man and women of this clan had done this things by instinct rather than by design, theirs was an unconscious fight to preserve some vestige of human dignity in the face of chaos.[9]

In short, Tarlogie = chaos; Bradshaw = order. Hence, the aim of the Bradshaws was to erect a civilized outpost in the middle of an uncivilized village in order to raise themselves to a patent

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[6] CAREW, p. 45.
[7] CAREW, pp. 21-2.
[8] CAREW, p. 49.
[9] CAREW, pp. 75-6.

position of superiority, to assert their difference from colonized people overtly, and to avoid any possibility of merging with the throng of ex-slaves.

As the future inheritor of his father's wealth, Hector is held with respect by the community of peasants in Tarlogie. "He was the master of the village. Sister had never let him forget this."[10] Unlike the other children of the village he is given an education, and particularly, a European one, whose objective is to prepare him for the overseas wide world and for university. Nevertheless, the new environment has a strong influence upon him and it is in Tarlogie that he learns what friendship and true affection is. As a consequence he soon grows fond of "the wild coast" and his wild inhabitants, so that he starts taking off the clothes of the master in order to put on those of the subject.

Due to his ancestry, he stands between two worlds. However, he cannot ride two horses and, as his father did, he has to take sides.

> Hector had the blood both of master and slave in his veins and the problems of both to solve. Before him lay the choice of allegiance, the question of loyalty, the need to discover who he was and what he was. Some day Tojo and his midnight people would break out and he would have to take sides.[11]

As the reader knows, Hector's father chose the master's side; during his years in Tarlogie, Hector seems to lean towards the slave's one. Indeed, he immediately feels in tune with the community and with its customs. He starts even behaving as one of them and enjoying the small pleasures of unaffected and natural life: "you growing up like *a regular savage*. Just because you kill an old bird you come home like you do something great. You better buckle down to your book work, that is more important"[12] (my emphasis), Sister scolds him off. But his way towards the wilderness is already marked, and Sister cannot do anything in order to avoid Hector's "going native."

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[10] CAREW, p. 75.
[11] CAREW, p. 148.
[12] CAREW, p. 89.

He was a strange boy, *a wild boy*. […] He had an earthy, physical side to his nature as though the land had breathed the smell of mud and swamp water into his being. You only had to watch him eating, shovelling his food down as if he was afraid that someone would snatch the plate from before him, to know that he had some of the peasant in him, or watch delight brightening up his face when he returned with trophies from a hunt to know that despite his book learning he was *a young animal*. She had tried to build moral fences around his life, but could she in all fairness do this in Tarlogie?[13] (my emphasis)

This is a splendid passage which characterizes Hector as a savage. The environment has infused his *sine qua non* in his body and has influenced his way of being. His spirit is in tune with the spirit of 'the wild coast,' his acting is the expression of his 'heart of darkness.' No matter how Sister had tried to protect him from the influences of the land, he has become "a wild boy." Even more: "a young animal."

Despite all her efforts to keep him away from the wilderness pervading Tarlogie, despite all her efforts to address him towards the printed world of Western civilization, Sister is not able to avoid Hector's merging with the spirit of the village. Towards the end of the novel, after the boy has joined a pagan ritual dance, she blames herself: "I fail me task, all I succeed in doing is bringing up *a young savage* who en't no better than the barefoot, good-for nothing people in this village"[14] (my emphasis). To which Hector answers:

Don't cry, Sister, don't cry…it wasn't such a bad thing that I went…it only made me seen *how much I belong here*…I don't even want to go away and study, I want to stay here with you…it wasn't a bad thing that I went.[15] (my emphasis)

Therefore, Hector understands he belongs to Tarlogie. He feels at home and at ease in it. His black blood prevails over his white and he realizes that this is the place where he wants to spend the rest of his life. He understands all this things soon after he takes an active part in the shango dance, a pagan and "illegal ritual dance which had come down from the slave days."[16]

[13] CAREW, p. 188.
[14] CAREW, p. 159.
[15] CAREW, p. 160.
[16] CAREW, p. 94.

Sister and Preacher Galloway strongly denunciate it as something which brings the man back to a primitive state. The preacher warns the villagers not to join the dance:

> It is over a century since my forbears brought your ancestors up from slavery into the fold of Christ, brought them from the dark place, the valley of the shadow, away from the iniquities of false gods and animalistic cults towards the eternal light. […] I am told that something called the wind-dance is still practised in Tarlogie, and I must tell you that this is an evil thing, a harking back to the valley of the shadow which your ancestors left a century ago.[17]

In a way, the wind dance is a link with Africa and to practise it is "to go back to Africa,"[18] that is, to a state of primordial wilderness. According to the white preacher, to perform the shango dance is to erase all the efforts the white man has undergone in order to civilize the uncivilized; it is to let the savage in once again. Indeed, the wind-dance uncovers the true nature of black Guyanese who had been forced by the white colonizer to put on a mask of whiteness. "But they wore their Christianity like the clothes they put on to go to church on Sundays only, for the rest of the week the shango gods Damballah, Legba, Moko were theirs."[19] In other words, for the most part of black ex-slaves, Christianity is just a fetish. It is a veil, a cover "made out of a book that white strangers had written to confuse black people."[20] So, under this cover the African heart is still beating and it is ready to burst out when required.

For Hector the shango dance is a cathartic event which makes him aware of his real and deepest nature. It is his joining the dance which signals the completion of his "going native" process. He takes part in it urged by

> an unconscious impulse to discover how deep his roots in Tarlogie were planted, to see which was more valid for him – the abstract heaven and hell about which the white minister preached or Caya's shango bacchanal with its drumming and dancing harking back to the African forests of long twilight.[21]

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[17] CAREW, p. 96.
[18] CAREW, p. 94.
[19] CAREW, 149.
[20] CAREW, p. 91.
[21] CAREW, p. 148.

When the dance starts he is drawn into it as a magnet is drawn towards an iron bar. He cannot resist it, the control he has over his own mind is wiped out by the power of the rhythm pervading his limbs. Nothing is worth anymore; at that particular moment, the primitive sounds clear his mind: every experience in his life is erased by the ecstasy of the dance.

Hector felt the drumbeats twisting inside his head and he didn't know when he had joined the dancers or how long he moved round and round with the crowd of worshippers. He only felt a dizzy heat suffusing his body and his limbs turning to liquid. He was released from all that was his life in Georgetown and in the big house of Tarlogie. The disciplines imposed by his father and aunt, by Sister and his teacher fell away. The savage singing of shango drums had exorcised them.[22]

The savage "other" in Hector has won over his civilized "self". The son a of the wealthy landowner and master has gone native.

Nevertheless, Hector's future and his position in the world have been already written down. He cannot escape what his family has designed for him. Even if his wish is to stay in Tarlogie and to share a life with poor black Guyanese peasants, he has to take his final exam and eventually leave for Europe and university.

You know, Sister, there are times when I feel that it would be a good thing for me to go away and study, to clear out of the village, but now that the time's drawing near sometimes I wish that I fail my exam so that I might go on staying in a place that I know. That last time that I went to Georgetown to visit my father I found the whole world full of strangers and I was frightened. At least if I had grown up in the city I wouldn't have been afraid, but *I'm a country bumpkin, a muddy-footed peasant*.[23] (my emphasis)

The years spent in Tarlogie have moulded his character so deeply that the consciousness of the master in him has been overshadowed. Hector defines himself as "a country bumpkin", "a muddy-footed peasant". He feels kinship with the humble inhabitants of Tarlogie, he has become one of them. He is not allowed to stay on "the wild coast" forever, however, "the wild coast" will always be part of him. Sister comforts him:

This coast has already given you something that, wherever you go, you will have strong memory to hold on to – the smell of the earth, the feel of the hot sun, the knowledge that when you stand facing the sea there en't

[22] CAREW, p. 155.
[23] CAREW, p. 170.

nothing behind you but swamp and forest and the blue horizon – you can never tear them things out of your system even if your restless spirit carry you to the ends of the earth.[24]

Soon before setting out for Europe, Hector thinks about his life in Tarlogie and concludes that it has been "a wild and carefree idyll,"[25] a happy interlude – which was not meant to last forever – preceding the ultimate and inevitable going back to the moral and social constraints established by Western civilization.

[24] CAREW, p. 171.
[25] CAREW, p. 221.

Fig. 2: HENRI ROUSSEAU, *La Charmeuse de Serpents*, 1907
Oil on canvas. Paris: Musée d’Orsay.

CHAPTER 3

PALACE OF THE PEACOCK

I will now move my analysis on to a third Guyanese novel. Indubitably, Wilson Harris is not only the most famous Guyanese writer, but also one of the greatest writers from the Caribbean area. His work is also reputed a milestone and a point of reference in postcolonial literature.

Wilson Harris was born in New Amsterdam in 1921. Thanks to his Amerindian, African and European ancestry he is a perfect representative of the spirit of Guyana, a country torn by ethnic conflicts and in search of a peaceful synthesis. Harris attended Queen's College in Georgetown; there he was taught in English, and became acquainted with canonical English and classical literature. After leaving school, he studied land surveying and in 1942 started to work as a government surveyor. Due to his profession, he led a number of expeditions into the interior and, besides becoming intimate with the Guyanese forests, he got into touch with the Amerindians. His experience as a land surveyor forged his writing, in that the Guyanese hinterland is central to his fiction. In 1951 he published *Fetish*, a book of poems which, three years later was followed by a second one, *Eternity to Season*.

In 1959 Harris moved to London in order to concentrate on writing. Here he turned to fiction and in 1960 he published his first novel and unquestioned masterpiece: *Palace of the Peacock*.[1] A stunningly prolific and versatile writer, up to now he has published some 25 novels, among which *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961), *The Secret Ladder* (1963), *Heartland*

[1] W. HARRIS, *Palace of the Peacock*. London: Faber & Faber 1973.

(1964), *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (1965), *Tumatumari* (1968), *The Tree of the Sun* (1978), *Carnival* (1985), just to name some of them.

A poet and a remarkable novelist, Harris is also a lecturer and a writer-in-residence who has visited important universities in different parts of the world. His eminent career as a contemporary novelist has earned him several honorary doctorates and in 2010 he was even knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. In 1987 he was awarded the Guyana National Prize for fiction.[2]

Palace of the Peacock is not only Wilson Harris's most famous novel and masterpiece, but also a key text in Caribbean literature. The first of the four books constitutive of the Guyana Quartet – the other three being *The Far Journey of Oudin*, *The Whole Armour* (1962), and *The Secret Ladder* –, *Palace of the Peacock* is a 152-page-long novel which is divided into four books introduced by quotes from canonical English authors.

The novel opens with the killing of the master by his much abused native mistress, Mariella. However, the killing turns to be only a dream by the I-narrator. According to Hena Maes-Jelinek – Wilson Harris's official biographer –, "the opening of the narrative on the frontier between life and death" suggests that the following story is like those flashes a man sees just before dying, that is, timeless flashes about his past.[3]

Hence, right from the very beginning, the reader balances between dream and reality, between life and death, between imagination and truth, between past, future and present. The boundaries between the opposites fade away; different layers intertwine and merge over and over throughout the narrative creating an ambiguous and shifty fiction in which the reader gets easily lost, even confused. Admittedly, it is quite difficult to read Harris, whose work is

[2] A. BOXILL, 'Wilson Harris' in *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. by D. CUMBER DANCE. Westport: Greenwood Press 1986, pp. 187-97; J. P. DURIX, 'Wilson Harris' in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 117, Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers*, First Series. Ed. by B. LINDFORS and R. SANDER. Detroit: Gale Research Inc 1992, pp. 166-85.

[3] H. MAES-JELINEK, *Wilson Harris*. Boston: Twayne Publishers 1982, pp. 3-4.

in no way naïve, and whose language is highly figurative. His novels ask the reader for a wide breadth of mind and nimbleness, as his fiction opens a number of questions without giving definite answers. Therefore, I apologize if my reading of *Palace of the Peacock* misses important issues raised by Harris's narrative and if I go quickly through questions which require and deserve broader analysis. However, I will try to do my best to offer an interpretation of one of the most discussed and cryptic novels of the last century.

Palace of the Peacock tells the story of Donne, a tyrannical European landowner setting on a journey upriver in the interior of Guyana in pursuit of a group of Amerindians, whom he needs as labour in his plantation. Some other men take part in Donne's expedition and constitute a motley crew: his brother and narrator of the story; the daSilva twins, "of Portuguese extraction"; Schomburgh, of German ancestry; Vigilance, an Amerindian; Carroll, a "young Negro boy"; Cameron, with Scottish ancestors; Jennings and Wishorp. This multi-racial crew, made up of the descendants of peoples belonging historically to different waves of migrants to the Caribbean, stands for the whole of Guyana, a melting-pot of different ethnic groups. According to Maes-Jelinek, the members of the crew "stand for the various features, tendencies and potentialities within one man, as well as for the latent possibilities of the Guyanese people."[4] Moreover, the crew is a replica of a previous crew of conquistadors who perished on the self-same river and under the self-same circumstances centuries before. Therefore, past and present are conflated and Donne's crew revives the dead crew of earlier colonizers.

> It was the best crew any man could find in these parts to cross the falls towards the Mission where Mariella lived. The odd fact existed of course that their living names matched the names of a famous dead crew that had sunk in the rapids and been drowned to a man, leaving their names inscribed on Sorrow Hill which stood at the foot of the falls.[5]

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[4] H. MAES-JELINEK, 'The Myth of El Dorado in the Caribbean Novel' in *Cross/Cultures-Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English, Vol 86: Labyrinth of Universality: Wilson Harris's Visionary Art of Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi 2006, p. 14.
[5] HARRIS, p. 23.

Donne is a cruel, ruthless and ambitious master, whose brother is actually his own *alter ego* – "[Donne] was myself standing outside of me while I stood inside of him."[6] To emphasize his double nature, there is the fact that his name calls for the well-known English poet John Donne, a poet divided between the material and the spiritual. As well as the metaphysical poet of whom he bears the name, Donne goes through an inner split and, as he approaches the Amerindian folk and the heart of Guyana, his idealistic side starts to cloud his materialistic one.[7]

When the crew arrives at the Mission of Mariella where the Amerindian folk used to live, they find out that the natives have left, therefore they begin a seven-days journey upriver in their pursuit. They take with them an old Arawak woman to help along the expedition. The influence of Conrad, here, starts to be patent: the journey upriver into the interior of the country is a physical as well as a metaphysical journey into the unconscious. To penetrate the forest is not only to get in touch with the deepest and purest core of life, but also to penetrate one's own consciousness.

As the crew passes through the dangerous rapids of War Office the nature of their journey becomes clear: in order to be reborn to a new life the members of the crew need to undergo physical destruction. Thus, one by one the members of the crew die: naturally, accidentally, from murder or exhaustion. These men of different origins become part of a superior unity: "the whole crew was one spiritual family living and dying together in a common grave out of which they had sprung again from the same soul and womb as it were."[8] Their death is necessary for the creation of a new Guyanese identity. On the seventh day of the journey, the survivors reach a massive waterfalls at the source of the river, above which

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[6] HARRIS, p. 23.
[7] L. JAMES, *Caribbean Literature in English*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc. 1999, p. 84.
[8] HARRIS, p. 40.

the natives have taken refuge. Thus, Donne, Jennings and daSilva start climbing its cliff. Along the ascent they have a series of visions: Donne sees a carpenter, a woman and a child, figures who clearly recall the Holy Family. The hollowness of his life is revealed to him and a wish of renewal enters his mind. Music accompanies the ascent of the survivors, the ghosts of the dead companions drive the survivors towards the palace of the peacock, that is, the unsullied place where colonizer and colonized, ruler and ruled, master and slave can live in tune with each other and give birth to a new hybrid Guyanese identity.

In this chapter I will focus my analysis on the protagonist, Donne, who is turned native by the primordial wilderness of the Guyanese hinterland.

