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# A Culture of Recycling / Recycling Culture?



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Katarzyna Nowak<sup>1</sup>

## The Myth of Eternal Return: Melancholic Formation of Identity and Production of Cultural Icons

How does one start to write about the ghostly presence of protagonists who are unreal in at least a double sense? How does one conjure up their presence so that their elusive existence is solid enough to be captured in a text? I am thinking about those characters in novels that were summoned to appear in a text as ghosts of their real life equivalents, from the very beginning not meant to imitate life but rather to imitate fiction. Two examples emerge: Maryna Zalenska and Norma Jeane, the former the protagonist of Susan Sontag's epic novel *In America*, which is an account of the Californian endeavor of a Polish actress and icon of the stage, Helena Modrzejewska; the other a character in Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Blonde*, which renders in a similarly fictionalized form the life and death of Hollywood icon Marilyn Monroe.

The two literary examples will serve to present different approaches to exile, and the differentiation begins in the very way the authors of the books reveal their methods of work with the material that is then molded into fiction. In a note preceding *In America*, signed S.S., we read:

The story of *In America* is inspired by the emigration to America in 1876 of Helena Modrzejewska. ... Inspired by ... no less and no more. Most of the characters in the novel are invented, and those who are not depart in radical ways from their real-life models.<sup>2</sup>

The author of this note did not bother to conceal her identity; she performs the authorial role, voicing her independence and creativity. The emphasis is on inspiration, and what is also stressed is the question of departure: obviously the author meant to point out the difference between a biographical and fictional account, yet what gets revealed, somehow uncannily, is the issue of deferral, the spatial differentiation, which is marked in the phrase describing the departure of the characters in the novel from their real-life counterparts.

What a reader finds in J. C. Oates's book is a presentation of similar concerns, though with the emphasis on different aspects:

*Blonde* is a work of fiction. While many of the characters portrayed here have some counterparts in the life and times of Marilyn Monroe, the characterizations and incidents presented are totally the products of

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<sup>1</sup> The author is a grantee of the Foundation for Polish Science.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, *In America* (New York: Picador, 2000).

the author's imagination. Accordingly, *Blonde* should be read solely as a work of fiction, not as a biography of Marilyn Monroe.<sup>3</sup>

We read the above in a note preceding the novel itself, on the page with the publisher's note, unsigned. Here, the stress is on the reader, with a clear instruction of how the novel should be read, and what is the "correct" approach to the material presented. The fact that the note remains unsigned, combined with the place where it is printed, adds to the sense of its being an absolute, and objective, command. What the author recommends here is to observe the central protagonist of the novel as doubly removed from the real life: Norma Jeane is a character who is not meant to be the fictional representation of Marilyn Monroe; she is a character who is supposed to be a fiction of a fiction.

The question of deferral appears crucial in this context, combined with the melancholic formation of identity, where the two create a space which is unreal yet reveals the fissures in reality, or, in other words, in the ways we conceive of the world around and inside us. This space I will understand as one connected with the turn towards the maternal, yet paradoxically, one that can be reached only with the separation from the maternal body, which by Lacan is associated with the entrance into language.<sup>4</sup> The space created for the characters in those two novels will be the testing ground for the very idea of exile, for the possibility of departure from the dominant economy of language and identity.

It comes as no surprise, of course, that America will be designated as the space of the immigrant dream, the space where one can escape all previous limitations. Yet the break from the past is not always imagined as desirable, as we are reminded in Franz Kafka's *America*. In the opening passage the Statue of Liberty is described as holding a sword instead of a torch. Not a benevolent but rather a menacing symbol of the place, it can be read as representing a threatening, castrating Father, suggesting that there is no escape from the masculine topography and economy of the language.

However, if one still dreams of escaping linearity and phallogocentric order, America seems to play the role of the new space perfectly. How is this space characterized in the two novels? The points of correspondence seem curiously similar, with the emphasis on the sense of a break with the past, yet an unreal one. It is the space where one is removed from the past, or rather, creates a new sense of beginning and thus attempts to escape the linearity of time. The levels of deferral pile up, because it is not enough to go to the United States as such, one has to go further, and in both discussed novels this place is California. In Sontag's novel, the depiction is quite straightforward: as one of the characters wonders, "Doesn't it

3 Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde* (New York: Ecco, 2000).

4 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience" (1949), in: *Ecrits: A Selection* (New York & London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), p. 2.

seem very American ... that America has its America, its better destination where everyone dreams of going?,"<sup>5</sup> not only commenting on the space itself, but also illustrating the character of the immigrant nation, in which everyone envisages a space of ending, of a final destination. Even more explicitly, it is described in the following words: "California, the ending, the last beginning."<sup>6</sup> The emphasis is on the dream quality of the place, where anything is possible, and the American dream can be carried out, pushed to the limit, though it never in fact comes true. Described as such, it becomes the boundary of one's vision, which reminds one of death, which can also be imagined as the space and time of abolition of the categories of possibility and limit.

