

Structure and Uncertainty

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A literary structure and radical intertextuality. On the semantic complexity of John Gardner's 'The King's Indian'

Bearing in mind the title of the article, it seems reasonable to offer some approximation of the notion of structure. "Structure" can be understood as a sememe, that is a unit of meaning, consisting of the following semes or semantic features: (i) completeness - it is something that is finished, graspable in its full range; (ii) concreteness - in the sense of being carried by some tangible medium (in case of literary texts, a structure is carried by the signal material); (iii) ordering - it is ordered, not chaotic; (iv) constituent elements and their relations - it comprises elements connected one with another; (v) and, finally, wholeness - it is more than a sum total of its parts, the difference is not merely quantitative: constitutive elements connected to each other through meaningful relations give rise to a new entity, qualitatively different.

In the humanities, the twentieth-century thought first applied the concept of structure in the field of linguistics, and from there it was adopted by literary studies, where the claim that a literary text is a structure enabled a completely new way of analyzing it. But it is by no means a simple structure, a literary text is "a complicated structural whole consisting of different signifying elements as well as of relations connecting them together, and also of the theoretically infinite number of relations above relations" (Zgorzelski 1999: 24; translation mine). A literary text then appears rather as a "nest of structures," consisting of structures within structures, at the same time being itself a structure within a larger structure or structures: a cycle, an author's *oeuvre*, the literature of the period, etc. Any change in the adopted perspective, in the focus of observation, entails a shift in the chain of perceived structures.

The nature of a literary text is then paradoxical: it is a text, a finite delimited sequence of signs, yet it gives rise or leads to an indefinite, potentially unlimited number of structures. To exhaust the semantic potential of a literary work in a single analysis is a sheer impossibility. A scholar, by necessity, narrows down his or her analytical focus, and literary research is a matter of choice, ideally based on the recognition of dominant tendencies in a given literary work. A literary text as a unique semantic and structural whole contains the rules or instructions ensuring its proper

understanding: it guides its interpreter through textual signals and clues. One of the text's internal markers of significance is a "subtext." Riffaterre, who has introduced this narratological concept, defines its role in the following way: "These subtexts operate as models of reading, as hermeneutic signposts, not unlike themes or motifs, except that a theme or a motif has a matrix of its own that is born elsewhere and exists before that of the larger text" (1993:55).

A subtext then is something specific to a narrative in which it is embedded; it has no existence outside of it. Furthermore, from the perspective of plot development, it is unimportant: "it can be omitted without unravelling the fabric or obscuring the logic of the narrative" (Riffaterre 1993: 55). Finally, as regards their *modus operandi*, subtexts are "dispersed along the narrative, either because their development is interrupted and the thread picked up later, or because a subtext reappears in successive variants like a paradigm of synonymic statements. [...] being idiosyncratic, [a subtext] becomes increasingly difficult to understand unless one connects it with the previous occurrences" (1993: 55). This latter quality of a subtext requires from the interpreter close attention and associative skills, especially if the successive textual variants of the subtext depart considerably from the original wording.

These subtexts are signifying systems in a narrative that generate their own clearly distinguishable structures, which serve as "hermeneutic signposts," pointing to the semantic organization of the text. However, the semantic organization of a literary text, on one hand clarified via subtexts, on the other hand becomes enormously complicated through the presence of intertexts, whose cumulative result is that the structure of a literary work expands beyond the textual borders and incorporates other literary structures. In its construction, it may resemble a collage, a veritable assemblage of quotations, paraphrases and allusions, which, paradoxically, does not preclude its originality and uniqueness. Such radical intertextuality marks the majority of contemporary fiction (Glowinski 2000: 15), and this widespread literary practice demands analytical procedures commensurate with it. A literary scholar must include in his analysis structures of other literary works with which an analyzed text meaningfully interacts, that is its intertextual sphere. He must take into account the fact that a particular textual signal or motif simultaneously belongs to two different semantic orders; he must give account of the semantic interplay between these two semantic orders and determine the function of the signal or motif in the new context.

"The King's Indian," the novella written by John Gardner, is undoubtedly a good case in point, illustrating the structural and semantic complexity of much contemporary fiction resulting from radical intertextuality. Critical commentaries on this work generally concentrate on three thematic areas. The first one is the recognition of its literary sources, and the almost unanimous agreement that the use of allusions and references in "The King's Indian" serves principally two functions. Greiner, symptomatically, states that the intertextual play in the novel is basically homage paid to the old masters: "[John Gardner] joyfully bows to traditional masters [...] he

not only affirms their status in the long heritage of tellers of tales but he also praises their values in the great works of narrative fiction" (1982: 78). The other function consists in inviting the implied reader to play a literary game; the text offers him the pleasure of recognizing the sources and the new twists given to them or the liberties taken with them:

Our delight springs **not so much from the meaning** of the novella as from the pleasure of recognizing allusions and the lure to unravel the Chinese-box structure of hoax within hoax. The comedy is intellectual, for it largely depends upon both spotting the liberties the author takes with the established masters and confronting the disarray the narrator makes of the conventions. (Greiner 1982: 85; emphasis added)

Foeller also points out the pleasure of "spotting the various bits and pieces of 19-th century literature that Gardner has ironically reworked into this collage of Gothic tale and sea-yarn" as well as the pleasure of "reading an engrossing tale (one does want to know what will happen next)" as major literary gratifications offered by the text (1981: 88). Against the critical responses to "The Kings Indian" presented above, a study of "The King's Indian" by David Cowart in his book *Arches & Lights. The Fiction of John Gardner* certainly offers more insights into its rich texture and suggests a deeper significance of its intertextual motifs.

