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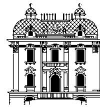

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Introduction

After the Second World Water Theodore W. Adorno (1981) famously questioned the possibility of creative work, declaring that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. ... it has become impossible to write poetry today" (p. 34). He later reconsidered this claim in *Negative Dialectics* (2004): "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living" (pp. 362–363). For Adorno, life and artistic creation after catastrophic experiences become moral questions because they balance between the possibility of becoming superficial, insensitive, inappropriate—in other words, "barbaric"—and an appropriate response to a complex and painful experience. This reflection on experience is necessary in order to go on living and creating art as well.

Today, such reflection remains essential, as the question persists across decades: How can one continue to live and create after a great catastrophe? From the Soviet occupation to the Srebrenica massacre, the Rwandan genocide, the civil war in Syria, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the Bucha massacre in 2022, and the events of October 7, 2023, followed by the ongoing war in Gaza, these examples—only a fraction of recent history—underscore the urgency of this question.

Within this landscape, a central concern for literature in eras of conflict is how writing continues—or what it means to write—while catastrophe is still unfolding. This raises further questions: How does literature function amid geopolitical, ecological, collective, and deeply personal crises? Can it adequately represent morally and psychologically traumatic experiences? How do conflict and ideology shape literary language, narrative forms, and aesthetic strategies? What happens to texts when conflict remains unresolved? How do authors negotiate the pressures of political discourse and control, reconstruct or challenge collective memory, and balance aesthetic value with ideological function? Ultimately, what ethical responsibilities do writers bear when representing violence and suffering?

These questions were explored at the international conference *Literature in Eras of Conflict: Ideology and Ethics*, organized by the Lithuanian Comparative Literature Association at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore in 2024. Scholars examined how literature represents and negotiates experiences of violence, ideology, and trauma across time and space, addressing contexts—ranging from the Israel–Palestine conflict, Russia's war on Ukraine, 9/11 and the Global War on Terror, to Soviet repressions and Cold War propaganda, the Holocaust, and colonial oppression—while also engaging with interpersonal, memory, and epistemic conflicts, questions of historical consciousness, and cultural identity. Case studies spanned diverse traditions, including the cultural memory of the Great War and the Lithuanian Wars of Independence, the ideological tensions found in interwar, Soviet, and post-Soviet Latvian and Lithuanian prose, pastoral and testimonial poetics under totalitarianism, anticolonial African writing, representations of cyclical violence in Latin America, and literature responding to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. At the same time, new concerns—such as the role of artificial intelligence in literary creation—point to evolving forms of authorship and emerging tensions in contemporary cultural production.

This eleventh issue of the scholarly journal *Acta Litteraria Comparativa* comprises five papers by Lithuanian and international authors. Almost all were produced based on the papers delivered at the aforementioned conference. In keeping with the thematic focus of this issue, **Sayantina Dutta's** article approaches literature not only as a creative but also as a political act. By bringing into comparison autobiographical, novelistic, and, to some extent, poetic discourse, the works of two major African American authors are convincingly analysed through the perspectives of Black aesthetics and feminism, together with concepts from trauma theory. Notably, the use of feminist frameworks also exposes certain historical limitations in addressing the specific works under consideration. The central concerns of the study are resilience and emancipation; accordingly, particular attention is devoted to the narrative trajectory of voice as it takes on various forms—speech, utterance, writing, and related modes of expression. The significance of the article is further reinforced by the fact that Black aesthetics is mobilised not only at the level of ideas, but also in the search for both conventional and individually inflected poetic forms, including narrative rhythm, folkloric traditions, vernacular language, the quilt metaphor,

and other expressive figures. Equally valuable is the comparative discussion of embodied language, which foregrounds corporeal representations of resilience and the language of sensory pleasure. Furthermore, the author's analysis of the representation of linguistic identity provides a basis for reflecting on analogous forms of identity construction in the literatures of other cultures.

Incorporating a political perspective and a sustained focus on the representation of African subjectivity, **Dame Kane's** article takes the discussion in a different direction. The study is primarily committed to an analysis of the narrative strategies of colonialism and their symbolic representations; however, it also displays a clear ideological engagement, seeking to promote African dignity as well as moral and ethnic pride. Although the analysis may at times appear to privilege moral and psychological characterisation over a direct critique of colonialism, these dimensions are consistently reinscribed within a broader social and ideological framework, oriented towards the overcoming of colonial stereotypes. The expression of the texts' shared ideas is effectively conveyed through eloquent textual quotations and the recurrence of related problematics—for instance, the role of ethnocultural heritage in the construction of character and in the shaping of interpersonal relations. The sustained attention to questions of imperialism and colonialism further enables this article to be read in relation to other contributions in the present issue.

The conception of literature as memory and linguistic identity also constitutes the central problematic of the works analysed by **Eglė Keturakienė and Kristina Straševičiūtė**. Their study combines the traditional understanding of the historical novel with the concepts of historical consciousness, the plurality of consciousnesses, and narrative traces. The parallel analysis of the selected works is made possible by the activation of the calendar narrative as a genre—understood not only as a traditional narrative form but also as undergoing distinctive transformations in contemporary Lithuanian literature. This enables the authors to reveal the creativity of historical narration and the modernity of the novel. Drawing primarily on the field of historical research, as well as on ego-documentary and other discourses, the calendar genre is approached not only from a structural and compositional perspective, but also in semantic and problem-oriented terms. The comparative analysis is further facilitated by a convincingly developed perspective of the comic in its broadest sense, encompassing both optimism and irony. By juxtaposing the two works under

discussion, the authors also identify and foreground the comparative dimension inherent in each of them.

Anagha Nair and Punyashree Panda's article is linked to the previously discussed study not only through the reconstruction of a particular nation's history, but also through its engagement with fictionality and, to a certain extent, the comic mode. However, in contrast to the works analysed by Keturakienė and Straševičiūtė, Nair and Panda foreground the dystopian as a privileged genre for interrogating the entanglement of ideology and literature. Accordingly, the articles in this issue collectively explore the interaction between ideology and literary form across a broad range of genres, while also engaging with an extensive affective spectrum. Fear, in the article by Nair and Panda, is fundamentally identified with both state violence and the construction of a seemingly "perfect" society. Literary manifestations of violence are convincingly located within the sphere of the political elite and its symbolic representations in dystopian contexts. At the same time, the literature discussed in the article establishes associations with other ideological structures through the activation of mystical and magical elements, thereby complicating its representational framework. The analysis of specific narrative configurations also acquires a symbolic dimension, for instance, when examining the plotline of surveillance strategies characteristic of dystopian narratives. A careful comparative analysis makes it possible to recognise a wide range of literary representations of violence, encompassing not only its more radical forms but also its subtle and nuanced manifestations. As elsewhere in this issue, the comparison of the works is conducted with close attention to historical context, seeking parallels with the sociopolitical realities of India.

Maintaining a focus on a specific, historically situated, and in a sense equally violent ideological voice, **Mathias Overgaard's** article draws attention to a concept that has often remained overlooked in literary studies. Conceiving the literature under discussion as an aesthetic force contributing to the dissemination of imperial ideas, the author aligns his study with others in this issue through the sustained activation of the political dimension in the reception of literature. The realisation of the central concept is enabled not so much by a detailed as by a diagnostic analysis of characters, and by the ensuing comparison of different characters. Evoking the psychology of the "superfluous man" to help explain the adventurism of the leisure class, the article offers a compelling synthesis of imperial aesthetics and ritual theory.

The eleventh issue of *Acta Litteraria Comparativa* reveals that, despite geographical, historical and economic differences, we unfortunately still share a common theme when discussing literature in times of conflict, including ideologies, politics, historical memory, ethics, optimism and tragedy. Whether we talk about the colonial context of African Americans and European colonialism in Africa, totalitarianism, the Lithuanian experience of the world wars and their aftermath, the violence of the Cold War in India or Russian imperialism in the Caucasus, we can see that history is always full of conflict and aggression. Let us hope that the complicated and tragic experiences analyzed in this issue will serve as a bond between us in this complex world rife with endless conflicts. Perhaps, by learning from these experiences, we will one day be able to confidently affirm and finally put into practice the principle of "never again."

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“But Still, Like Air, I’ll Rise”: Voicing the Black Aesthetics, Resilience and Survival

Abstract: African American literature embodies a sustained engagement with the historical realities of racial oppression, gendered marginalisation, and cultural resilience. This paper examines how certain African American women writers, particularly Maya Angelou and Alice Walker, employ Black aesthetics as a mode of resistance and self-representation within contexts of inequality and silence. Focusing on *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and *The Color Purple* (1982), the study offers an aesthetic and political reading of how narratives of trauma, displacement, and enforced silence are transformed into affirmations of identity, agency, and survival. The paper argues that these texts transform trauma into aesthetic resistance, where resilience emerges as both a literary strategy and a political act.

Drawing on Black feminist and womanist frameworks, the analysis shows how both writers move beyond victimhood to foreground expression, creativity, and relationality as modes of survival and self-authorship. It further demonstrates how Black women’s writing functions both as an archive of collective memory and as a creative strategy of empowerment, articulating a literary discourse that redefines the meanings of voice, humanity, and freedom within African American literature. By examining these seminal texts, the study highlights the dynamic interplay between art and activism and contributes to contemporary literary scholarship by foregrounding Black women’s writing as a critical space where aesthetics, resistance, and ethical self-making converge. Furthermore, it underscores how the creative expression of African American women continues to challenge hegemonic narratives and reimagine the possibilities of survival, dignity, and liberation.

Keywords: African American literature; Black aesthetics; Black feminism and womanism; resilience; survival and empowerment; trauma; voice.

Introduction

African American literature has long served as a potent medium for articulating the hardships, survival, and triumphs of a people historically marginalised by slavery, segregation, and systemic racism. Within this literary tradition, Black women's writing occupies a distinctive position, articulating resistance to racial subjugation while simultaneously confronting patriarchal silencing. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) embody this dual consciousness, using narrative as a transformative means of reclaiming identity, voice, and agency. While both texts have been widely studied, their convergence within Black aesthetics as a mode of resilience remains underexplored.

This study examines how these two landmark texts reconfigure experiences of trauma through aesthetic expression. Both Angelou and Walker construct literary spaces in which African American women reclaim their voices from historical erasure, transforming personal suffering into shared narratives of survival and empowerment. Rather than presenting resilience as passive endurance, the texts render it as an active, creative process shaped through language, memory, and form. This paper argues that Angelou and Walker transform trauma into aesthetic resistance, where resilience emerges as both a literary strategy and a political act.

Drawing upon Black feminist theory and the Black aesthetic tradition, the paper demonstrates how both writers reimagine suffering as a site of resistance and renewal. Through their protagonists, Maya and Celie, fragmented selves are reconstituted into self-articulating voices, suggesting that narration itself becomes an assertion of identity against racial and gendered oppression. These narratives thus construct an epistemology of survival in which aesthetic expression reclaims dignity, humanity, and agency from dehumanisation. Methodologically, the study adopts a comparative textual approach, focusing on narrative voice, imagery, and form to trace the movement from silence to self-realisation. Rather than offering a chronological survey, it examines motifs such as voice and silence, memory, the body, and sisterhood as key sites through which resilience is enacted and sustained.

Maya Angelou's poetic expression of defiance serves as a conceptual framework for this study:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise...
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise. (Angelou, 2015, p. 159)

The recurring assertion of "I'll rise" in the poem "Still I Rise" encapsulates the ethos of resilience, resistance, and self-assertion that defines much of African American women's writing. This insistence on *rising* reverberates throughout *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and finds a powerful narrative parallel in *The Color Purple*, where the reclamation of voice marks the transition from oppression to self-realisation. Here, the act of rising becomes emblematic of the Black aesthetics itself: a literary strategy that transforms trauma into voice, asserts identity, and affirms the survival and empowerment of African American women.

Black Aesthetics as Resistance

The concept of Black aesthetics, emerging during the Harlem Renaissance and later shaped by the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements, provides an essential framework for this study. Rooted in the affirmation of Black cultural expression and political self-definition, it foregrounds art as a vehicle of resistance and communal memory. The works of Angelou and Walker extend this tradition by centring Black women's experiences, demonstrating how aesthetic expression becomes inseparable from struggles for freedom, voice, and survival. Articulated by theorists such as Addison Gayle Jr. and Larry Neal, the Black aesthetics sought to define art through Black experience rather than Eurocentric standards. Rejecting traditions that positioned Black writers as addressing a white audience, Gayle urged Black artists to speak to their own communities, embracing Black cultural richness while confronting lived hostility. Similarly, Neal (1968) described Black Art as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept," envisioning an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America (p. 29). Within this framework, beauty emerges

through truth-telling and the transformation of richness into strength. Angelou and Walker exemplify this aesthetic commitment through rhythmic language, oral and folk traditions, vernacular speech, and epistolary forms that shape a distinctly Black artistic identity. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou fuses autobiography with poetic sensibility, transforming life narrative into self-definition. In *The Color Purple*, Walker's epistolary form, rooted in oral culture, similarly reclaims authenticity through voice. In both texts, aesthetics functions not merely as representation but as resistance itself.

Black Feminism and the Politics of Voice

Black feminist thought provides the study's gendered framework. In contrast to early feminist criticism centred on white, middle-class women, Black feminist theorists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Hill Collins foreground the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class. They argue that Black women's literature operates as a counter-discourse to both racist patriarchy and hegemonic feminism. In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, hooks observes:

> Contemporary Black women could not join together to fight for women's rights because we did not see "womanhood" as an important aspect of our identity. Racist, sexist socialisation had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and to regard race as the only relevant label of identification. (p. 1)

Elaborating on this structural exclusion, hooks (1981) notes that dominant feminist and racial discourses often operate through a reductive analogy in which "'woman' is synonymous with 'white women' and the term 'blacks' synonymous with 'Black men'" (p. 8). This internalised devaluation of Black womanhood, she contends, functions not merely as a psychological consequence of oppression but as a political strategy that sustains racist patriarchy while marginalising Black women within mainstream feminism. Lorde (1984) extends this critique by insisting on alternative epistemologies rooted in Black women's lived experiences. Her assertion "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 112), challenges reliance on dominant modes of knowledge

that reproduce inequality. While such tools may allow temporary survival within oppressive structures, Lorde argues that transformative change requires new forms of knowledge, expression and self-definition emerging from marginalised subjectivities (p. 112).

Resilience and Memory in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Maya Angelou (1928–2014), an African American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist, is best known for her autobiographical works that explore race, gender, and identity in twentieth-century America. Situated within a Black feminist framework, Angelou's work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* emerges as both a personal autobiography and a collective history of African American womanhood. Published amid the Civil Rights Movement, the text exemplifies the counter-discursive strategies envisioned by hooks and Lorde, transforming silence into speech and trauma into narrative agency. The caged bird operates as a potent metaphor for racial and gendered confinement, while its song signifies creative transcendence and the reclamation of voice. Angelou transforms autobiography, traditionally associated with linear growth, into a fractured narrative of memory and recovery, demonstrating that resilience is not a fixed state but a continuous process of becoming.

The narrative opens with Maya's childhood in segregated Stamps, Arkansas, where she internalises the humiliation and inferiority imposed by white supremacy. Maya experiences her initial encounter with discrimination at the movie theatre. When she offers a dime to the white girl selling tickets at the counter, the girl declines to accept the money. Instead, she uses a card to place the dime into the change box. At the age of seven, her father takes her and Bailey back to St. Louis, Missouri, to see their mother. Shortly after their arrival in St. Louis, her father departs, leaving them with their mother and her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. Initially appearing harmless, Freeman soon reveals a predatory nature and begins to abuse Maya. One morning, he sexually violates her and coerces her into silence. Frightened and confused, Maya eventually confides in her brother, Bailey. At the trial, Freeman is found guilty and sentenced to a year in jail, but he is later released without serving his full time. A few days

later, his body is discovered in an alley. She blames herself for Freeman's death and believes that her testimony in the court is the reason he has been killed. To protect others, she resolves to stop speaking: "Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended" (Angelou, 2009, p. 87).

In the aftermath of this experience, her retreat into silence is not represented as pathological withdrawal but as a protective and gestational space that precedes articulation, through which trauma is transformed into narrative agency rather than a permanent psychological damage. Maya exists in "perfect personal silence" (p. 87) for nearly five years until she meets Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Mrs. Flowers nurtures Maya's sense of individuality by providing her with books of poetry, engaging her in philosophical discussions about literature, and encouraging her to recite aloud. She emphasises the transformative power of verbal expression, fostering Maya's love for reading while insisting that reading alone is insufficient: "Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning" (p. 98).

When Maya rediscovers speech through the encouragement of Mrs. Flowers, language becomes a metaphor for resurrection. Trauma is not erased but reshaped into creative expression. This moment encapsulates the Black aesthetics by transforming suffering into song and injury into survival. Angelou's prose oscillates between lyrical cadence and stark realism, fusing the personal and the political. Her language, sensuous and rhythmic, draws on what Houston Baker (1984) terms the "blues matrix" (pp. 3–5), a Black vernacular expressive mode that converts historical pain into collective endurance and cultural memory. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the aesthetics operating here shape the movement between trauma and survival, as suffering is repeatedly reworked into affirmation through rhythm, voice, and remembered song. The memoir thus situates individual experience within a continuum of Black expressive survival rather than isolating it as private pain.

Angelou's resilience is not only linguistic but also profoundly embodied. Her narrative charts the reappropriation of her own body, once violated, regulated, and rendered silent, as a site of autonomy and self-possession. The moment of childbirth at the end of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* symbolises both literal and creative rebirth, marking a decisive rupture from histories of bodily exploitation. As Angelou holds her infant son, she asserts: "He was beautiful and

mine ... I sat for hours by his bassinet and absorbed his mysterious perfection" (Angelou, 2009, p. 289). Against a legacy in which Black women's reproductive capacities were controlled and dehumanised, Angelou reclaims motherhood as sacred rather than subjugated. The maternal body thus emerges as a site of agency, continuity, and self-definition. In this way, Angelou's autobiography aligns with what hooks (2015) describes as "talking back," a Black feminist practice in which speech becomes a form of resistance to enforced silence. hooks explains that "'back talk' and 'talking back' meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure" (p. 5), emphasising that silence functions as a disciplinary tool sustaining racial and patriarchal domination. To speak, therefore, is a risky but courageous assertion of subjecthood. As hooks (1981) observes, Black women were historically taught "to submit, to accept sexual inferiority, and to be silent" (p. 2). Angelou's narrative directly resists this legacy by transforming personal trauma into narrative voice, moving from imposed muteness to self-authorship and a collective cultural witness.

Throughout *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou situates her personal growth within a matrilineal network of strength. Figures such as Momma Henderson, Mrs. Flowers, and Vivian Baxter represent diverse models of resilience including religious fortitude, intellectual grace, and urban independence. Together, they challenge the controlling images of Black womanhood such as "mammies, jezebels" (Collins, 2002, p. 5), "hoochies" (p. 81) and "sapphires" (p. 156), stereotypes that sustain racial, gendered, and economic oppression. By resisting these derogatory constructions, these ladies, such as Momma Henderson and others, enact what Lorde (1984) understands as the political necessity of speaking what is most important, even at the risk of being "misread or misunderstood" (p. 40). Within Angelou's narrative, they function not merely as symbols but as formative influences shaping Maya's moral and imaginative growth through their everyday acts of speech, care, and self-respect.

