Inheriting the Other.
An Aesthetic of Postcolonial Custodianship

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Abstract

This study provides a response to current controversies in postcolonial studies. While recent interventions have proposed a rerouting or reconstruction of the postcolonial, this research argues that the postcolonial could be redefined as a form of custodianship. Indeed, this notion has not yet been recognised as such, but it has always been a central issue in postcolonial criticism. It has been adopted to portray the postcolonial intellectual as "custodian" or doorkeeper, in the derogatory sense of someone who claims to represent the essence of a culture. Yet custodianship does not correspond to the authority of cultural representation. Instead, it might be the fidelity to an ethical imperative, a responsibility for the other in forms of cultural and literary inheritance. For this reason, it is not something that needs to be formulated as an abstract theory, but rather it can be learned as a practice through the reading of literary and poetic forms. The aesthetic of custodianship presented in this research detects modes of transmission in the figurative, rather than strictly thematic aspects of canonical and non-canonical postcolonial literary objects. The thesis engages with influential postcolonial authors: Anita Desai, Mahasweta Devi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Arundhati Roy, and a young tribal artist, Bhajju Shyam, whose work has received no extensive attention in the postcolonial discourse. This inquiry illustrates that the postcolonial has addressed, and continues to address, a crucial problematic about how to transmit, to read and to inherit, not only one's own tradition, but also legacies of the other. The postcolonial could still be relevant today as an aesthetic of custodianship, that is, as an understanding of literature itself as a practice of poetic transmission able to weave figuration and worldliness in a common ground.

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Contents

Introduction

Poetic Inheritance, Postcolonial Custodianship

A living heritage is what is written today, and tomorrow.
(Mahmoud Darwish *A River* 130)

This introduction will propose the definition of an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship. It will provide the space to assess the contribution that this concept could make to current debates in postcolonial and cultural studies. In the first pages, postcolonial custodianship will be characterised as a responsibility for the other constitutive of acts of cultural and historical inheritance. Custodianship could be understood as a connection able to continue the other's legacy rather than merely one's own, an inheritance that does not legitimise property or sense of identity, but rather the consciousness of the other's presence. Subsequently, this introductory chapter will refer to recent interventions which could situate the idea of a postcolonial custodianship: an essay by Elleke Boehmer on the postcolonial aesthetic, published in 2010, and Neil Lazarus's introduction to his book, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011). It will be argued that a certain, unacknowledged practice of custodianship has always been at issue in postcolonial studies, yet it is timely that it may be explicitly recognised in the current re-orienting or re-writing of the postcolonial. During the last few years, postcolonial criticism has been experiencing a persistent sentiment of repetitiveness or "exhaustion" in the Anglo-American academy (Yaeger "End of Postcolonial"), a crisis partly caused, in my opinion, by the absence of emergent controversies, dialogues and keywords. The idea of custodianship, by suggesting a non-possessive relation to the past and to the changing, vanishing present, would aim at preserving some crucial legacies of the postcolonial for future conversations. The last part of this introduction will include an outline of the chapters and a contextual specification that will help clarify some presuppositions of this research. In fact, the readings presented in this work mainly revolve around intellectual and artistic figures from the Indian subcontinent, a restriction of the geohistorical scope that should be accounted for as a beginning, the tentative initiation of a translatable dialogue rather than the limiting of the notion of custodianship to literatures from India.

An Ethic of Transmission

The problematic of custodianship refers to an important question in postcolonial studies, that is, how literary and historical experiences should be taught and learned, proposed and received, in a word: how should they be transmitted? This is not a strictly pedagogical question, but rather a more general reflection on the public interest and social significance of the postcolonial today. The term custody or custodianship has never been addressed as such, but it has appeared, somehow casually or in passing, in some contexts. For instance, the term appears in the conclusion of a ground-breaking work, Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic,* where Huggan critically engages with a certain way of transmitting the postcolonial. He shows some latent ideological premises at work in a "pedagogical imaginary" relying upon the authority of the postcolonial teacher, someone who claims to have the right to indicate the only, correct way of interpreting postcolonial texts:

> Notwithstanding the advantages of using literature to situate *different* ideological readings . . . it seems necessary to point out the dangers of an oppositional postcolonial pedagogy fixated on replicating a *particular* ideological reading . . . A postcolonial approach thus runs the risk of replacing the ethical imperative of anti-colonial literary/cultural criticism with the moral presumption of an individual teacher self-appointed as custodian-transmitter of the text's allegedly oppositional value. (245-246)

In this interesting passage, "custodian-transmitter" carries a pejorative connotation, as it stands for an act of "self-appointment" or self-legitimation. This use of the word "custodian," which exemplifies a negative sign of cultural authority, is identified with a mere act of cultural representation. Huggan emphasises a passage from ethical imperative to moral presumption that, in my view, very eloquently exhibits the ambivalence of any form of custodianship or transmission. On the one hand, custodianship is a sense of appointment, a responsibility, yet on the other hand this responsibility can always turn into a mere exercise of power, a legitimation of the intellectual as keeper of the truth of literary texts. There is a shift from something that the postcolonial ought to transmit – a sort of ethical imperative – to something else that the postcolonial should carefully avoid and possibly dismantle: the cultural

authority of the native informant. Huggan continues:

> Postcolonial teachers, in arrogating the authority that derives from knowledge or, still better, the experience of these [formerly colonised] or similarly embattled cultures, risk merely reconfirming the irreducible otherness of the places from which they themselves, like the texts they explicate, are perceived to spring. (246)

The custodian-transmitter is thus someone who arrogates an authority stemming from her or his specific cultural-geographical provenance. This authority is a mere repetition of that culturalism that the postcolonial should have been able to subvert and oppose. In this way, the postcolonial intellectual, in particular the intellectual belonging to formerly colonised countries, is not only constantly remade as the object of a persistent nativism, but s/he runs the risk of actively providing the ideological concealment of global inequality and imperialist hegemony. This is a transfiguration of the exilic intellectual, famously defined by Edward Said, in the image of the comprador intellectual.

The comprador is a cultural broker whose characteristics have been one of the main subjects of controversy in postcolonial studies. The mediating, gatekeeping role of the comprador is founded on the premise of the native knowledge granted to the individual as representative of a particular culture, in a movement that reproduces the colonial vestigial figure of the native informant in anthropological fieldwork. Hamid Dabashi denounces the image of the postcolonial comprador intellectual in a recent book, following the canonical texts by Kwame Anthony Appiah ("Postcolonial") and Gayatri Spivak (*Critique)* on this question. In *Brown Skin, White Masks* (2011), a rewriting of the canonical Fanonian text *Black Skin, White Masks*, writes Dabashi:

> While Said celebrated the positive aspects of intellectuals in exile, at odds with the powers of the state – and while I recognize the emancipatory force of that exile insofar as Said himself personified it – I wish to map out the conditions in which from the selfsame cadre of exiles are recruited native informers who are no longer telling their imperial employers what they need to know but rather what they want to believe in order to manufacture communal consensus. (20)

Hamid Dabashi re-interprets Edward Said's portrayal of the exilic intellectual in light of the controversy around the role of the intellectual in postcolonial studies. While Edward Said already recognised the risk of "an accommodation with a new or emergingly dominant power" ("Intellectual Exile" 116), subsequent critics have transformed the ambivalence and potential resistance of the postcolonial intellectual – always complicit, to some extent, with structures of power – into a reproach of postcolonial studies as a whole. The figure of the custodian-transmitter is thus in the end equated with the native informer, the representative of an essentialised culture who plays a role in the manufacture of consensus and the hegemony of liberal multicultural ideologies. While I agree with the observations presented by both Huggan and Dabashi, it is my intention to rescue the figure of the custodian-transmitter as someone who does not try to gain power or legitimacy but rather responds to the "ethical imperative" mentioned by Huggan.

Custodianship and cultural transmission, like related ideas of tradition and inheritance, should not be seen as merely conservative replicas of colonial anthropology or mainstream culturalism.[1] These concepts need to be rescued from this ideological drift, in that it is precisely in these critical knots that the potentialities and emancipatory force of the postcolonial could perhaps re-emerge, or pre-emerge, once again. While a consciousness of the material cooption of the postcolonial in mainstream consumer culture should be taken into consideration, the postcolonial should not be reduced to it. The custodian-transmitter ought not to be someone who arrogates the right to speak the truth of a literary text, by virtue of cultural provenance or native knowledge. As a central postcolonial figure, the custodian-transmitter could be redefined as a condition of responsibility and appointment marked by ambivalence. Indeed, as it will be shown in the chapters of this thesis, custodianship is related to the meaning of imprisonment, and is always on the verge of turning into a way of securing power and authority. Rather than dismissing custodianship because of this risk and this ambivalence, I think that custodianship should become a central term of debate and the site where the ethical dimension of postcolonialism may be rethought. As an ethical attitude, custodianship needs to be distanced from the semantic categories related to imprisonment or the care of people who cannot take care of themselves.

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[1] I would like to acknowledge here that the question of poetic forms of cultural transmission, alternative to mere ideological reproduction, has been raised by Caroline Rooney in her works, especially in her *African Literature, Animism and Politics*. I will engage with some important passages of her works throughout the chapters of this thesis.

Custodianship needs to be understood as a relation, in which the custodian is placed in custody too, in which responsibility becomes a way of listening to other voices. The shift from imprisonment to custodianship, in all its semantic and ethical significance, will be analysed in the first chapter, as it is dealt with by Anita Desai in her novel *In Custody*. Accordingly, this research will attempt to provide a reply to the questions: who is the custodian-transmitter? What is her or his responsibility? This is the interrogation at the basis of the aesthetic of custodianship, which will be proposed through the reading of canonical and non-canonical postcolonial literary texts. It is my opinion that literature itself has something to teach about being the custodian-transmitter and not relapsing into ideological complicity with multicultural identity politics. In the following pages, I will offer a tentative definition of what a postcolonial custodianship could be, an attempt to rescue the custodian-transmitter from its negative connotation.

The phrase "aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship" might be explained as the intersection or the constellation of three main layers of meaning. Firstly, it is a concept of custodianship that can be understood as a responsibility for the other, which is the opposite of a silencing of the other or a speaking "on behalf" of the other. Rather, this responsibility is rooted in a consciousness of the ethical dimension of the subject, its being dependent on relations to other living human beings.[2] As Gayatri Spivak puts it, responsibility could be formalised as the "response to a call (or something that seems to us to resemble a call) that cannot be grasped as such" ("Responsibility" 22). Responsibility could be conceived of as being answerable for but also responsive to a call that may be perceived as a cipher or a cryptogram rather than a legible text; respond for/to ourselves and for/to others, for/to what can be spoken as well as for/to the unspeakable.[3] Secondly, postcolonial

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[2] For this concept of the ethical, I am partly indebted to Emmanuel Lévinas and especially his book *Totality and Infinity*, where ethics is defined as "a calling into question of the same . . . brought about by the other" (43). Writes Lévinas, in opposition to the ontological discourse of hermeneutic phenomenology: "The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics" (43). Yet, more radically than Lévinas, my source is the work of Johannes Fabian, and his critique of all those "acts of identity-affirmation" which are related to what he calls an "epistemological concept of the other" (Fabian "The Other revisited" 146). Fabian's idea that "in order to be knowingly in each other's presence we must somehow share each other's past" (145) may be considered an essential aspect of postcolonial custodianship.

[3] This concept of responsibility is inspired by Jacques Derrida, who writes that "responsibility would be *problematic* to the further [*supplementaire*] extent that it could sometimes, perhaps even always, be what one takes, not for oneself, *in one's own name* and *before the other* (the most classically metaphysical definition of responsibility) but what one must take for another, in his

custodianship could situate this consciousness of the other in an expanded, non-Eurocentric historical dimension that is characterised not only by changes, breaks, or disjointed times, but more radically by continuity and coevalness. The term "postcolonial" could be approached as a geopolitical and historical awareness that would call into question the attitude that Samir Amin terms "Eurocentric culturalism": the combination of universalistic claims and the essentialism of "cultural specificity" in the explanation of historical processes (Amin *Eurocentrism* 7-9). Yet, in a movement complementing the corrective anti-Eurocentrism of postcolonial theory, custodianship would also resonate with Susan Buck-Morss's concept of a "gift of the past," a "deprivatized, denationalized structure of collective memory" ("The Gift of the Past" 185). This is something that can be identified in those acts of reception of the past as an unconditional gift escaping the "logic of property" (183) imposed by capitalist imperialism. Custodianship would draw attention to forms of inheritance that do not result in a process of "selective tradition" (Williams *Marxism* 116) that may ratify the structures of domination of the present. Rather, it may be able to show the complexities, potentialities and exclusions at work in acts of cultural filiation and affiliation. As Buck-Morss writes in her recent reply to criticisms of her renowned study on Hegel and Haiti:

> It is not a matter of learning lessons from history, or even adding parts to history that have been forgotten, but of inhabiting an indeterminate, in-between space, rummaging around in its historical traces until a new possibility of mapping comes into focus as the necessary precondition for thinking the past at all. ("Gift of the Past" 175)

Custodianship – a consciousness of the past as "storehouse of human possibility" (183) – would prevent the recognition of traditions and legacies from being enclosed in cultural exclusivity or political bordering, and it would pose a historically specific "self-estrangement" (181) as the precondition of the transmissibility of culture. From this point of view, custodianship would correspond to a reflective, rather than restorative nostalgia, a concept proposed by Svetlana Boym in her pivotal book *The Future of Nostalgia* and recently reinterpreted in a postcolonial context by Dennis Walder, who writes that "it is not enough simply to recall the past, and turn it into a personal narrative. Recalling involves coming to terms with the past in an ethical as

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place, in the name of the other or of oneself as the other, before another other, and an other of the other, namely the very undeniable of ethics" (*On the Name* 10-11).

well as a heuristic sense; it is to connect what you remember to the memories of others, including the memories of those with whom you share that past" (Walder 938). The incomplete, fragmentary, ironic construction of a shared inheritance that Boym calls "reflective nostalgia" is hence a form of responsibility toward others, which does not concern the pastness of the past, but rather its living, shared continuity. This concept of custodianship would emphasise that moral significance of historical transmission explored by Elizabeth Rottenberg in her intriguing philosophical-literary readings:

> When it occurs, an act of inheritance (the acceptance of a legacy) is an extraordinary act: on the one hand, because it elicits from the heir a response to a chosenness; on the other hand, because any true act of inheritance always implies momentous decisions and responsibilities. Until there is a decision on the part of the heir, a legacy cannot but remain suspended, hovering between acceptance and rejection. (*Inheriting the Future* xix-xx)

Rottenberg notices that the concept of inheritance should not be approached in an essentialist way. Inheriting is an ethical act that requires awareness from the inheritor, and a certain distance, as well as proximity from what is being inherited. This notion of inheritance could be compared with the one presented by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. In that book Derrida points out the "radical heterogeneity" of inheritance. He suggests the following task, as a central question of cultural transmission: "If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause – natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret – which says 'read me, will you ever be able to do so?'" (*Specters* 16)[4] Lastly, an aesthetic of custodianship could locate the staging of postcolonial inheritances in practices of literary and artistic expression redefined as relay, or field of cultural and poetic transmission. In poetic and literary history, custodianship should be opposed to the "anxiety of influence": that "immense anxiety of indebtedness" that, according to Harold Bloom, is involved in the "self-appropriation" and misreadings that "strong poets" do so as to "clear

[4] I am aware of some problems regarding Derrida's inheritance of Marx, as shown by the essays collected in *Ghostly Demarcations* and by Caroline Rooney's remarkable reading of Derrida in her chapter "Sisters of Marx," included in her *Decolonising Gender*. However, I think that the idea that inheritance is always a relation to the other is a precious legacy of Derrida's work. It is a significant source for my own concepts of inheritance and custodianship.

imaginative space for themselves" (*Anxiety of Influence* 5). Against Bloom's idea of creativity as "self-appropriation" and denial of alterity, custodianship may be affiliated to those acts of reading able to "mobilise intertextuality," that "abyssal scene of inheritance" reconsidered by Ankhi Mukherjee in a recent article on Derrida and Spivak ("Traffic of Influence" 57). In its intertextual dimension,[5] custodianship is an explicit consciousness of the creative work as the continuation of a dialogue. Custodianship could redefine the poetic as a matter of relating to the coming-into-being of social realities rather than a principle of autonomous creation. For this reason, the time of custodianship would be the time of a present continuous. Custodianship could be referred to the unmeasurable process of a continuous coming-into-being, rather than the pastness of the past or the singularity of the simple present:

> This is a matter of according value to what is yet living, the mattering of the aliveness of life rather than the continuing of time. If what the measurement of time, time as measurement, occludes is the on-going life, a continuous coming-into-being, this is what of movement cannot be measured or counted. (Rooney *Animism* 7)

Caroline Rooney's important meditation on the present continuous could suggest an intriguing way of reconsidering the notion of custodianship, beyond the idea of the past as something concluded and finished. In the overlap of these three registers (ethical responsibility, historical continuity and poetic transmission) custodianship may be strategically adopted as an alternative to idioms of cultural representation, identity and appropriation. In current debates in comparative cultural studies, custodianship should correspond to a viable alternative to the jargon of identity or cultural politics. For this reason, the introduction of this term in arenas of discussion and research needs to address a set of interrelated questions and themes, ranging from notions of political commitment, to ideas of poetic realism, figurality and cultural authenticity. These questions will be considered in the four chapters

[5] In a very interesting essay on intertextuality and influence, Harish Trivedi writes that intertextualiy could be rethought "not mainly a matter of multilingual punning and allusion-mongering broadly within the same culture (as in the case of James Joyce), or a superficial and sensational representation of the exotic "other" (as in the case of Salman Rushdie), but the function of a more deeply permeating intermingling of two radically different cultures within the same individual sensibility" ("Colonial Influence" 132). Following Trivedi, custodianship would correspond to this redefined form of intertextuality. Yet, custodianship would also be a way of moving beyond the "textualist" premise of intertextuality.

that compose the core of this thesis. Hopefully, custodianship will be able to offer a new keyword to interdisciplinary cultural studies. The intellectual and historical context where it could make a contribution will be framed in the following pages. In order to show how postcolonial custodianship – a responsibility for the other in forms of cultural and historical inheritance – could intervene in current postcolonial research, I will attempt to juxtapose in a common space of dialogue the voices of two influential authors, Elleke Boehmer and Neil Lazarus. In fact, the inspiring contributions of these authors may hint at the possible relevance of custodianship in current revisions of postcolonial studies, both as an aesthetic-literary field, and as historical category. Both aspects of the postcolonial should not be neglected or excluded, but rather they might be kept in their proximity, contact, and contradiction.

In her essay "A Postcolonial Aesthetic. Repeating Upon the Present," written for a collective volume titled *Rerouting the Postcolonial*, Boehmer accentuates the oxymoron, the contradictory quality that the term "postcolonial aesthetic" could represent. In fact, the postcolonial has traditionally been identified with a political stance "taken to designate writing in opposition to empire and its oppressions" (170). From this point of view, "a crucial way of rerouting or reexamining the postcolonial therefore would be . . . to set aside the 'issues' that tend to define the postcolonial, and interrogate what its aesthetic, or its literariness, might in fact consist in" (170). The subject of a postcolonial aesthetic could be broached as a form of custodianship: it is the attempt to rescue a kind of "literariness" that has always been present in the canonised postcolonial literature, yet without being adequately recognised. It corresponds to the recovery of questions and themes that have been overlooked because of the visibility granted to other, political or historical issues. This way of rerouting cannot be defined as critical; rather, it has something to do with the way in which the postcolonial is (and will be) transmitted. From this perspective, the postcolonial aesthetic is a way of preserving some literary qualities that should not be dismissed or neglected in postcolonial discourse. It may be worth noticing, in passing, that the question of a postcolonial aesthetic, which Boehmer intriguingly advances, is not entirely new, so that the beginning is not an absolute foundation, but rather already a response, the continuation of a dialogue. For instance, authors like Deepika Bahri, Peter Hallward and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raised it in different contexts and by addressing divergent traditions of aesthetic thinking. It had been posited starting from the legacy of Adorno, Marcuse and Benjamin in Bahri's pivotal *Native Intelligence*. Hallward pointed to a re-

discovery of the "realm of the aesthetic" in the conclusion of *Absolutely Postcolonial* (334), a study influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou. Also, a specific aesthetic tradition was reconsidered in the first chapter of Spivak's *Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* in her re-reading of the Kantian lineages transmitted through the writing of Derrida and de Man.

Elleke Boehmer's essay addresses utterly thought-provoking questions:

> Is there something intrinsically postcolonial about certain kinds of writing *qua* form, about their structures of feeling or the modes of attention they invite; about certain inflections of voice or certain tropes and uses of tropes? Or is a postcolonial aesthetic – if it exists – always to be understood with reference to some real world out there, separate from the artefact? (170)

This question is really intriguing and complex, and I would like to propose a way of interpreting it that may show its relation to the practice of postcolonial custodianship. On the one hand, the question of a postcolonial aesthetic is distributed on the side of "form": the formal qualities of literary works, yet a formal or stylistic dimension that includes references to Williams's "structures of feeling" as well as the reception they invite, and their tropological or figurative staging. Somehow, the idea of form already interrogates the relation between form itself and the cultural contexts of literary production and reception. On the other hand, the second part of the question would locate the notion of a postcolonial aesthetic in a "real world" outside the artefact. It seems that rather than a sheer alternative, what is at issue in this questioning is precisely the connection between figuration and the real, which may be already, implicitly defined as the problematic of a postcolonial aesthetic. In other words, the question: "is there something specifically postcolonial about certain forms of writing?" points to another question, embedded in the former: what is the connection between literary form and the real, socio-political world?

The notion of "structures of feeling" incorporates this relation between social experience and stylistic convention. As Raymond Williams wrote: "structures of feeling can be described as social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available" (*Marxism* 133-134). Williams adopts here a highly literary chemical metaphor: social experiences are "in solution" rather than "precipitated," they cannot be divided from the literary texture, but rather they are

merged in and interwoven with it. The very notion of structure of feeling, in other words, is about the relation between the work and the world that a postcolonial aesthetic should be able to raise, once again. It points to a problematic that should not be merely "solved" or abandoned, but rather held as a subject of study and interrogation. It is the problem Williams framed at the moment of introducing the concept of structures of feeling:

> The unmistakable presence of certain elements in art which are not covered by (though in one mode they may be reduced to) other formal systems is the true source of the specializing categories of "the aesthetic," "the arts," and "imaginative literature." We need, on the one hand, to acknowledge (and welcome) the specificity of these elements – specific feelings, specific rhythms – and yet to find ways of recognizing their specific kind of sociality. (*Marxism* 133)

In this passage, Raymond Williams points out a sophisticated way of conceiving of the relation between literary expression and the real. It would be the unrecognised agenda of a postcolonial aesthetic to keep this question alive: the study of literature as a matter of form, but also a matter of the social experience transmitted through the "feelings" and "rhythms" of literary language. For this reason, a postcolonial aesthetic should be figural and worldly at the same time.

In Boehmer's essay, this first problem is then complemented by a second, intriguing derivation: "Is what we name a postcolonial aesthetic no more than a reiteration of tried and tested humanist assumptions about literature dressed in a late colonial guise – assumptions concerning the inherent yet universally accessible meaningfulness; concerning its capacity to elicit a cathartic or ethical response?" (171) This passage underscores a concept – reiteration – that should be avoided by a postcolonial aesthetic. On the contrary, postcolonialism should be aware of its ideological assumption and be opposed to an unconscious repetition of a Eurocentric premise in "late colonial guise." To reopen and keep in custody the postcolonial aesthetic is a form of continuity, a continuation of already existing creative forms and conversations, which should not be confused with repetition. The essay continues by listing other questions, to which, the author affirms, there are no "full or satisfactory responses," oscillating between a set of identifiable qualities disseminated through a variety of postcolonial texts and the "protocols" that "would assist in legitimating the study of postcolonial writing *qua* writing, as not simply reducible to testimony, tract, or manifesto" (171). The field of a postcolonial aesthetic

would involve a productive contradiction, not only between figuration and the real, but also between objects and methods, texts and readings. Thus, the author interrogates the "inclusiveness of the category of the postcolonial" (176), a category "drawn not from the *work* but from the *world*" (171). This would delineate the postcolonial aesthetic as a question about how to read and transmit literature rather than a mere historical period or geopolitical context.

"A Postcolonial Aesthetic: Repeating Upon the Present" is an interesting essay not only for the important questions it raises but also for some suggestions that, especially in the conclusion, are proposed. In the concluding paragraphs, some reflections are elaborated, which might suggest the fact that a postcolonial aesthetic is not just a question of literature in itself, but rather a specific understanding of literature that may lead us to rethink its worldly dimension as a consciousness of the other rather than determination of identity. Boehmer explains:

> The postcolonial aesthetic, then, is *in* language rather than *of* language; it requires participation from readers; it draws us into a process that makes possible certain kinds of postcolonial understanding. Books . . . allow us to ask questions of the final *unknowability* of other human beings. Perhaps that is ultimately all we can say about a postcolonial aesthetic. Like other kinds of aesthetic, it allows us to interrogate, and, as compensation to our questioning selves, tell stories about, the mystery that is not so much the Other, generically speaking, as the ultimately unknowable other human being. (180)

As this passage makes clear, what is considered in a postcolonial aesthetic is the question of being conscious and responsible for "the ultimately unknowable other human being." This concluding sentence may be reinterpreted as a question of custodianship – the aesthetic of custodianship that the postcolonial should epitomise and stage. From this perspective, the question of a postcolonial aesthetic is not only a link between work and world, but also a reflection on how the ability to respond to the figure could correspond to an ethical consciousness of the presence and life of other beings. A postcolonial aesthetic is hence a question of being responsible for the other human being through the exercise of literary understanding, rather than being circumscribed to the issue of the "singularity" of postcolonial writing. In the last part of Boehmer's inspiring essay, I read a shift from the initial preoccupation – about the specificity of postcolonial writing – to another, more intriguing meditation: how may the aesthetic – the postcolonial, "like other

kinds of aesthetic" – tell stories about the unknowable other human being? An interrogative that might be rephrased: how can the aesthetic be a form of custodianship? How can *figuration* tell something about the unknowable other human being? Is a postcolonial poetic somehow responsible for this ethical call? These kinds of questioning are what an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship might attempt to unfold and explore, in a provisional and non-exhaustive address. The concept of custodianship may be relevant to current rethinking of a postcolonial aesthetic, understood not as a problem of identity or singularity, but rather as the awareness of the other human being. More radically, the very idea of a postcolonial aesthetic is already a form of custodianship, on the occasion of its positing: custodianship may be the rediscovery of those creative potentialities of some forms of writing that are able to point to the unknowable other human being, to restore an awareness of her/his presence.

A second example of postcolonial custodianship may be able to emphasise its historical dimension, and it could be observed in a significant text, Neil Lazarus's introduction to his book *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. I think that there might be a form of custodianship in Lazarus's discourse in that his criticism of mainstream postcolonial theory seems to me to be aimed at recovering what the postcolonial was at the beginning, at the end of what he calls the "Bandung era." At that time, Southern historiographical and intellectual reflection was still able to provide an understanding of global historical developments. As he writes in "Postcolonial Studies after the Invasion of Iraq," a text re-elaborated in *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, which re-examines some issues considered in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies:* "it seems to me important to recollect the energy, dynamism and optimism of the decolonising and immediate post-independence era both for the sake of the historical record, and also to enable us to register the successes of this period, however slender, partial, provisional, or unsustainable they proved to be in the longer term" ("Postcolonial Studies" 3). While this problematic is more directly concerned with the continuity between colonial exploitation and neo-colonial domination as forms of an unfinished history of imperialist capitalism, as well as with the resistances, struggles and provisional achievements of the anti-colonial movements, it might also be affiliated to the same movement animating Elleke Boehmer's interrogation of a postcolonial aesthetic. In fact, Lazarus's act of custodianship represents a challenge to the theoretical mystification of postcolonial studies. He advocates a return to what should be a matter of urgency and primary interest for postcolonial scholars, understanding the

history of capitalist oppression in its global dimension. It is worth emphasising some crucial passages in Lazarus's recent introduction to his work, a re-elaboration of some of his previous essays that includes some new, important ideas. Writes Lazarus:

> While I still believe that it is important to write in the mode of critique, I will be concerned here also to propose alternative readings and conceptualisations, to be set alongside and compared with those currently prevailing. Much of this book will therefore be devoted to an elaboration of concepts, methods, and substantive themes, upon which what I would view as a plausible "reconstruction" of postcolonial studies might conceivably be based. (*Unconscious* 1)

The work of reconstruction that he proposes foregrounds the necessity of a periodisation of postcolonial studies, a "situation" and contextualisation of the field which would allow us to rediscover some neglected aspects of postcolonialism, or rather the common elements contributing to what may be called the "political unconscious" of postcolonial studies, in a recognisably Jamesonian movement. Lazarus interestingly denounces the "monumentalisation" (9) of the liberationist ideologies of the anti-colonial struggle that subsequent postcolonial theory seems to have performed. Since the 1970s, a field of intellectual dissent and political intervention has been reduced to a "a rationalisation of, and pragmatic adjustment to, the demise of the ideologies that had flourished during the 'Bandung' years" (9). While in first uses of the term "postcolonial" the accent was placed, in the words of Hamza Alavi, on the historical "specificity of post-colonial societies,"[6] subsequent variations of the term have overlooked this specificity in favour of an ideological discourse cut off from any reference to the material process of decolonisation. Therefore the postcolonial, a "theoretical weapon," has been incorporated in discourses of identity politics, cultural representation, alterity and difference that have dismissed the initial, radical and material thrust of the anti-colonial legacy that postcolonial theory is supposed to have inherited. Lazarus's positioning and periodisation of the postcolonial may be trying to articulate a consciousness of the

[6] This is "a specificity which arises from structural changes brought about by the colonial experience and alignments of classes and by the superstructures of political and administrative institutions which were established in that context, and secondly from radical re-alignments of class forces which have been brought about in the post-colonial situation" (Alavi "The State in Postcolonial Societies" 59).

postcolonial inheritance, so that future debates and dialogues may be aware of the "pragmatic readjustments" of a genealogy of dissent. In a remarkable passage of his introduction, Lazarus elaborates on some reflections that could be commented upon:

> I have argued against the general presumption of epochal change in postcolonialist theory on several occasions previously, and will not repeat those arguments here . . . What I would like to suggest instead (or in addition), in grounding the central, *reconstructive* thrust of *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, is that developments in the first decade of our new century – above all the US-led and -sponsored invasion and occupation of Iraq and the sorry misadventure in Afghanistan – have exposed the contradictions of this established postcolonialist understanding to stark and unforgiving light. For, conjoining violence and military conquest with expropriation, pillage, and undisguised grabbing for resources, these developments have demonstrably rejoined the twenty-first century to a long and as yet unbroken history, wrongly supposed by postcolonial theory to have come to a close *circa* 1975. This is the history of capitalist imperialism. (14-15)

The interest of this reconstructive, rather than deconstructive, undertaking could lie in the emphasis on the continuation of a shared, "unbroken" history rather than "epochal change" or absolute breaks. Lazarus makes clear that what remains unrecognised in postcolonial studies is the persistence of an old story, the history of capitalist imperialism and the resistances to it, which postcolonial and postmodernist theories have relegated to the status of something obsolete, a reified monument of the past. In contrast to this trend, Lazarus's historiographical project seems to insist on the actual relevance of those neglected and marginalised material components of the postcolonial condition. It seems to be the time of the coming-into-being of an unfinished history that has its roots in the struggle against colonial domination, rather than an idea of the past as object of mourning or contemplation. Thus, Lazarus's remarks on Arundhati Roy's description of postcolonial India could reveal a specific idea of history as storehouse of unrealised cultural and political possibilities. Writes Lazarus, in reference to Roy's "presentist" and somehow pessimistic vision of history, that the construction of the history of postcolonial India as one of unavoidable corruption and violence "leads Roy, I think, to the surprisingly unhistorical inference that what has happened in India is the only thing

that *could have happened*, that this thing that has happened has, in a sense, *always been happening* or has always been *about to happen*. Philosophically, of course, something that happens had to have *been able* to happen: it had to have been a *possibility*, or else it could not have become a reality" ("Global Dispensation" 33).

While Lazarus does not elaborate on this intriguing concept of possibility in that context, it could be a very important premise underlying his intervention as a practice of postcolonial custodianship. It would point to an idea of history incorporating possibility alongside reality, the potential for change rather than mere repetition. In my view, Lazarus's periodisation is animated by a feeling of "anti-imperialist nostalgia," a concept coined by Jennifer Wenzel, which may capture some interesting aspects: "anti-imperialist nostalgia holds in mind hope for changes that have yet to be realized, changes that were always yet to be realized. Anti-imperialist nostalgia acknowledges the past's vision of the future, while recognizing the distance and the difference between that vision and the realities of the present" ("Remembering" 7). Wenzel also writes: "Because *nostalgia* tends to connote a passive, reactionary, commodified wistfulness for an idealized, bygone era (to list the standard objections to nostalgia), I might well choose another term to avoid *nostalgia*'s obvious pitfalls" (7-8). While there might be reasons for adhering to the concept of nostalgia, why not attempt to introduce a new term, custodianship for instance? It is such a proposal that the present study intends to articulate. While Boehmer's redefinition of the aesthetic as a consciousness of the other human being is able to emphasise a form of custodianship as ethical responsibility in the figurative or creative expression, Lazarus's insistence on a permanent historical dimension is able to locate the act of custodianship in a historical-material framework of transmission and continuity rather than disjuncture. Both interventions seem to me to respond to the question: how should we transmit the legacy of the postcolonial?

Whereas there are many ideas of the postcolonial circulating today, one aspect that could work as a central question in postcolonial discourse may be the reference to the promises and potentialities of decolonisation. Indeed, there are many ways of interpreting the project of decolonisation. This term could refer to national liberation, or it may be placed, as an unfinished task, against the betrayal and violence of postcolonial dictatorial regimes. Decolonisation can also work on different fronts at the same time, regarding questions such as environmental degradation, social justice, the rights of migrants and minorities, the commodification of culture, the role of gender in defining society. However, there is

a question of inheritance that may be common to all these struggles, a question about how the spirit of these resistances may be continued, and how we can continue struggles that were initiated by someone else. The concept of custodianship can be understood as a meditation on the very act of transmission that, in spite of the diversity and heterogeneity of the postcolonial, is an urgent task today. From this point of view, the concept of postcolonialism may be rethought as an act of historical, social and cultural inheritance characterised by a form of responsibility for a legacy which is our legacy but also the other's legacy, a shared past which is the precondition for the thinking of a common future.

Outline: The Indian Postcolonial

The chapters included in this dissertation will be concerned with a constellation of themes and intellectual questions that might contribute to an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship. The works considered are all from India, yet this geographical provenance needs to be explained. First of all, they are not part of what can be characterised as "Indian literature." One of the advantages of the postcolonial is that it allows us to problematise the historical and cultural context of literature, without conflating specificities in notions of "universal" or "global" literature, yet without restricting the literary artefact to a narrow national paradigm. Literary works can be affiliated to more nuanced, specific and transnational regional contexts, rather than a homogenising category of the nation. This would not underestimate the relevance of national institutions and the history of national liberation, but, rather, it can avoid reproducing a rigidly Eurocentric comparative political partitioning in the interpretation of literature. From this point of view, the context of my reflections entirely corresponds to what Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri call, in a recent volume, the "Indian Postcolonial": "this book does not entail in any sense a national reframing or a nationalist enterprise. Rather, it attempts to interrogate, unsettle and review the premises of postcolonial studies through the prism of India, locating its contents and assumptions in the midst of Indian manifestations of the field" (4). In other words, it is not a question of circumscribing the postcolonial to India, but rather of "how postcolonial paradigms and perceptions have been taken up in the subcontinent, and (re-)inflected and refracted to address local and regional conditions" (4). As the suggested visual imagery displays, India could be considered as a "prism" and a "refraction" of a

wider postcolonial problematic that can be extended to possibly any other geographical or historical context. In postcolonial studies, concrete socio-political contexts in the Indian subcontinent, rather than an abstract idea of India, are the sites where important theoretical questions have been elaborated, and the work of custodianship seems to have been under consideration. Yet, this does not imply that these questions are formulated as if they were valid in exactly the same manner in other parts of the world. Indeed, the multiple contexts addressed in this thesis may reveal that the Indian subcontinent has been central to the development of postcolonial questions. This happens not only because India is part of a colonial history and is today experiencing an unfinished process of decolonisation. In addition to the persistence of colonial legacies, influential thinkers from the subcontinent have explicitly addressed notions of responsibility and intellectual commitment as part of a broader postcolonial discourse. The status of India in postcolonial studies has been exemplary and instructive. However, the question of custodianship can be, and I hope will be, translated in other postcolonial contexts such as the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. In fact, the postcolonial has always been affected by what Edward Said called "travelling theory"[7]: ideas do not need to be of a global or universal scope. Concepts do not lose their potentialities by staying close to the ground or to specific contexts. They can always travel, there is no border to stop them, with all the risks, ambivalences, and possible misunderstandings that this can entail. This is one of the most fascinating aspects of intellectual history. In this thesis, I focus on texts from the Indian subcontinent in order to take part in dialogues and conversations that already address the problem of the ethical responsibility of the intellectual in relation to cultures, voices and traditions that can be of different provenance. However, I believe that the cases presented in this thesis by no means exhaust the problem of custodianship. More humbly, my aim is to introduce this new keyword in specific contexts of debate. I believe that the assessment of the productivity of the concept of custodianship in some significant cases can be a valuable contribution to the future of postcolonial theory.

The focus on works from the Indian postcolonial is but a "beginning" in the

[7] Said developed this concept in what is now a chapter of his classical book *The World, the Text and the Critic*. He revised some of the ideas expressed on that occasion in another essay on the same topic, now collected in *Reflections on Exile*. Taken together, the essays by Said can reveal the ambivalences of borrowing ideas from different contexts. But they also show the potential enrichment that goes always together with the risk of appropriation and loss. How can we be the good custodians of something that was developed somewhere else, maybe in a different historical period?

sense defined by Edward Said in his pivotal book on beginnings: "a beginning immediately establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both . . . *The beginning, then, is the first step in the intentional production of meaning*" (3-5). In what could be considered as a first step rather than as delimitation, I do not aim to exhaust the notions and questions surrounding an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship but rather to inscribe this term into current cultural and literary debates. Thus, the first chapter makes references to the world of Urdu in some neighbourhoods of Delhi, masterfully depicted by Anita Desai in her novel *In Custody*, from which the term "custodianship" emerged. It could be of interest to the reader to know that this term, and the whole problematic that it has been able to broach, were not elaborated in a sort of abstract reflection. Rather, they emerged, surprised and captivated me during the writing of the first chapter, focused on *In Custody*. The overlooking of the trope of custody in many critical evaluations of the book led me to adopt this intriguing term as a general framework for my doctoral project. Custodianship was suggested by the literary material, rather than imposed on it. This borrowing from the literary object may suggest a belatedness of criticism with important implications: literary criticism should keep in custody something of the literary material rather than appropriate it, it should root its problems and concepts in the figurative potentialities of creative practice rather than develop them in abstraction. While the first chapter shows how the notion of custodianship may be related to the concept of poetic realism hinted at by the novel itself – joining rather than dividing poetic expression and worldly concern – the second chapter further develops the link between figuration and the real through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation of Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*. Spivak has been described as the "custodian" of Devi in the West. In an intriguing way, Mahasweta Devi's stories are about relations of custodianship or doorkeeping – the intellectual as custodian of the subaltern, and the subaltern as custodian of cultures and traditions that should not be lost in today's "developing" world. The chapter on Gayatri Spivak and Mahasweta Devi refers to the context of the tribal populations described in those stories, and presents an idea of custodianship understood as guardianship of a secret, an act of love that is the precondition for any form of commitment.

These questions have been further developed in the last two chapters, one on Arundhati Roy and the other on Bhajju Shyam, a young Gond artist from Central India inheritor of the Gond art movement started in the 1980s with the international circulation of Jangarh Singh Shyam's works. The chapter on Arundhati Roy focuses

on the relation between political and creative writing and elaborates on notions of the intellectual as custodian introduced in the chapter on Mahasweta Devi. I have considered "minor" texts by Roy alongside *The God of Small Things*, and attempted to raise questions about empathy and representation, responsibility and commitment that Roy's work is able to bring to the fore in quite unparalleled ways. As custodian of Roy's writing in my critical work, I have tried to call into question all facile dismissals of her work, in particular Ramachandra Guha's and Aijaz Ahmad's critiques. I have tried instead to demonstrate fidelity to Roy's own mode of being responsible – respond to/for the other human being and not only to herself. The last chapter defines custodianship in-between resistance and transmission in a work by Bhajju Shyam, *The London Jungle Book*. Beyond the jargon of cultural authenticity, I argue that Bhajju Shyam's work is able to place the authentic in a different perspective, by suggesting that authenticity, as an act of inheritance and custodianship, does not exclude inventiveness, coevalness and change. These chapters focus on different periods.

The first two chapters address postcolonial text and contexts from the 1980s, when *In Custody* was published and Mahasweta Devi collected the material and experience represented in *Imaginary Maps*. My reflection then turns to the 1990s and the subsequent decade, when the names of Arundhati Roy and Bhajju Shyam started to circulate in various artistic and political scenes. There is no chronological order in this, even though it is worth noticing that Bhajju Shyam's work is gaining more and more attention in Europe and elsewhere while I am writing these words, as a recent presentation of his work at the Southbank Centre in London could demonstrate. The settings of these chapters refer to different parts of India, from the neighbourhoods of Delhi narrated by Anita Desai, to the districts in West Bengal and Jharkhand where the tribals described by Mahasweta Devi live. The geopolitical scope then stretches to Northern Italy, Kerala and Kashmir, the locations referred to in the writings by Arundhati Roy, and to Madhya Pradesh, where the Gond art movement has been "discovered" and launched. In spite of the temporal, geographical, and thematic differences among these literary and artistic experiences, they all play a pivotal role in defining an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship. They have been affiliated by a common set of questions, which the texts themselves seem to ask. Without assimilating the one to the other, the unity of this study is to be located on the level of the problematic posed, rather than the identity of the material approached. I hope this problematic will be able to highlight some aspects reflected in other experiences too, travelling beyond the regions and times included in this

specific research. If custodianship can be an ambivalent gesture, leading to either a consciousness of the other human being or the formation of cultural authority, this research attempts to formulate a positive and productive meaning of custodianship.

It showcases a number of ways in which custodianship could be presented as a way of transmitting the postcolonial while resisting policing kinds of authority, cultural "branding" or essentialising forms of representation, and ideological complicity with what, in *Parallels and Paradoxes* (a collection of conversations with the director Daniel Barenboim), Edward Said called "the commodification of everything" (*Parallels* 168). My intention is to articulate a discourse on custodianship that could open a route rather than fix a border. For this reason, the forms of custodianship staged by stories, images and texts have been mirrored in the very act of reading. Throughout my work, I will contend that the meaning of inheritance can be seen as something other than a pretext for legitimation or a simple assertion of identity. Inheritance will be rethought as an important aspect of the ethical dimension of postcolonial studies. Indeed, it is by insisting on what Jacques Derrida called the "heterogeneity of inheritance" that cultural transmission can become a way of relating to the other rather than a reflection on our own self.

Chapter 1

Custodian of the Unspeakable: Reading Anita Desai

It is this invisible, literally unspeakable presence that gives to beauty its blinding brilliance, the seductive and protective shining of form.
(Leo Bersani "Psychoanalysis" 163)

In Custody was published in 1984. Coincidentally, this was the year of the death of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, one of the most important Urdu poets of the twentieth century. While not explicitly representing Faiz or his poems, the novel engages with the context of Urdu poetry in India, a transregional literary culture which was profoundly affected by the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965, as shown by C.M. Naim ("Consequences"). In a reading that will include references to poems and writings by Faiz as a counterpoint to passages of the novel, this chapter will suggest that Anita Desai's work is able to present a specific notion of cultural and poetic transmission. This idea of custodianship could be affiliated to what Svetlana Boym calls "reflective nostalgia": an inconclusive, fragmentary and ironic continuation of cultural memories animated by a "sense of distance" in which "the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development" (*Future* 50). *In Custody* could be read as the figuration of a work of transmission which has "a capacity to awaken multiple planes of consciousness" (50) rather than that mourning for a lost tradition, which critics have identified in a literal reading of the novel. In fact, Anita Desai's narrative is centred around an act of literary transmission – a scene of writing that incorporates the scene of reading – that is able to pass on a vernacular poetic inheritance through the medium of the English novel. One of the most important themes of Urdu poetry – the separation from the beloved, what Aamir Mufti has called "the dialectic of separation and union" (*Enlightenment* 220) – is reinterpreted by Anita Desai as a figure for literary reception. In my reading, the encounter between a literary critic and his beloved Urdu poet represented in the story will be connected to the poetic problematic presented by the novel itself: the interweaving of poetic word and those unspeakable aspects of the reality surrounding it. After an introduction to some key interpretative issues in postcolonial studies, which will provide a provisional intellectual context, this chapter will propose a reading of the beginning of the novel, where the poetic

dilemma will be represented as a dualism between poetry and life, a separation between complementary polarities guiding the search of the main character of the story, Deven. The second part will focus on the encounter between Deven and the poet, and the question of a certain resistance of human poetic creativity to the recording machine. The last part will be concerned with a re-reading of the conclusion of the story, where a suggestive idea of postcolonial custodianship is presented through the consciousness of a "poetics of the real" to which *In Custody* seems to correspond.[8] The question which will offer the point of departure, a pressing and urgent problem in postcolonial studies – how to read literature – will be reformulated in the conclusion as the custodianship of an inheritance, its continuation as a living tradition rather than the mournful remembrance of the past. This concept may be understood if the concept-metaphor of custody is attended and listened to, rather than being simply literalised. For this reason, a reflection on the meaning of reading will constitute the premise of this analysis of Anita Desai.

The Figure as Guide: Reading and Responsibility

"Reading," writes Derek Attridge, "involves working against the mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling of a particular work" ("Innovation" 25). In this view, reading is a creative act which takes responsibility for the otherness and unfamiliarity of the text that is encountered, a transforming experience able to work against the tendency to assimilate the unexpected into the known and familiar. Accordingly, the present chapter intends to articulate the reading of a novel by Anita Desai, *In Custody*. It will be the attempt to take responsibility for the structures of feeling conveyed through the figural nuances and those unpredictable elements that "can barely be heard" in the novel. This reading will regard the intimate connection between literature and the unspeakable, that is what lies alongside and beyond the text and cannot be reduced to it, a part of reality which is not captured by the image or the script, yet plays a role in the creative process. The unspeakable of this intriguing novel, as it will become clear, has to do with those aspects of life that should be heard while recording, reciting and

[8] The concept of a "poetics of the real" is borrowed from Caroline Rooney's *Decolonising Gender*. Rooney's work is a crucial reference point for my reflections. The questions of poetic realism, beauty and cultural transmission that constitute the main focus of this thesis are addressed in her published work in a thought-provoking way.

writing poetry. It is what Mahmoud Darwish calls "the essence of the poem," which can only be described as its "glowing secret" and the thing missing from its text, yet essential to it (*River* 130). Through a reading of *In Custody*, I will try to recover a specific aesthetic unfolded in Anita Desai's novel, an idea of the poet and the literary critic as custodian, and of poetry itself as "custodian of the unspeakable." This aesthetic of custodianship might be partly rooted in a cultural context to which the novel makes reference: the tradition of Urdu poetry in the Indian subcontinent. This is a literary tradition which, in the words of Aijaz Ahmad, "has never been, at any stage of its evolution, the language of any particular religious or regional group, and it has always been the language of urban or peri-urban social exchange" ("In the Mirror of Urdu" 123). Rooted in this transregional literary culture, the novel is able not only to transmit something of its poetic legacy, but also to reflect on the very act of transmission, the meaning and complexity of being appointed as the custodian. The chapter will be organised in three parts, in which three important moments of the novel will be addressed and re-told. The aim of the chapter will be to propose the first outline of an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship, which might be suggested by Anita Desai's work. However, before addressing the novel, the following pages will deal with an important preliminary question: how to read *In Custody*? How to take responsibility for the ideas of reading and poetry staged by the novel itself? In particular, how to articulate the reading of a text which is characterised by a certain degree of otherness, be it Indo-Anglian, postcolonial, Third World, Commonwealth or the like, as part of its labelling in the circuits of cultural consumption and intellectual dissemination? I think that it is important to consider this question, to which the experience of the novel might provide an interesting answer.

In her book *Death of a Discipline,* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes that "literary studies must take the 'figure' as its guide. The meaning of the figure is undecidable, and yet we must attempt to dis-figure it, read the logic of metaphor" (*Death* 71). She also states that "the rational destruction of the figure," the demand for a semiotic transparency leading to immediate comprehensibility, "destroys the force of literature as a cultural good" (71). In order to counter this rational simplification, a call for reading "the logic of metaphor" is hence affiliated to a looked-for "responsible literality," a commitment "to learn to read" which is at the basis of a proficient practice in cultural explanation. Spivak has written the mentioned remarks on reading in her attempt to redefine comparative literature as a more sophisticated enterprise, in the pedagogical effort to train skilled readers and teachers for what could be named, quoting the title of another essay by Spivak, a

"culturally different" book. Spivak's statement, concerning both the question of reading and the issue of literature's cultural value, leads us to recognise and to exhibit the latent work of identification of a literary text, rather than assuming it as matter of fact or invariable starting-point. Correspondingly, in another passage from *Death of a Discipline,* she clarifies that "we have to ask the question of collectivities without prefabricated contents" (26), that is, we have to oppose a thorough scrutiny of the logic of rhetoric to that phenomenon which has been described by Stephen Greenblatt as "enforced performativity" ("Racial Memory" 57). As Greenblatt remarks:

> Literary history, like any other form of history, has to commit itself to a vision of truth, however provisional, nuanced, and epistemologically modest. If the assumptions of an originary or primordial culture or of a stable linguistic identity progressively unfolding through time or of an ethnic, racial, or sexual essence are misguided, then they must not be embraced, even with a sly wink and a whispered assurance that the embrace is only ironic and performative. (57)

Even though informed by different conceptions of literature and reading, both Greenblatt's and Spivak's observations may suggest that if the notion of culture depends on the formation of collectivities, literature should be able to problematise and to displace a literal politics of cultural categorisation. Furthermore, Spivak's insistence on the figure – the logic of metaphor at work in a text – conjures up a significant problem that it would be worth interrogating and investigating, and that represents, in my view, the unavoidable premise to the elaboration of the broad question: how to read *In Custody*? How to take responsibility for the idea of reading suggested by the novel itself?

The problem at issue here might be the literalisation or dis-figuring of the figure, in other words, the explanation of a culturally different literary text, or its location in a context by means of the methodological procedures of literary critical analysis. The task of literalisation involves the preservation of the nuances of the literary expression in a process which will lead to its analytical dissolution, thus implicating a somehow aporetic respect for what Paul de Man has called the "proliferating and disruptive power of figural language" ("Epistemology" 30). Literary criticism involves an understanding of the meaning of a text. Yet, this meaning cannot be entirely divided from the literary figuration. By combining and

maintaining the ambivalence of a simultaneous "grammatization of rhetoric and rhetorization of grammar" (*Allegories* 16) in his deconstructive gesture, de Man emphasised the fact that "literature cannot merely be received as a definite unit of referential meaning that can be decoded without leaving a residue" (4). It is this figural residue, "unusually conspicuous, complex, and enigmatic," which "attracts an inordinate amount of attention to itself" (4), which Spivak retains as an important part of her reconsideration of the cultural signification of the postcolonial text. For this reason, to learn to read means to embark on a responsible literalisation: the refinement of our receptivity to creative writing, a receptive process able to displace the understanding of the literary text as the bearer or the representative of a cultural identity.