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Most Guyanese people inhabit the narrow coastal area and the cities of Georgetown and New Amsterdam. "Further inland lies eighty-three thousands square miles of mainly uninhabited jungle, pierced by great black rivers, and shadowed by escarpments plumed with waterfalls."[9] As I wrote in Chapter 1, the interior of Guyana has always been praised for its natural beauties and legendary primordial purity. Breathtaking sights all over seem to hide a lost paradise where the human being can find his origins and where he can achieve renewal. Through the voice of the narrator, this is the description Harris makes of one of these sights, namely, the heavenly waterfall on top of which the palace of the peacock houses the Amerindians whom Donne is looking for:

> Right and left grew the universal cliff they knew, and before them the highest waterfall they had ever seen moved and still stood upon the escarpment. They were plainly astonished at the immaculate bridal veil falling motionlessly from the river's tall brink. The cliffs appeared to box and imprison the waterfall. A light curious fern grew out of the stone, and pearls were burning and smoking from the greenest brightest dwarfs and trees they remembered.[10]

[9] JAMES, p. 76.
[10] HARRIS, pp. 128-29.

However, the wilderness is not only a charming paradise where the opposites merge ("moved and still stood", "falling motionlessly"),[11] and where marvellous beauties are hidden, but also a source of "fear and anxiety and horror and peril."[12] It is, indeed, an ambiguous place which is both feared and longed for by the foreigner. On the one hand, it is a maze where the human being can lose his self and, quoting Conrad, "be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil";[13] on the other hand it is the land of promise, where man can establish a new relationship with nature. "The physical world into which […] Donne moves is, at various times, Paradise and hell, apocalyptic and demonic, a new order and chaos."[14] The landscape is powerful and influences whoever walks along its paths. In the heart of the country Donne is dominated by the wilderness.

A cruel and sharp colonizer, Donne left Britain "to join a team of ranchers near the Brazil frontier and border country."[15] An exploiter of Amerindian labour, he made his estate flourish. Mariella, the native woman he abuses and whom he governs and rules "like a fowl", like a "senseless creature", defines him a "cruel and mad"[16] man. As a consequence, when the occasion occurs she flies away with her fellow Amerindians. Addressing his brother, Donne justifies his brute modes:

> Life here is tough. One has to be a devil to survive. I'm the last landlord. I tell you I fight everything in nature, flood, drought, chicken hawk, rat, beast and woman. I'm everything. Midwife, yes, doctor, yes, gaoler, judge, hangman, every blasted thing to the labouring people. Look man, look outside again. *Primitive*. Every boundary line a myth. No-man's land, understand?[17] (my emphasis)

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[11] MAES-JELINEK, *Wilson Harris*, p. 10.
[12] HARRIS, p. 106.
[13] CONRAD, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 44.
[14] J. ROBINSON, 'The Aboriginal Enigma: *Heart of Darkness*, *Voss* and *Palace of the Peacock*' in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol 20 (1): 148, p. 154.
[15] HARRIS, p. 14.
[16] HARRIS, p. 16.
[17] HARRIS, p. 17.

In accordance with Donne's perspective, the European colonizer *has to* be a brute in order to rule over the savage. Like Kurtz, Donne took advantage of his superior technical knowledge in order to subject the natives, to whom he appeared as an almighty being. If according to Kurtz the whites "must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings,"[18] according to Donne, the white man is "midwife", "doctor", "gaoler", "judge", "hangman", "every blasted thing to the labouring people".

Nevertheless, Donne's perspective changes as he progresses into the interior of Guyana. According to Maes-Jelinek, the journey upriver and through the unknown forest is a metaphor for moral or spiritual trial.[19] While exploring the wild jungle, Donne is exploring his heart too, so that, as he starts the ultimate ascent towards the top of the waterfall and towards a re-union with the runaway natives, the folly of his colonial enterprise flashes to his mind:

> As he made the first step the memory of the house he had built in the savannahs returned to him with the closeness and intimacy of a *horror* and a hell, that horror and that hell he had himself elaborately constructed from which to rule his earth.[20] (my emphasis)

That "horror" to which Donne makes reference is the world-famous 'kurtzian' outcome of the encounter between the savage and the civilized. That is to say, an unbalanced encounter which can only have dreadful consequences. Indeed, Kurtz is defeated by his obsession to dominate over the wilderness and, as a consequence, he dies. Donne presumably dies as well; however, his death is functional to his rebirth to a new and better life, in communion with those whom he used to rule and who are necessary for the creation of a new Guyanese identy. "To make yourself it is also necessary to destroy yourself,"[21] Voss claims in the novel by Patrick White (see Chapter 5). Quoting John Thieme, "*Palace of the Peacock* culminates in a mystical vision in which death usher in a resurrection and Christian symbol is fused with

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[18] CONRAD, p. 63.
[19] MAES-JELINEK, 'The Myth of El Dorado in the Caribbean Novel,' p. 6.
[20] HARRIS, p. 130.
[21] WHITE, p. 34.

Amerindian myth."[22] Briefly, death becomes a necessary step towards life, life is generated through death. Disintegration and fall into the void are necessary to the ultimate salvation and union with the natives:

> *Palace of the Peacock* initiates this movement of disruption followed by reconstruction or the promise of rebirth, which transforms catastrophe into a possible agent of release from an oppressive situation.[23]

The Guyanese forest is decisive to Donne's "going native." When the crew leaves the Mission of Mariella they plunge into a primordial maze. "We stood on the frontiers of the known world, and on the self-same threshold of the unknown."[24] Conscious of the several dangers they will face, Donne and his companions decide to carry on their journey. Soon, the landscape turns into an almost living presence, it takes an active part in the journey and it spreads its influence deeply over the crew. For each member of the crew "the rainforest plays its formative role; it is the theatre of an ordeal, the setting that stimulates their dreams and provokes their fear and uncertainty."[25]

> The forest rustled and rippled with a sigh and ubiquitous step. I stopped dead where I was, frightened for no reason whatever. The step near me stopped and stood still. I stared around me wildly, in surprise and terror, and my body grew faint and trembling as woman's or child's.[26]

The bush of the interior, hence, is humanized. It is such a powerful and omnipresent entity that one can feel its presence and hear its steps. The jungle scares because it exercises an invisible influence over those who wander through it. The narrator and Donne cannot but be subjected to the power of the landscape. Donne stoops "in unconscious subjection […] to the

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[22] J. THIEME, *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*. London: International Publishing 2002, p. 34.
[23] MAES-JELINEK, *Wilson Harris*, p. 2.
[24] HARRIS, p. 92.
[25] MAES-JELINEK, 'The Myth of El Dorado in the Caribbean Novel,' p, 16.
[26] HARRIS, pp. 27-8.

treachery and oppression in the atmosphere"; and he suffers "the very frightful nature of the jungle exercising its spell over [him]."[27]

> There was no simple bargain and treaty possible save unconditional surrender to what they knew not. Call it spirit, call it life, call it the end of all they had once treasured and embraced in blindness and ignorance and obstinacy they knew. They were the pursuers and now they had become the pursued. [28]

In other words, there is no point in trying to oppose the spell of the jungle. Once inside its borders the only possible alternative is to let it in, to let it take possession of one's own heart.

Harris' wilderness is deeply reminiscent of Conrad's landscapes in *Heart of Darkness*. As Conrad's "pilgrims," the members of Donne's crew are subjected to the power of the hinterland and their subjection increases as long as they approach the very heart of the country. "We were wonderers on prehistoric earth," Marlow claims, "on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first men taking possession of an accursed inheritance."[29]

> Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. […] You lost your way on that river, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself *bewitched* and cut off forever from everything you had known once – somewhere – far away – in another existence perhaps.[30] (my emphasis)

Hence, the wilderness colonizes the colonizer; it makes him lose his way, both physically and mentally. Into the unknown the colonizers's points of reference fade and he cannot but adapt to the circumstances.

The description Harris makes of the Guyanese landscape reminded me of one of the most famous paintings by the French artist Henri Rousseau (1844-1910): *The Snake Charmer* (*La Charmeuse de Serpents*, 1907). The painting represents a lush and impenetrable moonlit

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[27] HARRIS, p. 55.
[28] HARRIS, p. 106.
[29] CONRAD, p. 44.
[30] CONRAD, p. 41.

jungle, inhabited by dangerous animals. A feminine dark figure stands on the left side and attracts the viewer's attention: she is the snake charmer who is playing the flute and exercising her spell over the surrounding nature. She is neither witch nor evil spirit, rather she is a black Venus, standing for the naked and unspoilt Truth. Through her music she can tame the snakes inhabiting that earthly paradise.[31] Even though the painting has nothing to do either with Guyana (it is, indeed, the representation of an imaginary exotic Indian landscape) or with Wilson Harris, I like to imagine the forest painted in *Palace of the Peacock* as the forest drawn by Henri Rousseau. Namely, a wild forest dominated by a mysterious entity able to charm those who enter its borders. I believe the naked black Venus could perfectly represent that spirit reigning over the 'Harrisian jungle' and exercising its influence upon the intruders. As the Venus on the painting by Rousseau can tame snakes, that is, the representatives of evil *par excellence*, so, the spirit of the Guyanese interior can tame Donne, the cruel and ruthless colonizer.

Besides the spell of wild nature, Donne is driven native also by the desire to share a life with the Amerindians. He embarks on the pursuit of the natives because he wants to find some labour for his plantation; however, something more urges Donne along the journey, namely, "a mysterious youthful longing which the whole crew possessed for Mariella and for the Mission where she lived above the falls."[32] In other words, under the colonial quest, lies a quest for the natives in themselves and for what they represent.

> After all I've earned a right here as well. I'm as native as they, ain't I? A little better educated maybe whatever in hell that means. They call me sir and curse me when I'm not looking. […] the only way to survive of course is to wed oneself into the family. In fact I belong already.[33]

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[31] D. SPECCHIARELLO, *I classici dell'arte, Vol 37: Rousseau*. Milano: Rizzoli 2004, p. 128.
[32] HARRIS, p. 33.
[33] HARRIS, p. 58.

Due to his relationship with Mariella, Donne asserts his right to be considered a native too, and as a consequence, he claims his right to own the land as well. His brother and narrator of the story belies him. He tells Donne that they are all outside of the folk, nobody belongs to them because of

> an actual fear…fear of life…fear of the substance of life, fear of the substance of the folk, a cannibal blind fear in oneself. […] It's fear of acknowledging the true substance of life. Yes, fear I tell you, the fear that breeds bitterness in our mouth, the haunting sense of fear that poisons us and hangs us and murders us.[34]

According to the narrator, what keeps the colonizers from merging and finding a new identity in the colonized is fear. Fear to acknowledge to have chosen the wrong path, fear to find out that civilization has corrupted and overshadowed "the true substance of life." Fear to recognize that the natives are the last bearers of the real and purest significance of life and that it is only through them that the colonizer can gain access to it. What can save Donne, the prototype of the Western colonizer, from annihilation is "the rediscovery of a new life in the folk."[35] "Perhaps there's a ghost of chance that I can find a different relationship with the folk, who knows?"[36] Donne wishes.

The pursuit of the folk, therefore, turns into a pursuit through the protagonist's heart and consciousness and towards salvation. "It was as if the light of all past days and nights on earth had vanished. It was the first breaking dawn of the light of our soul,"[37] the narrator writes, denoting the pursuit of the Amerindians as the turning point for a new life. Like Kurtz, Donne has to surrender to the wilderness in order to win access to the truth. About Kurtz, Malow says that

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[34] HARRIS, p. 59.
[35] HARRIS, p. 123.
[36] HARRIS, p. 57.
[37] HARRIS, p. 34.

he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, all the truth, and all the sincerity are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible.[38]

At the beginning of the novel Donne, the colonizer, is shot by Mariella, the colonized. This is the obvious outcome of a relationship based on power. The colonizer needs to redeem in order to find salvation and to establish a new relationship with the natives. The ultimate ascent towards the top of the waterfall is an ascent towards the primitive folk and towards a primordial purity. While climbing the high and perilous cliff during the night, Donne "could see nothing and yet he dreamt he saw everything clearer than ever before."[39] "He goes blind and sees; he loses himself and discovers identity."[40] He understands the Amerindians he used to exploit are the only ones who can save him. He realizes that all his life has been a mistake. However, in order to attain "the psychical completion of the journey" and to achieve salvation, he has to commit himself to "an act of voluntary self-negation."[41] "And the truth was they had all come home at last to the compassion of the nameless unflinching folk."[42]

To conclude, even though Donne probably falls from the cliff and dies as a consequence of the "going native" process, the novel is meant to leave a message of hope. Indeed, Harris makes the reader understand that Donne will be born again with a new consciousness. He will be the new Guyanese man, fusing together the different identities constituting the nation.

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[38] CONRAD, pp. 91-2.
[39] HARRIS, p. 142.
[40] JAMES, p. 85.
[41] G. HUGGAN, 'Anxieties of Influence: Conrad in the Caribbean' in *Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments, Vol 2*, Ed. by K. CARABINE. Mountfield: Helm Information Ltd 1992, pp. 453-54.
[42] HARRIS, p. 143.

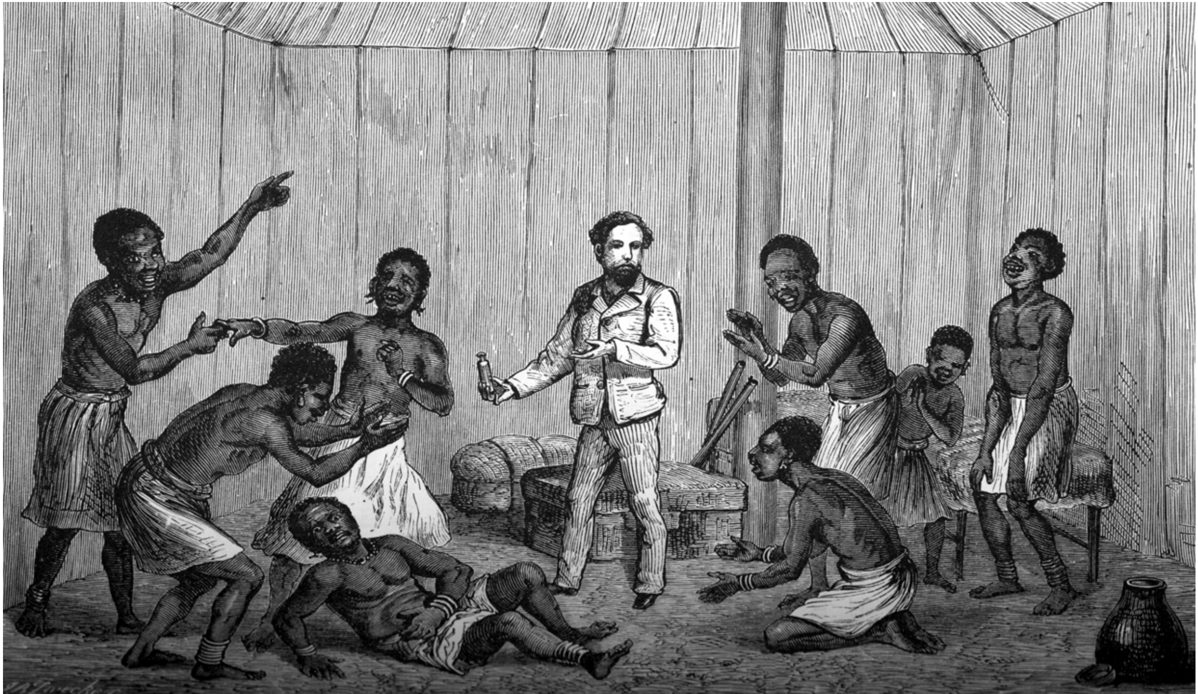

Fig. 3: *Ma-manyara Takes Medicine* in H. M. STANLEY, *How I Found Livingstone: Travels, Adventures and Discoveries in Central Africa; Including Four Months Residence With Dr. Livingstone.*

CHAPTER 4

PARADISE

Among the seven postcolonial novels at issues, only one springs from the "primitive continent *par excellence*": Africa. In the mind of the Western colonizer, indeed, 'the Dark Continent' has always been the land of savage peoples, of primordial and wild nature, of unspeakable pagan cerimonies, of danger and peril; briefly, the land of the primitive.

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a Tanzanian academic and novelist born in Zanzibar in 1948. At the age of 18 he set off for England where he still lives and works. Fourth among his seven novels – *Memory of Departure* (1987), *Pilgrims Way* (1988), *Dottie* (1990), *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001), *Desertion* (2005) – *Paradise*[1] was published in 1994 and it was short-listed for the Booker Prize.