The second thematic area involves the emphasis on the artificiality of the text and on how the story is told: "With artifice so flagrantly flaunted, we realize that the impact of the novella comes **not from what it says** but from the way it is told" (Greiner 1982: 86; emphasis added). Foeller makes basically the same point calling the novella a "fabulation":

A fabulation is a fiction which emphasized the artificiality, rather than the reality, of the events and the world it presents. [...] The fact that the whole of 'The Kings Indian' is fabulation, a figment of the writer's imagination, is stressed again and again. (1981: 82)

The third area of interest is the issue of the narrator's unreliability. According to Greiner, "the very first word is 'Hoaxes', and the mariner's initial speech insists that his tale has no meaning except what the guest brings to it under the spell of its enticing language" (1982: 86). He claims that "Upchurch's vision is as distorted as his tale" (86) Furthermore, as Greiner argues:

by telling them [the shipmates] that he has been everything from a pirate to a preacher, he then hints to us [the readers] that he has merely concocted the yarn to impress the guest. [...] Not only does the narrator admit that he hoaxes himself with the tucket and boom of his own language, but he also insists that meaning is relative and truth a farce. (87)

In the light of the fact that as both Greiner and Foeller observe, the novel so blatantly exposes its fictionality, that it so obviously renounces any mimetic pretensions and flouts verisimilitude, the question of the narrator's reliability appears irrelevant: the principal concern of the novella is not the exposure of the lack of moral integrity

on the part of the narrator or whether he tells the story in earnest or "has merely concocted the yarn to impress the guest."

As if anticipating this kind of argument, the novella has been equipped with the narrative frame, which serves as a metatextual commentary on Jonathan Upchurch's tale. In Chapter X, the guest listening to the tale accuses the narrator of telling him "an outrageous yarn," "unheard of"; he refuses to accept it, and his disbelief strikes at the very heart of narrative art, its contractual nature, where one of the rules is "the willing suspension of disbelief." And it is the third figure present at the scene, the angel, who speaks out in defense of fiction. He points out the paradoxical nature of literary fiction, which escapes classification into truth or falsehood; it is not bound by simple referentiality: "It ain't altogether a question of truth against falsehood."¹ The mariner tries to justify his tale and urges the guest to "mine deeper." Surely, the implied reader of the novel is meant to play the role of the guest, to adopt his position, and therefore the narrator's appeal is directed as much to the guest as to the implied reader, who is encouraged to search for "a deeper meaning" of the tale. The question of meaning is directly related to the issue of the semantic organization of the text, and it is precisely the area that the critics quoted above evade, downplaying the novellas meaning or even, in the case of Greiner, denying it altogether.

As it has already been suggested, the semantic complexity of "The King's Indian" to a large degree results from its rich intertextual sphere, from its extensive dialogic interplay with other literary works. In order to do justice to its radical intertextuality, one must find the text, ranging from quotations and allusions, through false quotations and misleading references, to names pointing to literary sources. An example of quotation, from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, comes very early in the text, when at the age of nine, Jonathan Upchurch has the vision, inspired in him by Flint, of "great white birds fighting the writhing serpents," the vision that discourages him from "mystic voyages," from "fooling around with those secret realms

from whence deep thunders roare,
Mus'tring thir rage, and Heaven resembles Hell!" (213)

Needles to say, such a "mystic voyage," which he undertakes in his adolescent years, becomes the substance of his tale. Inversely, what is presented as a quotation - "Ain't all men slaves, either physical or metaphysical?" (211) - turns out to be in fact a paraphrase of the passage from *Moby-Dick*:

Who ain't a slave? Tell me that. Well, then, however the old sea-captains may order me about -- however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way -- either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is. (Melville, Chapter I)

¹ John Gardner, *The King's Indian. Stories and Tales*, New York: Balantine Books, 1976, 251. All further references are to this edition.

The name of the inn, "The Buried Treasure Inn," in which the pirates, among them Pious John with the parrot, swindle Jonathan out of his money, is an allusion to *Treasure Island* by R.L. Stevenson that is impossible to miss. However, references in "The King's Indian" can be misleading and to spot the deception, one must know very well the literary source falsely invoked. This is evidenced by a metatextual signal in Jonathan's response - "I couldn't help but think of Mr. Poe's *Ligeia*" (339) - to Ngugi's confession that he loves the whales he kills, and he kills them because it is the only way he can get close to them.

Perhaps references that are the easiest to decipher are names that point directly to their literary sources. The text abounds with telling, richly allusive names, whose significance will be dealt with later, but now for the sake of simple demonstration, just two examples will be discussed. When onboard *Jerusalem* Jonathan is assigned to the kitchen, he picks up a butchers cleaver, "with some relish [...] a little like Odysseus picking up his bow" (242). The inclusion of *The Odyssey* in the intertextual sphere of the novella is confirmed by the question that Jonathan ponders later: "Was Homer Mad? —raging against war, bemoaning the very foundations of his world in the name of a vision of life never tried before nor since?" (261). What might appear at first as a random simile, with the invocation of Homer's name, and the shaping of Jeremiah as the ships blind prophet (modeled on Tiresias), turns into a consistent pattern. The initials "A.G.P." carved on the bulkhead of *Jerusalem*, of course, point to Arthur Gordon Pym and the ship *Grampus*, but in the context in which they appear, following Wilkins's suicide, Pym's initials serve also as the mock version of "R.I.P.," "Rest in Peace," thus becoming Wilkins's epitaph.

In this preliminary review of intertextual references in "The King's Indian," it is worthwhile paying attention to the less familiar sources generally passed over by the critics, and suggesting their relevance for the semantic organization of the novella. Alastor, the dog protecting Augusta, is modeled on Tiger from *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Jonathan is overwhelmed by the creature in exactly the same way as Pym was by Tiger, also in darkness. But the name of the dog is an intertextual signal, the name of a demon, a tormenting spirit, and also a hint at the poem by Shelley, "Alastor or the Spirit of Solitude," which warns against seeking solitude, and emphasizes the role of human sympathy and love. As Shelley explains in his "Preface," commenting on the poem:

They who [...] loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, yet keep aloof from sympathies with their kind, rejoicing neither in human joy nor mourning with human grief; these, and such as they, have their apportioned curse.[...]. They are morally dead. They are neither friends, nor lovers, nor fathers, nor citizens of the world, nor benefactors of their country.