Arguably, it might be suggested that current trends in the work of literalisation of postcolonial literature – here another name for "culturally different" – are strongly in need of such a reassessment of the relay between literary criticism and creative practice. Spivak's pedagogical insistence on "learning to read," the problematic of reading, seems to me to be very often overlooked in this area of study.[9] This fact is manifested by recent approaches to postcolonial texts, which seem to be signed by powerful forms of reductionism, both methodological and thematic, and which too often shift from responsible literality to immediate and cursory comprehensibility. In what is, under many respects, a very interesting and valuable introduction to the Indian English novel, for instance, Priyamvada Gopal affirms without hesitation that this genre "has been distinguished from its inception by a preoccupation with both *history* and *nation* as these come together to shape . . . 'the idea of India'" (*Indian English Novel* 5). Her comment is precise and thoroughly demonstrated in a masterful account of many examples of this literary genre, yet it seems to me that it corresponds more to the projection of a thematic preoccupation of the literary critic onto the novels themselves, rather than an exhaustive description of what all Indian English novels are about. While the idea of India is an important theme in many novels and works, I would like to argue that it plays no central role in *In Custody,* a text, perhaps significantly, excluded from *The Indian English Novel.* In my opinion, there are other, more important, aspects of this novel

[9] James Procter also raises the question of "the central but paradoxically neglected role of reading and readers in postcolonial studies" in a recent essay, though from a different perspective (Procter "Reading" 180). This is also the subject of new book edited by Bethan Benwell, Procter and Gemma Robinson, *Postcolonial Audiences,* and a special issue of *New Formations,* "Reading after Empire." Both include an essay by Derek Attridge, "Responsible Reading" which takes up some of the questions addressed in this chapter and already considered in his essay on innovation.

that an approach entirely devoted to ideas of history and the nation would not be able to grasp. This remark should not be perceived as a critique of Gopal's excellent book, or of other, canonically "postcolonial" readings of Anita Desai, but rather as the attempt to raise the awareness of the different potentialities at work in literary texts. What should we be doing when transmitting a literary text? What kind of questions and responses should be raised and given? This interrogative stance is not about the content alone, but also about figuration and the place of the poetic. It is a question that, in a sense, may come before the thematic components identified in Gopal's useful introduction: the question of a postcolonial aesthetic that should not be exhausted by the "enforced performativity" of identity in literature. The thematic focus of the "national allegory," inaugurated by Fredric Jameson in his canonical and contested essay on Third World literature, has somehow entailed the fossilisation of the critical activity on a range of pre-defined questions which can be asked of a text, and the deliberate rejection of alternative problems or perspectives on the study of literature. Aijaz Ahmad lamented such a content restriction many years ago in his essays on Jameson and Salman Rushdie (*In Theory* 95-158). While not agreeing with Ahmad in the way in which he reads literature as mere ideology, a way of reading also upheld by Terry Eagleton in his canonical *Literary Theory*, there is a point in Ahmad's essay on Rushdie which is, in my view, still relevant and urgent today. Writes Ahmad:

> The range of questions that may be asked of this categorical [Third World] counter-canon must predominantly refer, then, in one way or another, to representations of colonialism, nationhood, post-coloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, corruptions, and so forth . . . What is disconcerting, nevertheless, is that a whole range of texts which do not ask these particular questions in any foregrounded manner would then have to be excluded from or pushed to the margins of this emerging counter-canon. (*In Theory* 124)

While this questioning should be maintained and asked again in the current reorienting of postcolonial studies, the enlargement of the critical agenda Ahmad proposed resulted in a new kind of reductionism, not only thematic but also methodological, which identifies literature with nothing more than an ideological function, and concentrates upon a "symptomatic" reading of literary works (152). The reduction of literature to class ideology is, in my opinion, unable to account for the aesthetic complexity and specificity of literary works; it is in the end unable not

only to ask new questions of a text, but also to hear some other questions asked by the texts themselves. While literature, mainly and in a complex manner, points to a consciousness of the real, this does not entail, in my view, that its worldly dimension can be totally encompassed by the ideological discourse. In this context, I agree with the need to return to "read" Jameson advocated by authors like Neil Lazarus and Deepika Bahri – who, in her *Native Intelligence* affirms that the "selective representation of Jameson . . . does not do justice to the complexity of this important critic's attempts to define a new cognitive aesthetics for Third World literature" (13). However, the Jameson-Ahmad controversy seems to me to have really restricted the scope and the problematic of postcolonial studies. Lazarus's remarks in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (89ff) on the way in which Ahmad's criticism has prevented generations of postcolonial students from being able to read Jameson are important and his "defence" convincing. Furthermore, Lazarus noticed the same restriction and reductiveness that I am also concerned with in an essay published in 2002, and rewritten as a chapter of *The Postcolonial Unconscious.* In "The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism" he writes:

> To read across postcolonial literary studies is to find, to an extraordinary degree, the same questions being asked, the same methods, techniques, and conventions being used, the same concepts mobilized, the same conclusions drawn, about the work of a remarkably small number of writers. (773)

It should be remarked that Lazarus's intention, as I see it, entirely corresponds to an act of postcolonial custodianship, in which the ability to read plays a major role. Yet, I have to admit that the most arguable part of Jameson's essay for me does not lie in the definition of the "national allegory," but rather in his reference to "we Americans, we masters of the world" (Jameson "Third World" 85) recurring toward the end of that essay. There was a form of US-centrism in Jameson's essay on world literature which is more than a self-reflective subject-positioning, and it should be the task of postcolonial studies, at least, to call it into question. This is far from neglecting the value of Jameson's canonical work, but rather an attempt to extend the scope of postcolonial studies. The legacy of this debate, however, seems to be the fact that postcolonial literature is still (un)read as literal mirroring of prefabricated interpretive issues, usually the representation of cultural identity, the national

allegory, gender politics, ideological affiliation, and post-colonial history.[10] The task of a postcolonial custodianship should be to move beyond these trends of repetition and predictability that often stimulate descriptive readings unable to address the figural residue of the text, its poetic dimension or resistance to literalisation. It is by an emphasis on figurality rather than the letter that practices of literary transmission may be able to point to that which may constitute the specificity of a postcolonial literature. This specificity can be understood as a reference to the multiple realities, places and peoples affected by the legacy of imperialism and the unfinished work of decolonisation, to which the postcolonial as intellectual and historical category needs to remain close.

Beyond the "national allegory" and the jargon of cultural identity, and beyond both ideological and cultural "enforced performativity," the aim of this research is to raise the question of how to read and how to transmit postcolonial literature, once again. The question refers not only to the ways in which literature is determined by its socio-cultural and geopolitical context, but rather to the potentialities of literature as the site of a consciousness of the real, a poetic consciousness which is not at all detached from the questions of value, meaning, content and context which are inexorably part of creative practices. The problematic of reading corresponds to an interrogation about how the worldly and the poetic are related or intertwined, and *transmitted*, by the specific occurrence of the creative works themselves. Postcolonial custodianship might open up an idea of literature as a field of cultural transmission rather than object of ideological determination. In order to dispute forms of reductionism and thematic determinism and to interrogate both the worldly and the poetic aspects presented by a "culturally different" literary work, I would like to introduce an essay by Dominck LaCapra concerned with the role of reading in intellectual history. In his article, LaCapra addresses "the predominance of a documentary approach in historiography" ("Rethinking Intellectual History" 252), and denounces "the one-sidedness of analyses that stress either the symptomatic and representative nature of art . . . or the way in which 'great' art is itself an exceptional, critical force for constructive change" (261). In this article published in 1980, LaCapra was responding to a "crisis" in the field of intellectual history that may bear some resemblances to the current crisis of postcolonial studies. In fact, in analogy with "internal" and "external" criticism, now materialist

[10] Interestingly, James Procter points out that "postcolonial reading, like any other mode of reading, is necessarily circumscribed by processes of predictability, routinization and repetition that turn our peculiar habits into commonsense, taken-for-granted response" ("Reading" 182).

and culturalist approaches seem to prevent the exit from a sentiment of repetitiveness and vicious circularity. LaCapra's suggestion is epitomised by his intention to "reanimate . . . the importance of reading and interpreting complex texts – the so-called 'great' texts of the tradition – and of formulating in a cogent way the problem of relating these texts to various pertinent contexts" (246). In his return to the relevance and complexity of reading, LaCapra is able to expose the pitfalls of approaches which, on the one hand, do not take into consideration the specificity of artworks and which treat them as mere documents, passive and condensed symbols of larger historical or socio-cultural processes. This perspective maintains a compensatory and derivative conception of literature, a notion which overlooks the creative and aesthetic significance of the work of art. On the other hand, LaCapra criticises approaches which recognise the inventive potential of the artwork, but which overestimate this creative power and elevate the realm of the aesthetic to a performative questioning of the empirical. LaCapra points out:

> [T]his is the issue of the extent to which art serves the escapist function of imaginary compensation for the defects of empirical reality and the extent to which it serves the contestatory function of questioning the empirical in a manner that has broader implications for the leading of life. One might suggest that texts and art works are ambivalent with respect to this issue, but that they differ in the ways in which they come to terms with this ambivalence. A criterion of "greatness" or at least of significance might well be the ability of certain texts or works of art to generate a heightened sense of the problematic nature of this ambivalence and yet to point beyond it to another level of ambivalence where the very opposition between escapism and criticism seems to become tenuous. (261)

Actually, *In Custody* could be one of those "great" works able to point to another level of ambivalence in which the dilemma of choosing between an escapist and a critical position of art becomes untenable. LaCapra's essay might be important in this context, not only because of the focus on "reading" which I am also keen to reconsider, but also, and more importantly, because the two tendencies questioned by LaCapra – art as escapism or criticism – are two ways of evading the problem of the relation between art and the world that *In Custody* also addresses. The plot of *In Custody* has something to do with the relation between art and reality, or poetry and life, and all those ambivalences that keep the poetic related to the real but prevent it

from becoming totally identified with it. This aesthetic problematic, however, is somehow irreducible or inadequate to LaCapra's distinction between compensation and contest in that the novel draws from another tradition of poetic thinking. Desai's work is able to stage the relation between poetry and life as essential aspect of the "custody" of a specific literary tradition. As my reading will try to demonstrate, it is precisely through this problematisation of the "dualism" between poetry and reality that this novel presents a particularly effective resistance to the critical imperatives dominating the enforced performativity of culturally different texts today. Furthermore, this aesthetic question may have its roots in the Urdu aesthetic which the novel is about, a poetic which will be considered contrapuntally in the reading of some passages from *In Custody*. Through the tentative proximity to the novel's plot, articulated by a re-telling organised in three critical acts, I will propose a different way of taking into consideration the figure: in this case, a reformulation of the main notion represented by the novel, the trope of custody in the practice of the literary interpretation. This concept-metaphor seems to emerge from the novel itself as its central motive and inspirational drive. In conclusion, the concept of a poetics of the real will allow me to display the intimacy between literature and the unspeakable, and to outline some central aspects of an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship.

Scene 1: The Glory of Poets, or the Meanness of Existence

The novel begins with a scene of surprise, an act of recognition which brings about a feeling of joy rapidly turning to anxiety: "'Murad? You?'" (*In Custody* 1). In its emphasis on the sense of bewilderment which the familiarity of recognition could originate, the opening episode seems to introduce a sentiment of unexpectedness in the reader, something that may suggest a way of reading the novel. In fact, the sentence uttered by the protagonist could be extended and directed to the figure of the reader itself, a questioning of the domesticating power of reading that immediately places the content of the story in a dynamic and transforming relationship with the process of its critical appreciation. The novel seems to stage the question of "recognition" since its very beginning: the ability to recognise familiar elements, but also be surprised by unfamiliar ones. Deven, an impoverished schoolteacher living in Mirpore, a fictional suburb nearby Delhi, meets his old friend Murad, the son of a rich carpet dealer in Delhi and now director of a small Urdu literary magazine. The encounter between Murad and Deven performs a difference between these two characters, a picturesque contrast that is reflected in many

different aspects and events of the novel. In fact, it not only corresponds to the distinction between the poor teacher living in the countryside and a rich intellectual from the big city, or a dialectics of the country and the city. It also mirrors a more profound and intimate feature of Deven's attitude toward life. The unscheduled meeting between Deven and Murad, and the feeling it provokes in Deven, is part of a widespread dualism shaping the fundamental quality of the protagonist, his feeling and his consciousness of the reality surrounding him. Accordingly, the opening of the story includes the account of an emotional state, a particular that must be emphasised, as it influences a large part of the plot and reverberates in the progression of the narrated events. The reference to feelings emerges from the following extract, which can be found on the first page of the novel:

> His first feeling on turning around at the tap on his shoulder while he was buying cigarettes at the college canteen and seeing his old friend Murad was one of joy so that he gasped "Murad? You?" and the cigarettes fell from his hand in amazement, but this rapidly turned to anxiety when Murad gave a laugh. (1)

The feeling of joy turning to anxiety or disappointment is a pervasive element of Deven's life, divided as it is between an inadequate job at the college and his sincere love for poetry, especially Urdu poetry. The feeling of joy in seeing Murad is caused by the fact that Murad represents, at that moment, the beloved world of poetry and art, for the reason that Deven regularly contributes to Murad's magazine with articles and book reviews. But this feeling turns immediately to anxiety, and it is followed by Deven's statement: "'But I have a class just now, Murad'" (1), an answer responding to a question which is absent from the dialogue in the text, maybe not a response but the impulsive withdrawal from the initial feeling of joy, hence a statement of displeasure. As the development of the narration makes clear, the contrast between his joy in poetry and his feeling of entrapment in everyday life is a central theme in the novel as well as the crux obsessing its protagonist. This contrast is also represented in the description of Deven's lesson the day of his unexpected meeting with Murad. The presence of a bored, insolent, and unruly class is supplemented by Deven's evasive behaviour: the trick of ignoring his class, and focusing "his eyes upon the door at the far end of the room, the door that opened on to the passage, freedom, and release" (5).

The opposition between the claustrophobic interior – the class – and an imagined exteriority of freedom and release is also mirrored in the portrayal of the

place where he lives, Mirpore. This description could be understood, rather than as literal source of historico-geographical chronicle, as an expansion of Deven's feeling and attitude to the land itself. In fact, Mirpore is repeatedly compared to a prison: "a cruel trap, or prison, as well, an indestructible prison from which there was no escape," giving "an impression of total aridity," a town whose solidity and stubbornness "had formed a trap" (16). However, as the story unfolds after the meeting with Murad, we are told of Deven on a bus directed to Delhi, for a moment able to leave this trap behind, and to escape from it. During this journey, Delhi is configured in sharp contrast to Mirpore: it is characterised by "lost treasures of friendships, entertainment, attractions and opportunities," and the stretch of land between Delhi and Mirpore is perceived as "that strip of no-man's land that lies around a prison, threatening in its desolation" (18). Deven is going to Delhi because he has to accomplish a very significant task Murad has assigned to him and which he accepted with some difficulty: he has to interview the great Urdu poet Nur for a special feature of Murad's magazine. Thus, the novel revolves around a literary task, a staging or *mise en abyme* of the literary critical activity, an aspect that is full of figurative and interpretative implications. On the bus taking him to Delhi, Deven meditates on the profound distance he experiences between ordinary life and poetry, a gap that is also the sign of an absence and the cause of its supplementary consolation. The narrating voice explains:

> He had never found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings. The latter were constantly assaulted and wrecked by the former – as now in the form of the agonized dog, the jolting bus, the peanut-crunching neighbour, the little tin box in which Sarla [his wife] had packed his lunch and which he kept wrapped in a newspaper, the smallness of the sum of money he carried in his pocket: all these indignities and impediments. How, out of such a base material, was he to wrest a meeting with a great poet, some kind of dialogue with him, some means of ensuring that this rare opportunity would not also turn to dust, spilt blood and lament? (20)

This passage is very dense and meaningful: it exposes the trouble of this character, the lack of reconciliation between "the meanness of his physical existence" and the "purity and immensity of his literary yearnings" (20). This trouble could be understood as a focal point for the powerful sense of disappointment shaping

Deven's emotions and world view: his trick of ignoring the class, the joy turning to anxiety, the image of Mirpore as a prison or a trap, and his feeling of escape when on the bus toward Delhi. In this situation, the realm of poetry has the function of a consolatory fantasy. This explains the attractiveness of the task assigned by Murad, and the exceptional meaning it incorporates in the momentary joining of an idealised or imaginary world of freedom and release and the abandonment of the heavy burden of ordinary life, a burden experienced as the inescapable grain of bodily existence. As a result, the contradiction between the base material of everyday indignities and impediments and the prospective meeting with the figure of the great poet leads Deven to a personal speculation on the function of poetry, a vision which I would like to account for with the help of one more quotation from a later point in the novel:

> That, he saw, was the glory of poets – that they could distance events and emotions, place them where perspective made it possible to view things clearly and calmly. He realized that he loved poetry not because it made things immediate but because it removed them to a position where they became bearable. That was what Nur's verse did – placed frightening and inexplicable experiences like time and death at a point where they could be seen and studied in safety. (52)

What the above mentioned quotation explains is a precise idea of poetry and art, a conception based on the image of distance, a therapeutic evasion from the immediacy of events and emotions, which enables the achievement of a transcendent and detached perspective on life's frightening and inexplicable experiences. It could be emphasised that this notion of poetry represents the idealistic counterpart of Deven's hopeless orientation toward physical existence. In other words, the tension between the glory of poets and the meanness of existence epitomises the emotional rupture that is the framework of the dramatic action, the trip to Delhi and the interview with the poet Nur, as well as an "escapist" or compensatory view of poetry. In the account of the novel that has been presented so far, the plot is at the very beginning, the central episode has not yet occurred, and what I have just described is only the opening scene, the point of departure of the story. Nevertheless, the circumscribed framework of Deven's feeling of disappointment and his vision of art and poetry – the pretext of this story, and not its conclusion – seems to characterise a very interesting reading of this novel, the

analysis presented by Fawzia Afzal-Khan in her chapter on Anita Desai included in her important and thought-provoking book *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-Anglian Novel.*

Afzal-Khan titles a chapter of her intriguing book "The Morality of Realism Versus the Aestheticism of Myth" and provides a comparative reading of some novels by Anita Desai according to this general dichotomy. As she explains at the beginning of her chapter, "the call of realism is, by and large, the call of community, of communication with others, and requires the individual to connect with, and thus take some responsibility toward, others" (59). The call of realism is hence linked to a crucial theme of the postcolonial custodianship that I am trying to explore: the responsibility toward others. From this point of view, I substantially agree with Afzal-Khan. The theme of "responsibility" that she is able to address is a very complex and important aspect of *In Custody* and, in general, of Anita Desai's work. On the other hand, what she calls aestheticism of myth "stands for isolation and retreat from society and its values" and, she adds, the "characters who operate within this mode are, or wish to be, quite cut off from the rest of humanity" (59). While the use of the word "myth" does not entirely correspond to my own understanding of this term (in that myth is something profoundly social, in my opinion), however a point seems to me to be clear, that in opposition to responsibility toward others there is a sense of "isolation."

It is worth noticing that the dichotomy between an imaginary space of escape – the isolation of the lyric subject – and the communicative exigencies of social life – the worldly implication of realism – constitutes a very interesting explicative attempt to articulate some features of Deven's understanding of the function of poetry. For this very reason, Afzal-Khan emphasises "the temptation to escape from the onerous duties and the ordinariness of the realist mode, into the 'transcendent, wondrously illuminated realm' of poet and poetry" (85). She underlines the compensatory, imaginary quality of Deven's picturing of the sphere of art and how his imaginative construction is based on the rejection of the squalid details and occurrences of everyday life. The subsequent encounter with the poet is seen from Deven's perspective, and the events concerning that episode are encompassed by the theoretical and existential dualism dividing the aestheticism of myth from the call of community and communication. Hence, the account of the episode of the interview is understood as proving "Nur's point that the real (that is, the ordinary, the sordid, the realm of social responsibility for the present) can never be separated from the mythic (the supraordinary, the romantic, the realm of escapism into the past here

symbolized by his poetry)" (86). This observation leads Afzal-Khan to conclude that Deven's change of attitude after the interview with Nur "demanded responsible behaviour from Deven." For this reason, the conclusion of the story defines a socially responsible outlook which results in the final predominance of the call of realism, a call that "cannot be ignored in favour of a retreat from responsibility of the present, into a mythicized past" (87).

Afzal-Khan's reading represents an understanding of the meaning of this novel that is thought-provoking yet demands close scrutiny. While the point that the novel is about the emotional and epistemological relation between poetic writing and everyday life is an interesting interpretive stance that could be maintained, there are at least two remarks that could be directed to her interpretation. On the one hand, her reading conflates Deven's opening mind-set with a stylistic tendency of Anita Desai's work at large, a dis-figuring of the main character's feeling which does not account for, for instance, the fact that Deven's poetic imaginary does not represent an introverted form of escapism, or a withdrawal from communication with others, but rather the appeal of a big city like Delhi. In other novels by Anita Desai like, for instance, *Clear Light of Day* and *Fire on the Mountain,*[11] the retreat from everyday duties could be read as the search for a "solitary" running away. However, this seems not to be Deven's case, as he regrets the lack of access to Delhi's intellectual and poetic vitality, with its friendships and opportunities, opposed to the unproductive marginality and intellectual isolation of Mirpore.

There is a kind of twisting logic in all this, in that the "isolation" of the subject depends on a kind of escapist vision of poetry, but it is projected on the figurative context of the everyday routine in a countryside suburb. On the other hand, in spite of the acuteness of some of her observations, Afzal-Khan does not seem to take account of some further developments of the novel, especially the new discernment of poetry that occurs to Deven after his encounter with Nur. She understands the message of the story as a return to a critical form of realism, an interpretation that depends on the restriction of her perspective to Deven and to the dilemma he faces at the beginning, the dualism between the glory of poets and the meanness of existence. This "dualism," as I will show in a moment, is a very important aesthetic

[11] In her interview with Randomhouse, Anita Desai affirms that her books "deal with characters who find themselves going against the current and are therefore solitary, isolated beings themselves" (Anita Desai "Interview with Randomhouse"). In Deven's imaginary, the world of poetry incarnated by his memories of Delhi's intellectual vivacity seems to be very different from this general solitary tendency, so that Deven's isolation could be referred to his real life in Mirpore rather than to his poetic fantasy.

theme that Anita Desai might take, not so much from the European theoretical framework to which Afzal-Khan makes reference, as from the tradition of Urdu poetry that is the main context of the novel. In the introduction to her book, Afzal-Khan outlines her intention to apply the opposition between aestheticism and realism to the Indo-Anglian novel, thus engendering the transposition of a classic debate concerning European modernism to the postcolonial scene.[12] From this perspective, poetry remains opposed to life, for the call of realism eliminates the realm of the aesthetic from the duties of ordinary life, and the end of the story stages a simple return to life which is entirely enclosed by the emotional connotation of the opening scene of the novel, a feeling of joy turning to disappointment. While she affirms that at the end "myth is given its rightful place within the critical realist mode" (*Cultural Imperialism* 86),[13] the classification of Anita Desai as a critical realist writer implies a somehow arguable restriction of the novel to the scene of the beginning, something which the novel elaborates on and out of which it articulates new meanings.

A different reference point that might be suggested in order to contextualise and clarify some figurative and aesthetic nuances of *In Custody* could be the poetic understanding that a very important Urdu poet of the twentieth century, Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984), elaborated in his compositions and discourses. The figure of Nur may, almost explicitly, be affiliated to Faiz, to the extent that the film that Ivory Merchant produced from the text of *In Custody* includes many direct quotations from Faiz's poetry, which is also indirectly referred to in Desai's novel. While speaking about "dualism" and the subject of poetry, a canonical reference in this context could be Faiz's poem "Poetry's Theme," the poem n.12 included in Victor Kiernan's collection (*Poems* 90-95), one of the early poems by Faiz. This poem is about the relation between the duties of life and a potentially "escapist" theme for poetry, the traditional Urdu theme of love, especially the loss of the beloved. Throughout the stanzas of this poem, Faiz oscillates between his desire for writing

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[12] She deploys the perspective presented by Georg Lukacs in the first decades of the twentieth century, thus affirming that the "modernist impulse is very much akin to the mythic one, in that it tends to negate the on-going dialectic of history" (Afzal-Khan, *Cultural Imperialism* 17). Such a statement seems to overlook the remarkable critiques directed to Lukacs during the emergence of this debate in Europe, especially those presented by Adorno, Brecht and Bloch, now collected in Theodor Adorno and others, *Aesthetics and Politics*. The notion of critical realism is defined by Lukacs in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*.

[13] It should be emphasized that the portrayal of Anita Desai as a realist writer is at least controversial among the critics. R. S. Sharma, for instance, affirms that Desai "avoids the realistic mode to concentrate on states of psyche" (*Anita Desai* 88). Similarly, in her *Anita Desai: A Study of her Fiction*, Meena Belliappa describes her fiction as introspective.

about the beloved, and his awareness of the pain and suffering of people, those "walls dark with secrets" and "scaffolds on which dreams have died" (95) which claims a place in his poetic practice. The last stanza of the poem is very famous and significant, and it may be interesting to quote it in its entirety:

> These too are subjects; more there are; - but oh,
> Those limbs that curve so fatally ravishingly!
> Oh that sweet wretch, those lips parting so slow -
> Tell me where else such witchery could be!
> No other theme will ever fit my rhyme;
> Nowhere but here is poetry's native clime. (95)

The meaning of this poem has been variously understood, yet it seems to posit a kind of dualism between life and poetry: the occurrence of struggle, suffering and memories of historical events ("these too are subjects"), and the classical theme of love, which is defined in the end as the only place and only subject of true poetic devotion. As Aamir Mufti emphasises, in poems like "Poetry's Theme," composed during the 1930s, "we find the poetic persona torn between the exquisite demands of unrequited love, on the one hand, and those of the larger world and its oppressions, on the other" (*Enlightenment* 213). In the concluding stanza of the poem just mentioned, by alternating "between the mysteries of the beloved and those of the larger world, the poem ends by affirming that the poet cannot expect to overcome the former as his true theme" (213). At this point – of both the novel by Anita Desai and its references to Urdu aesthetics – it could be enough to recognise that there is a sort of dualism at stake, but this dualism is far from resolved or reconciled by a mere return to the duties and oppressions of ordinary life.

It is not so much a contrast between "myth" and "realism" which is at issue in the novel and its poetic dilemma, as another kind of opposition, which is problematised and staged in all its complexity. As Mufti continues: "I read the apparent dualism of these poems – interiority and affect versus the external world, lyric poetry versus society – somewhat differently, as demonstrating an interest in the relationship between the lyric self of Urdu poetry and the 'wider' world of contradiction and conflict" (214). The poetic dualism captured by the initial feeling of joy and disappointment operates in many different registers: love and suffering, interior and exterior, but also, and mainly, it is figured as a dialectic of separation and union, whose object is and remains the beloved or rather the loss of the beloved.

Faiz inherited this subject in his adaptation of the tradition of ghazal poetry, a poetic culture that he revived after it had been considered "disdainfully" (Pritchett xiv) by its own inheritors since the suppression of the Mutiny in 1857. As Pritchett shows, the colonial reaction against the Mutiny led major Urdu poets to "perform a radical surgery on their own culture, to enable it to survive in a world defined by the victors" (xvi). It is a tradition suppressed by the violence of colonialism and its culture that Faiz, and perhaps Desai in her novel too, have tried to keep in custody. As it is observed by Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri-American poet who translated some of Faiz's verse:

> The *ghazal*, a form that in its present shape is eight hundred years old, traces its origin to pre-Islamic Arabia. (Garcìa Lorca wrote several *ghazals*, acknowledging in his catholic manner the Arabi influence on Spain.) Composed of thematically autonomous couplets that are linked together strictly through rhyme and meter, the *ghazal* in its opening couplet establishes a scheme that occurs in both lines. (*Rebel's Silhouette* 76)

In the traditional form of the ghazal, the beloved is a main theme and a formal device that can be adopted to signify a variety of meanings, and to act in different contexts. For this reason, the point would be to learn to use poetry in a socially aware way. Yet this does not imply abandoning poetry, but rather knowing how to read and compose poetry, in order to articulate a consciousness of some aspects of the real. Frances Pritchett, in her *Nets of Awareness,* presents the following remarks:

> The ghazal universe is founded on the figure of the passionate lover, and mirrors his consciousness. The lover, while longing for his inaccessible (human) beloved or (divine) Beloved, reflects on the world as it appears to him in his altered emotional state. To him its highs are infinite heavens, its lows abysmal depths, its every scene and every moment charged with intense and complex meanings. (*Nets of Awareness* 89)

In Faiz's poetry, the image of the Beloved is extended to a variety of meanings, so that the "reader begins to infer, through a highly sensuous language, that waiting for the revolution can be as agonizing and intoxicating as waiting for one's lover" (Ali *Rebel's Silhouette* 80). As a Marxist intellectual, Faiz was committed to socialist,

radical views, even though critics like Ralph Russell (*Pursuit*) and Ted Genoways ("Let Them") do not portray him as unequivocally "revolutionary" or committed. Yet his poetry was also "classical" in that he did not despise the lyric and stylistic codes proper to the ghazal. In his work the tradition of Urdu poetry was never dismissed for a secular propaganda art. As Mufti notices in his study of Faiz, the traditional theme of separation and loss of the beloved was reinterpreted in the context of the Partition, which Faiz experienced and by which he was profoundly affected. Sabiha T. Aydelott, the daughter of Faiz's brother, narrates:

> He was a man who spoke seldom, and when he did everyone listened to him. One evening, when a group of us was surrounding him, he talked about the horrors that had taken place during the partition of India. He described, with anguish in his voice, the trains that came into Pakistan full of people who had been mutilated and slaughtered. I remember his saying, years later, that sight haunted him still. ("Memories of Faiz" 303)

It should be noticed that Mufti's analysis is concerned with "nation and community" in Faiz's poetry, and with the "complexities of a 'Muslim' selfhood in Indian modernity" (214), in a canonical and authoritatively "postcolonial" reading of his poetry. As Agha Shahid Ali remarks, this social significance of the image of the beloved may be part of a "long enough tradition of concealing politics in symbols" in Urdu poetry ("The True Subject" 136). Similarly, C.M. Naim observes:

> For the past hundred years, Urdu writers, especially the poets, have been overwhelmingly committed to causes. The reasons for this are simple. After 1857, the main concern of Muslim writers and thinkers – who formed the majority of Urdu writers – was to alleviate the condition of the Muslims in India. Their zeal for political reform led them to seek reforms also in the area of literature. They believed that literature had a social function, that the writer was the conscience of the people, and that his job was to seek not merely the beautiful, but, more essentially, the good and the useful. ("Consequences"270)

Accordingly, figures and emotional states in Faiz's poetry should be read as animated by a social consciousness, an awareness of the historical circumstances and the suffering of people in the Indian subcontinent as elsewhere, something that becomes quite explicit in his poem "Don't Ask Me Now, Beloved," where he affirms

an important shift in his thematic preoccupations. However, as regards the aesthetic problematic which *In Custody* opens up, the question may well be that the separation from the beloved, something which is at stake in both Faiz's poetry and Desai's novel, can also be a question about the relation between poetry and life. The beloved, in the novel, is the poet himself, so that the subject of his poetry becomes the reader, in a twisting logic of substitutions and transferences. The creative work includes, from this point of view, a staging of a scene of reading, a literary-critical scene, which could be useful in suggesting a way of reading the novel itself. In a piece of literary criticism written years after "Poetry's Theme," reported in the introduction to a book on Faiz edited by Imdad Husain, Faiz articulates the following idea of poetry:

> *All I had to say is that an understanding of the struggle of human life and a participation in it, according to one's capability, is not only a pre-requisite of life, it is also a pre-requisite of art. Art is a part of this life and an artistic struggle is a part of this struggle. This struggle is never ending. Thus there is no substitute for the struggle of the artist. His art is an eternal struggle and unending labour. Success or failure in this struggle depends on one's ability and power but to continue the struggle is possible and compulsory.* (In Husain *Introduction* 13. Italics in original.)

This reflection might correspond to one of those "turning points" in Faiz's aesthetic vision described by Mufti, who points out that some of Faiz's poetic works might be understood as exercises in "ending the isolation of the lyric subject, or rather in ending its illusion of isolation" (*Enlightenment* 232). Faiz's poetry could be read as an attempt to rejoin the subject of poetry and worldly preoccupations and impediments, to "show the social life of the lyric subject" (230). However, this is not because poetry becomes a form of critical realism, political propaganda, or because "myth" finds its right place in the poems. Rather, poetry is able to keep the contradiction alive, the social problematic is figured in the loss of the beloved, which remains the only true subject of a poetry that can be read as deeply concerned with the co-participation of life and art. It is *as poetry* that poetic practice can be recognised as social throughout. There is no substitute for "the struggle of the artist," yet precisely because participation in struggle is a precondition of life as it is a pre-requisite of art, and the struggle must be continued. A reading of the novel as caught in a "dualism" between realism and myth, escape and responsibility, only

partially addresses the complexity of the aesthetic vision that might be suggested within the text. In fact, the dualism between poetry and life is part of a dialectic of separation and union. It is a reference to the absence of the beloved, which might be affiliated, not to European philosophy, but rather to Faiz's reinterpretation of the ghazal tradition as it came to be realised in the Urdu poetry of the Indian subcontinent. As these intertextual references may demonstrate, the dualism between poetry and life is problematised in the novel, in a remaking of Faiz's compositions. The aesthetic dilemma is articulated through the expressive resources of a poetic tradition, rather than theoretically superimposed on it. However, the novel goes on, and the devout literary critic, Deven, eventually meets the beloved poet.

Scene 2: The Poet and the Machine

The first encounter with the poet is shocking. Nur lives a very lustful and dissolute life, in an overcrowded house, and Deven is not able, during his first meetings with him, to conduct a quiet and productive interview. Chaos, parties, social gatherings, and relentless arguments with his wives and his guests all contribute to a confusing situation surrounding the figure of the poet. Deven is therefore incapable of achieving the looked-for intimacy and concentration. Nonetheless, after a few failed attempts to interview him, Deven realises that Nur, even at his age and in his poor state of health, "is willing to recite his poetry to me, new verse and old verse that he has never written down, it is all still in his head and will be lost if it isn't written" (*In Custody* 94). But, as Deven cannot dedicate all his time to the interview with Nur because of his job at the college in Mirpore, the project seems destined to fail. At that moment, Murad suggests a captivating idea so as to complete the feature on Nur for his magazine: a tape recording. Murad gives precise instruction to Deven:

> "Get hold of a tape recorder. Then go and sit beside his bed. Give him a drink – buy him a bottle – and ask him to start reciting. Everyone knows he needs to be oiled, so do the oiling and he will recite. Switch on the tape recorder, sit back and listen. That is all. You will have it all on tape, for the whole Urdu-speaking world to listen to, not only Nur's words but Nur's own voice!" (95)

Murad's strategy to overcome the difficulties of the interview is hence related to the act of recording the voice of the poet, a technological form of transcription that will

facilitate Deven's task. With extreme difficulty, Deven obtains some money from his college to buy the tape recorder, a piece of second-hand equipment that he rents in addition to the services of a young technician – a problematic solution that is further complicated by the resentment and illness of one of Nur's wives, who manifests signs of hatred, jealousy and hostility toward Deven. With the help of Nur's elder wife, Deven is able in the end to rent a small room close to Nur's house and to conduct the recording there. The main part of the interview is held in this room, but the task reveals itself more arduous than expected and full of obstacles and impediments, as soon becomes clear:

> To begin with, Nur had spoken only of drink and food. Tucking up his feet under him – the white corpse-like feet of the aged who walk little – he had chosen this as a topic of primary interest to the dismay of Deven who had just signalled to Chiku [the young technician] to set the machine going and begin the recording of Nur's imperishable words. (164)

In some very funny passages of the novel, Anita Desai describes a series of misunderstandings between Deven and Chiku, resulting in the despairing occurrence that the tape recorder does register Nur speaking about banal and material things like food, drink, or insignificant comments on everyday matters, while the machine is always switched off during Nur's extraordinary poetry recitations. In fact, the poet's discourse is an irregular and unpredictable monologue in the course of which he delivers some extremely intense and great verse, sometimes with the help of his notes. The narrative continues:

> Ravished by its sweet tones and murmured sibilances, Deven would sink back on his heels and shut his eyes, nodding gently in agreement with the poet's sentiments, and fail to notice that Chiku was still fumbling with the machine and not taking any of it down. When his clumsy impatient fingers had finally put things in working order and switched on the machine, it was too late: Nur had come to the end of his recitation and was reminiscing about his pigeons and the races and combats and competitions he had held with them on the roof. (167)

In sum, the interview stages the utmost intricacy of Nur's verse with Nur's "speaking in prose, of the commonest variety" about trivial subjects and his engagement in

really non-poetic, down-to-earth arguments. Deven repeatedly fails to record Nur's poetry while the tape takes account of all the insults, gossip, and reminiscences forming the bulk of Nur's discourse. Deven's attempt to separate Nur's poetry from his dissipated life is destined to fail, and the impracticality of the tape recorder, working together with the incompetence of the young technician, ends in a complete disaster. Nur's monologue proceeds, at high cost for Deven, who is paying the rent for the room and food and drinking for Nur's friends, but without any useful or worthy piece of poetry eventually inscribed on the tape. The three days programmed for the interview last more than three weeks and the expensive endeavour of recording Nur's voice on the tape ends in a dramatically unfruitful way. The failure of the interview reaches an apex when Deven addresses the poet, asking him to declaim a poem while the tape recorder is working:

> "And, sir, were you writing any poetry at the time? Do you have any verse belonging to that period?"
>
> The effect was disastrous. Nur, in the act of reaching out for a drink, froze. "Poetry?" he shot at Deven, harshly. "Poetry of the period? Do you think a poet can be ground between stones, and bled, in order to produce poetry – for *you*? You think you can switch on that mincing machine, and I will instantly produce for you a length of raw, red minced meat that you can carry off to your professors to eat?" (170)

The poet's voice reveals a resolute reluctance to be captured by the machine, and the spontaneity and contingency of Nur's poetic inspiration are completely missed by the electronic apparatus. Nur's carnal metaphor in the above mentioned passage could hint at the violence of the recording machine, compared to a "mincing machine" cutting into pieces the living continuity of the poetic voice. However, the reference to a poetry being "ground between stones" and bleeding could also be connected to a specific theme of one of his poems, and the reference to the act of "eating" signify the deep intimacy between his poetry and the prose of his everyday exigencies and appetites. This carnal metaphor is related to one of Nur's poems recurring in the novel, firstly on the occasion of the initial meeting between Nur and Deven, when it is performed by the latter in honour of the former:

> My body no more than a reed pen cut by the sword's
> tip,

Useless and dry till dipped in the ink of life's blood. (40)

This poem might be read as the rewriting of a classical poem by Faiz, "If Ink and Pen," poem n. 17 in Kiernan's collection (*Poems by Faiz* 117). This poem is about the experience of imprisonment – Faiz was imprisoned in 1951 for his participation in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy case – in which he states how his verse is written from his own heart and blood, so that even without pen and ink he can carry on writing, after having "dipped my finger in my heart's blood" (117). The correspondence between "blood" and "ink" could be a reference to the interconnection between poetry and life. In Nur's composition, the poet is "dry" unless "dipped" in the ink of life. However, in the context of the interview staged in *In Custody,* it may also designate the violence inherent in the recording machine, or the intrinsic violence of the textual inscription of the creative voice, suggested by the image of the poet being made into pieces so as to produce "red minced meat" for the "professors" to eat.

The exuberant presence of his voice seems, in a sense, to exceed the violent value-coding system epitomised by the domesticating process of critical canonisation. It could be that Nur's voice is resisting here, not only analogical recording, but also the inscription of his voice in another kind of text, the ideological struggle in post-colonial India. While the poetic voice entirely belongs to the social life of the poet himself, it also manifests a certain reluctance to be appropriated by secondary discourses, either political or critical. The voice of Nur cannot be properly reproduced, and any attempt to interpret or transmit his story should account for this failure of the powers of technical reproduction. If the central theme of the dialogue between Nur and Deven is poetry, and the relation between poetry and reality is one compelling argument of the novel, it should be also taken into account that the reality Nur's poetry refers to is embedded in the physical, chronotopical location of the poet himself, the inhabitant of a chaotic neighbourhood in Delhi. As is said again and again in the novel, even if poetry is eternal, the poet himself cannot be moved from his specific place and time. It could be advanced that, rather than a general contrast between the call of realism and aestheticism of myth, the novel might also be related to a very concrete and material topic, the linguistic divide between Urdu and Hindi in post-colonial India.[14]

[14] In her interview with Magda Costa, Anita Desai states: "I was trying to portray the world of Urdu poets. Living in Delhi I was always surrounded by the sound of Urdu poetry . . . But although there is such a reverence for Urdu poetry, the fact that most muslims left India to go to Pakistan meant that most school and universities of Urdu were closed." (Anita Desai "Interview with Magda Costa") This statement is reaffirmed in "The Other Voice." On the state of Urdu in post-

Nur, Murad and Deven share a common interest in Urdu, but Deven is a teacher in Hindi, because the latter is the major language in India and, in Deven's view, it is very difficult to earn a living with the very limited social capital of Urdu. Siddiqui, the Urdu teacher in Deven's college, is the only staff of the Urdu department, and even if he is the only teacher he has a small number of students and little work to do. The recurrent reference to Urdu, and the important role that it plays in the novel, has led one interpreter to analyse this novel according to the important socio-historical question of language politics in India. In her review published in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, Amina Yaqin has read this novel as "Anita Desai's intervention in a communally charged Hindi-Urdu debate" ("Communalization" 121). This is the critical imperative guiding Yaqin's reading of the story:

> The key questions I raise in this essay are about the kind of cultural memory Desai is constructing in her text, and how this depiction can be read in relation to the actual machinations of Indian politics with regard to the language question. As a successful author, writing for an international publishing market, she is invested with a certain power to imaginatively represent an "authentic" India. (121)

Yaqin's masterful reconsideration of language politics and the responsibility of the writer provides a useful contextualisation of the novel, and her reading can be affiliated to the problematic initiated by prominent authors like Gauri Viswanathan, Aijaz Ahmad, and Meenakshi Mukherjee, who have, though from different perspectives, underlined the ideological and institutional significance of the teaching of literature in India. [15] Accordingly, Yaqin raises the problem of the kind of cultural memory Desai is able to construct in her novel, and the representative status of her writing on the international scene. While she provides a detailed and thorough situation of the novel in relation to communal politics in post-colonial India, my intention is to address the statement that *In Custody* "can retrospectively be read as a literary narration of the communalization and disintegration of Urdu in post-Partition India" (Yaqin "Communalization" 121). In fact, on the one hand, the novel is certainly in part about this: the story of Urdu as a language tied to the history of the partition of India and Pakistan and the subsequent communal violence. The

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Partition India, an important article is C.M. Naim's "Urdu education."

[15] See, for instance, Viswanathan's "Beginnings," Ahmad's *In Theory* and Mukherjee's *Elusive Terrains*.

decline of Urdu would be related to the passage from what Mufti calls "a human geography that traverses the boundaries, and escapes the territorial logic, of the nation state" (*Enlightenment* 228), from the borderlessness of an ancient literary tradition, to the dominance of post-colonial separatism in the Indian subcontinent. Yaqin writes:

> With regards to the situation of Urdu in contemporary India, the language controversies of the past have had a detrimental effect on the status of Urdu wherever religious identity has come to inform the ideologically separatist correlation of Muslim=Urdu=Pakistan and Hindu=Hindi=India. (Yaqin "Communalization" 128)

For this reason, Anita Desai as creative writer in India has a responsibility toward any literary intervention that might be involved in the context of the communalisation of Urdu, a socio-political situation also analysed by Ahmad in "In the Mirror of Urdu," and reconsidered by Yaqin. On the other hand, the complex episode of the poet and the machine seems to indicate that something *more* than the communalisation of Urdu could be read in Desai's narrative. To state that "*In Custody* tells the story of the decline and decay of Urdu in modern India" (129) seems to me to represent only a part of the story told by Anita Desai, which is also about a beloved poet and the custodianship of his legacy, the relation between art and life, and a maintenance of a poetic tradition through the form of the novel. From a strictly literary point of view, *In Custody* may be as well described as telling the story of the entanglement of the novel in a tradition of poetry, of the love-relation between poetry and prose.

It is worth noticing that by contributing to the authoritative agenda of mainstream Indo-Anglian literary criticism, Amina Yaqin frames the novel in the context of the critical and historical problematic of the national allegory: in the same way as Priyamvada Gopal, she applies "the idea of India" concept analysed by the social scientist Sunil Khilnani as the frame of reference for understanding the novel's role in the production of competing views on what Benedict Anderson famously called the "imagined community." In contrast with this thematic preoccupation, I would like to follow the perspective outlined by Sheldon Pollock in his introduction to *Literary Cultures in History*, where he clarifies the limits of applying the concept of the nation-state on the plurality and transregionality of South Asian literary cultures. In her remarkable contribution to Pollock's volume, Frances Pritchett

states that the "*ghazal* is always exploring borderline cases – and, in the process, playing with borderlines. The *ghazal* looks for borderlines in order to transgress them" (874). Desai's novel may be related, in some way, to this transgression of borderlines, and hence connected to broader, and more nuanced, contexts of South Asian literary culture, rather than being labelled as unequivocal part of a monolithically national-territorial discourse. Rather than superimposing a pre-given interpretative framework, the critic needs to be attentive to the ideas and practices of literature that may be conveyed by the literary works themselves.

To say that "*In Custody* tells the story of the decay and decline of Urdu in modern India" (129), in other words, involves a dis-figuring of the logic of metaphor which seems to preclude any room for the aesthetic problem that the novel might be able to pose. It is quite clear that the profundity of Deven's character, his emotions, and the comic and dramatic texture of his encounter with the poet cannot be reduced to a political or ideological background that is relevant to, but not exhaustive of, the novel's meaning. Therefore, when Yaqin, for example, examines the description of Mirpore presented in the second chapter of the novel, she takes Desai's geographical account in a very literal way, and her reading is able to underline some central social issues. However, in that passage of the novel, the town is seen through Deven's eyes, depicted as a trap in comparison to the attractiveness of Delhi, and it stages an opposition that could also be reminiscent of the dialectic between the country and the city alongside the struggle between Hindi and Urdu. In conclusion, it could be affirmed that Yaqin, following the postcolonial agenda in literary criticism, performs a symptomatic reading of *In Custody*.

Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar defined the notion of symptomatic reading in *Reading Capital*. This is a reading that "divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to *a different text*, present as a necessary absence in the first" (*Reading Capital* 29). The most significant feature of a symptomatic reading is that it contains "the paradox of *an answer which does not correspond to any question posed*" (29). The presence of this supposed answer exerts a strong pressure on the way in which the text is received and determines the very act of reading, an authoritative interpretive formulation, which deciphers the surface of the text as the derivative, though productive, expression of a different space of meaning, to which the text is responding.[16] In similar fashion, Amina Yaqin

[16] Some of the problems addressed in this chapter are considered by Pierre Macherey in his groundbreaking *A Theory of Literary Production*. Indeed, Macherey lists the "unspoken" among the elementary concepts of his theory. Yet, in his reliance upon Althusserian concepts of ideology

relates the text of *In Custody* to a question that is not posed in the novel, that is, the ideological text of the communalisation of Urdu in post-Partition India. Thus, when she points out that the "central characters, Deven, Murad and Nur, are all caught in a nostalgic remembering of Urdu, wishing to restore it to a former glory," or that their nostalgia "is rooted in the cultural memory of a premodern past that rejects the values of an evolving modern present" ("Communalization" 139), she seems, very interestingly, to locate the grain of the novel's texture in a historico-political field of intervention and contention.

Yet this symptomatic reading leads her to detect a nostalgic version of the communal religious and cultural identity that does not account for the representational nuances of the story. In particular, this symptomatic reading does not seem to be able to reflect on the reluctance to be appropriated by the recording, textual machine. To read Anita Desai politically in this way, in other words, one has to force a way of reading which the novel itself seems to resist. Yaqin states that Faiz, "stylistically wedded to the traditional form of the ghazal, was concerned with forging themes of modernity in his poetic message, constructing a new direction for his Urdu listeners and readers, while Desai, working with a modernist narrative, takes it back toward a sensibility rooted in tradition and premodern aristocracy" (121). While the distinction between modernity/modernism and traditional sensibility seems to me too stark in this passage, Yaqin's observation is interesting if read dialectically, and without the critical intent that animates her discussion of *In Custody*. There could be a question, rather than a statement, implied in her reflection that might be worth asking, once again: how to transmit a cultural legacy in changing historical circumstances? How to keep it in custody through changed situations and creative works? The ability to transmit a tradition through what she calls a "modernist" narrative is in fact something far more complex and intriguing rather than a mere by-product of what she portrays as a divide between tradition and modernity. The dialectic of continuity and change, or separation and union, that may be read in Faiz's poetry is maintained, even though in a different way, in Desai's novel. It could be read as a continuation of Faiz's effort, in the words of Aamir Mufti, to mobilise a "popular memory" by keeping "the signs of the 'other's' tongue" as a "means of unsettling the finality of partition" (*Enlightenment* 225). In the words of

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and of symptomatic reading, the "unspoken" is understood as the "unconscious," either as "latent" or as "repressed" of the text. In my reading, I focus instead on the consciousness of the real that can be achieved through literature, rather than the unconscious or what the text "cannot say" (Macherey 97).

Aamir Mufti:

> Faiz's poetry reveals a deep respect and *love* for this culture and a recognition of the poet's very complex relationship to it. It represents an agonistic embracing of a particular religious tradition – the Indo-Muslim and Urdu poetic elaborations of Sufi expression – in order to produce out of it the resources for modernity . . . At no point, however, is this merely a nostalgic embracing of a supposedly syncretistic religious life, and (poetic) modernity appears as a kind of dialectic of the religious and the secular or worldly. (223)

As regards Desai's novel, a symptomatic reading does not seem to be able to explain the developments that Deven experiences from the beginning to the end, nor the sophisticated meditation on art and reality, which is present in the novel, not as an answer without question, but as the immediately visible progression of the narrated events. The idea that *In Custody* presents characters who are caught in a nostalgic remembering of a lost tradition seems to evade another possible reading of this novel, in which the figure of custodianship is addressed as a way of maintaining and transmitting a living, and changing, tradition, even though in a different – novelistic, modern, even though not quite "modernist" – medium. The novel may be keeping Urdu poetry in custody through the creative potentialities of an Indian English literary work. Anita Desai states that in writing *In Custody,* she has been interested "in finding ways of bending or expanding the language, so that it includes the tones and accents and rhythms of other peoples" ("Other Voice" 81). As I will attempt to show in the last part of this chapter, what is at issue in the novel could be the theme of a success through failure, which is an important aspect of that dialectic of separation and union proper to the Urdu classical poetic tradition.