As is usually the case with writing about death, one borders on the naïve and the banal, which testifies all the more to the impossibility of conceptualizing one's mortality. It is only possible to write of death on the terms of life. It is the negative description of what death is not: it cannot be contained in words, because language remains the proof of life, even if we accept its being borne out of the death drive. So it seems that the movement represented when it comes to writing about death is circular, that is, it means going round in circles back to life, and curiously enough, for the protagonists of *In America*, it seems that the land that stands for what is customary and recognizable, that is, that represents life, is Poland: "Poland was circles – everything familiar, saturated, centrifugal," whereas America possesses the qualities of an unknown territory: "Here the country, ever more spacious and thinly marked, streamed and spiked in all directions."<sup>7</sup> The latter is a country in which the very possibility of death is denied; yet at the same time it presents death as an option, as the only option of survival, so it seems.

In the case of Poland circularity means familiarity, whereas in the case of California it means just the opposite, which is revealed in the episode when Zalenska discusses a play in which she is to act the role of Frou-Frou, who dies at the end. Peter, Zalenska's son, wants a different ending to the story: "Why does Frou-Frou have to die? ... She could jump up and say, I changed my mind. ... Then she could go out to California and go up in an air-ship and say, Try to catch me if you can."<sup>8</sup> Here the naïve character – which reminds one of the Romantic Wordsworthian notion of "the child is father of the man" – is telling the truth about the meaning of California, the place where one can escape even the limitations of death.

Yet this ultimate place seems to be the Protestant vision of heaven: it is described as "the Laborer's Paradise."<sup>9</sup> Being at the same time the space of a dream factory, Hollywood, it is supposed to unite two conflicting tendencies. Endowed

5 Sontag, *In America*, p. 120.

6 Sontag, *In America*, p. 327.

7 Sontag, *In America*, p. 313.

8 Sontag, *In America*, p. 328.

9 Sontag, *In America*, p. 121.

with the quality of a paradox, it has to be read in a circular fashion, in which the answer points towards the question. How is California characterized? "Salubrious Climate. Fertile soil. / No severe winters. No lost time."<sup>10</sup> If the time cannot be lost, then it cannot be "had"; it has to cease to exist altogether. California, then, must be the land of eternity, and hence the land of death.

Such a vision of the place agrees with its presentation in *Blonde*. The main protagonist dies at the end, and it is not only welcome event, but also anticipated from the very beginning, when we read in the opening passage: "There came Death undeterred by the smoggy spent air of Los Angeles. By the warm radioactive air of southern California where Death had been born."<sup>11</sup> The circular motion: going back to the event forestalled suggests not only the obvious inescapability of death, but being stuck on it and reviving the melancholic longing for the lost object.

I see the loss as connected with artistic performance as well as with the entrance into the language in Lacanian sense. In order to be able to use the language, which is the tool of creativity for the figures of the actresses discussed, the person must be separated from the mother. The condition for entering the language is the rejection from the source of primeval sense of oneness, and this traumatic process reminds one of the hardship of immigration. The loss of one's linguistic environment is thus characterized by Kristeva: "The foreigner, thus, has lost his mother."<sup>12</sup> The fact that it is not both parents that one is supposed to lose in the process, but the mother, is fortified by the phrase "mother tongue," in which emigration and initiation into the language are combined. In Polish, however, the corresponding phrase will be "father tongue," which seems to fit better the situation of the immigrants in Sontag's novel, who leave Poland and their Polish "father tongue." For the two discussed characters, the loss of paternal support and entrance into a foreign language start from different points of departure.

Kristeva illustrates the predicament of being a foreigner as such: "Not speaking one's mother tongue. ... Thus, between two languages, your realm is silence,"<sup>13</sup> and she adds, "Silence has not only been forced upon you, it is within you: a refusal to speak ... Nothing to say, nothingness, no one on the horizon."<sup>14</sup> This loneliness, being devoid of the ability to use the language, stretches to infinity: the horizon is empty, the world silent.

In the narration in Sontag's book, the main protagonist remains mysteriously devoid of voice in the last scene. The whole chapter gives voice to Edwin Booth, an actor who plays with Zalenska, while she is given one line only to show mercy to the mean, drunk, rambling Booth. In a monologue he describes his life and acting career, among other issues. The reader knows the reaction of

10 Sontag, *In America*, p. 121.

11 Oates, *Blonde*, p. 3.

12 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 267.

13 Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 275.

14 Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 276.

Zalenska, but not what she says. And it is Booth who tells her she speaks with the accent she has been trying so hard to eliminate. In this gesture she is relegated to the place of a foreigner and is meant to remain there. Nothing can change the fact that she has lost her mother – "father" tongue. Even though she immigrated to California, the land of fantasy, this fantasy is bound to remain unfulfilled.