In the closing sections, Angelou fuses her personal voice with the communal, enacting what Lorde (1984) terms "the transformation of silence into language and action" (p. 40). Lorde's insistence that "your silence will not protect you" (p. 41) underscores the urgency of speech as survival, reminding us that silence culminates in erasure: "death, on the other hand, is the final silence" (p. 41). Angelou's movement from muteness to articulation thus affirms language as a vehicle of resistance and collective becoming. The caged bird sings not for itself

alone, but for an entire people whose voices have been historically constrained. This collective articulation is further clarified through a reference to Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy," from which Angelou derives both her title and her enduring metaphor of the caged bird as a symbol of racialised suffering and the longing for liberation. In interviews, Angelou acknowledged Dunbar's influence on her writing ambition.

> I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
> When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, –
> When he beats his bars and he would be free;
> It is not a carol of joy or glee,
> But a prayer that he sends from heart's deep core. (Dunbar, 1904, p. 41)

The recurring metaphor of the "caged bird" represents Maya's entrapment within systemic racism, sexual violence, and restrictive societal expectations. Drawing on this earlier poetic articulation, this metaphor operates as a shared cultural signifier within the African American literary tradition, linking Angelou's personal narrative to a broader expression of Black suffering and resistance. Angelou's lyrical prose intensifies this inherited symbol, transforming personal pain into aesthetic expression. Through imagery, rhythm, and metaphor, Angelou demonstrates that Black women's resilience is not merely individual but rooted in collective cultural traditions of survival.

Thus, Angelou's book exemplifies resilience not as moral didacticism or passive endurance but as aesthetic innovation central to Black feminist literary tradition. Resilience in the text is enacted through form rather than merely articulated. Angelou's nonlinear narrative, integration of poetic rhythm with prose, and use of vernacular speech elevate autobiography to an act of self-assertion. These formal strategies align with Barbara Christian's (1987) claim "that literature is, of necessity, political" (p. 54), particularly in Black women's narratives where storytelling itself becomes a mode of thinking and theorizing. By privileging lived experience, memory, and voice over abstract theory, Angelou demonstrates how art and survival are inseparable. Through form itself, she enacts freedom by breaking boundaries that mirror the protagonist's struggle against racial, gendered, and social constraints. Resilience thus emerges not merely as survival, but as an aesthetic strategy with political force.

If Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* represents the reclamation of the individual voice through poetic memory, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* extends this aesthetics of survival into a relational and spiritual terrain. Where Angelou foregrounds the emergence of speech as resistance, Walker examines how voice is sustained, shared, and transformed within female community. Together, the two texts trace a continuum of Black feminist resilience, from articulation to connection, demonstrating how survival moves beyond individual self-recovery toward collective and ethical becoming.

Survival and Self-Authorship in *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker, a major voice in contemporary African American literature and the first Black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, explores the intersections of race, gender, and spirituality in her works. Her epistolary novel *The Color Purple* depicts the struggles and eventual empowerment of African American women in the early twentieth-century American South. Walker's novel explores the intersections of race, gender, and class through the life of Celie, a poor Black woman from rural Georgia, whose journey moves from enforced silence to self-realisation. The text does not merely represent endurance; it dramatises rebirth through creativity, female bonding, and spiritual wholeness. Structured as a series of letters, initially addressed to God, later to Celie's sister Nettie, and eventually opening towards a wider communal consciousness, the epistolary form becomes a textual enactment of liberation. Writing substitutes for speech when speech is denied, allowing Celie to articulate experiences that remain unspeakable within patriarchal and racialised power structures. At the outset, her letters to God resemble confessions shaped by submission and fear: "I am fourteen years old ... I have always been a good girl" (Walker, 1983, p. 11). These early utterances reveal the internalisation of domination. This is further evident in Celie's account of domestic violence, where her response to brutality is marked by emotional suppression and dissociation: "He beat me like he beat the children ... It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" (p. 30). The metaphor of becoming "wood" or "a tree" signifies a psychological strategy of survival, in which Celie numbs herself to pain by withdrawing into silence

and immobility. Her identification with trees, figures that "fear man," not only reflects her vulnerability within a violent patriarchal order but also encodes an early ecological consciousness of shared suffering between the human and the natural world. At this stage, Celie's voice does not yet resist oppression; rather, it registers trauma through fragmentation, restraint, and embodied silence. As the narrative progresses, however, these same letters evolve into instruments of self-definition, marking Celie's emergence as a speaking subject.

Celie's literacy functions not merely as a personal growth but as a historically grounded act of resistance. Within African American cultural memory, reading and writing have long been associated with liberation, self-consciousness, and dissent. Frederick Douglass (1845) recalls that literacy exposed both the brutality of bondage and the desire for freedom, offering "a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy" (p. 35). Walker draws upon this tradition while reshaping it through a womanist lens, situating literacy within intimate, female-centred modes of knowledge rather than public or patriarchal authority. Celie's letters initially register trauma and fragmentation, yet gradually acquire emotional clarity and agency. Writing thus enables her not only to narrate her suffering but to reconstruct the self beyond the limits imposed by patriarchy and white supremacy, transforming into a mode of ethical and spiritual wholeness. This process resonates with Elaine Showalter's (1986) formulation of "gynocritics," a mode of scholarship "concerned with woman as writer – with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women" (p. 128). Yet Walker's approach diverges from mainstream feminist paradigms. While Showalter distinguishes gynocritics from the "essentially political and polemical" orientation of feminist critique (p. 129), Walker situates women's textual self-fashioning within Black vernacular culture. Celie's letters, written in non-standard dialect, function as surrogates for speech, drawing upon African American oral traditions and affirming language as a site of cultural memory and resistance. Celie's evolving idiom, marked by syntactic irregularity and immediacy, thus becomes a linguistic emblem of liberation.

Central to Walker's conception of resilience is her theory of womanism. Defined as "a Black feminist or feminist of color... committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker, 1994, p. xi), womanism rejects separatism and foregrounds emotional healing, community, and spirituality, qualities central to Celie's transformation. It asserts that art by Black

women must be understood not merely as resistance to oppression, but as an affirmation of creativity, love, and sisterhood. Celie's relationships with other women, particularly Shug Avery, Sofia, and Nettie, constitute the moral and emotional core of the novel. Shug, the blues singer who becomes Celie's friend and lover, embodies sensuality and autonomy. She introduces Celie to a new theology of self-love and spiritual immanence, declaring that "God is inside you and inside everybody else" (Walker, 1983, p. 177). In this moment, Celie's transformation is not only psychological but theological. She redefines the divine as female and immanent, disrupting patriarchal constructions of a distant, judging God. Through Shug, Celie undergoes a radical reorientation of bodily self-perception. By affirming sensuality, erotic pleasure, and creative expression, Shug enables Celie to reclaim bodily autonomy and desire as sources of self-knowledge. The body thus ceases to be a site of violation and becomes a medium of affective freedom and artistic productivity, aligning with womanist thought that locates healing in embodied experience.

Sofia, by contrast, embodies a politics of physical defiance. Her refusal to submit to both Black patriarchal authority and white supremacist power structures marks her as a figure of unapologetic resistance. This contrast between passive endurance and active resistance is anticipated earlier in the novel through Celie's exchange with Nettie, where the limits of her survival strategy become evident: "Don't let them run over you ... You got to fight ... But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (Walker, 1983, pp. 25–26). This moment encapsulates Celie's early condition, in which survival is equated with submission, and resistance remains unimaginable. Against this backdrop, Sofia's defiance emerges as a radical alternative. The violent confrontation with the mayor's wife constitutes a symbolic rupture in the racialised economy of obedience governing Black women's bodies. Sofia's subsequent incarceration and forced labour expose the punitive mechanisms through which resistant Black female subjects are disciplined. Her narrative stages a tension between rage and endurance that resonates with Audre Lorde's conception of anger as a generative political force: "Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (Lorde, 1984, p. 127). Sofia's arc thus illustrates both the cost and the ethical necessity of anger as a refusal of erasure. Together, Shug and Sofia represent complementary modes of resistance: Shug's grounded in erotic reclamation and spiritual

self-fashioning, Sofia's in embodied and confrontational defiance. Through these figures, Walker articulates a womanist vision of survival that integrates pleasure, rage, and resilience.

Nettie's letters from Africa expand the narrative beyond the American South, drawing parallels between racial oppression in the United States and colonial domination abroad. Her missionary experience exposes the continuities between slavery and imperialism, situating Black suffering within a global history of exploitation. By interweaving these correspondences, Walker broadens the ethical and political scope of the novel, suggesting that Celie's liberation must be read in relation to interconnected histories of dispossession, resistance, and survival.

The novel's title encapsulates Walker's aesthetic philosophy: the color purple symbolises beauty, divinity, and gratitude, qualities historically denied to Black women. Shug articulates this ethos when she tells Celie, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (Walker, 1983, p. 178). This line fuses spirituality with aesthetics, suggesting that to appreciate beauty is to affirm one's existence – an act that, within the Black aesthetic framework, constitutes political defiance. Works of Angelou and Walker converge at a crucial aesthetic and ethical juncture, where art becomes not merely a form of representation but a way of seeing otherwise. In this sense, their writing participates in what Toni Morrison (1987) theorises in *Beloved* as "rememory" (p. 35), a process through which histories fragmented by violence, silence, and erasure are imaginatively retrieved and reassembled. Morrison insists that the past is not sealed off but persists in the present as lived experience, demanding narrative engagement in order to be understood and survived (p. 36).

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou enacts this process through the recovery of voice, transforming traumatic memory into lyrical expression and reclaiming agency over experiences that once enforced silence. Similarly, in *The Color Purple*, Walker presents storytelling and aesthetic perception as modes of epistemic resistance. Celie's growing capacity to recognise beauty, vividly revealed through her appreciation of the color purple, signals a movement from mere survival towards self-recognition and joy. This attention to beauty is not escapist; rather, it insists that Black women's lives contain meaning beyond suffering. In Walker's vision, seeing and naming beauty becomes a form of knowledge that challenges domination and affirms wholeness.

The works of both Angelou and Walker demonstrate how Black women's writing transforms memory, language, and beauty into tools of survival and renewal. Through narrative voice and aesthetic awareness, these writers reclaim what history has sought to erase, asserting art as a radical practice of remembrance, resistance, and joy. Walker's candid portrayal of female sexuality challenges entrenched literary conventions and the moral codes that have historically regulated Black women's bodies and desires. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's early sexual experiences are shaped by abuse, coercion, and silence, producing a profound estrangement from her own body. Sexuality initially functions as a mechanism of patriarchal control rather than pleasure or self-recognition. Against this backdrop, Celie's erotic awakening signifies not indulgence but transformation. Through her relationship with Shug Avery, sexuality is reconfigured as a mode of self-knowledge, mutual recognition, and embodied affirmation. Celie's declaration, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook ... But I'm here" (Walker, 1983, p. 187) marks a decisive moment of ontological self-claiming. This utterance resists the accumulated negations imposed by racism, sexism, class oppression, and aesthetic devaluation. Spoken aloud, it affirms Celie's presence as a subject worthy of recognition, care, and desire. Her voice, once shaped by fear and submission, becomes an instrument of self-authorisation, signaling a movement from enforced silence to articulated being.

Walker's representation of lesbian love thus exceeds a simple challenge to heteronormativity, realigning sexuality with spirituality and wholeness in ways that resonate with Lorde's formulation of the erotic as power. For Lorde (1984), the erotic is a deeply embodied source of knowledge and creative energy suppressed within patriarchal culture (pp. 53–54). Beyond mere sexual transgression, it emerges as a life-affirming force through which women counter domination by celebrating joy, connection, and self-definition. Within this framework, Celie's erotic awakening becomes inseparable from her ethical and spiritual transformation. As she learns to inhabit her body without shame, she accesses a form of knowledge grounded in feeling, relationality, and self-recognition. This collapse of the false binary between body and soul allows sexuality to emerge not as violation but as sustenance. In Walker's womanist vision, erotic power enables survival, forges solidarity, and makes possible the imagining of an autonomous self.

Quilting, Memory, and Feminist Material Aesthetics

The quilt, a recurring motif in African American women's literature, further crystallises this fusion of art, memory, and survival. Composed of fragments of worn fabric, quilts preserve personal and communal histories, carrying traces of lived experience, loss, endurance, and love. In Walker's narrative imagination, the quilt functions as a material archive of Black women's lives, embodying a collective aesthetic rooted in necessity and resilience. The domestic sphere, traditionally represented as a space of women's confinement and silence, is reimagined in feminist cultural history and in Walker's fiction as a site of creativity and resistance. As Hedges et al. (1987) note in *Hearts and Hands: Women, Quilts, and American Society*, nineteenth-century American women frequently described their quilts as "di'ries," "Albums," and even "bound volumes of hieroglyphics," recognising stitched fabrics as eloquent records of their lives at a time when women's authorship was discouraged (p. 11). Denied access to literary production, women made needles their pens and quilt their texts as an alternative mode of expression, transforming domestic labour into a form of historical and personal record.

This understanding of needlework as text is powerfully reflected in *The Color Purple*. Celie's sewing and quilting practices show how domestic labour, often devalued as "women's work," can become sources of economic independence and self-articulation. Her sewing business collapses the division between private domestic space and public participation, transforming household skill into material survival. Walker's fictional representation echoes the historical realities documented by Hedges and her collaborators, who show that quilts functioned not merely as household objects but as artistic expressions, political commentary, and tools of community formation during movements such as the abolition of slavery, industrialisation, and westward expansion (Hedges et al., 1987). Walker (1994) further clarifies the cultural significance of quilting in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, arguing that quilts served as alternative texts for women who were excluded from written artistic traditions. The quilt of an anonymous enslaved, Black woman carries meanings far more complex than utilitarian bed covering (Walker, 1994, p. 407). In this context, the needlework becomes an instrument of psychic survival and of physical, emotional, and spiritual liberation. Each stitch thus signifies both individual creativity and

communal continuity. Quilting, often a collaborative practice passed across generations, reinforces intergenerational bonds and collective survival. hooks (2009) recalls her grandmother as a "dedicated quilt maker" (p. 155) and describes quilts as "maps charting the course of our lives," preserving stories of family, labour, and survival through fabric, colour, and design (p. 160). Together, these perspectives reveal quilting as a feminist and communal practice through which silenced lives were recorded, sustained, and transmitted. Walker's use of quilt imagery participates in this tradition, transforming domestic art into an archive of endurance, cultural memory, and aesthetic resistance.

By the end of *The Color Purple*, Celie attains spiritual and emotional wholeness. The final reunion scene, in which Celie, Nettie, and their families embrace, represents the culmination of the womanist ideal, signifying the survival and wholeness of an entire people. The closing words "Dear God. Dear Stars, Dear Trees, Dear Sky, Dear Peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (Walker, 1983, p. 249), dissolve the boundaries between human and divine, individual and collective. Celie's voice, once confined to letters of lamentation, expands into a universal hymn of gratitude. Walker's aesthetics thus merges the sacred and the secular, the personal and the political, articulating a womanist vision in which spiritual gratitude, communal survival, and cultural memory converge.

Comparative Aesthetics: Voice and Relational Healing

Angelou and Walker share a commitment to transforming trauma into beauty, yet their strategies differ in scope and texture, moving from individual voice in Angelou to communal and relational healing in Walker. Angelou's narrative is autobiographical, emphasising the making of a voice through poetic rhythm and linguistic precision; Walker's novel, more communal and spiritual, centres on the making of relationships through dialogic exchange. Together, Angelou and Walker reframe resilience as an active, creative process rather than passive endurance. Their works resist cultural narratives that valourise Black women's suffering as silent strength or moral fortitude. Instead, resilience emerges as a deliberate practice through which wounded subjects reconstitute the self and reimagine their place in the world. Survival, in this sense, is defined not by mere persistence, but by the transformation of pain into meaning, agency, and ethical selfhood.

In Angelou's autobiographical narratives and poetry, the recovery of voice is central to this process. Speaking becomes a means of reclaiming subjectivity after experiences of racial humiliation and sexual violence that seek to render the self invisible. Language functions not only as expression but as restoration; through narration, fragmented memories are reorganised and a coherent self is asserted against histories of erasure. The movement from silence to speech marks a shift from imposed voicelessness to self-defined identity. Walker, by contrast, situates resilience within networks of intimacy, creativity, and care. Her fiction emphasises that healing is inseparable from the ability to love, create, and participate in communal life. Practices such as letter writing, quilting, gardening, and artistic expression function as ethical acts that repair damaged relationships. In Walker's womanist vision, creativity is relational, binding individuals through shared labour, mutual recognition, and emotional reciprocity.

Collectively, Angelou and Walker present a paradigm of resilience that is both personal and social, rooted in expression, imagination, and connectivity. Their texts insist that endurance without transformation is insufficient; it is the re-creation of self and community through language, love, and art that sustains marginalised lives. Resilience thus emerges as a transformative force that not only survives historical injury but also strives for dignity, healing, and the potential for more equitable human relations. Angelou's Black aesthetics is shaped by poetic prose, rhythm, and imagery rooted in oral tradition and collective memory. Her artistic intervention is primarily linguistic, grounded in the belief that reclaiming voice is an act of freedom. Walker's intervention, by contrast, is structural and symbolic, reshaping narrative form as a site of resistance. While Angelou liberates the word, Walker liberates narrative structure. Together, they challenge Eurocentric literary conventions, particularly the omniscient realist narrator and the linear bildungsroman, through fragmentation, dialect, epistolary form, and cyclical closure, representing Black experience as communal and historically situated.

Contemporary Resonances and Political Relevance

Politically, both writers situate personal struggle within collective history. Angelou's narrative of maturation reflects the ethos of the Civil Rights era, portraying self-knowledge as a mode of political emancipation. Walker's

womanist vision, emerging in the post-Civil Rights context, anticipates intersectional feminism by insisting on the inseparability of race, gender, and class. Their engagement with racial violence, sexual abuse, gender inequality, and systemic silencing continues to resonate in contemporary movements such as *#MeToo* and *Black Lives Matter*. Maya's confrontation with sexual violence and Celie's exposure of domestic abuse prefigure current practices of witnessing that resist patriarchal and racial silence through acts of truth-telling.

While rooted in the specific historical and cultural conditions of African American life, the writings of Angelou and Walker resonate beyond their immediate socio-cultural contexts. Their narratives of captivity, exile, and rebirth align with broader trajectories of anticolonial and postcolonial literature, mirroring the struggles of subjects seeking identity and agency in the aftermath of historical trauma. Yet this movement towards universality does not erase cultural specificity. On the contrary, both writers insist on the irreducible particularity of Black female experience, with its idioms, rituals, spiritual practices, and modes of survival. In their work, the universal emerges not by abandoning difference, but through the recognition of historically marginalised lives as fully human. This productive tension between cultural specificity and collective ethical claim can be understood through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism" (as cited in Ray, 2009, p. 110) that refers to the provisional and self-conscious use of collective identity as a political tool rather than a fixed metaphysical category. Though developed in relation to subaltern and Third World struggles, the concept is equally applicable to African American women's writing, where identity functions as a mode of solidarity and resistance rather than a closed or singular definition. Angelou and Walker thus mobilise Black womanhood not as a reductive category, but as a strategic site through which shared histories of oppression and survival generate collective ethical claims. Their work, mindful of internal disparities and conflicts, demonstrates how identity can be used as a political tool to connect individual experiences and broader human aspirations.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The Color Purple* employ Black aesthetics to articulate resilience as a dynamic

and transformative process. Drawing on Black feminist and womanist frameworks, the analysis has shown that both Maya Angelou and Alice Walker move beyond narratives of suffering to foreground expression, creativity, and relationality as modes of survival. While Angelou privileges the recovery of voice through language, Walker extends this transformation into the domains of relationship and spirituality, emphasising communal and ethical renewal. Through narrative strategies such as lyrical prose, vernacular language, and epistolary form, they challenge dominant literary conventions and reassert marginalised voices as sites of knowledge and power. Resilience in these texts is realised through the creative reconstitution of selfhood and community, where language, memory, and aesthetic expression function not merely as representation, but as acts of resistance and renewal. Thus, "rising" emerges as a sustained cultural and moral practice.