The invoked poem thus frames the budding relationship between Jonathan and Augusta, and provides an image of idealistic pursuits and romantic alienation, a negative path that Jonathan will reject at the end in favor of simple human values such as commitment, domesticity, and a loving relationship.

The image of "the dark Satanic mills" is a direct allusion both to Blake's poem "Jerusalem" (it is also the name of the ship on which Jonathan sails!) and D. H. Lawrence's poetic response to Blake's poem, "Dark Satanic Mills." The "mills," however, are:

a very literary concept, derived immediately from Milton and indirectly from the Bible. It is Samson, eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves, the chained Hebrew Hercules, who would shake the pillars of the presumed solid world. More specifically, as Blake's references to mills elsewhere in the prophetic books clearly show, the mill stood for the turning seasons of the stars and the fallen world of endlessly repeating generations. (Whitehead 2001)

"The dark Satanic mills" is Blake's metaphor of the industrialized world, hostile to imagination, with its endless mechanical repetitive processes, the meaning also underscored in the following lines from Lawrence's poem:

And now, the iron has entered into the soul
and the machine has entangled the brain, and got it fast,
and steel has twisted the loins of man, electricity has exploded the heart
and out of the lips of people jerk strange mechanical noises in place of speech.

The image of "the dark Satanic mills," however, must be also considered in the context of Jonathan musing in the novella on human consciousness as "the artificial wall we build of perceptions and conceptions," the wall that "a mushroom or one raw emotion (such as love) can blast to smithereens" to reveal the true nature of reality. The traditional empirical view of the world encapsulated in the vision of "the dark Satanic mills" driven by "the sludge-thick streams" brings out here its mechanistic, confining, and ultimately illusory nature: "The future is the past, the past is present to my senses. I gaze at the dark Satanic mills, the sludge-thick streams. I shake my head. They vanish" (260).

Another striking feature of intertextual practice in "The King's Indian," which merits special attention, is the conflation of many sources into a single textual derivation, already observed in the case of Alastor and "the dark Satanic mills." The two owners of the ship *Jerusalem* - by the names of Tobias Cook and James T. Horner - to whom Jonathan at the outset refers to as "'two old gnomes of Nantucket," "cracked checkerplayers," "Beelzebub and Jaweh!" (209) seem to have been derived from three different sources. The two figures bear some resemblance to Captain Bildad and Captain Peleg, two owners of the largest shares in the ship *Pequod* in *Moby-Dick*, but such cognomens as Beelzebub and Jaweh hint at their sinister role of two deities toying with human beings, deceiving both Dirge and Flint, sending them on a wild goose chase. These two deities are later alluded to in the trope of "a cosmic checker" watching Jonathan with his "indifferent, dusty eyes" (248). Affirming their sinister role in the fictional world, these "sly practical jokers" were momentarily disturbed at their play by Wilkins's death:

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[they] looked startled, went ashen, but the next instant couldn't remember what it was that had startled them. 'Yer move, ' said Tobias Cook, though he wasn't certain of it, and frowned at the old worn checkers as black as midnight and red as blood. (338)

The colours of the pieces they move, "black as midnight and red as blood," underscore the malevolent nature of the players. Additionally, the motif of the game and the two players refers to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and two supernatural figures, Death and Death-in-Life, dicing for the ship's crew.

The characters of Flint/Captain Dirge and Augusta/Miranda represent much more complex cases of derivations from many sources, and their complexity does not result simply from their unstable identities in the novella. Flint, the hoaxer and magician, seems to be a kind of degraded Prospero, especially so since his daughter is named Miranda. Flint is a chameleon-like, protean figure. In his impersonation of Captain Dirge, he seems to combine features of Captain Vere from *Billy Budd* - as Billy More characterizes him, he is "a highly cultivated man, is old Dirge. Speaks God only knows how many languages" (243), of Captain Ahab chasing whales - "I've known him to set after whale like a man with a devil in him. Last time I sailed with him, he'd send no boat in ahead of his own, him riding there high on the gunnels at the stern, and his eyes red as rubies" (243) - as well as of Roderick Usher, since he is described by Jeremiah as "a man of most delicate sensibilities," suffering "like a man in hellfire" from "too much noise, too much light" (265), which, of course, echoes Usher's "overacuteness of the senses."

Augusta, as the Captains daughter, is a female version of Augustus Barnard, Pym's companion; her original name echoes Miranda from *The Tempest*, but the juxtaposition of the two is highly ironic. She is also described by Jonathan in terms that bring to mind Beatrice, the feminine ideal: "a Dantesque image of beauty and gentle-less untestable, unreachable, and no doubt ultimately unreal" (261). Augusta is for Jonathan "as elusive and baffling as the world itself." Unable to perceive her simply as a human being, he bows before her tantalizing mystery and projects extremes of contradiction onto her:

Emblem of womanly generosity, yet spiteful and mean; honest as sunlight, yet devious, wily; soft, unbelievably gentle, yet ferocious. [...]. She was Arcadia and Sodom, the ideal pattern of Nature, the idea of Evil. (270)

Jonathan admits that all his conceptions are inadequate for penetration of the supposed mystery of Augusta, whose fickle and complicated nature is compared to the workings of fate: "I saw the impishness as Augusta's line of *necessity*, the kindness ; *free*, the perfunctory quality as the random stroke of *chance*" (271); the phrasing here playfully alludes to the famous passage in *Moby-Dick*: "chance, free will, and necessity -- no wise incompatible -- all interweavingly working together" (Melville Chapter XLVII). Jonathan's fascination with Augusta parallels the infatuation of the narrator with Ligeia in Poe's story:

it was in the *eyes* of Augusta that I found her chief beauty and the source of her impenetrability. They were the shining gray of storm-charged twilight, larger even than the gazelle eyes of the tribe in the valley of the Nourjahad. (272)

In addition, as Foeller notices, the later transformation of Augusta to Miranda, from the dark-haired heroine to the blond one "is a reversed echo of the blond Rowena's transformation into Ligeia" (1981: 86).