The novel fuses myth, history and storytelling.[2] According to Griffiths it "offers one of the most convincing and detailed accounts of traditional coastal East African society at the turn of the century and in the years leading up to the First World War."[3]

Paradise tells the story of Yusuf, a twelve-year-old boy, who is sold into bondage by his father to the wealthy Arab merchant Aziz in order to clear his debts. The novel is divided into six chapters and takes the shape of a *Bildungsroman*, re-tracing the steps of Yusuf's coming of age. At the very beginning of the novel, the boy is forced to leave a small inland trading town in Tanzania – as well as his family – in order to settle in a coastal town. There he

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[1] A. GURNAH, *Paradise*. London: Penguin Books 1995.
[2] *The Companion to African Literatures*. Ed. by D. KILLAM and R. ROWE. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2000, p. 110.
[3] G. GRIFFITHS, *African Literatures in English: East and West*. Harlow: Longman 2000, p. 313.

meets Khalil, also given to Aziz by his father, and starts working for the "seyyid" in a shop. Afterwords, he is sent to the mountains for some years, where he helps Hamid Suleiman – a shopkeeper – and his wife. In the central chapters of the novel, Yusuf joins Uncle Aziz's trading caravan into the interior of Tanzania, towards Congo, but the group is captured by natives and rescued by German explorers. Ultimately, Yusuf goes back to the coast and engages in an ambivalent relationship with both Uncle Aziz's wives – the Mistress and Khalil's sister Amina. At the very end of the novel, the boy follows some German troops which are recruiting people for the war against the English.

In this chapter I will focus my attention on a background character who goes native, namely a German who builds his kingdom in the wilderness. This will give me the opportunity to debate some issues raised by Gurnah about multiculturalism and hybridity in East Africa.

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I would like to introduce my analysis of the German who goes native by spending some words on the illustration at the beginning of the chapter. The plate is taken from Henry Morton Stanley's best-seller *How I found Livingstone* (1882), a 692-pages account of his expedition in 1881 aimed at finding Doctor Livingstone, an Englishman lost in the interior of Africa. I believe the illustration perfectly represents the white man's power over the natives, and this is why it is so significant in relationship to the character at stake in Gurnah's novel.

The plate represents a lighted Stanley surrounded by a group of native Africans. Stanley is holding a vial in his right hand and the natives are clapping their hands, some are laughing, one is kneeling. Indeed, during his travel, Stanley comes to the Wa-manyara tribe, he builds his camp and he is visited by the Mtemi (king) of a native village and his chieftains. As soon as they enter his tent they are immediately fascinated: "they cast a look of such gratified surprise at myself, at my face, my clothes, and guns, as it is almost impossible to

describe."[4] Obviously, their reaction is linked to the fact that they have never seen something similar before and, as a consequence, they are bewitched, curious. They want to be shown those strange weapons and, among the others,

the tiny deadly revolvers, whose beauty and workmanship they thought were *superhuman*, evoked such gratified eloquence that I was fain to try something else. […] After having explained to them the difference between white men and Arabs, I pulled out my medicine chest, which evoked another burst of rapturous sighs at the cunning neatness of the array of vials.[5] (my emphasis)

What this passage displays is that the white man's craft is admired and held as supernatural, by native Africans. "I succeeded, before long, in winning unqualified admiration, and my superiority, compared to the best of the Arabs they had seen, was but too evident," writes Stanley. After their encounter with the admirable white man, the natives reappraise the Arabs inhabiting the coastal regions of East Africa and trading with them in the hinterland. Before regarded as civilized and powerful, now the Arabs are "dirt" compared to the Europeans who "know everything."[6]

In Gurnah's novel there is a character who recalls Stanley's illustration:

In the dusty shadows of the snowcapped mountain, where the warrior people lived and where little rain fell, lived *a legendary European*. He was said to be rich beyond counting. He had learned the language of the animals and could converse with them and command them. His kingdom covered large tracts of land, and he lived in an iron palace on a cliff. The palace was also a powerful magnet, so that whenever enemies approached its fortifications, their weapons were snatched from their scabbards and their clutching hands, and they were thus disarmed and captured. *The European had power over the chiefs of the savage tribes*, whom he none the less admired for their cruelty and implacability. *To him they were noble people, hardy and graceful, even beautiful*. It was said that the European possessed a ring with which he could summon the spirits of the land to his service. North of his domain prowled prides of lions which had an unquenchable craving for human flesh, yet they never approached the European unless they were called.[7] (my emphasis)

This "legendary European" is a German colonizer. This is the only passage which tells about him, besides a short reference later in the text. His story is told to Yusuf by a native when he

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[4] H. M. STANLEY, *How I Found Livingstone: Travels, Adventures, and Discoveries in Central Africa; Including Four Months Residence with Dr. Livingstone*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington 1872, p. 333.
[5] STANLEY, pp. 333-34.
[6] STANLEY, p. 335.
[7] GURNAH, pp. 62-3.

is staying with Hamid. As Stanley, the German is believed to have supernatural powers which result from his superb craftsmanship.

From this description – even if it is clearly exaggerated and fanciful – I can claim that the German has gone native. Indeed, he seems to have left Europe forever and to have settled in the core of Africa; allegedly he can speak to animals and calm lions down; he lives in an impregnable fortress; he has the spirits of the land at his service; he has magical powers. All these fantastic details create an image of a man deeply at ease in the wilderness, a man who can easily fare well in an environment so different from what he was used to in Germany. Maybe he does not rule over lions, maybe he does not have a magic ring, but surely he has no trouble in surviving in the 'heart of darkness.' Speaking about him, an African sultan says that:

> The German, he's the big man. [He] is the new king now. He came through near here not so long ago and told everyone who he was. They have heard that the German has a head of iron. Is it true? And he has weapons which can destroy a whole town in one blow. My people want to trade and live their lives in peace.[8]

The connection is easily made: he is definitely reminiscent of Kurtz. His wealth, his living in the interior, his "kingdom," his admiration of the "savages," his halo of magic: all this, without any doubt, is moulded on Conrad's protagonist. Plus, as Kurtz, the "legendary European" has an immense power over the natives because the white men:

> must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of *supernatural beings* – we approach them with the might as of a *deity*. […] By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a *power for good practically unbounded*.[9] (my emphasis)

Knowledge, technique, sophisticated reasoning: this is what endows the white man with power over the black. Indeed, to those "savages" who had always lived a simple life in contact with nature, a day-to-day life with no need to think about tomorrow, a life committed

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[8] GURNAH, p. 140.
[9] CONRAD, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 63.

to the satisfaction of primary needs, Kurtz as well as the "legendary European" must appear as gods on earth. However, their power is a double-edged weapon since they can "charm or frighten rudimentary souls"[10]:

> [the savages] adored him. […] What can you expect? […] He came to them with thunder and lightning, you know – and they had never seen anything like it – and very terrible. He could be very terrible.[11]

With a mixed sentiment of devotion and fear, the natives cannot but submit themselves to the white man. His technological means are superior, maybe not even human. A war against him would have an indubitable result.

In fact, in *Paradise*, the Europeans are feared by both natives and Arabs because of their "ferocity and ruthlessness." They are believed to eat metal and to have the capacity to go through a blazing fire without getting burnt. Their representation has a mythical halo, they can be gods but also demons.

> They take the best land without paying a bid, force the people to work for them by one trick or another, eat anything and everything however tough or putrid. Their appetite has no limit or decency, like a plague of locusts. […] They wear clothes which are made of metal but do not chafe their bodies, and they can go for days without sleep or water. Their spit is poisonous. […] It burns the flesh if it splashes you.[12]

To conlude, "the legendary European" has gone native, but, at the same time, he has not completely merged with the natives. Rather, he has merged with the wilderness and he has kept a position of superiority in relationship to African peoples.

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Gurnah's narrative presents five human types: the savage Africans inhabiting the interior; those Africans living in the countryside (like Yusuf and his family) and occupying a kind of liminal area between savagery and civilization; the Indians working for the Arabs; the Arabs

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[10] CONRAD, p. 64.
[11] CONRAD, p. 72.
[12] GURNAH, p. 72.

of the coast; and the European (German and British) colonizers. The division of the five groups is clear, it is impossible to mistake somebody as a member of a group different from his own. And the separateness is preserved because each group perceives itself as superior in relationship to at least one different group, therefore, its members do not want to get contaminated.

As a consequence, at the beginning of the novel, Yusuf's father prevents him from playing with "[savages] who have no faith in God and who worship spirits and demons which live in trees and rocks."[13] Similarly, the Arabs feel superior and believe they represent an aristocracy.[14] So, when Aziz decides to set up a caravan in order to trade with African tribes, Mohammed Abdalla – the *manypara wa safari*, the foreman of the journey – addresses Yusuf with the following words:

> You'll come and trade with us, and learn the difference between the ways of civilization and the ways of the savage. […] But you know all about that, you don't need me to tell you. You are part of that savage country up there.[15]

Mohammed considers Yusuf a savage by the same standards as the natives from the hinterland; by contrast, he defines himself a civilized man. "A civilized man can always defeat a savage. […] He can outwit him with knowledge and guile."[16] According to the Arabs, the savages are "vicious", they "look like something made out of sin." They are believed to drink blood, to eat the penis of lions and to keep parts of the men they kill in a bag. The reason why they carry out these barbaric deeds is that this is inscribed in their nature of savages; it is part of their essence. The Europeans, finally, perceive themselves as superior to

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[13] GURNAH, p. 6.
[14] J. BARDOLPH, 'Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* and *Admiring Silence*: History, Stories and the Figure of the Uncle' in *Contemporary African Fiction*. Ed. by D. WRIGHT. Bayreuth: African Studies 42, 1997, p. 80.
[15] GURNAH, p. 52.
[16] GURNAH, p. 60.

all other groups: they take the Africans' land, they convert them to their religion, they do not know limits. They are "famed breakers of nations."[17]

However it is not impossible to cross the boundaries dividing the five human types. As I said before, the mythical German goes native. What drives him wild? "There's nothing like a few months among the savages for finding the weakness in a man," Mohammed Abdalla states.[18] In point of fact, we cannot say the "legendary European" is weak. Indeed, his new life among the savages has endowed him with an immense power. His weakness, according to Mohammed's words, lies in his renounciation of the civilized world in favour of the wilderness.

The interior is a seductive place but it hides dangers. On the one hand:

> When you look on this land […] it fills you with longing. So pure and bright. You may be tempted to think that its inhabitants know neither sickness nor ageing. And their days are filled with contentment and a search for wisdom. […] *If there is paradise on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here*.[19] (my emphasis)

On the other hand, the hinterland of Africa is "a paradise complete with its resident serpent"[20]:

> the air has the colour of plague and pestilence, and the creatures who live in it are known only to God. […] *The west is the land of darkness, the land of jinns and monsters*.[21] (my emphasis)

> The wilderness […] is a place of disorder and death. […] Distance from the coast, it seems, is directly proportional to distance from civilized behaviour. *In the interior man's baser instincts can overwhelm moral restraint* if one is careless enough to be caught off guard. [22] (my emphasis)

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[17] GURNAH, p. 120.
[18] GURNAH, p. 119.
[19] GURNAH, p. 115.
[20] D. SCHWERDT, 'Looking in on Paradise: Race, Gender and Power in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*' in *Contemporary African Fiction*. Ed. by D. WRIGHT. Bayreuth: African Studies 42, 1997, p. 98.
[21] GURNAH, p. 83.
[22] SCHWERDT, p. 98.

As a consequence, when questioned by Khalil about his journey into the interior, Yusuf tells him that he felt as "a soft-fleshed animal which had left its shell and was now caught in the open":

> The *terror* he had felt was not the same as fear, he said. It was as if he had no real existence, as if he was living in a dream, over the edge of extinction. It made him wonder what it was that people wanted so much that they could overcome the terror in search of trade. It was not all terror, not at all, he said, but it was the terror which gave everything shape.[23] (my emphasis)

Yusuf's "terror" recalls Kurtz's and Donne's "horror." It is a widespread and omnipresent feeling of displacement and ultimate incongruity. The core of Africa, therefore, is not the paradise of the title. It "harbours murderous savages prepared to slaughter each other as much as outsiders."[24]

By contrast with many of his contemporary African writers, Gurnah does not sentimentalise the past of Africa as an age of purity and unspoiled forests; his novel is not meant as a national allegory searching for a definition of a national identity.[25] Gurnah stresses the multiculturalism of the area, he highlights the East African melting-pot of races. Arabs, Africans, Europeans, Indians: East Africa looks, truly, more like a 'salad bowl' because its components do not easily merge. European colonizers submit natives, Indians and Arabs do the same. Arabs, besides profiting from the natives' ivory and gold, take slaves from their tribes and sell them illegally. Colonized twice – by the Arabs first, and by the Europeans at the time of the story – native Africans, ruled by the sultan Chatu, react by stealing the Arab traders' goods, by killing some of them and by capturing the rest. As Schwerdt points out in her essay, the journey towards paradise becomes a descent into hell. "It does not matter on which side one stands: the colonial experience corrupted and brutalized everyone."[26]

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[23] GURNAH, p. 180.
[24] SCHWERDT, p. 92.
[25] BARDOLPH, pp. 78-9
[26] SCHWERDT, p. 95.

Fig. 4: JOHN LONGSTAFF, *Arrival of Burke, Wills and King at the Deserted Camp at Cooper Creek, Sunday Evening, 21st April 1861*, 1907
Oil on canvas. Victoria: National Gallery of Victoria.

CHAPTER 5

VOSS

Patrick White is a major Australian writer. Born in London in 1912 to pastoralist parents from the Hunter Valley area of New South Wales,[1] he was taken to Australia as a baby, where he received his primary education. For his secondary education, then, he was sent to England where he eventually entered King's College, Cambridge. In 1948 he returned permanently to Australia, where he first settled in the countryside next to Sydney, afterwards in the centre of the city.[2] A prolific author, he published a number of novels, plays, short stories, essays, poems, and a complete autobiography. In 1973 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. His work dominated Australian Literature for decades and he is recognized all over the world as the author who introduced a new continent into literature, namely, the main Australian writer.[3] He died in 1990.

Voss was published in 1957 and is Patrick White's fifth novel and masterpiece.[4] It won the W. H. Smith and the Miles Franklin awards. The novel is set in Australia in the 1840s and tells the story of a German ambitious, narcissistic and Nietzschean explorer who organizes an expedition aimed at crossing the whole country westward. The following quote is taken from an interview to Patrick White and it conveys quite a precise idea of the novel:

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[1] J. BESTON, 'Patrick White' in *A Companion to Australian Literature Since 1900*. Ed. by N. BIRNS and R. McNEER. New York: Camden House 2007, p. 247.

[2] W. H. WILDE, J. HOOTON and B. ANDREWS, Eds., *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature,*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press 1991, p. 740.

[3] E. WEBBY, Ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2000, p. 126.

[4] P. WHITE, *Voss*. London: Vintage 1994.

> Some years ago I got the idea for a book about a megalomaniac explorer. As Australia is the only country I really know in my bones, it had to be set in Australia, and as there is practically nothing left to explore, I had to go back to the middle of the last century. When I returned here after the War and began to look up old records, my idea seemed to fit the character of Leichhardt. But as I did not want to limit myself to a historical reconstruction (too difficult and too boring), I only based my explorer on Leichhardt. The latter was, besides, merely unusually unpleasant, whereas Voss is mad as well.[5]

Hence, according to White's own statement, the protagonist of the novel is based on Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt (1813-c. 1848), a German scientist and explorer. Leichhardt engaged in four expeditions in the interior of Australia and *Voss* is moulded on his fourth and last one which took place in 1846-47. As well as Voss, Leichhardt started his journey in Sydney and passed through the Darling Downs, where he was provided with livestock. As Voss's, his expedition was meant to last several years, during which he was supposed to cross the whole Australia, from the Darling Downs to the Swain River in the western part of the country. Unlike Voss, he had already tried the undertaking, but failed. As well as Voss, he had six Europeans and two Aborigines with him. As Voss finally, he vanished and presumably died somewhere in the interior. Several expeditions meant to find out some evidence of his passing were organized, but each of them was unsuccessful.[6] Therefore, the mystery of his disappearance remained unresolved, but his myth was written down. Briefly, many are the similarities between the historical explorer and his literary counterpart. Nevertheless, the reader of *Voss* is tightly anchored at the world of fiction created by White, and he is never led to believe that what he is reading is history.