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African Cultural Resistance Under Colonial Indoctrination Through the Prism of Camara Laye's *The Black Child*

Abstract: European colonial domination profoundly affected African societies by imposing ideological, cultural and epistemic hierarchies that sought to delegitimize indigenous identities and knowledge systems. In response, African literature emerged as a privileged space of cultural resistance, particularly through autobiographical and novelistic narratives that reasserted African values, memory and dignity within the political moment of their original production and dissemination. This article examines Camara Laye's *The Black Child* as a literary expression of African cultural resistance to colonial indoctrination. Adopting a qualitative postcolonial literary analysis, the study explores how Laye's narrative deconstructs colonial stereotypes by valorizing African moral values, communal solidarity, artisanal knowledge and oral traditions. Close readings of key passages reveal how childhood experience, initiation rituals, metallurgy, communal labor and the figure of the griot together constitute a symbolic counter-discourse to colonial representations of African inferiority. The analysis reveals that *The Black Child* resists colonial domination not through overt political confrontation, but through a subtle reaffirmation of African cultural integrity and epistemological legitimacy. Ultimately, the novel contributes to a broader project of cultural decolonization by restoring African subjectivity, historical continuity and human dignity within a colonial context.

Keywords: African culture; colonial ideology; cultural resistance; Camara Laye; postcolonial literature.

Introduction

European colonization deeply transformed African societies by imposing political domination, economic exploitation and ideological control. Beyond the material expropriation of land and resources, colonial discourse sought to legitimize domination through the systematic devaluation of African cultures, identities and epistemologies. Africans were frequently represented as primitive, irrational and incapable of civilization, a narrative that served to justify colonial violence and cultural dispossession (Peiretti-Courtis, 2021). Such representations profoundly affected African self-perception and social structures, leading to long-lasting consequences for identity and dignity.

Yet African societies were never passive recipients of colonial domination. Resistance manifested itself through multiple forms, including armed struggle, political mobilization and, significantly, cultural and literary production. African literature, particularly during the colonial and early postcolonial periods, emerged as a powerful space for counter-discourse, enabling writers to challenge colonial narratives and to reassert African humanity, history and values. Movements such as Négritude, alongside autobiographical and novelistic works, played a crucial role in this process of cultural reclamation.

It is within this context that Camara Laye's *The Black Child* occupies a central position. While often read as a nostalgic autobiographical narrative, the novel constitutes a subtle yet profound response to colonial indoctrination. By foregrounding African childhood, communal life, artisanal knowledge and oral traditions, Laye dismantles colonial stereotypes and restores the dignity of African cultural systems.

This article therefore addresses the following question: How does *The Black Child* function as a literary and cultural response to colonial indoctrination? The study argues that Camara Laye constructs a counter-hegemonic narrative that valorizes African moral, social and epistemological values, thereby participating in a broader project of cultural resistance and decolonization.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative postcolonial literary approach grounded in close textual analysis and cultural criticism. Drawing on postcolonial theory and

African literary scholarship, the article examines *The Black Child* as a narrative space of resistance to colonial domination. Selected passages are analyzed to show how literary discourse functions as a counter-hegemonic tool, enabling the revalorization of African identity, knowledge systems and collective memory. The analysis focuses on narrative strategies, symbolic representations and cultural practices that challenge colonial discourses of African inferiority.

I. Deconstructing Colonial Stereotypes through the Moral and Spiritual Strength of the Black Subject

This dimension is particularly evident in Laye's childhood, which is characterized by an ability to endure hardship with dignity, thereby attesting to the inner strength of Black African individuals. Such endurance is not a mere reaction to adversity; rather, it reveals a profound spiritual richness and resilience that constitute fundamental traits of the characters portrayed in the novel. Each challenge encountered by the young narrator becomes an opportunity to reinforce his identity, self-awareness and determination.

Moreover, this strength is not solely individual but collective. It transcends the constraints imposed by an oppressive colonial environment and functions as a cultural heritage transmitted from one generation to another (Peiretti-Courtis, 2021). By foregrounding this resilience, the narrator suggests that human dignity is not determined by external conditions but is deeply rooted in cultural values and spiritual integrity. In this sense, *The Black Child* promotes the idea that true strength lies in the capacity to rise, persevere and move forward despite adversity.

Camara Laye further deepens the deconstruction of colonial derogatory discourse by emphasizing the endurance and resistance of his protagonist and other characters who, in the face of discrimination and marginalization, develop a form of resilience that goes beyond mere survival. They assert themselves and actively resist attempts to diminish their culture, identity and origins (Malanda, 2000). Through this narrative strategy, Laye redefines the image of the Black subject, who is no longer portrayed as a passive victim of colonial humiliation but as an individual capable of reclaiming dignity, cultural heritage and inner strength. Resistance thus emerges as a sustained ethical and spiritual posture, grounded in the ability to endure and to confront adversity with resolve:

> Quelle que soit l'angoisse et quelle que soit la certitude de la souffrance, personne pourtant ne songerait à se dérober à l'épreuve pas plus et moins encore qu'on ne se dérobe à l'épreuve des lions et pour ma part je n'y songeais aucunement ; je voulais naître, renaître. Je savais parfaitement que je souffrirais, mais je voulais être un homme, et il ne semblait pas que rien fût trop pénible pour accéder au rang d'homme. (Camara, 1953, p. 20)

> However much anguish and however certain the suffering, no one would dream of shirking the ordeal no more than one would shirk the ordeal of lions and for my part I did not think of it at all; I wanted to be born, to be reborn. I knew perfectly well that I would suffer, but I wanted to be a man, and nothing seemed too painful in order to attain the rank of man. (Camara, 1953, p. 20)

Resistance emerges as one of the fundamental qualities that Camara Laye seeks to foreground in this passage. By comparing the initiation ordeal to the confrontation with lions, the author emphasizes a resolute and courageous acceptance of suffering. The character does not attempt to evade pain; rather, he willingly confronts it as a necessary path toward self-realization. This decision to be born or reborn signifies a conscious affirmation of humanity, as well as a determination to transcend the constraints imposed by a colonial society that seeks to define the Black subject solely through suffering and subjugation.

Through this representation, Laye dismantles the colonial image of the Black subject as a passive victim and situates him within a universal human experience marked by the capacity to face life's trials, overcome adversity and reclaim agency over one's destiny. Beyond physical endurance, the author further reinforces this deconstructive gesture by highlighting the deeply human qualities embodied by his characters. In direct opposition to colonial discourse that portrays the Black subject as inferior, primitive or morally deficient, Laye foregrounds values such as generosity, emotional sensitivity, solidarity and profound respect for women, particularly for maternal figures (Peiretti-Courtis, 2021).

The protagonist's interactions within his family and community exemplify these ethical values, which transcend colonial stereotypes. Communal support in moments of hardship reflects a strong sense of fraternity and mutual care, far removed from the reductive and dehumanizing representations propagated by colonial ideology. Moreover, the reverence accorded to maternal figures—most

notably the narrator's mother, portrayed as a moral and spiritual anchor—plays a crucial role in the narrator's identity formation. Maternal love thus becomes a source of wisdom, ethical grounding and humanity, reinforcing the novel's broader project of affirming the dignity and moral complexity of African life:

> Je passai une triste nuit. J'étais très énervé, un peu angoissé aussi, et je me réveillai plusieurs fois. Une fois, il me sembla entendre des gémissements. Je pensai aussitôt à ma mère. Je me levai et allai à sa case : ma mère remuait sur sa couche et se lamentait sourdement. Peut-être aurais-je dû me montrer, tenter de la consoler, mais j'ignorais comment elle m'accueillerait : peut-être n'aurait-elle pas été autrement satisfaite d'avoir été surprise à se lamenter ; et je me retirai, le cœur serré. Est-ce que la vie était ainsi faite, qu'on ne pût rien entreprendre sans payer tribut aux larmes ? (Camara, 1953, p. 82)

> I spent a sad night. I was very nervous and somewhat anxious, and I woke several times. Once, I thought I heard moans. I immediately thought of my mother. I got up and went to her hut: my mother was moving on her bed and moaning quietly. Perhaps I should have shown myself and tried to console her, but I did not know how she would receive me; perhaps she would not have appreciated being surprised in her lament. I withdrew, my heart heavy. Was life such that nothing could be undertaken without paying tribute to tears? (Camara, 1953, p. 82)

Through his narrative choices and careful character construction, Camara Laye vividly conveys the narrator's emotional sensitivity and profound respect for his mother while simultaneously revealing a deep process of introspection (Malanda, 2000). Confronted with his mother's apparent suffering, the young narrator experiences acute anguish yet hesitates to intervene. This hesitation, shaped by the fear of intruding upon her vulnerability, reflects not indifference but a heightened sense of empathy and reverence toward a maternal figure who occupies a sacred position within African cultural traditions.

The narrator's withdrawal, described as a heart tightened by emotion, symbolizes both the pain of helplessness and a broader philosophical recognition of suffering as an inherent dimension of the human condition. This moment of silent compassion transcends individual emotion to express a reflective awareness of life's trials and moral complexity. As such, the passage directly

challenges the colonial stereotype of the Black subject as emotionally insensitive or primitive. On the contrary, Laye portrays a character endowed with empathy, moral discernment and emotional depth, capable of perceiving and respecting the suffering of others with great delicacy.

Although the gesture remains non-interventionist, it nonetheless testifies to a profound humanity grounded in ethical restraint and emotional intelligence, radically opposed to the dehumanizing images imposed by colonial discourse. Through this representation, family and communal bonds emerge as foundational pillars of African society, privileging relational values, moral responsibility and spiritual depth over material accumulation. This moral greatness, rooted in enduring values of resilience, respect and empathy, further reinforces the novel's broader affirmation of African cultural and ethical systems.

II. Metallurgical Knowledge and Communal Labor as Markers of African Civilization

The mastery of metallurgy and material transformation constitutes one of the defining markers of a civilization's technological and cultural advancement. In West Africa, particularly within the historical empires of Ghana and Mali the broader geographical and cultural backdrop of Camara Laye's narrative societies developed sophisticated techniques for exploiting mineral resources to produce tools, weapons and finely crafted artistic objects. This metallurgical expertise attests to the ingenuity and creativity of African societies, which successfully combined inherited traditions with technical innovation to shape and organize their material world.

In *The Black Child,* this ancestral knowledge is embodied by the figure of Laye's father, a highly respected blacksmith whose craft exemplifies the technical and symbolic mastery of metalworking. Far from being a marginal or purely manual activity, blacksmithing represents a complex body of knowledge that integrates technical skill, social responsibility and spiritual significance (Calderoli, 2010). Frequently overlooked or dismissed by colonial narratives, this expertise stands as a powerful symbol of the richness and depth of African indigenous knowledge systems. Through this character, Camara Laye reasserts

the intellectual and cultural legitimacy of African craftsmanship, challenging colonial assumptions that denied Africa technological sophistication or historical agency:

> L'opération qui se poursuivait sous mes yeux n'était une simple fusion d'or qu'en apparence ; c'était une fusion d'or, assurément, mais c'était bien autre chose encore : une opération magique que les esprits pouvaient accorder ou refuser ; et c'est pourquoi, autour de mon père, il y avait ce silence absolu et cette attente anxieuse. (Camara, 1953, p. 25)

> The operation that was going on before my eyes was a mere fusion of gold in appearance only; it was a fusion of gold, certainly, but it was something else as well: a magical operation that the spirits could grant or refuse, and that is why, around my father, there was this absolute silence and this anxious waiting. (Camara, 1953, p. 25)

By foregrounding this metallurgical expertise, Camara Laye underscores the central role of craftsmanship in the construction of African cultural identity. The valorization of artisanal knowledge directly challenges colonial stereotypes that portray Africa as devoid of creativity or technical intelligence, demonstrating instead that ingenuity and inventiveness are deeply embedded within African societies. Through this representation, the author invites the reader to recognize the diversity and complexity of indigenous skills that colonial discourse systematically marginalized or ignored.

Observing his father at work, the narrator gradually understands that what might appear to be a purely technical operation, such as the fusion of gold, possesses a profound spiritual dimension. Although materially grounded, the act of metalworking is described as a ritualized and symbolic process, likened to a magical operation in which the intervention of spirits is decisive. The presence of magical substances and pots of *gris-gris*[1] surrounding the blacksmith illustrates the intimate fusion between technical expertise and the sacred. Through this depiction, Laye highlights not only the craftsman's mastery of material processes but also the wisdom, authority and reverence that surround his social role.

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1 A protective charm or amulet widely used in West African spiritual traditions. It usually consists of small objects, herbs, or written prayers placed in a pouch or container and is believed to provide protection, luck, or spiritual power.

This spiritual dimension situates the blacksmith within a network of relationships that extends beyond the visible world, emphasizing the ethical responsibility and depth of knowledge required to practice the craft. Moreover, the silence and anxious anticipation that accompany the operation reinforce its gravity and solemnity, underscoring the importance of metalworking within the social and spiritual life of the community (Appia, 1956). Such an atmosphere of respect and concentration affirms the dignity and symbolic grandeur of African craftsmanship, which transcends mere material production to become a cultural, spiritual and communal act. This conception is further reinforced by the necessity of harmony among all participants involved in the metallurgical process:

> L'opération (...) n'était point une simple fusion d'or (...) c'était bien cela (...) une opération magique (...) cette attente anxieuse. Mon père s'y (...) était entre l'atelier en état de pureté et le corps enduit de surcroît des substances magiques, ses nombreuses marmites de gris-gris. Mon oncle Lansana ou tel autre paysan, car la moisson se faisait de compagnie et chacun prêtait son bras à la moisson de tous, les invitait alors à commencer le travail. (Camara, 1953, pp. 16–18)

> The operation (...) was not a simple fusion of gold (...) it was indeed that (...) a magical operation (...) this anxious waiting. My father stood there (...) between the workshop in a state of purity and his body coated with magical substances, surrounded by his many pots of *gris-gris*. My uncle Lansana or another peasant since the harvest was carried out collectively and each lent his arm to the harvest of all would then invite them to begin the work. (Camara, 1953, pp. 16–18)

Camara Laye also reveals a profound understanding of human nature and social relations within African communities. The social interactions depicted in *The Black Child* reflect a form of collective wisdom grounded in principles of harmony, reciprocity and mutual respect. This conception of social life stands in sharp contrast to the colonial vision, which tends to disrupt, fragment and instrumentalize social bonds in the service of domination.

By foregrounding these communal interactions, Laye suggests that the true wealth of a society does not reside in material accumulation but in its capacity to sustain meaningful and authentic relationships among its members. Such collective wisdom is the product of a shared historical experience in which each

individual occupies a clearly defined and valued role within the social structure (Hampâté Bâ, 1972). Through this representation, the novel affirms a moral and spiritual grandeur that directly challenges the reductive and dehumanizing image imposed upon African societies by colonial discourse:

> N'était-ce pas assez de cet effort et de ces torses noirs devant lesquels les épis s'inclinaient ? Ils chantaient, nos hommes, ils moissonnaient ; ils chantaient en chœur, ils moissonnaient ensemble : leurs voix s'accordaient, leurs gestes s'accordaient ; ils étaient ensemble unis dans un même travail, unis par un même chant. La même âme les reliait, les liait ; chacun et tous goûtaient le plaisir, l'identique plaisir d'accomplir une tâche commune. (Camara, 1953, pp. 51–52)

> Was it not enough of this effort and of these black torsos before which the ears of corn bowed? They sang, our men, they harvested; they sang in chorus, they harvested together: their voices were in harmony, their gestures were in harmony; they were together—united in the same work, united by the same song. The same soul connected them and bound them; each and all tasted the pleasure, the same pleasure of accomplishing a common task. (Camara, 1953, pp. 51–52)

Within this valorizing representation of the Black individual as a bearer of knowledge, one essential figure emerges: the griot, musician, reconciler, messenger and guardian of African history. Through this character, Camara Laye highlights the cultural richness and historical depth of African societies. The griot embodies the living memory of the community (Camara Sory, 1992). As a musician, he carries songs and narratives that preserve epics, legends and ancestral knowledge. Beyond this role, the griot serves as a mediator between generations, between peoples and even among individuals in conflict. His function as messenger and guardian of history grants him central importance, as he possesses the power to link the past to the present, ensure continuity within collective identity and guarantee the transmission of essential values, beliefs and knowledge (Karamogo, 1983). Through the figure of the griot, Camara Laye affirms that Black culture is not one of ignorance or absence of civilization, as colonial discourse long asserted, but rather a vibrant and learned culture sustained by a rich and profound historical heritage.

> Le griot s'installait, préludait sur sa Cora, qui est notre harpe, et commençait à chanter les louanges de mon père. (...) J'entendais rappeler les hauts faits des ancêtres de mon père, et ces ancêtres eux-mêmes dans l'ordre du temps ; à mesure que les couplets se dévidaient, c'était comme un grand arbre généalogique. (Camara, 1953, p. 13)

> The griot would sit down, play a prelude on his cora—our traditional harp—and begin to sing the praises of my father. (...) I would hear the great deeds of my father's ancestors recalled, and these ancestors themselves in the order of time; as the verses unfolded, it was like a great genealogical tree. (Camara, 1953, p. 13)

This passage illustrates the essential function of the griot as both guardian and transmitter of history, collective memory and African identity. The cora, a symbolic and traditional instrument, represents the very soul of African culture, and its use by the griot to prelude before singing the praises of the narrator's father forms part of a ritual practice in which each note and each word becomes a bridge between past and present. Through his song, the griot does not merely glorify the individual he celebrates; rather, he connects him to a broader ancestral lineage, thereby weaving a profound bond between generations.

Within the context of colonial discourse, which sought to portray Africans as devoid of civilization and history, such a representation of the griot constitutes a form of resistance. Its evocation therefore affirms the richness of Black heritage and reclaims the power to narrate, remember and reconnect with one's origins (Camara Sory, 1992). Consequently, Camara Laye rehabilitates African knowledge and underscores the importance of oral history, which emerges as a powerful tool of resistance against the derogatory judgments imposed by colonial discourse.

Conclusion

The Black Child constitutes a powerful yet subtle form of African cultural resistance to colonial ideological indoctrination. Rather than engaging in overt political confrontation, Camara Laye constructs a counter-narrative grounded in the affirmation of African values, knowledge systems and moral dignity.

Through childhood experience, initiation rites, metallurgy, communal labor and oral tradition, the novel dismantles colonial stereotypes and reasserts African subjectivity.

By valorizing African cultural integrity, this text participates in a broader project of decolonization that transcends political independence. It demonstrates that resistance also operates at the level of memory, identity and representation. In doing so, the novel invites contemporary readers and scholars to reconsider African literature not merely as a reflection of colonial trauma, but as an active force in the preservation and renewal of African cultural heritage in a globalized world.