Perhaps the most complicated case of derivation from multiple sources can be observed in the intertextual play triggered by the name of the ship in conjunction with the "Nowhere" motif. Once aboard *Jerusalem*, Jonathan hears the mysterious singing, "freighted with a kind of accusation, a promise of revenge" (231). As he discovers, it is the song of the Negro slaves kept under the deck, later echoed by the singing whales, which are also persecuted and killed by white men. Slavery and the exploitation of Nature introduce the theme of oppression into the novella, pointing out the ambiguity of the ship - "a whaling ship, yet there in the hold, a Slaver!" (232). The name of the ship, *Jerusalem*, is significant because it suggests the American ship of state, America as the New Jerusalem (Coward 1983: 109). The motif of Utopia in the text is signaled by its literal English translation: "Nowhere." During his first tour of duty on the masthead, at its dizzying heights, Jonathan feels the mysterious longing for the fall, he is tempted to commit suicide, but he is saved by Billy More who teaches him about the fatal attraction that "the step to Nowhere" holds for inexperienced sailors. "Nowhere" and the shipmates surname point to the concept of Utopia, and the USA as the embodiment of Utopia, the secularized idea of the City of God. As Coward observes:

The Nowhere motif, in other words, may ultimately have a political significance—a significance hinted at in the surname of the character who first names the phenomenon: Billy More. For Nowhere is the literal translation of Utopia, the secular version of the City of God from which Jonathan's ship takes its name, and the word's recurrence throughout the book adumbrates an ambivalent attitude, on the part of the author, towards America's perennial Utopian aspirations. (1983: 109)

However, the significance of the "Nowhere" motif goes beyond the political sphere, since "Nowhere" in the novella in fact comprises two opposite meanings: Nothingness (the Abyss) and Utopia. It is a paradoxical construct, an instance of syllepsis:

the trope that consists in understanding the same word in two different ways at the same time [...] The second meaning is not just different from and incompatible with the first: it is tied to the first as its polar opposite or the way the reverse of a coin is bound to its obverse. (Riffaterre 1980)

It brings together two contradictory concepts: the Abyss, with its contemporary connotations of the nihilistic vision and despair, and Utopia as its inversion, the idealistic and constructive vision of the material paradise. The description of Jonathan's temptation by the Abyss when he tries to perform his duty on the mast-

head - "With a wild, indefinite emotion, half-horror, half-relief, I cast my gaze into the abyss" (253-254) - closely echoes the passage in *Pym*, while the ensuing pantheistic vision and his desire to merge with All - "It was as if I had lost identity, become one with the mystic ocean at my feet, image of the deep-blue bottomless soul that pervades all mankind and nature like Cranmer's ashes" (254) - in turn reproduces the corresponding passage in *Moby-Dick*. The two texts are incorporated into "The King's Indian" with all their essential phrases so as there should be no mistaking the original sources.

The concept of the Abyss does not simply hark back to *Pym* as its intertextual source. Undoubtedly, it had its origins in Romanticism or more precisely, as Wilczyński argues, in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, as an emblem of transcendence: "The transcendent (toward which the imagination is impelled in its apprehension of intuition) is for the imagination like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself" (Kant, quoted in Wilczyński 1998: 31). Wilczyński extends the meaning of the Abyss to include the notion of the sublime; the Abyss would then be the manifestation of the sublime, or "the mystery manifesting itself through the sublime" (46). However, this important concept informed crucial philosophical and existential debates in the epochs that followed. As such, it must be considered in the light of the philosophies of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as the first attempts to come to terms with the horror at the discovery of the yawning void beyond human existence, as well as in terms of the twentieth-century existentialism, the successor to their thought.

The motif of gazing into the Abyss found perhaps its most famous formulation in Nietzsche's dictum: "146. He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee." Kierkegaard echoes Nietzsche in his description of his personal encounter with the Abyss:

I looked into the eyes of the horror and I was not afraid, I did not tremble. But I know that even if I courageously offer resistance to the horror, my courage is not the courage of faith; compared with the latter, it is nothing. I cannot accomplish the movement of faith; I cannot close my eyes and fling myself without a glance into the abyss of the Absurd.

The meaning associated with the Abyss changed as the concept evolved from the emblem of transcendence in Kant and the Romantics, through the tormenting promise of eternity in Kierkegaard, to the void and oblivion in existentialism. This is clearly evidenced by the monograph study by David K. Coe, *Angst and the Abyss. The Hermeneutics of Nothingness*, which according to the publisher's note, takes *Angst* in the face of the abyss as its unifying metaphor and examines critically this phenomenon in the thought of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and Tillich.