The novel is divided into 16 chapters which tell the story of the preparation for the expedition at Sydney, the expedition itself, and the aftermath of the expedition which takes place 20 years after. At the beginning of the narrative, Johann Ulrich Voss meets Laura Trevelyan, Mr Bonner's – the financier of the expedition – niece. He fell in love with her.

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[5] PW to Huebsch, II.ix. 1956, Congress, in D. MARR, *Patrick White: A Life*. London: Jonathan Cape 1991, p. 313.
[6] R. J. HOWEGO, *Encyclopedia of Exploration: 1800 to 1850*. Potts Point: Horden House 2011, pp. 352-53.

Indeed, she is the only one who is able to understand the mysterious and dark explorer, hidden behind the *façade* of scientific exploration and heroic achievement. Laura can see his real driving motives because their minds are connected. As a result, they engage in a psychic relationship. In autumn 1845, Voss leaves Sydney with four fellow explorers: Palfreyman the ornithologist, Turner the drunkard, Harry Robarts the young simple-minded, and Frank Le Mesurier the poet. The crew reaches Newcastle where they are welcomed by the cultivated Mr Sanderson who rides them to Rhine Towers. There two more people get enrolled in the expedition: Ralph Angus the wealthy pastoralist, and Judd the convict. Eventually, the party arrives at Jildra – in the Darling Downs – "the last human outpost it will come to before venturing into the unknown interior."[7] There, an uncouth Mr Boyle provides them with livestock and two aborigines: the old Dugald and the young Jackie. The expedition finally leaves for the deep inland but, on the way, suffers several misfortunes: Turner and Le Mesurier fell ill, Voss is injured in the stomach by a horse, cattle are stolen by natives, provisions are lost into a river. As a consequence of Voss's irrational and out of control obsession with the country which ultimately leads to Palfreyman death after the Aborigines, half of the crew mutinies. While the mutineers try to go back to Jildra, Voss and his last faithful fellows move forward but find death among the natives. Twenty years after the expedition, Laura meets the only survivor of the party, Judd, who had been living with the natives until then.

The narrative about the ruinous expedition is intertwined with the narrative of Laura's life at Sydney and the two narratives often get connected thanks to Laura and Voss's psychic meetings. The relationship between their minds is so strong that Voss sees Laura in the desert and in those moments preceding his beheading, and Laura is even able to feel Voss's death. Their mental connection is deeply reminiscent of Kurtz and his Intended's one. When Marlow

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[7] W. WALSH, *Patrick White: Voss*. London: Edward Arnold Ltd 1976, p. 24.

meets Kurtz's fiancée, he claims: " I saw her and him in the same instant of time – his death and her sorrow – I saw her sorrow in the very moment of his death. Do you understand? I saw them together – I heard them together."[8]

In this chapter I will focus my analysis on the protagonist of the novel, Voss, a Western man who goes native and whose mind is overwhelmed by the primitive.[9] For this reason, Voss has evident affinities with Conrad's Kurtz.

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According to Brian Kiernan, the German explorer Johann Ulrich Voss "provides an image for the modern man."[10] In fact, he is rootless, twice displaced (from his native Germany and from bourgeois Sydney), he does not believe in God anymore and at the same time he believes himself to be God. He trusts nobody and is persuaded of the viability of his becoming a legend, a 'maker of history.' He is uncertain of his place in the universe, he is "self-destructively embarked on a quest to discover his potential and to assert it against the world."[11] He is an extreme individualist, ready to sacrifice himself and others to his own obsession. He is an annihilation-oriented narcissist. "Voss is passionately concerned with himself alone, with his own nature and the realization of his driving purpose."[12]

'And do you really intend to send the creature on an expedition into this miserable country?' asked Mrs Bonner of her husband. 'He is so thin. And,' she said, 'he is already lost.'
'How do you mean *lost*, Mamma?' […]
'Well, he is,' said Mrs Bonner. 'He is simply lost. His eyes,' she said, 'cannot find their way.'[13] (emphasis in the original)

Voss is "lost," then. The first impression he gives is one of a man struggling with himself in order to find his place, which apparently is neither his native Germany nor the civilized and

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[8] CONRAD, *Heart of Darkness*, pp. 96-7.
[9] D. TACEY, *Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press 1988, p. 89.
[10] B. KIERNAN, *Patrick White.* London: The Macmillan Press Ltd 1980, p. 51.
[11] KIERNAN, p. 51.
[12] WALSH, p. 15.
[13] WHITE, pp. 27-8.

bourgeois Australia of Sydney. He is an outcast, he has rejected his own inauthentic civilization with which he feels no kinship and he is wishing to dissolve himself in order to be born again. The message delivered in *Voss* is similar to the one delivered in *Palace of the Peacock*: to make space for something new, it is necessary to razed the old. “The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming.”[14]

Savage and unexplored Australia seems to Voss the only place where he can feel at ease; its exploration the real vocation of his life, his ultimate purpose. The myth of an Arcadian paradise lost in the middle of unexplored land and waiting to be discovered and possessed is strong. According to Shaffer:

> The central image against which the Australian character measures himself is the bush. [...] the personification of the bush as the heart, the Interior – a mysterious presence which calls to men for the purposes of exploration and discovery but is also *a monstrous place in which men may either perish or be absorbed*.[15] (my emphasis)

In other words, the Australian bush is such a fascinating and powerful place that the European man can be sucked up by it, absorbed, robbed of his own identity and assimilated. Voss is charmed by this possibility. “He is obsessed by this country,” Laura claims. The bush is the *locus* of an ambivalent desire, it is feared but at the same time it is alluring. These are the words Voss says to Le Mesurier in an effort to convince him to join his foolish deed:

> To make yourself it is also necessary to destroy yourself. In this disturbing country, so far as I have become acquainted with it already, it is possible more easily *to discard the inessential and to attempt the infinite*. You will be burnt up most likely, you will have the flesh torn from your bones, you will be tortured probably in many horrible and primitive ways, but you will realize that genius of which you sometimes suspect you are possessed, and of which you will not tell me you are afraid.[16] (my emphasis)

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[14] WHITE, p. 271.
[15] K. SHAFFER, *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989, p. 52.
[16] WHITE, pp. 34-5.

Hence, Australia is the country where the self can renew itself. It is a refuge for outcasts, and for those who feel not at ease at home; for those who carry bad experiences with them and are seeking for a refuge; for those who committed sin and are searching for atonement. Indeed, the explorers in the novel come from such experiences. For example, Harry Robarts had been tortured by his father; Palfreyman had been engaged in a ambiguous relationship with his sister; Turner had killed a man. For these kind of men, Australia is the country not only of redemption, but also of open possibilities. In Australia nobody knows you, nobody knows your past: hence, you can be whatever you want, you can re-invent your history in order to set the basis for a better future. So that, even Ralph Angus, the wealthy and well-settled pastoralist who "had known the Palladian splendours,"[17] is ready to risk everything in pursuit of fresh grounds.

As David Tacey puts it, "Australia has often been imagined in literature and life as an escape from European tradition and restriction, as a movement into space and life. […] Australia is the New Beginning, the place of freedom and the future."[18] Facing the perspective of a new kind of life in the new world, the old one appears dull and muddy. So that, while leaving London for Australia, Voss and his companions realize,

> standing on the wharf, that the orderly, grey, past life was of no significance. They had reached that point at which they could be offered up, in varying degrees, to chaos or to heroism. So they were shaking with their discovery, beside the water, as the crude, presumptuous town stretched out behind them, was reeling on its man-made foundations in the sour earth. Nothing was tried yet, or established, only promised.[19]

In other words, Australia is the place for renewal, the place of new hopes in contrast with the old, constricting, bourgeois-shaped Europe. "Places yet unvisited can become an obsession, promising final peace, all goodness."[20] Australia, then, becomes Voss's fixed idea.

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[17] WHITE, p. 253.
[18] TACEY, p. xiii.
[19] WHITE, p. 96.
[20] WHITE, p. 126.

For Voss, Australia is the place where he can best test his Nietzschean *Wille zur Macht* ("this expedition of yours is pure will"[21]). He has an Idea – with a capital I[22] – and he would do anything to achieve it. He aims at exceeding the limits, at going beyond the known world in order to find his genius. His mind is overwhelmed by a desire for self-annihilation. Voss seems to be in search for death because he sees death as "the ultimate opportunity for an enlightenment about the meaning of life."[23] Moreover, since suffering is considered as an inevitable step towards regeneration, it must be embraced without fear.[24]

For the German explorer, the Australian hinterland exists only as a challenge for his will, since it is the place where "he can rival the Almighty and wrest superhumanity for himself."[25] He is not at all interested in the enormous scientific and geographical potentialities of his exploration: his it is just an egoistic and egotistic exploration of his interior self. Therefore, I believe Voss's journey in the interior of Australia has much in common with Marlow's one in the interior of Africa, in that both journeys are not only geographical, but also psychological. Moreover, the motif of darkness as associated to both unexplored geographical regions and unexplored regions of the mind, occurs over and over in White's novel. As the party progresses into the interior, darkness becomes thicker and embracing. When induced by Voss to join the expedition, Le Mesurier is "thrilled by the immensity of darkness"[26] and Voss himself, when approaching Jildra, is excited by "the unity of darkness."[27]

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[21] WHITE, p. 69.
[22] WHITE, p. 44.
[23] A. J. HASSAL, 'Quests' in *The New Literary History of Australia*. Ed. by L. HERGENHAN. Victoria: Penguin Books 1988, p. 404.
[24] R. GIBSON, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia*. Australia: Sirius Books 1984, p. 204.
[25] *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature,* p. 709.
[26] WHITE, p. 36.
[27] WHITE, p. 166.

As the ‘Australian ego’ wins over the ‘European ego,’ the white man loses contact with tradition and conventions: “he sinks into the unconscious, becomes savage, animalistic.”[28] In order to welcome the raw, the uncultured, the unsophisticated, the untamed, the white man has to put tradition aside and to get rid of Western institutions:

> White’s characters turn away from social structure and convention toward the inner world of archetypes and elemental forces. They go the way that the explorers of any new culture must go, *into the unknown*. The past cannot be relied upon to provide order or meaning, and so individuals have to undertake hazardous and epic journeys into the unconscious, to ground the culture in new depths and new psychological soil. However, White’s culture-heroes embark on tragic, one-way journeys into the unconscious. They take leave of society and never return to it. […] They enter a world so pristine, unmarked, weirdly enchanting, that *they lose their way* and become completely cut off from ordinary human consciousness.[29] (my emphasis)

Hence, the primitive is charming and seductive. It is the place where the self can come into contact with his own repressed unconscious, where he can unleash his instincts. In other words, the wilderness frees man from society-built boundaries and brings him back to natural life. However, the journey into the wilderness is dangerous, in that once the society ties are loosened man can get lost into his own unconscious.

From what I have till now written about the character of Voss it is obvious that he has the right credentials to go easily native. And this is exactly what happens to him.

> Voss was shouting in a high voice.
> ‘I forbid any man to fire, to make matters worse by shooting at this people.’
> For they were *his*.[30] (my emphasis)

Exhausted and hungry, after many moths spent between the desert and the rain forest, after having experienced the drought and the pouring rain, the cold and the hot, the explorers face a group of Aborigines. Some would like to shoot them in order to avert any danger. But Voss orders his fellows to lower their guns. He does not want anybody to harm *his* people. He uses the possessive adjective to make reference to a group of Aborigines he had never met before.

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[28] TACEY, p. xiv.
[29] TACEY, p. xv.
[30] WHITE, p. 343.

He feels kinship with them at first sight to the point that he risks his companions' lives – and has eventually Palfreyman killed – in order to defend them. He has clearly gone native. He has sunk definitively into the wilderness. "Where do I belong, if not here?"[31] Voss asks one of the natives. He is deeply fascinated, almost enchanted by those representatives of a primordial virginity:

Everybody looked, and saw a group of several blackfellows assembled in the middle distance. The light and a feather of lowlying mist made them to be standing in a cloud. Thus, elevated, their spare, elongated bodies, of burnt colours, gave to the scene a *primitive purity* that silenced most of the whites, and appealed particularly to Voss.[32] (my emphasis)

The natives appear to him as superior beings. In Voss's eyes they take up a quite godlike mien. Their sensual bodies seem to float on air and they spell who is looking at them. But Voss's enthusiasm for the natives is so strong and atypical that his fellow explorers start to be ill-disposed towards their gone-native leader. They cannot understand his "hob-nobbin' with the blacks."[33]

However, Voss's sympathy for the Aborigines is not completely unconditioned. Rather, they are necessary to his self-assertion. Like Kurtz's, Voss's closeness to the natives is inspired by a wish to rule them, to become their leader:

Voss rode across, sustained by a belief that he must communicate intuitively with those black subjects, and finally rule them with a sympathy that was above words.[34]

Indeed, the natives believe Voss has supernatural origins due the the fact that their encounter takes place during the passing of a comet. Voss becomes the "man who appeared with the snake […] and must be respected, even loved."[35] Therefore, he is welcomed in their village, he is fed and took care of. He is treated like a God, but as soon as the comet vanish, Voss's

[31] WHITE, p. 364.
[32] WHITE, p. 340.
[33] WHITE, p. 340.
[34] WHITE, p. 334.
[35] WHITE, p. 388.

divine aura vanish with it. He becomes again a man among other men, more precisely a white man among black men. Since "blackfeller dead by white man,"[36] there cannot be friendship between the two. Voss has to be killed.

Voss's "going native" is gradual. He is already inclined to it before leaving Sydney, but the deeper he penetrates into the Australian hinterland the bigger his 'heart of darkness' grows. As Cynthia Vanden Driesen noted in her essay, Voss psychological transformation into the indigenous is mirrored by his physical transformation[37]:

> Blackened and yellowed by the sun, dried in the wind, he now resembled some root, of dark and esoteric purpose. […] He was drawn closer to the landscape, the seldom motionless sea of grass, the twisted trees in grey and black, the sky ever increasing in its rage of blue; and of that landscape, always, he would become the centre.[38]

So, Voss is subjected to the influence of the bush. He would even become part of the Australian landscape, namely the centre of it. According to Bronwyn Davies, there is a connection between the human body and the landscape. Pure, savage, untouched nature is saturated with desire, a desire to merge with the surrounding environment, to get lost into it, to become part of it.[39] As the Guyanese hinterland in *Palace of the Peacock*, in *Voss* Australia turns almost into a character of the novel: it is personified. Indeed, as the only worthy opponent of Voss's *Wille zur Macht*, it need to be given human traits.[40]

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To conclude, I would like to spend some words on the painting which opens this chapter and on why I believe it is significant to it.

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[36] WHITE, p. 365.

[37] C. VANDEN DRIESEN, 'The (Ad)Missions of the Colonizer: Australian Paradigms in Selected Works of Prichard, Malouf and White' in *Missions of Interdependence: a Literary Directory*. Ed. by G. STILZ. Amsterdam: Rodopi 2002, p. 317.

[38] WHITE, p. 169.

[39] B. DAVIES, *(In)scribing Body/Landscape Relations*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press 2000, p. 13.

[40] WALSH, p. 39.

As Kurtz's, Voss and his fellows' journey into the interior is fatal. Hunger, heat, rain, and illness struck the expedition which is weakened more and more as it moves forward.

Men and beasts were grown very thin as they butted with the heads against the solid rain. Some of the men were hating one another worse than ever. Animals hate less, of course, because they have never expected more. But men grow green with hatred. […] In the condition to which they had come, the men's souls were more woundable than flesh. One or two most dispirited individuals confessed themselves that their greatest pleasure would have been to die.[41]

The conditions of the explorers are so dreadful that death becomes finally charming. At the beginning of the chapter, the painting representing Burke, Wills and King perfectly shows how the Australian inland in the 19th century could have been devastating for white explorers. The painting, indeed, represents three famous explorers who crossed Australia from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1860-61. The three of them remind me of the group of three mutineers in the novel – Judd, Turner and Ralph Angus – due to the fact that they too were separated (though the reasons were much different) from the main group. Moreover, as in White's novel, only one of them managed to survive: Burke and Wills died for starvation, King joined a group of Aborigines. In the painting the three dying men are surrounded by a dark nature. One is lying on the ground, a second one is sitting on a stone, his face sunk down, and the third one is standing, his eyes lost, his shoulders pulled down. The scene on the whole gives a sense of desolation, of surrender.