The novel might have something to tell about the ability to transmit an inheritance without appropriating it, or inheriting despite the failure of reception and reproduction, which is something that any reading of the work should try to address. It is the figuration of an act of custodianship that corresponds to a radical alternative to the nostalgia for a lost tradition. The two novelistic episodes addressed until now, the encounter between Deven and Murad and the interview with the poet, have been affiliated to two critical readings of the story, which have been able to raise two important questions: the relation between poetry and life and the relation between a cultural tradition and a literary medium. Afzal-Khan and Yaqin have written extremely valuable and interesting readings of the novel, and I have

elaborated on some of the questions they raise. In particular, Yaqin's reading seems to me to point to a certain failure of critical reception presented in the story, something that she addresses very critically. It is my intention to reinterpret this failure of reception, the resistance of the poetic voice to be captured by the recording machine, as the point of departure for an understanding of the concept-metaphor of custodianship. In the last part of my chapter, I will offer a third reading of the story, concerned with weaving the first problem – the art/reality dualism – with the second question: transmission through different creative forms. In fact, these issues are somehow re-figured in the last episode of the novel, the conclusion, where Deven is represented as the custodian of Nur's poetry.

Scene 3: Symptom, Escape, Custody

After three weeks of inconclusive interviews, Deven has to account for his project to a college board. After all, the college paid the expenses for the tape recorder, and now the college staff intend to examine critically Deven's research outcome. As the frustrating scene of the last interview anticipates, the final product is something totally unusable and without any scholarly value. Although Deven is helped by some friends of one of his students to adjust and improve the soundtrack, the tape does not contain a clear, significant recording of Nur's voice. The narrative explains:

> The patchwork that the boys made of the tapes, recording an excerpt from one tape and putting it together with an entirely incongruous bit from another, quite arbitrarily and fantastically, made a bizarre pastiche of it all, completely useless from a scholarly point of view (*In Custody* 198)

Deven's project comes to an end: he has a lot of bills to pay and his enterprise has not produced any significant result. Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that the conclusion of the story is not just a coming home, or the return to a repetitive everyday routine after the failed attempt to escape from the meanness of a marginal position. If a quick paraphrase of the plot could be reduced to this plain statement, the text of Anita Desai presents a more intriguing vision, and it is rich in details which should be taken into consideration. In order to achieve a more profound and meticulous understanding, I will focus on a particular scene, the episode placed at the end of the novel. The book concludes with the description of a nocturnal

landscape, Deven's wandering in the silent night. Disappointed and unhappy, Deven suffers from insomnia, he is unable to sleep, and hence he is usually awake, especially during the hours before the dawn. In this nocturnal atmosphere, which Anita Desai is able to depict in a suggestive and lyrical way, Deven meditates, and his meditation seems to reach the magnitude of a general meditation, a momentary loss of the individualisation of enunciation, beyond the private life of the character, in an expanded context of reflection, for the narrator reports her character's thinking without quotation marks. The content of his reflection is just placed in the text. The nocturnal setting of the final scene is not the first to be represented in the novel, so that the reader is compelled to recall at least one previous night, where Deven's insomnia is depicted in similar fashion, and correspondent sounds and imagery are reported. Actually, the scene which stages the conclusion is the reiteration of another scene present in the text, a first scene that could be quoted at length:

> He looked up at the dusty pelt of the sky for some chink that promised, or assured, escape but even the stars were smothered in murk. No message came whispering on a nocturnal breeze; every leaf on the *neem* tree hung still, lifeless. Out in the lane a bullock cart creaked by, the wooden wheels lacking oil and shrieking dismally. Across the canal a stray dog barked in a long monotonous howl of protest. Then there was silence. A long while later it was broken by the sharp, shrill whistle of the Janata Express from Assam clattering down the railway line. He bit down on a cigarette, cursing it: why was there always a train whistle in the dark, calling over vast spaces to all who longed to travel and move on? It promised nothing, it merely reminded prisoners of their bars, mocked them in their cells. (142)

This passage is situated in the text soon after the narration of a great disappointment experienced by Deven. The great poet Nur is not the kind of pure and immensely poetic person he expected, in fact, he is trapped, as Deven himself, in the impediments, weaknesses, and necessities of ordinary life, with its squalid and prosaic aspects. The friendship with Nur "had given him the illusion that the door of the trap had opened and he could escape after all into a wider world that lay outside" (141-142), but he had then realised that that wider world was simply an illusion, "it was just a cage in a row of cages. Cage, cage. Trap, trap" (142). Deven is here at the climax of the feeling of dissatisfaction which frames his consciousness and attitude

from the very beginning, echoed in his joy turning to anxiety, the image of Mirpore, and his strong desire for escape to a fantasised realm of poetry. His passion for art is a supplement, a prosthesis of something that has no place in his life, trapped as he is in the meanness of a humble existence. But this is not the end of the story, and there is something of this scene that the critical reviews considered have ignored or too quickly literalised: the figure of cage or trap, which is essential to the story. This image is everywhere in the novel: Mirpore is represented as a prison; the feeling of being trapped is used to describe Deven, Nur, and every thing or human being. Even the sound of the train in the night, with its poetic reference to vast spaces and travelling routes, is here mentioned just to remind prisoners of their bars. This is a figurative use of language, it cannot be taken in a literal sense, as Deven is not really a prisoner, he is a teacher, and he is a free citizen. In view of that, the logic of this metaphor should not be too quickly dis-figured according to a theoretical or historical background existing outside the novel.

Even though the symbolism of entrapment could suggest the presence of an existential predilection for portraying the human condition, I would like to point out that this figure is used by Anita Desai in a particular and original way, specific to this novel, yet in a way that could suggest the influence of Faiz's poetry in the texture of her prose. Faiz wrote many poems related to his – actual – experience of imprisonment, yet in a way that the image of the prison, or cage, seems to be endowed with a figurative dimension, and to have gained the status of a proper poetic device. In fact, the image of the cage is a classical element of the ghazal, signifying the experience of being in love and being captured by the beauty of the beloved, a theme that had been made and remade for centuries in Urdu poetry (Pritchett *Net of Awareness* 94). There is a poem, collected and translated by Kiernan, written in the 1950s, which is titled "The Hour of Chain and Gibbet" (poem n. 25 in Kiernan's volume, *Poems* 152-53). A stanza of this poem may be relevant to an understanding of Desai's remaking of the image of the cage in *In Custody*. Writes Faiz:

> At your command the cage, but not the garden's
> Red-rose fire, when its radiant hour begins;
> No noose can catch the dawn-wind's whirling feet,
> The spring's bright hour falls prisoner to no net. (*Poems* 153)

The poem concludes by saying that if the poet will not be able to see a time of

freedom, "others will see" (153). This seems to suggest a sort of hope in the future, in the fact that the struggle continues and will be continued. It is also a reference to the cage and the image of prison, which is related and counterposed to the "radiant hour," in a thematic of the seasons – spring and autumn – and moments of the day – night and daybreak – which are constant elements of some fascinating poems by Faiz. In a letter titled "Faiz on Faiz" in the collection edited by Husain, the poet connected prison life to three important themes, all recurring in his poetry, and which may have somehow been reinterpreted in Desai's novel. Faiz wrote that imprisonment is an experience that "*opens up a new vista of thoughts and insights*" (In Husain *Introduction* 29). The reflection continues:

> *[L]ike the dawn of love, all the sensations are again aroused and the mistiness of the early morning and evening, the blue of the sky, the gentleness of the breeze return with the same sense of wonder . . . the time and distances of the outside world are negated; the sense of distance and nearness is obliterated in such a way that a single moment weighs on the mind like the day of judgement . . . in the vastness of separation one gets more time for reading and thinking and for decorating the bride of creativity.* (In Husain *Introduction* 29. Italics in original.)

The experience of being imprisoned – separation and negation of distances at the same time, a sense of wonder and acute perceptiveness, and "vastness of separation" which allows time for the literary activity – is deeply related to the process of poetic creation. Ralph Russell commented upon the specific context of this essay by Faiz as related to his imprisonment after the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case in the 1950s, in a controversial chapter of his book *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature*. While Russell's Orientalist and biased portrayal of Faiz has been widely, and justifiably, dismissed by more recent authors, I think Russell interestingly emphasised the importance of the experience of imprisonment in Faiz's aesthetic, as emerges in "If Ink and Pen," a poem directly related to Faiz's prison time. Ted Genoways writes, in an essay on Faiz's prison poetry:

> [W]hen Faiz was confined to solitary, his pen and paper confiscated, he composed *qit'as*—a four-line rhymed form that he could memorize and recite. . . Thus he was forced to develop a covert system of images and metaphors, often drawn from the traditional forms of Persian and Urdu poetry, that would seem

> harmless to the unthinking eyes of the censors. ("Let Them" 98)

In *In Custody*, the image of imprisonment is deployed to depict the encounter between a poet and a scholar, and it refers to the distinction between poetry and life which is at the basis of Deven's quest. A few lines before the depiction of that night, Deven's insomnia is described as follows:

> [H]e paced up and down in his bare feet, his pyjamas and the vest full of holes, scratching at mosquito bites, smoking an occasional cigarette, refusing to entertain poetry and thinking in strict prose that he must look like a caged animal in a zoo to any creature that might be looking down at earth from another planet. (*In Custody* 141)

The image of being caged is always affiliated to passages referring to the poetry/prose distinction. For this reason, it could be understood as a figurative staging of the central question posed by the novel, which is not only the dialectic between tradition and modernity, myth and realism, or the communalisation of Urdu. The novel seems also to ask, perhaps more simply: what is poetry? Where is poetry? What is the relation between poetry and life?

This series of questions could configure a specific approach to the image of being imprisoned, and it becomes extremely suggestive for understanding the conclusion of the novel, where a night very similar to, but at the same time profoundly different from the above-mentioned one is reported:

> That night, before the board meeting, Deven found himself unable to sleep. The house was more oppressive, the heat more unendurable, than on any other night that summer . . . He lay on his string bed in the courtyard, periodically rising to walk up and down, from one wall to another, barefoot so as not to wake his wife and their son . . . After a while Deven lay down beside them quietly, straining to hear wind or thunder, but the stillness of the night hung intact and impenetrable. It was finally broken by a dog howling across the canal. (222)

The second night is, according to this passage, full of similarities to the first. Both participate in the imagery of cage and confinement. While in the first one the word cage (or prison) is repeatedly mentioned in the text, as belonging to Deven's thought

and to the picture of the scene including himself and his world, now the sense of imprisonment is made clear by the use of adjectives like "oppressive, intact, impenetrable." Similarly, the sound of a howling dog is present in both scenes. Nevertheless, a very subtle difference makes the second scene a real development from the occurrence of the first: while in the first the dog's howling is followed by silence and stillness, now the dog is breaking the silence, and this is extremely significant in order to grasp what happens a little later, toward the very end of the novel. In fact, it could evoke a correspondence to the voice of the poet itself, the introduction of a speculation on the question of the power of the poetic voice as breaking the prosaic aridity and silent, illusory, isolation in Deven's feeling of the burdens of everyday life. The story continues:

> A little later, shortly before dawn, he heard steps shuffling through the dust in the lane and voices singing. They grew clearer and louder, and it was obvious they were approaching . . . "What is it?" Sarla asked, coming to stand beside him, haggard from broken sleep. "Why don't you sleep?"
>
> He gave a disgusted snort, gesturing at the band of devotees. "I can't sleep now," he said, "I'll go for a walk," and before she could protest he slipped out of the door and left. (222-223)

After a poetic description of Deven's walk into the night, during the silent nocturnal hours which anticipate the dawn, when the shadowy sky is turning into the clear light of day, Deven meditates on the board meeting he has to face the next day, and the impending unpleasant consequences of his endeavour. The committee will condemn his project, there will be "an inquiry, an interrogation, exposure and blame" (224). Then, Deven's thinking turns to Nur:

> When he remembered the joy of hearing his voice and listening to him quote poetry, then quoting his lines back to him, binding them together in a web, an alliance, he knew this was what he would have to recover, to retrieve. If he could do that, it would give him a reason, and strength, to survive whatever came . . . he tried to return to his old idolatry of the poet, his awe of him, his devotion when it had still been pure, and his gratitude for his poetry and friendship . . . He had imagined he was taking Nur's poetry into safe custody, and not realized that if he was to be custodian of Nur's genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too. This alliance could be considered an

> unendurable burden – or else a shining honour . . . He thought of Nur's poetry being read, the sound of it softly murmuring in his ears. He had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit. It was a great distinction. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure. (225-226)

From the comparison of this passage with the account of the first night mentioned, that other night when the train reminded prisoners of their bars, a semantic and metaphorical shift appears in all its force and effectiveness: the prison has turned into the image of custody. The diversity of Deven's emotions at the end should be connected to this shift from imprisonment to custody that is, in many respects, the fundamental metaphorical motive of *In Custody*. The image of custody entails a profound change in Deven's idea of poetry, a new vision which involves the reference to a specific set of terms like gift, binding, web, and alliance, all suggesting relation and proximity. Rather than "property," Nur's poetry is a "gift" of which Deven is now the custodian, in the staging of a poetic responsibility for the legacy of the other. As a result, Deven does not go back to the critical realist mode, to a simple acceptance of the squalid details of everyday life or the nostalgic resignation to the loss of his beloved poetry. Through the passage from cage to custody, his love for poetry assumes a completely different function, rather than being totally eclipsed by the prosaic return to the everyday. The crucial fact is that Deven's idea of poetry, and of himself as custodian of that poetry, has radically developed, and this alteration also modifies his attitude toward everyday life: "it would give him a reason, and strength, to survive" (225). What does the shift from cage to custody involve? Attempts to literalise the logic of metaphor should not lead to authorising only one legitimate interpretation. Still, one thing seems to me to be very clear: Deven has become conscious of a notion of poetry embracing life – this is the important lesson Nur's chaotic and unrestrained life is able to teach – something which cannot be detached from empirical reality, and which for this very reason achieves its own aesthetic value. It is a poetic alliance both active and passive, working in both directions: poetry keeping life in custody and being placed in custody by it. From this perspective, *In Custody* might be affiliated to the concept of a "poetics of the real" presented by Caroline Rooney in her book *Decolonising Gender*.

In the context of a discussion of the concept of poetic realism, Rooney explains that "this term is used to refer to literature that attempts to address the real not so much in an objectifying, representational way but in a manner that accords

particular significance to states of consciousness . . . I am interested in the expressions of poetic realism because these offer suitable instances for an enquiry into the idea of reality as consciousness of reality" (9). In Desai's novel, the poetic real is reconfigured as Deven's consciousness of the relation between art and life – or, between the spoken verse and the unspeakable real from which poetic verse is inspired, "dipped in the heart's blood," as the poet would have it. Going back to the intellectual preoccupations of current literary criticism, this important concept could be connected to Leo Bersani's perspective on psychoanalysis and art. Indeed, Bersani describes "modes of subject-being [which] can both recognize and initiate correspondences between the subject and the world that are free of both an antagonistic dualism between human consciousness and the world it inhabits and the anthropomorphic appropriation of that world" ("Psychoanalysis" 161).

A "consciousness of the real" might be defined as a phenomenological experience that is opposed to both a total reduction of the experience of the subject to the objective world and, at the same time, a reduction of the world to the subjective experience. A poetic of the real keeps the subject and the world in constant overlap and exchange, without reducing the one to the other.[17] Deven's re-articulation of the dialectical correspondence between art and reality seems to point to a redefinition of the relation between the subject and the world that calls into question the mechanisms of identification, projection, and appropriation. This aspect reminded me of the stress on a consciousness of reality that the notion of poetic realism is able to convey. If the initial idea of the glory of poets was referred to a conception of art understood as supplement of an absence, the conclusion of the novel designates an *aesthetic* conception of art, in the sense also defined by Leo Bersani. In his reconsideration of the relation between psychoanalysis and art, Bersani conceived the aesthetic subject as manifesting "the human subject's nonprojective presence in the world," a mode of being which art is able to express through signs of what he calls "correspondences of forms within a universal solidarity of being," rather than through "signs of interpretation or of an object-destroying jouissance" (164).

Accordingly, to read the image of custody in Desai's novel as the narrative picture of a poetics of the real means to consider the logic of metaphor at work in this text as a shift from a projective and compensatory glorification of poetry to the

[17] Caroline Rooney proposed this notion in order to emphasise the limitations of both essentialist and constructivist approaches to feminism. I am trying to develop some implications of her reflections for an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship.

poetic consciousness of an aesthetically redefined subject. The image of an unspeakable presence giving art its beauty – an alliance between the subject and the real – is thus turned into what Bersani calls the diagram of a universal relationality, signified by the sense of responsibility for the other's legacy, gift and love concluding the novel. It is a gift by which one is placed in custody, a chiasmatic gift, whereby the subject is active and passive at the same time. Similarly, Deven's aesthetic correspondence with Nur could suggest a formulation of art as aesthetic weaving of the unspeakable, namely, of those aspects of reality which constitute the essence of the poem yet are not to be found in the letter of the poem itself.

The unspeakable is what resists reproduction, a poetic of the real that is not part of what is being recorded or transcribed, yet forms the living substance of poetic composition. It may be compared to the study on the negative in literature addressed by the contributors to Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser's *Languages of the Unsayable*. In the introduction to the volume, Budick and Iser provide a definition of the unspeakable as "something that is arguably as real as anything else we know, even if it can be located only by carving out a void within what is being said" (xi). This necessarily inadequate conceptualisation requires a fundamental counterpart: the unspeakable referential reality of the artwork becomes custodian of the artistic practice. There is a continuous oscillation between the written and the unsayable, which displaces the separation between art and reality, and maintains an interrelationship between the two. Faiz expressed the radical participation of both life and art in the same struggle – for freedom, against oppression and division – yet in *In Custody* the co-participation of art and life is kept and transmitted in an act of custodianship. Borrowing again from Bersani's aesthetics, it could be said that Deven's protective and defensive fantasy is transformed in a vision of poetry as containing the "ontological truth about both the absolute distinctness and the innumerable similitudes that at once guarantee the objective reality of the world and the connectedness between the world and the subject" ("Psychoanalysis" 168). For this reason, fantasy becomes the creative site of our relationship with reality rather than withdrawal from the world or symptom to be cured. Accordingly, the conclusion of the story suggests an original reformulation of fantasy and the literary imagination: the achievement of a more accommodative and receptive sensibility in the positioning of the subject which is, at the same time, a constellation of communicative correspondences with the shattering otherness and unpredictability of the exterior world. The novel is able to perform a non-appropriative transmission of a cultural legacy. It could be read as the literary composition of an aesthetic which

is neither merely "modernist" (as Yaqin states) nor critically "realist" (as Afzal-Khan suggests) but rather rooted in a specific tradition, a cultural tradition of contact and exchange exceeding the borders and separations of the post-colonial nation-state.

Following this aesthetic redefinition of a poetic consciousness of art's responsibility towards not only one's own, but also others' traditions, it could be emphasised that *In Custody* is about a poet and a scholar trying to study his work and his life. This is a preliminary step for an impossible literary critical treatise. It will be the special issue of a literary magazine that appears, in the end, to be the novel itself. As a result, the novel seems to designate and to incorporate the scene of its critical reception, somehow corresponding to Shoshana Felman's remark on a story by Henry James in the case of the transmission of Urdu poetry: "The scene of the critical debate is thus a *repetition* of the scene dramatized in the text. The critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates the text but reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly *participates in it*" (Felman "Turning" 101). According to this co-participation of critical work and narrative configuration, the most significant feature of the notion of custody is that it redefines Deven's quest (which is pre-eminently a literary critical investigation) as a success, rather than a failure, or a success through failure. Deven has eventually understood Nur's art, and he realises that this makes him custodian of that poetry.[18] If Deven's story is understood in this way, it could have something to teach about the question of reading, as it is re-emerging in postcolonial studies today.

The fact that Deven is now custodian of Nur's poetry could be connected to the idea that the reader is responsible for the text s/he is trying to understand and transmit, so that "critique" should not be the only mode in which the postcolonial legacy is maintained. This first aspect subverts the common understanding of the novel as the narration of a failure: the failure of aestheticism in Afzal-Khan's view, the failure of communal nostalgia in Yaqin's essay. On the contrary, Deven's feeling of honour and distinction at the very end points to a sense of correspondence and dialectical exchange between poetry and life by means of which Deven does not simply confirm the dualism underlying his original imaginative disjointing. The literary scholar is able to reformulate his aesthetic conception and to connect it to a renewed view of his social existence. The sense of disappointment that shapes the beginning of the story is hence turned into a reformulation of Deven's appointment, his role in caring for Nur's poetry. Being responsible for Nur involves a love for his

[18] As A. G. Mojtabai wrote in her review of the novel, "Whatever Deven's ineptitudes, and they are formidable, he has a redeeming sincerity. He is a true disciple of art" ("The Poet" 8).

poetry, but also the ability to re-connect poetry to the unspeakable which is life itself. It is a scene of arousing sensations and deep perceptiveness as the one described by Faiz in his account of prison life. It is also the turning of a sense of imprisonment and being caged to the emotional connotation of being custodian, and being placed in custody. This thinking entails the introduction of a new sense of appointment, a meditation on the task of the custodian of art as the continuation and guardianship of an important inheritance.[19]

The understanding of this novel as the symptom of a protective and projective fantasy distancing the subject from the world is limited to a partial aspect of the story, and it does not account for the full significance of the image of custody. On the contrary, the dialectic of change and continuity, union and separation, figured in the two nocturnal scenes demonstrates that a radical shift has occurred, and this alteration epitomises the aesthetic redefinition of poetry after the encounter with Nur. A third reading of this novel should hence complete the movement of the story, following the remaking and shifting of the original dualism which Deven experiences in the concluding act of the plot. The change is represented, on the one hand, by the final discovery that poetry is so embedded in life that it cannot be separated from it. On the other hand, it concerns the ability to perceive the poetic essence of the real. From this point of view, life cannot be divided from art. Life itself provides that sense of "wonder" that Faiz emphasised in his aesthetic reflection. This reciprocity could also display an intriguing elaboration on the problem of poetic tradition and cultural transmission, as Desai's novel is able to present an alternative way of connecting the poetic word to the prosaic or novelistic configuration. Rather than the loss or disintegration of a restorative nostalgia for a universe of Urdu poetry, in other words, *In Custody* points to a creative responsiveness to material and historical conjunctures. The poetic voice is hence portrayed as an unbroken cultural tradition capable of being continued and productively conveyed independently of the appropriative strategies and divisive apparatus of textual inscription and communal identity politics. The connection of this story to the notion of a poetics of the real similarly allows for a subversion of the representational gap between the subject and the world. It does not lead toward a generalised performativity of the text (or the expansion of Deven's poetic fantasy to actual reality), but rather toward a more subtle and sophisticated reconsideration of the subject's consciousness of reality, an awareness of the real which poetry is able to transmit beyond separation and

[19] For an intriguing meditation on appointment and disappointment in postcolonial contexts, see Caroline Rooney's "The Disappointed of the Earth."

appropriation.

To conclude, the image of custody might be relevant to the question which originated the beginning of this chapter – how to read *In Custody*? A suggestive formulation of this question seems to emerge from the novel's inclusion, or *mise en abyme*, of the scene of reading, the scene of reception of the poetic artefact. As a result, the emotional connotation that defined the opening scene and that stimulated Deven's research – the feeling of surprise conjured up by the initial interpellation: "'Murad? You?'"– is echoed by the final sense of recognition in which Deven is transfigured into a real literary disciple and custodian of Nur's art. This event and act of responsibility is manifested by the literary scholar's receptivity to the presence of the unspeakable, what resists textualisation and the recording machine in the process of poetic understanding and cultural transmission.

The act of custodianship corresponds to a consciousness of the possibility that the poetic voice may not be conveyed and reproduced, that the poetic could pose a resistance to the effort to represent and reproduce it. Yet, it is this possible failure of reception that demands the utmost form of fidelity. Anita Desai's story could recall the reflection on reading with which the present chapter began, Derek Attridge's idea that by discovering "the other in reading, the mind (understood in the broadest sense) lets itself be carried to the borders of its accustomed terrain by the text. And the other here, once again, is a relation or relating rather than an object; it is the act-event – for it is clearly both – of my reading, now, here, of this particular text" ("Innovation" 25). Accordingly, the novel is able to connect this reflection on the sense of unfamiliarity originated by the act-event of reading to a very important meditation on the meaning of cultural transmission and the persistence of poetic and artistic legacies. Nur's poetry is able to survive beyond the assimilative and disjunctive techniques of critical textuality, through the inventive literary composition woven by Anita Desai's novel itself. In its focus on the continuation of an ancient heritage of Urdu poetry rather than on its disappearance, the novel is therefore able to expose the responsible involvement required by the act of taking care of a poetic inheritance as well as the role of the aesthetic subject in the unfolding of a process of cultural transmission. *In Custody* is able to point to an idea of literature which may take the form of a postcolonial custodianship. The figure of custody – in its complexities and potentialities – will be developed as a concept-metaphor in the following chapters, as it reappears in other important postcolonial stories.

Chapter 2

Guarding the Secret: Allegory and Realism in *Imaginary Maps*

If we have to know about tribals, we have to go back in tradition, in oral tradition, re-read something that is not written, or written in human beings, generation after generation.
(Mahasweta Devi "Telling History" xiii)

This chapter will be concerned with the figurative aspects of *Imaginary Maps*, a collection of stories by Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi edited and translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The English translation of these stories was published in the early 1990s. This work refers to the context of the oppression and resistance of tribal populations in India, a political situation in which Mahasweta Devi has been working both as writer and as activist since the 1960s. The reading proposed in this chapter will be focused on the episodes of death which conclude the first two stories, the ritual killing of a corrupt businessman and the death of a bonded labourer. These two deaths will be connected to the state of mourning that pervades the life of an entire tribal community in the third story. The death of the fictional characters will be considered as a figurative element able to place the realist imperative of Mahasweta Devi's writing into an allegorical shifting, in which the documentary impulse proper to realist narrative is complemented by a transformative drive. Caught between realism and allegory, these stories could suggest an idea of custodianship as impossible mourning, or a refusal to mourn the destruction of tribal cultures in a context where the life of these peoples is subjected to the neocolonial effects of "development" plans: economic exploitation and cultural annihilation. The impossible mourning that the third story signifies could be read as a new idea of responsibility staged through the representation of the characters of the story – the tribals and the committed intellectual. Yet, beyond the fictional text, this idea of responsibility also involves a response from the creative writer and the literary critic. Within and beyond the narrative frame, the impossible mourning

suggested by the narrative could become a way of transmitting the stories themselves, a practice of custodianship that corresponds to the refusal to abandon the signs of life and resistance of these populations. In *Imaginary Maps*, custodianship is embedded in the figurative dimension of narrative and related to the production of a crypt: a literary component that cannot be assimilated by the interpretation and that is able to suggest the inability to mourn something that may still be living. Custodianship is hence a question about the transmission and understanding of literature, and the literary invention as field of transmission of traditions and cultures as something that is still living, rather than as an object of the past or a lost origin. Mahasweta Devi's stories would have something to do with the ability to "read the unwritten," as she intriguingly puts it in an interview with Spivak. In *Imaginary Maps* custodianship cannot be identified in the letter of the representation, in what becomes image or visible sign. Rather, it could be glimpsed in the figuring of the text, the weaving of what may be called the cipher, or the secret, of the story. To put it in a few words, it might be suggested that custodianship in Mahasweta Devi's fiction is a matter of resisting decipherment, a question of communicating through figures which elude literalisation.

The chapter will propose, in the first part, an introduction to Spivak and Mahasweta Devi and the question of realism and the figure, which is the focus of my reading of the narratives. The second part will address "The Hunt," the first story collected in *Imaginary Maps* and it will reflect on the central character of the story, who might signal the presence of a regenerative or transformative drive in the fiction. My reading will suggest that there is something that goes beyond a simple account of the oppression of tribals, and this element is the place of the figure, the presence of a narrative component that resists immediate decipherment. The second story, "Douloti," will be considered in the third part of the chapter and it will elaborate on the allegorical, or figural element of narrative in the final scene of the story, where the tormented corpse of Douloti seems to become a foreign body with intense allegorical value. The last part of the chapter will show how the figurative dynamics ends in the construction of a crypt, covered and guarded as a secret by the inhabitants of Pirtha, the setting of the third story included in *Imaginary Maps*. The intention of this chapter is to show that Mahasweta Devi's fiction could be read as custodianship if her stories are not too quickly literalised, but rather re-read in their relation to the unwritten, the secret or what is maintained as an interpretative enigma. It is the persistence, the *resistance* of this figural element that might require the act of love and response that Mahasweta Devi herself indicates as the

precondition of political involvement in support of tribal populations in India today.

The Doorkeeper

The writing of Mahasweta Devi is described by Amit Chaudhuri as a radical break with the Bengal Renaissance by which she was formed as a writer, in that "in her absorption with the non-Sanskritic universe of the tribals, right down [*sic*] to the non-Sanskritic names and words they use and pronounce, she marks a break with the high cultural, sometimes Brahminical impulses that informed the secular sensibility of the Renaissance" (*The Vintage Book* 122). However, *Imaginary Maps* is also canonised today as one of the classical texts in postcolonial studies. As Minoli Salgado observes,

> Mahasweta Devi is probably the most widely translated Indian writer working in an indigenous language today. Now recognized as the foremost living writer in Bengali, she has taken up the case of the tribal people of India through political activism and writing. (Salgado 131)

The circulation of her work on the international scene has raised many questions concerning the appropriation and interpretation of her stories within competing theoretical and critical discourses. Among the many translations of her work, the one proposed by Spivak is without doubt one of the most relevant and renowned, in spite of the fact that, as Salgado emphasises in the same context, Spivak's defamiliarising strategies of translation seem to be apt to legitimise her "own claim that Mahasweta's work creates an alternative, subaltern discourse that undermines the authority of nationalist constructions of a unified, democratic India abroad" (Salgado 134). Rather than investigating the controversial question of the politics of translation of Mahasweta Devi's stories, this chapter will focus on a specific work, *Imaginary Maps,* whose authorship could be maintained as shared between Devi, the original composer, and Spivak, the "doorkeeper" or custodian of her creative writings in the anglophone postcolonial literary-critical framework. Spivak reports that, in an article published in the *Book Review,* Sujit Mukherjee named her "the female doorkeeper of Mahasweta in the West" (Spivak "Translator" xxvi). Following her remark that there is "some truth in this" (xxvi), my reading will offer a further reflection on the figure of the custodian as important subject in the transmission and re-telling of stories from different parts of the world. As Spivak emphasises in the

same text, "Mahasweta's fiction resonates with the possibility of constructing a new type of responsibility for the cultural worker" (xxvi). "Custodianship" could be a name for this new type of responsibility. My interpretive hypothesis, or rather the thesis that will be explored and unfolded in this chapter, is that *Imaginary Maps* could be read as a literary representation of the complexity of this act of responsibility or custodianship, both in the relation between fiction and the context of tribal activism in India, and within the narrative itself. It could be suggested that the "female doorkeeping" with which Spivak has been identified has a figurative resonance in Mahasweta Devi's stories, which could thence be read as tales of custodianship. In this chapter, I will be reading the stories as locating this responsibility in the shift between the codes of realism and allegory, a shifting which configures a specific aesthetic (not only political) dimension.

The focus on the stories included in *Imaginary Maps* will be complemented by references to Spivak's own reading – and doorkeeping – of Mahasweta Devi. This counterpoint will show a movement that, in its specific allegorical quality, tends to incorporate the scene of reading within the text itself. Although the three stories collected in the book are not part of an overarching fiction, I will attempt to read them as weaving a single composition, one fragmented by narrative discontinuity but grouped around a shared question, or idea. If Spivak convincingly rejects any interpretation of these stories as idealisation of the native, as well as any treatment of Mahasweta Devi as national cultural artefact, it is because her work is able to open up a space of aesthetic reflection rather than simplistically reproducing what Spivak has recently named "the hierarchical functioning of current comparative literature which measures in terms of a standard at whose heart is Western European nationalism" (*Nationalism* 30). In this, I hence follow Spivak's reading, to a certain extent, and assume a certain responsibility for it, in that there are questions of transmission, aesthetics and creativity that have been opened by Spivak through Mahasweta Devi. While Minoli Salgado could be correct in underlining that Spivak's translation is apt to foreground the translator's preoccupations, the extent to which Spivak's own concerns have been inspired and motivated by Mahasweta Devi's fiction remains an open question, or rather the opening of a question about the thing that is being placed in custody and the subject of custodianship. I would like to suggest that, in its unifying aesthetic element, *Imaginary Maps* stages a proposition about cultural transmission and the artistic creation, and that art assumes the connotation of what I will call a cryptic figuration: this train of thought will be explored in the heterogeneous signification of death, a pre-eminent thematic

element eventually confronted with "the demand for a mourning of what cannot be mourned" (Rooney *Animism* 110), which cannot be partitioned from an inherent discourse on art and creativity (the question: "how to represent," and the consciousness of the other living being).

The question of custodianship will be extensively addressed in the last part of the chapter, where I will attempt to read the story from the point of view, not only of the intellectual – perhaps the "main character," a representative of the urban radical intelligentsia – but also from the perspective of one of the "tribal" characters, whose enigmatic presence incorporates a form of custodianship. The last story collected in *Imaginary Maps*, "Pterodactyl," stages a chain of acts of custodianship which may be affiliated to what psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have defined as the "crypt": the formation of a figural space, an enclave, where a secret is buried. Beginning with the recognition of a certain irreducibility of these stories to truths or forms of knowledge that could be produced elsewhere, for instance in politics, cultural discourse, theoretical elaboration or postcolonial history, my attempt will be to disclose a domain "in some way marked off from the discursive institutions that are operative elsewhere in a culture" (Greenblatt *Learning* 198). I will address this domain as it could be un/veiled by *Imaginary Maps*, engaged as a work in itself, in its own right so to speak. This movement will lead me away from the most evident and canonical issues related to the elucidation of Mahasweta Devi's work, such as "the disruption of a traditional historiography" (Bagchi "Conflicting" 44) engendered by the undoing of mainstream historicist narratives of nationhood and the pedagogical/performative articulations of marginal temporalities, or the central question of the "habitat of the *subproletariat* or the *subaltern*" as "space of the displacement of the colonisation-decolonisation reversal" (Spivak "Woman" 106). Also, I will not focus on the extremely interesting debate over the literary capture of indigenous voices, or the re-contextualisation of Mahasweta Devi's fiction in political struggle in India today, all subjects addressed by Jennifer Wenzel in her important contribution to the study of the book ("Grim Fairy Tales" *passim*).

In other words, I would like to connect my reading of *Imaginary Maps* to a now slightly outmoded question, one that Spivak was able to address with remarkable efficacy in an essay on another story by Mahasweta Devi, "Stanadayini," and that seems to have been overshadowed in the subsequent vicissitudes of Devi's criticism in Europe and the US. To come back to "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern," in particular to a question that Spivak poses at the very beginning of that article, could appear as a return to the origin of a certain critical tradition of postcolonial

readings in literature, because of the ground-breaking role that that writing has played in the thematic orientation of postcolonial theory. My aim is to reconsider some unexplored potentialities which were originally outlined as the point of departure of Spivak's own reading of Mahasweta Devi, but which have subsequently been covered by the predominance of other, then and now extremely cogent, political and intellectual constellations. The question was posed by Spivak herself on that occasion:

> A historian confronts a text of counterinsurgency or gendering where the subaltern has been represented. He unravels the text to assign a new subject-position to the subaltern, gendered or otherwise. A teacher of literature confronts a sympathetic text where the gendered subaltern has been represented. She unravels the text to make visible the assignment of subject-positions. (Spivak *Other Worlds* 332)

I find the comparison opening this essay extremely interesting because of what it presumes, a postulate that is unpacked during the first sections of the essay: there is a text, which is encoded as a specified object of disciplinary formations, and there are two characters, one a male historian and the other a female "teacher of literature." There are two issues at stake: gendering and subalternity, which operate and reverberate both at the level of the literary (or documentary) material and in the scene of critical reception. But there is also a difference, which provides Spivak's speculation with a more general background: the difference between history and literature in the interpretation of a text. This distinction is approached from a very theoretical point of view, and eventually recoded and clarified:

> Those who read or write literature can claim as little of subaltern status as those who read or write history. The difference is that the subaltern as object is supposed to be imagined in one case and real in another. I am suggesting that it is a bit of both in both cases. The writer acknowledges this by claiming to do research (my fiction is also historical). The historian might acknowledge this by looking at the mechanics of representation (my history is also fictive). (336)

In the passage Spivak points out that there is a distinction to be made, but also a connection, or a channel to be kept open: the interstices between historical concatenation and literary figuration. Spivak does neither advocate a rhetorical

encapsulation of history in an expanded literary field, nor a simplistically historical reduction in the study of artistic forms: the most fascinating aspect of her reflection consists in the fact that she is able to articulate a "traffic in telescoped symbols" (Spivak *Critique* 205) between history and literature when a similar object of investigation is produced in a potentially elusive cross-disciplinary terrain. But study of literature and historical reconstruction are two fields or genres of knowledge which are different in their claims and aims and are not to be mixed, even when it seems that it is the object of analysis in itself which requires such a blurring of boundaries. This point should be carefully kept in mind when we deal with the problem of the context and location of Mahasweta Devi's stories: what is the difference between literature and history in the case of *Imaginary Maps*?

In her essay on "Stanadayini," Spivak deploys two words: imagined and real, and suggests that "it is a bit of both in both cases." But what does it mean to affirm this coexistence of imagination and reality in a story by Mahasweta Devi? If it does not point to the recognition of the figurative element in historiographical prose, this reasoning should be read from the perspective of the teacher of literature, as a reflection able to overcome the limiting identification of literature and the imaginary. This reflection could lead us to rethink the creative or aesthetic dimension of the literary as primarily concerned with reality, rather than with the imagination as such. It is very important to notice what this theoretical elaboration implies in the unravelling of Spivak's reading of "Stanadayini;" in her practice of a different historico-literary criticism. If her thematic interest is directed to the representation of the subaltern, her methodological approach to the text should provoke a critical dialogue, a conversation able to bring to crisis the singular, autonomous disciplinary limitations of both history and literary criticism. This dialogical scene is made possible by the fact that, even if there is a bit of reality and a bit of the imagination in both historical document and literary creation, history and literature should not be confused. In other words, the type of question that Spivak raises at the beginning of her reading of Mahasweta Devi has something to do with the writing of history and the writing of literature and literary criticism, and the traffic and influence between the two. As regards the historical context of the stories collected by Spivak in *Imaginary Maps*, this should be placed in the political situation of West Bengal at the end of the 1970s. An overview of the context is provided by Sugata Bose in a study on rural Bengal since 1770:

Since 1977 the state of West Bengal has been governed by the Left Front led by

> the C.P.I.(M) [Communist Party]. It has followed a cautious but clearly class-based policy of consolidating its electoral power base in the rural areas among the middling peasantry including sharecroppers. Firmly entrenched in the elected panchayats or local governments from the village level upwards, the C.P.I.(M) has provided one of the most stable and at the same time moderately progressive state governments in independent India. But its repeated electoral successes have been achieved only by nurturing a peasant smallholder base of support and not delivering anything of substance to the poorest of the landless rural poor. In so doing the C.P.I.(M) has merely strengthened the middling peasantry's attachment to petty landed property. (*Rural* 178)

Mahasweta Devi began her writing career in 1956 with the publication of *The Queen of Jhansi,* and it is since the end of the 1960s that she started to be involved in the political struggles and sufferings of tribals, of which *Imaginary Maps* is a fictional account. After the death of her father in 1979, Mahasweta Devi took charge of the periodical he directed, *Bortika.* As Maitreya Ghatak points out, since she became the editor of that journal, *Bortika* "became a forum where small peasants, agricultural labourers, tribals, workers in factories, rickshaw pullers, could write about their life and problems" ("Introduction" xiv). Mahasweta "insisted that the contributions must be based on facts, figures, observations and even surveys – only those actually relevant to an understanding of a problem that affected the people, or those which provided some directions for change" (xv). While she had been affiliated to the Communist Party in Bengal, she is renowned for being close to the life of the disenfranchised rather than merely adhering to the policies of the Party. In 1981, "she was involved in the formation of an organization of bonded labourers in Palamau district, along with a local journalist, Rameshwaram. Since then, she has been associated with a large number of organizations, most of them tribal and a few of those traditionally considered untouchable by Hindu society" (xviii). While the historical context should be taken into account, the fact that the stories collected in *Imaginary Maps* are presented as literature rather than journalism or historiography should not be set aside. In its relation to history, literature would be a way of transmission that is able to locate the social or historical situation in a different figurative dynamic. "The two operations are similar but not identical," writes Spivak about the role of the historian and the teacher of literature in the first page of her essay. But since both literature and history deal with reality, and if they deal with it differently, then we could ask: what is the specificity of the literary as

regards its referential or realistic dimension? In other words, I would like to suggest that what is being considered in Spivak's questioning is the pre-eminently aesthetic problematic of literary realism, a train of thought I will elaborate on in my reading of Mahasweta Devi. The potentialities of this reasoning are unfolded and displayed when Spivak substantially approaches Devi's text, and in particular when Spivak provides her analysis of the story, calling into question the way in which Mahasweta Devi interpreted her own writing. Spivak's interpretation cannot be restricted to the essay on "Stanadayini," although it characterises an important element of Spivak's subject-position as doorkeeper and custodian of Mahasweta Devi's work, a feature that might signify beyond itself, then, as vehicle of a specific intervention in the field of literary and cultural studies. Spivak writes:

> By Mahasweta Devi's own account, "Stanadayini" is a parable of India after decolonization . . . This interesting reading is not very useful from the perspective of a study of the subaltern. Here the representation of India is by way of the subaltern as metaphor . . . Under the imperatives of such a reading, the "effect of the real" of the vehicle must necessarily be underplayed. The subaltern must be seen only as vehicle of a greater meaning. The traffic between the historian and the writer that I have been proposing could not be justified if one devoted oneself to this reading. In order that Mahasweta's parable be disclosed, what must be excluded from the story is precisely the attempt to represent the subaltern as such. (Spivak *Other Worlds* 337)

Spivak adopts the terms parable and metaphor to designate Devi's reading of her own story, but, in my opinion, it would also be appropriate to use the term allegory, in reference to the debated issue of the national allegory, and the image of the mother as allegory of the nation in India, a classical theme in postcolonial historiography. Charu Gupta emphasises the maternal metaphor in India: "The maternal metaphor was constantly evoked for designing the nation, even if it often remained a bodyless and a wordless feminine body, taking the shape of maps, masculine gendered words or statistical figures" ("Icon" 4297). I find it extremely remarkable that Spivak dismisses that reading of the story, and advances a different interpretation, in order not only to address more faithfully the attempt to represent the subaltern, but also to justify the traffic between the historian and the writer, or the literary scholar, which she articulates at the beginning of her essay. While reading that passage in Spivak's essay, I felt that the intention of inaugurating a

productive traffic between the historian and the writer was an extremely intriguing project. I was also really impressed by the framing of this undertaking in the interplay between representation and parable, a question that Spivak re-examines later on in that essay, by writing that Jashoda (the main character of "Stanadayini") inhabits "the shifting line between parable and representation" (Spivak *Other Worlds* 355). Spivak indicates the double scene in which the literary subaltern is placed as both parabolic sign and representative of a concrete subalternity. The recognition of this shifting line notwithstanding, the allegorical side of the story – more than of Devi's own reading – seems to be put to one side, and not really engaged with as compositional counterpart of a representative or realist dimension.

Differently, it might be suggested that the tension between allegory and representation is able to generate the specific aesthetic configuration of a scene of custody, one which is obliterated by a strictly historiographical or documentary reading of Mahasweta Devi's writing. This reading could show, on the one hand, the relation but also the distinction between Devi's narrative and her journalism. On the other hand, it could emphasise that the question of Mahasweta Devi's aesthetic – her aesthetic of custodianship – is incorporated by the figurative features of her stories, more vividly and intensely rather than in her reports or documents. This is not to dismiss the political side, but rather it is an attempt to show that fictional writing is able to reveal the traffic between literature and history, which is at work in both the journalistic and fictional work of Mahasweta Devi. Spivak's contribution is extremely important because able to raise the question of realism in the analysis of postcolonial literature. However, the question of realism should not be reduced to what Hillis Miller has portrayed as the anti-fictional counter-displacement of narrative, often provided by writers in interviews or prefaces: "I did research, my fiction is also historical" (Miller "Narrative" *passim*). The reference to the real should be detected and decoded in the literary work itself, in its script or figurative texture. In other words, the question of realism is also the question of figuration. The thesis I intend to pose could be phrased as follows: in order to assemble a creative space of communication between history and literature, the allegorical component should not be marginalised, but rather it could be understood as intimately related to the realist dimension of the literary creation. My aim is to show that it is a kind of dialectical tension between representational and allegorical imperatives that delineates a properly transformative or revolutionary aesthetic space in this work. This particular reading will lead me to a formulation of custodianship as figured between allegory and realism, or custodianship as a

question of connecting figuration and the real or, from a different perspective, communication and the incommunicable. I hope my reading will contribute to a reconsideration of the importance of the aesthetic dimension in situating some specific stories in a much larger network of collective struggle and participation, a proposition declared by Spivak in her reading of "Stanadayini," and to which I intend to subscribe in my re-reading of *Imaginary Maps*.

Mobilised Traditions and the Immanence of the Real

In this section, I will propose a reading of the first story. Spivak has described it as one of mobilised traditions, a story in which the traditional idiom is reinscribed as political agency. While Spivak's suggestion is very interesting, my reading will focus on a slightly different problematic, also suggested by Spivak in an interview where she talks about the "fact that we are not dealing just with this content, but the content-ness of this content as arranged by other contents . . . the production of versions of the real" ("Interview" 89). My reading will attempt to show that what is at issue in this first story is, not only a question about the politicisation of tradition, but also a shift in the very idea of tradition, from filiation to conviviality. Yet this shift is represented by a specific figurative element of this story, the image of blood recurring before and during the ritual killing. This figural component is irreducible to a literal or anthropological reading and may suggest that the story includes an aesthetic aspect that is about the redefinition of the real, literature as transformative figuration rather than mere repetition of the existing.

The first story presented in *Imaginary Maps* has been titled "The Hunt" by Spivak, even though the choice to translate in this way the original word in Bengali, which could also mean "The Prey," could already suggest a reading of the story, an intimate act of reading presented in the very text of the translation: "a reinscription of the enablement that is given by the ritual" (Spivak "Interview" 90). The story begins with the description of the setting of the narrated events:

> The place is on the Gomo-Daltonganj line. *Trains* stopped at this *station* once upon a time. The expense of having *trains* stop was perhaps too much. Now one sees a stray cow or a goat in the *station* room, in the residential *quarters* and the porters' shanties. The *billboard* says "Kuruda *Outstation, Abandoned.*" Arrived here the *train* slows. It gasps as it climbs. It climbs Kuruda Hill bit by bit right from here. It is a low hill. After a while the *train* enters a ravine.

(*Imaginary* 1) [20]

The text introduces some specific place names, and gives an exact location: Gomoh and Daltonganj are two towns in the Palamu district, Jharkhand, and the place is situated on the railway line connecting these two cities. In spite of its descriptive conciseness, the coordination of short sentences constituting this beginning could transmit a sense of abandonment, which is both explicitly and figuratively conveyed by the text, in the slowing of the train before entering a ravine and in the message on the billboard of the station. The emphasis is on economic and material elements in the landscape: we are told about the difficult track of the train in these places, and the poverty of the area is immediately signified by the fact that there is no money for making the train stop there. The scenario of abandonment and desolation of Kuruda is then contrasted with a neighbouring market town, Tohri, where the train stops and many economic activities take place. This contrast between Tohri and Kuruda, even though it is nothing more than the introduction to the story, could point to something else or something more than a simple geographical information. To be more precise, if there is reference to a precise region, the spatial coordination and succinct connotation of the atmosphere of the place looks like it is animated and then interrupted by what we could encode as the first real event of the story: Mary Oraon.

> When Mary Oraon comes up, she looks at the *train*, as the passengers look at her if they see her. Eighteen years old, tall, flat-featured, light copper skin. Usually she wears a print sari. At a distance she looks most seductive, but close up you see a strong message of rejection in her glance. You wouldn't call her a tribal at first sight. Yet she is a tribal. (2)

The visualisation of the character proposed to the reader is vivid and essential: Mary is standing; she looks at the train, and could be seen from far away, but not in the strength of her glance, as her message of rejection cannot be grasped from the distance and movement of the train.

What I read in the first two pages of "The Hunt" is an insistence on clashes and a pervasive feeling of antagonism: the wild landscape is contrasted with decadent

[20] As specified in the translator's note included in the book, the words in English in the original have been italicised in the translation. This particular strategy of translation is discussed in detail in Minoli Salgado "Tribal Stories."

signs of modernity: train, station, station room; Tohri is opposed to Kuruda; Mary to the train, or to the passengers looking at her from the windows of the carriages; Mary is a tribal, yet she does not look like a tribal. There is a question of not being able to see, of blindness and insight, or the presentation of what cannot be deciphered, in other word a question about the secret, which could be announced in this beginning, and that will return in the last story.

Mary is the first name of the protagonist of this story, but her family name, Oraon, is the collective naming of one of the so-called scheduled tribes in India: "The Oraon are mainly found in Bihar. In Chhattisgarh they are found in the districts of Raigarh, Jashpur and Sarguja. They are divided into a number of totemic clans. Marriage among them is mainly monogamous. The Oraon are mostly settled agriculturists and also depend on hunting, fishing, cattle-rearing etc. They worship local village deities like Andheri Pat" (Kumar *Demography* 44).[21] The narration continues with the description of Mary, who is "the illegitimate daughter of a white father" and an Oraon mother, and for this reason the tribal population to which she belongs "don't think of her as their blood and do not place the harsh injunctions of their own society upon her. She would have rebelled if they had. She is unhappy that they don't" (*Imaginary* 6). The fact that Mary does not entirely belong to her own family casts some radical doubts on seeing her as representative of her tribe, as a literally anthropological reading of the story would too quickly detect. Mary is not a native informant, rather, she keeps in custody the potential of a difference, a rebellion signed by the strength of her glance, by her standing before the train in the first scene, and by many other aspects of her life which are described in the story. She is the daughter of the son of a former settler colonialist, who fled after Independence and sold his household to a rich Indian family. She works without wage for this family and earns a living by picking and selling the fruit from the mahua trees in the estate that belonged to her father. She is qualified by her strong character, dedication to work, and independence of thinking. She has the intention

[21] The Oraons have been subjected to genetic and genomic studies, as shown in Saha, "Genetic Studies": "Blood samples were collected from 334 unrelated male and female Oraons of eastern India by the fingerprick method into heparinized capillary tubes and onto Whatman 3 MM filter paper strips . . . Plasma was separated from the capillary tubes and used for protein polymorphisms (Hp, Tf, Alb, and Gc) while filter papers were used for hemoglobin and red cell enzyme polymorphisms. Packed cells in capillary tubes were stored as stocks for repeat experiments on haemoglobin and red cell enzymes. The sample comprised 130 sedentes, resident in the Gumla district, Bihar, and 204 migrants residing in the Birpara area of the Jalpaiguri district, North Bengal" (322). I am intrigued by this definition of belonging on the basis of blood samples, proper to physical anthropology. In "The Hunt" blood as figurative element becomes the sign of a substantially different form of commonality.

to marry a Muslim boy from the market town: "Daughter of an Oraon mother, she looks different, and she is also exceptionally tall. So she couldn't find a boy of her own kind" (3). Spivak describes her in the following way: "Mary Oraon, the individual who is and is not, completely undoes the binary opposition between the pure East and the contaminated West, the desire to present oneself in a kind of primitive differentiation which is completely ahistorical" ("Interview" 84).