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Historical Consciousness in Norbertas Černiauskas' *1940. The Last Summer of Lithuania* and Agnė Žagrakalytė's *The Noisy Ones: Catholics*

Abstract: Based on Marc Bloch's concept of diversity of consciousness and narrative traces, Hayden White' s concept of historical narrativity, and Umberto Eco' s concept of the open work, this article examines two historical narratives that appeared in Lithuania in 2022: Norbertas Černiauskas' *1940. The Last Summer of Lithuania* and Agnė Žagrakalytė's *The Noisy Ones: Catholics* which stand out in the field of contemporary Lithuanian historical prose primarily for their focus on the traditional form of historical narrative—the genre of the calendar. Both authors' original historical narratives are based on specific written testimonies of people; both reveal a clear feminist perspective and a comparative view, where events of local significance and people's stories are linked to events in world history and the experiences of specific individuals. Černiauskas' historical narrative creates an optimistic discourse of 1940, which is linked to the arrival of young and promising artists on the cultural scene, while Žagrakalytė's polyphonic historical narrative, presented in a unique card catalogue form, conveys two world wars through specific human experiences using irony and satire, and links the future of humanity with Benedictine culture and the ethics of love.

Keywords: calendar story; open work in movement; testimony; mood; optimistic discourse; Benedictine culture; ethics of love.

Introduction

Two interesting historical narratives have entered the field of contemporary Lithuanian literature: Norbertas Černiauskas' *1940. Paskutinė Lietuvos vasara* (*1940. The Last Summer of Lithuania*, 2022) and Agnė Žagrakalytė's *Triukšmaujantys: katalikai* (*The Noisy Ones: Catholics*, 2022), in which historical events, the cultural and social life of Lithuanian society during the last summer of the interwar period, and the consequences of the First and Second World Wars are portrayed through the testimonies of individuals. The concept of the historical novel formulated by Giedrius Viliūnas (1992) is important for Černiauskas' and Žagrakalytė's historical narratives in which "people, events, and phenomena of *the past* related to the *national and state level* of social life are depicted" (pp. 12–13). The scholar emphasizes the ambiguity of the historical novel: "it is a genre-diverse type of novel ..." "which can take the form of an adventure, psychological (biographical), or social novel". (p.16) Viliūnas' apt observation that "the most important historical novels today are no longer descriptive or reconstructive, but intellectual in nature: they no longer seek to create a 'concrete vision of an era', but rather to raise and develop a certain thought or idea" (p. 163) echoes the concept of the historical narratives of Černiauskas and Žagrakalytė. Discussing the situation of the Lithuanian historical novel after 1990, Algis Kalėda (2008) notes that some writers (J. Laucė, J. Užurka) follow the beaten path and employ traditional themes (the personality of Vytautas the Great, the decline of paganism, the introduction of Christianity, the formation of the Lithuanian and Polish states), while other creators of non-traditional historical narratives (S. Šaltenis, P. Dirgėla, G. Beresnevičius) are looking for new ways and forms of expression to bring the past to life. For Kalėda (2008), the most problematic aspect of non-traditional historical novels is the relationship between fiction and documentary, where the discourse model "integrates many narrative perspectives, often implying a polyphonic interplay of meanings and axiological criteria"; he describes this type of historical discourse as "creationist, because it is based on the power of imagination to transform the world." As examples, Kalėda, Saulius Šaltenis, who created an ironic, creative "way of talking about the past" in his historical novella *Kalės vaikai (Bees on the snow*, 1990); Petras Dirgėla, who, in his historical prose, exposes a wealth of historiographical material, "creating an original discourse by imitating the writing strategy of a chronicler and author of

chronicles,"; and Gintaras Beresnevičius', whose essayistic novel *Pabėgęs dvaras* (*The Runaway Manor House*, 2005), "resembles a mosaic" in construction and creates an "ironic discourse" that "not only performs a clear testimonial function and creates a comic effect, but also helps to deconstruct collective myths." The historical discourse created by Beresnevičius depicts "the current human being, who is skeptical and inclined toward postmodern playfulness" (Kalėda, 2008).

The historical narratives of Norbertas Černiauskas and Agnė Žagrakalytė also belong to the creative type of the contemporary Lithuanian historical discourse: being people of their time, the authors re-read/reinterpret the past, show the convergence of past and present perspectives, explain (Černiauskas) and model (Žagrakalytė) a unique narrative of past events. Even so, the historical narratives of Černiauskas and Žagrakalytė differ from the creationist historical novel discussed by Kalėda, in that neither Černiauskas nor Žagrakalytė transform historical and cultural documentary sources into radical personal fiction; rather they incorporate the available historical evidence of people's experiences into their fictional narrative.

The aim of this article is to examine how historical consciousness manifests itself in the historical narratives of Černiauskas and Žagrakalytė. A comparative analysis of these contemporary historical narratives is made possible by an analogous conception of history, namely that there is no single objective grand narrative of history; rather, a specific interpretative version of history is written based on authentic testimonies collected by the historian-creator. Both Černiauskas' and Žagrakalytė's historical narratives, which reduce the momentariness and anonymity of history, speak of the lived history of individuals and society, paying much attention to the world of everyday life. Both creators focus on the strategy of creating individual historical narratives and the artistic genre of those narratives. The comparison of the historical narratives of Černiauskas and Žagrakalytė is also made possible by a similar comparative historical perspective, in which Lithuanian historical events are recorded within the context of global historical processes. On the other hand, Černiauskas' and Žagrakalytė's interpretations of history differ in important respects. Žagrakalytė's historical narrative is modelled solely on other people's written testimonies, and the author's position is to explain and evaluate nothing, leaving this function to the reader. Černiauskas' historical narrative reveals a very clear personal creative position regarding the events and situations under

discussion, which the historian does not hide—on the contrary, he openly shows and states that his goal is to reject the one-sided deterministic assessment of the events in Lithuania in 1940, which "often leads to an inevitable chronology of occupation or conditions defensive positions or self-flagellation for the loss of independence" (Černiauskas, 2022, 236).

Methodological Approach

This study undertakes a comparative reading that combines Marc Bloch's approach to history as a diversity of consciousness, Hayden White's concept of historical consciousness, and Umberto Eco's semiotic concept of the open work and artistic form. It should be noted that all these researchers share a common view of historical narrative as a specific art form, a concrete literary narrative characterized by the individual expression of the creator. However, the scientific positions of these three are not identical. Marc Bloch's (2024) concept of historical knowledge, which emphasizes the constant changeability of events (p. 102) and highlights the necessity of recognizing traces understood as written evidence (pp. 99–105), is important for this research. According to Bloch, "narrative sources ... have always provided valuable assistance to researchers. ... They are witnesses" (p. 105). He is convinced that historians must always question these narrative testimonies "make them speak" (p. 107). Bloch further believes that the narrative testimonies, collected and cited by each historian, and the selection of historical material constitute an individual, purposeful historical narrative, shaped by personal values (p. 109). His assertions that the only territory of expression for a historian is the words of his native language (p. 200), that every collection and sorting of historical material is already an individual analysis (p. 185), and that "no science can do without ... imagination" (p. 187) undoubtedly paved the way for Hayden White's ideas and his own literary concept of history. Nonetheless, it is understandable that there are fundamental differences between Bloch's and White's concepts of history: Bloch was more interested in the social history of society, which he described as "the product of individual consciousnesses," where in "a continuous interplay of various interactions takes place" (p. 192). In contrast, White emphasized not the social but the narrative aspect of history.

It is important to clarify how the concept of historical consciousness is understood in this article. Giedrius Viliūnas (1992) argues that "a historical novel devoted to the life of a nation and a state depends primarily on the national and political consciousness of society, or the historical consciousness of the nation" (p. 21). According to Brigita Speičytė (2006), "the possibility of a New Historicism perspective arises when we question the existence of a single, unchanging image of the past" (p. 283). In this connection, it should also be noted that White's ideas on historical narrativity were not received unanimously. According to Carolyn J. Dean (2019, p. 1349), after much debate, historians recognized the importance of White's theory for the methodological foundation of history, but continued to raise questions, such as how is that figurative language determines the type of narrative story. Jörn Rüsen (2020) argues that White was accepted by literary scholars but passionately criticized by fellow historians for his primarily narrative approach to historical thinking. However, it eventually had to be acknowledged that White's theory "marks a turning point in theory of history" (Rüsen, p. 96) as well as a shift towards a new rhetoric. Ewa Domanska (1998) is interested in White's analysis of historical thinking, which she describes as poetic.

White (1973) argues that a historical story is primarily a literary story that reveals the individual historical consciousness of the historian-narrator, or in other words, the chosen rhetoric and poetics that convey a specific aesthetic, philosophical, ideological and ethical approach to understanding the human being and the world: "the ideological dimensions of a historical account reflect the ethical element in the historian's assumption of a particular position on the question" (p. 22). White examines the concept of historical consciousness, which manifests itself in different types of historical stories and different historical styles (p. 12): the specific type of historical story can be given the plot of an epic, a heroic novel, a chronicle, tragedy, comedy, or satire (pp. 6–7). In a previous work, Eglė Keturakienė (2007) described this consciousness as follows: "Based on the experience of new historicism, a human's consciousness is both a historical and aesthetic phenomenon, a process of awareness, a certain form of self-creation" (p. 19).

The method of New Historicism, which emphasizes the importance of the way history is written, is close to Umberto Eco's (1989) concept of artistic form as historical reality: "In every century, the way that artistic forms are structured

reflects the way in which science or contemporary culture views reality" (p.13). Both White and Eco are united by their focus on the relationship between history and art, and both scholars emphasize the importance of narrative plot, structure, and interpretation. However, for White, narrative is a means of modelling an individual version of historical narrative, while Eco emphasizes the process of artistic communication, formulating the concept of the modern text as an open work in movement.

The Genre of the Calendar Story

For both Norbertas Černiauskas and Agnė Žagrakalytė, the genre of historical narrative is important. Černiauskas (2022) states that when writing his historical study, he paid a great deal of attention to "the narrative itself and its direction, as well as the analysis of sources" (p. 242): "This book undoubtedly prompted me to think not only about the 1940s themselves, but also about the form and direction of the narrative" (p. 241). Umberto Eco (2004) writes that "any discourse on art takes place through the creation of form, any artistic statement about man and the world ... arises in a certain way by composing forms" (p. 262). The scholar emphasizes that the form of a work of art can be understood as the literary expression of a particular era: "every artistic form can be viewed as an epistemological metaphor: this means that in every era, artistic forms reflect the scientific or cultural view of reality through similarities, metaphors, and the embodiment of ideas in matter" (p. 78). Černiauskas' original historical narrative *1940. The Last Summer of Lithuania* (2022), which rejects a monumental deterministic narrative ("The summer of 1940 is reflected upon and described not day by day, but by highlighting the problems of that time," (p. 240), is comprised of individual fragments of history, which could even be called short stories, linked by the genre form of a calendar. The composition of Agnė Žagrakalytė's historical narrative *The Noisy Ones: Catholics* (2022) "like that of Černiauskas' work, is based on the genre of the calendar story. The method of reading the historical novel proposed by the writer, "to put together the desired image and write your own historical novel" (p.11), echoes Umberto Eco's concept of an open work in movement: as "an invitation to create together with the author" (p. 86).

Thomas Herold (2014), who studies the functions of the calendar story in Bertolt Brecht's *Cäsar und sein Legionär* (*Caesar and his Legionnaire*), argues that one of the fundamental characteristics of this genre is data, which he describes as "an anchor", a link connecting "the world of the text" with "the world of the reader" (p. 17). Thus, the basis for communication between the storyteller and the reader is the data which, according to Herold, defines the realistic narrative at the beginning of the story, characteristic of the genre of the calendar story. Herold further asserts that "authors of historical novels ... often choose to begin their works with a date" (p. 17). This is true of both Černiauskas' and Žagrakalytė's historical narratives, in which the date is not only a means of conveying information but also an internal gene of the narrative, linking specific time to specific events.

The genre of the calendar story combines the everyday lives of ordinary people with world history, the elements of popular culture with historical events: "the typical 19th-century calendar story ... often alludes to world history, historical events, wars, and kings—so that a connection is made between ordinary people on the one hand and history, politics and world events on the other" (Herold, 2014, p. 19). According to Herold, "this historical tendency also helped one critic define the calendar story as a story about history" (p. 20).

Lithuanian historians Aurelijus Gieda and Gytis Valatka draw our attention to the significance of Lithuanian calendars for the processes of Lithuanian historical culture (Gieda, 2011, p. 114; Valatka, 2008, pp. 8–11). Their research shows that historical publications on the calendars of Vilnius, Kaunas, Biržai, and Žiburys primarily focused on historical narratives emphasizing the uniqueness of Lithuanian people, with national identity being sought in various areas—language, culture, religion, politics (Gieda, p. 114; Valatka, pp. 8–11). These scholars note that biographical texts about Simonas Daukantas, Motiejus Valančius, Vincas Kudirka, Merkelis Giedraitis, and Duke Vytautas in Lithuanian calendars did not aim to explain in detail the historical, cultural, or political significance of a particular person, but a constant repetition of biographical narratives "was intended to become an effective means of shaping historical culture" (Gieda, p. 114; Valatka, pp. 8–11).

Agnė Žagrakalytė's historical story revives the genre tradition of the calendar story: here, the calendar is not only a compositional device, an artistic form chosen for the work, but also an integral element of the historical narrative.

As is typical of the calendar story genre, Žagrakalytė' s historical novel recounts historical events, such as the two World Wars, and provides biographical details about famous Lithuanian figures (such as Andrius Rudamina, Antanas Strazdas, Motiejus Valančius); it also briefly recounts the life story of Chinese diplomat Lou Tseng-Tsiang, who became a Benedictine monk. In Žagrakalytė's story, various historical events from around the world (Belgium and China) and Lithuania are linked to elements of popular culture. For instance, alongside facts about language, history, and art that are important to Lithuanian cultural history, playful fragments from Lithuanian farm life are inserted, such as the priest Kazimieras' advice on how to make wine from apples, pears, and gooseberries (Žagrakalytė, 2022, pp. 111-113), and a quote from Šatrijos Ragana's *Bičių knygelė* (*The Book of Bees*, 1899), which says: "Of all the drinks, the tastiest and best was Kaunas mead. It was famous not only in Lithuania and Poland, but also in other European countries" (p. 109); fragments of cheerful songs and church hymns are also inserted.

The Historical Narrative of the Mood of Society in the Modernization of the Republic of Lithuania

The title of *1940. The Last Summer of Lithuania* can be read as a reference to the existential situation of disposability, characteristic of existentialist texts and ego-documents. For instance, Alfonsas Čipkus (Nyka-Niliūnas, 1998) writes in his diary, which is also mentioned by Černiauskas, his determination to "enjoy every moment of summer as if it were the last or would last forever" (p.14). The historian also states that his book was "directly influenced by Florian Illies' book *1913: The Year Before the Storm* (p. 241), as well as architect Marija Drėmaitė's monograph *The Architecture of Optimism*. Černiauskas' individual historical narrative focuses on the mood of Lithuanian society in 1940, which was undergoing modernization under the threat of World War II. Marc Bloch (2024) claims that "there is nothing more useful than research focused on a specific society, on one aspect of it, or even better, on a specific problem" (p. 194). Hayden White (1973) argues that an individual approach to writing/creating history is characterized by a specific tone or mood that can reveal the ideological subtext of a particular historical narrative: "these implications need not be formally drawn in the historical account

itself, but they will be identifiable by the *tone* or *mood*" (p. 27). This individual historical narrative by Černiauskas is characterized by an intention to describe the mood swings of various social strata in Lithuania, ranging from elation, joy and optimism to anxiety, tension and confusion.

In Černiauskas' historical book, the fate of interwar Lithuania, metaphorically described as an island, its rise in all areas and a sudden loss of independence is told through the story of an individual, whose experiences and moods, are recorded in narrative testimonies. It should be noted that the historian is very attentive to describing the life of Lithuanian women artists in interwar Lithuania. The unifying thread of the historical narrative is the leitmotif of the feelings, moods, and experiences of a young woman immortalized in the notebook of art historian Halina Kairiūkštytė. Černiauskas' book begins with a story about how Halina Kairiūkštytė celebrated the New Year in 1940 and what she experienced; he is interested in art historian Kairiūkštytė' mood, which fluctuates between tension, anxiety and uncertainty, caused by her personal existential situation, family problems and longing for her homeland. In Černiauskas' historical book, alongside the achievements of the Lithuanian state (in the section "Lithuanian Projects and Plans"), the life story of another woman is also briefly recorded: the dramatic fate of Lithuanian artist Barbora Didžiokienė, with quotations from her memoir about her unhappy marriage to "the arrogant, rude, alcohol-abusing painter Vladas Didžiokas" (p. 127) and her only goal in life—to erect a monument to her son, who died young from tuberculosis. The historian also focuses on the life experiences of another creator, poet Matilda Olkinaitė: her emotional and spiritual state is vividly recalled, and it is no coincidence that Černiauskas' historical book ends with a quote from her diary, thus, confirming that the course of history is made up of human experiences. The feelings of a young woman, a Lithuanian Jewish poet, constitute important testimony in describing the interwar summer of 1940 in Lithuanian society.

People's Testimonies – Narrative Traces of the Past

According to Bloch (2024) both past and present traces of knowledge are also "a narrative written down by a witness to an old [or new] event" (p. 99). Černiauskas' historical book also draws on people's testimonies, the narrative

traces of Lithuanian and international celebrities from the worlds of art and culture such as writers, poets, teachers, diplomats, priests (Halina Kairiūkštytė, Astrid Lindgren, Matilda Olkinaitė, George Orwell, Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, Alfonsas Čipkus, Mykolas Römeris, Jurgis Savickis, Ignas Šeinius, Petras Klimas, Motiejus Lukšys) as reliable historical evidence in order to "feel the atmosphere of the last summer in Lithuania" (p. 242), to more accurately describe the mood of Lithuanian interwar society in 1940 in the context of the threat of World War II.

Černiauskas' historical narrative is further characterized by a distinct comparative perspective—a search for parallels between Lithuania and the world. For instance, while discussing in detail the mood of Lithuanian art historian Halina Kairiūkštytė (sadness about her family falling apart, doubts about her usefulness to her homeland, "fear of growing old") at the celebration of the New Year, Černiauskas draws parallels to Astrid Lindgren', who "felt no festive atmosphere anywhere" "like Kairiūkštytė, she was worried about her homeland: would Sweden remain neutral or get involved in the war?" (p. 10).

The section entitled "Touching Vilnius" conveys the moods and behaviour of various strata of Lithuanian society after the restoration of the Vilnius region, and examines the process of Lithuanization that sparked the wars of songs (Černiauskas, 2022, p. 93). In this context, a letter written by Marija Alseikaitė, later Gimbutienė, to Jurgis Gimbutas on April 23rd, 1940, is used to convey the ambivalent joy of a young girl ("I almost cried with joy") while singing Lithuanian songs in Vilnius Cathedral, and her firm belief that "life is alive in Vilnius and only through Vilnius will the Lithuanian nation grow stronger" (p. 88). Unfortunately, the "manifestations of songs ... escalated into riots" (p. 88). Černiauskas refers to the wars of songs with gentle irony as "student post-study practices," which the dean of the Faculty of Humanities at Vilnius University, professor and poet Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, described as the behaviour of "country boys" at "the darkest village parties" (p. 88). The historian strives for human objectivity, which is why his book presents narrative testimony completely opposite to that of Professor Mykolaitis-Putinas. When examining the specific phenomenon of song wars, a reference is also made to an entry in the diary of the young poet Alfonsas Čipkus (Nyka-Niliūnas), who went with other students "to early morning services at the Gate of Dawn" (Nyka-Niliūnas, 1998, p. 44), "in order to create the impression of a large crowd" (Černiauskas, 2022, p. 88).