Although desired within a framework of imperial and colonial ideologies as an object to be possessed, conquered and tamed, the Australian landscape in the nationalist tradition is also a loathed and feared plain of exile which threatens mandness and defeat.[42]

The brave and daring historical figures are manifestly defeated by the wilderness. And the literary explorers imagined by White are defeated as well. The untouched and pristine Australian interior is not the romanticised heaven explorers expected and dreamed about. The

[41] WHITE, p. 267.
[42] SHAFFER, pp. 22-3.

experience of it is quite different from the mythical image created before its exploration: "the serpent has slid even into this paradise."[43]

> So the party entered the approaches to *hell*, with no sound but that of horses passing through the desert, and saltbush grating in a wind.[44] (my emphasis)

Having lost all their means the explorers just wish death to catch up with them and put an end to their suffering.

> The bush took on the characteristics of danger, particularly for the bushman of the nationalist tradition. It threatened him with assimilation, isolation and death. It represented a force which might reduce him to madness, melancholia or despair. Man's identity, which might be secured heroically by his possession and control of the land as a primary object of desire, was called into doubt by the threat of the bush as a form of the monstrous feminine.[45]

Indeed, at the end of the novel, wilderness takes the explorers' lives: Palfreyman and Harry Robarts are killed by natives; Turner and Ralph Angus die while trying to go back home; Le Mesurier commits suicide; Voss is beheaded by Jackie, one of the two Aborigines who had joined the "infernal expedition."[46] His *Wille zur Macht* is not strong enough to fight the wilderness back. The white civilized European is destined to perish because "the destructively anarchic Australian ego […] falls down into primitive depths and makes no effort to return."[47]

As in *Heart of Darkness*, the encounter between the white man and the wilderness has dreadful consequences: the white man has to perish. By contrast with Conrad's novel, however, what drives the protagonist to death is the overpowering, infite, unknown nature, rather than the encounter with native peoples. Voss cannot bear the power of such an immense and completely absorbing landscape; as a consequence he cannot but be defeated in

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[43] WHITE, p. 129.
[44] WHITE, p. 336.
[45] SHAFFER, p. 62.
[46] WHITE, p. 38.
[47] TACEY, p. xvii.

the challenge he had himself set up. Once again, the incompatibility between civilization and the wilderness is stated.

Fig. 5: SIDNEY NOLAN, *Mrs. Fraser*, 1947
Ripolin enamel on hardboard. Brisbane, Queensland Art Gallery.

CHAPTER 6

A FRINGE OF LEAVES

A Fringe of Leaves[1] is a historical novel by Patrick White. It was published in 1976 and it re-tells the story of the legendary Mrs Eliza Fraser, a white woman who lived with the Aborigines in the hinterland of Australia, and managed to go back to civilization after a while.

Though her persona has often suffered from denigration in accordance with the different accounts of her adventures, today Eliza Fraser is deemed a sort of national heroine of Australia and her myth still excites fascination.

Mrs Eliza Fraser was the wife of the Scottish captain James Fraser whose ship, the *Stirling Castle*, was wrecked during its voyage back to England. The shipwreck took place in 1836 on the south coast of Queensland. Mrs Fraser spent some thirty days at sea and fifty-two on what is today called Fraser Island – after the captain of the ship – in the company of a group of Aborigines. While at sea, Eliza Fraser lost the child she was expecting and on the island she witnessed the spearing and death of her husband. After that, she was captured by the natives, stripped naked and given a sick child to nurse. Moreover, she was forced to climb trees in search for honey, she was made to carry wood and fetch water, and she was never allowed to sleep inside the natives' shelters. Eventually, Mrs Fraser managed to escape from the natives with the help of the convict John Graham and she was rescued by a party sent in search for her from the Penal Settlement in Moreton Bay. Once in Moreton Bay Mrs Fraser

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[1] P. WHITE, *A Fringe of Leaves*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1977.

was nursed back to health and subsequently sent to Sidney. There she married Captain Alexander Greene and she followed him back to England.

Her story aroused immediately a huge sensation and different accounts of her captivity among the Aborigines appeared on newspapers all over the world.[2] "In universalistic terms, Mrs Fraser became an Everyman character, testing and transgressing the physical, spiritual and ideological boundaries between white and indigenous cultures."[3]

Sidney Nolan (1917-1992) is one of Australia's most famous painters and a contemporary of Patrick White. He was deeply fascinated with Eliza Fraser's myth to which he committed a great part of his work. The name of Sidney Nolan is so closely connected to Mrs Fraser, that the cover of the Penguin edition of *A Fringe of Leaves* lodges one of his paintings on the subject, namely *Mrs Fraser and the Convict* (1964). Hence, I deemed it proper to open this chapter with one of the most celebrated and controversial paintings by Nolan: *Mrs Fraser* (1947). The picture represents a faceless and naked Eliza Fraser in the act of collecting sticks. The woman is portrayed as a savage animal soaked into the bush, and watched at from a binocular or a gun-barrel. The landscape surrounding her is thick and impenetrable. Mrs Fraser is shown as a completely vulnerable being (more animal-like than human), stripped of her Western substance and subjected to the wilderness.[4] And this is indeed the kind of woman depicted by Patrick White in his novel.

> The pattern is […] familiar: the over-civilized woman is in search of her primitive nature, which must be brought into closer proximity to her social persona. The imagination transforms the historical facts into a wonderfully simple and lyrical tale of self-discovery, a kind of modern folk-tale with all the fascination and appeal of this genre.[5]

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[2] K. SHAFFER, *In the Wake of First Contact: The Eliza Fraser Stories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995, p. 1-8.
[3] SHAFFER, *In the Wake of First Contact*, p. 2.
[4] SHAFFER, *In the Wake of First Contact*, p. 141.
[5] TACEY, *Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious*, pp. 174-75.

A Fringe of Leaves is a tale about oppositions: nature against civilisation; the instinctual self against the social self; Ellen, the Aborigines and the escaped convict against the colonial white society; the bush against the city.[6] The female protagonist of the novel embodies all these oppositions.

Ellen Gluyas is Eliza Fraser's fictitious counterpart. She is a simple and quite uncouth farm girl from a small village in Cornwall. When she marries Austin Roxburgh, an invalid gentleman, she is educated in gentility by her mother-in-law. Hence, as Shaffer points out in her study, she is an outcast amongst the English bourgeoisie.[7] In 1936, Mrs Ellen Roxburgh follows her husband on a voyage to Van Diemen's Land (nowadays Tasmania) aiming at visiting Garnet, Austin's brother. After many hesitations, Ellen looses her natural instincts and has intercourse with her detested but attracting brother-in-law. In the autumn of the same year the Roxburghs set out from Sidney on the *Bristol Maid* in order to go back to England. However, the ship crushes against a coral reef and wrecks. The passengers and the crew manage to survive on launches, but the cabin boy and the steward die after some days and Ellen gives birth to a still-born child. When the survivors finally land, they are attacked by the natives. Among the others, Captain Purdew and Austin Roxburgh are speared.

Ellen Roxburgh is captured by the Aborigines, stripped of her clothes and treated as a slave. During a corroboree she meets an escaped convict, Jack Chance, with whom she has intercourse and who eventually rescues her by leading her to a farm close to Moreton Bay. Despite the premises for a lasting love relationship between the two, and despite Ellen's promise to release him, Jack turns back into the wilderness. Ellen is cared by the Oakes

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[6] SHAFFER, *In the Wake of First Contact,* p. 162.
[7] SHAFFER, *In the Wake of First Contact*, p. 165.

family and brought to Sidney where – at the very end of the novel – she marries an English gentleman and sets off for England.[8]

In this chapter, as it is quite clear from the plot summary, I will focus my analysis on the protagonist – Ellen Roxburgh – who is inevitably driven native as a consequence of her stay with the Aborigines. I believe it of some account, that, among the novels I dealt with in my thesis, *A Fringe of Leaves* is the only one which presents a female character going native. Indeed, from a phallocentric viewpoint, the primitive is something to be penetrated and conquered by the Western white man. The primitive and the wilderness, therefore, had to be conceived as feminine, namely as the "other" opposed to the dominant and ruling male "self."[9] In accordance to this perspective then, the wilderness is more tempting and devastating for men, while women feel more at ease in it, they are almost 'at home.' Moreover, all the novels upon which I have speculated are set in the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth centuries. At that time, it would have been quite bizarre and daring for a woman to set out alone for unexplored regions. Hence,

> when women inhabit the bush in the histories and fictional accounts, it is seldom in their own right. They appear as daughters, lovers, wives and mothers in relationship to men. This is, they are (always) already spoken for.[10]

And indeed, Ellen Roxburgh enters the wilderness as the wife of Austin Roxburgh.

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Ellen Roxburgh is a young woman who has exactly the right credentials to go native. I could venture that she is naturally predisposed to have her Western self submitted to the wilderness of the place she plunges into. This because, not only she is a nineteenth-century-woman – therefore, a subaltern –, but also a daughter of the soil raised to the glories *du beau monde*

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[8] *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, p. 283.
[9] See the introductory chapter in TORGOVNIK, *Primitive Passions*; TORGOVNIK, *Gone Primitive*, p. 205; and SHAFFER, *Women and the Bush,* pp. 1-25.
[10] SHAFFER, *Women and the Bush*, pp. 62-3.

through marriage. She was born a poor farm girl and raised in Cornwall, what English people hold for "a remote country […] of dark people."[11]

As she marries the gentleman Austin Roxburgh, she is taught to scrape away her rude country manners and to take up a suit of refinement and grace. In opposition to her erudite, inhibited and cold husband, Ellen is sensual, warm, sensitive and instinctive.[12] With his dying breath, Austin remarks indeed their fundamental difference by telling her "Ellen, you are different."[13] In order to appease her husband's mother and to suit her newly acquired position, the countrywoman has to turn into a proud gentlewoman and wife. In a society ruled by white middle-class males, Mrs Roxburgh cannot be what she wants to be, but has to transform herself into what her masters wish her to be. Therefore, she is an oppressed.[14]

Despite her efforts to conform to her new role, however, Ellen Roxburgh often hears Ellen Gluyas's call. And she answers back. "On the voyage, Ellen's natural self reasserts itself."[15] Indeed, her experience in Australia does not change her spirit; rather it pushes the real Ellen back to the surface. In other words, her "going native" does not involve a subversion and a loss of her "self," but a rediscovery of her truest nature. In the New Continent, she "lives to experience not a moment of 'pure being,' but a succession of such moments through her venture into the heart of darkness, when she is stripped of her social identity and forced to share the life of the Aboriginals."[16]

Ellen's first breakdown towards a life ruled by instincts takes place when she surrenders to her turbulent brother-in-law, the 'black sheep' of the family. With Garnet Roxburgh, Ellen can put aside her mask of respectability and meet with her repressed

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[11] WHITE, p. 12.
[12] K. GELDER, 'The Novel' in *New Literary History of Australia*. Victoria: Penguin Books 1988, p. 508.
[13] WHITE, p. 214.
[14] GIBSON, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia*, p. 226.
[15] KIERNAN, *Patrick White*, p. 128.
[16] KIERNAN, p. 129.

sexuality. She enjoys again the pleasures of her primary instincts. For Ellen, Garnet is just a means to put her back into contact with true and unaffected nature. He is "the instrument she had chosen for measuring depths she was tempted to explore."[17] Tired and oppressed by her sterile life of devoted wife, she realizes she has "lost touch with an essential instinctive vitality."[18] As a consequence, she yearns for unbounded passions. And Australia is the place where she can release her hidden self. As a matter of fact, had she met Garnet in England, nothing would have happened between them. All the events in the novel are tightly linked to the New Continent: "most of us on this island are infected," says Garnet, "you, Ellen, though you are here only by chance have symptoms of the same disease."[19]

A second moment during which she experiences a feeling of release from her bourgeois wife persona occurs when she is left alone on the sinking *Bristol Maid*:

> It was the greatest luxury to be sitting alone, to give up the many-faceted role she had been playing, it now seemed, with mounting intensity in recent months – of loyal wife, tireless nurse, courageous woman, and more unreal than any of the superficial, taken-for-granted components of this character – expectant mother.[20]

Having nobody around her, Ellen is not forced to act her role. She can just be herself, and she loves the feeling.

A further but not ultimate stripping of her Western social self takes place when she is captured by the Aborigines and she is consequently plunged into the wilderness.

> This, Ellen Roxburgh sensed, was the beginning of her martyrdom. […] Mrs Roxburgh barely flinched, not because sustained by strength or will, but because the spirit had gone out of her. She was perhaps fortunate, in that a passive object can endure more than a human being.[21]

Exhausted by hunger and tiredness, Ellen cannot but submit herself to her captors. However, in a way, her captivity will turn out to be freedom from her European persona and from

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17 WHITE, p. 104.
18 TACEY, p. 176.
19 WHITE, p. 121.
20 WHITE, p. 156.
21 WHITE, p. 217.

Western social constraints. "Ellen must escape the society of role-players wherein one suppresses one's immediate emotions and intuitions. Her liberation in Australia can begin only through direct experience of the new, uncivilised land."[22] Significantly, on her first meeting with the Aborigines, Ellen is stripped off her clothes, the visible mark of her civilized and social self. Nevertheless, her prudery is still very strong and as a consequence, she tries to hide her private parts with the fringe of leaves of the title. Moreover, to this fringe of leaves she ties her wedding ring, which stands for the ultimate link with her social persona, and during her stay with the natives she is always careful not to lose it.

> At this early stage of her Aboriginal experience […] she is not prepared for such nakedness, and she immediately covers herself with the fringe of leaves, in which she conceals her wedding ring, that final symbol of her civilised servitude. Not until she achieves complete nakedness will she have freed herself entirely from her old English-womanly roles.[23]

Eventually, after her intercourse with the convict Jack Chance, she forgets about the fringe of leaves and she loses the wedding ring: her "going native" is at that moment complete. With Jack, the convict who has gone native before her, her instincts and her sensuality get awaken and she can feel in tune with the land. According to Gibson, "the deprivation and cruelty which Ellen experiences with the Aborigines heighten her senses so that she rediscovers her most basic hungers and desires."[24] Ellen can forget her prudery and wholly embrace "a passion discovered only in a country of thorns, whips, murderers, thieves, shipwreck, and adulteresses."[25]

Ellen's "going native" is gradual. At first detached from the "monkey-women,"[26] and the "ignorant savages,"[27] frightened by her husband's murderers and disgusted by the sick

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[22] GIBSON, p. 235.
[23] GIBSON, p. 237.
[24] GIBSON, p. 237.
[25] WHITE, p. 280.
[26] WHITE, p. 218.
[27] WHITE, p. 244.

child she is forced to nurse, bit by bit she starts experiencing sympathy and closeness with the natives. Particularly, she feels at ease with the children, to the point that:

the young children might have been hers. She was so extraordinarily content she wished it could have lasted for ever, the two little bodies united in the sun with her own blackened skin-and-bones.[28]

As long as she goes native, her European inner and outer selves fall apart; her body gets dark in the sun, her words become useless and are, consequently, lost. Despite her status of captive she cannot but be moved by the amazing natural landscape.[29] "The spirit of the place, the evanescent lake, the faint whisper of stirring trees" charm her and take possession of her.[30] "For the first time since the meeting on the beach, the captive and her masters, especially the women, were united in a *common humanity*"[31] (my emphasis). Thus, the Aborigines are not beasts or some kind of beings at an intermediate stage between animals and men. They are human being as well as the most civilized Europeans. I would like now to look closely at this issue.