The plot weaves two intertwining strands: on the one hand, there is the personal love story of Mary and Jalim, and the act of courage and violence which will allow them to marry and to have a life together. On the other hand, "The Hunt" is the story of an illegal and environmentally disastrous business, the selling of the Sal trees of the area on which the Oraon economy and life depends. As both Mahasweta Devi in her political writings and Jennifer Wenzel point out, the problem of forests and deforestation is not only crucial to the survival of tribal populations in India, but also a complex social and cultural issue in the postcolonial Indian nation-state.[22] The intersection of this economic situation and of Mary's individual life is a very important aspect of "The Hunt." The story unfolds with the conclusion of the unequal business, in which a broker manages to buy the trees of the area for a ridiculous price and to cheat Prasadji, the owner of the estate. Mary understands the plot that will lead both Prasadji and the people living in the area to ruin and informs Prasadji of his mistake. In the meantime Tehsildar, the broker who intends to buy the trees and to conclude the business, is captured by Mary's beauty and begins to molest and pursue her. The story ends with a ritual, the recurrence of a spring festival, reflected in the title of this tale:

> It is revealed that the ritual of the hunt that the tribes celebrate at the spring festival is for the women to perform this year. For twelve years men run the hunt. Then comes the women's turn. It's Jani Parab. Like the men they too go out with bow and arrow. They run in forest and hill. They kill hedgehogs, rabbits, birds, whatever they can get. Then they picnic together, drink liquor, sing, and return home at evening. (*Imaginary* 12)

During this celebration, Mary manages to attract Tehsildar in a wild place and to kill him with her knife. Then she throws his body down in a ravine. Interestingly, Spivak interpreted this event, that is the final occurrence of the story, as the mobilisation of

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[22] Jennifer Wenzel "Epic Struggles," Vidhya Das "Minor Forest," Ramachandra Guha "Colonialism," Prakash Louis "Marginalisation."

a particular tradition for the purpose of resistance against the destruction of the economic and social life of the tribal population. "This half-caste tribal woman takes the static re-enactment of the festival and transforms it into something active; and that performance script becomes indistinguishable from political agency" ("Interview" 84).

The fact that Tehsildar is named, in the act of the hunt, "animal," and killed as a ritual prey, does support her reading. Nevertheless, I would like to foreground some different aspects presented by this story and to linger on the intriguing representation of the final, ritual scene, the idea that Mary has "rewritten it, doing something transgressive with it" (90). The problematic of transforming, or transgressive rewriting, is not just about difference in repetition, but could also be about writing itself, its redefinition of the real. The final scene could include a reflection on literary representation itself, rather than being a mere content. The question that I would pose to Spivak's reading could be: what is the meaning of this "transgression" not just as a content, but also as a narrative, a story? What happens when transgression is incorporated as figurative element of this story? Mary is not an ordinary member of the Oraon tribe, not only because she is the product of what Spivak calls a "disabling violation" (92), the colonialist father figure. Most importantly, she is not an ordinary native informant because her belonging is defined in terms of conviviality rather than of blood, conviviality rather than filiation: "She sits at any Oraon house in the village, fries wheatcakes on a clay stove, eats with everyone" (*Imaginary* 6). The main aspects of her character are beauty, intelligence, razor-sharp mind, and relative freedom from the harsh injunctions of her own society.

The mobilisation of the ritual of the hunt for political contest overshadows that Mary does not need the idiom of tradition to understand and struggle against the machinery of exploitation at work in her region. She is very strong in economic matters, and nowhere in the story are we told of her being particularly religious. After the killing, "she takes the *wallet* from Tehsildar's *pocket*. A lot of money. A lot of money. She undoes the fold in the cloth at her waist and puts the money with her own savings" (17). Her mother abandoned Christianity after losing her job in the household. Similarly, the belief to which the ritual of the hunt is associated is not really explained to the reader, who is therefore placed side-by-side with the women performing the ritual, who do not know the meaning of it. "They don't know why they hunt. The men know. They have been playing the hunt for a thousand million moons on this day" (12). The religious element in this text is almost absent, and

where mentioned it is explained in manifestly economic terms.

The material and secular perspective that the story engenders is generally considered one prominent feature in literary realism, symptomatic of its democratic and politically engaged concern with a worldly order of disillusionment and social mobility, aspects underlined by canonical studies on realism, such as the works of George Levine ("Literary Realism"), and Harry Levin ("What is Realism?"). These aspects could resonate with Priyamvada Gopal's interrogation of the figure of the subaltern, which has been the subject of an important controversy in the Subaltern Studies group: "What if the subaltern upset our generous expectation of "complete alterity" by articulating "rational" or even merely non-religious views of her own, however? What if she told us of things other than ghosts and spirits? Would she cease forthwith to be subaltern (enough)?" ("Reading" 158). In this context, it could be mentioned that the idea of mobilised tradition – a reinscription of the ritual – could somehow be affiliated to the idea of "invented tradition" famously defined by Eric Hobsbawm in his introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*. To be more precise, the ritual of "The Hunt" could be more aptly described as what Hobsbawm names "custom," that is the adaptation of really existing cultural forms to changing political circumstances in "so called 'traditional' societies" (*Invention* 2). It is the use of culture in political struggle rather than the invention of new forms in "modern" societies: what custom does "is to give any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity" (2). However, while the continuity of the ritual of "The Hunt" could be real rather than invented, thus making it more akin to a custom rather than a properly invented tradition, a certain idea of the religious traditional idiom as false consciousness is what a reading of "The Hunt" as mobilised tradition could lead us to conclude.

As Christopher Steiner points out in his discussion of Hobsbawm and Ranger's volume, tradition "in this sense is evacuated of all meaning and becomes a mere epiphenomenon or mask hiding the 'real' social conditions and causes underlying current struggles, issues and concerns" ("Tradition" 95). While there is a question about tradition in the story, the question is not just about the use of tradition for gaining political agency. What could be at stake here is a reflection on the story itself, on what the story is able to tell and figure, rather than a literal representation of the event. The ritual killing could be a way of keeping in custody the resistance of tribal peoples, the sign that it continues to live, rather than the adaptation of the ritual as politics. In my opinion, the staging of the murder and the ending of the story could point to a different problematic enacted by this narrative.

In order to disclose my reading, I will focus on a specific element in this story, the image of blood. As already noticed, a specific reference to blood is mentioned at the beginning, when the participation of Mary to the Oraon collectivity is represented as one of illegitimate filiation, not thinkable as a kinship relation. The image of blood recurs intensively in the final episode, before and after the act of killing: "A great thirst dances in her blood. Tehsildar, Tehsildar, I'm almost there. Tehsildar wants her a lot. Now Jalim is nothing to her. With how much violence can Tehsildar want her? How many *degrees Fahrenheit*? Is his blood as wild as Mary's? As daring?" (*Imaginary* 15-16). I would like to suggest that blood is subjected to a literary recoding: from mark of filiation and kinship to image of death and rebirth, ritual of regeneration which allows Mary to confirm her solidarity to the tribal community and her faithfulness to Jalim on a different basis. If the first mention of blood reminded me of the genetic, biological essentialism of technologies of identity executed on a bodily level, the figural recurrence of blood in the concluding scene is pointing to a new kind of freedom for Mary and the Oraon group. The scene is described as follows:

> In the women's gathering Mary drank the most wine, sang, danced, ate the meat and rice with the greatest relish. At first everyone mocked her for not having made a kill. Then Budhni said, "Look how she's eating? As if she has made the biggest kill". Mary kissed Budhni with her unwashed mouth. (17)

This intuitive understanding and kissing between Mary and Budhni, a sort of sisterhood, is here inscribed in a frame of conviviality, a feast and banquet that does not presuppose "blood" as family but rather as participation in the same struggle, a reference to death that signals the possibility of life. As Paul Gilroy writes, conviviality can be understood as a process of cohabitation and interaction in ordinary life. Gilroy highlights its "radical openness" which "introduces a measure of distance from the pivotal term 'identity,' which has proved to be such an ambiguous resource in the analysis of race, ethnicity, and politics" (*After Empire* xi). Etymologically a form of co-living, hence of eating-together, the act of sharing the meal, conviviality is not identity. This displaced codification of blood and the ritual could suggest the attempt to change a political and economic situation of bondage and oppression: Mary will awaken Jalim that same night, and they will run away together. This "awakening" could be what the story achieves in the end: the indication of a new vision of reality, or a new beginning in which the story

overcomes a simple, objective statement about the agony and defeat of tribal peoples. The killing of the broker does not only stage the political agency gained through the transgressive reinscription of tradition. It is also an act of fidelity, the redefinition of a being in common that is not belonging, a common struggle which is not the repetition of a ritual of identity. The killing, in other words, could be approached as a question about continuing the reality of the struggle against cultural annihilation, a reflection on what the story is able to do, and its relation to the context of tribal resistance.

I would like to read "The Hunt" as a tale about the problem of the definition of reality rather than one of mobilised traditions. This story ends with a killing, the death of a man which signals a certain re-birth, or at least points to a distancing of the narrative from the incumbent process of economic exploitation and social annihilation. This would resonate with the anthropological remark by Nicholas Dirks that rituals incorporate the "cosmological and symbolic site for the containment of chaos and the regeneration of the world" ("Ritual" 220). As Dirks notices, this regenerative drive does not always lead to the re-establishment of a previous order, but it might be the site for social change and resistance: "while rituals provide critical moments for the definition of collectivities and the articulation of rank and power, they often occasion more conflict than consensus, . . . as much a social moment of liminality in which all relations of power (and powerlessness) are up for grabs as it is a time for the reconstitution and celebration of a highly political (and thus disorderly) ritual order" (220).

"The Hunt" addresses a real context: it is about the violence of economic and political forces at work in contemporary India. The region between Gomoh and Daltonganj is real. In "The Author in Conversation," included in *Imaginary Maps*, Mahasweta Devi affirms: "I know that area like the palm of my hand. I have seen the person I have called Mary Oraon. The tribals have this animal hunting festival in Bihar" (xvii-xviii). The style in which this story is written is succinct, it goes to the point and, as Spivak explains, it avoids hypotaxis and rather uses parataxis ("Interview" 89). However, Spivak's translation seems to retain "the unexpectedness of a terse piece of journalism that is being transformed into poetry," which Amit Chaudhuri retrieves in Devi's original Bengali text (*Vintage* 122). A specific aspect noticed by another translator, Sumanta Banerjee, seems to me to be recognisable in Spivak's translation: "To describe this relentless struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors, the powerful and the powerless, at the various levels of our society, Mahasweta Devi has developed a unique style that combines stinging wit with a note

of pathos" ("Translator" 25). Even though Mahasweta Devi's contrast of wit and pathos, journalism and poetry, has been described as "radically different from the prescriptive imaging of reality" proper to other socially committed Bengali writers (Beck and Bose "Dispossession" 447), it could still be read as the technique of a mere report on the current situation of tribals in India. Yet, in "The Hunt" what Mary does is, in a sense, to break through this kind of reality. This character incarnates a regenerative drive aimed at redefining reality: the revolutionary potential of a particular parable that dismantles the domination of an exploitative machinery, and that for this reason presents the radical figuration of a truly realist, namely transformative, impulse.

Shachi Arya, in a book on tribal activism, describes the experience of reading Mahasweta Devi in a way that could resonate with the story itself: "passing through these stories is a thrilling experience and the reality of these pierces through your heart like a sharp-edged knife" (*Tribal* 129). In its "piercing" by a sharp knife, the death of Tehsildar is the point where the story reclaims its specificity, where its content is not imposed by an immanent and overwhelming reality of economic oppression, extinction, and injustice; rather, another reality is pointed to – one that is freed from a constricting immanence and immobility. Mary, a figure of irresistible beauty, signals the presence of an artistic element, or appearance, in this story. The appearance of Mary Oraon could remind the reader of Theodor Adorno's meditation on the role of semblance and the aesthetic in literature. While it is not my intention here to force Adorno's perspective upon Mahasweta Devi's story, there could be some kind of affinity, some correspondences in Mary Oraon as fictional character – her beauty, her strength, her transformative or transgressive presence – that could suggest that she partakes of the figural element of the story. Adorno writes:

> Artistic appearance, the fact that art has set itself apart in qualitative terms from the immediate actuality in which it magically came into being, is neither its ideological Fall, nor does it make art an arbitrary system of signs, as if it merely reproduced the world without claiming to possess the same immediate reality. (Adorno "Reconciliation" 159)

Mary Oraon could be read as the figure of a narrative impulse that goes against a mere reproduction of the state of things. The figure of death could be understood as the locus where the story exceeds a merely fictional duplication of the social situation, so that the text, considered in its aesthetic feature, is transformed in what

Adorno called a negative knowledge of the actual world, a knowledge configured by virtue of a qualitative distance, or independence of the artistic medium from the immanence of economic and political reality. It is because of this tension that the weaving of the text is able to reflect the struggle and resistance which is the object of narration and to transmit not only a sense of the endangered life of indigenous peoples in India, but also a reflection on the literary representation itself. "The Hunt" unfolds the attempt made by a work of art to suggest that realism does not only consist in the repetition of the existing, but it is animated by a sort of figural imperative, an interruption or "ritual killing" of the immediacy of external forces, an act signified by the conclusion. As Linda Nochlin points out, the followers of the realist movement in art were animated by "a very stringent effort to fight clear of existing [beliefs, styles, and status quo] and to battle their way through to new, less shopworn and more radically empirical formulations of their experience" (*Realism* 51-52). Yet this effort does not deny the reality against which it rebels, it rather keeps the burden of its collective socio-economic framework in tension with the specificity of the artistic configuration.

Alongside the mobilisation of tradition, which could be a part of the content of the story, the ritual becomes the act of custodianship which is the story itself, tradition as fidelity to a struggle which defines the common being. Custodianship would be the transmission of a spirit of resistance able to question the power of those who arrogate the right and authority to define what reality is. Beyond the condition of tribals as one of oppression, agony and exploitation, there is something of their resistance that should be transmitted. Yet at the same time this spirit of resistance indicates the possibility of another reality principle, the promise of a world free from domination. This corresponds to the Adornian observation proposed by Marcuse in *The Aesthetic Dimension*: "The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to *define* what is *real*" (9). This reflection could resonate with Adorno's important statement about creativity, an idea of the place of the literary invention and its relation to historical reality. Adorno states, in his essay on "Commitment" (190):

> The imagination of the artist is not a creation *ex nihilo*; only dilettanti and aesthetes believe it to be so. Works of art that react against empirical reality obey the forces of that reality, which reject intellectual creations and throw them back on themselves. There is no material content, no formal category of artistic creation, however mysteriously transmitted and itself unaware of the process,

which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free.

Adorno's idea that art originates in the empirical reality from which it breaks free could suggest the tension between the imperative of representation and the transformative drive that "The Hunt" passes on. In its reformulation of collectivity and "blood" as the adherence to a common struggle, the aesthetic of conviviality opened by "The Hunt" relies neither in its adequate repetition of socio-political reality nor in its imaginative component, but in the contrapuntal, contrasting maintenance of the actual circumstances of reference and something that as yet has no name, but that could be called its allegorical dimension.

Production/Consumption and the Foreign Body

The third section of this chapter will centre on the figure of Douloti, the main character of the second story. It will show that the death of Douloti, which concludes the narrative, could have an allegorical value. While on one level the story should be read "literally" as a representation of the subaltern and the extreme degree of violence caused by bonded labour in India, the death of Douloti evades this literality and could point to an allegorical register. Following Benjamin, "allegorical" is redefined in this context as an antinomic figuration of both an experience and an expression, a figure of contrast or interruption mirrored in both the content of the story and the weaving of the narrative. In the allegorical text, the content of the narrative is interrupted by the figuration of the story. Through the allegory, content and form, letter and figure, bring each other to crisis. Thus, Douloti's death is allegorical because it paradoxically points to the life of tribal peoples, a continuity of their life in the story, and because it cannot be assimilated to the circuit of production and consumption to which her living body is subjected. Her dead body remains a foreign body irreducible to the capitalist anaesthesia which throughout the story makes her a mere means for producing capital. Benjamin's suggestion that, within the allegorical mode, death could stand for life, will show that this fictional story of death becomes a sign of the impossibility to mourn the destruction of tribals. The death of Douloti resists the reinscription in the economy of the narrative and leaves the text itself in abeyance, in the impossibility of being continued or our attention redirected to something else. This impossibility to mourn will open the question of mourning something that cannot be mourned, which is the subject of the last story, "Pterodactyl."

"Douloti the Bountiful," the second story collected in *Imaginary Maps,* epitomises some important aspects of a possible allegorical desire in the writing of Mahasweta Devi, especially the quality that Joel Fineman portrays as the "tendency on the part of allegory to read itself, for its theme to dominate its narrative, or, as [Northorp] Frye says, to prescribe the directions of its commentary" ("Structure" 29), a tendency emerging in the very conclusion of the narrative and that would suggest a parallelism with "Stanadayini." The final scene recounts the death of the protagonist Douloti, a girl who is abducted and then sold into prostitution to repay the debts of her father. In her analysis of this story, Spivak rightly emphasises the importance of the female body as "the last instance in a system whose general regulator is still the loan: usurer's capital, imbricated, level by level, in national industrial and transnational global capital" ("Woman" 112). One of the most terrible and striking aspects of this narration is that, as in "Stanadayini," the reproductive female body is inserted in a perverted and extremely violent machinery of exploitation. The living properties of the body are constricted and finally annihilated by their inscription in an economic system of capitalist accumulation, a system regulated by inequality or in-equivalence and destructive repetition.

This story is one of oppression and death, and it contains a clear reference to Mahasweta Devi's political activism, in particular to her struggle against bonded labour. The system of debt as a method of surplus extraction has been an historical condition of the social production of rural labour in West Bengal. Sugata Bose explains that merchant "and usury capital were distinct but they effectively complemented each other in exploiting the working peasantry" (*Rural* 124). The first part of *Dust on the Road,* "The Bonded Labourers of Palamau" (1-36) contains articles written by Mahasweta Devi from 1981 to 1984. They denounce the situation of bonded labourers, tribals kept in slavery by an illegal system of loan, people who are not aware of their rights and who are prevented from even seeking help from local authorities: "the bonded labourers are kept in darkness so that they can slave for the feudal landowners, who can flourish and prove themselves pillars of strength for the ruling powers" (*Dust* 27). Following Mahasweta Devi, it could be affirmed that this contemporary form of slavery and oppression is a local form of exploitation of the poor. In the Palamau district, it "is totally inconceivable that a *bandhua* [bonded labourer] can actually come forward and declare himself to the district administration, defying the near-almighty Rajput or brahman who has, over centuries, exploited and used him as a slave. To unite bonded labourers and urge them to come jointly and fight against exploitation, needs courage" (*Dust* 16-17).

However, the mechanism of bonded labour in Palamau should be understood as something deeply imbricated in the national and transnational logic of the capitalist mode of production, the corruption and collusion of both national and local secular public institutions, and the persistence of an unequal society where tribals and untouchables are kept in a state of poverty and subjugation. Devi's denunciation of this situation could be understood, not only as a critique of the pervasive corruption in the post-colonial nation state, but also a call for continuing the unfinished project of decolonisation and liberation from old and new forms of oppression of peasants in Bengal. In one of her pieces of journalism, Mahasweta Devi writes: "Palamau is, in reality, a mirror of true India" (*Dust* 9).

While on the one hand the situation described is rooted in a first-hand knowledge of the oppression and struggle of these peoples, on the other hand, I would like to propose, this story has something to do with the awakening of consciousness, and with death as allegory of the living. Even though it is not about a sacrifice or a suicide, nonetheless Douloti's death may be read as a case of what Gayatri Spivak calls "comparativism in extremis": "a plea to the political other to recognize equivalence, to respond, and, finally, to end oppression. I have been long attracted to this species of comparativism, attempting to go outside of the space-time enclosure, when that enclosure means oppression, colonial or gendered or both, undoing history and geography by inscribing the body with death" ("Comparativism" 615). Against the historical and geographical closure operated by the local mechanisms for capital accumulation (conversion of the living body into money), the story could be said to pose a reflection on death as a call for equivalence, a call for recognising the voice/resistance of the subaltern through the work of figuration. The fact that the body is the crucial figurative element as well as the link to the real situation of tribal peoples could reveal a specific tension between a system of exploitation and a space that could point to a future beyond it. As Elleke Boehmer emphasises in a different context, in her reading of different stories:

> [T]he body complex as a palimpsest of different symbolic layers – land, mother, scored flesh – is disclosed, opened out and ultimately divided up into multiple constituent narratives of bodily/national investment. Symbol is expanded into plot, or plots, history in the epic sense of the tale of a nation becomes biography, autobiography, anecdote, . . . in other words, becomes individual or communal narrative, less lofty than national epic, certainly not as coherent, not as authoritative. Character (as in symbol, cipher) is transfigured into character (as

> in the subject of story). The inscribed body – woman, oppressed – inscribes itself. ("Transfiguring" 275)

I would read the palimpsest essence of the figured body as the place where the link to reality is displayed in all its vividness and strength, and where the mechanism of consumption/production is not just represented, but also relocated in an antagonistic framework, a frame of possible resistance. If the female body is the central character of the story, the body is also signifier of a more general situation, in which the caste system, the bureaucratic power of the government, and economic oppression are all combined to produce a situation of extreme poverty. Indigenous feudal structures are combined to neocolonialist economy of deforestation, dispossession and the logic of profit. The bonded slaves, *kamiyas*, are the lower strata of the population and their life is entirely ruled by the interest of landowners and moneylenders, who keep them as slaves by virtue of a logic of loan and debt. The essential element of this mechanism is the reduction of the body to mere labour-force, to instrument "consumed" for producing and accumulating money; it is not by chance that the story begins with two characters, Ganori and Bono Nagesia, whose corporeal details are foregrounded. Bono builds a new house for himself and his family, an act that is immediately punished by the men of Munabar, the landowner, as it is described in the story:

> The Nagesias of Seora sighed when they saw Bono's house go up. What is Bono doing? A Nagesia doesn't do this. Raise a house because he has two hundred rupees in hand?
>
> First, a Nagesia shouldn't have money. If he does, he shouldn't raise a roof. If you raise a roof, or buy a water-buffalo, the master will notice. If you buy land, the master will grab it. If you buy cattle, the master will snatch them. If you buy an umbrella for your head, or shoes for your feet, he'll have you tied to the post in the yard and beaten. That's why the other Nagesias sighed when they saw him build a hut. (*Imaginary* 24)

Because of what is perceived as an act of insubordination, Bono's house is burnt and Bono himself is locked in a room with his hands tied up. Unlike Ganori and the other Nagesias, Bono does not accept his condition as a bonded labourer, and his rebellious attitude is signified by the "dance of his hands," the hands with which he killed a hood lusting after women in the shanty town where he went to work as a

miner. But after his house is burnt and the men of the master lock him in a room, his hands cannot dance, they are tied in a rope, and his life seems to become tied, too. After burning his house, the landowner addresses him with these words:

> Take these twenty-five rupees. You are borrowing this because your house burnt down. From now on you are my bond-slave. You will repay by the body's labor. I could have made your aunt, wife, and son my bondslaves too. But they have no strength in their bodies, they won't be able to work hard. I won't ever get back the cost of giving them snacks and their breakfast of thin gruel. (28)

As this passage makes visible, the central preoccupation of the exploiter is the ability of the body as machine for work. Confronted with this situation, Bono manages to escape, and he will be back to meet Douloti towards the end of the story, as political activist working against bonded slavery. Ganori's body is crushed after being used by the landowner to pull the cart after the death of a steer, for which Ganori is held responsible. In trying to lift the carriage, Ganori falls on his face and his body is seriously injured, thus compromising his capacity to work for the landowner. After this episode Douloti, Ganori's daughter, is bought by a Brahman as alleged wife, but in reality sold in bonded prostitution.

The account of Douloti's life is shocking: her body is subjected to an intolerable degree of violence and finally consumed and annihilated by disease. As Spivak points out: "The name 'Doloti' [*sic*] is extraordinary because, in all of the northern languages it means 'traffic in wealth.' But it is also the bonded laborer's proper name" ("Interview" 89). Her permanence in the whorehouse is always defined in terms of money and productivity:

> "Let's look for a rich client for Douloti. You will get money, he will be happy." Baijnath said, "How much will I get?"
> – Easily three hundred rupees a month.
> – And she will pull in ten-rupee clients for a year, ten a day. A hundred rupees daily means three thousand rupees monthly, where is the higher profit?
> – Ten ten-rupee clients a day in this Madhpura? You can't get that sir. That's why the god tried to get a good client who'd give a big monthly fee.
> – There will surely be a bigger profit in what we get, and if we go by father's rules, I cannot carry on.

– Douloti will then turn into Somni.

– That chewed-up thing? Somni has become a beggar in ten years by father's rules. By my rule Douloti will become a beggar in five years. What's that to me? (*Imaginary* 82)

As emerges from this passage, bonded *kamiyas* are exploited according to the law of the maximum profit, and their bodies are consummated by this "rule," until they become unusable by the criminal exploiters and hence abandoned and compelled to become beggars to survive.

While "The Hunt" ended with Tehsildar's body thrown in a ravine, and with an image of feasting and rebirth after his killing, "Douloti" ends with the death of the protagonist, and with the discovery of her body in a schoolyard, lying on a map of India drawn on the ground for the celebration of the anniversary of Independence. Mahasweta Devi writes:

> Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies *bonded labor* spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs.
>
> Today, on the fifteenth of *August*, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India. (93)

In the context of the debate on the national allegory, the body of Douloti could be assumed allegorically to stand for the national body of India, but the text itself seems to prevent a similar interpretation. The concluding sentence, "Douloti is all over India," does not imply that Douloti is a metaphor of the nation-state, that Douloti *is* India. Rather, it suggests that the realities of bonded slavery represented or symbolised by the story of Douloti cannot be forgotten or hidden anymore in the writing of official history, and that the celebration of post-colonial India should be aware of this. The ending displays the carnal image of Douloti's corpse, "Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas" (93). The terrible final description culminates the process of putrefaction and consumption of her hollow body, burning with fever, shaking, and covered by red swellings. Douloti's death represents the end of the narrative, and for this reason I would like to read it as

directly related, but also opposed to Mary's killing in the first story. Unlike "The Hunt," where the realist account is interrupted by the rebellious act of literary figuration – and where the killing signals a kind of beginning: Mary will marry Jalim and they will have a life together – Douloti's death is here the final episode, the point where the narrative cannot continue. The discovery of her body displays the undeniable fact that people like Mohan, the schoolmaster who stands before Douloti's body in the concluding scene, will have to cope with the reality of bonded slavery, and try to find ways to change it. Two opposite, yet connected movements could be identified in the first two stories.

In "The Hunt" there is a first death: Tehsildar is killed; the representative of oppression, violence and economic exploitation is eliminated so that the story can continue, or rather so that life can begin. Realism (the representation of the oppression of the subaltern and her resistance) is first introduced and then re-figured as a movement in which the story tends to redefine reality. In the second story Douloti dies, so that the story itself cannot go on: the atrocious machinery of bonded slavery must come to an end, cannot be ignored, and hence Douloti's suffering must not continue. The transformative aesthetic impulse figured by the killing of Tehslidar is not the final word: with "Douloti," fiction must come back to reality, a new reality: the interruption of the story coincides with an awakening, which is indicated by Mohan's body jerking "as if his arms and legs were tied and a *machine-gun* was being emptied into him" (93). At this moment of the story, the reader is not as shocked or surprised as the teacher and the students who find her body in the morning of the celebration of the Independence. For this reason, it might be affirmed that, as readers, we are led to identify – cautiously, imperfectly, even improperly – with Douloti herself rather than with the teacher and the students. The reader is placed on Douloti's side, before the crowd of students. Before the concluding scene, the reader already knows the suffering, violence and pain of Douloti's life, the injustice of her condition, and the reader of the story could feel closer to her, rather than to the middle-class intellectuals who are unable, as another passage of the story says, "to light the fire": "There are people for passing laws, there are people to ride *jeeps*, but no one to light the fire" (88). Within the story, how could Douloti's death be read? What could be the point of her death, in other words?

The main aspect that I intend to underline is that the story could be read allegorically, not because Douloti can be a parable of India, but because there is, in her dead body, a reference to life, to a life that is not directly signified, but rather presented by the antinomic contrast of allegory. Douloti's corpse is a presence,

rather than an absence, an unburied presence that cannot be merely mourned. The allegorical value of the corpse would be the recognition of the corpse as a presence, hence the signification of life. If Mahasweta Devi's stories should not be read as documents, as a simple reportage on the agony of tribals, then how else should they be read? My suggestion is that they could be read as staging a tension between realism and allegory, a tension that is also a resistance to decipherment. What does it mean to advance that Douloti's death is an allegory? My theoretical source for this redefinition of allegory will be Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama.* The fact that in that book Benjamin analysed a European tradition of sorrow-play or mournful genre is not at all insignificant to *Imaginary Maps*, centred as it is on two deaths, and on the case of a mysteriously mourning community in the final story, which I will examine in the last part of this chapter. If the three stories can be read together, the last one is not divided from the first two, hence from Tehsildar's and Douloti's deaths. If there are some affinities between Walter Benjamin and Mahasweta Devi, this is not a question of using European philosophy to read non-Western material. It could be a different way of producing intertextuality, of finding similarities in spite of differences. Benjamin relates the notion of allegory to the corpse. He is able to read the figuration of the corpse as allegory, something that could be in turn referred to the body of Douloti in the final scene.

According to Benjamin, a certain European philosophical tradition codified allegory in contrast with a vulgarised notion of symbol, one which operated a shift from the dialectic movement between the extremes of immanence and transcendence to a simple unity of form and content. This particular definition of symbol was developed as counterpart of a restrictive notion of allegory, redefined as illustrative technique, a conventional mode of communication with no real artistic value. Benjamin insisted on redefining allegory as a specific form of expression, and he contrasted it with the symbol in its specific temporal extension. Allegory expresses "everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful" (Benjamin *Origin* 166). The allegorical way of seeing is intimately related to death:

> The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance. But if nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is also true that it has always been allegorical. (166)

The essential aspect that allowed Benjamin to explain the specific temporal essence of allegory, in its relation to death, is the image of the ruin, which might suggest the reference to a time that is conscious of its transience, its movement. Allegories are not totalities or syntheses, in that they involve an irresolvable tension between expression and convention, sacred and profane, nature and history. Allegory is defined as "amorphous fragment" opposed to the "organic totality" of the symbol. It cannot be explained as the identification between form and content, but rather as the fragmentary, antinomic coincidence of expression and experience. It operates a simultaneous elevation and devaluation of what Benjamin calls the "profane world": "Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else" (175). This devaluation of concrete detail corresponds to its paradoxical elevation: the immediate content loses value in itself but does signify the divine, hence it is raised "onto a higher plane." Similarly, in the image of the ruin "history has physically merged into the setting," (178) so that it can be glimpsed as a process of "irresistible decay." Baroque allegory is characterised by an absence of transcendence, an all-too-earthly elimination of charm and totality. Nonetheless, as Benjamin emphasises, the image of the ruin is also "the basis for a re-birth": a stripping off of the ephemeral beauty linked to the relativity of historical content in order to reach the "truth content" of the artwork. "In the allegorical construction of the baroque *Trauerspiel* such ruins have always stood out clearly as formal elements of the preserved work of art" (182).

In all these episodic and fragmentary references to different aspects of allegory, an important aesthetic idea is conveyed: the allegory operates contradictorily on two registers, on the levels of experience and expression, the narrative act and the narrated object. The profane world is elevated and devalued, meaning is destroyed and re-constituted, history is at a standstill and in irresistible motion. In an important passage of his work, Benjamin describes the importance of the body and the corpse in the allegorical configuration. He writes that

> [I]f it is in death that the spirit becomes free, in the manner of spirits, it is not until then that the body too comes into its own. For this much is self-evident: the allegorization of the physis can only be carried through in all its vigour in respect of the corpse. And the characters of the *Trauespiel* die, because it is only thus, as corpses that they can enter into the homeland of allegory. It is not for the sake of immortality that they meet their end, but for the sake of the corpse . . . Seen from the point of view of death, the product of the corpse is life. (217-218)

The corpse acquires an emblematic property, and it could be related to the image of the ruin, as deeply historical allegorisation of time, a process in which all that is transient falls away in its paradoxical elevation to a different plane. From this point of view, the corpse of Douloti might be read as the incarnation of the historicity of tribals, their suffering and the continuing violence perpetrated against them. At the same time, the allegorical value of Douloti's body could be understood as the resilience, the resistance of tribals, their life. The allegorical dimension opens up a level of multiple meanings in which the death of Douloti acts as a foreign body, an unmournable or unburied body signalling an impossible death. I would like to read the image of the body/corpse as allegory, in the sense defined by Benjamin: inherently contradictory co-existence of immediacy and transcendence, expression and convention, an anticipation of what Benjamin would call dialectics at a standstill – namely, a pre-eminently aesthetic discourse. On this aesthetic plane, the absolute corporeality of the corpse corresponds to an as much absolute freeing of the spirit. If the locus of allegory is death, it is because death itself becomes allegory: from the point of view of the corpse, it becomes life. It is by becoming corpse that the body can incarnate and simultaneously exceed its physicality, so that "precisely nails and hair, which are cut away as dead matter from the living body, continue to grow on the corpse" (218). Immanence can be allegorised only when freed from what it is not, from its residue of idealisation, so that, in its purely corporeal dimension, it can signify something else. Its elevation is coterminous with its absolutely worldly and earthly dimension.

If this particular conception were to be compared to the devastated body of Douloti, the image of the latter could be read as allegory, but not as image or symbol of the Indian nation-state as opposed to the concrete, realist account of *kamiyas* in the violent context of post-colonial India. Rather, the body of Douloti, stripped of its life, has to become corpse so that Mohan can understand: the concrete reality of the exploited and abused body of the gendered subaltern must not be forgotten or mourned. Rather, it must be at the basis of a new perception of reality. The fact that "Douloti" can be read as an allegory does not mean that it is not literal or that it is a mere fiction. Differently, it is a way of stripping off the imaginative content of the story in order to reach a connection with the actual world, a connection which is not entirely contained by the scene of representation, in that it moves toward something beyond it. If the first death, in "The Hunt," pointed to a breaking free from a reality which was nonetheless kept in tension, the second death, Douloti, signals a return to

reality in which the aesthetic is posited in the allegorical shifting.

The death of Douloti points allegorically to a life that cannot be encapsulated by the mechanism of production/consumption. Her desiccated and putrefied limbs hint at the unlocatable space of something that cannot be envisaged, but that will probably lead Mohan to act, to change the unbearable situation he cannot disavow or simply neglect in his attempt to fix "the Indian tricolor on a bamboo pole" (*Imaginary* 93). The story also addresses the reader, who at this point is not surprised or shocked as Mohan is, in that the reader is now close to Douloti, on her side. The reader knows what Douloti has gone through, so that things now cannot be seen but from Douloti's perspective, rather than by standing in front of her. What is really shocking is the indifference of those who know and accept this system from a distance, without committing themselves to the cause of the oppressed tribals. The fact that in the final scene Mohan's body jerks, that he has convulsions and must close his eyes before something that cannot be concealed any longer, this fact could suggest that what this story is capable of doing, in the end, and in continuity with "The Hunt," is to challenge that anaesthetising procedure which capitalist exploitation realises in its brutal subjugation of the vital functions of the body to the circuit of production/consumption. The owner of the whorehouse exemplifies this commodifying attitude on many occasions in the story:

> The feeding money will go down more, the number of clients will go up more. Body! Kamiya woman's body! If the body dries up she will depart. Famine's on the way, is there any shortage of harijan kamiya women? . . . It's profitless to make a pet of a parrot. A body like an elephant, it's very hard to keep up with food money. (79)

In an important essay on Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss ("Aesthetics") describes the anaesthetic nature of capitalism as a blocking out of reality rather than as a being in touch with it: a system in which the only possible reality – the mechanism of oppression and accumulation – corresponds with the ontologisation of the most abstract, and where the freedom of individuals and collectivities is obliterated by their insertion in a world of inequality. The figuration of the body in these stories could be read as a critique of that sealing off from experience that paralyses creativity and results in a concrete, tangible, and painful death. The dead body of Douloti is a foreign body, a place that cannot be enclosed, assimilated, or appropriated by the moneylenders and brokers. Her corpse cannot be reinscribed in

the economy, through burial or mourning. For this reason the death of Douloti could signify a return of the aesthetic, in the primary, phenomenological sense of feeling and, as Terry Eagleton writes, of a "discourse of the body" (*Ideology* 13). It might correspond to a return of the body in its resistance, its final act of resistance against a total annihilation of Douloti and the memory of her story. Mohan and his young students "point" with their fingers to Douloti's tormented corpse, they cannot be sealed off from the experience of bonded slaves and their shocking conditions of existence. The first two stories included in *Imaginary Maps* seem to be animated by an effort directed to what Marcuse portrayed as an "emancipation of sensibility" (*Aesthetic* 9). This literary figuration implies the allegorical dimension of Douloti's corpse: absolute corporeality in which the historicity of the individual is signified on a different level, a return of the real that interrupts the narrative and leaves it in abeyance. The final scene evades the symbolic function of the story, it cannot be rewritten and remains as a foreign element within the text.

Through the allegorical figuration of Douloti's death, Mahasweta Devi's story could be read as a call for response, an interruption of the symbolic ability of the narrative which, in its urgency, could suggest that the resistance of tribals ought to live on. This is a continuation of their struggle in the literary work, which is for this reason able to keep in custody, rather than to mourn, the death of Douloti, her body which is all over India. In conclusion, the allegorical dimension of Douloti's death is important because it is the element, which would allow us to read the story not just as one of helplessness and defeat, but also, to an extent, as a potential hope. As Shachi Arya writes: "Mahasveta [*sic*] is a writer of 'hope'. In her works, she has told tales, not only of the helplessness and displacement of the exploited class, but also of their valour, protest and rebellion . . . resistance and protest are integral parts of her work. She is just not interested in telling tales of 'hopelessness' and 'escape'" (*Tribal* 70). If Douloti's death is not a gesture of resistance or rebellion in itself, it can become so in the figurative context of the story, her death as a call to recognise human equivalence. This call cannot be set aside by the reader, now positioned on her side, in a reading that becomes something of an impossible mourning: a state of unrest, a situation that may prevent the reader from redirecting or reinvesting energies and attention to another subject.

Carrying the Secret: Custodianship and Encryptment

In the last part of my reflection, I will focus my attention on "Pterodactyl, Puran

Sahay, and Pirtha," the final story collected in *Imaginary Maps*. While in the first two stories the shift between realism and allegory is located in the events of death, a killing and a corpse, which could manifest a redefinition of reality called for by the narrative, in the last story the figurative element is the image of the pterodactyl, a prehistoric creature which is supposed to have returned, to have resurrected, in a remote tribal village in India.

The story places the impossible mourning which pervades the tribal community enigmatically affected by the reappearance of the pterodactyl in a scene of custodianship. This scene is referred to as a sort of message which resists decipherment. Custodianship is defined as a responsibility for something that cannot be exhausted by our interpretative powers. It can hence have to do with the question of reading, and the problem of how we should read Mahasweta Devi's work. In the act of interpretation, the reader seems to be involved in an act of transmission. From this point of view, impossible mourning could demand an act of reading as custodianship. It is the guardianship of a secret, which is shared by a native, Bikhia, and a committed intellectual who is in charge of investigating the reality of the appearance of the creature, mysteriously carved on the walls of a hut. The figure of the pterodactyl could be interpreted as a crypt, in the psychoanalytic sense defined by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. In a renowned essay, they explain the crypt as follows:

> Grief that cannot be expressed builds a *secret vault* within the subject. In this crypt reposes – alive, reconstituted from the memories of words, images, and feelings – the objective counterpart of the loss, a complete person with his own topography, as well as the traumatic incidents – real or imagined – that had made introjection impossible. ("Introjection" 8)

The crypt, a secret feeling of being inconsolable, a vault which resists the process of introjection, could be a central aspect of an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship. It would correspond to the creation of a space – here, a space within the narrative text – which resists assimilation, introjection. Nicholas Rand points out that the crypt leads "to the creation of a text . . . whose sole purpose is to hide words that are hypothesized as having to remain beyond reach" ("Translator" lviii). While it concerns psychoanalysis as a way of understanding the subject, the crypt is also a useful means for reading literature. From this point of view, a crypt is a place that is

neither literal nor figurative. It is a third space beyond the letter and the figure, where the letter-figure distinction is placed on a different plane. Abraham and Torok describe the act of incorporation which forms the crypt as an antimetaphor: the figurative destruction of the figurativeness of language. In his introduction to *The Wolf Man's Magic Word,* Jacques Derrida explains the crypt as a place included in another but rigorously separated from it, a topography of exclusion/inclusion; an undecidable contradiction between mourning and melancholia – "an effect of impossible or refused mourning" (*"Fors" xxi*) which results in the antinomic act of keeping the dead alive as dead – and finally, a code, or a cipher which is, strictly speaking, undecipherable. The crypt would be the breaking of the correspondence of the symbol, a symbol that cannot be interpreted as such, and that hence requires another way of being read. In its relation to death, a crypt would correspond to an impossible mourning: the keeping of the object of love alive, yet without assimilating it to the self. The impossible mourning of the crypt is a way of keeping the other as other. It is a way of preserving the otherness of the other in the act which keeps it within the same. If "The Hunt" and "Douloti" staged a final episode of death, "Pterodactyl" presents the account of an entire community fallen in a mysterious and apparently inexplicable state of mourning. This scene of mourning is narrated in a passage from the story:

> Alas! In pain we are stone, mute. We failed to give peace to the ancestors. We are coming to an end, rubbed off the soil. And so the unquiet soul casts its shadow and hovers. We didn't know how it would look. This is surely the ancestors' spirit! This is surely the curse of the ravaged land, village, field, home, forest! Now no one can save us. Now we are all unclean, in mourning. (*Imaginary* 120)

If the theme of death could be read as the element of continuity among these stories, the last one deals with an impossible mourning, or apparently, a mourning without death. What interests me in "Pterodactyl" is that the indigenous community of Pirtha is depicted in a mournful suspension of every productive activity: in sheer contrast with the hyper-productivity of the oppressed subaltern body represented in the other stories, the inhabitants of Pirtha refuse their inclusion in an unjust system of economic exploitation and social annihilation. Yet, at the same time, they let themselves go toward death, a form of immobility that is a form of resistance, yet a resistance in extremis. In his work on German tragic drama, Benjamin not only

defined allegory but also stated some interesting remarks on mourning, in particular he associated it with silence and the "unknowable": "In all mourning there is a tendency to silence, and this infinitely more than inability to communicate. The mournful has the feeling that it is known comprehensively by the unknowable" (*Origin* 224). In "Pterodactyl," the unknowable would be represented by the reference to the extinct prehistoric creature, which is supposed to have appeared in a remote region of India, in an inaccessible valley inhabited by a marginal and impoverished tribal group. The story is about Puran, a journalist who is committed to finding the truth about this mysterious appearance and the equally unfathomable mourning of this population. The main characters of this story are Puran and Bikhia, a young tribal boy who has drawn a picture of the extinct animal on the wall of his hut and who maintains a state of silence. As it is reported in another passage from the story:

> Why is Bikhia not speaking? Why is he remaining mute? Was some communication established between your prehistoric eyes and his eyes, so that he (illiterate, never having read a book, with no knowledge of the history of the evolution of the planet) grasps that to keep your affair secret is tremendously urgent. The world of today cannot be informed about you. "Today" does not know the "past," the "ancient." "Today," "the present times," "civilization," becomes most barbaric by the demands of getting ahead. (*Imaginary* 156)

As it emerges from this passage, Bikhia's mournful silence corresponds to a secret communication, something that cannot be explained or verified according to the criteria of journalistic report, or what is portrayed in the story as Puran's "homework." While the image of the pterodactyl could suggest "extinction," a desperate effort to get in touch with the surrounding "civilisation" which is destroying the existence of this tribal group, the carving on the wall of a hut is also a sort of enigma. Seen from the point of view of objective discernment, the image remains undecipherable. Is there really a pterodactyl? Or is it an invention? The tribal boy has no education whatsoever, he cannot know about prehistoric animals, yet some sort of communication – a secret communication – seems to be at work. The story concerns the ability or inability to read, to speak, an inability to understand that is represented since the beginning, when Puran meets the local SDO, sub-divisional officer, who informs him of the event. The dialogue is reported in the text:

– Come on, tell me what's up. You too have believed that some terrifying event has taken place.

– Look at this painting.

– A cave painting?

– A boy painted this on the stone wall of his room. The picture was taken by Surajpratap, but no, this photo is not for a newspaper, *not for publicity*.

. . . What is it? Bird? Webbed wings like a bat and a body like a giant iguana. And four legs? A toothless gaping horrible mouth.

– But this is . . .

– Don't say it. I won't hear it.

– How did he paint this?

– I don't know. The boy's shut up.

– Where? Where is the picture he painted?

– In Pirtha.

Now the SDO begins to speak in bursts. As if a badly wounded person is making a last-ditch effort to make a deposition to hospital or police, to the killers or to friends. (102)

Yet the enigma that the appearance of the creature implies is not at all a mystery that the reader of the story must codify as irrational or as the cipher of an irretrievable past. The SDO affirms that "it is not possible for these tribals to think reasonably, to offer explanations" (104). This sentence tells more about the communicative limits of the SDO rather than the way of thinking of the tribals. The image of the pterodactyl, undecidable and undecipherable, could be interpreted as a question about the secret transmitted by the story, the place where the text cannot be enclosed by the scene of representation, or where the text represents something "unknowable" that should be preserved as such.

From the point of view of Puran, this is also a question of an ethic of custodianship: he is in the situation of being called to guard the secret of these tribals, to prevent it from being divulged and the life of this group being destroyed irreparably. In the conclusion, this story seems to be about a defeat, a disappointment:

Do you know the final word? There is no communication point between us and

> the pterodactyl. We belong to two worlds and *there is no communication point.* There was a *message* in the pterodactyl, whether it was a fact or not, and we couldn't grasp it. We *missed* it. We suffered a great loss, yet we couldn't know it. The pterodactyl was *myth* and *message* from the start. We trembled with the terror of discovering a real pterodactyl. (195)

This "final word" seems to suggest that the pterodactyl is a figure. The question about fact or fiction, reality or invention, seems to be a misleading question. The point of the story is not to know whether there is a real pterodactyl – the main preoccupation of the journalists and authorities – but rather to understand the "message" that this figure epitomises. In a literal reading, this story could be about the relation between the intellectual and the subaltern, and the inability of the former to understand or represent the latter. This problematic has recently been reconsidered by Neil Lazarus in a very interesting reading of the story. Lazarus emphasises the space that, in the story, could be a point of contact between "elite and subaltern forms of consciousness" (*Postcolonial Unconscious* 159). According to Lazarus, in spite of the remark, included in the story, about the absence of any point of communication, Puran is able to gain "a degree of insight into the tribal structure of feeling" (159). Thus Lazarus interestingly concludes: "The text leaves us with the idea that there is a link between the sustainability of human life itself and recovery of the forms of tribal sociality – and that responsibility for establishing this link lies with Puran and, more generally, with 'India' and with 'us' (her presumptive readers)" (160). This is an intriguing reading and it is able to raise the question of "responsibility" which is also a question of guardianship and secrecy. Yet, it might be argued that the problematic of elite and subaltern consciousness, which is an important part of Mahasweta Devi's writing, does not exhaust the idea of responsibility that is proposed in "Pterodactyl." Through the message-myth (concept-metaphor, or antimetaphor, a figure that is not legible within the predefined patterns of reading) of the prehistoric creature, what the story stages is an idea of responsibility as the ability to respond to the figure, to a call that cannot be grasped as such. While it is true that Puran grasps some of the content of subaltern consciousness, what he fails to grasp is the logic of the figure. In fact, the figurative destruction of the figure, the crypt, which is guarded through the carving of the pterodactyl, is related to consciousness, but by means of figuration. It is not entirely reducible to the subaltern consciousness, but rather it could be a question of passing on, of transmitting something as living.

In the story, the inability to communicate does not depend on a supposedly incommensurable essence of tribal cultures, but rather it is caused by the intention to objectify tribal life in the grid of socio-historical accounts or plans. The story seems to be suggesting that in order to know the tribal peoples, they should first be understood; the radical intellectual should be able to learn from them, to respond to the "enigma" rather than to solve it. Accordingly, the story might not be about consciousness-raising, but rather a guardianship of the secret, the transmission of something that cannot be deciphered or objectified. I would like to emphasise that the story presents the problem of custodianship on many levels: if Spivak, the translator, is portrayed as the doorkeeper of Mahasweta, the latter keeps in custody the mystery of this story, and, inside the story, Puran is confronted with the problem of how to safeguard the secret of this event, a secret that, in turn, is kept by Bikhia in his state of mourning. Furthermore, the Pterodactyl could not be the real thing to be kept under cover. As a crypt, the pterodactyl itself could be just a way of concealing a real, yet unseen, presence, the external form (a myth) taken by a formless ancestral soul, its physical and transient manifestation. As it is written in the story:

> A survey map of Pirtha *block* is like some extinct animal of Gondwanaland. The beast has fallen on its face. The new era in the history of the world began when, at the end of the Mesozoic era, India broke off from the main mass of Gondwanaland. It is as if some prehistoric creature had fallen on its face then. Such are the survey lines of Pirtha *block*.
> – Come and see. What, looks like an animal, no?
> – Yes, but these creatures are extinct. (*Imaginary* 99)

The profile of the creature, made at first identifiable on a map, inaugurates a recurrence of the imagery of the body of the animal throughout the narrative: for instance, the depression in the rocks is compared to a "monster's bowl" (109) or the journey to the valley to a passage into "the tail of the animal traced by the survey map of Pirtha" (114). The recognition of the animal on the map, as well as its visibility in Bikhia's drawing, is complemented by the invisible and unknowable but nonetheless perceptively real presence of the extinct creature.

There might be a topographical question in this context: the animal is visible on the map yet it cannot be mapped. It is in the map but cannot be totally represented, it is visible and invisible at the same time. When Puran and Bikhia reach the

entrance of the cavern where the source of the mysterious drawings would be finally explained, the reader is confronted with a reflection on time, a "timeless darkness of time," which could be related to the secret communication between Bikhia and the ancestral soul, to his custodianship of the secret: "Today" cannot be informed about "the past." This multitude of layers and relays is signified by the journey of Bikhia and Puran in the wild place where the secret is supposed to be buried, the hills where tunnels, crevices, and narrow paths lead to the jaws of a dark cavern:

> The present, encroaching from all sides, will eat the past whole. Yet there may be a priceless truth worthy of being guarded in secret, that you cannot let anyone know, give it to me, I am that ageless, timeless darkness of time, when the earth was under water, there was no light anywhere, darkness was everywhere and the creator was in thought, how to create the earth and the living world. I am waiting since then, I keep everything in my lap, nothing is lost. (*Imaginary* 176)

Following this figurative chain, I would like to read the image of mourning as deeply related to the figural dimension of this story, the theme of literary creation literally indicated by the reference to the "creator" and to the "living world" in the passage above. The voice speaking in the cavern says that nothing is lost: everything is kept, guarded, as a certain spirit of the tribals is transmitted by the story itself. The guardianship of the secret could be what the story is doing, after all, sharing a secret which is presented as a figure, a space included in the story which cannot be accessed or assimilated, a place which is inside, but kept outside, the outside incorporated in the inside of the narrative. Everything is kept, the forms of life and sociality of this tribal people are kept, but through a figure which prevents the reader from being able to see them, or to "tell" them. The content of the story is spoken as the unspeakable. This does not mean a total inability to understand the other, but rather the ability to understand that in order to communicate with that other, vanishing, continent of tribal culture, the committed intellectual should learn to read the figure, to respond to the figure that is not immediately understandable as symbol, message or discourse. The point of the crypt, in its appearance as a broken symbol, would be that in some cases the figure is not understood as a symbol at all, "it is as if speech did not refer to any enigma at all" (*Magic Word* 79). In other cases, the enigma would present a difficulty in that "it is as if the sense of the words were shrouded by an enigma too dense to be deciphered by known forms of listening"

(79). Too enigmatic or not enigmatic at all, the communication point is missed if the question of responsibility, guardianship or doorkeeping as response to the figure is not approached as such. The message that the chain of forms of guardianship could convey, the message that Puran has missed, in other words, could be the secret covered by the pterodactyl, the veiling itself as the message, or the spirit of the story.