In his historical book, Černiauskas recounts the history of Lithuanian society in the interwar period of the 1940s through its everyday life and experiences of celebrations and hardships. For instance, the section entitled "When Will Summer Begin?" explores how Lithuanian society welcomed the beginning of summer in 1940, what people were doing, and thinking, how they worked, and how they relaxed. Černiauskas (2022) cites a passage from Professor Mykolas Römeris' diary in which he anxiously claims that "during these holidays, this summer, significantly more events may occur than would occur at other times, in other eras, perhaps even requiring a whole decade" (p. 35); he recounts how and where Lithuanian society "looked for attractive places for holidays," and that the growing demand for quiet and inexpensive rest encouraged even rural residents and farmers to offer their farms to vacationers (p. 35); he records how the students of Telšiai Crafts School entertained themselves by forming a glider club and trying to "conquer the blue sky" (p. 37), while at the beginning of summer, the young poet Matilda Olkinaitė had not yet taken her vacation, but had had a literature exam at Vilnius University with her supervisor, Professor Mykolaitis-Putinas, and passed with flying colours (p. 38).

The section "It's' Hard to Be a Parisian", whose title comes from Astrid Lindgren's war diary, depicts the encounter between Lithuanian interwar society and the culture and art of France. According to Černiauskas (2022), Paris, having outcompeted Rome and Chicago, became a center of attraction for art, culture, and spiritual values, coveted by Lithuanian interwar artists, scientists, and even military officers: "For many in Lithuania, Paris and France were associated with freedom, tolerance, innovation, modernity, and creativity" (p. 206). To support this claim, the historian uses an excerpt from Liūnė Janušytė's novel *Korektūros klaida* (*Error of Proofreading*), in which the novel's protagonist expresses his admiration for Paris, to illustrate and confirm the historical fact that "Lithuanian scholarship holders... flocked to Paris to gain knowledge and experience the cultural life there" (p. 206). The historian aptly notes that the fascination with Paris among Lithuanian cultural workers and artists was influenced not only by scholarships to study and train in Paris, but also by the targeted education reform policy of Lithuania: "In the middle of the fourth decade, after the educational reforms, French became the main foreign language in Lithuanian schools" (p. 206).

Černiauskas is also concerned with the fate of Lithuanian diplomats and their forced departure from France in the historical context of the impending

Second World War, which is conveyed by examining diplomats' state of mind. For instance, the historian is interested in the state of Lithuanian writer and diplomat Jurgis Savickis when "war was brewing" between France and Mussolini (p. 209): "June caused even more anxiety for ... Savickis, who at that time was renting a new home, the villa 'Ariogala,' in Rocbrun-Cap-Martinet in southern France" (p. 210). The historian's account is based on Savickis' diary, which states that when the gendarme arrived and ordered everyone to evacuate by 8 p.m., a quick decision had to be made about what could be saved. Knowing the context of Jurgis Savickis' life and work, which focused on aestheticism, it does not seem so surprising that he suggested to his wife that they "take with them" the better paintings they had, including those by Adomas Varnas (Savickis, 1995, p. 194). The historian does not limit the description to a single artifact but strives to convey the situation of war refugees and Lithuanian diplomats from various perspectives. For instance, the book reveals that "another Lithuanian diplomat, Petras Klimas, experienced the turmoil in a slightly less dramatic way" (p. 12).

The Discourse of Optimism

Černiauskas' historical narrative of "the atmosphere of Lithuania's last summer" is a purposeful, individual discourse of optimism created by the historian. For Černiauskas (2022),

> the 1940s were not (only) years of a young state suppressed by an authoritarian regime, but (also) the zenith of a maturing, growing society. Having implemented numerous complex reforms, risen from the ruins of war and the century-long yoke of the Tsarist Russian Empire, Lithuania showed that it was determined and ready to modernize rapidly in all areas – from education and culture to the economy and social security (p. 240).

This discourse of optimism is established by Černiauskas' description of the beginning of the interwar summer of 1940 in Lithuania, full of literary, cultural, and political news, showing that there was a variety of books on offer to suit the different aesthetic tastes of the reading public in Lithuania. Among the summer's

recommended reading were a popular travel book; Jonas Marcinkevičius' latest novel *Nemunas patvino* (*The Nemunas Flood*); translations of Stefan Zweig's historical novel *Mary Stuart*, and Nobel Prize winner Frans Eemil Sillanpää's novel *People in the Summer Night*; Juozas Baltušis' debut book of short stories *Savaitė prasideda gerai* (*The Week has Begun Well*); the third edition of Vincas Pietaris' historical novel *Algimantas*; Kazys Binkis' beautiful poem about Vilnius *Keistutis pas Gediminą* (*Kęstutis and Gediminas*); and young poet Valerija Valsiūnienė' rhyming fairy tale *Gintaro lazdelė* (*Amber Wand*) (p. 199).

Černiauskas reports not just what Lithuanians were reading, but what they thought of it: he discusses Antanas Miškinis' favourable review of Marcinkevičius' *Nemunas patvino*, published in *Vairas* (*The Helm*) and Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas' critical review from his diary, which deems the novel superficial and says that its "main idea ... is the constant persecution of the intelligentsia by the countryside" (p. 192) as well as similarly contrasting reviews of Baltušis' book of short stories. Černiauskas' optimistic discourse is reinforced by *Bleter* (*Pages*), the second almanac of works by Jewish poets from Kaunas and Vilnius, which he deems, "one of the most beautiful examples of cooperation" between those two cities (p. 195). Optimism is also evident in the historian's playful description of the situation in the Lithuanian poetry scene in 1940, when "there were constant arguments over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine" about which poet, Antanas Miškinis, Jonas Aistis or Bernardas Brazdžionis, was a "brighter Lithuanian superstar" (p. 194).

The historian's optimistic narrative is reinforced by his discussion of the achievements of Lithuanian interwar culture and art. He notes that on June 3rd, 1940, the State Theater in Kaunas put on the twelfth performance of the *Atžalynas* (*The New Generation*), based on Kazys Binkis' play, and two weeks later, the troupe of the Latvian Art Theater arrived with their own interpretation of Binkis' *Atžalynas*: "Lithuania was extremely pleased that the staging of this play in Latvia contributed significantly to closer cultural cooperation between the two countries" (p.219). In this context, the historian quotes the testimony of Irena Veisaitė, a student at Sholom Aleichem Gymnasium in Kaunas, who said that the performance of *Atžalynas* left an "indelible impression on her—it was the first professional performance she had ever seen in her life" (p. 219).

Faith in the prospects of Lithuania's prosperity was also supported by the art and poetry created during the interwar period. The historian writes

that the future of the Lithuanian state was "optimistically linked" to the young generation of artists (Matilda Olkinaitė, Henrikas Nagys, Eugenijus Matuzevičius, Emilija Šešeikaitė, Kazys Bradūnas, Bronius Krivickas, Paulius Jurkus, Vytautas Mačernis, Mamertas Indriliūnas, Alfonsas Čipkus), whose works were published in the spring and summer of 1940 in *Ateitis* (*Future*) and *Studentų dienos* (*Students' Days*).

The Ironic Story: From Playfulness to Satire

The essential theme of Žagrakalytė's historical novel—the fragility of human life (Šerelytė, 2024)—is conveyed through the ironic interpretation of history, human existence and destiny, balancing between light-hearted playfulness, laughter, and painful satire. The way Žagrakalytė writes history, creating a card catalogue made up of quotes from historical sources, resembles "the satirical mode" that White (1973) identifies with a "supposedly 'non-narrative'" (p. 8) type of history.

In Žagrakalytė's historical novel-satire, moments from the life of Antanas Strazdas showcase human life as an ironic joke about human existence. The origins of Strazdas' song "Pulkim ant kelių" ("Let's Fall on Our Knees") provide one example: after a long journey with pilgrims, Father Strazdas oversleeps Mass, but finds a quick solution by suggesting that the faithful pray in the cemetery, where there are as many crosses as they want: "That," says Strazdas "is how the song 'Pulkim ant kelių' came to be" (Žagrakalytė, 2022, p. 29). The imperfection of life and playful laughter are conveyed in Bishop Motiejus Valančius' letters to the parish priests of Rietavas and Andriejavas, instructing them to "admonish people not to rush when going to confession" (p. 40). Another example is a 1943 testimony from a Belgian monastery which depicts an ironic, playful episode when life itself offers comically ambiguous situations during World War II: "The Benedictine monks expelled from St. Andrew's Monastery near Bruges find refuge in the Benedictine monastery of Our Lady of Bethany in Lopeme (Loppem)" (p. 287).

Agnė Žagrakalytė' s historical story quotes not only fragments of writings by famous authors, but also testimonies of ordinary people, including soldiers'

letters to loved ones during the First World War. According to Renata Šerelytė (2024), "soldiers' letters from the front are full of the horror of war and absurdity." The letters of Pierre, a soldier in 1914, to his wife convey light-hearted playfulness and provoke laughter at human imperfection: "Dear wife, / We eat well and drink well. In the mornings we go to Mass. If only you could see how these peasants stick out their tongues to swallow the host" (Žagrakalytė, 2022, p. 180). A few months later news that the soldier has been killed brings painful awareness of human finitude and the fact of death. The reality of World War I itself testifies to the relativity of earthly existence: "Just a year ago, 'going to the hospital' meant nothing but misery.... And now, the hospital is the promised land. For millions of men, it is hope and a dream" (p. 179).

The fate of the soldier during the First World War can be read as a case of irony, a joke of fate, testifying to the cruelty, instability and transience of this earthly life. This is illustrated by the case of Joseph, whose letters to his wife Ninete in 1917, are initially optimistic, full of joy and zest life ("We are being cared for by civilian nurses, they are powdered and perfumed, their eyes full of passion"; (Žagrakalytė, 2022, p. 213), conveying his hope of returning to her and their children. A year later, the chaplain writes to Ninete, informing her that the lieutenant has died in hospital due to complications following a leg surgery. According to White (1973), "satire ... views these hopes ... ironically, in the atmosphere generated by the apprehension of the ultimate inadequacy of consciousness to live in the world happily" (p. 10). The extreme situation of war takes on the image of meaningless repetition; witness the testimony of a cellist in 1914, who writes to his mother that, amid bullets and cannonballs, "just like with any repetitive melody, you quickly get used to it" (Žagrakalytė, 2022, p. 186). In letters written from hospital in 1914, soldier Etjen writes that it is impossible to adequately describe the realities of war, that the horror of the slaughter of war cannot be conveyed through human discourse. The soldier's reuse of the word "impossible" underscores that not all experiences can be expressed (p. 186). According to White, "the trope of Irony [is] a model of the linguistic protocol in which skepticism in thought and relativism in ethics are conventionally expressed" (p. 22). Etjen's letters are a satire on war, imbued with hidden irony, conveying a critical attitude and skepticism about the possibility of adequately telling the whole truth about the reality of war. The testimony of the 1916 war conveys the chaos of values in ironic language, blurring the line

between good and evil and disrupting the paradigm of values: "A Christmas gift from the Belgian royal couple to the soldiers, ... a palm-sized prayer book with pink covers. Postcards of naked beauties. Syringes to treat gonorrhoea" (Žagrakalytė, 2022, p. 196).

In her historical novel-satire, Žagrakalytė invites us to distrust the earthly world of humans and to reflect on absurdity in history is beyond our good will and strikes unexpectedly. The book quotes the 1949 verbal testimony of its main character, Lou Tseng-Tsiang: "Now don't talk about my homeland anymore, I entrust it to Our Lord, it is in good hands," while a week later it becomes clear that: "Communist forces occupy Beijing" (Žagrakalytė, 2022, p. 305). According to White (1973), "as the basis of a world view, Irony tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions [in] its apprehension of the essential folly or absurdity of the human condition" (p. 38).

The Significance of Benedictine Culture

Agnė Žagrakalytė's historical novel presents a catalogue of facts—rumour cards that can be read as people's testimonies, as recorded historical, cultural, literary traces of the world in which people live—which are combined into a readable narrative not only in the genre of the calendar story, but also through the author's conscious effort to establish Christian discourse, in many cases via specifically Benedictine culture. The power of faith is confirmed by the saint's own testimony—the story of St. Benedict's life, written on one of the cards in Žagrakalytė's story, tells how wicked monks tried to poison the saint, but he blessed the cup of poisonous drink with the sign of the cross and it exploded. Renata Šerelytė (2024) asks:

> Why "the noisy", why "Catholics?" Why are there so many facts, rumours, paradoxes, and twists and turns related to saints, missionaries, martyrs, church construction, monasteries, Christian culture, and politics? For the simplest reason – Catholicism created Western civilization, Lithuania is no exception (the cards mention Antanas Strazdas, Kazimieras Jaunius, Motiejus Valančius, Antanas Baranauskas, Maironis, Jurgis Matulaitis, Andrius Rudamina).

Here is another vivid example from Žagrakalytė's historical narrative, in which cards contain information from 1893 related to Christian and Benedictine culture: in 1893, Sister Agnes, who entered the Benedictine convent in Maredret, established a drawing workshop, mentioned in the 1893 Catalogue of Saints, an excerpt from the 1893 "Review of Samogitia and Lithuania" and the title of Fr. Antanas Milukas' 1893 textbook *An Easy Way to Teach Yourself to Write Beautifully*. It would be pointless to list all such information presented in Žagrakalytė's historical novel: it is more important to understand what this abundance, this catalogue of Christians and saints, means. Umberto Eco (2011) suggests that "we must learn to read lists, catalogues, and directories as if they were music" (p. 173). This poetics of excess created by Žagrakalytė is not an end in itself; it signifies the author's desire to create a purposeful narrative that emphasizes the importance of Benedictine culture to the Western world. According to Piero Lazzarin (2011) it was the Benedictines who, "in a Europe disrupted by the chaos of the barbarian invasions, were destined to become the disseminators of culture and civilization" (p. 84).

Lou Tseng-Tsiang is named not only as the main character of Žagrakalytė's historical novel, but also as the reason for the creation of the book. The author's curiosity was piqued by a gravestone in the Laken cemetery in Belgium: a "monument in the form of an open bronze book" engraved with a Catholic priest's love letter to his wife in French and Chinese. In its very shape, this memorial takes on biblical significance, symbolizing the Christian concept of human existence (in the Bible, human life is known to God as an open book of life) and pointing to the Benedictine tradition associated with the culture of writing and books. Lazzarin (2011), argues that Western culture and civilization would have disappeared "if it had not been for the meticulous and enthusiastic work of Benedict and his monks, because it was they who preserved that culture – the source of our culture today – and passed it on to future generations" (p. 82).

Žagrakalytė's historical novel develops the life story of the main character, Lou Tseng-Tsiang, who was born and raised in China, fell in love with and married Berthe Bovy, the daughter of a Belgian general, and after her death gave up his political career as a prime minister and became a Benedictine monk. His conscious transformation could be interpreted as a triumph of Christian Benedictine culture. Lou Tseng-Tsiang can be considered a true hero of Christian culture more broadly, one who humbly accepted all of the hurdles

of life (the early death of his mother, his "boycotted" marriage to a European Catholic woman, the death penalty of his teacher, childlessness, the death of his wife) as God's grace, turning away from the earthly world and choosing to become a Benedictine monk and later a priest.

The Ethics of Love

The life story of Lou Tseng-Tsiang, the main character in Žagrakalytė's historical novel, shows that this man chose courage over fear, renounced worldly power and authority, and chose the Christian faith and the ethic of love, which radically changed his life. According to bell hooks (2001), "commitment to a love ethic transforms our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by" (p. 64). This set of values primarily involves the rejection of fear:

> cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience. ... Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation ...When we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in other. (p. 68).

Lou Tseng-Tsiang, married to a woman of a different nationality and faith, chose the sacrament of marriage, chose to discover himself through another person, following the path of love and faith. According to hooks, "faith enables us to move past fear" (p. 67). It should be noted that in Žagrakalytė's work, the personal story of Lou Tseng-Tsiang, who became a Benedictine monk, develops in parallel with the history of Belgium, China, and the entire Christian world, including Lithuania. This comparative view, characteristic of Žagrakalytė's historical novel, also conveys the writer's own historical consciousness, based on the ethics of love, that our human nature is the same, yet our lives and destinies are not identical, but closely related and intertwined in various situations of human experience. This parallels hooks' assertion that

> individuals who choose to love can and do alter our lives in ways that honour the primacy of a love ethic. We do this by choosing to work with individuals we admire

> and respect; by committing to give our all to relationships; by embracing a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet (p. 64).

Agnė Žagrakalytė's historical novel ends with a written testimony by King Baudouin of Belgium, a prayer found in his notebook, which also reveals the ethics of Christian love and testifies that the only sustainable and reliable source of support for human existence is the practice of the Christian faith—a prayer to the Lord—protecting us from our own selfishness, self-interest, and lack of love for people who are suffering pain and hardship.

Conclusions

The concept of historical consciousness formulated by Hayden White, Marc Bloch's concept of diversity of consciousness and narrative traces, and Umberto Eco's concept of an open work are employed to analyse two original historical narratives published in Lithuania in 2022. In the context of contemporary Lithuanian historical prose, the historical narratives of Norbertas Černiauskas and Agnė Žagrakalytė are unique in terms of both form and content. Both authors return to the traditional form of historical narrative, renewing the genre of the calendar story, which is not only their fundamental principle of composition, but also their personal method of purposeful storytelling. The historical narrative of Černiauskas' calendar is transformed by the distinct voice of the historian-interpreter, while Žagrakalytė does not comment on historical events or the behavior of historical figures, but only presents written evidence, which is, of course, also a subjective writing strategy.

It should be noted that Černiauskas' historical book offers a distinct feminist perspective. In describing the mood of interwar Lithuanian society in 1940, Černiauskas focuses on the experiences of specific individuals, recorded in various written testimonies—traces of memory. Černiauskas' historical narrative is dominated by the experiences of a woman artist in interwar Lithuania, including moments of celebration, as well as everyday life. The experiences of art historian Halina Kairiūkštytė and the fates of artist Barbora Didžiokienė and young poet Matilda Olkinaitė, described with particular sensitivity, become the unifying

thread of the historical narrative. The meticulously composed life story of the main character of the book, who reduced binary oppositions with his fate, can also be considered a subtle embodiment of mature feminist thought. Further, both authors present a comparative perspective: as is typical of the calendar story, both writers connect events of local significance with world history.

Černiauskas creates an optimistic historical discourse about 1940, which witnessed the rise of literary and cultural life in interwar Lithuania. Typically, of his chosen genre, Černiauskas depicts the lived history and everyday concerns of Lithuanian creators and diplomats in the face of the looming threat of World War II. Meanwhile, Žagrakalytė's polyphonic narrative is multi-layered and multifaceted, both satirically ironic and Christianly hopeful. The attempt to encompass the historical events of Lithuania, Belgium, and China conveys a conscious refusal to create an East-West opposition, characteristic of traditional Lithuanian historical self-awareness, and the writer's desire to discover common human principles. Agnė Žagrakalytė's satirical narrative, depicting the events of the First and Second World Wars, conveys ironic historical self-awareness and a skeptical view of cruel human reality. At the same time, the abundance of Catholic figures and the radical transformation of the main character's life story (a Chinese diplomat becoming a Benedictine monk) in Žagrakalytė's card catalogues convey a vision of the future associated with Benedictine culture and the ethics of love, which saves us from selfishness, loneliness and egotism.