In the analyzed novella, Billy More teaches Upchurch that he can walk above the Abyss, that he can overcome the temptation of Nothingness by thinking about Faith: "Exactly like a man going over a gorge on a highwire. Throw yer vision to the rim. [...] Faith, that's the secret!" If ye *must* think, think of Faith itself" (253-254). In

this way "the step to Nowhere" is transformed by More into Kierkegaard's "leap of faith"; however, the constructive efforts of Billy More, the champion of "Nowhere" as Utopia, are in the story countered by the machinations of Wilkins, the veritable agent of the Abyss. Wilkins is loosely modelled on Peters, Pym's companion: "a half-breed or multi-breed (black-Chinese-Indian, or Lord knows what)" (240). However, there is also a hint at Ahab in his description as "a man struck with lightning, unable to ground it, the flicker of it still in his eyes" (240). Wilkins's favourite pastime appears to be dismantling clocks as seen in the following two scenes separated by a considerable span of time:

I saw only now that in the dimness beyond him Wilkins sat tinkering with the springs and coils of a dismantled clock, listening with both his big monkeys ears. He was working in almost complete darkness. (243)

With every further hour he put in on those clock-parts, the thing he was constructing looked less like a clock, though it resembled nothing else much neither. (277)

This mysterious activity, in the light of the cultural trope of the world as a watch, identifies Wilkins as the inverse of the watchmaker, the clock-destroyer, the nihilist ripping apart the fabric of the universe, God's perfect mechanism. He "scoffs at God, scoffs at beauty," (330) which adds a deeper meaning to his rape of Augusta. Despair is his foundation, he is "connected to no one and nothing" (331). In his farewell speech, before he finally succumbs to the Abyss, he glorifies absolute whimsical freedom as the only principle he is prepared to accept and enact: "If Creation is nothing but blind chance—mind this, milord—then the highest thing I can aspire to become is an impulse, a mindless whim, whether terrible or lovely" (335).

It is Wilkins who brutally destroys the illusion of the transcendental or metaphysical nature of the Captains quest, whose object Jonathan summarizes at the climax as "'Death or Absolute Vision among the Vanishing Isles" (340). The purpose of the journey undertaken by Captain Dirge/Flint was to explain the mystery of the phantom ship, the duplicate of *Jerusalem* reported to have gone down near the Vanishing Island, and the painting saved from the ship, thought to be identical with the original (later it is revealed as a forgery but painted by the same artist who created the original). The testimony of the ship *Grampus* {Pym}, which hauled the painting aboard, in the fictional world seems to confirm the incident, but at the same time points to the literary origin of the quest, centered on the Vanishing Islands, as in *Pym*. On the other hand, the epistemological motives behind the quest, articulated by the Captain himself and reported to Jonathan by Billy More, hint at its affinity with Ahab's pursuit of the mystery at the heart of human experience, his attempt to strike through the pasteboard mask to reveal the true nature of things:

Suppose, that is, that by somehow passing through a crack in Time a man could discover his destiny, find out the manner and place of his death. [...] What if these two distinct paintings here are one and the same—a single painting seen from different points in Time? [...] But the implications, gentlemen! How could such a man help but believe that what will be *must* be—in other words, that all our freedom is a ludicrous illusion? (311)

Wilkins mocks the idea of the quest, showing it as an absurd delusion, disclosing it as a hoax whose reason is in keeping with his nihilism: "It was only from whim, sir. Monumental whim! Artistic impulse, the urge of the Creator [...] - by *whim*, Captain, by meaningless whim, because nothing in the universe was firm" (336). For Jonathan, however, the voyage on *Jerusalem* has a deep personal meaning; it represents his passage to maturity and true humanity, whose literary origins go back to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in addition to the already mentioned *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Odyssey*. Discouraged at an early age by Flint from exploring "mystical realms" and "unearthly things," he turns to practical matters. He plans to go West and settle there; he works hard and puts aside the earned money in order to buy a farm in Southern Illinois; in other words, Jonathans aspirations perfectly embody the myth of the West and the promise of the American Dream. He is the opposite of Ishmael from *Moby-Dick*. He associates the sea with Flint, danger, magic, the unknown, and its sight fills him with dread; as he confesses: "I kept to landside" (215). His early role models are Reverend Dunkel, who instills in him the harsh values of discipline and hard work, and Van Klug, the butcher. Their emblematic names obviously betray the humorous intention: "dunkel" in German means "dark, not clear," and "klug" - "wise." But as it turns out, his destiny is shaped by forces beyond his control, which thwart his plans: "Then, quite suddenly, my fortune turned. By an act of spectacular folly I lost all I had. Say it was the draw of the universe—the powers that laugh at winds, tides, planets" (219).

Ironically, it is the pirates who intoxicated him and sold him a boat who precipitate him on his sea-voyage. Upchurch finds himself standing "somewhat dazed, and somewhat unwell, on the old decayed wharf by the abandoned lumberyard of Pankey & Co." (224), gazing at a sailboat by the name of the *Jolly Independent*. The place from which he begins his journey is the same place from which Pym and his companion Augustus embarked at night on a drunken escapade onboard *Ariel*. However, the motive is derived from *Moby-Dick*, as indicated by the passage that Jonathan recalls, while looking at the boat he has been tricked into buying:

I wanted to be there, with Plato and Plotinus, despite all my sensible talk about southern Illinois. In landlessness alone lies the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God! thought I. Better to perish in that howling infinite than be... something or other. (I forget my phrase.) (224)

This passage playfully introduces a crucial intertextual motif, the concept of "landlessness," metaphorically developed in the following passage in *Moby-Dick*:

all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore.

But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God -- so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! (Melville, Chapter XXIII)

The sea-voyage in *Moby-Dick* represents the quest for the truth that "resides in landlessness alone," but also, in the case of Ishmael, it is the vehicle for his personal quest for finding his place in the universe.

The motif of landlessness and the howling infinite are again evoked in the background of Upchurch's initiation into the quest onboard *Jerusalem*, which takes place, appropriately, in the darkness:

He answered from the darkness, the voice of a minister discoursing on Hell, or a hanging judge when he talks of Heaven—'Yer destiny's set ye a perilous venture, but a far nobler venture than some, it may be. Ye're landless, landsman, and like to remain so, circling the watery wilderness now till Doomsday.' The rough sea rumbled in the bulkhead beside me, howling, infinite... (230)

The mysterious figure (the blind Jeremiah, as it is revealed later) speaks of his destiny: Jonathan is sentenced to sail the oceans until the end of the world, and the voyage will take him beyond the limits of the known world: "Ye've jined with a company of deadmen, ye see; deadmen pursuing a deadman down into his grave and, could be, through it" (230). "A company of deadmen" is an allusion to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," where the mariner's crew was composed of literally dead sailors, at some point animated by spirits. Of course, the prophecy at this point appears very enigmatic; its sense will be revealed to Jonathan gradually later. Interestingly, Jonathan's initiation by the blind Jeremiah (Tiresias) also recalls the episode in *The Odyssey*, in Book XI, in which Odysseus enters the Underworld, the realm of the dead, in order to consult the blind prophet Tiresias about his safe journey home.