Another reading of "Pterodactyl" could be mentioned in this context, one proposed by Caroline Rooney in her book *African Literature, Animism and Politics*:

> It might be presumed that in writing "Pterodactyl," Mahasweta Devi wished to preserve and transmit something, at least, of the spirit or spirits of those she writes of. As a journalist, she could write a sociohistorical account, with an ethical and political slant, of the displacement and possible destruction of the cultures concerned. However, if she chooses to compose a literary text, it is perhaps because this kind of text is the one needed if you hope to transmit something of spirit or spirits. Then, even if a culture were to be rendered extinct, there would be something of its living spirit in the text. (Rooney *Animism* 114)

This reflection is greatly suggestive in that it could provide an answer to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: how should we understand the relation between literature and history in Mahasweta Devi? How should we read her fictional writing, as opposed to her work of journalism? The answer could lie in the "spirit" of the tribal populations that are the subject of the story, and it could also lie within the figuration of custodianship, a responsibility which depends on the ability to read the figure or guard the secret. After all, what is kept in custody by Bikhia and shown to Puran is something that is still part of the life of this marginalised population, but that cannot be included in the topographical coordinates of modernity or of the invading forces of economic exploitation, politics, and "development." This thing which the pterodactyl points to, I would like to suggest, could be understood as something that is still living, something that is mourned by the tribal group in a situation of extreme poverty and desperation, yet which cannot be mourned. The image of the pterodactyl would be the mourning of the unmournable. To recapitulate the readings proposed in this chapter, it might be affirmed that the stories included in *Imaginary Maps* could weave a unique figuration of custodianship, which corresponds to the introduction of an allegorical dimension in the realist narrative. Mahasweta Devi's fiction is different from her journalism in that it is only in her

stories that she is able to problematise the act of writing itself, writing as guardianship rather than representation of a communication with the subaltern. Her stories are able to transmit the secret – the figure, the crypt, the spirit – of tribals in a way that no objective report could be able to do.

In the first story, "The Hunt," the account of the exploitation of the resources and life of tribals is redefined by an act of resistance which draws attention to the story itself, the narrative act as the call for a response, the intervention of someone who may be able to "light the fire." This connects the story to the real, not as representation, but as a transformative drive. "The Hunt" is able to define itself as fiction through this transformative impulse, which coexists with the representational aim of Mahasweta Devi's writing. The second story, "Douloti," continues the movement of the first story by staging the death of Douloti as an interruption, an allegorical antinomic coexistence of multiple meanings. The death of Douloti signals a space – a foreign body – that cannot be appropriated by the collusive machinery of feudalism and neocolonial capitalism. Her death is an ultimate act of resistance, which places the reader side by side with her, and raises the problem of a death that cannot be mourned. The conclusion of "Douloti," ending with an interrogative, an open question that cannot not be answered, puts the narrative in abeyance, prevents it from going on, or redirecting the attention to someone else. The impossible mourning of Douloti connects the first two stories to the third. The oscillation between allegory and realism is incorporated in the image of the pterodactyl, which is neither a figure nor a letter but rather a crypt: a secluded space that cannot be accessed through established forms of understanding and that is kept as a secret. In its shift between allegory and the real, figure and letter, the appearance of the pterodactyl could suggest an idea of custodianship that is not based on objective, factual knowledge. Before that, custodianship is staged as a response to the figure, a responsibility that is primarily an act of love. As Mahasweta Devi herself seems to suggest:

> Only love, a tremendous, excruciating, explosive love can still dedicate us to this work when the century's sun is in the western sky, otherwise this aggressive civilization will have to pay a terrible price, look at history, the aggressive civilization has destroyed itself in the name of progress, each time.
>
> Love, excruciating love, let that be the first step. Now Puran's amazed heart discovers what love for Pirtha there is in his heart, perhaps he cannot remain a distant spectator anywhere in life. (*Imaginary* 196)

As a "first step" in the process through which the reader cannot remain a "distant spectator" any more, custodianship is first of all an act of love, a guardianship of the other as other, kept within oneself in her otherness, kept as a secret, a response to the cipher of a call that cannot be grasped, yet should be carefully listened to. Mahasweta Devi comments upon "Pterodactyl" in an interview with Gayatri Spivak, where the story is defined as one of hope rather than despair:

> But in *Pterodactyl* also there is hope, because they are saying at the end that they will plant thorns and eat the tuber. They're learning to cope with the modern, they aren't accepting defeat, they will not be crushed. They know charity will come and go, that the government will do nothing. But they are not accepting defeat. Pterodactyl is the crux of my tribal experience. I do not see them as defeated and crushed. ("Telling History" xiv)

An important part of an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship, as an act of love, would be to learn to read this unwritten hope, an unwritten transmission of something that continues to live, through figurations and encrypted messages. If the story itself is an act of custodianship, it could also contain a secret that is shared without being revealed, a message that is a crypt, a legacy that should not be lost, while its living forms are being destroyed. The "imaginary map" chosen as the title for this collection of stories could be something more than simply imaginary. Rather, it could be a cryptic map, the topography of an encryptment, which is how Mahasweta Devi's literary work could be described, in the end. The message of the extinct animal, the encrypted word, could be as simple a word as "love." If it is read as a meditation on literature and the use of fiction rather than the journalistic report, the enigma of figuration rather than the letter of knowledge, *Imaginary Maps* could suggest that reading itself should be an act of love, the last part of a chain of relays and forms of transmission

Chapter 3

The Curators of the Real: Arundhati Roy's Custodianship

He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors.
(*God of Small Things* 216)

Many criticisms directed to both Arundhati Roy's novelistic and essay writing seem to assume specific views on the relation between politics and literature: either literature is a directly ideological discourse, or it is something that should have nothing to do with concrete struggles and commitment. Yet what these criticisms do not address is the complexity that links Arundhati Roy's highly poetic style to the question of the real, how literature could be a form of engagement in the world by retaining the figurative aspects that characterise its artistic dimension.[23] This chapter will propose a reading of two essays by Arundhati Roy, both included in her recent book *Listening to Grasshoppers*, alongside her novel, *The God of Small Things*. Arundhati Roy's writing will be redefined as a form of custodianship, a questioning of the right to define oneself as the "the world's real curator, or the real world's curator" as she eloquently puts it. Rather than arrogating the right to be the "real curator," the authority to define what is real and what is not, her writing could be described as custodianship of the real. Arundhati Roy will be described as a custodian: a writer concerned with the transmission of experiences that are not her own. I am writing to argue that, through her writing, she is able to empathise with others and to tell their stories, in a way that eludes the affirmation of identity. Arundhati Roy's concern can be termed "custodianship" because it is always a form of responsibility towards someone else, rather than herself. However, whereas Roy writes about other peoples and stories, she does not become the authoritative gatekeeper or "curator" of these experiences. Her writing demonstrates responsibility towards the other but does not seem to collapse the many differences

[23] In *Decolonising Gender,* Caroline Rooney suggests some reflections on beauty and the real that have provided an inspiration for the thoughts presented in this chapter. Especially on page 37-38 of *Decolonising Gender,* Rooney proposes the reading of a poem by Darwish starting from the question: "Is not reality beautiful?" (37). Rooney's "poetic realist vision" has enabled me to see the potentialities of beauty as related to a "consciousness of the real" rather than mere idealisation or ideology.

between herself and the subject with whom she is concerned. Custodianship would consist, precisely, in this ability to transmit the experience of the other without appropriating it, without claiming to speak on behalf of others, and without claiming a total identification with the other.

Custodianship is cultural transmission and social concern beyond the politics of identity. The difference between the curator and the custodian would regard the production of authority: while the curator needs to legitimise himself and in this way prevents other possible perceptions of the real, the custodian would be aware of her own otherness and her inability fully or totally to "represent" the thing that is placed in custody. Whereas the curator has to provide legitimised knowledge, the custodian would be animated by a receptive attitude able to show the complexity and plurality of social and political contexts. As custodianship, Roy's writing seems to be an attempt to recover what lies behind fantasies, projections, structures of power and violence in which peoples and environments are crushed. For this reason, it could be approached as a form of custodianship: a responsibility for the other as a real human being, which does not result in appropriation. Custodianship does not aim to speak on behalf of collectivities. It should not be taken for a totalising, political and narrative representation of the subaltern, or the mere production of a form of counter-knowledge, as a canonical location of her work in the "politics of representation" could imply. Rather, a reading of her essays alongside her novel could demonstrate that Arundhati Roy's custodianship is an effort to respond to the real existence of the other, the other as a real presence, even when the other's experience is not commensurable with one's own. The figurative aspects of her writing seem to point to a form of empathic writing that corresponds to a way of listening rather than speaking, a way of being on the other's side, side by side with her or him. To put it briefly, Arundhati Roy's work might be affiliated to what Spivak calls the work of "interrupting the epistemological": the ability to respond to the figure so as to be the custodian of the reality of the other rather than projecting anxieties, desires and ideologies. From this point of view, I will argue that Roy's writings are not directly political, but rather they indicate a certain precondition or prefiguration of another politics. This chapter will be organised in three main parts, followed by a short conclusive section.

The first part will address Roy's critics and their unrecognised assumptions. It will open the political/literary question that will be explored in the reading of Roy's work. It seems to me that she has been attacked by her critics in a way that resembles the scapegoat logic that informs the punishment inflicted on some of the

subjects with which her writing is mainly concerned. By making her a sort of scapegoat, critics have overlooked a major message that Roy's writing could be said to propose: a re-evaluation of the relation between politics and literature. The second part will revolve around "The Briefing," an essay written on the occasion of an art festival in 2008, and it will regard the definition of an elusive beauty in this essay, a beauty that is also incorporated by Velutha, the untouchable "God of Small Things" of her novel. Beauty is the figurative element that connects Roy's writing to a certain receptiveness, a custodianship of the real which is able to overcome the "fortification" of political separation and antagonism. Following and elaborating on the notion of an elusive beauty, the third part will propose a re-consideration of empathy as a crucial obligation for the postcolonial intellectual, an empathy which could be signified in a dream recounted in *The God of Small Things,* where the closeness to the other does not result in an encompassing grasp, but rather in an always incomplete, partial figuration on which empathic understanding nonetheless depends. The dream will be considered after a reading of the essay Roy wrote about the case of the attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001, which epitomises some key aspects of being custodian rather than representing the other.

Elusive beauty and empathy seem to be the two central motives, and they will be addressed as compositional aspects of her writing. The chapter will also make reference to the philosophical question of natural beauty and the postcolonial debate on the subaltern, two intellectual contexts in which Roy's writing could make an interesting intervention. The reading that will be articulated in this chapter could be considered an attempt to write in support of Arundhati Roy, in order to shift the interpretation of her work from the mode of critique to that of custodianship and responsibility. It is the aim of this reading to identify a sort of receptiveness or empathy that could be learned directly from her writing, a tentative openness to the radical questions that Roy's intellectual labour may be said to convey and transmit.

The Scapegoat: Literature and Politics

After the publication and "mammoth success" (Chakladar 198) of her novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997, Arundhati Roy's writing may be said to incarnate the controversial features of the commitment of the intellectual in a historical conjuncture when reflections on political engagement cannot not face the fundamental ambivalence of cosmopolitanism and the interplay of globalisation and postcoloniality. Intervening in animated arguments on nuclear armaments,

terrorism, environmentalism and democracy, in India and abroad, Roy's border-crossing essays intriguingly pose the question of their genre, their affiliation, and disclose a contested interpretative field triggered by the instability and uncertain categorisation of her work. The status and effectiveness of her activism have been evaluated on many occasions and generated interesting terms for debate. One critic suggests a central issue that any discussion on commitment, and writing for Arundhati Roy, should take into consideration:

> Roy recognises how nomenclature constructs, represents and in the process circumscribes space for critique and dissent, notably in the elevation of the specialist or expert. But the creative recycling of her publishing catalogue and the extension of her brand in the republishing of Chomsky's work does indeed suggest that she is collusive in the very process she decries. Her protest may well be subject to co-option from above; by a publishing industry keen to make capital and not just cultural capital out of her interventions. (Mullaney 60)

Mullaney states that Roy's practice of dissent runs the risk of being co-opted and nullified by the branding mechanism of the market, resulting in its collusion in the very process that is being opposed. She then identifies a second problem in Roy's political interventions:

> However potent Roy's arguments, their place in wider systems of debate and interrogation is often undermined by attendant, problematic "rhetorical" conflations which appear in what can be described as her 'hyperbolic' style and her use of dangerous moral equivalences. (64)

If publishing success and the force of cooption of capitalism represent a first danger to Roy's engagement, a second problem seems to be related to her "style," a poetic that could undermine the power of its political content. These two aspects – becoming-commodity and style – may be said to constitute a widespread concern in the criticism of Roy's writing. In his influential book *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan describes *The God of Small Things* as an exercise in "strategic exoticism, designed to trap the uncanny reader into complicity with the Orientalisms of which the novel so hauntingly relates" (77). Another critic, Nagesh Rao, emphasises that, in spite of these weaknesses, Roy's radical writing cannot be assimilated to "liberal multiculturalism and its attendant politics of location and

identity" (Rao 167) and calls into question Mullaney's remarks on style, a questioning that could partly resonate with Elleke Boehmer's observation that Roy's "poetic exercises in prose . . . stilted and skittish burlesques, and the evasive or over-stylized arabesqueries . . . demonstrate a subtle subversion that at once co-operates with and exceeds the definitions criticism imposes" (Boehmer 70). In the context of an assessment of the relation between Roy's "style" and the value of her political intervention, it may be interesting to notice that in one important reading of her novel, Aijaz Ahmad writes about some "drastic failings" of the book, in particular "the way the book panders to the prevailing anti-Communist sentiment, which damages it both ideologically and formally" (Ahmad "Reading" 112). This hostility and "inherent incapacity to affectively imagine what she so passionately despises" (112) is related by Ahmad to the "theme of the privatisation of both pleasure and politics" (114), a prevalence of the erotic component to the detriment of collective emancipation and realist literary conventions. The novel is criticised because of its manifest anti-communist sentiment by which, in what may sound like a slightly tautological observation, "Arundhati Roy appears to be the representative of the social fraction whose particular kind of radicalism she represents," one that portrays love or "the erotic as the real zone of rebellion and Truth" (119). While Ahmad focuses his analysis on the actual political content of Roy's fiction, at the same time considering the formal or stylistic failures of her writing as a "minor" related issue, the historian Ramachandra Guha writes in a polemic contribution published in *The Hindu* on 26 November 2000 that Arundhati Roy's journalistic contribution in support of the NBA – namely, the Narmada Valley Project[24] - is "unoriginal," "self-indulgent" and "hyperbolic." Guha's critique is mainly directed to Roy's "style" more than to her political position, even though Guha's article seems to imply a more radical disagreement and personal antipathy:

> To suppress my reservations was not easy, for I had been intensely irritated by Ms. Roy's previous venture into public interest journalism: her polemic against the nuclear tests in 1998. There too, I was on her side, "objectively" speaking. Yet her vanity was unreal. (Guha "Arun")

In a polemic that has attracted many responses – of both solidarity and anger – Guha insists on his statement that Roy should go back to "fiction" and recommends

[24] For more information on the Narmada River dispute see, for example, Wood ("India's Narmada"). On the NBA (Narmada Bachao Andolan) and its politics see Whitehead ("Environmentalism").

her "retreat from activism."

What this overview of some critical positions concerning Arundhati Roy brings to light could provide the starting point for investigating a problem that many critics presuppose and imply in their attacks on Arundhati Roy but that as yet seems to have paradoxically been neglected in most academic and political readings of her work. The question concerns the relation between the field of literature and politics, a problematic encapsulated by the notion of "political commitment" to which both Ahmad and Guha make implicit or explicit reference. Accordingly, it might be asked: what does it mean to read Arundhati Roy "politically," as Ahmad does, or to suggest that she should retreat from activism and return to a purely literary activity, as Guha polemically proposes? What is the meaning of literature and engagement in the case of Arundhati Roy, and to what extent can her novel be considered "political" and/or her political activism "literary"? What does it mean for a work of literature to be political, or for an essay to be literary?

In spite of Ahmad's authoritative contextualisation of Roy's fiction and his interesting remarks on her style, his reading of the ideological dimension of her writing is based on a fundamentally literal understanding. Whereas Ahmad recognises the "ideology of form" incarnated by literary works, he does not engage with it at the moment of evaluating the novel's representative political "message." Ahmad's conclusion that resistance, for Roy, can only be "individual and fragile" and that "the personal is the only arena of the political" (119) is an interpretation of the book which takes the manifest dismissal of the Communist Party in Kerala as a rejection of collective emancipation in general, rather than as a denunciation of the corruption, prejudice and casteism persisting even in the most radical components of Indian civil society; and which methodologically presupposes that every aspect of the narrative should be read as something else than literature. In other words, while Ahmad identifies a direct political statement in what he himself recognises to be a literary, figural writing, the historian Guha seems to perform the opposite movement, apparently judging as figurative what should be approached instead as a directly political text. In her response to Guha, Roy ("Scimitars") affirms that the disagreement between herself and the environmentalist historian has nothing of the literary in it, and that it is a real, concrete argument on how politics should be practised. All these lively debates around Arundhati Roy seem to lead towards a questioning of the political dimension of literature, something that the widespread interpretations of Arundhati Roy's radicalism seem to take for granted rather than to examine systematically.

It seems to me that the critical mode dominating postcolonial readings of her work has indicted Arundhati Roy as a scapegoat, a sort of sacrificial victim into which personal resentments and feelings of guilt have been channelled, so that the critical community can maintain its integrity. This is a situation which could place Arundhati Roy on the side of the people she supports in her writing: the untouchable of her novel as well as the subaltern of her essays, people with no defence who are accused and sometimes charged with crimes, crushed and oppressed by political and ideological arenas which need such scapegoat figures for their power to continue. As René Girard explains in his renowned theory of the scapegoat: "the order that is either absent or compromised by the scapegoat once more establishes itself or is established by the intervention of someone who disturbed it in the first place. It is conceivable that a victim may be responsible for public disasters, which is what happened in myths as in collective persecutions, but in myths, and only in myths, this same victim restores the order, symbolizes, and even incarnates it" (42).

Arundhati Roy seems to have been constructed as one such scapegoat, essential to the maintenance of an order, a myth, and to liberate and reconcile the (critical) community, the community of radical literary and social critics. In this way, it is the potential of dissent, of disturbance that is domesticated, so that the perspective of the scapegoat, her view, is dismissed and reintegrated. While I feel that reading should be animated by a critical element, critique is not the only way of understanding dissent and the role of the postcolonial intellectual. Accordingly, this chapter should be read as written "for" Arundhati Roy, in support of her writing and her activity, and as an attempt to clarify some aspects of her interventions, those aspects that a mere "critique" of her work is not able to address and understand. The very idea of being on someone's side, rather than in front of her, is what Roy's writing is about, and it seems to me that a responsible reading of her work should take it into consideration.

In a recent collection of essays titled *Listening to Grasshoppers*, Arundhati Roy makes some interesting observations on the question of political commitment:

> As a writer, a fiction writer, I have often wondered whether the attempt to always be precise, to try and get it all factually right somehow *reduces* the epic scale of what is really going on. Does it eventually mask a larger truth? I worry that I am allowing myself to be railroaded into offering prosaic, factual precision when maybe what we need is a feral howl, or the transformative power and real precision of poetry. (xi-xii)

According to what is stated in this passage, a critical reflection on Arundhati Roy should take into consideration the fact that she is recognised as the successful author of the Booker prize winner *The God of Small Things*, but also that she makes a distinction between a level of "factual precision" and the "real precision" of poetry, a distinction between poetry and prose that could recall Jean-Paul Sartre's proposition, as he presented it in a classical essay on the meaning of literature. Sartre's idea of committed writing was elaborated as a response to critiques of his journal *Les Temps Modernes* in 1947, and it is now a canonical text in discussions about literature and political involvement. Furthermore, it could be noticed in passing that Sartre and *Les Temps Modernes* played a major role in anti-colonial opposition in France, as Robert Young underlines in his excellent reading of Sartre in *White Mythologies*. It is not my intention to address the complexities of "What is Literature?" in the context of a reading of Arundhati Roy, yet Sartre's proposition could suggest some interesting points when talking about commitment and literature. The principle at the basis of Sartre's notion of engaged literature is a distinction between prose and poetry. The poet cannot be committed, according to Sartre, because poetry has nothing to do with meaning. Sartre famously defined the artist – the poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician: the artist as a figure opposed to the prose writer – as someone who does not treat sounds and colours as a language, as signs able to convey a meaning. The poet approaches language as a thing, rather than a tool. He is able to see the world inside the words, rather than adopting the words as instruments, as a means to see the world. Sartre defined poetic creation as an act of contemplation and as the encounter with a sort of "wilderness" of language. Poetry captures the unfamiliarity of words seen as objects mirroring aspects of the real rather than as ways of getting to know the world, of domesticating it. Sartre wrote:

> [T]here is nothing in common between these two acts of writing except the movement of the hand which traces the letters. Otherwise, their universes are incommunicable, and what is good for one is not good for the other. Prose is, in essence, utilitarian. I would readily define the prose-writer as a man who *makes use* of words . . . The writer is a *speaker*; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates. (Sartre 34)

Sartre excluded the poetic from the realm of "commitment" by upholding the idea

that the poet does not make use of words – does not treat them as signs – but rather the poetic has a relation to its compositional medium close to that of music, painting and sculpture. Poetry cannot be committed because there cannot be a poetic discourse: it does not utilise language, rather it moulds it, in a way that is not aimed at articulating meaning. From another point of view, it could be said that Sartre's idea of the poetic implies that poetry cannot equal prose in contexts of struggle and revolution. However, it seems that rather than excluding the poetic dimension from the possibility of social concern, the task of criticism should be directed at understanding the often nuanced, indirect and lateral modes in which poetry reveals profound social participation. This preliminary exclusion of poetry from the discourse of commitment – prose as language, utilitarian definition of language as sign – implies and enacts an equivalence between engagement and the prosaic, a vision based on a particular idea of the social role of art that, as I will show, does not fully account for Arundhati Roy's writing practice and that, as Adorno ("Commitment") famously contended, does not consider the significance of the aesthetic in contesting oppression and power. Even though the poetic cannot be committed in the same way as prose, even though the poetic cannot be directly political, there is a way in which poetic qualities of writing could raise consciousness of the real world, or could elicit a response, an emotional response.

The poetic could be a side of writing which is the precondition of commitment, even though it should not be confused with commitment itself. The core of my reflections could be said to be motivated by Roy's declaration, at the beginning of a collection of prosaic essays: what's the difference – or rather the connection – between factual precision and real precision? An attempt to make connections between the properly fictional writing and what is not fictional – essays or writings of a different genre, activism and political intervention – entails the outline of a perspective on the poetic/prosaic differential and on the significance of "writing": it is for this reason that my analysis aims to delineate some specific characteristics of the poetic that some of Arundhati Roy's essays could be said to retain, in spite of her intention to restrict essay-writing to prose and facts. There is factual precision in her essays, but there is, somewhere, in certain passages of her prosaic writing, a return of the poetic that should not be dismissed as invalidating the efficacy of her prose. Rather, the poetic elements of Roy's prose could point to a notion of custodianship rather than commitment: a different way of considering the engagement of literature as always mediated by figuration. There is an elusive aspect – an elusive beauty – that returns in Arundhati Roy's writing and that could suggest a different way of

interpreting her work. In contrast with many commentators, I will not offer a detailed analysis of *The God of Small Things,* but rather my reflection will engage with some passages from the novel as they could inaugurate a dialogue with the questions exposed and configured by some of her essays. Despite the prominence of the political in the work of Arundhati Roy, the fact that she *writes* requires a preliminary research into the connection between figuration and commitment, or the way in which not only the political but also the poetic element of writing could be detected and interpreted.

An Elusive Beauty

The second part of this chapter will analyse "elusive beauty" as an important figurative aspect of Roy's writing. This element appears in one of her essays and in the protagonist of her novel, Velutha. The connection between the essay and the novel will be complemented by references to the notion of natural beauty in European aesthetics, a discourse on art from which this sort of elusive beauty has been canonically excluded. Through natural beauty as elusive beauty, Roy's aesthetic of custodianship could be figured in those appearances of the real which cannot be appropriated or made objects of "war or branding." The figuration of beauty could define writing as custodian of the real: rather than the authority to speak for what is real and what is not, beauty suggests a way of being able to listen, a sort of worldliness defined as a receptivity to writing. Opposed to beauty, the recurring image of the fort, of being fortified, armoured or locked in is a constant element of Roy's writing, signalling the inability to go over to the other side, that of the outsider. It is through the contrast between beauty and the fort that a first glimpse of Arundhati Roy's custodianship can be understood, a theme that will be developed in the remaining part of the chapter as a question of empathy rather than representation, figuration rather than letter or prose. The following pages will be concerned with beauty in "The Briefing," the notion of an elusive beauty in European philosophy of art, and the beauty of Velutha, the scapegoat of caste society in *The God of Small Things.* This meditation will be centred on the interplay of the poetic and the prosaic in Roy's writing, something that does not seem to deconstruct her arguments, but rather to point to creative writing as the precondition or prefiguration of commitment.

In Summer 2008 Arundhati Roy contributed to *Manifesta 7,* a European festival of contemporary art. Titled "The Briefing," the text she wrote was read aloud

on that occasion in a theatrical performance directed by Ant Hampton, and is now collected in *Listening to Grasshoppers*, a book published in India and Great Britain in 2009. The event was held in Fortezza/Franzenfeste, a fort built in the nineteenth century and situated in a mountainous region in Northern Italy. As explained in the introductory note to the text, the artists involved in that art Biennale were asked to respond to the enigma of a fortress that has never been attacked as, actually, is the case of that fortress in the heart of Europe, a building erected by the Hapsburgs in 1833 as a military base but never subject to assaults. "The Briefing" is described in the same note as a "fictional text" and is included as an appendix, maybe because of its somehow unclassifiable status and its distance from the Indian context permeating the other essays collected in *Listening to Grasshoppers*. There could be at least one intertextual reference at work in this piece, Dino Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe*, which could weave a suggestive chain of relays and responses around the theme of a fort that has never been attacked. Maybe the piece bears the sign of a supposedly local audience familiar with the work of Buzzati, something that Roy could have considered while composing this text. I cannot develop this intriguing web of references here, yet there is a passage from *The Tartar Steppe* that might resonate with "The Briefing," in an intensely poetic way. It is a passage placed at the end of Buzzati's novel, at the beginning of the last chapter, narrating the death of the protagonist, Drogo, a soldier who spent his life in a fortress waiting for an attack that, ironically and tragically for him, did not happen during his permanence there, at the borderland with the barbarous territories, those unfamiliar, distant territories in the desert. Buzzati writes:

> He was sitting in his bedroom in a wide easy-chair; it was an evening so splendid that it brought in at the window a perfumed air. Drogo looked listlessly at the sky which was becoming more and more blue, at the violet shadows in the deep valley, at the crests still bathed in sunlight. The Fort was a long way off, even the mountains around it could no longer be seen. (Buzzati 210)

One of the last moments before the death of the protagonist of Buzzati's novel narrates the beauty of the landscape, the languid beauty of a night "so splendid that it brought in at the window a perfumed air." As I will show, the perception of the air of the night, the perfume of the sunset, probably a summer sunset, entering through the window, is a very important figurative aspect which resonates in Roy's writing.

The image of natural beauty, as glimpsed through a window, could suggest a

meditation on the aesthetic that I wish to consider in the first part of my reading. At the very beginning of "The Briefing," the first person narrator – who is described in the introductory note as a "phantom," "a militant commander of indeterminate provenance and gender" – addresses the audience but at the same time decides not to reveal her/himself, in order to keep a "veil" or a figurative cover that is precisely what allows communication (imaginary but also real, as it could be identified with the actual audience of the text, while it was being performed as acoustic exhibition in the ancient fortress). These are the words introducing the text: "My greetings. I'm sorry I'm not here with you today but perhaps it's just as well. In times such as these, it's best not to reveal ourselves completely, not even to each other" (203). The opening of this strange text, both work of art and essay, narrative but also figural, is animated by a narrator who is not actually there, who is speaking to no better identified listeners who are then encouraged to step "over the line and into the circle" as if from the other world, or however from a great distance. Even though the explanatory note makes clear that this narrative voice might be a sort of ghostly "militant commander," the reader could be surprised by the irruptive delineation of a quite sophisticated and intriguing reflection on beauty, something which could reveal the voice of Arundhati Roy herself.

> Would you say that it's beautiful, this Fort? They say it sits astride the mountains like a defiant lion. I confess I've never seen it. The guidebook says it wasn't built for beauty. But beauty can arrive uninvited, can it not? It can fall upon things unexpectedly, like sunlight stealing through a chink in the curtains. Ah, but then this is the Fort with no chinks in its curtains, the Fort that has never been attacked. Does this mean its forbidding walls have thwarted even Beauty and sent it on its way? (203)

What the reader should take for the literal context of this writing, the fortress built in the middle of the Alps, is proposed in the text as what could assume a metaphoric connotation, or the emblematic quality of a symbol, a pretext for situating the discursive framework of the essay into the figural shifting of a narrative whose proceeding manifests a substantial instability or oscillation. In short, the text asks a precise question: is this fort "beautiful"? What's the meaning of beauty in this case? Beauty is compared to the light of the sunset stealing through the curtains, to unexpectedness, to something that the fort is said to have excluded from its walls.

From the point of view of the fort, beauty is what Jacques Derrida would have

called the absolute *arrivant*:

> I am talking about the absolute *arrivant*, who is not even a guest. He surprises the host – who is not yet a host or an inviting power – enough to call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage, names and languages, nations, families and genealogies. The absolute *arrivant* does not yet have a name or an identity. (Derrida *Aporias* 34)

The figure of the *arrivant*, like the appearance of beauty, should not be literalised, but rather considered as pointing to the figurality of writing, what in writing cannot be reduced to trace, identity, image or script. It is a sort of scriptless movement that goes beyond writing, and it is perhaps related to a quality that could arrive at writing, could be able to enter into writing, quite unexpectedly.[25] Uninvited guest, beauty disorients the host, who as yet does not think of her/himself as a host. But the fort is said to have thwarted even Beauty. This reasoning continues in the following lines, in Roy's essay

> Beauty. We could go on about it all day and all night long. What is it? What is it not? Who has the right to decide? Who are the world's real curators, or should we say the real world's curators? What is the real world? Are things we cannot imagine, measure, represent and reproduce real? Do they exist? Do they live in the recesses of our minds in a Fort that has never been attacked? When our imagination fails, will the world fail too? How will we ever know? (Roy *Listening* 204)

It would be possible to read this statement as an incorporation played by the defensive operation of the text. If the text is fictional, then things should not be read literally, the fort is not just the location of the event, the occasion for writing, but also something more, a figured fort. Yet the discourse on beauty does not appear to be fictional, but rather strictly prosaic, beyond the fictional frame created by the text itself. It is as if "The Briefing" were playing with the fictional and non-fictional

[25] Meyda Yegenoglu addresses the question of unconditional hospitality related to Derrida's reflection on the *arrivant* as an alternative to identity politics in neoliberal capitalist societies. Meyda Yegenoglu "Liberal Multiculturalism and the Ethics of Hospitality in the Age of Globalization," *passim.*

context of writing, and the literal and figurative use of words, or at least this is how I would like to read it. There would be a question about the poetic and the prosaic, which the image of the fort not allowing beauty to enter into its interior would be able to signify. The fort could be the text itself, a fortified prose that is exposed to the surrounding beauty, a poetic embrace which is also the reality beyond or around the fortified text. From this perspective, the reflection on beauty could correspond to the mechanism that Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok define as an antimetaphor: "a figure that serves in the active destruction of figuration . . . not simply a matter of going back to the literal sense of words but of using them in such a way – in speech or in action – that their 'figurativeness' is thereby destroyed" (Abraham and Torok "Introjection" 10). A figure of the absence of figure, or negative figurality which is radically other than a mere literalness, this kind of mechanism could guide us in a reading of the work of Arundhati Roy, our investigation of the difference between her fictional and non-fictional writings. What appears in "The Briefing" is a manifestly aesthetic proposition: beauty is related to the unexpected, to the problem of "curators," of the right to take care of the real world, and to the notion of reality itself: what is the real world? How to conceive of its relation to the imagination and the "Fort"? These may be literal questions, a conceptual constellation forming the core of an intriguing poetic theory, reaching a level of epistemological preoccupation: "what is the real world"? Even though this sentence implies a work of literalisation, it is a letter based on the metaphorisation of the fort, a destruction of figure that is also in itself a figure.

The problem of being the "curator" of the real might be reformulated as a question of custodianship. The question concerning the relation between writing and the real is also the question of the relation between the writer and the people who are represented in her writing. The problem of custodianship could be phrased in terms of a question: how can the intellectual connect her writing to the real experiences of people of different provenance and social belonging? How can the writer be responsible for others' experiences and histories without betraying them, but also without appropriating them? I am writing this chapter on Arundhati Roy because I believe that there is something to be learned from her writing. In fact, Roy seems to be able to be responsible for others' experiences, to tell the story of someone else, without turning this responsibility into the fortification of her own position. Instead, Roy puts herself at risk, she exposes herself – to critique, to scapegoating and political attack, as has happened on many occasions. It is the risk and vulnerability involved in this exposure that could suggest a different way of

being involved, beyond the safety of speaking for oneself (one's group, one's history and identity) and strategies of appropriation. It seems to me that it is from passages as these that Arundhati Roy's work could suggest an idea of custodianship: cultural transmission reformulated as responsibility towards the other. To begin with, she might be suggesting that custodianship is a matter of rediscovering those real things, which "we cannot imagine, measure, represent and reproduce." Writing could be custodian of the real by not claiming to "reproduce." The ethical dimension of custodianship is not a matter of asserting one's knowledge or "expertise" about a situation, a context or specific histories. In the contrary, custodianship as ethics begins with the recognition that one is speaking of something that is not identical with her own story, something that is not a matter of private property: this is "my" history, "my" family etc. Whereas affirmation of identity, knowledge and property end up in consolidating one's own position, they also separate people who cannot recognise each other within the same grouping. Identity does not allow the recognition of interconnectedness and commonality that is, in my view, the precondition for any ethical or political engagement. Identity leads intellectuals and peoples to enclose themselves in a "fort," to construct imaginary defences that prevent any real communication with the outside. By passing on, and taking on, experiences that are not necessarily her own, Arundhati Roy may suggest a different form of social involvement for the intellectual: rather than fortifying oneself, the intellectual should become an especially sensitive person. In other words, the intellectual should become a custodian: someone able to transmit experiences that are not her own and to be responsible towards them in her writing. The custodian is the intellectual able to tell the other's story, to empathise with other people, without reducing this to a matter of identity.

The fort could evoke something like the topography of the self, something that the antimetaphorical procedure of identification is meant to keep intact and to prevent from accommodating a sudden change in reality: "Demetaphorization is not a primary phenomenon; it occurs as a result of intrapsychic compartmentalization of an experience that has threatened the topography. Such sealing off, imprisonment, or, in the extreme, interment only serves to objectify the fantasy of incorporation" (Abraham "Introjection" 10). From this point of view, the uninvited arrival of beauty could make not only the fort collapse, but with it the entire topography of fictionality, the symbolic efficacy of the equivalence posed between the real world and the work of the imagination, or, from another point of view, the legitimacy of the curators, the ability to say what is real and what is not, what beauty is and what it is

not. Elusive beauty would exceed the authority of the text, the both fictional and non-fictional frame that keeps the text divided from the real, or unable to perceive a reality which is not immediately representable or reproducible. Absence of figure and extreme degree of figure at the same time, this quasi-philosophical exploration of the potential of beauty is further elaborated in "The Briefing":

> How big is it, this Fort that may or may not be beautiful? They say it is the biggest fort ever built in the high mountains. Gigantic, you say? Gigantic makes things a little difficult for us. Shall we begin by mapping its vulnerabilities? Even though it has never been attacked (or so they say) think of how its creators must have lived and re-lived the *idea* of being attacked. They must have *waited* to be attacked. . . . Until they no longer knew the difference between terror and desire. And then, from that knothole of tormented love, they must have imagined attacks from every conceivable direction with such precision and cunning as to render them almost real. (Roy *Listening* 204)

Roy seems to suggest that the architects of this fort were barricaded in their preoccupations and anxieties and unable to perceive a reality that might not correspond to this "fear and desire" nurtured by the imagination. The fort is then characterised as a "fragile testament to trepidation, to apprehension, to an imagination under siege" (204). The creators of this gigantic fort have been motivated by fear, a fear so intense that they have lived and experienced it as imminent and real, as if a fantasy of being attacked resulted in the existence of the effect of the expectation, to the point of identification of terror and desire. This emotional configuration could be related to the "conservative, preservative function of fantasy": "if one agrees to use the term 'reality' (in its metapsychological sense) for everything that acts on the psychic system so as to bring about a topographical alteration . . . one can reserve the term 'fantasy' for any representation, belief, or body state working to the opposite effect, that is, toward maintenance of the topographical *status quo*" ("Introjection" 3). Fantasy is defined in terms of a fort designed to maintain and preserve, but also to exclude, keep distant, in an emotional mixture of terror and desire. The interplay of terror and desire seems to echo the question previously posed: "When our imagination fails, will the world fail too?" We are told that the fort was built to preserve and defend the most precious and important things, civilisation itself, "everything that ought to be defended at all costs," gold maybe, and now, in "Europe's time of peace and plenty, it is being used

to showcase the transcendent purpose, or, if you wish, the sublime purposelessness of civilization's highest aspiration: Art" (Roy *Listening* 205). I would like to take these reflections as a point of departure, a consideration of how it is that art is showcased in a fort, while its walls do not allow the beauty of the sunset a glimpse of its inside. Arundhati Roy seems to suggest that art is identified with this fort, so big, in its sublime grandeur, that it takes the place of reality itself, and the idea of being attacked plays as the motivating force of its creators/curators. For this very reason we understand that beauty cannot enter into it. Is art without beauty, or is beauty something that art should learn to accommodate, as the uninvited guest from the real world, something that is not part of the reproducible?

I would like to interrupt the reading of "The Briefing" to suggest a possible connection to an important meditation on beauty, in particular natural beauty, a notion that, as Roy herself points out, is not admitted in the fortified domain of art. Some passages from a European discourse on art and the unrepresentable beauty of nature could be adopted to reconstellate Roy's aesthetic suggestion. The European context of her intervention could connect her meditation on art, beauty and the fort to a tradition of aesthetic philosophy that, while not directly addressed by Roy, has developed interesting dialogues on the same issues. In a chapter of his unfinished, posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory,* Theodor Adorno wrote some reflections on natural beauty, a section which is considered to be preliminary to his speculation on artistic beauty and that includes an extensive critique of Hegel, in particular Hegel's failure to understand beauty in general. It is extremely interesting to quote in this context the critique that Adorno extends to Hegel, as it could reveal some uncanny correspondences with Arundhati Roy's figurative statement about art and beauty.

> Hegel's philosophy fails vis-à-vis beauty: Because he equates reason and the real through the quintessence of their mediations, he hypostatizes the subjective preformation of the existing as the absolute; thus for him the nonidentical only figures as a restraint on subjectivity rather than that he determines the experience of the nonidentical as the telos and emancipation of the aesthetic subject. (Adorno *Aesthetic* 99)

What Hegel failed to grasp, in elaborating his aesthetic philosophy, is the "speech of what is not significative" (99). Hegel equated reality and reason, the real and the reproducible, as it might be re-interpreted. Adorno contested the equation between

reason and the real and suggested that the "nonidentical" (what eludes Hegel's logic of identity, reason=real) is in truth a part of reality. Reality is not just the product of reason. On the contrary, it may escape the mastery of the individual subject. Something that is reduced to the unmeasurable and feebly subjective or indeterminate is in reality what is most objective. In the same way as the creators of the fort described by Roy wanted to realise "the biggest" building ever built on the mountains, so European philosophy of art has led to the reduction of art to the subjective, to a preservative fantasy unable to communicate with the real, and anxious that the end of the imagination may be coterminous with the end of the "world." Translated to a speculative or philosophical framework, the post-Kantian European philosophy of beauty seems to be enclosed in the "fort" of a discourse based on a repression of what Hegel called "unintelligent" nature, a disconnection of the mind from what Kant (in the section titled "The formal purposiveness of nature is a transcendental principle of judgement" as well as other passages in his *Critique of Judgement*) still designated as a radical purposiveness, or accord, knowability and correspondence between the subject and the surrounding world.

In this philosophical context, Adorno was able to demonstrate that natural beauty is indeterminate and undecipherable only because it cannot be appropriated by the rule of identity and reification: it is the promise and "allegory" (Adorno *Aesthetic* 90) of what cannot be exploited and transformed into an object of consumption. Accordingly, it cannot be expressed in the objectifying idiom proper to capitalist societies unless it comes close to an ideology of immediacy. It is for this reason that it cannot be grasped in positive terms by a subject defended in the walls of a fortified fantasy of "terror and desire". Within the economy of this epistemic formation, if beauty is what is thwarted in the fear of attack, it cannot but re-appear clandestinely, as the unexpected or the uninvited guest, a ray of light "stealing through the chinks of the curtains." Most importantly, Adorno elaborated on these issues by talking about *natural* beauty, something which was still important in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* but that has subsequently been repressed and covered by a utilitarian, exploitative attitude which "does violence to the surface of the earth" (Adorno, *Aesthetic* 84) as well as to human beings. Adorno described natural beauty as "the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity. As long as this spell prevails, the nonidentical has no positive existence. Therefore natural beauty remains as dispersed and uncertain as what it promises" (95). If art, to a certain extent the pure opposite of the idea of nature, absolute mediation in contrast to the immediacy of what is not made, is to be related to nature, it is as

imitation of this "dispersed and uncertain" quality of natural beauty, rather than as literal imitation of nature itself. As Rodolphe Gasché remarks,

> The way art relates to natural beauty in Adorno's aesthetics is characterized by the constitutive effort of the arts to save what fleetingly promises itself in mute nature and to give it expression in the nonconceptual language that is specific to the arts. However, the arts can successfully accomplish this task only if they keep their distance from nature, that is, as long as they do not relinquish their character as art. (Gasché 121)

The concept of natural beauty, characterised by the fact that it cannot be copied, that it cannot be represented in image or sold as a commodity, is said to "rub on a wound" in that it contains the paradox that it maintains a difference from the aesthetic domain of the artefact but it nonetheless points to some of its essential qualities. Hegel excluded natural beauty in the first pages of his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics:*

> By the above expression ["Philosophy of Art"] we at once exclude the *beauty of Nature.* Such a limitation of our subject may appear to be an arbitrary demarcation, resting on the principle that every science has the prerogative of marking out its boundaries at pleasure. But this is not the sense in which we are to understand the limitation of Aesthetic to *the beauty of art.* It is true that in common life we are in the habit of speaking of beautiful colour, a beautiful sky, a beautiful river, and moreover, of beautiful flowers, beautiful animals, and above all, of beautiful human beings . . . We may, however, begin at once by asserting that artistic beauty stands *higher* than nature. For the beauty of art is the beauty that is born – born again, that is – of the mind. (Hegel 3-4)

This passage can be read as a gesture of fortification; for what emerges is a marking of boundaries in order to keep something outside, natural beauty is excluded from the field of aesthetic speculation because it is not created by "the mind," it does not correspond to the ideal of "freedom" embraced by European aesthetic philosophy: "in accord with this concept nothing in the world is worthy of attention except that for which the autonomous subject has itself to thank. The truth of such freedom for the subject, however, is at the same time unfreedom: unfreedom for the other" (Adorno *Aesthetic* 81-82). What emerges from these scattered references to Hegel

and Adorno is that natural beauty could offer a resistance to a vision of art derived from the narcissistic subject at the centre of Hegel's speculation. In beauty there is the figuration of a reality which is not produced by "reason" or "the mind," or what Arundhati Roy would call the product of the imagination and a logic of the reproducible. If the subject of a narcissistic aesthetic is fortified in a space "for which the autonomous subject has itself to thank," the natural beauty excluded by this fortification would be that part of reality which is excluded, unheard and unspoken. The image of the fort surrounded by beauty could suggest a non-narcissistic aesthetic, an aesthetic of the other or, perhaps, an aesthetic of custodianship rather than the protective fantasy of the authoritative "real world's curators." In fact, custodianship does not coincide with knowledge production and the expertise of those claiming to present the picture of how things are. The custodian is rather someone transmitting experiences that are not her own, able to learn from others' histories, to retain a radical openness to what eludes familiarity and immediate understanding. Rather than imposing his or her view on the world, custodianship is the ethical attitude of being open and receptive to what lies outside the boundaries of one's own background.

In "The Briefing", Arundhati Roy goes on to talk about the phenomenon of the so-called "snow wars." Because of the melting glaciers and always more problematic absence of natural snow on these European mountains, companies have undertaken a new business, a production and distribution of artificial snow.

> To generate artificial snow, nucleated, treated water is shot out of high-pressure power-intensive snow cannons at high speed. When the snow is ready it is stacked in mounds called whales. The snow whales are groomed, tilled and fluffed before the snow is evenly spread on slopes that have been shaved of imperfections and natural rock formations. The soil is covered with a thick layer of fertilizer to keep the soil cool and insulate it from the warmth generated by Hot Snow. Most ski resorts use artificial snow now. Almost every resort has a cannon. Every cannon has a brand. Every brand is at war. Every war is an opportunity. (Roy *Listening* 206-207)

A marginal problem, if confronted with more compelling issues going on in other parts of the world, it could nevertheless reveal the basic elements of a common logic at work, operating in more violent and politically significant contexts: the affinity between branding and war. Re-codification of "nature" as product and battlefield,

this mechanism provokes the insertion of what Adorno would have called the indeterminacy of natural beauty in the system of reproduction and commodification – an appropriation and reproduction of nature and its beauty: "If you want to ski on – or at least *see* – natural snow, you'll have to go further, up to the glaciers that are wrapped in giants sheets of plastic foil to protect them from the summer heat and prevent them from shrinking" (207).

In an article on Arundhati Roy's environmental commitment, focusing in particular on a famous essay by Roy called "The Greater Common Good," Graham Huggan writes that her essay "remains a highly intriguing text," because "it effectively deconstructs many of its own best arguments by drawing attention to itself as a playful piece of highly literary investigative writing" (Huggan 709). I would like to emphasise that Arundhati Roy's writing is able to communicate something about the idea of being "literary" and/or "investigative." The relation between the two would be a question of figurality and literality: it would rely on the way in which the text will be read, as a figure or letter. In "The Briefing" the essay form appears to deconstruct, and hence as being deconstructed by itself, to the extent that the reader is required to further investigate a fundamental problem: the literariness of the writing. Rather than seeing the lyrical component of Roy's writing as a limitation or deconstruction of her arguments, it might be proposed that the poetic element has an important role to play, even in essay writing. Roy's writing cannot be restricted to a level of factual precision or prose discourse, but rather it is animated by a play of the poetic and the prosaic, which could imply a specific idea of custodianship, and the postcolonial intellectual as custodian. In Roy's writing, the custodian would be a subject able to listen to those unrepresentable, unimaginable aspects of the real which are silenced or excluded by the logic of appropriation, reification and knowledge production.

From this point of view, the fact that Arundhati Roy has written only one novel, and that after it she dedicated herself completely to "political" writing could be rethought starting from a text like "The Briefing", written in 2008, which could be read as a poetic return, or a poetic re-flection, or an important step in the development of an original aesthetic perspective. The conclusion of "The Briefing" is an exhortation, an encouragement to the listeners to put an end to the "snow wars," to high-speed cannons combining the violence of war with the competition and appropriation of the market:

When the stone lion's stone bones have been interred in this, our wounded,

> poisoned earth, when the Fort That Has Never Been Attacked has been reduced to rubble and when the dust from the rubble has settled, who knows, perhaps it will snow again. That is all I have to say. You may disperse now. Commit your instructions to memory. Go well, comrades, leave no footprints. Until we meet again, godspeed, *khuda hafiz* and keep your powder dry. (Roy *Listening* 209-210)

If this short "appendix" begins with an intense reflection on beauty as something lying outside the "fort", something unpossessable which may arrive unexpected or uninvited, a beauty which could correspond to the anterior futurity of an absolute *arrivant,* the conclusion of the text points again toward the future, a time envisaged after the destruction of the fort, a kind of utopian moment which is also a commitment to memory, completed by a salutation, a reminder not to "leave footprints". This last exhortation not to leave footprints, a seemingly insignificant *parergon* with merely decorative, ornamental function, is here a most revelatory form of salute, like the originally Persian expression *khuda hafiz* ("May God be your guardian"). "Leave no footprints" could mean to do it in order not to be caught, but also not to be followed, or, not to be identified.

In *The God of Small Things* there is a central passage, a very short chapter titled "The Crossing," which represents the core of the narrative architecture of the work, but which could be said, in a sense, to stand outside it, to interrupt the flow of the narrated events and at the same time to play an essential part in the plot. It could be read as an ornament, at the same time superfluous and essential to the narration. Velutha, the "untouchable" "God" who plays such an important and enigmatic role in the novel, is going to encounter his "destiny", the dramatic combination of events which will lead him to death. Oppressed by a system of institutionalised injustice and collusion between what should be secular "democratic" structures and the violence of the caste system, Velutha's love affair with Ammu has been discovered, and he has been rejected by the family which prospered and lived thanks to his work for them. In the pages preceding the insertion of "The Crossing", after knowing about the loss of his job, he attempts to find help at the Worker's Union. In a scene of impossible communication with a leader of the Union, Velutha understands that the people around him do not consider him as a human being, independently of their political or religious affiliation, and that a communicative barrier is stronger than ever between himself and the person who is supposed to be a "comrade":

> As he replied, Velutha heard his own voice beat back at him as though it had it a wall. He tried to explain what had happened, but he could hear himself slipping into incoherence. The man he was talking to was small and far away, behind a wall of glass . . . Once again Velutha heard himself say something which made no difference to the man he spoke to. His own voice coiled around him like a snake. (*God of Small Things* 287)

It could be possible to compare this "wall of glass", this impossibility of reaching the other person in front of him, to the walls of the fort, their symbolic and literal value. But after this dialogue, which is part of a chapter called "Work is Struggle," the text presents the reader with the short, descriptive scene disclosed and enclosed by "The Crossing." After the failed attempt to find help at the Union, Velutha feels profoundly tired, and in a moment of intense fatigue, he reaches a place on the outskirts of the town, a place called the "House of History," an abandoned cottage where he used to meet Ammu, his lover, and where Eshta and Rahel, Ammu's twins, used to go as well. The House is on the other side of a river, and the short description narrates Velutha's crossing of the river and his final arrival at the place where he can find rest and sleep. In spite of the tragedy that is about to happen, and in spite of the horrible events described in the preceding chapter, "The Crossing" looks like a picture posed in the interstices of the novel, a pause for breath in which a peaceful description of the night and the landscape gives rise to a very poetic and lyrical passage.