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Epistemic Violence and Totalitarian Ethos in O. V. Vijayan's *The Foetus* and Henry Slesar's *Examination Day*

Abstract: The post-World War II era is characterised by the Cold War and recurrent internal conflicts between factions divided along ideological, cultural, economic, religious, and political lines within a nation. At times, however, the conflict is between the state and the citizens. The avarice of the powerful and their desire to assert control over the powerless bring about the metamorphosis of democratic states into totalitarian regimes. *The Foetus* (1989) by O. V. Vijayan and *Examination Day* (1958) by Henry Slesar are two short stories that critique state violence in such metamorphic times. *The Foetus* is a political allegory on the internal Emergency that was declared and extended in India for a period of twenty-one months, from 25 June 1975 to 21 March 1977. Fiercely denouncing the state and its extreme regulations, this short story graphically narrates the actions by which the state sought to control and confine its citizens. *Examination Day* concerns an extremist government that defines and limits the intelligence of its citizens, thus curbing their freedom of thought. Fear of the state arising from systemic violence burdens the characters in both stories and precludes them from possible resistance against the state.

This paper uses the concepts of epistemic violence from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) and simulated democracy from György Lengyel's & Gabriella Ilonszki's "Simulated Democracy and Pseudo-Transformational Leadership in Hungary" (2012) to argue that fear of the state is simulated/generated to subjugate the citizens. It also attempts to locate the totalitarian undertones in both short stories by applying the concept of the panopticon, introduced by Jeremy Bentham

and later discussed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975).

Keywords: Emergency in India; Henry Slesar; mortacracy; O. V. Vijayan; panopticon; simulated democracy; totalitarianism.

Introduction

The Foetus (1989) by O.V. Vijayan and *Examination Day* (1958) by Henry Slesar are two short stories that explore the theme of state violence towards citizens. Constant fear of the state, anxiety towards state policies, and recurring episodes of emotional turmoil experienced by the common people can be identified as the main themes in both these stories. The kindred experiences and emotions of the characters become the point of convergence for works otherwise set in different locales and cultures.

The Foetus is based on the national Emergency that was proclaimed in India on 25 June 1975. Extended for the next twenty-one months until its revocation on 21 March 1977 (Gwatkin, 1979; Paul, 2017; Tarlo, 2003; Williams, 2014), the Emergency was marked by strict government policies that curbed and controlled any form of dissent. *The Foetus* allegorically represents the political condition of the nation-state of India during this period. Slesar's *Examination Day* is set in an unnamed dystopia and narrates the extent of state encroachment on the public as well as personal lives of its citizens, depriving them of their right to life and freedom of thought and imagination. The lack of protest or revolt from the citizenry towards the power centers, in both of these works, can be attributed to the persistent fear of the system ingrained in the minds of the people. This paper compares the two stories to answer the following questions: Do the citizens fear the state, and how does this fear permeate the general population? In what ways does the state exploit the element of fear to subjugate and silence its citizens? How does the citizens' conditioning to fear serve the interests of the state? Is there potential to transcend this condition in which citizens are silenced by fear?

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, drawing on György Lengyel's & Gabriella Ilonszki's concept of simulated democracy in "Simulated Democracy and Pseudo-Transformational Leadership in Hungary" (2012) and R. J. Rummel's

concept of mortacracy in "Democide in Totalitarian States: Mortacracies and Megamurderers" (2017), the paper argues that the settings in these stories are simulated by the authorities to inculcate fear in the minds of the common people. Secondly, this paper undertakes a detailed comparative analysis of both stories using the concept of the panopticon introduced by Jeremy Bentham and later discussed by Michael Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). The goal of this analysis is to understand and locate the totalitarian undertones and indicators in these works by considering the elements of fear that are employed to generate and maintain a state of fineness in society—as embodied by the hegemonic interaction of the state with its citizenry.

This study is grounded in a close reading of the texts *The Foetus* and *Examination Day*, which are analysed textually, comparatively, and thematically. Published in the post-World War II era, both texts explore the contingent and questionable nature of democracy, centring their narratives on systems that have shifted from representational forms of government to authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, both allegorically and fictionally. The analysis reveals shared tropes, such as the tenuous state-citizen dynamic resulting from authoritarian overreach and the depiction of a fearful, subjugated populace. *The Foetus* will be further analysed historically by situating it within the context of the Indian Emergency of 1975.

Power and Surveillance

R. J. Rummel (2017) defines totalitarianism in his work "Democide in Totalitarian States: Mortacracies and Megamurderers" (2017) as:

> a system of government that is unlimited constitutionally or by countervailing powers in society (such as by a church, rural gentry, labor unions, or regional powers); is not held responsible to the public by periodic secret and competitive elections; and employs its unlimited power to control all aspects of society, including the family, religion, education, business, private property, and social relationships. (p. 5)

It can be discerned from this definition that a political situation such as totalitarianism restricts the freedom and individuality of its citizens and imposes

a rule characterised by fear of certain state institutions. Rummel deems totalitarian governments "the contemporary embodiment of absolute Power" (2017, p. 7); further, he traces the transformation of this power into violence committed by the state. In order to explicate the relation between power exercised by a totalitarian government and democide (killing of a person or a group of people by the government) he applies the "Power Principle" which states that "Power kills, absolute Power kills absolutely" (Rummel, 2017, p. 7). Rummel observes that absolute power would result in mortacracies, a "type of political system that habitually and systematically murders large numbers of its own citizens" (2017, p. 3). Within his study of absolute power, Rummel categorizes certain states as megamurderers and kilomurderers. The former refers to states that kill innocent people in the millions, the latter in the thousands or more. But how does the state decide whom to punish and whom to leave free? Who should be killed and who should be "allowed" to live? How is the state informed of the "transgressions"? What gives the state the right to kill its citizens, and how does the state exercise this agency? Constant surveillance of citizens, the generation of fear about being surveilled, and the punishment that would ensue in the event of an aberration, are factors that decide the oppressor–oppressed dynamics between state and citizens. Novels such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, set in totalitarian regimes, narrate the state's aspiration to perfection within society and the pursuit of it through systematic and pervasive surveillance mechanisms.

The ideals of a perfect society that monitors and guides its citizens are reflected in the panopticon model of architecture, proposed by Jeremy Bentham and later expounded by Michael Foucault in his work, *Discipline and Punish*: *The Birth of the Prison* (1975). In prisons modelled on the panopticon, prisoners in their separate cells are under constant surveillance by the guards, and the structure of the prison prevents the intermingling of the prisoners in private. Therefore, the prisoner "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, 1975, p. 200). In these cells, the prisoner is made conscious of the permanent visibility of power, which further assures the automatic function of power. Thus, according to Foucault, automatization and deindividualization become the key mechanisms by which the panopticon model functions. Totalitarian states function on these same models, creating among the citizens a spectre of power and a fear of constant

monitoring. Foucault observes that Bentham's panopticon is a menagerie as well as a laboratory: "The Panopticon is a royal menagerie; the animal is replaced by man, individual distribution by royal grouping, and the king by the machinery of a furtive power" (1975, p. 203). Here, the individuals are closely observed and are differentiated based on their attitude and behaviour. As a laboratory, the panopticon serves "to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals" (Foucault, 1975, p. 203). The act of one-way surveillance—the guards (powerful) watch the prisoners (powerless)—establishes a perilous and hierarchical power dynamic within the society. The constant surveillance characteristic of totalitarian regimes induces fear among the populace, which in turn checks them from potential uprisings against the government.

Examination Day and *The Foetus* are analogous with regard to their foundational themes, particularly the totalitarian turn of the state and its coercive strategies of repression, intimidation, violence, and surveillance. While previous studies have analysed these texts in isolation, the present study brings together these two post-World War II stories, the latter of which also responds to the Indian national Emergency of 1975. Using fictional texts as a critical medium, the study examines the re(g/p)ressive transformation of the state during times of political turbulence. Through a comparative analysis of both these texts, the study seeks to point out that, irrespective of the cultural setting, repressive regimes across diverse global contexts thrive by instilling simulated fear in their citizens. Additionally, the study draws parallels between the selected texts to argue that these regimes employ similar methods of oppression, from silencing the populace to intruding upon their private lives and stripping them of their personal rights.

Fear as an Inducer of Fineness in *The Foetus and Examination Day*

Persistent fear of the state, born of the knowledge of constant state surveillance, and the habituation of this fear can be identified as the main tropes in both *The Foetus* and *Examination Day*. Appearing in his 1989 anthology *After the Hanging and Other Stories*, *The Foetus* is a short story by noted Indian writer and cartoonist O. V. Vijayan. Set in an Indian village, it is an allegorical representation of the nation's political condition and what was criticised as state-propagated violence

during the internal Emergency of 1975–1977. *The Foetus* thematizes the legacy of political leadership concentrated in the hands of a single family and shows how, over the generations, the exercise of political power strays from its original aims and goals of community development to fulfilling the selfish desires of a few stakeholders. Lady Sovereign and her unborn child, referred to in the story as Foetus, symbolise the political elites, while characters such as the Priest and Astrologer represent a populace who fearfully submit to the former ruling class.

Written in third person, *The Foetus* incorporates supernatural elements such as omens to emphasize the unpredictability and unreachability of the powerful. The story opens with a description of the village and the palace of the Sovereign. Phrases such as "layered darkness of the fortress," "malignant carbuncles," and "prehistoric spiders" (Vijayan, 1989, p. 30) set the general atmosphere of the story and prepare readers to expect unnatural and formidable events. Within the politically stratified society of *The Foetus*, supernatural and mystical events also serve to generate a lingering climate of fear and suspicion of the state as experienced by the common people. The latter are reduced to the level of spectators in the narrative, living under the constant surveillance of a repressive regime. The story opens with the Astrologer, who is forced to convey that the pregnancy of the "Lady, widowed Sovereign of the village" (Vijayan, 1989, p. 30) is an immaculate conception.

> "Is it an immaculate conception?" the Priest asked in anxiety.
>
> The Astrologer gathered his shells together and flung them again and meditated.
>
> "The planets do not speak," the Astrologer said. Suddenly there were three young men looming behind him.
>
> "Old man," their leader said, "read your shells properly. This is an immaculate conception, and the people need such a reading."
>
> His voice was menacing, and the Astrologer looked up helplessly.
>
> "Cast your shells again," the young man said. The Astrologer did so.
>
> "Don't you see it is immaculate?" demanded the young man.
>
> In a weak voice the Astrologer assented, "I do."
>
> The young men turned and left the temple. The Priest now asked the Astrologer, "Do you, in truth?"
>
> "I see nothing." (p. 30)

This is a case of coercion by the state, which withholds the truth from its citizens by constructing narratives that glorify the deeds of the rulers. The story progresses, and after three months, the villagers spot the cadaver of the village drummer covered in blood and a slime-like substance. The trail of the slime leads them to the dark fortress, the residence of the Lady Sovereign, which is guarded by hounds and thus inaccessible to the villagers. Though the villagers dismiss the first case of death by the Foetus as an "inexplicable aberration" and choose to forget the incident, the "enormous blob of jelly" (Vijayan, 1989, p. 31) continues to harass and haunt people irrespective of age or gender. Hounds' tracks alongside trails of slime, the bleating of terrified goats, and the howling of the hounds thus become "omens of the night" (Vijayan, 1989, p. 32) that foretell the impending violence. Later in the story, it comes to light that the unnatural deaths and frequent destruction in the village are the doings of the Foetus that crawls out of the Lady Sovereign's womb every night. As the story progresses the Foetus grows more and more powerful, conquering night and day, old and young, men and women. An army of followers, including other younger foetuses and young men referred to as gentry in the story, who relish the powers the Foetus confers upon them, indicates the rising reverence for the Foetus within the story's society. At the same time, the narrative is laden with the fear and uneasiness of the village's common people under the supremacy of non-human rule: what Vijayan terms "the Foetus's Law" (1989, p. 37).

As an unborn child, the Foetus could symbolise Indira Gandhi's younger son Sanjay Gandhi, the undeclared ruler devoid of political position and political experience but exercising complete power. Mr. Gandhi, who was entitled to "extra-constitutional powers" (Jaffrelot & Anil, 2020, p. 18) during the Emergency, implemented various programmes for national development. One of the five programmes he introduced, family planning, was implemented nationwide with fixed targets to be met through compulsory sterilisation (Paul, 2017). In *The Foetus*, the Foetal Law prohibits childbirth, hence only foetuses are born in the village from then on; women are raped by the Foetus, and the pregnancy is checked by the state repressive apparatus, the gentry. In one instance, the Foetus descends on the water among ladies taking a bath and violently seizes the foetus of a pregnant woman. The gentry follow suit and abuse women in the name of pregnancy checking:

> "No," matrons clad in wet sarongs pleaded. "No, children!"
>
> But the young men plunged into the water, and swam after the women, stripping them in the water and feeling them for signs of pregnancy.
>
> "Desist, my children!" a grandmother cried.
>
> "No!" replied the leader of the youth. "This is the Sovereign's search. There are no private pregnancies any more."
>
> The women swam round in distraught circles, and their pursuers came upon them, blind to identity, incestuous. (p. 35)

This incident is illustrative of the mass sterilisation drive that took place across India during the Emergency. The Constitution Act of 1976 empowered the central government to decide on the execution of family planning programmes, which led to the establishment of sterilisation camps and the setting of sterilisation quotas. Men who did not voluntarily undergo a vasectomy were forcibly taken to the makeshift camps for the surgery; government employees received their salaries only after producing a sterilisation certificate (Gupte, 2017). Forced sterilisation was a blatant invasion of privacy, with the state deciding on the reproductive choices of individuals. Gupte (2017) observes:

> Mr. Gandhi allocated quotas to the chief ministers of every state that they were supposed to meet by any means possible. The chief ministers, too, in an attempt to impress the younger Gandhi, strived hard to meet those targets. Mr. Gandhi often visited villages and towns in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to encourage and approve the tremendous work being done in terms of meeting sterilization goals. Commissioners were awarded gold medals for their hard work. As a result, nothing mattered when it came to meeting the targets. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were at the top when it came to exceeding the targeted number of sterilizations, resulting in more commissioners from these states receiving medals. (p. 42)

During the vasectomy drive, people were coaxed and coerced to undergo sterilisation in order to check the country's rising population, which simultaneously forced them, either subtly or overtly, to compromise their bodily autonomy. The sterilisation project, which mainly required men to undergo vasectomy, included an incentive scheme that "gifted" radios, ghee and similar everyday objects to people who underwent the procedure. Government officials

were recruited across the nation to carry out this family planning initiative—smoothly if possible, and if required, through coercion and violence. To meet the state-set target and receive favours from the state, physical as well as indirect violence became a measure. While cases of forced sterilisation carried out in haste and in unhygienic conditions were reported from north Indian states (the “vasectomy belt”), indirect forms of violence involving denial of free treatment, salary and license renewals to the unsterilized were reported in other parts of the country (Gupte, 2017). Thus, the family planning programme operated on a reward and/or punishment basis, becoming such a notable feature of the Emergency that the period is also remembered as “nasbandi ka vakt (the time of sterilisation)” (Williams, 2014, p. 471).

In *The Foetus*, both the Astrologer and the Priest seek solace by holding on to the “book of litany” (Vijayan, 1989, p. 33), which could be an allusion to the Constitution of India apropos of the Emergency. In the story, a distressed Priest is consoled by the Astrologer, who asks him to trust the book of litany. According to Article 352 of the Constitution of India, the President has the authority to declare a National Emergency on the grounds of war or external aggression or armed rebellion. According to the then-Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, the rise in “‘forces of disintegration’ and ‘communal passions’” (Guha, 2017, p. 489) within the nation was the reason behind the declaration of the Emergency. The Emergency provisions, curtailing the right to life and suspending personal liberties, empowered the state to exercise maximum control over its citizens and implement laws without fear of opposition. For these reasons, the Emergency of 1975 in India is also described as an eclipse of democracy (Palmer, 1976).

The Foetus’ reign is described as the “foetal eclipse” (Vijayan, 1989, p. 42). It is a time when power is easily transferred from the Lady Sovereign to her unborn child. This period is characterised by violence towards the villagers, who, marginalized and powerless, are abused and killed at the whim of the all-powerful Foetus and gentry. The latter’s blind devotion to the Foetus can be traced throughout the story. The term “eclipse” may further underscore the allusion to the Emergency, with the Lady Sovereign and the Foetus representing Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay respectively.

The narrative also contains dramatic elements which serve to reinforce and establish state authority and the movement of power.

> The dogs howled, but were silenced, and then from the depths of the fortress a voice, husky and seductive, spoke to them, "What do you desire, my children?"
>
> "O Sovereign!" the leader of the youth replied, "for the last two months, the Incarnation has not left his trails in the village. We feel orphaned."
>
> "He slumbers and grows. Have patience." (p. 34)

The Sovereign is described as having a voice that enchants and hypnotizes her followers, transporting them into a trance-like state where obedience to the state becomes a virtue that ensures their survival. *The Foetus* is revered and respected in the village as the "young messiah" (Vijayan, 1989, p. 38), which fortifies its power over the region and the people.

The Foetus follows a classical model of narrative structure. The story opens with the grim setting of the village, providing an exposition in which the atmosphere of fear and control is established. The central conflict emerges through the ideological suppression of the citizens by a totalitarian state. The rising action unfolds as the Foetus leaves its mother's womb. The narrative reaches its climax when the Foetus, now a figure of authority, hunts down the villagers with its followers. In the falling action, the Priest confronts the Foetus and implores it to return to the womb. The resolution arrives with the deaths of both Foetus and Sovereign, symbolising the downfall of authoritarian rule and a return to democratic governance in the village.

With the state machinery collapsing into the everyday lives of its citizens, a new ecosystem is in creation in *The Foetus*. This is an artificial and/or simulated space that functions at the will of the rulers. A similar milieu can be found in the short story *Examination Day*, written in 1958 by the American author and playwright Henry Slesar and first published in *Playboy*. The story takes place in an unnamed nation; a major part of its action unfurls in the household of Mr. and Mrs. Jordan and their son Richard, who goes by Dickie. The story opens in a slightly tense atmosphere on Dickie's birthday: the boy is confused by the sudden irritation of his father and the melancholic state of his mother. Gradually, readers get a glimpse of the world the Jordans live in, as citizens of a state that is confining and controlling. One peculiar policy of the state is that every child who reaches the age of twelve must take a test, which Mr. Jordan explains to Dickie:

> "This is a—special kind of test. They give you this stuff to drink, you see, and then you go into a room where there's a sort of machine—"
>
> "What stuff to drink?" Dickie said.
>
> "It's nothing. It tastes like peppermint. It's just to make sure you answer the questions truthfully. Not that the Government thinks you won't tell the truth, but this stuff makes sure." (p. 94)

Written in third-person point of view, *Examination Day* is laced with short dialogues that emphasise the story's general mood of unease and apprehension. Mrs. Jordan's fragile demeanour in the face of this particularly volatile situation comes through in limited dialogues and descriptions: she speaks in an "anxious manner," avoiding eye contact and looking at the tablecloth. Meanwhile, Mr. Jordan's iterative dialogues—"He'll do all right" (p. 93), "it's nothing to worry about" (p. 94), "It's nothing ... you'll make out fine" (p. 94)—reveal his hesitant and anxious optimism. Dickie's side of the narrative is laden with descriptions that foreshadow the ending. The rainy birthday, the shroud of mist on the window glass, and his uninterestedness in the colourful stack of comic books are all symbolic of his uncertain future. The story mainly adopts "external focalization," which Gerard Genette in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1950, p. 10) describes as a narrative technique that informs the readers what the characters do but not what they think. This affords readers the liberty to deduce the emotional turmoil of the characters. From the apprehensive demeanour of Mr. and Mrs. Jordan, the first hints of the examination's importance can be inferred. The examination also evokes fear in the parents. Later, it is revealed that the examination is a medium used by the state to eliminate and/or subjugate the common people.