The common theme for the two novels is designating California as a place associated with death, separation, and, ultimately, with freedom. The question of artistic freedom is obviously crucial in the case of the two protagonists, both of them actresses. In order to achieve this freedom, they have to abandon the space governed by the paternal law, the "Name of the Father," and set out for the place where they can create their identities without the parental support. The loss of the mother, and consequently, the loss of the mother tongue remain central to the performance of their identities. Yet they remain trapped in the play of imagined loss and grief, hence one can designate their identity as melancholic. The two figures present two ways of coping with the loss. According to Julia Kristeva, one of the two modalities that permit the survival of rejection is oralization, which is associated with "melody, harmony, rhythm"<sup>15</sup> and characterized by "a reunion with the mother's body, which is no longer viewed as an (...) expelling and rejecting body, but rather as a vocalic one."<sup>16</sup> Maryna Zaleska serves as an example of this modality, whereas Norma Jeane will be presented as opting for the second modality, thus described by Kristeva: "The second modality ... appears in the reunion with brothers' bodies, in the reconstruction of a homosexual phrathry."<sup>17</sup> It is worth mentioning that one modality is "always inseparable"<sup>18</sup> from the other, thus both create a vision of coping with being rejected by the mother's body and entrance into language.

In Zalenska's case, the impossibility of speaking without an accent, impossibility of entering the language fully, and being reminded of one's alien status, testifies to the way she uses the language in terms of oralization. Language is central to her performance as a foreigner. She longs to belong, to see the body of the mother as vocalic, yet she can never succeed. Monroe remains an outsider, too. What is emphasized in her case is her incessant repetition of shots over and over again: here circularity serves as the sign of not belonging. She is not a foreigner in the strict sense of the word, yet her attempt to deal with the rejection of the mother's body is as unsuccessful. Death is presented in both cases as the way out of the circular motion dictated by the will to deal with the separation.

The silence imposed on both characters is strengthened by the circularity of their emergence as cultural icons: the real life characters are used as material for the characters of biographies, then into personas in fiction, and finally, are

15 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia Press, 1984), p. 80.

16 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 79.

17 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 79.

18 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 79.

combined with their existence as icons of stage or screen. The effect of silence, their removal from life, the deferral, is finite.

Quite paradoxically, then, the price of an attempted escape from the Law of the Father and the symbolic order is the loss of mother/tongue, which is, simultaneously, the very condition for freedom, which proves to be impossible. Being stuck on this loss produces melancholic desire for oneness, which means repeating the gestures that are supposed to free us from the painful feeling of a loss. Desire for oneness means desiring death. And this death is realized in California.

Grzegorz Moroz

### From a Theodrome to the Dance of Shiva-Nataraya – Recycling Aldous Huxley's Views on Circularity in Nature and Culture

I would like to begin re-cycling Aldous Huxley's views on circularity in nature and culture with two contrastive images from two of his novels, one written at the beginning and the other at the end of his career as a novelist. *Antic Hay* is his second novel and was published in 1923, and *Island* is his final novel, published a year before his death in 1962. *Antic Hay* opens in this way:

Gumbril, Theodore Gumbril Junior, B.A. Oxon, sat in his oaken stall on the north side of the School Chapel and wondered, as he listened through the uneasy silence of half a thousand schoolboys to the First Lesson, pondered, as he looked up at the vast window opposite, all blue and jaundiced and bloody with the nineteenth century glass, speculated in his rapid and rumbling way about the existence and the nature of God.<sup>1</sup>

Gumbril is the second, after Denis Stone from *Crome Yellow*, in the long succession of Huxley's characters portrayed in a usually more than less denigrating manner bearing more or less direct similarities with Huxley himself. Gumbril is a disheartened and disgruntled public school teacher, as Huxley was at Eton from September 1918 to February 1919. But what is more important, Gumbril is a sceptic and an agnostic. So, when Reverend Pelvey booms that "the Lord our God is one Lord," we encounter this flippant, theologically philological free indirect speech:

Our Lord; Mr Pelvey knew, he had studied theology. But if theology and theosophy, then why not theography and theometry, why not theognomy, theotrophy, theotomy, theogamy? Why not theo-physics and theo-chemistry? Why not the ingenious toy, *the theotrope or wheel of gods?* Why not a monumental theodrome?<sup>2</sup>

Gumbril's long, *in service* speculations about "the existence and the nature of God," which meander beyond good and evil or „merely below them," through the painful memories of the death of his mother who was good, "not nice, not merely *molto simpatico* ... but good," end with the conclusion: "But this was nonsense, all nonsense. One must think of something better than this."<sup>3</sup> And so he does; the

1 Aldous Huxley, *Antic Hay* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 3.

2 Huxley, *Antic Hay*, p. 3; my italics.

3 Huxley, *Antic Hay*, pp. 4-6.