> It was past midnight. The river had risen, its waters quick and black, snaking toward the sea, carrying with it cloudy night skies, a whole palm frond, part of a thatched fence, and other gifts the wind had given in. (289)

The river is absorbed into but also operates like a flow animating this suggestive landscape; it seems that it is carrying its elements with it, and with its stream it moves towards the sea, full of "gifts." Velutha is supposed to cross this river, to pass a threshold – which in the economy of the narrative plays an important role in the chain of events that will allow the policemen who will beat him to death to chase, accuse and kill him. The passage of this threshold, the crossing of this river, is extremely dramatic event, even though there is something more happening in this scene, a quality which makes this episode different from a merely fictional expedient to make all the vicissitudes of the plot cohere.

> A weak, watery moon filtered through the clouds and revealed a young man sitting on the topmost of thirteen stone steps that led into the water. He was very still, very wet. Very young. In a while he stood up, took off the white mundu he was wearing, squeezed the water from it and twisted it around his head like a turban. Naked now, he walked down the thirteen stone steps into the water and further, until the river was chest high. (289)

Velutha is "revealed" by the light of a watery moon, a moon made fluid and pale by the rain, which had slowed down and then stopped at the moment of the crossing. It could look like the natural landscape is staring at him, the dark night in which the river flows and a young man, naked, is about to cross a river. Now, the fact that this picturesque scene, with its supposedly silent atmosphere, might signify something more than a literal step in the architecture of the story, could emerge from further descriptive elements, which the reader can visualise as if revealed by the pale moon emerging after the interruption of the rain and illuminating the scene. The passage continues:

> Then he began to swim with easy, powerful stokes, striking out towards where the current was swift and certain, where the Really Deep began. The moonlit river fell from his swimming arms like sleeves of silver. It took him only a few minutes to make the crossing. When he reached the other side he emerged gleaming and pulled himself ashore, black as the night that surrounded him, black as the water that he had crossed. He stepped onto the path that led through the swamp to the History House. He left no ripples in the water. No footprints on the shore. (289-290)

Velutha is totally immersed in the night and the water. His visibility is related to his nakedness, a manifest nudity that corresponds to a different kind of veiling or clothing. In fact he is apparently covered by the beauty of the nocturnal scene: "sleeves of silver", darkness, water, moonlight. He also wears a sign, a nail varnish, sign of his love and only element of the "story" remaining on him during and after the swim. After the crossing, he walks "swiftly" as the stream of the river. He emerges on the opposite side, but at the same time he does not leave footprints. Nor ripples in the water. Could this element of the narrative have something to do with the significance of Velutha in the story, with a quality incarnated by this character,

which is revealed and suddenly disappears during this crossing? The fact that the narrator tells us about these minor details could have some implications for the thinking about beauty that is proposed in "The Briefing," a text that concludes with the exhortation: "Do not leave footprints."

Velutha first appears in the novel at a crucial moment, narrated in the second chapter, a moment which seems to reproduce something of the aesthetic problematic that I am trying to address and that the reflection on the "fort" and the snow wars could help us understand. Some of the main characters of the novel, Ammu and her brother Chacko, her twins Eshta and Rahel, and Baby Kochamma, another member of their family, are all going to a cinema in a neighbouring town by car, a blue Plymouth. Suddenly they encounter a protest organised by the regional Communist Party, and they find themselves stuck in the car in the midst of a marching crowd. The description of the event is interrupted by digressions in which we are told about the story of the Communist movements in Kerala, the region and setting of the story, and their "unexplainable" political influence, as well as about Velutha himself, allegedly among the protesters. The scene is centred on a division of spaces, an interesting architectural definition of the events: the inside of the car and the outside, where the flow of the protesters acts as an imaginative "sea" around the island – the isolated car. This could correspond to a class division: the rich family of a bourgeois, middle-class owner of a factory against the multitude of impoverished and exploited workers. As Friedman (119-120) points out:

> Reflecting, no doubt, Roy's profession as an architect, each space is architecturally embodied. Buildings function as tropes in the novel - that is, as images of historical over-determination. They are more than settings or backgrounds for human action. Instead, they are locations that concretise the forces of history. They are places that palimpsestically inscribe the social order as it changes over time. Containing history, they constitute the identities of the people who move through them.

Throughout the novel, spaces and locations define issues of identity and belonging, as it emerges suggestively from the scene of the protest. Velutha is supposed to appear in this crowd: he is recognised, but actually he is not really identified. In a sense, he does and does not leave "footprints", even though he is compromised in the situation, and the events happening on that day will play a part in his death. Roy writes:

> The marchers that day were party workers, students, and the labourers themselves. Touchables and Untouchables. On their shoulders they carried a keg of ancient anger, lit with a recent fuse. There was an edge to this anger that was Naxalite, and new. Through the Plymouth window, Rahel could see that the loudest word they said was *Zindabad.* And that the veins stood out in their necks when they said it. And that the arms that held the flags and banners were knotted and hard.
>
> Inside the Plymouth was still and hot. Baby Kochamma's fear lay rolled up on the car floor like a damp, clammy cheroot. This was just the beginning of it, the fear that over the years would grow to consume her. That would make her lock her doors and windows. (69-70)

The anger of the crowd is counterbalanced by the fear inside the car, and this emotive framework involves a separation, the putting of a barrier between inside and outside. The car itself plays as such a barrier in this scene, so that the people barricaded within its blue body are momentarily isolated and armoured, while experiencing a terrible fear, a real terror for what could be about to happen to them. It is at this moment that Velutha appears. Actually, even though the reader may maintain with almost certainty that he is there, among the protesters, wrapped in a red flag, singing and marching, the characters in the novel are caught in a persistent doubt. All of them, except Rahel and Ammu.

> Just then Rahel saw Velutha. . . . Her most beloved friend Velutha. Velutha marching with a red flag. In a white shirt and mundu with angry veins in his neck. He never usually wore a shirt. Rahel rolled down her window in a flash. "Velutha! Velutha!" she called to him. He froze for a moment, and listened with his flag. What he heard was a familiar voice in a most unfamiliar circumstance. Rahel, standing on the car seat, had grown out of the Plymouth window like the loose, flailing horn of a car-shaped herbivore . . . He stepped sideways and disappeared deftly into the angriness around him. (71)

Velutha, "her most beloved friend," is promptly recognised but, in order not to be identified by the family, which is, after all, on the other side of the division, he attempts to escape from this recognition, in order not to make himself recognisable and probably be prosecuted or fired. Rahel, with childlike simplicity, cannot fully

grasp the political significance of the "red flags" of the protesters, and, on the contrary, she is very attracted by the flag, which "seemed to her a most impressive piece of equipment. The right thing for a friend to have" (71). Velutha is recognised by the people who love him: Ammu immediately tells Rahel to be silent, understanding the troubles that this recognition will cause him. Immediately, though belatedly, she decides to cover him, to protect him, in an effort that seems to occur just a second too late. It is most interesting to notice that, even though Velutha is recognised and in a sense, betrayed by this appearance with absolute certainty, after all, the reader and the people inside the car cannot grasp or properly see his face, no one can really visualise him. He just disappears.

The point I would like to make is that Velutha is not visible from inside the car, for Rahel has to stretch out of it "like the horn of a car-shaped herbivore". The people inside – and the car plays like a "fort" in this situation – are enclosed in a sort of "island" in a sea of people. From the point of view of the reader, as well as the characters of the novel, there is a sort of enigma or aura around the figure of Velutha. He has uncommon abilities and surprising intelligence. We are told that he disappeared four years after a misunderstanding with his father and that no one knows where did he go or what did he do. He is described as a "little magician," and there is a feature of his body that makes him really intriguing and mysterious; on his back he "had a light brown birthmark, shaped like a pointed dry leaf. He said it was a lucky leaf, that made the monsoons come on time. A brown leaf on a black back. An autumn leaf at night" (73). After his recognition/sudden disappearance during the protest, we are introduced to him by way of a long digression, in which the reader is told something about the caste system in India, in particular about the extreme degree of degradation in which the so-called "untouchables" like Velutha have to live and behave. Roy writes:

> Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans [another name for "untouchables"] were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. (73-74)

The fact that in "The Crossing" Velutha does not leave footprints on the shore, nor ripples in the water: the fact that he does not leave footprints could be related to his untouchable status. It indicates that the tragedy of his personal story is produced by

the violence of the caste system, a system which is strongly denounced and attacked throughout the novel. He does not leave footprints because he is a Paravan after all. Except for Ammu and her twins, people around him do not consider him as a human being, as equal to them, and for this reason he just disappears, he cannot be properly "recognised" but for indictment and accusation, as a scapegoat, and the aura of mystery around him has something to do with the lack of communication imposed by the pervasive cruelty and power of the caste system. The inter-caste love story between Ammu and Velutha is a major transgression of this law, punished with death, something that has led many critics to identify in this love-story a turning of the political into the privacy of sentiment and desire. Nonetheless, it may be argued as well that the story of the individual is annihilated by the violence of the material and symbolic circumstances of the context, an ideology and social organisation so powerful that it leaves no room for change or for escape in desire, but only in what could be envisaged as a radically political transformation. Rather than the liberatory power of the realm of desire and the libido, it may be argued that the narration seems to point to the absurdity of social partition in any of its forms, be they caste or class. Following Needham, it could be remarked that, without ignoring the significance of love in the novel, we could "(re)locate the novel and Roy's politics in a different register, within which it acquires a larger social and political significance" (Needham 384). Accordingly, I would like to circumscribe the scope of my reading and focus my attention on a particular detail: the fact that Velutha does not leave footprints, and that he cannot be fully grasped or really recognised from the inside of the car, a fact that seems to point to a certain "out-of-placeness" as well as the fact that what "makes Velutha dangerous so far as the touchables and untouchables are concerned is his refusal to be interpellated as a Paravan" (Needham 374). I would like to read the poetic description of "The Crossing" alongside the poetic-literal text of "The Briefing." The exhortation concluding the latter: "do not leave footprints" could be read as an exhortation to get out of the fort (or the car), an incitement to solidarity, to go to the other side, a message that "The Crossing" could also translate on a different plane.

In "The Briefing" beauty is an uninvited guest: unexpected, it is something that operates a sort of "crossing," or a transgression of borders and divisions. Beauty is in that text related to the real, in the sense of a real world existing beyond our imagination, or rather a real world that is opposed to the "terror and desire" of the real-effect of the imaginary attacks projected by the architects of the fort. The reality of beauty is substantially different from the becoming-real of the imaginative efforts

of the architects. However, it does signal the paradox of a fort that has never been attacked: it could be said that beauty is the only "attack" that the meticulous and paranoid architects did not take into consideration, something that would have taken them totally unprepared. What is most important, however, is that beauty could be said to "leave no footprints" in that it is something that cannot be made object of "war or branding," if we consider that "brand" originally means a mark made by burning, to demonstrate ownership, hence a sign of possession, a border, an imprint. Beyond the logic of the imprint or the script, beauty is what cannot be possessed. It arrives unexpected, it disappears without leaving a trace. Adorno, similarly but also differently from Derrida, would say that beauty implies the experience of the nonidentical, or the unspeakable, but only from the point of view of a subject enclosed within the limits of the logic of identity. The nonidentical, like the *arrivant*, is beyond the identifying procedure that constitutes the ground of a self-imposing subject, but it also implies that it is codified as negative, absolute negativity, or unreality, only because it is seen, we could say, from a tiny window in the wall of the fort, or from the window of the blue Plymouth trapped in the workers' protest.

It is because of its negativity that natural beauty is excluded from the domain of the aesthetic, in that it would compromise the singular, self-consolidating freedom of the subject: hence, Adorno would say, the unfreedom of the other. A reading attentive to the aesthetic dimension could help us situate the image of the fort at the level of the compositional framework, a writing fortified like a fort, and the metaphor of the subject could provide further insight in what we might call the idea of responsibility, as relation to the other, indicated by Arundhati Roy. In fact, the arrival of beauty could correspond to a challenge to the defence mechanism of the text, to its "terror and desire." It would be an opening of the text itself to a consciousness of the other. I would like to stress that there is something in the character of Velutha that operates like beauty, a quality that cannot be appropriated, beyond the imprint or the footprint of social identification, and able to reveal the space of responsibility or custodianship in the text. This is not so much the "erotic" or libidinal component criticised by Ahmad and reconsidered by critics like Brinda Bose ("Desire"), with the result that, for them, the political is turned into the intimate and the realm of private life. Rather, this feature appears every time the reader is reminded that there is a "mystery" residing in him, something that cannot be represented or comprehended. The magic element – he is a "God" after all – is produced as "unspeakable" and mysterious or libidinal by the denial of human

commonality that the caste system imposes on him.

Love, depicted in the novel as a form of transgression or indiscipline, rather than being a sign of singularity, privacy or individuality, could be interpreted as a radically social effort, the attempt to restore a collective belonging beyond caste and class identity, an attempt to communicate with or rather to accommodate the other simply as a human being, something that must take the form of a response to a sort of negative or auratic fascination because of the antagonistic and divisive context in which it is played. Towards the end of the novel, Velutha is described in terms of partaking of a sort of natural beauty, something which should be grasped in the depth of its significance:

> As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she [Ammu] saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labour has shaped him. How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planed, each nail he drove, each thing he made, had moulded him. (333-334)

In this passage, Roy describes an act of love, a vision of the beloved. It is this act of love that enables Ammu to perceive Velutha's beauty. Like the arrival of beauty in the fort described in "The Briefing," Velutha's beauty has something to do with "the world" and figuration as an alternative way of understanding the referential dimension of the text.

In Arundhati Roy, beauty is natural beauty, in that it plays like a sensation that is not produced by the text, but arrives at the text from the outside. It looks like the text is pointing to a beauty that cannot be posited by its script, or the artefact, but that lives out of it, as if outside the representation. The fact that the fort described in "The Briefing" is disarmed before the arrival of beauty, while the terror and desire of its architects are displaced, could mean that beauty is a matter of evading the fortification in order to reach reality, a reality which could be nature, in the sense of that part of nature which exceeds appropriation: a snow which is not the artificial snow and which maybe, one day, is going to reappear after the destruction of the fort. In *The God of Small Things,* it is a crossing of the river revealed by the moonlight – a crossing which leaves no imprint for Velutha to be identified and branded, even though in the story, he will be discovered and beaten to death. In the

crossing, however, it seems that something of Velutha is going away in the river, as if something is becoming part of the natural beauty around him, something, maybe god-like, which cannot be destroyed or annihilated. It is a beauty beyond possession, and hence beyond destruction. I would like to propose that we could read this beauty, reflected in and belonging to the world around him, as the presence of the figure in the novel, something that, paradoxically, a reference to Roy's later – non-fictional – writing can suggestively show.

To summarise, what I would like to suggest is that, on the level of the content, the meaning of being committed as prefigured in the novel and mirrored in "The Briefing" can be firstly recognised as a message against caste inequality, or as Needham aptly points out, "Ammu and Velutha's transgressive relationship as part of a discourse less about overcoming and more about *annihilating* caste distinction" (385). A reference to "The Briefing" would connect a statement against caste distinction to a message against the collusion of "war and branding": the intimacy between political antagonism and the destruction/appropriation of natural resources. Yet, the figurative elements of her writing are by no means exhausted by the analysis of the literal content of her work. Before understanding how engagement is at play, before or beyond the strictly political, the figurative element of writing could point to a sort of radical precondition or prefiguration: the ability to listen to the other, to be on the other side, to see the other as a human being. There would be a prefiguration of actual forms of commitment, which could be at work in Roy's writing. The elusive appearance of beauty presented in "The Briefing" could correspond to what is accommodated by the stream of the river reaching the sea with its "gifts": an image of natural beauty which poses something like a breaching of the epistemic ordering that from inside the parameters of class and social division can only be perceived as ungraspable or unrepresentable.

Empathy: Position beyond Representation

In the second part of this chapter I have attempted to read "beauty" as the reference to a custodianship of the real: beauty can be read as the figuration of a radical openness and receptivity that is the precondition for the transmission of the experiences and histories of others beyond absolute identification. Beauty, as it is described in Roy's essay, is what is not captured by projections and imaginary defences. It is what eludes knowledge production and the epistemological construction of the other. In contrast with mechanisms of power formation and

authorisation of one's own position, the capacity to perceive the natural beauty surrounding the fort is a call to look forward, to look beyond the fortification of one's identity and field of expertise. "The Briefing" and "The Crossing," a chapter of *The God of Small Things*, could suggest the presence of a figurative element in Arundhati Roy's writing able to point to a reality beyond lines of caste and class division. Beauty has been contrasted with the concept-metaphor of the fort: the establishment of an authority aimed at excluding from reality what is not measurable or reproducible, a defensive mechanism of the text and the subject, animated by fear and desire. Roy's writing seems to suggest that, before actual commitment, literature could constitute a field of response to the other, through the attendance to those aspects of the real which cannot be immediately reproduced. From this point of view, Roy's writing does not seem to me to be directly political: it is rather an exhortation to solidarity with the oppressed of the earth, an incitement not to remain trapped in one's identity, class, or social positioning. Literature is hence more a prefiguration of political involvement, rather than commitment itself. In the third part of this chapter, I will elaborate on the idea of a responsiveness through literature, through the outline of a notion of empathic writing. Her essay on the attack on the Indian Parliament and another section from her novel will be considered, after some reflections on the question of the subaltern and the role of the postcolonial intellectual, a context of debate to which Roy's work might be responding. The question of empathy seems to be a direct development of the question of poetic and prosaic aspects of writing addressed in the previous section, in that the recognition of the role of the poetic might open up a different understanding of Roy's intellectual engagement.

In the critical literature on Arundhati Roy, the description of Velutha has been interpreted in relation to Spivak's reflections on the subaltern, and this theoretical subject has been understood by some critics as an important component in the representational strategies at work in Roy's writing. For instance, Alex Tickell writes that in "the figure of Velutha (as an untouchable) we might be tempted to see a fictional representation of the subaltern, especially as the social structures he inhabits only allow him to 'speak' in limited ways, and he often appears in the novel as a body, or as the object of other characters' fears and desires" (Tickell 84). However, Tickell interestingly remarks that this particular representational strategy may be a matter of "creative choice" rather than an "obvious failure". Following other commentators (in particular Needham "Small Voice") Tickell suggests that the ungraspable, elusive and auratic quality surrounding Velutha could be an adequate

representation of the concrete lack of political agency for the subaltern, incarnating in this way "an evasive protest at the 'touchable logic' that confines him" (Tickell 84). In the unfolding of his reflection on this issue, Tickell includes a reference to Arundhati Roy's political writings whereby he takes into consideration the fact that the different "commitment to truth" involved in writing an essay rather than a novel could lead Roy to an actual appropriation and representation of the subaltern, to speaking on behalf of the dispossessed and in this way silencing them. Tickell leaves the question as an open one, one that Roy "will have to address more comprehensively in future work" (86).

Tickell touches upon the problem of the difference between fiction and essay as a question of genre, and his important and thought-provoking review could be complemented by a further questioning of the significance of the political in Arundhati Roy's writing. The literary representation of the subaltern that Velutha is supposed to epitomise might be compared to a real case on which Roy has written an important contribution, the controversial case of the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament that occurred in 2001. Some preliminary insights on the question of genre may be useful in comprehending one important issue at stake in Roy's writing, one which goes beyond the canonical post-colonial problematic of the "politics of representation" and which directly interrogates the presence of the political in literature. If, as Tickell remarks, "it is in 'factual' forms of writing such as her prose essays" that "we should be most wary of Roy's potential 'assimilative' articulations of subaltern concerns" (85), some reflections on the significance of the "prose essay" as a genre can be very useful to assess Roy's aesthetic. In a noteworthy article on Roy's "rhetoric of radical cosmopolitanism," Nagesh Rao ("Politics") addresses some interesting aspects of Arundhati Roy's essay writing and its underlying politics. Rao (169) intriguingly notices that "Roy's essays thus disrupt the hegemony of the liberal-individualistic 'personal essay'," and mentions an important reflection on the essay as form by Theodor Adorno. However, Rao does not engage, as I would like to do, with the potentialities of Adorno's insistence on what Carlo Ginzburg terms the "nondeductive element proper to the essay as a genre." As Ginzburg writes: "for a person reading an essay, the end results, the *terminus ad quem* of a generally tortuous course, are by definition unknown, hence the surprise accompanying the reading of the best examples of this literary form" (Ginzburg *Island* xii).

An extremely interesting aspect of Adorno's proposition on the essay is that this genre is said to open up "an arena of intellectual experience" that the architecture of writing conveys by not being a static edifice, but rather by keeping the dynamism

and "force field" originated by the configuration of concepts (Adorno "Essay" 161). The essay reveals "irritating" aspects of the object and "shakes off the illusion of a simple, basically logical world that so perfectly suits the defense of the status quo" (163). Most importantly, Adorno writes that the essay should be neither confused with nor too drastically distanced from art: "The essay thereby acquires an aesthetic autonomy that is easily criticized as simply borrowed from art, though it distinguishes itself from art through its conceptual character and its claim to truth free from aesthetic semblance" (153). While it is signed by a "claim to truth" free from semblance, the essay does not produce scientific knowledge in that it does not provide the continuity and "single direction" of discursive argumentation, but rather it is similar to the weaving of a "carpet": its strength depends on the "density of its texture" (161) and the questioning of the illusion of immediacy, exhaustiveness, totality and unity (164).

The epistemological motive of the essay does correspond to an interruption of the epistemology of the positivist jargon against which Adorno wrote many important reflections. For this reason, writes Adorno, the essay is "the critical form *par excellence*" (166); it is anti-ideological in a way that resembles and borrows from the aesthetic sphere while maintaining the logical and philosophical essence of discursive thought, even though it proceeds radically *sui generis*. The essay would be animated by the contradiction between poetic and prosaic elements that would allow the weaving of a discourse, and a commitment to truth, which does not objectify as happens in the production of knowledge. The fragmentary quality of the essay could be related to the remarks that the historian Gyanendra Pandey dedicates to the role of non-conventional forms of writing in the production of a counter-history: "what the historians call a 'fragment' – a weaver's diary, a collection of poems by an unknown poet . . . is of central importance in challenging the state's construction of history, in thinking other histories and marking those contested spaces through which particular unities are sought to be constituted and others broken up" (Pandey "Defense" 50). It could be remarked that the accusations moved by Ramachandra Guha against Roy, her being un-original, self-indulgent, hyperbolic, are precisely the elements that make her essay writing "irritating" and hence effectively critical and subversive. In this context, it might be proposed that "factual precision" and "real precision" – essay and literature – are not entirely disconnected and that, in a sense, Roy's essay writing could be read as intimately related to her novel, as a prolongation and continuation of her custodianship. Before turning to this question in the conclusion of this chapter, I would like to address some aspects of Roy's

writing and her particular relation to the post-colonial debate on subalternity and the politics of representation.

After her canonical essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" Gayatri Spivak has offered many other important contributions on the question of the collective, political engagement of the intellectual, the problem to which that essay initially responded. In an essay written for a special issue of the journal *boundary 2* edited by Aamir Mufti, focused on the notion of secular intellectual famously presented by Edward Said (*Humanism*), Spivak addresses the problem of terror, in a text that could provide us with some food for thought in reconsidering the work of Arundhati Roy and the problematic of her engagement. Spivak writes about "the stereotype of the public intellectual," a stereotype according to which the role of the engaged writer corresponds to the producer of a counter-knowledge dissonant from the official, mediatised dissemination. Production of knowledge is thereby restricted to countering the production of an ideologically charged, biased knowledge. Spivak writes about this:

> This is undoubtedly worthy, often requiring personal courage, but it is not a response. It enhances the charisma of the intellectual and produces in the reader a feeling of being in the thick of things. This type of cognitive mapping, heavily dependent upon the fieldwork of frontline investigative journalists and humble gatherers of statistics, legitimates by reversal the idea that knowledge is an end in itself, or that there is a straight line from knowing to doing politics as human rights or street theater. But to respond means to resonate with the other, contemplate the possibility of complicity — wrenching consciousness-raising, which is based on "knowing things," however superficially, from its complacency. Response pre-figures change. ("Terror" 87)

In the secular space of public intervention, the engaged intellectual is required to accommodate a more profound and radical change in the configuration of the debate: rather than accepting the ideology of knowledge – or of expertise – which gives the media the authority to codify, for example, some events as "crime," or "terror," or "dissidence" or "humanitarian crisis" (the authority of the "curators of the real"), the intellectual should pose a challenge to the epistemic ground of production of information and knowledge. This point does not simply ground a critique of "expertise" that may be easily co-opted by the culture industry and the "creative recycling" on the international publishing scene, but something more

radical – a question regarding the role and significance of writing itself, and the relation between the intellectual and the subaltern, as Stephen Morton notices in a recent essay on Spivak (Morton 80). Accordingly, Spivak introduces the notion of "figuration" – in contrast to the idea of "diction," value-free or simply factual expression. Figuration is described as essential to the possibility of response.

> Reading Aristotle and Shelley, students typically ask, What is the difference between prediction and pre-figuration? The difference is, negatively, in the intending subject's apparent lack of precision, in the figure; positively, it is the figure's immense range in time and space. The figure disrupts confidence in consciousness-raising. That is the risk of a response that hopes to resonate through figuration. When we confine our idea of the political to cognitive control alone, this does not just avoid the risk of response, it closes off response altogether. We end up talking to ourselves, or to our clones abroad. Predictably, on Left and Right, you lose support when you stop us-and-them-ing, when you take away the unself-critical convenience of doing good or punishing. It is for such situations that Mahasweta Devi wrote, "there are people for passing laws, there are people to ride jeeps, but no one to light the fire." . . . The response is in the fire. You get burned if you are touched and called by the other. ("Terror" 87)

Prefiguration would hence incorporate two senses: something that comes before figuration, and figuration itself as the precondition for political engagement, for action. It would be a chain or a relay that is the way in which literature may become committed. The figure of being touched by the other – being touched by the untouchable – could lead us to reformulate the question of the subaltern in Arundhati Roy's writing. What I would like to stress is that Arundhati Roy's engagement with the question of the subaltern, rather than reproducing a supposed transparency in the relation between the representing (individual) intellectual and the represented (collective) subject, is able to locate the discourse on the public engagement of the writer on a ground which is not the field of representation. The figurative element of "touching" and "being touched" (and "getting burned," following Mahasweta Devi's powerful imagery) could signify the passage from the economy of representation to a field that Roy herself describes as "empathy": taking part, or feeling and participating, going to the other side, rather than speaking for a collective movement. Arundhati Roy states this very clearly in her response to the criticism of "un-originality" posed by the historian Ramachandra Guha:

> When one is writing to advocate a political position, or in support of a peoples' movement that has been yelling its lungs out for the last fifteen years, one is not trying to be original, one is adding one' s voice to theirs in order for them to be heard. Almost by definition, one is reiterating what they are saying. My essays are not about me or my brilliance or my originality or lack of it. They're not meant to be a career move – they're about re-stating the issue, they're about saying the same things over and over again. (Roy "Scimitars")

This (uncannily Adornian) claim of non-originality and of "adding one's voice to theirs" is then confirmed in the same interview when she complains about the fact that every time she takes part in a protest with the NBA the media report that she "led" the protest, while she claims being there in support of the movement, which is "led" by its real, political leaders. I think that the shift from the "politics of representation" model of the engaged intellectual to the idea of the intellectual as taking part or participating in a collective struggle with her/his "weapons" – writing, speaking and listening – this shift could resonate with a more recent rephrasing of the notion of the subaltern which Spivak proposes in an essay called "Scattered Reflections on the Subaltern and the Popular." If I am correct, I would read that essay as a leap forward from the renowned and controversial notion of "strategic essentialism" and the double bind politics developed by Spivak in earlier writings to a new model, fashioned from the point of view of the "figure" – or the difference between "pre-diction" and "pre-figuration."

This model is defined by the interaction of "metonymy" and "synecdoche," and corresponds to a vision of the subaltern as "position without identity" that might allow us to keep the specificity of a particular struggle (feminism, anti-casteism, environmentalism, class struggle) in connection to other sites of protest, without this implying the idea of globalising or "universalising" engagement. Rather, it would be close to the concept of "writing for", in the sense of committing oneself to a cause, of trying to listen to what is happening "on the other side." The originality of this model is signalled by the relevance that the figure can assume in breaching the defensive-literal syntax proper to the logic of appropriation common to "war and branding." Rather than "essentialism," the discrepancy between metonymy and synecdoche emphasises the fact that the intellectual is not and does not represent the subaltern: the intellectual is not a political leader, or the producer of counter-mediatic knowledge. Rather, the work of the engaged writer could signify what

Spivak calls the "interruption of the epistemological." The discrepant experience of the synecdoche/metonymy figurative logic implies that taking part in a collective struggle – or even "being part" of it (the individual as synecdochical part of the collective) is not immediately reflected in the opposite: that the collective is in the individual. There is a major difference between the individual acting as part of the collective and the collectivity being represented or subsumed in the individual subject. The point is to keep this difference alive, or better, to set it to work. The literal "filling" of the figurative frame in which collective struggle is realised does not entail the fixity of the representational object. Rather, the movement of the letter is figured in itself: the individual takes part/is part without representing a supposedly homogeneous group.

From this point of view, I would like to reconsider briefly the insistence on the part of some important critics that Arundhati Roy's work "contributed to the domestication of India for the Western consumer" (Mongia 109) and that "the critical perception of Roy in western critical circles" can be said "to intersect her harrowing themes and verbal extravagance with her Indian and feminine identity" (Boehmer 66), whereby "the criticism of Roy's writing as lushly overwritten, overwhelmed by its poetic effects" (64) may lead to a replication of colonial paradigms of cultural diversity. Boehmer writes:

> Overdetermined in all its strangeness, abstracted from its local context, stereotyped and restereotyped, the exotic attraction of the once-colonized appears therefore to have been imported into postcolonial criticism, and, in the process, to have been commodified and made safe for a western readership. (67)

Boehmer's emphasis on "fascination with difference" might be said to address an extremely important and relevant question, which is one of the central issues of an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship. In fact, if Indian feminine writing is circulated and distributed under the rubric of a persistent neo-orientalism, or a fascination with the exotic, the responsibility of the postcolonial reader or critic would be to suggest a different way of reading these kinds of text, "of cutting through this neo-orientalist bind in order to give the very real vitality of postcolonial literatures their due regard" (69). This seems to me what Boehmer's inspiring reflections could lead the reader to aspire to: a new way of approaching postcolonial literature. The task of the reader might consist in going beyond the stereotype of neoorientalism, and trying to learn something through a more responsible approach

to artworks. If Roy's engagement could teach the reader and critic something important, it would be an exhortation to approach her work with something other than an essentialist or neo-orientalist assumption in mind. I think that Roy's writing could present an idea of responsibility as a step to the other side, a way of anticipating what Spivak calls a "response."

In 2001, the media reported the failed attempt to make a terrorist attack against the Indian Parliament. The falsity and the machinations behind this delicate political case have been demonstrated and widely confirmed by the fact that almost all the people supposed to be part of the terrorist plot have been released on the ground that there is no proof to pursue the legal dispute against them.[26] Arundhati Roy has taken part in a collective movement intended to promote a parliament inquiry to reveal the truth of this case and the responsibility of institutions and secret police officers in the production of a fake terrorist case in support of a well-defined antagonistic political strategy. In fact, the attribution of the attack to the insurgency in Kashmir could have repercussions for a long and unfinished situation of conflict in the Indian subcontinent. As Victoria Schofield summarises:

> Although the two countries [India and Pakistan] fought each other in 1947, 1965 and 1971, there has never been a mutually acceptable outcome to the Kashmir issue. The dispute between India and Pakistan, combined with a fifty-year struggle by the people for the right of self-determination, has now been inherited by the next and the next generation. (*Kashmir* 225)

It is thanks to the work of intellectuals such as Arundhati Roy that the case of the attack on the Indian Parliament has gained media attention in India and in the West, attracting strong reactions from the leader of the far-right Indian nationalist party. Roy's essay on this event has been translated in many languages and is easily available to the Western reader in a recent collection of essays. A significant development in this case is represented by the fact that in the lack of direct evidence of involvement in terrorist activities for *all* the accused, they all have been released, except one of them: Mohammed Afzal, who has been condemned under the death penalty, but who still remains in prison at the moment of writing these words. In an essay titled "'And his life should become extinct': The Very Strange Story of the Attack on the Indian Parliament," Roy reports that, in absence of the legal evidence

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[26] An outline of the case is provided by Nirmalangshu Mukherji in the *Economic and Political Weekly*

for accusing Afzal of involvement in the case, the text of the judgement adopts a very strange rhetorical emphasis: "Spelling out the reasons for awarding Afzal the death penalty, the judgement goes on to say, 'The appellant, who is a surrendered militant and who was bent on repeating the acts of treason against the nation, is a menace to the society and his life should become extinct'" (Roy *Listening* 48). The problem behind and around this case is that whatever the decision about Afzal, there will be violent political repercussions. Indeed, both the media and the government linked the responsibility for the terrorist attack to the war in Kashmir, and Afzal himself has become a "representative" or even "martyr" of the Kashmiri struggle against the Indian occupation, a particularly violent context whose origin can be traced back to partition, and which represents the fulcrum of a conflictual situation in the subcontinent since the year of Independence.[27] This is what Arundhati Roy writes about Afzal:

> Sadly, in the midst of the frenzy, Afzal seems to have forfeited the right to be an individual, a real person any more. He's become a vehicle for everybody's fantasies – nationalists, separatists and anti-capital punishment activists. He has become India's great villain and Kashmir's great hero – proving only that whatever our pundits, policy-makers and peace-gurus say, all these years later, the war in Kashmir has by no means ended. (49-50)

Like Velutha in her novel, Afzal seems to have been framed as the scapegoat of a conflictual political situation. As René Girard writes, the scapegoat figure emerges "when human relations have broken down in crisis" (43). The victim becomes "the only effective and omnipotent cause in the face of a group that believes itself to be entirely passive" (44). By becoming a scapegoat, Afzal has also become a "vehicle for everybody's fantasies" and has lost the right to be a real person any more. Arundhati Roy's strategy of reading the mass-media and juridical textuality might be compared to the Subaltern Studies method of reading against the grain of the official performative declarations, in order to reach the "authentic" or true voice of the silenced, and negatively defined, space of the popular, a question that stimulated much debate and controversy among Subaltern Studies historians. Following Needham's intriguing parallel between Ranajit Guha's historiographical programme

[27] For a reconstruction of the history of the conflict in Kashmir, see the work of Ashutosh Varshney, who argues that peace and security in that place depend on the possibility of an understanding between Pakistan and India and the end of India's tentative assertion of full state authority in the region.

and Roy's fictional writing, it may be argued that there are many intersections between her practice of storytelling and the historian's attempt to recover the voice of the silenced space of the popular, the agency repressed by different forms of meta-narrative explanation. At the same time, Needham recognises some important differences between Roy and Guha, in particular the fact that

> [U]nlike Guha, she is interested as well not only in the conditions of the former's [the "Small" stories'] emergence and development, but also in how these conditions do not uniformly yield the difference of the subaltern from the dominant. To give flesh, as it were, to her interests, she draws upon the resources of story telling (which entail the use of both imagination and invention), in general, and the techniques of the realist novel, in particular, to bring her readers into a close, even intimate relationship with the world her characters inhabit. (Needham 380)

The difference between Arundhati Roy and Ranajit Guha would implicate the question of storytelling. As narrator and creative writer rather than professional historian, Roy would demonstrate the ability to show a more nuanced view, a different perception of the real. Needham's reflection points to what I think is an important aspect of Roy's commitment. In fact, Needham identifies the utopian moment in the Subaltern Studies in the always delayed collapse of the distance between the historian and the subaltern, something famously expressed by Guha's statement about the "close approximation" (Guha 33) that could be realised by the recognition of the "distortion" necessarily involved by historiographical reconstruction and the maintenance of this distortion as "parametric" in the "optics" of historical discourse. While there might be utopian moments in both Roy and Guha, I would not say that, in the case of Roy, utopia should correspond to the erasure of the distance between the historian and the subaltern subject. The "intimate relationship" that Roy's writing may be said to achieve and configure does not imply the idea of representing the other or of re-covering and hence re-silencing her/his voice. I would like to argue that Roy's essay is substantially different from the Subaltern Studies group in that, apart from the fact that, for example, in her essay on Afzal she is underlining the problem of "the right to be a real person" rather than the object of our fantasies and projections (or, to keep the emotional connotation of "The Briefing," the object of our terror and desire), her essay does not seem to aim at collapsing the distance between Roy herself and Afzal. It would be

misleading to claim that Roy herself has a privileged contact or proximity with the subaltern, and her writing does not allow us to think so. Furthermore, Roy's essay may be said to have something to do with our capacity to listen rather than the effectiveness of our speech. But to be able to listen does not mean to speak for someone else.

Roy's reflections on the complexities of the individual case and their implications in the socio-historical situation in Kashmir do not aim at recovering the supposedly uncontaminated voice of the people, at speaking on behalf of him (or them) in the supposedly transparent medium of discursive or historiographical reflection, but rather she may be attempting to breach the surface of fantasy and projection in media representation. Roy might be said to operate what Spivak, in the context of a discourse on intellectual response in the case of another "terrorist attack," calls the interruption of the epistemological:

> What seems important today, in the face of this unprecedented attack on the temple of Empire, is not only an unmediated intervention by way of the calculations of the public sphere— war or law—but training (the exercise of the educative power) into a preparation for the eruption of the ethical. I understand the ethical, and this is a derivative position, to be an interruption of the epistemological, which is the attempt to construct the other as object of knowledge. Epistemological constructions belong to the domain of the law, which seeks to know the other, in his or her case, as completely as possible, in order to punish or acquit rationally, reason being defined by the limits set by the law itself. The ethical interrupts this imperfectly, to listen to the other as if it were a self, neither to punish nor to acquit. (Spivak "Terror" 83)

Spivak's insistence on the role of the intellectual as the sabotage of epistemological production of the other as object of knowledge means that the intellectual should not be simply producing counter-knowledge. The ability should be "to listen to the other as if it were a self," which may be read as a definition of empathy. I would like to argue that Arundhati Roy's essay on the attack on the Indian Parliament does correspond to the "interruption of the epistemological" and the opening of a field of "response" which challenges the production of knowledge and does not simply subvert the constitution of official objects of knowledge and public information. It also discloses a call for listening to the other as if it were a self, to discover the real person, the real human being, beyond projections of various kinds. I think that

Spivak's statement on the figural and her undoing of the epistemic idiom could resonate with Roy's introduction of "empathy" as opposed to "concern," something that she expresses in the already mentioned interview:

> But even those of us who do understand and sympathise with the issue, even if we feel concern, scholarly concern, writerly concern, journalistic concern – the press has done a reasonably persistent job of keeping it in the news – still, for the most part , there's no real empathy with those who pay the price. Empathy would lead to passion, to incandescent anger, to wild indignation, to action. (Roy "Scimitars")

The emotional, sensitive response named by Roy "empathy" is a domain that is not entirely reducible to politics and that regards something more intimate and radical, a prefiguration of action. While it has been subjected to many forms of criticism, the notion of empathy, adopted by Roy herself, nonetheless presents some intriguing aspects that could lead our discussion of Roy's engagement from the politics of representation to a questioning of the political dimension of literary and essay writing.

Authors such as Dan Zahavi ("Beyond Empathy") and Susan Lanzoni ("Epistemology") have reconsidered the phenomenological genealogy of the German term *Einfühlung,* a term that derives from the philosophical reflection on artistic response and that is still the object of discussion among philosophers and psychologists. In a critical intervention in the study of empathy, Dan Zahavi writes an interesting remark:

> Under normal circumstances we understand each other well enough through our shared engagement in the common world, and it is only if this understanding for some reason breaks down, that something like empathy becomes relevant. But if this is so, an investigation of intersubjectivity that takes empathy as its point of departure and constant point of reference is bound to lead us astray. ("Beyond Empathy" 155)

According to Zahavi, empathy becomes necessary only when allegedly "normal" conditions of communication are not realised. While Zahavi considers this observation to be a major critical point against the use of "empathy" as a paradigm for intersubjectivity, it could work well in a political context in which forms of neo-

colonial oppression, in addition to the violence of a growing religious nationalism and economic exploitation codify the supposedly "normal" circumstances of social relation. I do not know what are the political, social and historical conditions that would allow Zahavi to talk about "normal" circumstances, maybe would they refer to a condition of trust, equality and conviviality, a social bond among people of different provenance? In that case, I would define them as "utopian" rather than "normal" circumstances. In a postcolonial context such as Kashmir, signed by conflict, military occupation and war, it seems to me quite difficult to speak of "normal circumstances." Perhaps, in such a context empathy could be still relevant to reformulate possible human interactions, to reconstruct the shared perception of a common world. The historian Dominick LaCapra points out the relevance of empathy in historiographical practices dealing with situations of trauma:

> Opening oneself to empathic unsettlement is, as I intimated, a desirable affective dimension of inquiry that complements and supplements empirical research and analysis. Empathy is important in attempting to understand traumatic events and victims, and it may (I think, should) have stylistic effects in the way one discusses or addresses certain problems. It places in jeopardy fetishized and totalizing narratives that deny the trauma that called them into existence by prematurely (re)turning to the pleasure principle, harmonizing events, and often recuperating the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios. ("Trauma" 723)

Empathic unsettlement would correspond to the opening up of a field of response, a moment of listening that does not involve identification and the appropriation of the experience of the other. Instead, empathy would be the precondition for recognising a common world, and the other as another human being. As defined in its originally phenomenological meaning, empathy would not entail the collapse of the "other" into the imaginative projection of the "self," but it would be able to see the other as another self, with all the philosophical limitations that this could imply. As Alison Landsberg remarks, empathy would not depend on an "essentialism of identification," but rather on an "alterity of identification" (82). According to Landsberg, empathy would not collapse differences and would not suppose a naturalised, essentialised likeness among subjects. Instead, empathy is "about the lack of identity between subjects, about negotiating distances" (82). Empathy is hence worked through by otherness; it is the ability of "feeling for, while feeling

different from, the subject of inquiry" (82). In this sense, it may be argued that neither Roy's novel nor her essays – neither factual nor poetic precision – can and should be understood as operating on an epistemological level of knowledge production, or of essentialised identification. Roy's work does not operate in the political domain of predictive counter-knowledge. Rather, she would allow us to recognise a metapolitical field of human reciprocity and a non-political, maybe simply responsive or sensitive, aspect implicated by the practice of commitment, an aspect suggested by Deepika Bahri in her important reading of *The God of Small Things*: "the text's refusal to establish an exclusive relationship between memory and person suggests that the custodian of memories is neither one self nor a collective subject but a dramatically *third* person who can remember, or remembrance, what it did not, could not have experienced, at least in its entirety" (238). Bahri's excellent reading of Roy seems to point to a central element of custodianship – and it is very interesting to notice that Bahri adopts the term "custodian" in passing, without expanding on it. Whereas for Deepika Bahri custodianship does not assume the relevance of a new keyword in postcolonial aesthetics, she emphasises a crucial aspect of an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship: the custodian is someone who can "remember what it did not, could not have experienced."

It is on this "aesthetic" level of a subject redefined as the custodian of something that s/he does not entirely experience, "aesthetic" in the etymological sense of "feeling" or corporeal perception, bodily "listening" or "touching," that the participation of the intellectual in collective movements could be prefigured. Arundhati Roy makes clear that if Afzal is still in jail it is because, unlike the other people accused, he does not have friends in the elitist circles of the urban bourgeoisie: "For five months, from the time he was arrested to the day the police charge sheet was filed, Mohammad Afzal, lodged in a high-security prison, had no legal defense, no legal advice. No top lawyers, no defence committee (in India or Kashmir), and no campaign. Of all the four accused, he was the most vulnerable" (58). The collusion between political interests and police brutality made him object of mass-media spectacularisation and exhibited his extorted "confession" on national television channels. In this confession Afzal accused himself completely of the terrorist attack, even though an attentive and "close" examination of his case demonstrates that his "confession" was clearly made up, arranged, staged, and simply obtained under physical and psychological torture.

Arundhati Roy provides a detailed analysis of the proofs collected against him

and dismantles them one after the other, in order to present a more reliable, convincing story of Afzal. However, the point that I intend to make does not concern the accuracy or inaccuracy of Arundhati Roy's argument, in other words, the exactitude of the knowledge her essay could be said to produce. Differently, I would like to read her essay as positing a fundamental challenge to the codification of the "other" as object of knowledge, or simple ground for projecting our fantasies and desires-cum-terrors, "to punish or acquit." In the same way in which "beauty" is able to open up a contact with reality in "The Briefing", the alternative perspective on the event proposed by Roy could lead the reader to a different kind of insight: "It is Afzal's story that gives us a glimpse into what life is really like in the Kashmir Valley" (74). I would like to argue that this acknowledgement does not result in a "representative" strategy in which the "subaltern" is made "speak," in this case a "surrendered combatant" unjustly accused of what looks like a state-plotted crime, and kept hostage in a militarised and antagonistic ideological setting. On the contrary, Arundhati Roy clarifies at the beginning and throughout her essay that what she does criticise is precisely the attempt to treat human beings as ciphers caught, as Jacques Derrida would write, in "*the logic of an emblem, a rhetoric of the flag or of martyrdom*" (*Specters* xiv), to project our fantasies on them and use them as symbols for mounting political statements on behalf of the collective conscience of the society. At the end of her essay on Afzal, Roy writes:

> The story of Mohammad Afzal has enraged Kashmiris because his story is their story too. What has happened to him could have happened, is happening and has happened to thousands of young Kashmiri men and their families. The only difference is that their stories are played out in the dingy bowels of joint interrogation centres, army camps and police stations where they have been burned, beaten, electrocuted, blackmailed and killed, their bodies thrown out of the backs of trucks for passers-by to find. (*Listening* 75)

The fact that the story of Afzal is the story of many Kashmiris does not mean that what is at work is a logic of identity politics or representation. But this statement stages a contradiction: Afzal is taking part in a context of violence, struggle and political propaganda and his case has been taken as a symbol by many people sharing his provenance and "empathising" with him. In her denunciation of the violence of the context, Roy could be said to perform an interruption of the epistemological and thereby contrast the creation of ideological and discursive

objects of knowledge with the emphasis/empathy of her writing, a procedure which does not involve the political fixation of an essential collective identity, yet makes reference to a form of collective experience. Roy insists that Afzal should not become the "villain" or "hero" of different identities in conflict, but nonetheless his story is the story of Kashmiris. The contradiction evidenced here could be read as sign of the metonymy/synecdoche logic which connects the activity of the intellectual to collective struggles and the question of the subaltern. His story is *their* story – and Roy acknowledges here a distance or difference – because they belong to the same geopolitical context, and not because they can be grouped under the same identity. But this is Arundhati Roy's story too, in that she is able to make it her story, to move from a journalistic concern to a deeper feeling of empathy. As Zahavi ("Beyond" 165) observes, "empathy" means precisely to abandon a model of social relation based on "analogy," that is "projection or introjection." The ability of literature would mean in this case interrupting the epistemic impulse of the image or text and trying to get in contact with what lies behind them. It would be a breach in the surface of the text, the opening of its letter.

Some key aspects of the empathic attitude that Roy expresses in her essays could be found in her novel too. In the chapter of her novel titled, like the novel itself, "The God of Small Things" the reader can find the description of a dream. Ammu is asleep and before being awakened by her twins, she encounters a strange and fascinating creature, a man with one arm.

> That afternoon, Ammu travelled upwards through a dream in which a cheerful man with one arm held her close by the light of an oil lamp. He had no other arm with which to fight the shadows that flickered around him on the floor . . . He held her close, by the light of an oil lamp, and he shone as though he had been polished with a high-wax body polish. (215)

This cheerful man holding an oil lamp, a phantasmatic transfiguration of her lover, shining and guiding her upwards, as though to a different world, transports her to see things from a different perspective or in a new light, like the one he is carrying in his arm. A very enigmatic characteristic of this man is that he can do "only one thing at a time": "If he held her, he couldn't kiss her. If he kissed her, he couldn't see her. If he saw her, he couldn't feel her" (215). There might be many ways of understanding this last detail, which is recurrently reiterated throughout the novel, but one thing that comes to mind is that it corresponds to the description of an

impossible synesthesia, or an impossible total grasp of the other with the complete range of our senses in a singular instant. The narration of the dream continues, telling us that "in the gloom beyond the oil lamp, in the shadows, there were metal folding chairs arranged in a ring and on the chairs there were people, with slanting rhinestone sunglasses, watching . . . they all had the flickering reflection of an oil lamp on each lens" (215-216). The enlightenment at work in the texture of the dream is rejected by these people sitting in the dark, who cannot see or perceive the guidance of this enigmatic creature. These people have "sunglasses" which prevent them from seeing the light. On the seashore without moon, there is a beach littered with broken glass bottles. The dream narrative goes on to present oneiric images, while Ammu and the man get closer to each other, and she lets herself be guided by him. The appearance of this enigmatic, cheerful figure could be related to the empathic understanding signalled by the "standing together" of Ammu and the mysterious figure, a proximity revealed by the lamp whose light is being reflected and rejected by the people wearing sunglasses, an element, the latter, that might be joined to the syntax of division, locking and closure signified by the fort and the blue car in the other passages considered.

The dream may be connected to what Adorno described as the "enlightenment in the genesis of beauty" (*Minima Moralia* 224), a radiance, like the light of a lamp, which involves a promise of liberation from domination, and which prefigures the awareness of an alternative society.[28] The quality manifested by the cheerful man in Ammu's dream may be connected to the promise of the emphatic, radically communicative dimension of writing, something disclosed by the beauty of form and which, in its prefigurative aspects, suggests a space free from antagonism and identity: a figuration of commitment as the positioning of oneself on the other side, following what is perceived as a luminosity emanating from the whole body of the one-armed man. If Arundhati Roy's writing cannot be said to represent the subaltern – in figure, politics or law – it is because her writing is not animated by an epistemic imperative. Rather, the images of the lamp, of the sunset entering clandestinely into the fort, of Velutha's beauty could point to the interruption of the binary structure of

[28] Caroline Rooney presents some intriguing reflections on the theme of radiance in a chapter of her book *Decolonising Gender.* Radiance is described as "unamenable to theorisation or criticism" and "at once evident and mysterious, indefinable yet recognisable" (75). Interestingly, radiance would pose a resistance to formalisation and appropriation, while at the same time it would concern "the ways in which a text might give us a consciousness of 'what is' – or 'what may be' – in its non-definability, non-formality, non-conceptuality" (75). Through radiance and the beautiful, this "non-definability" emerges from some passages of Roy's writing, and characterises the aesthetic dimension of her writing.

knowledge and counter-knowledge and engender a perceptive attitude, an effort aimed at "listening," as the title of Roy's recent book may be said to convey.

Custodian, Gatekeeper: Interrupting the Epistemological

Arundhati Roy's custodianship might be defined as a commitment to the real, to tell the truth about what is going on in India and elsewhere, a commitment that does not end in legitimising solely the authority of the speaker or the writer. The word custodianship could be read as an alternative to ideas of representation and political commitment, two terms frequently used to attack Arundhati Roy, or to domesticate her writing into predefined interpretative agendas. I have argued that her writing is not directly political, but rather points to the prefiguration of another politics. Custodianship could be understood as a radical openness of writing, redefined as a receptive rather than representational form. It is the ability to respond to experiences that are not our own, without appropriating them. This act of custodianship can be retrieved in those parts of Roy's writing which are poetic, lyrical rather than prosaic. In this chapter, I have attempted to reinterpret such elements as beauty and a certain radiance as the figurative expression of such a field of empathy and response. To conclude, I will offer a brief reflection and summary of the central concept proposed in this reading, by trying to clarify the aesthetic aspect of Roy's writing.