Jonathan's passage to maturity and full humanity during his journey onboard *Jerusalem* consists of several stages, and it involves the evolution of his view of the universe as well as his developing love for Augusta; what is significant, his shifting attitude to Augusta has a direct bearing on his philosophical and moral outlook. Onboard *Jerusalem* Upchurch is first confronted with the universal "pointlessness" of things and the emptiness of the universe: "Adrift in a universe grown wholly unfamiliar, I'd been suddenly ambushed by the dark vastness which [...] suggested to me, and very powerfully, too, mere pyrotechnic pointlessness" (248). His sense of loss and estrangement in the universe is compounded by the mystery of the ship and of the purpose of its voyage. For explanation, Jonathan turns to Jeremiah, "the owner of the voice that had spoken to him that first night," who plays the double role of the prophet and the oracle. Upchurch asks him fundamental questions:

What ship *is* this?' I asked. I spoke louder now, the silence of the ship all around me like the silence of a black-draped hall when a medium begins, and my question self-conscious despite my urgency, as if I were delivering lines long rehearsed. 'Where does the ship put in? Where can I get off?' (250)

However, Jeremiah's answer that "he sails in the company of deadmen, risen saints," leaves him even more baffled than before.

From this confusion and universal meaninglessness, Jonathan is delivered by the absurd pursuit of "the object of his desire, a girl he had never seen." This mysterious object of his desire is the Captains daughter, Augusta, which he finds out later, when he is honored with the proposition of being her tutor. The second stage of his development, then, is his infatuation with Augusta. He himself describes this period as "joyful enslavement" and the end of his "jolly independence," the latter being an allusion both to the name of his sailboat and to his personal quest for maturity. Upchurch now perceives the series of adventures that brought him to Augusta as "the grand but for us inscrutable scheme of Providence" (276), as Gods plan, "not yet revealed in all particulars" (277). The chain of events now seems to him logical, ordered, not chaotic, but pre-ordained, which hints at the Puritan view of history. What is significant, at this point Upchurch justifies the established order and slavery as its foundation, manifesting at this stage the condition that can be described as false moral complacency:

Without slavery there could have been no Homer, no Pericles, no thousand and one images of the Goddess of Mercy in the temple at Kyoto. ... Free Will was not as simple as I had imagined, then. It arched up out of enslavement. (284)

Moreover, he becomes a pantheist, at home in the universe, with his mind being the centre of things.

However, his naive beliefs in the universal order and in his unity with the universe, the beliefs founded on his idealization of Augusta and sanctioned as it were by her integrity, collapse with the sudden revelation of her wickedness: "I knew all at once that Augustas sickness went deeper than I'd guessed. It was as if I was suddenly seeing her plain, without stagelights, without make-up" (299). The discovery of her deceitfulness coincides with the discovery of the murder of a Negro boy - Jonathans "double," whose place he has taken at the oars - which brings home to him the guilt of slavery. Earlier, he identified Augusta with the whole creation, hence Jonathan's disillusionment with Augusta hints very strongly at the disenchantment with the world, and in particular with America as a failed Utopia stained by slavery. He becomes disillusioned, and through his participation in the collective guilt of slavery, he achieves moral maturity. He realizes "the white man's burden," the terrible legacy of the white race comprising the enslavement of human beings, the slaughter of animals and "the misery of killers." In addition, his fall from idealistic pantheism leads to solipsism, the sense of isolation in the universe:

No longer was I one with the wind, the sea, the motion of the ship. No longer were stars gone-out-long-since my ultimate skin. I was an object in a great bumping clutter of objects - every wave, every coil of twine, every nail, my enemy, cold-blooded Massuh. I knew now the madness of my former opinions, freedom arching up through enslavement, redeeming, reaffirming it. (300)

The fourth and conclusive stage of Jonathan's personal quest begins when he turns to the mysterious Indian called Kaskiwah; he confesses to him his despair, and

while talking to his silent interlocutor, he suddenly realizes the humanity of his fellows: "A man could waste his life not noticing his fellow man is human. And waste his fellows life too, no doubt. It can be a lonely world, this mote in the abyss" (303). Of course, Jonathan's recognition of the humanity of **all** people echoes the transformation experienced by Huck Finn, when Huck "humbles himself and apologizes to the nigger." Jonathan is earlier called "a Mississippi flimflam man"(267), the designation that hints at Huck Finn; as his literary antecedent, Jonathan also tells lies about his identity, and the intertextual link is definitely confirmed by Miranda's description of Jim Ngugi as Jonathan's "friend with the bone in his nose, **Nigger Jim**" (350; emphasis added). Kaskiwah effects Upchurch's deliverance from the vision of meaninglessness and "deadly separateness" by offering him hallucinogenic mushrooms, the gift as he says "from the King," thus revealing himself as the eponymous King's Indian, "a man who knew that men and the land or sea they live on are one, an indivisible being" (304). Very early on in the story, the Indians are described by Jonathan as the race partaking of the mysteries of Nature and the universe, from which white men have cut themselves off. Accordingly, it is Kaskiwah's gift that triggers in Jonathan the new altered perception of things, and incontrovertibly demonstrates to him that human consciousness indeed is the artificial wall erected between the self and the universe:

A mushroom or one raw emotion (such as love) can blast that wall to smithereens. I become a kind of half-wit, a limitless shadow too stupid to work out a mortgage writ, but I am also the path of the stars, rightful monarch of Nowhere. I become, that instant, the King's Indian: Nothing is waste, nothing unfecund. (260)

This artificial barrier, the boundary between the "self" and Nature and the universe understood as "not self," is not an individual flaw, but the legacy of the Western culture, of the traditional divisive paradigm.² It is as Wilber puts it, the effect of "drawing a mental line or boundary across the whole field of your experience," and marking everything on the inside of that boundary as "self," while everything outside that boundary is perceived as "not self." However, as this contemporary philosopher argues:

The ultimate metaphysical secret, if we dare state it so simply is that there are no boundaries in the universe. Boundaries are **illusions**, products not of reality, but of the way we map and edit reality. [...] For boundary lines, of any type, are never found in the real world itself, but only in the imagination of the mapmakers. (Wilber 1979; emphasis added)

The sustained metaphor of the wall as the culturally conditioned separateness and isolation cuts across the textual boundaries, and enters the fictional discourse

² The entry in *A Dictionary of Philosophy* defines "paradigm" as follows: "in the philosophy of science, a central overall way of regarding phenomena, within which a scientist normally works. The paradigm may dictate what type of explanation will be found acceptable, but in periods of crisis a science may exchange paradigms" (261).

of Wilkins as well, who rephrases it in the following way: "We've cut ourselves off. That's the secret, Captain. Ye've said so yerself. **Our skulls seal out the universe**" (335); emphasis added). In his own twisted, nightmarish way Wilkins tries to bridge the gap, to destroy the wall between consciousness and the universe by blowing his brains out: "Can a man become one with the universe, undo the separation that makes sinners of us all? Impossible, ye say. Yet, behold, I seem to!" (338).

The trope of human consciousness as the illusory prison is inextricably connected in the novella with what can be called, adopting Riffaterre's term, the "sentient trees subtext." The "sentient trees subtext" dispersed through the novella bears out Riffaterre's thesis that from the point of view of the logic of the narrative, a subtext is rather unimportant; it plays virtually no role in developing the plot. This freedom enables then the "sentient trees subtext" to assume the role of a "hermeneutic signpost," guiding the interpreter through the semantic maze of "The King's Indian," clarifying the resolution of the central motif of the quest, and finally bringing together its two compositional planes: the fictional world of Jonathan's tale, and the fictional reality of the narrative frame.

The "sentient trees subtext" is introduced through the textual agency of the first mate on the ship, one Mr. Knight. As Jonathan characterizes him:

He'd run across the curious theories of Goethe, in *Metamorphose der Pflanzen*, and the theory of "organic force" in Muller. He'd heard some strange theory that eggs feel terror, that plants can sense things and keep watch on a friend—a human being, a spider—from miles away. (262)

Specifically, Mr. Knight is obsessed with the theory that trees and plants are sentient beings, that sentience is not uniquely human, as indicated by the results of the experiment conducted in Prague in which a gardenia developed an emotional attachment to a spider, sensing at a distance any imminent threat to the insect. For Mr. Knight, these findings with their far-reaching consequences demonstrate the crisis of the empirical worldview, and generally, the crisis of the traditional divisive paradigm of the Western culture. He is perplexed by the scientifically and philosophically sanctioned split between consciousness and nature. He is also troubled by the fatal gap yawning between the spiritual realm and the physical world, by the absence of an overall explanatory pattern, a paradigm uniting both realms:

He had facts corpuscular and facts crepuscular, messages from Newton and news from the company of table rappers, but the connector his Methodism longed for had vanished: the moral principle, the arc-flash, the man with the halo. Mere fact was killing him. (263-264)

The personal dilemma of Mr. Knight reflects the deep-seated dualism in Western thought, "a dissociative split between spirit and nature," which Metzner considers "a core feature of the European psyche":

Western culture - this great civilization of which we are so proud, in both its religious and its humanist scientific worldview - has this dualism built into all aspects of it. According

to this worldview, **the material world is inert, insentient, and non-spiritual**, and no kind of psychic or spiritual communication or communion between humans and Earth or nature is possible. (Metzner 1993; emphasis added)

According to Metzner, this negative valorization of nature and the material world has a direct bearing on the Western concept of spirituality: "Spirit, we imagine, rises upward, into transcendent realms, whereas nature, which includes bodily sensations and feelings, sinks or draws us downward" (Metzner 1993). As he convincingly argues, the split produces disastrous distortions in our perception and the deadly sense of separateness: "if we feel ourselves mentally and spiritually separate from our own nature (body, instincts, sensations, and so on), then this separation will also be projected outward, so that we think of ourselves as separate from the great realm of nature, the Earth, all around us" (Metzner 1993).

However, this oppositional dualism of the spiritual and the natural can be resolved by the recourse to the indigenous or shamanistic cultures, upholding the alternative worldview which sees all natural forms and beings as pervaded by spiritual energy and intelligence. In theological language, it is known as *immanentism* or *panentheism*, which means that Divinity exists within everything and pervades throughout everything (Metzner 1993). Panentheism claims that all is in God, the universe is God's body, but God's awareness or personality is greater than the sum of all the parts of the universe. As the individual experience carries on its choosing process, it is a freely aiming reality that is not strictly God, since it departs from God's purpose to some degree; yet everything is within God.³

The "sentient trees subtext" recurs in different contexts and in different phrasing, and these new textual instances become meaningful only as successive variants of the original wording, acting "like a paradigm of synonymic statements," to recall Riffaterre's formulation. This framework is necessary for the proper understanding of the following instance of the subtext: "as mind blooms up from befuddled, tormented flesh—poor timorous green, if those experiments at Prague were right" (284). The analogy suggested by the narrator between "befuddled, tormented flesh," from which mind "blooms up," and "poor timorous green" similarly endowed with sentience, cannot be fully grasped without recalling the gardenia sensing at a distance the threat to the spider, and fearing for it. The "sentient trees subtext" also recurs in Jonathan's sudden vision triggered by Wilkins's suicide, in a new textual variant, rephrased as "the mind of a tree":

Wilkins' face exploded, dark blood in the bandanna, and it was over, the repercussion still booming, deafening, in our ears. The *Jerusalem* tragedy was finished, or just begun. **I could suddenly see things far away, like the mind of a tree.** (338; emphasis added)

³ The definition of the term based on "New Thought: A Practical American Spirituality", <<http://www.websyte.com/alan/pan.htm>>, 26 September 2006.