At the beginning of the novel a creepy story is told by an Australian middle-class man:

'It appears, […] that two shepherds in a remote corner of the run had fallen foul of the natives. Some matters […] of women. […] The two men – honest fellers both of 'em – had just been found, their guts laid open. […] Stone cold, they were, an' the leg missin' off of one of 'em – a mere lad from Taunton, Somerset.'[32]

The story shocks the two ladies listening; the idea of cannibalism arouses horror, although a "fascinated horror." One of the two women – Mrs Merivale – is so upset by the story that she cannot understand it completely. In fact, she cannot believe somebody could eat human flesh, she cannot figure out how it is even possible to conceive such a dreadful deed. She refuses to understand because here "human nature is concerned."[33] So, although cannibalism borders on

[28] WHITE, p. 230.
[29] WHITE, pp.120-21.
[30] WHITE, p. 246.
[31] WHITE, p. 234.
[32] WHITE, p. 20.
[33] WHITE, p. 20.

bestiality, Aborigines are given the status of proper human beings. This splendid quote from *Heart of Darkness* seems to me significant at this point:

> It was unearthly, and the men were – *No, they were not inhuman*. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – the suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; *but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar*. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from the night of first ages – could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything – because everything is in it, all the past as well as the future. [34] (my emphasis)

In other words, the greatest fear of the European man is to recognize the primitive as human as himself. Though their bearing and their appearance is reminiscent of animals, they cannot be denied the status of human beings. To acknowledge the savage as a human being is to put him at the same level as the civilized man, and to imply also that there is no fundamental difference between the two; even worse: that the civilized Western man could be able to commit the same dreadful deeds the savages are charged with. And indeed, in a *Fringe of Leaves*, that act incomprehensible to Mrs Merivale is carried out by the respectable wife of an English gentleman.

Ellen's kinship with the Aborigines is strengthen by her act of cannibalism: blinded by hunger, she takes the bone of a young girl which the natives had left on the ground and eats it. The human bone not only nourishes "her animal body," but also "some darker need of the hungry spirit."[35] She puts aside her Christian principles and she becomes convinced that she has partaken some sacred act. Although many times on the verge of sharing her secret, Ellen never confesses her horrible deed to anybody. Indeed, she fears to be unable to convey "the sacramental aspect of what could only appear a repellent and inhuman act."[36]

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[34] CONRAD, *Heart of Darkness*, pp. 44-5.
[35] WHITE, p. 245.
[36] WHITE, p. 283.

This act of cannibalism reminded me of a tale by Joseph Conrad, namely 'Falk: A Reminiscence.' Falk is a seaman who confesses having eaten human flesh as a result of many days spent adrift. Although this dreadful act was carried out due to his wish to survive – so, in order not to die –, those listening to Falk's story cannot understand how even the possibility to commit such a barbaric deed could enter somebody's mind, because:

> The duty of a human being was to starve, *Falk therefore was a beast, an animal*; base, low, vile, despicable, shameless, and deceitful. […] However, […] Falk must have gone mad quite recently; for no sane person, without necessity, uselessly, for no earthly reason, and regardless of another's self-respect and peace of mind, would own to having devoured human flesh.[37] (my emphasis)

The story told by Falk is unbelievable because nobody on earth would ever confess such a deed. Finally, however, the narrator is persuaded that all is true:

> When I looked at him I doubted the story – but the remembrance of Falk's words, looks, gestures, invested it not only with an air of reality but with the absolute truth of *primitive passions*.[38] (my emphasis)

Hence, the drive towards cannibalism is a "primitive passion," that is to say, it is not inhuman; rather it is in everybody's heart although buried under layers of civilization.

To go back to our Ellen, once in Moreton Bay, when asked by Captain Lovell whether she took part in the Aboriginal corroboree or not she answers:

> 'As much as a woman is expected to. It is the men who perform. The women only accompany them, by chanting, and by slapping on their thighs. Oh yes, I joined in, because *I was one of them*.'[39] (my emphasis)

Mrs Roxburgh displays familiarity with the natives' habits. Moreover she perceives herself as part of the group of natives which captured her. She says she "was one of them." For this reason, she had to take part in the ritual dance: because they were her people. Her statement is

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[37] J. CONRAD, 'Falk: A Reminiscence,' in *Typhoon and Other Stories*. London Penguin Books 1992, pp. 221-22.
[38] CONRAD, 'Falk,' p. 222.
[39] WHITE, p. 328.

clearly reminiscent of Voss ordering his fellow explorers not to shoot the Aborigines and making reference to them as *his people* (see Chapter 5).

Her "going native" is so tough that, at the very end of the novel, Mrs Roxburgh fears her "return to the world." Before leaving for Sidney she hesitates: she would like to go back among the savages because she feels now more akin to the Aborigines than to the sophisticated and hypocritical colonial gentry.

> If she hesitated to celebrate her longed-for release becoming actual fact, it was because she could not ignore a future fraught with undefined contingencies. Had the walls but opened at a certain moment, she might even have turned and run back into the bush, choosing the known perils, and nakedness rather than an alternative of shame disguised.[40]

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I really appreciate Tacey's association of Ellen with the mythical Persephone. In accordance with this mythical reference, as the Greek goddess was constantly moving between the upper and the lower worlds, Ellen is crossing the boundaries between civilization and the wilderness, between culture and raw nature.[41] In other words, she is moving between the upper and the lower worlds as well. Born a farmer's daughter, she is transplanted into gentry through marriage; as a proud and refined gentlewoman, then, she slides into the wilderness; eventually, she is rescued from savage life and brought back to civilization; at the end of the novel, finally, she re-enters the gentry by marrying another gentleman. In this way she regains her status of refined wife and her place in Western society.

Hence, Ellen is a complex and contradictory character who straddles two realities, "two incompatible worlds."[42] She arises out of a number of distinctions between "self" and "other." Indeed, she belongs to both (and neither) the peasantry and the bourgeoisie, to nature and culture, to the instincts and reason, to a pagan and a Christian heritage. Unlike the more

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[40] WHITE, p. 354.
[41] TACEY, p.175.
[42] WHITE, p. 335.

static characters in the novel, Ellen is a multifaceted character struggling with her contradictory selves.[43]

What Patrick White wants to convey through Ellen Roxburgh's characterization is an image of what the emerging Australian society should have been. On the contrary, the representatives of the colonial society White present in his novel are shaped as vapid, shallow, arid, repressed and lifeless. Nevertheless, THEY are the fathers of contemporary Australia, which is the product of 19th century colonialism. When White returned to Australia after his stay in England he was disappointed by what he called "the Great Australian Emptiness,"[44] that is, the void created by out of place socio-cultural mechanisms. According to White, what should constitute the individual, instead of being the fulfilment of his/her obligations inside a materialistic and hypocritical society, should be "the universal, pre-social and individual aspects of the existential self."[45] In this sense, I believe White's narrative is meant to prove that the the Australian wilderness could have been used to renew contact with those lost instincts revealing the human being's truest nature. If the European colonizers would have let them, Aborigines could have helped them to find the right way of living in Australia.

Australia ended up to become a Europe transplanded overseas, so that Australian society was shaped as the mirror of an old society built and nurtured for a complitely different environment. The European man adapted Australia to himself; contrariwise, HE was the one who had to adapt to Australia. In accordance with this perspective, Ellen comes to represent the opportunity missed by the colonizers in Australia: the opportunity to get rid of shallow social structures and to enjoy a life ruled by instincts and in tune with the landscape.

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[43] SHAFFER, p. 160.
[44] P. WHITE, 'The Prodigal Son' in *Patrick White Speaks*. Sydney: Primavera Press 1989, p. 15.
[45] SHAFFER, *In the Wake of First Contact*, p. 162.

However,

The contsruction of Ellen Gluyas Roxburgh as the tie to man's sacred and primordial past is a mythic representation of Woman which remains embadded within the White Man's Story.[46]

In other words, despite her being the involuntary forerunner of a new Australian identity, her example is doomed to have no echo. From the beginning, Ellen is destined to go back to civilization and to put on again the role imposed to her by a men-ruled society. She has no choice. She never had. She did not chose herself to enter the wilderness and she cannot chose to stay in it. She had the possibility to enjoy a short interlude into the wilderness among other subalterns (the natives and the convict) but she has to go back because she is not allowed to reject her social duties.

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To conclude this chapter I would like to spend some words on the difference between men's and women's "going native."

According to David Tacey, in White's novels, Australia is "the destroyer of *masculine consciousness*, a continental matrix which overcomes the personality"[47] (my emphasis). In a way, the Australian continent stands for the unconscious of the colonizers. It is "primitive, hostile and devouring," it threatens the civilized self. Suffice it to think of Voss. However, White's female characters experience Australia in a quite different way: "they benefit from the very experiences which destroy men."[48] Instead of being a threat to their existence, Australia is a world where women can get rid of their subordinate roles and enjoy freedom and contact with primordial forces. Voss is defeated by the wilderness, Ellen survives. According to Marianna Torgovnik:

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[46] SHAFFER, *In the Wake of First Contact*, p. 167.
[47] TACEY, p. 174.
[48] TACEY, p. 174.

Women […] often cast off (rather than protected) models of selfhood that were completely normative back home. Often, the women cultivated precisely what men […] repressed: strong attachment to, even identification with, animal life or the land. Perhaps because they had less of a stake in the norms of their culture and received less reinforcement from them, women tended to speak out loud what men only whispered: *contact with the primitive can provide an "out" from Western patterns of thought and action felt to be limiting or oppressive*, such as nuclear families and their obligations. It can trigger self-transformation and the experience of dissolved hierarchies and boundaries.[49] (my emphasis)

Torgovnik's point, as I anticipated in the introductory chapter, is that while men are deeply bound to their role of representatives of the dominant class, women can easily surrender to the wilderness because they do not have anything to lose back home.

In isolated locales or remote households, the women could avoid communities whose conventions demanded domesticity and mildness in females. At the same time, because they were women and not men, they did not have a place in the imperial, governmental, or bureaucratic structures that absorb or reward men. They had no "careers" […], no promotions or newspaper contracts or missions to fulfil, no boss to answer in Europe. They were *free* to establish relationships with the land and its people outside the norms.[50] (my emphasis)

So, in remote countries women are freer. Free from their oppressive roles and free to invent a new existence in tune with the surrounding environment. In Australia, a woman "can escape the servile duties which have been imposed upon her because of her sex."[51] There she can enjoy the pleasures offered by the land, she can wholly embrace her newly gained freedom from a male-ruled society. A passage from *A Fringe of Leaves* seems to me interesting in this regard:

Oh the *blackness* in which it is never possible to distinguish the outline of a beloved form, or know the wife of one's choosing! No wonder that *a state of doubt, anguish, even terror*, should exist, to explore which might prove disastrous. I am from time to time *the original Abyss into which I must restrain my rational self from plunging* for fear of the consequences.[52] (my emphasis)

These are words which Mr Roxburgh locks in his journal. He confesses he feels the charming lure of the "original Abyss," that is, the wild call of his unconscious buried under layers of civilization – but always there, at the bottom of his heart. While on Fraser Island, he starts

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[49] TORGOVNIK, *Primitive Passions*, pp. 16-7.
[50] TORGOVNIK, p. 86.
[51] GIBSON, p. 236.
[52] WHITE, p. 61.

wandering alone with "no purpose or direction, kicking at the solid though harsh ground for the simple pleasure of renewing acquaintance with primordial substance."[53] So, he also experiences the lure of the wilderness. However, he is able to keep himself off from merging with it. His fear to lose his rational self is too strong. What the Australian continent arouses in his heart is a sense of "doubt, anguish, even terror." A "terror" which calls for Kurtz's famous "horror" in *Heart of Darkness*, for that experienced by Donne and his companions in *Palace of the Peacock* (see Chapter 3) and for Yusuf's own "terror" in Gurnah's *Paradise* (see Chapter 4). An anguish which calls for Marlow's one and for Donne's "anxiety" (see Chapter 3). Again, Mr Roxburgh writes in his diary that Australia is the "emptier and more hostile country," a thought which Ellen does not share "because of the fanciful, or 'romantic,' streak in her nature."[54]

Briefly, *A Fringe of Leaves* exemplifies Torgovnik's main idea in *Primitive Passions*: while men can stand on the very verge of the wilderness but are unable to make the final step, women are freer to merge with it. Nevertheless, their merging cannot but be temporary: although not by their own choice, women are bound to go back to civilization.

[53] WHITE, p. 185.
[54] WHITE, p. 61.

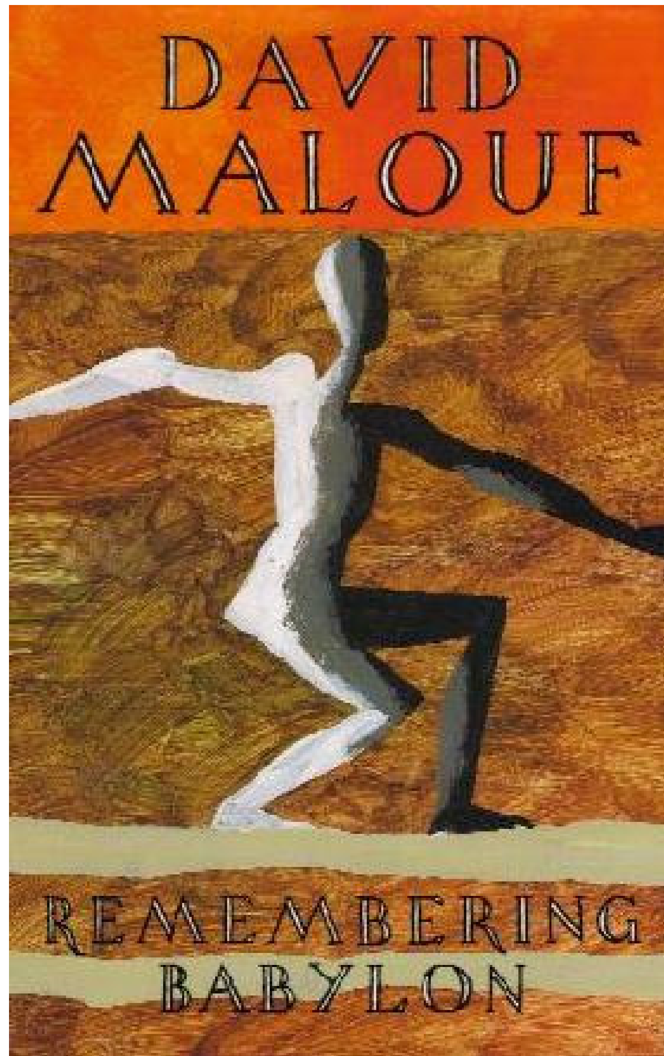

Fig. 6: JEFF FISHER, Cover Illustration of David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, Chatto and Windus edition, 1993.

CHAPTER 7

REMEMBERING BABYLON

The last novel I will deal with originates in the Australian context too. David Malouf (1934-) is internationally recognized as one of the most talented contemporary Australian writers. Born in Brisbane of Lebanese and English parents, he studied at the University of Queensland. At the age of 25, he left Australia for London where he worked as a teacher. In 1968, he went back to Australia and taught English at the University of Sydney. Now he is a full-time writer and lives partly in Australia and partly in Tuscany.

Malouf is an extraordinarily fruitful and diverse writer: he published a number of novels, among which *An Imaginary Life* (1978), *The Great World* (1990), *Remembering Babylon* (1993), and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996) are the best known; six volumes of verse; some novellas; a group of autobiographical essays; a play, *Blood Relations* (1988); five collections of short stories; and some librettos, among which the libretto of Richard Meale's opera, *Voss*, based on White's famous novel.[1]

Divided into 20 chapters, *Remembering Babylon*[2] is a historical novel set in the mid-19th century in a remote European settlement in Queensland, some twelve miles from Bowen, Australia. Although only 200 pages in length, the novel is, in a way, an Australian epic about racial hostility at a moment of national beginnings; namely, an epic about fear and about the

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[1] W. H. WILDE, J. HOOTON and B. ANDREWS, Eds., *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature, 2nd ed.* Melbourne: Oxford University Press 1994.
[2] D. MALOUF, *Remembering Babylon*. London: Vintage 1994.

impossibility for the white settlers to accept the "otherness" of natives.[3] It is centred on issues raised by binary oppositions, such as "centre and periphery, wild and civilised, self and other."[4] "Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not," claims the epitaph quoted from William Blake, *The Four Zoas* (1807). In other words, is Australia a heavenly place where people of different races live in step with each other, or is it a chaotic place whose inhabitants constantly fight?