In an essay ("The Historian as gatekeeper") published in *Frontline* as a response to Ramachandra Guha's polemic intervention, Chittaroopa Palit writes:

> One of the other things that is deeply disturbing about Guha's article is the contempt that he shows for literature. By advising Arundhati Roy to go back to creative writing, he implies that literature is not about politics. That Velutha or the way he loved or died is not a skein from the political life or the personal anguish of the Dalits in our country. ("Historian")

This remark is extremely interesting in that it effectively, and succinctly, demonstrates the social value of literature in India. Palit mentions the many occasions on which major artistic and literary figures took part in movements of collective mobilisation, and helped express and support protest and dissent with their writing and their words. Palit's response insists on the political dimension of literature. This point is related to a second response elaborated in the same essay:

> It must be recognised that Arundhati Roy's voice is the voice of an independent writer. She has never presumed to speak on behalf of the NBA. She has consistently, as a matter of principle, refused to represent the voice of the dispossessed – Dalit, Adivasi or anyone else. (The politics of representation is a vast and complex subject.) The I in her essays that critics like Ramachandra Guha sneer at as self-indulgence, is seen by others as painful honesty. ("Historian")

Palit suggests that Roy should not be mistaken for the leader or spokesperson of the popular movements in which she take part. Roy's commitment is an act of solidarity and should not be confused with a "leadership" that she has never claimed. Arguably, this second argument could be said to contradict the first: if literature is immediately and directly political – and hence the novel is literally meaningful and representative, its content an accurate portrayal of "Dalits in this country" – how can it then be affirmed that Roy "has consistently refused to represent the voice of the dispossessed"? If Palit is right in affirming that Guha has no right to posit himself as the "gatekeeper" (or, it might be added, as the curator) of a social movement that has to account for the plurality of its voices, perspectives, and affiliations, we may ask how it is that Roy herself does not fall into the same accusation if the aim of her work is to provide a deeply political representation of the experience of the oppressed.

It may be proposed that what is at stake in Arundhati Roy's work of storytelling and essay writing is a practice of custodianship able to take responsibility for experiences which cannot be encompassed by the "identity" of the intellectual. Arundhati Roy's writing may be said to have a social and emancipatory value to the extent that it is not merely political, a vision that demands the responsibility of the interpreter. The social value of her writing is not merely a matter of what Walter Be.njamin called the "tendency" of a work of art, but also of its technique ("Author" 84) It is not only a question of contents, the message or the political ideas of the writer, but rather of the aesthetic composition itself, the production and arrangement of the work's formal elements. In this context, it may be mentioned that Deepika Bahri observes that an emphasis on the aesthetic, "however, may not be much of a match for the force field of representation within which the post-colonial text exists, unless we shift the emphasis in the poetics/politics nexus to poetics and its constitutively incommensurate relation to politics" (*Native*

Intelligence 226). Roy's essays may gain effectiveness because the factual knowledge that she provides – a knowledge convincingly argued and supported by accurate and precise references –, this counter-knowledge, is nonetheless interrupted and complemented by the persistence of the poetic or figural: concern is never detached from empathy. What her work could suggest is that literature can and should be related to collective emancipation and political struggle, but in doing so it should never forget the aesthetic specificity of its production and its practice. In my opinion, Ramachandra Guha's attack cannot be dismissed simply because Roy adequately represents the collective experience of the oppressed, or because of her ability to speak for the subaltern. Rather, Guha's criticism could be opposed because she is able to commit herself to reporting and being a custodian of the real through literature, both creative and essay writing. Her approach to political and social issues could be read as based on what Spivak would call the interruption of the epistemological and Roy herself names "empathy." This element has more to do with the poetic component of her writing than with the expository – whether realist narrative configuration or factual counter-knowledge produced by her essays.

In this sense, Ramachandra Guha's critique of Roy as an activist is misleading, not because literature is always and inherently political, but, more effectively, because it is in its not being "just" political that it achieves the most radical political effects. The reflection that Adorno dedicated to Beckett and Kafka, two writers that with extreme difficulty could be described as producing "committed" literature, could be applied to Roy's writing as well. With this, I do not intend to affirm that Arundhati Roy's writing is similar to Beckett or Kafka. However, Roy's writing seems to be distant from a superficially "committed" literature, and point to a deeper, more substantial way of involving the reader, in a way that could remind Adorno's reflections on Kafka and Beckett:

> By dismantling appearance, they explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance. The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand. He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed, has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgement that the way of the world is bad; the element of ratification which lurks in resigned admission of the dominance of evil is burnt away. (Adorno "Commitment" 191)

It is by reaching this radical form of custodianship, the literary transmission of others' experiences that assumes responsibility towards them, empathically unsettling without reverting to the essentialism of identity, that Arundhati Roy's essays may be read as a continuation of her literary practice and as an important definition of what it could mean to be committed or engaged, as a creative writer, and what this commitment could require from her readers and interpreters. If the difference between the essay and fiction cannot be erased – as the one cannot take the other's place – it may also be argued that they cannot be totally separated. This perspective would allow us to recognise the transformative value disclosed by the intimacy with what is not produced and contained by the universe of our own personal experience. Arundhati Roy's work could be read as an attempt to create a field of empathy with experiences that should not be encompassed by the jargon of identity, representation, or appropriated by partisan political discourse. In her aesthetic of custodianship, Arundhati Roy is able to suggest a specific idea of responsibility for the postcolonial intellectual: the construction of a field of responsiveness and prefiguration which recognises its distance from an epistemological construction of the other. By not claiming to lead or represent the other, postcolonial custodianship is nothing more than a continuation of the struggle, the participation in the unfinished project of decolonisation, in India as elsewhere.

Chapter 4

Woven Into a Song: Cultural Relays in *The London Jungle Book*

What I can do must also be woven into a song and sung, this song continues, then another phase, another song, these songs are sung here and there – that it continues to live, this is also resistance.
(Mahasweta Devi "Telling History" xi)

Peoples have other relationships to cultural forms – trust, secrecy, guardianship, stewardship, initiation, sacralization – and obligations to relatives, ancestors, spirits, and future generations which make models of access and ownership appear extremely impoverished. Such knowledge is not adequately understood as information, nor may its circulation be properly understood as speech.
(Rosemary Coombe "Comments" in Brown 208)

This chapter will address *The London Jungle Book*, a travel guide to London authored by Bhajju Shyam, an artist from the Gond population in Central India.[29] The reading elaborated in the following pages will attempt to show that this book may be interpreted as a suggestive and original act of custodianship: the artist's account of a personal experience of travel also provides the transmission of a specific cultural inheritance. In fact, on the one hand, it should be acknowledged that the collaborative work aimed at producing the book "demanded that Bhajju make a radical move away from the art he had practised so far, away from the known world of his traditional themes and icons" (Rao and Wolf "How London became a Jungle").

[29] As John H. Bowles notices, the Gonds are "not easily categorized, and defy the usual generalizations and assumptions made about tribal societies." (*Painted Songs* 19) They are described as the second largest tribal group in India, and Bhajju Shyam comes from the village of Patangarh, famous for having hosted the fieldwork of renowned anthropologist Verrier Elwin. The history of Gond populations in India is ancient and it is known that there were prosperous Gond kingdoms during the fifteenth century, and there are nowadays remains of important Gond medieval architecture. Since the 1940s the Gonds have been subjected to ethnographic study, and anthropologists like Elwin, Stephen Fuchs, Durga Bhagvat and Walter Kaufmann have collected their folktales and customs. Elwin and his collaborator Shamrao Hivale recognised the relevance of a Gond art, which was then re-"discovered" during the 1980s when a team of art curators from Bhopal noticed the skill of a Gond, Jangarh Singh Shyam, and launched the national and international career of the artist and the subsequent Gond art movement.

On the other hand, it might be maintained that the work offers, in the words of Bhajju himself, a "Gond view of London," and an introduction to what Sirish Rao and Gita Wolf, the editors of the book, name Gond aesthetics.

The London Jungle Book is able to transmit the cultural legacy of Gond aesthetics through the enactment of a certain kind of resistance, in particular the resistance to the incorporation of Bhajju's work into current trends in the interpretation and marketing of global "tribal" art. In this context, custodianship could mean the passing on of stories, the weaving of them into a song rather than a text, in the sense of a collective, on-going and historically changing flow rather than the singularity of an inscription. In this way, Gond aesthetics is presented in its vitality and creativity rather than fixed as that form of "textualized object" whose characteristics have been described by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (395). Furthermore, custodianship may provide an alternative to the idioms of appropriation, authorship, and possession at stake in the negotiations over native or "tribal" cultural property in different regions of the world. By not being caught in the impasse between the adoption of a concept of cultural property derived from a model imposed by Western colonialism and the dispossession that its denial may entail, custodianship may correspond to that different way of "sharing a culture" well identified by Fred Myers in an important essay, in which he analyses the sense of participation felt among Australian aborigines as a question of "accountability to a community, of being recognized and responsible for what one does" (Myers "Ontologies" 7).

Beyond the double bind, indicated by Hal Foster, between an "over-identification with the other" which "may alienate the other further," and a "disidentification from the other" which may result in a conservative "political solidarity through fantasmatic fear and loathing" (Foster *Return* 198-203), custodianship could shift discourses of culture and art away from the idioms of belonging and their market-inspired jargon of possession and cultural exclusivity. Rather than "solving" the contradiction through reflexivity or what Foster calls "critical distance," an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship could aim at building a porous and changing proximity between the world of art and the life of popular cultures today. Custodianship may be thought as a connection rather than a frame, a weaving rather than a cut, one in which the authority of the ethnographer/curator/critic and the borders of the art gallery may be re-opened as a space of relay and transmission, one voice among the others rather than the singular

power of the representative.[30] In order to clarify my thinking, a sentence could be advanced to summarise the proposed reading of this work: The London Jungle Book *transmits Gond aesthetics through a creative act of custodianship that resists various attempts at appropriation, and in this way it transforms a text into a song.*

In accordance with the Gond practice of village singing or storytelling,[31] the suggestion to adopt a musical rather than textual model for interpreting this work would imply that a song, unlike a text, may be defined as a living continuity: fluid rather than static, changing and transient rather than violently inscribed, more easily subject to collective and choral remaking rather than the iteration of a singular script or a signature. As Daniel Barenboim explains in an intriguing conversation with Edward Said on musical and textual interpretation, "the musical experience, the act of making music, means to bring the sounds into a state of constant interdependency . . . everything is relative and is always connected to what came before, to what came after, and also to what happens simultaneously" (*Parallels* 112). The musical would affect the textual paradigm in literary criticism by accentuating interdependence, interconnection and simultaneity, rather than the delimited space of the script. The main difference between a textual and a musical emphasis would be, as Barenboim and Said explain, a matter of "authenticity" (111). Whereas from the point of view of the written authenticity is understood as "fidelity to a text" (111), music "is different from the written word because music only exists when the sound is created" (111). Authenticity in music would be more a question of being faithful to something that Said describes as an experience of "the ineffable, the unspoken, the unreachable, the unattainable" (123). While textual interpretation attempts to reproduce what is written, musical interpretation is not a question of reproduction and the "entitlement" (129) that the mere reproduction of a canonical text may give. Music can be authentic only when it becomes part of the life of people, when it is performed, when it continues and transmits some kind of feeling

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[30] My reflections on weaving, cut and the "scriptless" are deeply indebted to Vera Dieterich and Caroline Rooney's *Book Unbinding*, which concludes with an exhortation to "perceive the weave" (52). The material dimensions of textual composition – folding, cutting, and binding – cannot be separated once for all. My emphasis on "weaving" and musicality rather than inscription or cutting should be read as a matter of emphasis or accent: how could things change if we started from the musicality of weaving rather than the fetishism of the text, from the act of composition rather than the commodified product?

[31] As Roderic Knight shows in his ethnomusicological study of the traditional Gond storytelling performance: "The music is lively: even though it is performed merely by a solo singer and his instrument, bells on the bow accentuate his every stroke, and the pace ranges from medium to fast tempo. Songs are interspersed with narratives in which the performer tells of a hero's exploits in recitative, with bana punctuation. The sound of the bana is distinctive: it is played in double stops, one line doubling the voice, the other a fourth below it" ("The 'Bana'" 101).

through the arrangement and interrelation of its elements. Its authenticity is a matter of what it is able to transmit to an audience, more than the ability to reproduce a textual source. Barenboim states that, when you play music, the point is not so much to "reproduce what is printed and nothing more" (112), but rather to understand a set of interrelations, so many other dimensions (tempo, volume, balance, phrasing etc.) that the "script" of the musical piece only imperfectly and approximately can indicate. Edward Said proposes some way of returning to literature starting from music, something that the literary critic may learn from the music director: "if you think of a poetic text in the musical sense, what you have is a relationship within the text the way elements relate inside of a score" (120). Rather than merely reproducing it, the text becomes a song that needs to be sung, continued, which needs to become part of the life of the interpreter. Mahasweta Devi appears to have something similar in mind in her reflections on the scriptless, unwritten narrative tradition of tribal populations in India and the description of her own novel as "open" from the beginning to the end, "continuity placed within an open frame at both ends" (Mahasweta Devi "Telling History" xi). As Udayan Vajpeyi has shown, the Gond artistic movement initiated by Bhajju's uncle, Jangarh Singh, was a creative act of transmission able to remake the oral tradition of Pardhan legends and myths into a visual repository, at the same time retaining an intimate relationship to Pardhan music. "It won't be an exaggeration to say" – Vajpeyi affirms – "that this school of art initiated by Jangarh is nothing but painted narrative song. Now the deities were waking up in colour, throbbing in lines, and went peering through dots. The stories, instead of finding expression through song, were manifesting themselves now on canvas. In the Pardhan psyche, musical notes have begun to impart their mystery to colours and forms" (Vajpeyi "Jangarh Kalam").

Paradoxical as it may seem, *The London Jungle Book* could be approached as a song rather than a text, or at least it might be said that it contains a specific temporal dimension that should be recognised, so that the way in which it transmits Gond aesthetics and *resists* forms of appropriation may be fully appreciated. Accordingly, even though the use of the term "resistance" cannot be identified with more directly political actions in support of indigenous rights or subaltern collectivities in India and elsewhere (and it should not provide a substitute for such political involvement), I write in the conviction that what Marcuse famously expressed in an oft-quoted sentence may hold true for the "resistances" offered by the book under scrutiny: "Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world" (*The Aesthetic*

Dimension 32-33). In this context, resistance to appropriation could correspond to the creation of a new sensibility and a change in the "consciousness" of an international readership, something which is important but should not supplant other forms of directly political engagement. Circulation may not entail speech, as Rosemary Coombe points out in a way that could well demonstrate the difference between established patterns of political communication and divergent forms of marginalised cultural expression. The task of this chapter will be to explain the way in which Bhajju's work may contribute to a changing awareness of the situation of tribal peoples and their cultures.

The book, an assemblage of images and writings, has been edited and composed by an independent publisher based in Chennai, Tara Books, in collaboration with the Museum of London in 2004. In an imaginative and visually appealing way, it recounts the travel made by Bhajju from India to London in 2002, where he stayed for a few months to decorate the interior of a famous restaurant. As example of the travelogue genre, *The London Jungle Book* could manifestly subvert the ideological codes by which – in the words of Mary Louise Pratt – Western travel and exploration literature has historically "*produced* 'the rest of the world' for European readerships at particular points in Europe's expansionist process" and contributed to "encod[ing] and legitimat[ing] the aspirations of economic expansion and empire" (*Imperial Eyes* 4). The unusual and unsettling situation of a "native" travelling to the centre of a former empire constitutes an original and noticeable element of this work, a poetic of the "writing back" suggested by the title, which is an explicit reference to Kipling's *Jungle Book,* a colonial children's narrative described by one critic as providing that "mythic" or ideological escape necessary to the formation of British national identity in an imperial setting (McBratney 277). As part of this peculiarly postcolonial poetics, *The London Jungle Book* may reveal that "tendency towards subversion" that has famously been associated with the response of peripheral and "dominated" literatures to the global power of formerly colonial centres. As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* point out:

> Directly and indirectly, in Salman Rushdie's phrase, the "Empire writes back" to the imperial "centre," not only through nationalist assertion, proclaiming itself central and self-determining, but even more radically by questioning the bases of European and British metaphysics, challenging the world-view that can

polarize centre and periphery in the first place. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 32)[32]

Notwithstanding its subversive questioning of the Eurocentric perspective in travel writing, the increasing popularisation of Gond painting, and excellent reviews in India and abroad, the book has failed to generate any academic discussion. This might sound surprising in that the book raises many important questions that generate constant discussion in postcolonial literary studies and cross-cultural aesthetics, questions connected to the book's ability to subvert a hegemonic narrative point of view in the relation between Europe and its Others – London through the eyes of an Indian citizen belonging to a recognisably "tribal" or "scheduled" minority. To be more precise, there might be three of these central questions that *The London Jungle Book* could pose to the student in postcolonial and comparative literature.

It will be the aim of this chapter to unfold them in the discussion of the notion of custodianship, a concept which may work as a resistance to the appropriation of cultural inheritances in either the standardised arena of mass culture or the detachment of art collection. First of all, custodianship may be at work as regards the question of authenticity. The book is proposed as the work of a "tribal" artist, yet its circulation as travel book and even tourist guide to the city of London may somehow complicate the "tribal" belonging of this text, in a way that I will explore in the first part of the chapter. From this perspective, cultural transmission is articulated in the book as the questioning of a certain "jargon of authenticity" in cross-cultural aesthetics. Second, the question of market appropriation or commodification should be recognised as inscribed in the very production of the work. The book is unique in that it makes available to the Western reader material that would otherwise be inaccessible to an international readership. Yet, this process of international circulation could correspond to the incorporation of a cultural tradition into the mechanism of the market, the characteristic and widely discussed transformation of culture into capital, something that the critic Kwame Anthony

[32] In postcolonial theory, *The Empire Writes Back* has been widely criticised, so that the rhetoric of the "writing back" has been identified as a postmodern appropriation of the postcolonial. For example, Vijay Mishra and Bod Hodge famously denounced the reduction of radical postcolonial political claims to "a purely textual phenomenon" ("Post(-)colonialism," 34). I share Mishra and Hodge's unease as regards *The Empire Writes Back*, yet the level of "discourse" (as they say) is not totally indifferent to political claims. The point would be to learn to connect the aesthetic or artistic to the political in a non-reductive way. It would mean to identify neither the political solely with the discursive, nor the discursive solely with the political. But this is far from neglecting the value of "writing back."

Appiah pointed out in a renowned essay, in which he talks about

> [T]he incorporation of all areas of the world and all areas of even formerly "private" life into the money economy. Even in domains like religion where instrumental reason would recognize that the market has at best an ambiguous place, modernity has turned every element of the real into a sign, and the sign reads "for sale." (Appiah 344)

Appiah contends that the transformation of non-Western cultures into products of consumption is the epitome of the postcolonial condition. However, I would like to argue that rather than turning the real into a sign, the collaborative production of this specific artistic project eludes a total and exhaustive assimilation into the commodity form: in a critical yet also positively creative way, the book distances itself from the ideological discourse of the postmodernist global art market and its implied detachment from collective, popular cultural creativity. In this sense, while sold as a book to an international readership, the work may be able to resist the passage from culture to commodity, or at least avoid complacently turning the aesthetic object into yet another product for consumption within the circuits of capitalist imperialism. In parallel to what Fred Myers points out in the context of Aboriginal material cultures, it might be said that Bhajju's paintings also "have resisted the process of simple commodification by retaining a series of properties and values that cannot be reduced by the market and that recognize the interests of those beyond the owner and maybe even beyond the producer" ("Ontologies of the Image" 15).

The third theme that I intend to consider is the question of "fictional topography": one interesting aspect of *The London Jungle Book* is the redescription of a pre-eminently Western urban space from a peripheral, subaltern, perspective. The reference implied in this Gond re-charting of London city life is the exotic natural space characteristic of much colonialist literature, in particular Kipling's *Jungle Book*. However, by performing a "reconstructive" rather than "deconstructive" reversal of colonialist topographies, the book is able to suggest what will be called the "hospitality of the guest," an important aspect of the inter-cultural and trans-regional definition of postcolonial custodianship.

In conclusion, I will suggest that these three resistances – in the fields of authenticity, market and topography – form the basis of the creative act of cultural transmission or custodianship that the book performs, something that may be

exemplified by another quotation from Mahasweta Devi's interview with Gayatri Spivak, an interview centred on the situation of tribals in India and the role of the creative writer: "These people do not find anyone writing about them, and they do not have script. They compose the stream of events into song. By being made into song, into words, they become something . . . a continuity" (Mahasweta Devi "Telling history" x). In its resistance to the "script" or "sign" of the three categories considered (authenticity, market and topography), it might be hoped that the reception of this book in the West may become part of that continuity, the passage from "the stream of events" to a "singing" about which Bhajju Shyam has so many interesting things to say, as we shall see.

First Movement: "Where is the water without mud, where is the fire that does not singe?"

The first section of this reading will be concerned with the notion of authenticity from the point of view of a Gond aesthetics. In particular, it will pose the question: can *The London Jungle Book* be considered authentic? Is the term authenticity relevant at all in the understanding of this work? Before developing the analysis of this question, it may be useful to clarify succinctly my position in this regard: the book may be considered to be authentic, in a way that could lead us to rethink the critical notion of authenticity. Moreover, if a non-academic specification may be allowed in this context, *The London Jungle Book* could be presented as a beautiful and precious book and the work of Bhajju Shyam, Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao should be appreciated and recognised for providing international readers with the opportunity to get to know these images, which would otherwise be inaccessible from abroad.

As Theodor Adorno remarked in *The Jargon of Authenticity,* the aura surrounding the discourses on authenticity that were diffused in Europe by Heidegger and other existentialist thinkers during the twentieth century constituted a powerful ideology able to mask and mystify the alienation imposed by the capitalist system: "The category of the authentic, which was at first introduced for a descriptive purpose, and which flowed from the relatively innocent question about what is authentic in something, now turns into a mythically imposed fate" (104). Authenticity thus became a powerful means against thinking and the recognition of historicity, a confirmation of the state of things as ineluctable fate reverberating in

both philosophical language and the idiom of advertising of the culture industry. From the reference to a realm of transcendence able to elude the reification of every aspect of social existence, the jargon shifted into an ideological support for the apparatus of production and "unfreedom." The use of a set of words and the granting of performative powers to a certain philosophical and theological language were responsible for turning a promise of freedom from domination and inequality into a celebration of the ineluctable and the alienated. Even though the historical and intellectual context of Adorno's meditations was profoundly different from the contemporary market of tribal art, Adorno's critique of the jargon of authenticity may be extremely relevant in that it is able to disclose a link between the realm of cultural evaluation and the material alienation produced by the capitalist system.

The first part of my reading will be focused on a specific part of the book, which constitutes the concluding image of the volume – thus, the reading will begin from the end, in a sense. This particular passage from the book includes an image, titled "The Bard of Travel," and its relative explanatory note, titled "I Become a Storyteller." The picture represents Bhajju himself, on a blue background, dressed as the traditional Gond storyteller. It is complemented by a footnote, which should be quoted in its entirety:

> I have painted myself as the "Bhujrukh," the traditional bard of the Gonds who remembers and re-tells all our myths and songs. The bard usually holds his storytelling sessions in the village centre at night, accompanying himself on his instrument. In my painting, my suitcase stands beside me, because it is this that has made me the bard. My constant refrain of "London, London" has turned the moon into an underground sign, with the word "London" written in Hindi. (*London Jungle Book*)

As it emerges from the description reported in this passage, the figure stages a self-portrait of the artist as a bard, at the bottom of the image, holding an object that may be identified as the *bana*, the traditional Gond instrument used by local storytellers (or *pardhan)* to accompany their performances in village gatherings. In the picture, Bhajju as *pardhan* is sitting on a piece of light brown cloth floating in the blue background of the night. Next to him, on the right side, his dark green bag, under black and white small signs representing the stars and a cloudy, bird-like flying animal, whose eye is clearly recognisable among the red, blue, yellow and white semi-circular strips that compose his body. At the top, over the head of the bard,

there is the moon turned underground sign, with the word "London" written in Hindi. The electric blue background contrasts with the warm tonalities of the human figure, painted in brown with yellow clothes, while holding a red and ochre musical instrument with white strings, with its red bow adorned by white dots. Apart from the warm/cold tonality contrast, the monochromatic background can impress as being very different from the way in which the bard and his bag are represented. In fact, the latter may show a clearly recognisable style, which Shyam adopts in almost every other painting included in the book: figures are compositions of geometric forms punctuated with small black dots or lines formed by small circles. The yellow clothes have a decorative motif of small diagonal lines arranged in mirroring patterns in the trousers and the hat. In this picture, it seems that the most recognisably Gond stylistic devices are in fact decorative elements, usually lines or dots which give a sort of movement or dynamism to the entire picture, in the vertical, horizontal and diagonal juxtaposition of patterns on the same surface. In another part of the book, a different note explains that these decorative marks are "handed to us from the ancient tradition of body tattooing," and their designs are "very varied and unique to the artist, a signature, in a way" (*London Jungle Book*).[33] Yet, it might be added, a "scriptless" signature, as its visual and "musical" aspect cannot be reduced to a type or a form of writing. John Bowles reports that these patterns are inspired by the movements of a traditional dance, where the dancers intertwine in an embrace:

> The distinctive pattern field Bhajju invented for filling in figures (in his own artworks) is comprised of parallel rows of alternating small ovals and dashes, which he explains is like the Saila dance, in which dancers interlock with one another. (Bowles 36)

The visual effect is remarkable, and "The Bard of Travel" may be said to incorporate signs of Western modernity (London underground, travel luggage, maybe an aeroplane depicted as the bird-like creature) within a Gond visual representation. A very interesting element which may contribute to the meaning of the scene is the

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[33] I would like to thank Arun and Gita Wolf for providing me with a preview copy of the Tara Books film "Between Memory and Museum," which includes extremely interesting material and interviews with Bhajju Shyam and others discussing the transformation of Gond culture into museum object. A passage from this intriguing documentary remarks the relevance of tattooing as a form of body painting and recording of stories and myths among tribal populations in Central India.

narrative explanation provided under the image, and, more extensively, on the next page, where a longer text concludes Shyam's journey to Britain with the account of his departure. In the picture, Bhajju Shyam shows himself as a bard, in the act of singing a song with his instrument, and reconnecting his travel to the West to the return to Madhya Pradesh. For this reason, it may be argued that this picture represents not only the conclusion of the travel to London and the final section of the book, but also the return of the traveller to everyday life in his birthplace, a reflection on routes and roots, in which the artist complements travelogue with the traditional role of community storyteller. His task is to remember and re-tell Gond myths and stories, but also to incorporate new experiences into the traditional narrative repertoire, and this is precisely what the author himself starts doing after his return, as the editors at Tara Books report: "we met Bhajju in November 2003, a year after he had returned to India from his London trip . . . Bhajju kept us entertained for a whole week with stories of his travels, and we were completely charmed" (Rao and Wolf). Bhajju has achieved the status of the storyteller because of his travel and the stories he has to narrate about his experience, so that the figure of the traveller and the local figure of the traditional bard are united in the same person, who incorporates the novelty of travel into the familiarity of traditional oral narrative.

The question that may be posed, concerning authenticity, is whether this image, "The Bard of Travel," is an authentic Gond image. In a sense, the question itself may be redundant, because the fact that Bhajju Shyam can be identified as the author already provides a response. Gond artists are widely recognised, both in India and abroad, and Bhajju's style can be affiliated to other renowned artists, in particular Jangarh Singh Shyam, Bhajju's uncle, whose story will be mentioned in the last part of this chapter, and whose painting style acquired celebrity after the recognition of his work in various exhibitions: "*Magiciens de la Terre*," which was held at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1989, and "The Other Masters," a more recent event curated by renowned art critic Jyotindra Jain at the Quai Brainly museum. As Krishna Chaitanya explains, in a survey of contemporary art in India:

> The Gonds are the largest tribal group in Madhya Pradesh. The pardhans are a subgroup; they are the bards of the tribe conserving its lore through the generations and Janghar Singh of Patangarh village of the Mandla district belongs to this group. The community has a very old tradition of decorating huts with wall painting and mud reliefs, making clay images of gods and goddesses

> associated with them and casting bell metal icons the stark strength of form of which is now attracting worldwide attention. (Chaitanya 49)

While it is true that Gond art is gaining "worldwide attention," Swaminathan and Vajpeyi explain that the decoration of huts is not an ancient tradition but rather a more recent transformation of the characters and episodes of traditional songs into painting. Thus, on the one hand, there is no doubt that the image titled "The Bard of Travel," like the other images included in the book, is authentic. Yet the question may be also answered in the negative, in that the painting is presented in book form, which does not seem to be an "authentic" Gond medium, as Gond storytelling and artistic practice rely on music, narratives and oral performances rather than drawing or book writing.[34] Furthermore, while the author of the image is specifically Bhajju Shyam, the image considered as the part of a printed book, which includes explanatory note and writing, is composed by the editors of the book on the basis of conversations with Bhajju, translated into English, and aimed at a Western audience supposedly unfamiliar with Gond cultural practices and traditions, thus allegedly running the risk of contributing to that construction of a "permissible" tribal culture denounced by Fred Myers ("Representing Culture" 35). The book is also the result of a journey to London, and it revolves around the description of the city and its inhabitants, which is not a traditionally Gond motif – Bhajju is perhaps the first Gond to reverse Verrier Elwin's famous anthropological description of Gond tribes and to offer a Gond vision of a Western metropolis. In addition, Bhajju's travel may be considered a postcolonial rewriting of the travel to London made by Indian "natives" to take part in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition staged for the celebration of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1886. Following the traces of Tulsi Ram, one of the natives who went to London on that occasion, historian Saloni Mathur describes the "crisis" that the event of a subaltern colonial subject travelling to the West posed to both European and Indian colonial elites, and recounts Ram's voyage as "a tale of persistence by a subaltern figure against the authority of urban and imperial officials." Mathur writes:

> Tulsi Ram's transgressions threatened the boundaries of public space, both the

[34] However, it should be recognised that even if the book form may not be a traditionally Gond form of transmission, what Robert Fraser calls the "infinitely complex phenomenon" of South Asian script culture should be taken into consideration, in particular all those "alternative technologies" of perpetuation and variegation, and the "embodiments" of oral performance which complicate "the relationship between spoken, written and printed word" (*Book History* 53-77).

> geographic distance between "home" and "colony" that was painstakingly maintained by the British in power, and the socially divided space of urban London with its starkly mapped inequalities and separations. (Mathur 77)

The "native journey" described by Mathur could be interpreted as preceding Bhajju Shyam's journey and prefiguring the "transgression" and "resistance" to imperial or neo-colonial topographies that his journey may epitomise. Thus, if the jargon of authenticity depends on a rigid separation of spaces – metropolitan/native, urban/village, West/East – Bhajju's journey may be said to transgress colonial topography, in a way that will be further explored in the third part of this chapter. Another element allegedly problematising the authenticity of the book is that most of these paintings were produced for the publication of the book and are related to the secular, remunerative job of decorating an Indian restaurant in London, rather than ritually composed for traditional religious or festive occasions, so that Bhajju's work may be categorised as what anthropologist Shelly Errington would define "art by intention" rather than "art by appropriation" ("Authentic Primitive Art" 202). As Larry Shiner emphasises, although this form of "ethnic art may be stylistically authentic (traditional) because it is produced to be sold outside the society of origin, its authenticity is always suspect, especially since materials, techniques, or even style may be modified to save time or cost or to please purchasers" (Shiner 227).

This observation needs to be complemented by John Bowles's remark that forms of patronage and commissioning of painting for commodity exchange are not totally foreign to the Gond tradition, even though the framework of "art" criticism was partly imported from the West. To summarise these characteristics, there are at least four elements that may play a role in questioning the supposed authenticity of this work: book form, combination of English text and image, Western location and non-traditional commissioning. Yet, however powerful these arguments may be, they rely upon a notion of authenticity that has been widely challenged and discussed, and that "The Bard of Travel" itself is able to call into question, in an intriguingly expressive way. What may be at stake behind this interesting and distinctive work by a Gond artist is an entire system of pigeon-holing, interpreting and marketing non-Western artefacts and objects, a whole paradigm of artistic appreciation which presumes an implicit discourse on culture and art and their interactions. The main reference point in such types of cultural discourse is perhaps James Clifford's characterisation of the art-culture system, "a machine for making authenticity," in *The Predicament of Culture* (224). In a widely adopted and

discussed theoretical diagram, Clifford distributed authenticity on the top side of the art-culture schema, as being referred to both culture and art and requiring "originality and singularity," in the case of an authentic work of art, while necessarily being "traditional and collective," if the "authentic" work is not a work of art but a cultural object. In the first case, the work may be defined as a "masterpiece," while in the second it is an "artefact." The art-culture system is hence based on a distinction between the space of the art museum and that of the ethnographic museum, between aesthetics and folklore, art and material culture. While Clifford allows for some kind of movement within this schema, especially in the passage from art to history and vice versa, the system is based on a rigid separation of spaces. Thus Clifford writes that in spite of the "transience" and "instability" (235), historicity, incompleteness, and the zones of transgression and contest excluded by the system, the culture/art opposition remains at the basis of the collection of non-Western material cultures into Western systems of evaluation and market.

> Whatever its contested domains, though, generally speaking the system still confronts any collected exotic objects with a stark alternative between a second home in an ethnographic or an aesthetic milieu. The modern ethnographic museum and the art museum or private art collection have developed separate, complementary modes of classification. (Clifford 226)

It could be remarked that the very idea of this "stark alternative" has been called into question by authors like Molly Mullin, who demonstrates how the anthropological and the aesthetic may concur in forming what she calls the "patronage of difference." In her comments on an early exhibition of North American native art as "art" rather than ethnology, Mullin writes:

> Although the "art, not ethnology" slogan did indicate a slight shift of emphasis in the discourse of evaluation – from *authenticity* to *quality* – there was no radical challenge to anthropological authority, just as anthropological notions of culture, especially in their popular applications, were not so very incompatible with the more Arnoldian notion of culture as "the best that has been thought and said." ("Patronage of Difference" 397)

By suggesting two senses of the word "culture" that Edward Said also famously affiliated in the introduction to his *Culture and Imperialism* (xiii) – culture as "all

those practices . . . that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms" and as "a source of identity" (Said xii-xiii) – Mullin shows how the idea of preserving and encouraging an "authentic" native art may become a form of denial of the historicity of non-Western cultures and a way of keeping the authority and patronage of these forms of art in the hands of curators and experts. In this context, artistic and cultural categorisation may become a machinery aimed at reproducing a power structure of inequality and dispossession. What is interesting, however, is that both the separation and the cooperation between aesthetic and anthropological cultural categories take place in the "patronages of difference" marking and limiting the domain of authenticity, which is in its turn opposed to the fields of non-art and non-culture defining the category of the inauthentic.

According to James Clifford, in this polarity may be included fakes, inventions, ready-made and anti-art products defined by their being "new and uncommon," and, on the cultural side of the spectrum, tourist art, commodities and utilities, defined by their "reproduced and commercial" nature. According to the polarities, definitions and oppositions upheld by the scheme, the beholder of Bhajju Shyam's "The Bard of Travel" may be tempted to associate all the qualities described by Clifford to this single picture, in a sort of short-circuit of the ordered anthropological classification. Bhajju's painting is artistically authentic, in that it is original and singular, explicitly attributed to an author, who is internationally recognised as an artist, and who adopts a personal, recognisable style that is defined as his "signature." On the other hand, the picture is culturally authentic because it evades a purely artistic singularity by adopting traditional and collectively transmitted stories and visual elements. Rather than a monographic overview on Bhajju Shyam, the kind of visual collection proposed by *The London Jungle Book* is aimed at providing an introduction to Gond aesthetics, the uncommonly Western and metropolitan subject notwithstanding. The work is noticeably collective, composed by Bhajju Shyam in collaboration with the editors, and traditional, in that the style is transmitted musically, and now also visually, among the Gond population, and translates in pictorial expression what is a culturally specific oral repository and tattoo symbolism. Indeed, Indian critic J. Swaminathan observes in an essay included in the catalogue of an exhibition of Adivasi art, in which he recounts the "discovery" of Jangarh Singh, Bhajju's uncle, that Jangarh was allegedly the first to give Pardhan deities visual, pictorial form, for which there was no immediate reference in the Gond traditional inventory. However, Swaminathan remarks, interestingly, that the works by Jangarh – and the visual styles passed on to Bhajju

and other Gond painters after him, it may be added – "are drawn from the deep recesses of Adivasi memory. They have that marked authenticity about them which cannot be adduced to chance. In this sense they may most certainly be termed expressions of Pardhan Gond art" (Swaminathan 47). Swaminathan goes on to raise the question of "authenticity" in a revealing passage from the same essay:

> As his [Jangarh's] works are not based upon any formulated design sanctified by repetition, can they truly be called as expressions of Gond or Pardhan art? Yes, precisely because it is the individual artist who gives visual, tactile expression to commonly held beliefs and it is only then that such expressions become communal property. (48)

In my view, Swaminathan's remarks indicate a very important aspect of Gond aesthetics: the authentic is not what is authorised or sanctioned by repetition. Instead, the authentic is what becomes what Swaminathan calls "communal property": authenticity means to be part of collective life rather than the fact of being entitled by tradition. Because of these concurring reasons, the work may be labelled at the same time authentically art and authentically culture. Yet, as part of a printed book and in its relation to the work commissioned by an upmarket restaurant, the work is also reproduced, commercial, and inventive, in a way that, according to the scheme proposed by Clifford, would without doubt put it in the category of the inauthentic. In this regard, while the category of authenticity has been shown as product of the superimposition of a colonially derived art-culture system dependent on the values of the market and the authority of the anthropologist, a celebration of inauthenticity and the hybrid may be an even more problematic response to the critique of the authentic.

The inauthentic or derivative may be a by-product of the same system of incorporation and can sometimes result in exploitative economic and political effects. This aspect has been emphasised by Elizabeth Coleman, who makes a directly relevant observation in an article on authenticity and identity in documentary representations of Aboriginal art. Coleman points out:

> The denial of "authentic culture" as a myth may be used to justify a continuation of property relations that indigenous people claim to be exploitative. If authentic cultures do not exist, then claims by indigenous people about the relationship between their art and their identity are also false. And, as these

> claims also contain arguments for collective ownership of cultural property beyond those provided by Western legislative systems, the denial of authenticity may be used to undermine demands for the reconsideration of intellectual and cultural property rights. ("Aboriginal Painting" 387)

As Coleman very convincingly underlines, both authenticity and inauthenticity may have the effect of maintaining the power of definition and authentication on the side of the collector, curator, or anthropologist, in a way that complicates any facile dismissal of attributes of both authenticity and the inauthentic. More significantly, however, the interpreter may be tempted to call into question the validity of the art-culture system as helpful toolbox for understanding this particular image, and the pertinence of categories of the (in)authentic to the analysis of "The Bard of Travel." In this context, Shyam's work may resonate with Rosemary Coombe's critique of some presuppositions of the art-culture system. In fact, while Coombe contributes to debates around North American native cultures, it might be argued that some of her remarks on tribal art may sound particularly apt for an understanding of Gond aesthetics. In a meditation on cultural property, Coombe denounces the ideology of authenticity requiring the location of the object "in an untouched, pristine state that bespeaks a timeless essence . . . [that] cannot bear any traces of that culture's contact with other cultures" ("Culture and Property" 258). A Westernised notion of the authentic would imply the idea of each culture as a world apart, bearing no sign of contact, exchange, borrowing or impurity and, in particular, no sign of what Sidney Kasfir also characterises as the contradictory epistemic assumption of this mode of discourse: the simultaneous dependency of the uncontaminated cultural object on the gaze and the "contamination" or "pollution" brought about by the contact with the Western tribal art collector, who remains the ultimate authority in establishing the genuineness of the artefact (Kasfir 42). Rosemary Coombe complements her critique of an ahistorical and "timeless" notion of authenticity with some other, profound suggestions:

> The capacity of "tribal" peoples to live in history, and to creatively interpret and expressively confront the historical circumstances in which they live, using their cultural traditions to do so, cannot be contemplated, except under marginalised categories like "syncretism" which suggest impurity and decline . . . Those cultural manifestations that may signal the creative *life* rather than the death of societies are excluded as inauthentic, or, alternatively, denied cultural, social, or

> political specificity by becoming incorporated into the universalizing discourse of art. ("Culture and Property" 258)

Coombe emphasises that debates on authenticity have been based on a dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic cultural traits that is severely limiting the understanding of the historicity of tribal cultures. According to Coombe, those cultural manifestations that may be different from sanctioned traditional patterns are excluded from the realm of "culture" and incorporated in the world of art. However, changing forms of expression should not be seen as products of an individual artistic imagination rather than collective creation of popular cultures: inventive and creative forms can suggest a different concept of "culture" and "authenticity," whereby the authentic is what is living, what tribal people make, rather than what they are supposed to do. It is worth noticing that in Coombe's reflections, a critique of authenticity implies a questioning of the derivative category of "syncretism" or inauthenticity, in that these labels may suggest a context of marginality, decadence and even extinction that denies once again vitality and creativity to other cultures. By denying rootedness and continuity to cultural objects, the inauthentically cultural may be incorporated in the abstract realm of "universal art" and its cultural provenance forgotten or mourned in the secluded space of the museum. In the same essay, Rosemary Coombe demonstrates how the categories of authenticity and inauthenticity implied in the art-culture system may be connected to the development of the legislation on copyright and the extension of imperial and colonial categories of property "that divide peoples and things according to the same colonizing discourses of possessive individualism that historically disentitled and disenfranchised Native peoples" (249).

More importantly, what is excluded from the art-culture system are those manifestations that "may signal the creative *life*" of peoples and societies, their capacity to respond to changing historical circumstances and to be perceived as taking part in what Johannes Fabian calls the coevalness of cultures and traditions. This coevalness may be defined as the "sharing of time" proper to any communicative interaction, any dialogue – as it may occur both in the ethnographic fieldwork, the main source of Fabian's concern and intervention, but also outside the ethnographic fieldwork, in everyday life or art collecting. According to Fabian, the sharing of time is denied by the "allochronic" procedures of anthropological writing, which "consistently places those who are talked about in a time other than that of the one who talks" (Fabian 143).

The most visually characteristic image in *The London Jungle Book*, the one placed on the front cover of the book, consists of a rooster – the traditional Gond symbol for time – intersecting the icon of the Big Ben, London's most famous and iconic clock, London's symbol of time. The image is titled: "When two Times Meet." In the image, the dial of Big Ben overlaps the eye of the rooster, and both rooster and Big Ben are decorated with Gond traditional patterning. In an almost too literal interpretation, it might be said that we can have no more explicit statement about the coevalness of Gond culture and its changing, creative response to the passing of time and the developments of history. But it is not only "When Two Times Meet" that exhibits a powerful idea of coevalness, as all other pictures by Shyam may be said to do so. In its composition, subject, style and content, "The Bard of Travel" is equally able to point to historical coevalness as well as contact with other cultures, inventiveness and creativity. Yet, it could be argued that it is precisely for this reason that it may be defined as authentic. Far from being hybrid or synchretic, in that it does entirely belong to Gond visual culture, and it is made by a subject who recognises himself and is recognised as Gond, not as a hybrid, this image may suggest a different idea of authenticity, one which corresponds to Rosemary Coombe's magnificent expression: authenticity as creative *life*. In contrast with the common critique of the idea of authenticity as ideology, or the vision which, in the words of Richard Handler, defines authenticity as "a cultural construct of the modern Western world . . . closely tied to Western notions of the individual" (Handler 2) – in other words, in contrast with an idea of authenticity as singularity – *The London Jungle Book* may show the different idea of an intrinsically plural, coeval and communicative authenticity, authenticity as a batch of possibilities which is manifested by Bhajju Shyam's self-portrait as the bard of travel.

The publication of this book in 2004 could therefore be considered a part of the process described by Sally Price as a "fundamental reorientation" in approaches to non-Western art, one in which

> [T]he complex workings – social, cultural, economic, and political – that give structure, texture, and (contested or uncontested) meaning to the more traditional matter of art objects and their collective history have been moving into greater prominence. Artworks once viewed as visual entities set into more or less elaborate wooden borders are now being framed in a completely different sense, as contextualized productions undergoing contextualized readings. (Price 607-608)

An important part of this "reorienting" – the word itself may suggest a movement not only towards, but also *from* the Orient, a response from the East, "reorienting" as a subversion of a previously unrecognised orientalism – Sally Price emphasises the emergence and significance of those "processes by which members of small-scale societies, working in collaboration with interested outsiders, have been reconfiguring their art worlds in response to the exigencies of an increasingly globalized audience" (607) .While this context of "shifting authenticities" may pose a radical challenge to a traditionally Western idea of authenticity, the one well captured by James Clifford as the foundation for the art-culture system and purporting an essentialist idea of culture, it may also be said that rather than dismissing the category altogether, works like *The London Jungle Book* could have the potential to reorient and redefine authenticity, in modalities that may correspond to a specifically Gond idea of the authentic, in this case the practice of Gond storytelling. This reading would resonate with Sidney Kasfir's critique of "curatorial authority," and her questioning of the subject defining the criteria of the authentic in the field of African art. In her analysis of Yoruba and other African artistic practices, Kasfir advocates a return of discourses on authenticity to the actual, contemporary, concrete making of non-Western art as perceived and interpreted by the makers themselves rather than to the views held by curators and anthropologists: a displacement (or reorientation) of the dependence of the periphery on the authority of the centre should be able "to bring the canon into better alignment with the corpus" (53), with what indigenous artists really make rather than an abstract idea of what they should be doing.

As these different reflections may indicate, current academic debates on authenticity in anthropology and tribal art demonstrate that, on the one hand, the "myth" of the authentic cultural object as a pure, pristine, uncontaminated specimen that may express an essential origin or cultural type is no more tenable, and it has been shown by many authors after James Clifford's ground-breaking work that this idea depends more on remnants of the colonial power/knowledge frame and cultural cataloguing than on really existing local traditions around the world. On the other hand, while some authors limit their analysis to a deconstruction of the ideology of the authentic and a celebration of the hybrid and derivative, other contributors to the debate more interestingly point out that the category of authenticity may be a shifting and contested terrain of meanings, enunciations, positions and authorities, whereby it is the location of the subject making claims and judgements that needs to

come into view. "The Bard of the Travel" may be said not only to define the position of the author as the traditional storyteller, but also to relate *The London Jungle Book* to a context of traditional oral literature, so that the book itself may take part in a "creative life" of readjustments, remakings and continuing "resistances" in Gond artistic and cultural practice. "The Bard of Travel" may be said to oppose an idea of authenticity as essentialism or cultural purity – authenticity as "denial of coevalness" and location of the native artist in a temporality other than the present. At the same time, however, this work may contest definition as inauthentic or derivative or "fake."

In order to show what kind of idea of the authentic could be at stake in Bhajju Shyam's depiction of himself as a storyteller after his travel to London, an actual storytelling performance could be considered here. An account of this traditional narrative occasion is described by Hartosh Singh Bal in a very interesting essay titled "Storytellers of the Night." The title of this essay resonates with Bhajju Shyam's painting, and hints at the common practice of nocturnal storytelling widely adopted in the Mandla District as in many other parts of India. Bal's article contains the story of his journey to some Gond villages in Madhya Pradesh, in which Bhajju Shyam himself is mentioned, as well as the story of Jangarh Shyam, Bhajju's uncle and predecessor as internationally renowned Gond "tribal" artist. Hartosh Singh Bal spent some time in villages in the Narmada region, and recounts the life of Gond peoples living there. This article presents a description of a traditional Gond storytelling, and it is extremely interesting to report how this traditional narrative practice is performed today and what it could involve in terms of authenticity and inauthenticity in relation to *The London Jungle Book*. In particular, an episode described by Hartosh Singh Bal could be extremely significant, in a metaphorical or figurative way, of the discourse on authenticity outlined in these pages. Bal narrates:

> One night, I watched a Pardhan from the distant village of Garkamatha throw the Pardhans of Sonpuri a challenge. "You are wise and learned," he began, "you are the repositories of stories. I ask you two simple questions – where is there water without mud, and where is the fire that does not singe?" Serious debate ensues, for these are serious questions, but everyone listening knows it is only ritual leading up to stories. In an open courtyard under the clear night sky, just a kilometre from the Narmada, a Gond Pardhan tells of Ganga's descent from the heavens. ("Storytellers")

The storytelling contest among *pardhans*, or traditional bards, begins with a question which is a "serious" question, but also a ritual opening "leading up to stories." This kind of question should not be taken too literally, as a way of knowing the correct answer (reported by Bal in the same article, and widely known in popular Hindu mythology) but as a way of telling the audience that storytelling is about to start, a pretext that aims at beginning the event and opening the exchange of stories. Now, what may be interesting in the context of discourses on authenticity and the shifting contexts and audiences that Gond art is experiencing – a theme that Bal raises at the end of the essay – is that there could be a sort of idea of purity or the idea of an element that is not contaminated implicated in these ritual storytelling formulae, borrowed from the Hindu popular religious tradition: a water "without mud," a fire that "does not singe." This kind of problem may be the start of a discourse on authenticity as well, and it should be noticed what the author reports after this ritual opening: the questions about water and fire are pretexts for telling stories and they will raise many other questions in the course of the narrative that storytellers will answer by telling and relating other stories, sometimes very well-known ones, sometimes new or previously unheard. As Bal continues:

> For the Sonpuri Pardhans, some of these stories were new; by the end of the evening they made them their own. The Pardhans are, first and foremost, storytellers, and a memory honed on intricate genealogy accommodates everything in its own fashion. It is difficult to talk of borrowings and influences. Many of the stories are told in one form or other in different parts of India. It makes sense to come to this truth from across the globe, for the stories have spread far. ("Storytellers")

Bal interestingly observes that Pardhan storytelling has not to do with a restricted repository, a set of "authentically" Gond stories that are being reproduced. Gond culture is part of a context of transmission and adaptation of stories of diverse provenance, to the extent that it is "difficult to talk of borrowings and influences."

As Bal makes clear, these stories are, in a sense, without origin and without end, a continuous, uninterrupted stream that is part of an on-going transmission of stories, protracted borrowings and influences. Both painting and stories may be a way of "rediscovering the world" through Gond eyes, and the article concludes with a reference to *The London Jungle Book* which states that "when a people learn to tell their own tales and feel free to shape London in their image, then there is reason to

believe that they can tackle the world on their own terms" ("Storytellers"). The question of authenticity, as in the ritual opening of a Gond oral performance, may be rephrased as one story told among other stories and a remaking the world from a Gond point of view, authenticity as the ability of a cultural tradition to respond to and accommodate changing circumstances and survive, transforming the "stream of events" into a song. Is the image authentic? Where is the water without mud? The attempt to give the answer will provide the occasion for another story, authenticity as a pre-text, or the continuation of the stories, the movement from the experience to the singing.