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This is the final consequence of Jonathans altered perception, and seems to corroborate the results of the experiment in Prague, which struck so forcefully at the empiricism of Mr. Knight, undermining the traditional divisive paradigm.

The resolution of Jonathans quest is deeply affected by two factors, the first of which is the paradigm shift⁴ that he has experienced, the shift initiated by Kaskiwah's hallucinogenic mushrooms and completed by Jonathan's reaction to Wilkins's suicide, the paradigm shift with "the sentient tress" as its index. The other crucial factor is his love for Miranda, the litmus test of his personal transformation. Their evolving love is now shaped primarily through allusions to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," beginning with the description of the calm that stalls the ship. The breakthrough in their relationship comes when Jonathan ceases to idolize Miranda, when he takes pity on her, and sees her as a human being, crying over the lost innocence, his own and Miranda's. The ideal, despoiled by the brutal rape, no longer perfect, comes alive, and Miranda becomes humanized. By accepting and returning Jonathans love, she "blesses him unaware," just as the Ancient Mariner blessed the water snakes, admiring their beauty and feeling love for them flowing from his heart:

I touched her breast. [*She blesses him unaware.*] She reached to me suddenly and pulled me to her. 'You're so *wall-eyed!*' she whispered. I saw on her face a wild, unintentional idea. 'Jonathan, I love you,' she whispered. (351-352)

Their love lifts the calm; it restores the wind and also brings back to life "the company of deadmen" as the crew awakes from the hypnotic spell of Flint.

With the "risen sailors" and the wind blowing, Jonathan may now pursue the Vanishing Isles and thus complete the quest. The descriptive passages now become heavily reminiscent of *Pym's* final chapter, with all the essential particulars: "sullen darkness and a milky sea where a strangely luminous glare arose," and "gigantic, pallid white birds" emerging from behind "the glowing veil" and crying *Tekeli-li*. What is more, three ships suddenly appear at the scene, hence what has been concocted as a hoax - the sinking of the *Jerusalem* witnessed by three ships - is coming to be enacted in the fictional reality. To crown it all, the mysterious white figure reveals itself on the land (The Vanishing Isles) that has just risen from the depths of the sea. But Jonathan abandons the quest, he chooses to sail back home. He gives the crew command to "tack alee," to sail "homeward," back to "Illinois the Changeable." Jonathans decision is foreshadowed in an intertextual reference earlier in the text: "But a wise man settles for, say, Ithaca" (331), where "settling for Ithaca," that is the rejection of the quest in favor of happy domesticity, loving relationship, is considered a sign of wisdom and maturity.

⁴ "Paradigm shift" is the term first used by Thomas Kuhn in his 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, here slightly modified and understood as the adoption of a new, more comprehensive view of the world, based on the essential unity of all beings.

"Tack-alee" is an echo of *Pym*, of the crying of the white birds at the very threshold of the transcendental reality. However, the ominous cry of doom, with which the sky above the ship is now ringing, is humorously transformed by Jonathan into the declaration of his commitment to his fellow human beings and to the whole creation. Again, his decision is prefigured earlier in the following exhortation: "Tack alee, then, mate, away from the maelstrom, away from the Coal-pocket, upward in all directions, home to Visions!" (228) "Tack-alee" is in direct opposition to the intertextual motif of "landlessness," the concept of truth as residing in the howling infinite. It means sailing away from the maelstrom, and setting the course for the shore, to the lee, which represents, according to the passage from *Moby-Dick*: "safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities" (Melville, Chapter XXIII). The decision to "tack alee" affirms the values of domesticity, ordinary human happiness, and spirituality as embodied not in transcendence, not in "the howling infinite of landlessness," but in physicality, in "Illinois the Changeable."

The "sentient trees subtext" plays a crucial role in the redefinition or even subversion of the central motif of the quest, relocating its object to the new site, praising simple domestic happiness, "all that's kind to our mortalities," instead of idealistic pursuits, and rooting spirituality in the "here and now," in the experience of the natural world. It also brings together the fictional world of Jonathan's story and the fictional reality of the narrative frame. In the frame reality, the narrator's transformation is mapped onto the reaction of the guest, although in the syntagmatic order of the text, in the order of "telling," the guest's reaction precedes Jonathan's acquisition of the "new sense of things." The guest achieves a new sense of reality, and shares the new paradigm, of which the sentient trees are the crucial index:

Beyond the barn, old trees stand listening, reaching through the darkness ... with anguish like a mother's, listening in a terror of concern for the footsteps of spiders gone astray. Say no more of the thousand-mile animal, philosopher! I gave you an animal large as the world, blind and full of terror, purposeless, searching. [...] **And now the guest, too, feels the trees groping inward, dark, age-old, mute inglorious Miltons...** (320)

This instance of the subtext at once harks back to its original wording, trees "listening in a terror" for spiders gone astray, and contains its hyperbolic intensification, the metaphoric image of trees as "mute inglorious Miltons," as both unsung heroes and unrecognized prophets. With the guest's newly acquired perception, the aim of Jonathan's tale may be said to have found its fulfillment, to have achieved its effect. In the narrative frame the guest is the stand-in for the implied reader and his reactions model the reception of the work, and when the same response is evoked by John Gardner's novella in the personal reader, literary fiction has affirmed its power and value.

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