Examination Day is set in a dystopian world where the government exercises complete control over its citizens, including their thoughts and intelligence. By establishing and enforcing a maximum intelligence quotient, the state curbs freedom of thought and expression. The construction of a social setting where the intelligence of the ruled is limited by the rulers gives birth to an intolerant as well as oppressive regime. In Slesar's dystopia, all twelve-year-olds are required to submit to an intelligence test, and the state "makes sure" (Slesar, 1958, p. 94) of the result. Those who pass are the ones whose intelligence quotient is less than the state-set standard. The writer hints at the statutory nature of

the intelligence test and the precariousness of a nation of people below the designated intelligence level when Dickie asks what makes the grass green and Mr. Jordan replies, "Nobody knows" (p. 93). Though the incident could be argued as an instance of paternal dismissal of Dickie's inquisitiveness, it can also be read in terms of state-imposed paradigms that curb such intellectual curiosity.

Dickie is taken to the examination centre, where he finds children of his age waiting for their turn to complete the examination. He fails the test and is therefore killed, an act which points towards the state's probable counter-fear of dissent: in the long run, without constraints on intelligence, voices might arise to thwart this assumedly perfect social structure that thrives on discipline and disquietude. This also points towards the narrow vision of the rulers who, consumed by their zeal to sustain and safeguard their positions of power, become inhuman in the process:

> "This is the Government Educational Service. Your son, Richard M. Jordan, Classification 600-115, has completed the Government examination. We regret to inform you that his intelligence quotient has exceeded the Government regulation, according to Rule 84, Section 5, of the New Code."
>
> ...
>
> "You may specify by telephone," the voice droned on, "whether you wish his body interred by the Government or would you prefer a private burial place? The fee for Government burial is ten dollars." (p. 96)

The narrative that records the curt, "brisk, official voice" (Slesar, 1958, p. 96) and the helplessness of the Jordans in the wake of their grief become a spectacle for the readers to deliberate on the epistemic violence and apathetic rule that devalue the citizens by inhibiting their social as well as individual growth.

Examination Day, like other dystopian works such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), has a totalitarian setting. Orwell writes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that "Nothing was your own except a few cubic centimetres in your skull" (1949, p. 34). However, in *Examination Day* people are denied even that: both the body and the brain of individuals are owned and controlled by the government. This implies that the common people, powerless

and not belonging to the elite ruling class, are taught and trained not to think, but to believe the discourses of the state without questioning. The ruled become the mental slaves of the ruling, so that the powerful grow more powerful while the powerless become weak and fragile. The latter never realise this, as they are denied the resources to think outside the state-approved narratives and even if they do, the fear of repercussions stops them from defiance. The state of fearful compliance can be seen from the characterisation of Mr. and Mrs. Jordan, who yield to the rule of the government and send Dickie to take the test even when they are well aware of the repercussions if a child "fails". The state law that mandates these tests can be read as its strategy to terminate potential cases of non-compliance at a juvenile stage. Thus, to suppress future uprisings against the political elite and maintain the status quo, execution becomes the solution.

Various elements of narrative structure can be traced in *Examination Day*: the anxiety that saturates the household on Dickie's twelfth birthday serves as the exposition, setting the tone and atmosphere of the story. The central conflict emerges through the Jordans' internal turmoil, lack of agency, and their constant fear of the state. Dickie's awareness of the growing restlessness within his family marks the rising action, which builds tension leading up to the climax, when he attends the government-mandated examination. The government's ominous call to the Jordans constitutes the falling action. However, the story lacks a clear resolution, suggesting that the state's ruthless elimination process is ongoing, potentially affecting other families too.

The events that unfold in the life of the Jordans on a single day shed light on the fear and helplessness the people live with every day when ruled by a repressive regime. A single wrong utterance, interpreted as an act of defiance, would cost them their own and their close ones' lives. The fear and worry that the Jordans have, Mrs. Jordan's breakdown at the end of the story after being informed of her son's demise, and the silent acceptance of the state decision point to the fact that the Jordans live in fear of the state and are habituated to this epistemic violence. The children who pass the test are brought up in an ecosystem so blanketed by fear and submission that they could never fathom the existence of a different world, where people are aware of their rights—or the denial thereof—and their fate is not state-decided. The (pseudo-)finesse that these regimes offer is built on the foundations of trepidation, tyranny, and megalomania.

Deification of the State and the Simulated Cyclic Loop of Violence, Fear, and Habituation

In both short stories, the governments act as bodies of surveillance and the people are under constant surveillance by the authorities. This resembles the panopticon model of prison proposed by Jeremy Bentham in that, using the force of the government, the common people are constantly watched and analysed. The knowledge of being watched prevents the people from resorting to any "crimes." In *Examination Day*, right from the birth of a child, the government is always in the picture, waiting for the child's twelfth birthday to administer the intelligence exam. This test determines the longevity of the individual in Slesar's dystopian world. In a way, each and every birth in the nation is being monitored; the growth of the child is closely observed and is systematically tested later. The result becomes the criterion by which the state decides whether a person should live or die. The state, thus, is involved in the processes of both creation and annihilation of its citizens. This power of the state makes it a godlike entity, to be revered and feared at the same time. In the same way, the government metamorphoses into a divine image in *The Foetus*. The leaders employ its repressive state machinery, the gentry, to scare, mistreat, and traumatize the common people. Orders that prevent pregnancies without the state's knowledge point towards the denial of bodily autonomy. The state's insistence on being informed and involved in its citizens' births and deaths endows it with a deific quality.

State rule that is devoid of compassion and empathy leads, by its nature, to the inhuman treatment of citizens. In such an environment, the powerless become mere bodies and are treated as less than human by the state. Those on the lowest rungs of the power ladder are the first to face the wrath of the state and become lab rats for new policy measures, to be discarded afterward. They are always on the receiving end of everything unpleasant. The godlike nature of the state, coupled with its intimidating resources, enables even greater state infiltration into the lives of the people. The totalitarian regimes' idée fixe of violence and punishment to counter and curb incidents of dissidence makes it, as well, a fundamentalist establishment. The status quo and social order are maintained through a series of punishments; often carried out in public, these become spectacles that inform the citizens of their possible fate if they stray

from the rules of the state. Michael Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*: *The Birth of the Prison* (1975) has described the spectacle of abuse and how it creates a dialogue on power. Abuse by the gentry under the aegis of the Foetus, like that by the faceless state in *Examination Day*, clearly defines and demarcates the power/powerlessness of the common people and the relative position of state and citizens in these two mortacracies.

Foucault argues that the series of confinement, constant surveillance, extremist assertion of power over individuals, and maintenance of a strict and uniform code of conduct form part of a utopian society that is perfectly governed. Continuous surveillance is a feature of both short stories: in *Examination Day*, there is a faceless system at work that scrutinises every movement of the citizens. The omnipresence of the state in citizens' daily lives deprives them of their privacy. In such a scenario, the boundaries between personal space and public space blur, so that eventually the personal space ceases to exist. Everything about an individual is documented by the state. The facelessness of the system makes it even more frightening, as people live in constant fear of being monitored by anyone who may be out there. The failure to attribute a face to the monitoring puts the citizenry in a constant state of worry and apprehension. A similar situation can be traced in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), where initially the protagonist Offred is worried about the identity of another employee in the household. She fears the other person may be an "Eye" of the state, who is there to closely watch her every move and report any act of transgression.

In contrast, what puts the people in *The Foetus* into an ominous situation is the gruesome face of a state that derives contentment from the repeated harassments it inflicts upon the people. The tortures committed by the state become a spectacle as well as a caveat for the rest of the civilians. The killings spearheaded by the Foetus and the gentry, wreaking havoc on the entire village and resulting in chaos and confusion among the villagers, make the village a hostile place. Similarly, in *Examination Day*, the first twelve years of parenthood are overshadowed by uncertainty and apprehension about the child's future. Unlike the ruthless violence that unfolds in *The Foetus*, the violence in *Examination Day* is understated; this may stem from the biopolitical climate of the narrative settings, nascent in the former and established in the latter. However, in both cases, state hostility results in the subjugation of common people by the powerful. Thus, there is a cyclic loop which is simulated by the

powerful and which passes through the points of violence, fear and habituation of fear. This simulated environment aids the stakeholders of power in monitoring the citizens continuously, and the marginalised position of the citizens due to this "epistemic violence" (Spivak, 1994, p. 76) makes them unable to speak or fight for themselves.

A comparison of the totalitarian settings in *The Foetus* and *Examination Day* reveals the dichotomies of unbirth and birth, hope and hopelessness, as markers for determining the degrees of despair experienced by the characters in these works. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993) observes that in *The Foetus*, the Lady Sovereign

> remains invisible in the text, as in the narrative—only her portrait is seen and worshipped (represented in "the carnal fullness of middle age, pregnant, naked"), and her voice is heard, "honeyed," promising the young men the growth of the Foetus into their future leader. (p. 106)

The hope of the Lady Sovereign for her Foetus after its birth is reflected in these lines. However, at the end of the story, she dies along with her Foetus during childbirth, thereby ending the last traces of totalitarianism and making way for democracy and hope for the citizens. In the case of the Jordans, the birth of their son and their hopes for his future are constantly clouded by state policy, in the form of the intelligence test. The call from the state office at the end of the story becomes a harbinger of the dissolution of parental hopes and aspirations; unlike in *The Foetus*, there is no change in the political scenario in *Examination Day*, which further reinstates the despondency of the people.

Both of these stories were written in the post-Second World War era, a time marked by widespread political restructuring and the rise of superpower nations. *The Foetus* reflects the political climate of India during the Emergency of 1975–1977, while *Examination Day* is didactic, informing readers about how those who hold power can abuse it to serve individual agendas. Both stories explore themes of totalitarianism, much like other significant works of the time, such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Bend Sinister* (1947), Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). While *Examination Day* did not encounter censorship issues upon publication, it can be inferred that Vijayan's *The Foetus* was published only after the Emergency ended, as the lifting of

censorship laws paved the way for the publication of such political allegories. Though both stories contribute to discussions on authoritarian power shifts and state violence, *The Foetus* engages directly with the political scenario of India during the Emergency, contributing to the discourse on that period.

Conclusion

The short stories *The Foetus* and *Examination Day* portray systems of governance that are tyrannical yet perfectly designed. In each, the underlying factor that acts as impetus for the state's inhumanity is the idea of attainment of perfectness, a utopian landscape that is flawless and that functions according to the whims of the powerful. In these systems, the citizens are under constant state surveillance by the state. However, the absolutist nature of the state forestalls the state from being watched and critiqued by the citizens. The state exercises maximum control over the people, relegating their existence to the mere periphery of the whole system of governance. The extremist disposition of the state makes it a mortacracy that systematically wipes out any possibility of threat. This process of disciplining and decimation is carried out by repressive state apparatuses under the close supervision of the state.

The state in *The Foetus* is a simulated democracy that gradually shifts towards a totalitarian mortacracy. The voters who "chose" their "representative" to be the leader, could later be seen as fearing this same leader and her progeny, who thrive and sustain themselves on exploiting the common people using nepotic powers. The fear that the people live with, of losing their own selves and their loved ones, born and unborn, is current, intimate, and mystifying. The repercussions of acts that were once ordinary and standard, such as speaking against the decisions of the state, turn extreme and even fatal in both stories. However, the political landscape is different in *Examination Day*. Slesar's fictional dystopia functions under a totalitarian administration. The story starts and ends within this political setting devoid of any changes or attempted changes in the system. The characters are fully aware of the powers of the state and the ramifications of any kind of action against the state. The ability to think and question becomes a privilege of which, in Slesar's fictional world, the common people are absolutely robbed by the state.

The state keeps the citizens under constant surveillance, functioning as a macrocosm of a panoptic institution. In such a social system, the everyday life of the people is defined by power relations. Moreover, the state helps a small group of people in exercising power over a much larger group of people; in both short stories, a powerful minority dictates the lives of a powerless majority. The sentiment of fear runs deep in both these stories, born of the state's policies and its excesses. This fearful response towards the regime is manoeuvred by the state in such a way that it prolongs and sustains the subordination of the people to the system. It arises out of the spectacle of violence that the state visits on bodies that question its authority. Thus, in an autocratic and dictatorial way, the state resorts to establishing a state of fineness in society. Underlying this state of fineness is the fear of the common people. Thus, the totalitarian societies function as a simulated loop that is based on violence, fear, and habituation.

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Post from Tiflis. "Enlivenment" as Imperial Aesthetic in Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*

Abstract: This article suggests "enlivenment" as an important but overlooked term for examining literature as an aesthetic medium participating in imperialist expansion. With reference to ritual theory, I show how enlivenment combines aesthetic and sociological ideas, and how it can help conceptualize how the enhancement of collective feelings serves as an antidote to social resentment and alienation in periods of imperialist overstretch. The article argues that literary fiction, like the ritual, functions as a site for affective enlivenment, and thus as a site for reaffirming social obligations. Focusing on the Russian war in the Caucasus as represented in Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, I analyze how literary colonialism goes beyond discursive misrepresentation of indigenous cultures and the exotic sublimity of foreign landscapes. Instead, I examine how the emotional response of reading texts from the imperial periphery enlivens social relations and solidifies the expansionist project. Lermontov's novel is not just a Caucasus tale, but also a tale about the distribution of stories from imperial frontier to imperial center, while reflecting on how these stories ought to be written to secure affective impact.

Keywords: imperialism; aesthetics; Russian literature; Caucasus; rituals.

Introduction

"Suffice it that the disease has been diagnosed, how to cure it the Lord alone knows!"

Lermontov's foreword to the second edition

Using a term such as "imperial aesthetic" suggests that aesthetic phenomena—e.g., sensibility, emotions, and images—are somehow related to the social, economic, and political logic of empire, and consequently, that an artistic medium such as literary fiction can be said to support or even advance this logic. From the outset, then, to talk about an imperial aesthetic involves a critical understanding of literature as a cultural practice that exerts an important influence on the structure of the body politic, its form, its power, and its resilience. This article sets out to propose "enlivenment" as a concept for analyzing the nature of this influence. The concept has its origin in the philosophical aesthetics of 18th- and early 19th-century German thinkers from Kant and Herder to Hegel, where it is referred to as *Belebung*, *Lebendigkeit*, or simply *Kraft* (Menke, 2005; Bertram, 2019). However, the concept resurfaces in 20th-century sociological theory as a means of explaining the social effects of ritualistic practices and, further, why these effects are a vital part of a society's ability to reproduce itself (Overgaard, 2025). Many ritual theorists begin with the premise that societies—in whichever way and form—must be enlivened on a periodical basis, and that the circumscribed time and place of the ritual marks a domain where such an enlivening process can happen (Durkheim, 1914/1995; Turner, 1991). An absence of rituals, and thus an absence of occasional enlivenment, might lead to public fatigue and social resentment. This risk of social alienation is enhanced in prolonged imperial wars and geographical overstretch; the sacrifices made by the empire's subjects through taxation or lost family members must be countered by an enthusiasm for the imperial project. This is another way of saying that a certain level of affective intensity is needed if citizens are not to feel estranged from state policy or even to begin to rebel against it. Enlivenment denotes a vitalization of societal emotions which serve as an antidote to rising levels of dissatisfaction, in turn allowing for continued imperial expansion.

I claim that literature, in a modern and secularized world, has a function like that of rituals, and, consequently, that literature can serve as a place for affective enlivenment on a societal scale. With this I suggest an *aesthetic* approach to the study of literary fiction as a medium where imperialist and colonialist ideas, sentiments, and discourses are negotiated. Such an approach is not (or not solely) concerned with the discursive subjugation of one population on behalf of another where the former is framed as uncivilized and thus culturally inferior. Rather than looking for imperialist motifs on the discursive level of

textual representation, I examine the excitement of and affective response to reading exotic stories from the imperial periphery. To illustrate this difference, and to qualify my claim about "enlivenment" as an imperial aesthetic, I take Mikhail Lermontov and his novel *A Hero of Our Time* as my example. Published in 1840, the novel was put into circulation during Russia's military campaign in the Caucasus and recounts a catalogue of adventures from the Caucasian mountains, where Lermontov himself was stationed as a soldier. I should add that my focus is less on the actual response to *A Hero of Our Time*, and more on the rhetorical manner through which the novel indirectly foreshadows its own reception via lengthy discussion of how to write in a way that will attract an audience. Lermontov's novel spends a lot of time pondering the act of reading and how this act ought to induce a proper level of emotional engagement in the story. The narrator is always on the lookout for new material, for new Caucasus stories that he can bring back to the homeland. As a collector, he serves as a medium for distributing these stories from the imperial outskirts to the imperial centers of St. Petersburg and Moscow. His reading response—and the judgments of taste formulated along the way—serves as a proxy for the response of the imagined reading public in the Russian metropolises.

I am certainly not the first to emphasize the connection between Lermontov's writing and Russia's imperial wars in the Caucasus region. There is a solid scholarly tradition of examining the ways in which Russian Romantic authors, represented by Pushkin and Lermontov, contributed to the expansionist politics of tsars Aleksander I and Nikolai I not only as soldiers but through their literary production (Thompson, 2000; Layton, 2009). This is not to say that Lermontov had political or specifically imperialist intentions in writing *A Hero of Our Time*; his ambivalence towards tsarist Russia and the war in the Caucasus is aptly explained elsewhere (Ram, 2003). The usefulness of a theory of imperial aesthetics focusing on "enlivenment" lies in the way it offers a method of explaining the political and ethical function of fiction that adheres neither to the ideology of authors nor to the political statements uttered by fictional characters in the storyline. Lermontov's novel is devoid of explicit political positions: it brings forward neither a direct critique nor an appraisal of the imperial invasion of the Caucasus.

In the wake of postcolonial studies, and following the approach of Edward Said, readings of *A Hero of Our Time* have rightly focused on the racist and

misogynist typologies that cling to Lermontov's representation of the native mountain clans in the Caucasus (Scotto, 1992). Descriptions of the Tatars and the Ossetians are particularly degrading in following well-known colonial dichotomies such as modern/traditional, civilized/natural, rational/irrational. While commenting on these dichotomies, I nonetheless want to take a step further and claim that the colonial discourse goes beyond the crafting of images of Caucasian culture as inferior to Russian culture. As a metafiction on how to write and read, *A Hero of Our Time* reveals the aesthetic importance of extracting narrative accounts from the imperial borderlands. I begin with an elaboration of how "enlivenment," as a concept cross-fertilized by ritual theory and aesthetics, can be used to elicit the role of affects in an imperial context. I then show how Lermontov's novel stages the drama of text circulation while playing with the genre of travel literature. Finally, I offer an interpretation of the novel's self-reflexivity regarding the production and consumption of literature, analyzing the narrator's discussion of exciting versus non-exciting reading experiences.