Remembering Babylon tells the story of Gemmy Fairley, a twenty-nine-year-old man who has been living sixteen years into the Australian bush, with a group of Aborigines, and who suddenly bursts into a European settlement. Although Malouf derives inspiration from a real experience concerning a certain Gemmy Morril – named at the end of the book – the facts narrated are fictitious.

The novel opens with a pastoral and almost idyllic scene: three children – Lachlan, Janet and Meg – are playing at the edge of a paddock, pretending to be in a forest in Russia, when they see "something extraordinary."[5] An undefined figure approaches them and immediately the children mistaken it for "a black." However, as "the thing" comes closer, it seems not even human to them;[6] they are scared, they do not know how to react, except that the boy, Lachlan, takes a stick and holds it as a pretend gun. Then, "the creature" stutters: "Do not shoot […] I am a B-b-british object!"[7] This extraordinary person turns out to be a white man who, after a shipwreck, had been rescued by some Aborigines with whom he has spent 16 years in the Australian bush. During those years Gemmy has learnt Aboriginal ways and slowly forgot the English ones.

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[3] J. SEMPRUCH, 'Philosophical Encounters with Identity: David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*' in *Antipodes 19*, no. l, 2005, p. 44.
[4] *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature, 2nd ed.*
[5] MALOUF, p. 1.
[6] MALOUF, p. 2.
[7] MALOUF, p. 3.

As he breaks into the settlement he arises a great sensation. Indeed, even if he is welcomed by the McIvors, a Scottish family newly settled in Australia, the community does not trust him because they fear he could be still in contact with his native friends. Moreover, they cannot recognize Gemmy as fully white: he has took up savage modes and he has even forgotten the English language.

Is he white or is he black? This is the chief matter: his in-betweennes, his hybridity scare the white settlers. The tensions his presence creates are so deep that an uproar breaks out when Gemmy is visited by two Aborigines, and some whites injure him. In order to avoid other fights, "the black white man"[8] is sent to live in the more distant house of Mrs Hutchence, from where he suddenly disappears into the wilderness. Presumably, he rejoins the Aborigines. The last chapter of the novel is a sort of epilogue and it is set fifty years later, during the First World War: Janet has become a nun, Lachlan a prominent politician and has unsuccessfully looked for Gemmy for years.

In this chapter I will focus my analysis on one of the protagonists, Gemmy, who is a sort of male version of Ellen Roxburgh. Like *A Fringe of Leaves*' protagonist, indeed, Gemmy goes native as a consequence of his stay among the Aborigines, and he eventually goes back to civilization. However, by contrast with White's character, Malouf's protagonist turns back to the wilderness.

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Right from the beginning of the novel, Gemmy makes his appearance as a "body" literally balancing "between two realms."[9] As a matter of fact, when the boy Lachlan confronts him with his pretend gun, Gemmy straddles on the fence separating the settlement and the

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[8] MALOUF, p. 10.
[9] J. BESTON, 'David Malouf' in *A Companion to Australian Literature Since 1900*. Ed. by N. BIRNS and R. McNEER. New York: Camden House 2007, p. 260.

unknown world. The fence is a symbolic liminal space which stands for the threshold between civilization and the wilderness: it is both a concrete and metaphorical barrier.

So unfamiliar is Gemmy's mien that in the first three pages of the book he is referred to with the pronoun "it." In other words, he is not even given the status of human being.

> [Gemmy] was hopping and flapping towards them out of a world over there, beyond the no-man's land of the swamp, that was *the abode of everything savage and fearsome*, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents' too, of *nightmare rumours, superstitions* and all that belonged to *Absolute Dark*.[10] (my emphasis)

Briefly, the three children are frightened of Gemmy because he is springing out from the very 'heart of darkness,' the world of "Absolute Dark," that is to say, a world inhabited by unknown and potentially dangerous beings. "Even in full sunlight it was impenetrable dark."[11]

Hence, the division between the two worlds, between the familiar territory and the mysterious hinterland, between safety and danger is stated right at the beginning of the novel. For the settlers, danger is what comes from outside the fence, which is the physical barrier against any potential threat.[12] The world outside the enclosed settlement, namely the Australian immense outback, is the world of the Aborigines, of "otherness", alienation and exile.[13] Gemmy's entering the protected area from the wide outer area arouses the deepest fear in the white man: the threat of the blacks' invasion.

This fear is so strong because the settlement at issue has not long been established: "most unnerving of all was the knowledge that, just three years back, the very patch of earth you were standing on had itself been on the other side of things, part of the unknown."[14] Hence, the white settlement is a small and newly founded civilized island in the middle of a

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[10] MALOUF, pp. 2-3.
[11] MALOUF, p. 8.
[12] C. EGERER, *Fictions of (In)Betweenness*. Göteborg 1996, pp. 121-22.
[13] J. TULIP, 'David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*: Issues of Race and Spiritual Transformation' in *"And the Birds Began to Sing": Religion and Literature in Post-Colonial Cultures*. Ed. by J. S. SCOTT. Amsterdam: Rodopi 1996, p. 69.
[14] MALOUF, p. 9.

dangerous wilderness which is supposed to have still some power over it. Indeed, "the sense of being submerged, of being hidden away in the depths of the country, but also lost, was very strong"[15] among the settlers. The natives inhabiting the no man's land are a menace, they are "thinshanked, dusty, undignified" creatures; the life they live is "so squalid and flea-ridden" that it inspires "nothing but a kind of horror at what human nature might in its beginnings spring from, *and in such a place so easily sink back to*"[16] (my emphasis). So, the community of settlers fears the possibility to be influenced by the place and to go native, in other words, to regress to a barbaric stage of life.

As soon as he is identified as a white man, Gemmy is offered a shelter by the McIvors. But most of the settlers do not accept him and the difference he embodies.

It brought you slap up against a *terror* you thought you had learned, years back, to treat as childish: the Bogey, the Coal Man, Absolute Night. And now here it is, not two yards away, solid and breathing: a thing beside which all you have ever known of darkness, of visible darkness, seems but the merest shadow, and all you can summon up to the encounter, out of a lifetime lived on the other, the lighter side of things […] weakens and falls away before the apparition, out of nowhere, of a figure taller perhaps than you are and of a sooty blackness beyond black, utterly still, very close, yet so far off, even at a distance of five feet, that you cannot conceive how it can be here in the same space, the same moment with you.[17] (my emphasis)

The feeling Gemmy's presence arises in the settlers' community is a feeling of "terror." This "terror" (as well as the "horror" in the previous quotation) is a primordial fear for the "other" *par excellence*: "the Bogey, the Coal Man, Absolute Night." Briefly, the black man. The white man, who has been living in "the lighter side of things," is terrified by the proximity of darkness, namely, by Gemmy, the child of darkness.

By trespassing the threshold between civilization and the wilderness,

Gemmy does not simply transgress boundaries and divisions, he challenges the way the settlers construct the world in terms of difference and division. Throughout the novel Gemmy is a scandal to the small community of Scots settlers in Queensland, who are fearful of all that is not like themselves. They see Gemmy as the Other which has somehow come to inhabit one of Them and thus their community, a kind of bedraggled and bewildered Trojan Horse in white human form, which has penetrated the pitiful defences of their little fortress.

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[15] MALOUF, p. 9.
[16] MALOUF, p. 51.
[17] MALOUF, pp. 42-3.

Because he is both subject and object, both active and passive, both European and Aboriginal, he challenges the distinctions, the differences, with which they try to maintain their identity.[18]

So, Gemmy's presence is challenging all Western points of reference. The differences set by the Western civilization, its assumptions of superiority are smashed down by somebody whose body is the concrete and visible proof of the mingling of the opposites. Gemmy's experience evinces that the "other" can take possession and inhabit the "self"; that the white man can go native.

And the *horror* it carries to you is not just the smell, in your own sweat, of a half-forgotten swamp-world going back deep in both of you, but that for him, as you meet here face to face in the sun, you and all you stand for have not yet appeared over the horizon of the world, so that after a moment all the wealth of it goes dim in you, then is cancelled altogether, and you meet at last in a *terrifying equality* that strips the last rags from your soul and leaves you so far out on the edge of yourself that your fear now is that you may never get back.[19] (my emphasis)

This is a remarkable passage. In it Malouf conveys the immensity and simplicity of the "horror" which springs from the contact between civilization and the wilderness. It is an immense horror because it emerges from the white man's greatest fear; at the same time it is a simple horror because it is not caused by atrocious and unspeakable acts, rather by the mere proximity to the "other." Even worse, by the mere proximity to someone who used to be "white" and turned into "other." In other words, somebody who used to be civilized and went native. Gemmy Fairley is the living and dreadful proof that all the differences between colonizer and colonized, ruler and ruled, civilized and savage can be deleted. He "raises the spectre of what the unknown country might do to [the white settlers]."[20] Gemmy embodies the "threat of excess, of having gone too far."[21] The white man is frightened by the possibility to "stand on the edge" of himself and to fall into darkness with no way back. I want to stress the

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[18] A. TAYLOR, 'Origin, Identity and the Body in David Malouf's Fiction' in *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 19, Issue 1, May 1999, p. 11.
[19] MALOUF, p. 43.
[20] EGERER, p. 124.
[21] P. INGRAM, 'Racializing Babylon: Settler Whiteness and the "New Racism"' in *New Literary History*, Vol. 32, No. 1, Winter 2001, p. 169.

fact that once again we find the words "horror" and "terror" in reference to the outcome of the encounter between civilization and the wilderness. Kurtz, Marlow, Donne and his companions, Austin Roxburgh, and Yusuf. All of them, in different moments and under different circumstances, experience the same feelings when facing the wilderness: "horror" and "terror".

Gemmy is a hybrid being. He is neither black nor white and at the same time he is both. He inhabits a liminal space both inside the settlers' community and inside the Aboriginal tribe. When native Australians first see him lying on the shore, his appearance is so different from what they are used to that they mistake him for a sea-creature:

> What was it? A sea-creature of a kind they had never seen before from the depths beyond the reef? A spirit, a feeble one, come back from the dead and only half reborn?
> The flesh was raw, covered with white flower-like ulcers where the salt had got in, opening mouths that as the soft water touched them lifted pale tentacles. […] The eyes were open upon something. Not us, they thought. Not them, but some other world, or life, out of which the creature, whatever it was, sea-calf or spirit, was still emerging.[22]

This passage reminded me of *The Tempest*, namely the scene when Trinculo mistakes Caliban for a fish ("What have we here? a man or a fish? dead or alive? A fish: he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell"[23]). So, for the natives who had never seen a white man before, Gemmy is a Caliban in reverse order. His features call for some mysterious creature come out from the sea depths. In a community of blacks, it is the white man who is "other." Therefore, it is him who has to conform to the majority and who needs to be ruled, taught and guided. As well as the three children in the first pages of the novel did, at first sight the Aborigines do not deem Gemmy human due to his unfamiliar physical mien.

Gradually, however, Gemmy takes up the natives' modes and, apparently, the changing process is quite easy, even natural. This is due to his background. As a matter of

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[22] MALOUF, pp. 22-3.
[23] SHAKESPEARE , *The Tempest*, II.ii.24-6.

fact, in England Gemmy Fairley was an outcast boy, oppressed and afraid of his master Willett. According to Jo Jones, Malouf depicts him as a Dickensian child,[24] exploited as a worker in a saw mill, and deeply traumatised. Australia gives Gemmy the possibility to start a new life. When he is rescued by the Aborigines he is only thirteen years old, therefore, the enculturation process is favoured by the children's ability to absorb and assimilate everything surrounding them. "Young enough to learn and to be shaped as if for the first time, he was young enough also to forget."[25] He quickly forgets English and learns the language of the natives. Moreover, since he used to be a street-wise child, he can readily adapt to every kind of situation in order to survive.

> So he began his life among them. […] He was a child, with a child's quick capacity to take things in and the street child's gift of mimicry. They were astonished at the swiftness with which he learned their speech, and once a thing had been pointed out to him, how keen his eyes were. Relying on a wit that was instinctive in him and had been sharpened under harder circumstances than these, he let himself be gathered into a world which, though he was alarmed at first by its wildness, proved no different in essence from his previous one.[26]

In other words, Gemmy's experience in England facilitates his assimilation inside the Aboriginal tribe. The urban wildness is, indeed, not so different from the Australian outback's one.

As I already wrote, the whites scarcely recognize Gemmy as human. Even after the evidence of his being British they struggle to consider him one of them:

> It was a white man, though there was no way you could have known it from his look. He had the mangy, half-starved look of a black, and when, with a cry, he lost his grip on the rail and came tumbling at their feet, the smell of one too, like dead swamp-water.[27]

He is the same and different at once. His double nature is appalling: "it was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing to

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[24] J. JONES, 'Ambivalence, Absence and Loss in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*' in *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 24, Issue 2, 2009, p. 74.
[25] MALOUF, p. 26.
[26] MALOUF, pp. 25-6.
[27] MALOUF, p. 3.

them, since at any moment he could show either one face or the other."[28] He is more treacherous than a black because it is not clear on whose side he stands. The only thing to be done is to strip him "of every vestige of the native."[29] He is "a parody of a white man"[30] and the white settlers start wondering if he could ever re-gain access to the white community, if could inhabit again "the lighter side of things."

Poor bugger, he had got lost, and as just a bairn too. It was a duty they owed to what they were, or claimed to be, to bring him back, if it was feasible, to being a white man. *But was it feasible?* He had been with them, quite happily it appeared, for more than half his life: living off the land, learning their lingo and all their secrets, all the abominations they went in for.[31] (my emphasis)

The heart of the matter is clear: is it possible to go native and to come back to civilization, not only physically, but also psychologically? The Western culture has been almost completely uprooted from Gemmy and it has been replaced by the primitive. Is it feasible now to do the opposite: to uproot the primitive from him and transplant the Western culture back?

He had started out white. […] But had he remained white? […] Could you lose it? Not just language, but *it. It.* For the fact was, when you looked at him sometimes he was not white. His skin might be but not his features. The whole cast of his face gave him the look of one of Them. […] In taking on, by second nature as it were, this new language of looks and facial gestures, he had lost his white man's appearance, especially for white men who could no longer see what his looks intended, and become in their eyes black. [32] (emphasis in the original)

What is that *it*, repeated twice and stressed in italics? That pronoun stands for 'whiteness.' For the European settlers *it* "embodies the entire register of their identity as white people, their whole civilization, home, and as such it signifies everything that distinguishes them from the natives at the other end of the line, still submerged in the primeval mud of the dawn of civilization."[33]

[28] MALOUF, p. 43.
[29] MALOUF, p. 10.
[30] MALOUF, p. 39.
[31] MALOUF, p. 40.
[32] MALOUF, pp. 40-1.
[33] EGERER, p. 133.

Hence, the question which the presence of Gemmy raises is: is it really possible for a white man to lose his 'whiteness'? That is, is it possible to undergo a process of total deculturation? This is the white men great fear: the fear to get their selves lost into the wilderness; the fear to have their Western culture wholly erased and replaced by the primitive. Briefly, the fear to go native. They know that the surroundings are powerful, they know they are colonizing a place which "had not yet revealed all its influences upon them,"[34] and which can colonize them instead. Anthropology teaches that, in the space of millions years, the human being adapts himself (body and mind) to the environment. The Australian settlers are afraid that this process could be fastened in such a savage country, and affect them directly. "Wasn't it true […] that white men who stayed too long in China were inclined to develop, after a time, the slanty eyes and flat faces of your yellow man, the Chinese?"[35]

Gemmy is the proof that the environment affects people. He is "an in-between creature",[36] a "black white man",[37] a "white black man".[38] I believe the image on the cover of the Chatto and Windus 1993 edition of *Remembering Babylon* (Fig. 6) represents quite well Gemmy's nature. The illustrator, Jeff Fisher, draws a stylized human figure and fills it with three different and significant colours: white, grey and black. Evidently, the white part stands for Gemmy 'Europeanness' and the black one for his acquired 'primitiveness.' He cannot be either completely white or completely black, rather the two identities embrace in his person creating a grey area too. "Gemmy is the occupant of a hybrid space through which insights into both worlds are mediated."[39] He is "a transitional object"[40] carrying the proof that the two colonial opponents can stick together and create a new Australian identity.