An Uplifting of Moral Life

Before examining the aesthetics of reading in *A Hero of Our Time* as an aesthetics of enlivenment, we need to establish the theoretical background that enables us to see the social and political features of this aesthetic. These features support the overall argument of enlivenment as a concept for understanding, at least partly, the nexus of aesthetics and imperialism. As mentioned in the introduction, I am inspired by how the term is used in ritual studies. Here, enlivenment explains *what* rituals do, and just as importantly, *why* this doing is necessary for society's ability to sustain itself. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim proceeds from the fundamental assumption that the existence of any social group depends on periodical settings or situations where the identity of the group can be reaffirmed. For a group, a community, or even a society to maintain its coherence, "it must assemble and concentrate" (Durkheim, 1914/1995, p. 424). In the ritual gathering, the members of a society come together around what they believe they have in common, around that which they take to be the founding principles of the group they belong to. Sociologically speaking, the ritual is not the celebration of some deity, but rather a celebration of the

community itself, understood as the social bonds that bind its members together. What is represented during the rites—in whatever symbolic form is available—is therefore society itself. In short, ceremonies and feasts present occasions where society gets a chance to stage itself to itself. As William Robertson-Smith writes:

> In rejoicing before his god, a man rejoiced with and for the welfare of his kindred, his neighbors and his country, and, in renewing by a solemn act of worship the bond that united him to his god, he also renewed the bonds of family, social and national obligation. (Robertson-Smith, 1901, p. 263)

Behind this characterization of the rite lies the conception that the social order risks disintegration if it is not confirmed from time to time. Without occasions for collective self-representation, societies may encounter a state of alienation. In Durkheim's words, "there can be no society that does not experience the need at regular intervals to maintain and strengthen the collective feelings and ideas that provide its coherence and distinct individuality" (1914/1995, p. 429). In a similar vein, ritual theorists such as Victor Turner and René Girard claim that rituals function as emergency tools. Society can stage rituals when social structures are subject to pressure. Like a societal valve, the rite relieves internal tension and reinstates social equilibrium (Turner, 1991; Girard, 1972).

This is how ritual studies often explain the existence of rituals: if we did not have rituals (or other means for collective self-expression), members of a community would eventually forget what they have in common and mutual obligations would wither away. Without the affective presence of such obligations, the moral force of society would become impotent. This is the *why* of ritualistic practices, while enlivenment is the *how*. Rituals ensure that society keeps "the sense it has of itself at the acquired intensity" (Durkheim, 1914/1995, p. 424). It energizes collective life by recharging shared beliefs and sentiments. It is a commemoration of the values shared between us and why we allow these values to guide the way we think and act. This societal sense of self is not only cognitive but also affective. In the ritual setting, each member experiences an emotional uplifting of moral life which strengthens his or her belief in the ideas that hold the community together as a unit. Bringing slumbering feelings to life, the ritual awakens the social side of the subject, reminding it why it became a member of the group in the first place.

Ritualistic enlivenment thus presents itself as a solution to a problem, namely the possible threat of social disintegration and the subsequent disruption of the societal order. This is also a problem that every long-term imperial enterprise—like the Russian invasion of the Caucasus—is faced with. How to uphold the national spirit of the citizens and ensure their continued support for a cause that has been underway for decades?

A Hero of Our Time points directly to the looming risk of social alienation. The novel is composed of a set of minor stories, told by different characters or revealed through diary entries, but all centering around the titular "hero," Grigory Alexandrovich Pechorin. In a rare moment of honesty, Pechorin reveals his existential predicament. After declaring himself an "unfortunate character," a "fool" or even a "scoundrel," Pechorin explains his course of life as a long list of disappointments beginning with his entrance into the world of society where he loves and is loved by beautiful noblewomen. Soon, however, he has had "enough of society" and, like a modern-day Faust, enmeshes himself in studies until he gets bored of that too (*HT*, p. 36). Pechorin's issue is that he constantly craves new things. Because his desire is metonymical, he is never able to settle down once and for all. Finally, "when everything became tedious," he set off for the Caucasus which for a moment was the happiest time of his life:

> I hoped that boredom didn't exist under Chechen bullets, but it was in vain – within a month I was so used to their whirring and to the nearness of death, that really, I paid more attention to the mosquitoes. And I was more bored than before, because I had lost what was nearly my last hope. When I saw Bela in my home, when for the first time I held her on my knees, I kissed her black curls, like a fool, I thought that she was an angel, sent to me by compassionate Fate ... I was again mistaken. The love of a savage girl is not much better than the love of a noblewoman. The ignorance and simple-heartedness of the one becomes as tiresome as the coquettishness of the other. (p. 36)

Pechorin's self-analysis is simultaneously a diagnosis of the society of his time—or at least a generation of young men living in certain classes of Russian society. The passage above is exemplary of a key theme in 19th-century Russian literature where male protagonists encounter an existential crisis and get caught in a feeling that Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*. This particular form of resentment

is characteristic of a class of young adults referred to as "superfluous" and it is often conceived as the product of a modern world where the individual is weighed down by cultural burdens and the norms of civilization—or simply "society," as Pechorin calls it (Chances, 2002). In *The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche (1887/2007) contrasts the resentful human, caught in a "slave morality," with the aristocratic human who is characterized by an ability and proclivity for spontaneous action. While resentment denotes an overly passive and too reflective existence, the strong human that Nietzsche imagines has a more immediate relationship to life, which is also to say: a more intense and powerful way of living.

This motif of a modern, civilized subject who has become too distanced from the real life of things is not just a cornerstone of Russian literature, but a well-known trope in post-colonialist theories and Marxists accounts of class structures (see Žižek & Fiennes, 2012). When an over-cultivated upper class becomes too decadent, too civilized as it were, it begins to establish a proximity to the lower classes who, allegedly, live in a more immediately naïve (and hence unreflective) relation to their surroundings. Another version of this motif is the prosperous and well-educated imperial subject living in a metropolitan capital who decides to leave the city in order to recapture the feeling of living beyond the "coquettishness" of social norms. Pechorin desires the excitement of war with bullets flying around his head, just as he finds temporary enjoyment in a foolish, unreflective, and supposedly authentic love affair with a "savage girl," who, being "ignorant and simple-hearted," knows nothing of civilization. Existential distress can be substituted for a meaningful cause or the simple excitement of coming face to face with danger—a variation of this motif can be found towards the end of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* where Vronsky, disillusioned by Anna's suicide, flees to the Balkans to fight the Turks. Both Pechorin and Vronsky travel to the empire's southern borders to find solace in an existence that has become alienated in the large cities. Many protagonists of Russian novels from this period find this original and free-of-civilization feeling in the Caucasus. In the words of Peter Scotto, these characters nurture "a fantasy that could be sublimated as a search for authentic human communion unavailable within the confines of civilization" (1992, p. 252).

Though useful as a category for literary historiography, the "superfluous man" is nonetheless a very broad category that conflates imperial themes

with more domestic issues, in turn marginalizing the imperialist violence of the Pechorin-character by explaining it as psychologically motivated. As Ewa Thompson writes, Russian colonial history was "elbowed out from the purview of literary criticism by the introduction of the 'superfluous man' stereotype," seeing that the "concept of superfluity was imposed on literary characters of fundamentally different social backgrounds" (2000, p. 72). While I follow Thompson's critique, I still believe there is analytical value in viewing Pechorin not simply as a character causing trouble in the Caucasus, but also as a mirror of an emerging feeling structure at the core of Russian society: a feeling structure of ressentiment that could be cured through the enlivening reading of literature about life-and-death combat. It is not only superfluous men who rely on the intensified way of living associated with adventures in the mountains; the rest of the salon aristocrats also found entertainment in the so-called "Caucasus tale," which served as a substitute for not being able to participate in the action themselves.

The Narrator as Post Officer

Pechorin's story is composed (we might even say edited) by the unnamed narrator, who is both a character in the plot and the one who collects the stories and makes them available to us the readers. In many ways, Lermontov's novel follows a traditional literary trope through the choice of a frame narrative, where one diegetic storyline is contained within another. He plays on the trope of randomly stumbling across manuscripts that were meant to remain unpublished—in this case, Pechorin's diaries that make up most of the book.

When I claim that these choices indicate more than a reuse of worn-out templates for literary composition, it is because of the concrete historical setting in which they are displayed, namely the Russian war efforts in the Caucasus. There is an astonishing amount of talk about text in the novel: of how to get hold of texts (and make sure others get hold of them as well), how to write good texts, and, finally, how these texts ought to be read. While the whole frame story may at first glance appear to serve as a backdrop for Pechorin's exploits, a closer look at the practice of storytelling and the distribution of writing can tell us something about the imperial function of Lermontov's novel. The opening

sentence of the book says: "I was traveling post from Tiflis," followed by a description of the amount of luggage the narrator brings with him and an explanation of how difficult the transport is due to bad mountain roads and changing weather conditions (*HT*, p. 5). Shortly thereafter, the narrator teams up with an old officer, Maxim Maximych, from whom he tries to squeeze some juicy Caucasus stories. "'So, you've had many adventures I would think?' I said, my curiosity excited" (p. 9). When Maximych confirms, the narrator goes on to ponder: "I wanted terribly to extract some little story from him – a desire characteristic of all those who travel and write" (p. 9). There is plenty to chat about—"savage people," "dangers," "miraculous events"—and the narrator even goes on to "regret that so little of this gets recorded" (p. 10).

Our narrator, however, is on a mission, making sure that every interesting story is documented and brought back for readers to get a taste of the wild Caucasus. Yet for such a story to be distributed in public, it needs to be of a certain quality. The narrator therefore serves as an implied reader or self-instituted censor who casts aesthetic judgments on what he hears. If the story is judged to be good, then it is worthy of traveling post all the way back to the motherland. Importantly, the criteria for judging are drawn from the register of affects. The criticism does not revolve around literary composition or style; what matters is that the story is interesting, that it captures attention, and that it demands a vivid emotional response from its reader. The first part of *A Hero of Our Time*, titled "Bela," centers on Maximych's retelling of his first encounter with Pechorin and the latter's tragic love affair with a local Caucasian girl. This retelling is continuously interrupted by the narrator, who either asks for more details or forms an evaluative comment on the quality of the story in his mind. Thus, when Maximych says of Pechorin that he was born for unusual events, the narrator breaks in: "'Unusual?' I exclaimed with a look of curiosity, helping him to more tea" (*HT*, p. 10). When, on the other hand, Maximych prolongs the narration and includes unimportant details, the narrator is quick to show his impatience and mock the storyteller.

At the same time, the narrator is a self-conscious reader who not only comments on his own reading practices but addresses the readers and plays with our expectations about the development of the plot. Hence, the story of Pechorin and Bela is interrupted by the narrator's and Maximych's continued travel along the post line from Tiflis back into Russian territory:

> But perhaps you want to know how the Bela story ends? Firstly, I am not writing a novel, but travel notes: so it follows that I can't make the staff captain start recounting the tale before he actually starts telling it to me. So, wait a while, or, if you like, turn a few pages – only I don't advise you to do that because the traverse across the Krestovaya Mountain is worthy of your interest. (p. 29)

Here, Lermontov deliberately manipulates the genre of travel literature, a genre whose colonial function is well-documented within disciplines of anthropology and ethnography wherein descriptions of foreign lands and people are extracted and brought home (Said, 1979; Pratt, 1992). But the narrator's address also serves as a regular reading manual. "Interest" is revealed as one of the chief qualities of fiction; therefore, the narrator does everything within his might to keep hold of our attention. His main objective is to make sure that we are not bored with his tale: "Won't you agree, however, that Maxim Maximych is a man worthy of respect? ... If you agree, then I will have been rewarded for my story, overlong though it may have been." (*HT*, p. 44). Likewise, he declares that he, in his descriptions of the surrounding environment, deliberately leaves out "those statistical notes" about the Caucasus "that nobody can bear to read" (p. 45). Sometimes, the experience of listening is so intense that the cool and self-reflective narrator loses control of himself, immersed as he is in the retelling of Bela's sickness and eventual death: "'Did she get better?' I asked the staff captain, grabbing his arm, *unable to help myself from feeling glad*" (p. 40, my emphasis).

The narrator's value judgment, along with his reflections on the act of reading, reveals something important about the imperial function of Russian tales from the Caucasus. One thing is the description of how stories travel from Tiflis to, say, St. Petersburg. Another is the way distribution is inscribed in the value judgment itself. As Sianne Ngai has recently suggested, judging an object to be interesting is the opposite of a final judgment; it is, rather, a speech act that encourages a succession of additional judgments (Ngai, 2011). There is an ambivalence, an undecidability, or even a vagueness clinging to "interesting" as an aesthetic category and this fundamental insecurity has the effect of promoting further conversation. So instead of saying something objectively about the text (in fact it says very little), judging a story to be interesting prompts intersubjective relations among the reading audience. To value something as interesting is

inevitably to compare it to other, less interesting literary expressions. It is a judgment which, because of its "comparative dynamics," cannot stand alone, but partakes in a larger discursive exchange. This is the reason Ngai links the interesting to a mode of circulation; it is a distribution of speech acts that effects additional value judgments, such as "do you also find this interesting?"

For Ngai, however, the interesting also has a coolness to it, much like our hero Pechorin with his ironic detachment from the affairs of regular life—revealed, for instance, in his cold response when reunited with his old friend Maximych. Indeed, the reason Pechorin is so interesting, bordering on scandalous, is because he is not just another standard protagonist, a hero in the sense of a genuinely virtuous character. There is instead an ambivalence clinging to his persona which resembles that of the interesting as an aesthetic category: is he (or the object being judged) good or bad, is he merely interesting, or do we use this word because we have no others to describe this unprecedented character in the history of Western literature? The narrator knows very well that Pechorin and his exploits are interesting, which is why he writes them down to the pleasure of other readers back in St. Petersburg and Moscow. This underscores the point about *A Hero of Our Time* as a novel about the circulation of text, of the imperial practice of transporting fresh and provocative stories from the periphery to the imperial center.

From Ressentiment to Engagement

The sublime Caucasian landscape and the dangerous life of a soldier eventually disappoint Pechorin. The diaries tell us that he moves on to settle in a spa town to engage in new dispassionate adventures, including a love affair and a deadly duel. This disappointment does not prevent the retelling of his life from having an enlivening effect on its audience. Put differently, it is not Pechorin's but the readers' affective engagement that is at the center of the imperial aesthetic under scrutiny here. As mentioned in the introduction, this aesthetic differs from traditional postcolonial approaches. It is not difficult to see a colonial discourse at work in the portrayal of the Caucasian people in "Bela." In his influential *Orientalism*, Said (1979) highlights one of the underlying logics of colonial relationships by pointing to the way in which the Occidental relies on images

of the Oriental to establish and confirm its own identity. In a sort of Hegelian dialectic, the Western colonizers need an Other in order to craft an image of themselves as advanced. Hence, the imagination of the Caucasian tribes—be they Ossetians, Tatars, or Chechens—as naively bound to nature and given over to their basic impulses works as a strategy for underlining the civilizational superiority of Russian culture, just as it functions as a tool for legitimizing the imperial expansion.

Scotto (1992) rightly observes how the "ideological arsenal of nineteenth-century Russian imperialism" is operative in the characterization of the local Caucasians with the effect that their status as subjects, or as humans properly speaking, is diminished, in turn paving the way for the trail of violence Pechorin leaves behind: "Bela and her family are 'savages' and simply not fully vested subjects of moral, ethical, or even legal concern. They can be freely disposed of by Pechorin as he stages his drama of self-realization" (p. 256). The imperial discourse is mirrored in the arguably more likable Maximych, who confirms Russian racial superiority by accepting Pechorin's behavior (kidnapping a local princess) even though he is above Pechorin in military rank.

When discussing how literature partakes in the development of a colonial fantasy of one culture "civilizing" or taking advantage of another, I believe it is important to note how this involvement goes beyond the discursive formation of an image of the Caucasian as primitive. Put another way: the representation of the local tribes as isolated from progressive history also affects the genre through which the stories about Pechorin, Bela, and Maximych are told. The interesting allure of the Caucasus tale is not just a function of the "primitive" or "exotic" characters whose actions are narrated as part of the novel's content. We are simultaneously dealing with a "primitive" catalogue of old plotlines that dates far back in the history of literature. What the reader of Lermontov's novel encounters is thus not only a presumed *civilizational regress*, but also what we might call a *regress of literary history*. It is not simply the Caucasian people who are believed to belong to an earlier civilizational stage in the history of cultural development; the literary form likewise recalls genre modes from past times. It is as if the subject matter demands a style that can only be expressed through traditional genre templates. With a different formulation we can say that it is not enough to relocate the *mise-en-scène* from the salons of Petersburg to the empire's mountainous frontier if the goal is to achieve the affective enhancement

that follows from the unmediated experience of authentic living characterized by immediate dangers and stripped of coquettish culture. The literary style must similarly move closer to this original living, which involves a genre-historic jump back to the times of naïve folk ballads and fairy tales. Fear-provoking, unknown, and mysterious landscapes—along with stories of kidnapping, robbers, and foolish love—are all part of the stylistic regression that can excite a reading public bored by modernized (understood as overtly intellectual) literary expressions. This attention to pre-modern genre forms can serve as the literary equivalent to postcolonial arguments about how Westernized upper classes sought thrill and enjoyment through proximity to a more natural (and thus more original) way of living, represented by people outside the Occident. Reading about the imagined naturalness of these people was more than an argument for imperial expansion with its moral promise of cultivating the uncultivated; it also dressed the expansion in an enchanted veil that could enliven collective enthusiasm for the tsarist war in the Caucasus. The circulation of Caucasus tales can thus be said to exert an imperial function in the intensification of affects that not only spiritualized the imperialist project but simultaneously reminded the Russian people of who they were (in contrast to the Caucasian tribes) and what they had in common (the extension of the Russian empire and its culture).

Conclusion

With this article, I have tried to sketch the contours of another imperial aesthetic than those we find elsewhere in the scholarship on Russian literary history. As already mentioned, the Said-inspired approach to the linkages between art, aesthetics, and empire focuses on creating images of an Other who is imagined to be wild, primitive, or in any case inferior to the colonizers. This crafting of images is supported by discursive taxonomies that make a split between the civilized Westerners and the underdeveloped people from the Orient. The other prevalent linkage to be found in research on the Russian Caucasus tale draws on the tradition of European romanticism by focusing on the beauty of foreign landscapes. In this imperial aesthetic, the landscape is conceived as wild and free in a way that mirrors "the artist's need to flee the suffocating constraints of civilization," as Rebecca Gould (2013, p. 89) puts it. As both

Gould and Harsha Ram argue, this makes the "sublime" into the key aesthetic category for understanding the imperialist underpinnings of texts from Pushkin and Lermontov to Tolstoy: "The romantic aesthetic was thereby yoked to the imperial mission, and hunger for power was harnessed to the quest for the sublime" (Gould, 2013, p. 89).

As a supplement to these two imperial aesthetics—the image and the sublime—I have tried to suggest a third aesthetic perspective that centers on the concept of enlivenment. Instead of dealing with discursive representation or the awe-inspiring sensation of nature, enlivenment is a notion concerned with social emotions; it is a manner of forgetting one's private preferences and everyday problems to rejoice in a feeling of collective belonging and purpose. As explained by ritual theorists, such an uplifting of social emotions is crucial for the continued coherence of a community, because it serves as a reminder of the values shared among its members. One way to enliven the social bonds between citizens and to avoid the "suffocating constraints" of repressive norms is through the excitement caused by rituals.

As I have attempted to illustrate through a reading of Lermontov, a similar excitement is found in the domain of literature. *A Hero of Our Time* is, among other things, a novel about the aesthetics of reading. The narrator is not only a collector and distributor of texts; he is also a literary critic judging stories to be good or bad. As we have seen, the criteria informing these judgments center around notions of affect: more precisely, around how one ought to write and tell a story for it to arouse an emotional response in the reader. Hence, the circulation of Caucasus stories is also a circulation of affects, and as Durkheim would say, the effect of such circulations is a strengthening of collective feelings to ensure society's sense of self remains at the "acquired intensity." As a metafiction on excitable reading, Lermontov's novel is both an example and a representation of one of the roles played by the Caucasus tale in the larger imperialist scheme of tsarist Russia.

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