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[34] MALOUF, p. 41.
[35] MALOUF, p. 41.
[36] MALOUF, p. 28.
[37] MALOUF, p. 10.
[38] MALOUF, p. 69.
[39] C. VANDEN DRIESEN, 'The (Ad)Missions of the Colonizer,' p. 313.

As Mr Frazer – the minister – sees him, Gemmy is a forerunner in that he embodies what the new Australian man should be: "He is no longer a white man, or a European, whatever his birth, but a true child of the place as it will one day be."[41] The Western settlers are wrong when they try to mould Australia on a European shape. They are not able to grasp the continent's natural wealth. They try to change the land, using the ways familiar to them, in order to make it flourish. But they simply do not see what is in front of them: a blossomed and blessed country.

> It is habitable already. I think of our early settlers, starving on this shores, in the midst of plenty they did not recognize, in a blessed nature of flesh, fowl, fruit that was all around them and which they could not, with their English eyes, perceive, since the very habit and faculty that makes apprehensible to us what is known and expected dulls our sensitivity to other forms, even the most obvious.[42]

That is to say, man is prisoner of his own culture. He is naturally led to ethnocentrism, that is to say – as Montaigne pointed in his essays (see Introduction) – he believes his own culture the only true and right one. Consequently, he considers what is unfamiliar to him faulty and in need of improvements. Therefore, he transplants known patterns onto unknown objects. Australia is one of these 'objects.' But Australia does not need to be re-shaped, it is already rich in whatever means man might need. Only, the white European man is not able to look beyond his cultural standards and to open his eyes onto Australian beauties.

Rather than re-shaping the land, the Western man should re-shape himself in order to be in tune with the Australian landscape. The emerging Australian society should not be the copy of the European one, but a new society harmoniously adapted to the environment. That is, a society made of men and women able to give up old modes, which are no use in the new territory, in order to grasp and enjoy what the new continent has to offer.

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[40] K GELDER and P. SALZMAN, *After the Celebration: Australian Fiction 1989-2007*. Victoria: Melbourne University Press 2009, p. 66.
[41] MALOUF, p. 132.
[42] MALOUF, pp. 129-30.

To conclude, the message Malouf’s novel delivers to the reader is similar to that deliverd by White in *A Fringe of Leaves*: European colonizers were wrong in their try to mould Australia under Western shapes; what needed to be changed was not the Australia, but themselves.

> That is what is intended by our coming here: to make this place too part of the world’s garden, but by changing ourselves rather than it and adding thus to the richness and variety of things.[43]

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[43] MALOUF, p. 132.

CONCLUSION

It is necessary and right now to piece everything together and to come to a conclusion. Of the seven postcolonial novels I analysed in my thesis, three are by different Caribbean, and strictly Guyanese writers; one by a writer from the East Africa; and three are by two Australian writers. The first of the seven novels at issue was published in 1957 (*Voss*), the last one in 1997 (*The Ventriloquist's Tale*). All the novels are set in the 19th and in the first half of the 20th century, hence, before the end of colonialism. In order to start drawing my conclusions, I would like to list briefly the differences among the characters I dealt with.

On the one hand, some of the characters *go voluntarily native*, that is, they consciously reject civilization in favour of the wilderness. In other words, they start their "going native" process with the intent to let the primitive in. McKinnon travels to the interior of Guyana with the purpose to start a new life among the natives; he enjoys the pleasures which the primitive can offer and conforms to Wapisiana habits. The "legendary European" decides to settle in the heart of Africa and adapts himself to the environment; he feels at ease in it and builds his empire there. Voss leaves his native Germany and the bourgeois Sydney, where he does not feel at ease, in order to get dissolved into the Australian alluring landscape. Gemmy Fairley returns to the bush after he realizes he does not belong to the European settlement in Australia.

On the other hand, some other characters *go involuntarily native*, that is, they do not choose to set out for the wilderness but they find themselves in fortuitous circumstances which plunge them into it. They cannot, however, resist its spell. Father Napier goes native as

a result of food poisoning. Hector Bradshaw becomes a "young savage" due to his father's forcing him to move to Tarlogie. Donne reconsiders his life due the influences the Guyanese interior exerts on him. Ellen Roxburgh and Gemmy Fairley join groups of Aborigines as a consequence of shipwrecks.

On the one hand, a few characters *fear the "going native" process*. Donne and his companions are frightened by the wilderness surrounding them in the Guyanese hinterland, which is a source of "fear and anxiety and horror and peril." Mr Roxburgh is afraid of losing his rational self in the vastness of the Australian continent. The community of settlers in *Remembering Babylon* fear the might be influenced by the surroundings.

On the other hand, most of the characters *fancy the "going native" process.* McKinnon wishes to change his life, he is fascinated by the primitive and he feels the lure of the Amerindian women's bodies. At the end, Donne yearns for a new communion with the Amerindians. Voss's driving force is his nihilistic impulse to merge with the Australian wilderness. Ellen Roxburgh starts enjoying her existence when sharing her life with the Aborigines. Gemmy Fairley prefers the wilderness to civilization.

On the one hand, some characters go native due to the *contact with native peoples*. McKinnon takes up native modes as a consequence of his living among the Wapisiana. Hector Bradshaw turns into a wild boy because he is subjected to the influence of the people surrounding him, and especially because he takes part in a pagan native dance. By reason of her stay among the Aborigines, Ellen Roxburgh becomes a savage to the point that she commits an act of cannibalism. Gemmy Fairley gradually 'loses his whiteness' and is turned into a savage by his proximity with groups of native Australians.

On the other hand, some other characters go native through the *influence of the landscape*, which exerts an invisible and powerful spell and which often takes up human traits. Father Napier goes native because of food poisoning and is made hallucinate by it and

the surrounding savage environment. The "legendary European" changes his life to survive in an environment totally different from his native one. Donne is subjected to the spell of the wilderness and, as a consequence, he radically modifies his *Weltanschauung*. Voss is obsessed by savage and unexplored Australia, the only entity which can oppose his Nietzschean *Wille zur Macht*.

On the one hand, a few characters decide to *stay in the wilderness*. The "legendary European" settles his home in the African hinterland. Donne, presumably, joins the Amerindians in "the palace of the peacock" above the waterfall. Gemmy Fairley turns back to Aboriginal Australia.

On the other hand, most of the characters eventually *leave the wilderness*, either voluntarily or involuntarily. McKinnon, after 25 years spent among the Wapisiana, finds out about his children's incestuous relationship; out of that, he realizes he does not belong to the place, and sets off for his native Scotland. Father Napier is driven mad by poisoned food, takes up savage modes and is forced to go back to England by his supervisors. Hector Bradshaw, even if after the shango dance he comes to understand he belongs to Tarlogie, is destined from the beginning of the novel to leave "the wild coast" in order to pursue his studies in Europe. Ellen Roxburgh, although she enjoys the primitive body and soul, has no choice but to re-enter civilization.

Finally, some of the characters neither stay nor leave, but *perish in the wilderness*. Donne and all his companions die while in pursuit of the Amerindians in the interior of Guyana. Voss and his fellow explorers cannot bear the rough vastness of the unknown Australian hinterland and die in it. Mrs Roxburgh's husband and fellow passengers are killed by native Aborigines.

However, all the characters at issue have something in common: *they do not go completely or permanently native*, they are not fully absorbed into the "other"; rather they keep some connections with their original culture. McKinnon cannot renounce some Western habits like sleeping on a bed and eating on dishes. Father Napier, in his savage madness, wants to use European technology in order to build the Pope's railway in savage South America. Hector is temporarily wholly possessed by the primitive during the shango dance, but soon plunges back into his books. All along Harris's novel, Donne never forgets his role as a master; nevertheless, the open ending of the novel makes the reader imagine he will renounce to dominate the Amerindians in order to allow the creation of a new hybrid Guyanese identity. The "legendary European" abuses his supposed superiority in order to exploit the African peoples. Voss wishes to join Aborigines whom he admires, however, only to rule them. Mrs Roxburgh is highly attached to her wedding ring – which is the last connection she has with civilization – and goes temporarily native only when she loses it. Gemmy, finally, as soon as he breaks again into civilization, has the English language suddenly come back to him.

Briefly, what all these characters share is the fact that they are neither "black", nor "white", rather they are different tinges of "grey"; they are neither native, nor civilized, rather in-betweeners. What they create is an hybrid in-between identity: in them western civilization gets fused together with other cultures. I believe this is evidence that once you are born inside a culture you cannot get rid of it. It is there. It will always be inside you. Its roots are too deep to be eradicated.

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I would like now to make reference to the definition of the phrase "going native" which I quoted at the beginning of the introductory chapter, and to analyse it against the seven postcolonial novels at issue.

All these novels present characters who are instances of the "contamination by absorption into native life and customs." The definition identifies two main causes of this "contamination": "the associations with other races" and "the mere climate of colonies in hot areas." In other words, the *contact with native peoples* and the *influence of the landscape*. As I wrote above, McKinnon, Hector, Mrs Roxburgh and Gemmy Fairley are instances of the former; Father Napier, Donne, the "legendary European" and Voss are instances of the latter.

Then, the definition lists four main effects of the "going native" process: 1) "the temptation posed by inter-racial sex" (which is actually a cause too); 2) "lapses from European behaviour"; 3) "the participation in 'native' ceremonies"; 4) "the adoption or even enjoyment of local customs in terms of dress, food, recreation and entertainment". McKinnon and Donne, are instances of the first effect; McKinnon, Father Napier and Gemmy Fairley are instances of the second; Hector and Mrs Roxburgh are instances of the third; McKinnon, Father Napier, Hector, Mrs Roxburgh and Gemmy Fairley are instances of the fourth.

So, these are the causes and effects of the "going native" process. However, what is at the very heart of the matter? What lies at the very bottom of the process? What kick-starts it? With reference to the questions about *The Ventriloquist's Tale* which gave the *input* to my thesis, what drives a white man to prefer the wilderness to civilization? I believe Conrad already had the answer. What lies at the heart of the "going native" process is:

the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness.[1]

Sometimes we came upon a station close by the bank, clinging to the skirts of the unknown, *and the white man* rushing out of a tumbledown hovel, with grat gestures of joy and surprise and welcome, seemed very strange – *had the appearance of being held there captive by a spell.*[2] (my emphasis)

[1] CONRAD, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 85.
[2] CONRAD, p. 43.

The influence of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* over the seven novels I dealt with is undeniable. As Ashcroft *et al*'s definition of "going native" points out, *Heart of Darkness* is the "canonical example of the "going native" process. Kurtz is the father of all literary characters who are subjected to the lure of the primitive and to the spell of the wilderness. A spell which finds fertile ground among those men who start wondering whether the values they have been taught to believe in are the right ones. Men bored by a shallow and hypocritical society. Men who feel the need to break the monotony of their lives and to live some threshold experiences. Men who do not feel at ease with the social role imposed on them. Men who feel they lack something. Men who believe there can be other and different ways of being in the world. "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, / chè la diritta via era smarrita,"[3] Dante wrote, putting marvellously into words the crisis through which men go when they start questioning the culture and society in which they live and when they start looking for the truth elsewhere. Precisely, into what is more different from the place they come from.

There they try to renew contact with those elements which are part of their selves, but which their society has repressed and condemned.

> Bit by bit, thread by thread, the West has woven a tapestry in which the primitive, the oceanic, and the feminine have been banished to the margins in order to protect – or so the logic went – the primacy of civilization, masculinity, and the autonomous self.[4]

Colonialism gave the Western man the possibility to come into contact with what he had learnt to banish: the unconscious, instincts, spontaneity, natural life, artlessness, simplicity. In one word: the primitive lying in the heart of every human being. However the white man was both attracted by the promise of a life meant for the enjoyment of pleasures and repulsed by

[3] D. ALIGHIERI, *La Divina Commedia*. Ed. by C. H. GRANDGENT. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company 1933, p. 12.
[4] TORGOVNIK, *Primitive Passions*, p. 212.

the savagery of this kind of life. The colonized was *le bon sauvage* and the barbaric savage at once.

The novels I dealt with show how the civilized man is fascinated by the wilderness, which stands for everything the Western civilization has rejected and which becomes the place where the white man can free his "self" from all of those restraints imposed by Western society. It is the place where man can renew contact with his own origins, where he can leave in tune with nature, where he can enjoy the simplest pleasures which an unaffected life can offer. In this sense, the wilderness is an imaginary place, a projection of the European mind and, as such, it can never count for the other culture. Possibly, it is just a desire for the "other," which remains conceived of as simply the opposite of one's own. As I wrote in the introductory chapter the "other" does not really exist because the "other" is other only in relationship to the "self." As a consequence the primitive as the "other" is just a Western construction.

However, when the protections of civilization are removed from the civilized man and the wilderness takes possession of him, the outcome is often a 'Kurtzian' Horror.[5] All the novels I dealt with show that the contact between the civilized and the primitive either is disastrous and cannot but fail or it is meant to be temporary from the beginning. In *The Ventriloquist's Tale* every try in a cross-cultural dialogue has a negative ending (McKinnon and Father Napier return to Europe, Chofy renounces his love for the European scholar and returns to the Wapisiana village). In *The Wild Coast*, whatever happens, Hector's stay in Tarlogie is meant to be just an interlude. Voss is defeated by the Australian continent and perishes in it. Mrs Roxburgh has to take back her place inside society. Also the only two novels which drop a hint that there can be a communion between colonizer and colonized,

[5] M. KINKEAD-WEEKES, '*Heart of Darkness* and the Third World Writer' in *Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments, Vol 2*. Ed. by K. CARABINE. Mountfield: Helm Information Ltd 1992, p. 469.

between civilized and primitive, have the “gone native” characters die in the wilderness: in *Palace of the Peacock* Donne needs to die before his rebirth to a new life in tune with the natives can be accomplished; in *Remembering Babylon* Gemmy Fairley, the forerunner of the Australian man, dies in the bush and leaves nobody to carry on his involuntary achievement of a new hybrid Australian identity.

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I would like to conclude my thesis with some final remarks. “Going Native, the White Man and the Primitive: A Reading of Seven Postcolonial Novels,” the title of my thesis sounds. I want to stress the fact that the “Seven Postcolonial Novels” are just instances of a topic approached in a number of other novels – colonial and postcolonial –, movies and cartoons. Suffice it to think about Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *Kim* (1901), Michael Blake’s *Dance With the Wolves* (1988) and the related movie with Kevin Costner, Walt Disney’s *Pocahontas* (1995), David Lean’s colossal *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), Sean Penn’s movie *Into the Wild* (2007) and, in a way, James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009).

Moreover, the “Reading” at issue was meant from the beginning to be as objective as possible. I tried not to force the meanings the writers intended to convey. I tried to present my topic plainly. I tried to deliver the substance of the novels I dealt with and in order to do this I used a number of quotes from each of them. I tried to focus my reading on the characters pertaining to the topic of my thesis, leaving often aside important postcolonial issues raised by the authors which would have required an extensive analysis. I did not want to get lost in complex and contorted reasoning. I did not want to misread the texts or to add meanings which were not meant by the authors. Rather I tried to be as faithful as I could to the texts and to what the authors meant. My hope is that my tries were successful.

‘This time I dreamt about eggs. Eggs everywhere. Chicken laying in the bushes. In the trees. On the ground.’
‘That is life coming back after all your problems,’ said auntie Wifreda. ‘Fertility and growth. Food too. It means hope and coming back to life.’

‘Yes,’ said Marietta, and then, practical as ever, added: ‘Or maybe I was just thinking about eggs.’[6]

This quote from the last page of *The Ventriloquis’s Tale* reveals how sometimes it is useless and irrelevant to try to find interpretations. Sometimes there are no hidden meanings who need to be searched for. Sometimes the truth lies just there, in front of everybody. Sometimes, when reading, we should just make a *tabula rasa* of our mind and read only for the pleasure which literature bestows.

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[6] MELVILLE, *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, p 352.

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