From this point of view, Bhajju Shyam's self-portrait as a storyteller at the end of the book could be read as a sign of the authenticity of the book: not because of its adequacy to ideologies of purity and essentialism, but rather because he himself tells us that his experience in London has become part of a Gond tradition and the subject of stories that, we can be sure, some other storyteller will make his own and transmit to other groups, in other nocturnal gatherings, in India and elsewhere. In this sense, the transmission of Gond aesthetics and the survival of storytelling are able to resist claims to essentialised, reified authenticity. At the same time, this work cannot be defined as inauthentic, but rather it could suggest a different notion of authenticity, one in which the purity of the water without mud or the fire that does not singe is re-opened and sung, with the music of the *bana*, as a pretext for the continuation of stories, a passage in a flow of narratives that may be able to raise other stories and other questions, and bring in always changing subjects into the Gond remaking and repainting of the world. The reference to London, binding in book form, and marketised commissioning of the work do not prevent *The London Jungle Book* from being transmitted as "truly" Gond.

In this first section I have attempted to demonstrate that the mention of traditional storytelling at the end of *The London Jungle Book* may displace ideologies of authenticity and inauthenticity, and connect the book to a context of Gond narrative performance. This exposition may be the first movement of the act of custodianship that the book could show: custodianship as location of new experiences within a framework of musical and visual expression that belongs to Bhajju Shyam as "individual talent," but also as traditional Gond storyteller.

Second Movement: Undivided, a Subaltern Aesthetics

In the second part of this reading, it will be advanced that *The London Jungle Book* is able to provide a specific – and explicit – distancing from the market ideology and the commodification of the artistic object. If Bhajju Shyam's work can be described as profoundly aware of the global context of readership and dissemination that it has now been able to reach, his work is also able to resist the transformation of culture into capital, or "reality into sign," in Kwame Anthony Appiah's condensed phrase. Before moving on to the analysis of a second image included in the book, it may be useful to clarify my perspective on the lively debate on the commodification of tribal art. On the one hand, the inclusion of tribal artistic objects in the international flow of commodities may be part of the historical development of what Molly Mullin calls "the patronage of difference," that is a worsening of the life condition of tribal populations and the definitive gesture of appropriation and exploitation of their cultural traditions for the purpose of accumulating capital, and, as Mullin remarks, it should be acknowledged that "the processes by which artifacts become art offer no refuge from inequality." (414) On the other hand, the circulation of works such as Bhajju Shyam's paintings in Europe and elsewhere may not be a bad thing in itself, and could be a preliminary step for the validation of political rights, the prefiguration (but not the realisation) of a regained speech. The circulation of tribal art should be a means, a channel or a relationship, but not an end in itself. As Rosemary Coombe points out, the introduction of cultural forms into the arena of property rights could lead to a reorienting and a revision of the capitalist, Eurocentric notion of property and belonging:

> To grant native peoples full voice in these discussions, however, may well involve a preliminary recognition of proprietary claims – not as exclusivity of possession but as bundles of multiple rights and relationships still to be delineated in contested and contingent dialogues that may well reshape the concept of property as we think we know it. (Coombe "Comments" in Brown 208)

In this passage, Coombe remarks that discourses on cultural property should not incorporate "culture" into predefined models of possession and ownership. Instead, tribal cultural claims could suggest a different concept of "property": property is a "bundle of multiple rights and relationships;" it involves responsibility and the

conceptual constellation that I am trying to describe as "custodianship." In my opinion, the most important thing in this context would be the creation of receptivity to the resistances that artistic objects may pose against becoming an ideological cover for global chains of accumulation, exploitation and inequality. The recognition of property might not end, as if automatically, in appropriation. It could be a "preliminary recognition," and it could be the task of the interpreter to learn to understand the alternative paradigms of custodianship that can elude the exclusivity of belonging as well as the jargon of authenticity. This may resonate with what another important author in this debate, Howard Morphy, points out in some relevant articles. In an essay titled "Aboriginal Art in a Global Context," Morphy shows that aboriginal art may be able to challenge the established assumptions and canons of Western art, and to resist what he calls the "incorporation" or "swallowing" of non-Western art into "the process of individuation that is characteristic of the marketing of European art" (Morphy "Aboriginal" 235). It is worth noticing that Morphy emphasises that the "re-incorporation" or "pigeon-holing" of aboriginal art into the art-culture system is by no means inevitable, and that it may be subverted thanks both to the conscious, intentional response of the "tribal" artist to the international scene, and to what he calls, in another essay, a reinvention of art history so that it may accommodate a plurality of traditions and influences ("Seeing Aboriginal Art" 48).

Following Morphy, it may be said that, against the authority of "patronage," postcolonial custodianship should be able to make room for other voices rather than silence them in the negotiations of tribal art, and to acknowledge both *contemporaneity* and *continuity* with pre-existing indigenous traditions in the evaluation of tribal material cultures. Discourses on art and culture, as well as their circulation on the international scene, could be a way of calling attention to the conditions of life and the political claims of living indigenous groups – rather than mourning the loss of previous forms of expression or original fantasies of allochronic purity and non-contamination. From this point of view, the international circulation of these works may provide the opportunity to rethink art history and awaken a sensibility to the rights of the others, not only the right to be considered as contemporary, but also the right for previously unrecognised political agendas to be heard and represented, the rights to what Seyla Benhabib would call "membership" within the institutions and spaces of civil society: not only human but also political and civil rights, the "right to have rights" (*The Rights of Others* 140). In this sense, even though the resistances offered by a work of art – or within practices and

processes of cultural expression in general – should never be confused with political action, they may be related to political struggles and give them international visibility.

As regards the student interested in appreciating and understanding these works, the point would be to learn to read, to understand the potential subversion of market ideologies articulated by works that, in themselves, are sold and reproduced as commodities. A book, an object that can be replicated, distributed, reprinted, sold, capitalised, may contain and produce a more radical threat to inequality and capitalist exploitation than a singular, non-reproducible, auratic work that, in itself, can provide a mystification of the real condition of peoples and their alienation from the lands and the means of production. From this potentially and productively contradictory point of view, the concept of authenticity should resist its appropriation as ideological cover for capitalist neo-colonial exploitation. If tribal or aboriginal art can become "art" and be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities, this appreciation should always be responsible and resist complicity with the neo-colonial ideological function delineated by Hal Foster. As Foster emphasises, the "elevation" of tribal art to the museum and gallery space in the West may be, not only the "compensatory form," but also the "imaginary resolution" to the fact that the category of tribal art in itself may be implicated in the same mechanism which is responsible for the exploitation and domination of non-Western societies (Foster "The 'Primitive' Unconscious" 61). Against compensatory forms, supplements, and imaginary resolutions, the circulation of tribal art may bring about a radical consciousness and the lineaments of what may be called a "subaltern aesthetics": a discourse on art able to recognise the deep and sometimes starkly contradictory interconnection between artistic forms and popular cultures, the beauty of paintings, stories and songs and the real living conditions of their makers, the present situation and the continuity with the past, plurality and collective influence in the individual composition. Thus, the second question that this reading will attempt to address is: how does *The London Jungle Book* respond to the contextualisation of Gond art in a globalised field of cultural production and exchange?

In order to answer this question, a second image from the book may be taken into consideration, the one titled "Life and Death." The picture represents a cow, cut into four pieces, from the head to the bottom. Each piece is placed in a grey, circular frame. The cow pieces are disposed horizontally, they occupy the entire length of the picture, and are surrounded by snakes and tree branches with variously pigmented leaves. On the bottom left, there is a baby bird emerging from its egg. The

background is a monochrome light brown surface, while all the figures are decorated with Bhajju's personal Gond style: diagonal lines, points and dots and circles, black and white. The serpents and the trees form a continuous, intricate web of branches and bodies that intensifies on the left, close to the head of the cow. Some branches are blue or light blue, other brown and orange, with green, yellow and white leaves. Leaves and small branches are present only in the left part of the picture, while the right side is emptied, spoiled, with a less intricate and less colourful vegetable assemblage. The picture may be said to have a movement, from right to left, passing from absence of leaves and a deserted surface, to a rich and flourishing tree on the left. The combination of trees and snakes in a web of weaving bodies gives the picture a certain life, a sense of interconnection and movement that is emphasised by the juxtaposition of a varied Gond decorative patterning. It could be worth transcribing the entire footnote accompanying the picture, placed at the bottom of the two pages over which the image spreads:

> The strange cow stuck in my mind, and I decided to use it in a painting of my own about life and death. I have embedded the cow as I remember it, over a Gond style painting symbolising life and death. For us, life does not end with death – every death is a new beginning. So the tree in the background is dying on one side, but it is re-born on the other side, with new leaves and a baby bird hatching out of its egg. The snakes are the roots of the tree and symbolize the earth, which gives us life. As forest dwellers, the tree is the most important symbol for us. It gives us life – food, shelter, beauty, medicine, and wood. (*London Jungle Book*)

The explanation of this image is further clarified by the preceding text, titled "A Cow in a Gallery." Bhajju Shyam narrates that while in London he had the opportunity, after the completion of his decorative work in the restaurant, to spend a few days in London in order to visit museums and art galleries, in which he was very interested, being an artist himself. In one of these art galleries he noticed a work of art consisting of a real cow cut into pieces and placed in big cases, which attracted his attention and inspired his painting "Life and Death." The work that Bhajju saw in London, as it might be easily recognised, is Damien Hirst's "Mother and Child, Divided," a work that he contributed to the Turner Prize competition in 1995, and that was previously exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1993: a cow and a calf bisected and suspended in formaldehyde solution, placed in individual cases of steel

and glass. Bhajju Shyam's "Life and Death" may be considered a reference to Damien Hirst's work, in a way that moves away from some ideological implications of the British artist's fashionable art production. In *The London Jungle Book,* the explanatory note related to "Life and Death" makes clear that Bhajju interprets Hirst's work as being about death, and it also points out a really thought-provoking comment. Bhajju recognises that the cow cut into pieces and exhibited in the museum reminded him of something he saw in India: "I knew I had seen something like that before, and after a long time I remembered where. As a child I was taken to the science museum in Raipur, and there they had all sorts of dead animals floating in glass cases like this" (*London Jungle Book*). In a single image, Bhajju Shyam may suggest a reference to the scientific display that was introduced in India as part of a colonial pedagogical ideology, a reference which Gyan Prakash describes in a famous article on science "gone native" in India. Prakash demonstrates that the scientific museum was an important tool in the staging of colonial authority in India, and that "colonialism amplified the importance of classification and natural history in the organizations of museums" ("Science" 156). Writes Prakash, in the same essay:

> As museums spread and expanded their collections, the stress on natural history, classification, and re-presenting the order of nature persisted . . . This natural-history vision proved to be enduring because geological and natural history collections were the predominant concerns of the older and larger museums from their inception. But more important in this respect was the colonial conception that India was close to nature: its inhabitants lived close to the soil; it was home to numerous "tribes and races"; and the state of knowledge was chaotic – "same things are called by different names, and different things by same names" – requiring persistent classification. (156)

"Dead animals" were part of a colonialist pedagogy aimed at maintaining cultural difference yet subverted, as Prakash demonstrates in a way influenced by Homi Bhabha's work, by the "improper" or "inappropriate" reception of the scientific objects on display. From the point of view of a postcolonial remaking of colonial scientific exhibition, Bhajju's cow may constitute one of such improper or inappropriate readings, the natural history museum specimen remade from a native Gond perspective. If the exposition of the dead animal in the science museum in Raipur may be associated to colonial hegemony, it may be asked how Damien Hirst's dead animal relates to the positing or subverting of other forms of authority and

ideology. The reference to colonial scientific display is thence applied and adapted to a "new wave" postmodern commodified anti-artistic product such as Damien Hirst's controversial "Mother and Child, Divided." In this context, I will follow Julian Stallabrass's thoughtful analysis of Damien Hirst in the *New Left Review*, in which the artist is characterised as partaking of a "facile postmodernism" that has taken "no principle seriously" since its first emergence on the scene, and in its relativism, vacuousness, and mass-media attitude, which approached the art market as a form of commercial culture, "accepted the system just as it was" (Stallabrass 155). The characterisation of Hirst's art as "bad art," or even "blockbuster art," part of a sensationalist culture and an anti-aesthetic practice with no consideration whatsoever for meaning, audience, commitment or quality seems to me to be agreeable and correct, even though Stallabrass is also critical of the conservative reaction against this postmodernist form of art and, indeed, there might be some creative potential provided by the fact that Hirst's work is not totally serious, a lack of gravity which could suggest an ironic reflection on the situation of art. In fact, in the conclusion of his analysis, Julian Stallabrass emphasises more positive aspects of Hirsts's work, or at least a sort of potentiality that his anti-aesthetic practice may imply. Stallabrass underlines the in-between, fragile location for Damien Hirst's art practice, which is able to contest the elitism and conservatism of "high art" but is threatened at the same time by the trivialising and commodifying power of the mass media. Stallabrass explains:

> [T]he current scene is fragile, it could so easily be ruined by something as trivial as a slight influx of cash, bringing with it those structures of distinction—of snobbery and elitism—that have sustained it in the past. Since it only has access to its wider public through the often trivializing forms of the mass media, there is the complementary risk that the scene will be subsumed by them, so that it can no longer say anything not heard everywhere else. To defend against either of these fates, art needs more than universal irony and a yuppie bohemian attitude —it has to decide that there are certain things it must take seriously. (Stallabrass 159)

In my view, indeed, there are certain things that must be taken seriously. Playfulness should not become mere complicity with the neoliberal capitalist appropriation of cultural forms. In relation to Hirst, the problem would be how to be responsible for a "fragile location" that is an alternative to both elitism and massification. However, in

spite of its potential for evading both elitist definition of artistic authenticity and a totalising absorption into a massified cultural industry, Damien Hirst's work seems to correspond to the mixture of advertising and philosophical generalisation proper to the jargon of authenticity criticised by Adorno. In particular, his reference to death and mortality, correctly noticed by Bhajju Shyam and reinterpreted from a Gond perspective, is an element that belongs to many of the titles of Hirst's works, and that may be interpreted with the help of Adorno's suggestive statement: "Insofar as death is absolutely alien to the subject, it is the model of all reification" (*Jargon* 125). From this point of view, Hirst's non-sense titles – with their insistent and generalised reference to death – may hint at a discourse on art itself, art as a space of death, cut off and disjointed from living reality, and in this way divided from the vitality of popular cultures. Yet, the sublimity of death epitomised by Hirst's work may result in an even more powerful celebration of the reification of the aesthetic domain. If the work of art is a space of death – the dead animal cut into pieces and suspended in formaldehyde solution – it is because death itself is posited as an absolute detachment from the realm of the living. Hirst's work traps death in the enclosed space of the art gallery, it codes death as the product of an individual artist who, in spite of his critique of the elitism of high art, has not been able to change anything in the relation between art and the world. In Hirst's works, death can be understood as the cipher of a complete disengagement from any form of social concern or commitment. The bracketing of "death" inside the art gallery hence becomes a mere opportunist strategy for establishing Hirst himself as recognised individual artist. Death functions as a definitive signifier able to represent an individual work of art that is reified and marketised, to the extent that it is detached from life – collective, cultural or popular life.

The popularity of Hirst's work should not be confused with a popular or subaltern belonging. In its being massified, his art is the epitome of the distance and abstraction of the commodity from the vitality and historicity of popular cultures, the alienation of the work of art from collective participation, resulting from the "framing" of the art object, the final destination of those processes of distancing from contexts of use and performance described by Shelly Errington (207). From this perspective, between Hirst's cow and Shyam's painting there are many differences that should be taken into consideration. Apart from the reference to Gond beliefs, and a different idea of death – death as a "new beginning" related to the life of trees and their roots, the earth from which the Gonds take and provide nourishment – Shyam's picture seems to suggest a different conception of the

artistic practice itself. While animals in the science museum in Raipur as well as in the London art gallery are dead specimens exhibited for display, and, in a sense, the exhibition space itself is anaesthetised, cut off from the living reality outside it, Bhajju's cow makes reference to the regeneration of life and the connection of domestic animals and plants to the everyday productive activities of the Gond population, the "forest dwellers."

It has to be noticed that "Life and Death" is by no means an ethnographic curiosity or an ethnographic object that could be easily appropriated through what James Clifford calls the collecting of cultures. "Life and Death" is a work of art – it belongs to an aesthetic sphere of reference – yet it does not partake of that vacuousness and self-referentiality proper to current postmodernist "inauthentic" Western art forms. Shyam's remaking of Hirst's work is able to shift the level of meaning, to give new meaning to Hirst's work, in a way that no professional art critic would be able to do. The references to the science museum and its "dead" objects are adopted to interpret Hirst's work as pointing to the space of the art gallery as a space of death: death in the sense of absolute negativity and absence of meaning, or a definitive disconnection from reality. If both Hirst's and Shyam's works are about death, the former is unable to move beyond the physical death of the cow and the absence of meaning that this could imply as part of a form of artistic expression. The latter, on the contrary, gives meaning back to "death" and to the aesthetic practice as well, as part of a chain of life and regeneration and as inextricably connected to the actual life of Gond people, something that Hirst's advertising-style title is not able to transmit. While Hirst's work is for the mass, Shyam's work is "popular," to the extent that the artist-storyteller is able to re-connect the aesthetic definition of art to the realities of collective existence. In this sense, Raymond Williams's comments on the changing meaning of the words "mass" and "massification" in his renowned *Keywords* could be useful to understand the difference between the massification of postmodernist art and popular artistic practice:

> **Mass society, massification** (usually with strong reference to the **mass media**) are seen as modes of disarming or incorporating the *working class*, the *proletariat*, the **masses**: that is to say, they are new modes of alienation and control, which prevent and are designed to prevent the development of an authentic *popular* consciousness. (*Keywords* 196)

What strikes me in this passage is Williams's ability to make a distinction between

what is massified and what is popular: massification is the process by which popular consciousness is commodified, in which popular forms of expression are captured and coded by commercial culture. Massification means alienation of popular culture from itself.[35] While I'm not sure whether Bhajju Shyam could be part of the proletariat – and maybe it could be mentioned, among the controversial, and complex historical permutations of Marxism in India, Gayatri Spivak's idea of the subaltern positioning as a popular space which is not included in forms of organised class struggle – in any case it can be suggested that the massification of art plays as a "new mode of alienation and control," and that it is the task of a popular or subaltern aesthetics to subvert this alienation. Against the alienation of the postmodern mass art, subaltern art practice may reveal a form of "organic" participation of the artist in the production of a popular consciousness, in a way that corresponds to Ashis Nandy's remark that in India and elsewhere, mass culture and popular or folk culture are not the same, and that folk culture "which is neither dead nor marginalized" evades the aim of mass culture, that is, to "reproduce the original standardized product" (in Pinney "Hindi Cinema" 9). While, according to Nandy, in the West mass and popular are often used as synonymous, in the interpretation of *The London Jungle Book* they should not be conflated. As explained by the note below the picture in *The London Jungle Book*, "Life and Death" incarnates a Gond idea of life and death, a popular conception of the connection between the natural and the human world. The death of the cow is reinserted into a cycle of life and regeneration which inexorably involves the definition and location of the artistic object. While both Hirst's installation and Shyam's image take part in a global art-culture system of exchange and accumulation of capital and cultural capital, the former mystifies it with a reference to mortality which detaches the work of art from the real world outside it, killing the living animal in order to show it as dead specimen in the interior of the exhibition space. By pointing to the absoluteness of death, it also sanctions the absolute disengagement of the work from any kind of social and cultural vitality, in a merely negative or critical gesture which is restricted to the self-referential ground of art discourse – the mother and child, with their

[35] I am aware of the complexity of the debates on the popular and the proletariat, which form a great part of the intellectual history of Marxism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Antonio Negri's concept of the multitude, for instance, is an attempt to rethink the popular beyond the orthodox Marxist notion of the proletariat. Jacques Ranciere addresses some of these issues in his essays recently collected and translated in English in *The Intellectual and His People*. Spivak has been working on related questions since the 1980s, and her essay "Scattered reflections on the Subaltern and the Popular" testifies to her engagement with the problematic notion of the popular in relation to subalternity.

vague reference to traditionally iconographic Christian motives, will never join again, they will be forever alienated.

On the other hand, Shyam's reinscription of Hirst in a popular cultural creativity is able to challenge the art-market self-referential ideological layer and re-connect the artistic object to the actual life of tribal populations, reinterpreting the work of an individual artist with the stylistic and expressive resources of a non-Western popular tradition. In this sense, Shyam's remaking of the dead cow is able to reattach the artistic to the social, and to combine a critique of the colonial-capitalist display of dead creatures with a more positive act, a continuation and transmission of Gond beliefs and artistic elements in the passage through the globalised art market.

In this second section I have attempted to demonstrate that a second way in which *The London Jungle Book* is able to act as a form of custodianship of Gond beliefs and traditions is through its resistance to a vision of art that is totally dependent on the market – the passage from real life to capital. In his remaking of one of the most commodified and marketised works that can be found on the stage today, Damien Hirst's "Mother and Child, Divided," Shyam's "Life and Death" testifies to the continuing vitality of Gond culture and to the participation of expressive forms in a collective existence. By challenging the space of the museum and the art gallery from without "Life and Death" could bring a different consciousness into the consumer-spectator of art and the art-world today. Even though the aesthetic may be inherently related to the market and the exchange of commodities, by stepping outside the self-referential space of the art gallery as a space of "death," and by attempting to participate in collective, popular rather than mass traditions, expressive practices can resist their being co-opted by the market and pose a subtle, continuing opposition that corresponds to the vitality of tribal cultures today, in their resistance to exploitation and cultural annihilation.

In conclusion, the potential of resistance and custodianship shown by "Life and Death" has something to do with an important aspect of Bhajju Shyam's artistic practice: while his work is proposed to the audience as the work of an individual artist, and in fact he has a recognisably personal style, nonetheless this personal style is not the intervention of an individual into the self-enclosed discourse of art, but rather it corresponds to the presentation of Bhajju Shyam as custodian of Gond aesthetics. The relation between the individual artist-storyteller and his work does not correspond to what Rosemary Coombe describes as the colonial and capitalist idea of property and belonging, but rather to modes of relationship "which bind

generations in a spiritual relationship with land, customs, and ancestors based upon traditions of respect, not values of exchange" ("Culture and Property" 284). Bhajju Shyam's artistic practice may be, in this sense, characterised as being part of what Coombe terms an "ethics of cultural appropriation" in which Western notions of individualism and copyright may be opposed by a different form of responsibility towards cultural inheritances. Coombe rescues the word "appropriation" from its singularly capitalist connotation and re-employs it in different, non-Western contexts. However, Coombe also mentions other terms alongside appropriation, such as guardianship, stewardship, initiation, secrecy. She does not mention the word "custodianship." In my view, custodianship may offer a viable substitute for indicating a form of inheritance that is opposed to "appropriation," and that could emphasise the responsibility of the heir as custodian, as relay in a chain of cultural transmission. Whereas Coombe's maintenance of the word "appropriation" in her "ethics of appropriation" does not sufficiently stress the distance from the ideology of private property underlying neoliberal capitalism, the custodian needs to be someone who inherits cultural forms without appropriating them. Coombe quotes the speech of a representative of North American First Nations' claims for cultural and artistic heritage, Loretta Todd. I would like to quote from the already mentioned essay the words of Loretta Todd, as they have been reported by Coombe:

> Without the sense of private property that ascended with European culture, we evolved concepts of property that recognized the interdependence of communities, families, and nations and favoured the guardianship of the earth as opposed to its conquest. There was a sense of ownership, but not one that pre-empted the rights and privileges of others or the rights of the earth and the life it sustained . . . Ownership was bound up with history . . . Communities, families, individuals, and nations created songs, dances, rituals, objects, and stories that were considered to be property, but not property as understood by the Europeans. Material wealth was re-distributed, but history and stories belonged to the originator and could be given or shared with others as a way of preserving, extending, and witnessing history and expressing one's worldview. (Loretta Todd quoted in Coombe "Culture and Property" 284)

Todd emphasises a crucial difference between appropriation and the practice that she terms "guardianship": whereas cultural appropriation is a mere act of acquisition, a statement of ownership – this is "my" country, "my" culture etc. –

guardianship is "bound up with history," it involves a re-distributive responsibility. The custodian, unlike the owner, needs to share the inheritance with others. It is then the responsibility of the recipient to become custodian in her or his turn, to keep the historicity of culture alive by not transforming it into her or his own property. Custodianship is linked to a logic of relay in which the custodian has to allow others to preserve, extend and witness what is being transmitted. The custodian redefines the transmissibility of cultural legacies as what makes for their authenticity – the ability to be adapted and remade – whereas the owner concerned with establishing property can only understand culture as commodity, a wealth-generating mechanism for accumulating capital via exchange. The ideas of guardianship rather than conquest, relationship rather than exclusivity may well describe the way in which Bhajju Shyam transmits and interprets Gond traditional culture and challenges the appropriation of the art-culture system. His Gond remaking of a Western copyrighted individually-owned work could suggest a different idea of creativity and its relation to culture and society, the individual as a custodian of a tradition, taking part in it rather than being its exclusive possessor, and of the aesthetic as being committed to the life and regeneration of popular cultures rather than the detachment or excision operated by the frame of the art gallery. The recoding of "death" from the space of the science museum and the art gallery to the historically changing life of Gond popular culture may signal a passage through the incorporating power of the market which leaves room for other ways of "belonging." These different ways may correspond to a notion of custodianship that does not produce cultural capital but, rather, is able to suggest a notion of subaltern aesthetics as practice of cultural transmission and historical interdependence. In the last part of this reading, I will now turn to the question of space and topography, and to another picture included in *The London Jungle Book*.

Third Movement: Fictional Topography and the Hospitality of the Guest

In the last section of this analysis, another important aspect of *The London Jungle Book* should be considered: its topographic dimension, that is, the representation of London and, in general, the representation of space in the book. Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao point out in their comments at the end of the book that Bhajju Shyam is an "unlikely" and "rare" traveller who may be able to "bring a freshness to familiar

sights" – in this case familiar sights of London, one of the most visited and known cities in the world ("How London Became a Jungle"). Through the eyes of a Gond artist, London is defamiliarised; is reinterpreted as a completely unfamiliar and uncharted territory. As Rao and Wolf emphasise, this is "an ironic twist, considering that this was once the centre of an empire that had mapped the world." The question of mapping and charting geographical spaces is a suggestive aspect of the book and it is able to point to a concept – deeply related to the idea of custodianship outlined in this chapter – which might be termed the "hospitality of the guest." The fictional topography of *The London Jungle Book* is animated by the hospitality of the guest rather than the ethnocentric gaze of the traveller or the tourist. The expression may sound puzzling as it may be commonly held that the guest is not the one who should be hospitable – s/he is not expected and has no right to be hospitable, in a sense. As Jacques Derrida noticed in his influential seminar on hospitality, the concept itself is constituted around an insolvable antinomy, in which the place of the proper is signed by a more radical "expropriation," and in which "the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host's host" (*Of Hospitality* 125). In a postcolonial context, the host who becomes the host's host might be taken as a repetition or prolongation of a persistent (neo)colonial relation, the danger of appropriation or re-colonisation, yet it could also be read from another perspective, from the perspective of the tribal subaltern teaching a different way of being hospitable to the in/hospitable West, an alternative tradition of hospitality. Rather than becoming the "host's host" the guest can be hospitable by showing other ways of being hospitable, formulae of politeness or welcome that move beyond the power of home, the mastery or property of place, and the related, complementary expropriation of the other.

The inequality of power and economic relations should also be considered, and the metaphor of food may be particularly significant here, in that Bhajju went to London to decorate the walls of a restaurant – and also in that the wealth of the West is fed by the exploitation of non-Western countries and peoples. The image of the subaltern hospitable guest should be read differently, as the prefiguration of a non-exploitative relation, an equality which is the real precondition of hospitality, rather than power or "home."[36] In the North-South neo-colonial relations that frame

[36] Meyda Yegenoglu explores Derrida's principle of unconditional hospitality in the context of neoliberal multiculturalism. Yegenoglu's work is fascinating and shares many aspects with my own attempt to rethink hospitality. In addition to Yegenoglu's rethinking of the unconditional, I would argue that juridical, philosophical and economic models should not be the only sources for rethinking hospitality. There is so much to learn from popular cultures around the world – from

the historical occurrence of a tribal travelling "back to the centre," the hospitality of the guest is something that may readjust the notion of hospitality by equating it to a practice of conviviality, hospitality as the idea of sharing something – eating together or staying together in a place, rather than appropriating or being expropriated. This concept of conviviality could be explained, following Gilroy, as a co-habitation, a neighbouring zone of co-existence, which might provide an alternative to forms of identity and belonging. Following Ivan Illich, conviviality could also refer to human creativity opposed to industrial productivity (Illich 11). It could correspond to the recognition of human freedom as personal interdependence and the resistance to the reduction of persons to mere consumers or producers. As Illich writes, a convivial society "must and can be so constructed that no one person's ability to express him- or herself in work will require as a condition the enforced labor or the enforced learning or the enforced consumption of another" (13).

Bhajju Shyam exemplifies the case of a hospitable, or convivial guest, in a way that places the representation of the host in a totally different light. To summarise and clarify what I mean in a few statements, I will outline the thesis that is going to be tested and unfolded in the last part of this chapter. In *The London Jungle Book* there is no critique of urban life in London, colonialisms and neo-colonialisms, or Western society in general. The book is absolutely positive and serene, and even funny in some parts, without any kind of irony. The practice of not criticising the host is, as Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao explain, a clearly recognisable and commonly adopted "tribal" sign of hospitality. It is from this perspective that Bhajju is a hospitable guest. This hospitality is, perhaps, a legacy of Gond culture that enters into the visual and written representations included in the book, in particular representations of spaces and peoples.

Gond culture, for example, but of course this discourse needs to be extended to other cultures and traditions. Derrida seems to me to be stuck, as he affirms in the conclusion of his seminar, in a singularly Eurocentric tradition of hospitality. Gayatri Spivak reflects on hospitality in her essay "Resident Alien." Spivak's reflections are extremely interesting because the residual figure of the resident alien could point to a form of hospitality beyond the native/immigrant distinction. Resident Aliens do not have access to civil society and are not recognised as proper citizens. They often occupy a socially and economically marginal position and should not be confused with upper class migrants. The version of "Resident Alien" included in *Aesthetic Education* concludes with a reference to aboriginality and the Indian tribal as a figure of alien residency. The concept of "resident alien" is important because it may lead us to situate the practice of hospitality in specific historical and political contexts and to rethink hospitality beyond the host/guest divide. Resident Alien is a space of otherness that prevents the formation of stable cultural belongings, a constant reminder of otherness at the core of national communities. Indeed, the Gond artist has something of the resident alien, both as tribal in India and as traveller in the West.

The hospitality of the guest is also able to reverse the ethnocentric gaze of travel and adventure writing. In particular, its "reversing" potential depends on a particular topographic configuration – a representation of spatial coordinates that recurs in many of Bhajju's paintings. While the attitude of not criticising the problems, flaws and possibly irritating and disturbing aspects of a new country may be confused with a form of naïveté, or the ideological concealment of contradictions and power relations, the hospitality of the guest shows the contradictions but is able to put them in a new light, to offer, we may say, a real space of travel and the formation of what Marcuse would call a new consciousness. In a sentence: *The London Jungle Book* shows a fictional topography that opposes any idealised vision of London and keeps and exhibits contradictions. Yet this fictional topography excludes any critique; rather, it is by not criticising the host (hospitality of the guest) that it produces an alternative consciousness and reverses the ethnocentric gaze in a somehow inadequately defined poetic of "writing back."[37] Rather than critical distance, this reversal results in a creative proximity. The relation between fictional topography and hospitality of the guest may come into view if we take the title of this book very seriously, and the work is understood as a rewriting of Kipling's stories. Chosen by the editors, this title bears at least two implied references: Verrier Elwin's *Leaves from the Jungle,* a famous anthropological account published in the 1950s, authored by an ethnographer "gone native," - who decided to spend the rest of his life among the Gonds - and, more obviously and remarkably, Kipling's *The Jungle Book.* Actually, the most interesting inter-textual reference could be taken to be Kipling's collection of stories. Before engaging with Kipling's work, it is worth noticing that one passage in which the hospitality of the guest may be recognised is an image titled "Nightlife at the Drunken Fox," where Bhajju remakes an English pub as the Mahua tree, with people transformed into bats.

> I have painted an English pub in the form of a sacred Mahua tree. Gonds make alcohol from its flowers. It is a provider for us, like the restaurants and pubs seem to be for English people. In Gond myths, the Mauha tree was the first tree to be created when the world began, so it will always be there. And it is this tree

[37] The poetic of "writing back" is in my view inadequate because it keeps the "West" or the "centre" as the reference point, making other cultural forms derivative from the colonial encounter. Whereas the value of "writing back" should not be denied, cultural poetics should not be reduced to it. In other words, I think that Shyam is able to reverse the Eurocentric gaze, but he is also doing more than that: he is showing us another reference point. He is truly reorienting our gaze, teaching the reader to see things from a Gond perspective. Mishra and Hodge, among others, demonstrated some ideological strictures in *The Empire Writes Back.*

> that loosens our tongues and sets us free during celebrations and festivals, like pubs do for the English. (*London Jungle Book*)

The image represents the Mahua tree with bats pending from its trees, over a blue background. The description of the pub as the Mahua tree includes the representation of English people as bats "not to make fun of them, but because I like to think of them as creatures that come to life in the evening" (*London Jungle Book*). The image is funny and able to show relations in spite of differences, and its most captivating ability is to provide a new way of looking at Western customs. With this visual affiliation of the pub and the Mahua tree could be contrasted Verrier Elwin's thoughts and feelings at the moment of his arrival in the village of Karanjia, as he narrates in his ethnographic diary *Leaves from the Jungle:*

> *January 30.* About midday finally reach Karanjia . . . Feel very tired and have been mistaken enough to go two hours ahead of our supplies. Sit on cold bit of rock, and think wishfully of beer and oysters . . . *January 31.* Explore Karanjia, which has two brick buildings . . . There is also a bazaar, entire contents of which could be bought up for about £10, and a liquor shop, which in its dirt and stink, unhappily bears no resemblance to a country pub in England. (Elwin *Leaves* 58)

The London Jungle Book can be read as a response to Elwin because it is reversing Elwin's travel journal. Whereas Elwin was a European who travelled to Central India and spent his life among the Gonds, Shyam is a postcolonial Gond traveller to London. Bhajju Shyam's family know Elwin very well, because one of Shyam's relatives worked for Elwin in the 1950s. Decades later, a descendant of Elwin's "natives" has travelled to England. It is for this reason that Elwin's and Shyam's narratives can be compared. While the traveller from the West is pervaded by a sense of nostalgia for the "country pub in England," and the "beer and oysters," the travelling back is able to show in a humorous and funny way resemblances and forms of similitude that do not regret the faraway familiar place. In this case, the hospitality of the guest may be a sort of welcoming attitude, a reconstructive way of relating the familiar with the unfamiliar without entirely appropriating or assimilating it. However, a most interesting poetic element in *The London Jungle Book* remains the way in which it could be said to rewrite another colonial narrative, *The Jungle Book*.

Kipling's jungle narratives may be said to incarnate fully the ideology of colonialism, and the fact that they belong to the genre of children's literature may suggest the persistence of a stereotype of infantilisation of the tribal when their title is applied to Bhajju Shyam's work. Attributes of naïveté, simplicity of forms and contents, and freshness of insight may in fact be related to the stereotype of the other as immature. However, if there is one thing that emerges as infantile, this seems precisely to be Western culture – and this may be taken as a personal reading, perhaps not shared by the artistic intention of Bhajju Shyam.[38] Thus, where are the signs of the connection between fictional topography and the hospitality of the guest in the book? How do they relate to Kipling?

Before broaching the subject in Bhajju Shyam's work, I would like to make reference to fictional geography in Kipling, and in particular to what a scholar has called the "felicitous space" in Kipling's *Jungle Book*. In an interesting essay, already mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, John McBratney defines the "felicitous space" in Kipling as a powerful ideological device able to locate the Western imperial subject in an unfamiliar, colonial terrain. He borrows the term "felicitous space" from Gaston Bachelard, who coined the expression as identifying those "childhood images of enclosed space . . . that arouse a sense of recollected delight, intimacy and comfort in the adult writer and reader" (McBratney 278). These spaces have a powerfully ideological role to accomplish by resolving the paradoxes, fears, and contradictions generated by the doubly national and imperial definition of the British colonialist subject, and with their insistence on enclosure and a rigid physical and symbolic separation, they point to both an idealisation of the other space – and of the "other" in general – and a maintenance of power and confidence in the colonising subject. It is this ideological topography that Bhajju's depiction of London may be said to undo and subvert. In fact, in a way that parallels but also displaces Kipling's anthropomorphic rendering of the animals of the jungle, Bhajju's

[38] The theme of "imperial childhood" in Kipling is addressed by Donna Landry and Caroline Rooney in "Empire's Children." They detect a certain tension or ambivalence in Kipling's *Kim*, between "an open-hearted love of otherness in its (familiar and delighting) otherness, even an empathetic being 'possessed' by otherness, and the grasping, colonising desire to appropriate otherness so as to make it a property of the self" (74). In relation to their fascinating reading of Kipling, my question would be: how is this tension recoded from the point of view of the tribal subject in neo-colonial societies? It seems to me that ambivalences and tensions may be present, even if the subject is speaking from an oppressed social position in a neo-colonial age. Bhajju Shyam's work may be seen as a creative way of transforming compensatory fantasies that would cover the ambivalence into a different structure of feeling, where "being possessed by otherness" becomes an occasion for cultural transmission. From this point of view, the intertextual reference to Kipling in *The London Jungle Book* is the site of a genuine transformation, a really creative remaking of a colonial narrative.

reinterpretation of the city may be understood as a sort of reverse anthropomorphism, in which it is not animals who behave like humans or take human form, but rather humans who are perceived through the looking glass of a Gond "bestiary." In this reverse anthropomorphism, spaces are not "felicitous" but rather caught in a contradictory fictional topography, in which it may not be entirely correct to state that "London became a Jungle," in that the distance between Gond view and Western urban location remains at any moment visible. Differently, the "Jungle" invented by Kipling is a space where contradictions are resolved in the register of the imaginary, whereas the real conflict in the positioning of the colonialist subject is masked by the fiction of an anthropomorphic natural and animal world.[39]

One example of "felicitous space" in Kipling may be represented by the jungle before the arrival of man, and the "original sin" which brought fear, death and violence among the animals of the jungle. This story is told by Hathi, the elephant, in "How Fear Came," a story included in the *Second Jungle Book*. In a moment of drought and famine in the forest, the elephant narrates the story of how the fear of Man originated among the animals. What may be interesting in this context, and this is also considered by McBratney as a most significant example of "felicitous space," is how the jungle is described by Hathi before the arrival of Man, and the subsequent appearance of fear:

> In the beginning of the Jungle, and none know when that was, we of the Jungle walked together, having no fear of one another. In those days there was no drought, and leaves and flowers and fruit grew on the same tree, and we ate nothing at all except leaves and flowers and grass and fruit and bark . . . In those days there was no corn or melons or pepper or sugar-cane, nor were there any little huts such as ye have all seen; and the Jungle People knew nothing of Man, but lived in the Jungle together, making one people. (Kipling 10-11)

In an idyllic description of the jungle as a place of abundance, peace, plenty of food, and total absence of humans, an uncontaminated space of purity is posited as an

[39] My use of the term "imaginary" derives from Lacan and, more importantly, from Etienne Balibar, who adopts it in his Marxist and Lacanian analysis of racism and nationalism. In "Difference, Otherness, Exclusion" Balibar writes, commenting on Said, that the construction of self and other in the imaginary "contradictorily combines a *real encounter* (if only an encounter with real *texts*, with the *writing of the Other*) and *a denial of the reality of the encounter*, indeed of its very possibility. Or, to put it in Althusserian terms, that it combines *recognition* with a *misrecognition*, each taking place within the limits and in the language of the other" (30).

Edenic space. The jungle, as the place of absolute otherness and separateness, was not disturbed by earthly needs or human intervention. As McBratney points out:

> The tale has a crucial bearing on the relationship between felicitous space and Mowgli's identity. Under the original version of the Law, man was irrelevant to the jungle because there was no need for the terrible fear he aroused. But with the violation of jungle peace, the Law gave man a role in the jungle scheme of things, a role that proves ambiguous. Although he lives outside the jungle, he must nonetheless enter it at times to maintain peace. (McBratney 284)

The "Law of the Jungle" inaugurated by the initial transgression seems to be "bounded and permeated by the Raj" (290), and the "felicitous space" that the image of the wild nature of the jungle incarnates reveals itself as metaphorically connected to the project of European colonialism in India. While it should be remarked that the space of the Jungle in Kipling is never totally Edenic or idyllic, it may be maintained that it plays an important ideological function, well expressed by Jopi Nyman: "the stories' racialized and interrelated images of Indian children and animals contribute to an imagining of Englishness as a site of power and racial superiority" (Nyman 38-39). This adoption of imaginary resources to construct colonialist authority is related to the idea of the "Law" of the Jungle: "Kipling's text seeks to construct culture within the natural space of the jungle, contributing to the colonialist project's attempt to subordinate the native to imported law" (42). The natural space is hence necessary to the positing of a master, civilised and civilising subject, even though its security and identity are potentially threatened by other beings who are not submissive: "what the Law of the Jungle constructs is a utopian space ideal for boy-scouting, where experience and knowledge help the exploring subject to survive . . . This Edenic utopia is transformed into dangerous colonial space by introducing the native Other, who takes the form of the man-eating tiger Shere Khan which displays no respect for the Law of the Jungle" (42).

Through the natural topography of the *Jungle Books*, in other words, "Kipling comes to voice a colonialist fear of being (and becoming) like the Other" (45), a fear of contamination and impurity that it is the function of the Law to ward off. The space of the Jungle, it may be argued, corresponds to the ideological cover of colonial conflicts and struggles, and the Law of the Jungle, which Kipling re-adapted from legal theories of his time, is deeply related to the formation of colonial authority, as John Murray concludes in his analysis of the subject. Despite its

didactic, pedagogical intention, "Kipling's law was never intended to make his readers good. Rather, it was intended to make them safe citizens at home and effective rulers in the colonies" (Murray 12). As Jane Hotchkiss notices in a really interesting psychoanalytic reading of Kipling, however, the *Jungle Book* is also about notions of paternity and maternity which complicate the colonialist belonging of the text. The text becomes ideological through the enacting of a substitution: "substituting the British government as *pater unfamilias* for Mowgli the New Adam, and putting Mowgli's new-minted values, a mixture of Jungle Law and British Forestry code, in place of the culture and traditions of India" (Hotchkiss 448). As Salman Rushdie notices in an introduction to Kipling reported by Hotchkiss, Kipling has "a personality in conflict with himself," he is "a writer with a storm inside him," and the figure of Mowgli allows him to enter what Hotchkiss calls the "the blurred borderland that figures in the official imperialist code as the rigidly defined border between civilized and barbarous, between 'sahib' and 'native'" (437).

The ambivalence and instability of this "blurred borderland" notwithstanding, the natural topography of Kipling's stories offers a solution helpful to the subject constituted by a situation of power and authority, yet always "at risk" of going native, of passing to the other side of the bordered unequal relations formed in the colonialist context. In order that *The London Jungle Book* can be read as a rewriting – or rather a re-singing, re-weaving – of this specific natural topography, some aspects need to be taken into consideration. First of all, the situation of a European "native-born" colonialist is mirrored in the case of a subaltern subject visiting the centre of a former empire. From a particular point of view, there may be a parallel between these two figures – at the opposite poles of the colonial and neo-colonial global episteme. Both are travellers across colonial and neo-colonial divides. In the months spent in Europe, Shyam may incarnate the image of the ex-colonised "travelling back" to the metropolitan space, that figure of real and imagined "traveller in the West" of which the narrator and the Imam of Amitav Ghosh's canonical novel *In an Antique Land* may be the epitome. As "traveller in the West," Bhajju Shyam seems to be a particularly gifted observer: in his remaking of London as a Gond visual narrative, he is able to re-map the West in an original way. But, and this is a second point that should be considered, the re-mapping of the urban space is never produced to solve or domesticate the situation of unfamiliarity that the traveller in the West can experience. While Kipling's Jungle concurs in the formation and foundation of an identity – something that may be replicated and reiterated by postcolonial narratives of the "writing back" type – Bhajju's London does not entail

the definition of a postcolonial tribal belonging. The relation between Bhajju and Gond aesthetics is performed as an act of custodianship rather than possession or identification. To put it simply, maybe even too simply, Bhajju is not in need of solving the contradiction or unfamiliarity that a "Gond view of London" may imply. The creative re-charting of the urban space is here affiliated to Gond mythology and stylistic expression, yet this affiliation does not end in incorporation, in a performance of symbolic and cultural appropriation. In this sense, it is distanced from the postcolonial "writing back" strategies of appropriation and abrogation described by Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffiths. A very interesting aspect of *The London Jungle Book* is that it does not pretend to define the status of a tribal subject in the Western metropolis, there is no attempt to anchor or root the subjectivity of the reader or the narrator in a definitive cultural position. The book is "a Gond view of London," London seen or watched through "Gond eyes," so that any reader – independently of social or cultural provenance – can see London through Gond eyes, while reading the book. Participation never becomes identification, sharing does not end in possession. It might be suggested that this is the potential "guest hospitality" revealed by the ex-colonised travelling to the centre. The hospitality of the guest – seeing London through Gond eyes – is one of the most intriguing figurative aspects of the book. It can emerge through the representation of spaces and places in some images, in the specific "inadequacy" of this "Gond view."

One pertinent image in this regard – one passage able to show the hospitality of the guest through the definition of a fictional topography – is a picture titled "England is an Emerald Sari." The image consists of an alternation of concentric rhombuses and squares, one placed inside the other, of different colours, all decorated with traditional Gond patterns. The centerpiece is a green and orange rhombus, placed inside a yellow, blue, and orange square, included in a brown rhombus. Next to each of the four sides of the bigger rhombus, there are four animals: a fish on the upper right and lower left side, a turtle on the upper left and lower right side. The explanation may be very useful in the understanding the work:

> I decided to show my first view of England from the air as a piece of cloth. I drew the centerpiece using the same pattern that I use to draw the earth in Gond style, but I coloured it like a sari. Then to show that England is an island, I drew creatures of the sea – fish and turtles – around it, which is the Gond way of indicating water. (*London Jungle Book*)

This is the first of a series of representations of space in the book in which the British landscape is reinterpreted through Gond eyes. Thus, people at the pub become bats on the Mahua tree, the London underground becomes the Gond earthworm, with spider webs for the tube stations, the double-decker bus becomes a faithful dog. In "England is an Emerald Sari," the territory as seen from the aeroplane is transformed into a beautiful sari, a piece of cloth that is a figurative mapping of England. The title of the image may be taken to be a metaphor, yet it is a metaphor without "literal" equivalence, without pre-defined signified, in a sense. While the land is remade in a context of figurative shifting, England is an emerald sari could mean: seen from above, it incorporates the qualities of a piece of cloth: colourful, beautiful, adorned by vertical and diagonal lines and patterns, which may be routes, motorways or the lines of trees in the countryside, traced to divide the land for agriculture. As a metaphor, it may not suggest any kind of literal equivalent, but rather produce an emphasis on similarity in spite of the differences. Metaphor needs to work as a provisional, ephemeral affiliation, in this context, so that England can become an emerald sari. The same technique deployed to represent the basic natural elements in Gond painting is adopted for the decorative motives of a piece of cloth.

The equivalence between the map of England and a sari is also the equivalence between earth and cloth, the affiliation between the worldly, earthly appearance of the British island glimpsed through the window of the aeroplane and the weaving of a beautifully adorned and coloured dress. It may be of interest to notice that the text corresponding to this image is titled "Becoming a Foreigner," and it recounts the experience of arrival – the enigma of arrival, in the words of Indian-Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipaul – and it explains how the idea of the painting originated, in a way. After falling asleep during the flight and re-opening his eyes just before the landing at the airport in London, Bhajju narrates his sense of surprise and discovery: "England was more like a design, a pattern in bright, glowing green. I was going to a country that looked like a sari!" (*London Jungle Book*). This impression suddenly disappears while getting closer to the ground, and little by little the narrator discovers himself, not only being in a foreign place, but also becoming a stranger himself. Bhajju narrates:

> Everyone was a foreigner – all kinds of skin colours and all kinds of hair. I had seen foreigners before . . . but now I realized that something strange had happened. My colour was different, my language was taken away from me . . . I

myself had become a foreigner! (*London Jungle Book*)

In the combination of image and text, the transformation of England into a sari does not imply, as could be supposed, a reassertion of Gond subjectivity. Rather, the sensation at the moment of arrival is precisely the opposite: the author feels as if he himself has become a foreigner. The beauty of the picture, and the absence of any feeling of unease, anxiety or fear that the reader might perceive from the representation of an emerald sari, are reflected by the description of the situation of foreignness. Two important elements could be preserved and extrapolated from "England is an Emerald Sari" and "Becoming a foreigner": the "invention" of space in the fictional topography of England remade as a feminine dress does not pretend to map the territory, to dominate it or make it less unfamiliar. The interpretation of the island as a traditionally "oriental" feminine cloth is perfectly compatible with the corresponding description of the subject "becoming a foreigner."

The fiction is kept divided from the reality of the land – so that the dream-like image of the sari suddenly vanishes, as the plane gets closer to destination. On the other hand, the sense of foreignness does not imply the loss of the Gond view. A Gond vision of England may accommodate a transient, provisional sense of difference and strangeness, without attempting to create an imaginary compensation for the potential ambivalence of the situation. From this point of view, Bhajju's work moves so far from Kipling that the reference implied in the title may be slightly inadequate, yet it remains interesting from a literary critical point of view. The figurative representation of England does not correspond to a mapping or a charting, so that England remains open to different views: there is a Gond view of London, but not a Gond map of London. The transformation of London into a "jungle" is never complete; it shows the contradiction, incompleteness, partiality yet visually captivating representation of an experience of travel, a topography that remains literary or metaphorical, "affiliating," rather than simply covering real experiences through an imaginary construction. The hospitality of the guest may be defined as the idea of viewing a foreign place without attempting to map it, the ability to observe and interpret it without controlling it. While the "felicitous" space of the jungle in Kipling works as an ideological fiction, because it codes the colonial encounter as a (safe) space of adventure, the contradictory, poetically intense visuality of *The London Jungle Book* is able to expose the inadequacy and foreignness of the "traveller in the West" while simultaneously disclosing the creative potential of Gond aesthetics. It may be argued that the recognition of this

foreignness prevents the remaking of London from a Gond perspective from becoming a "felicitous" space. The power and economic inequality of the world-system is not attenuated or masked by this travel journal, but rather it is revealed in the contradiction that a Gond view of London may imply, in the alternative references adopted to redesign the Western metropolitan space as a space of the "Other." The subversion of a Eurocentric vantage point does not imply the fictional remaking of the West as the counterpart of an authoritative non-Western identity. There is no anxiety of contamination or loss in a Gond travel to London, and the experience of travel is remade into traditional painting and storytelling in a way that shows the creativity and resistance of tribal culture in an idiom that is profoundly different from the possessive essentialism derived from the expansion of colonial capitalism. What Gulammohammed Sheikh writes in an essay on Jangarh Singh, Bhajju's uncle, may be valid for Bhajju's creative practice as well:

> His [Jangarh's] responses to modern urban materials, means and working systems do not seem to negate a retention of the memory of his past and the modes of tribal articulations carried across. His growing pictorial repertory brings urban images like the aeroplane to coexist in the tribal world. Living in two diverse cultures does not seem to divide his vision. His work foregrounds an open-endedness and ability to expand orbits in response to the challenges of change with an unmistakable resilience of its own. (Sheikh 20)

While Kipling's jungle is a space of "law" where the fear of the colonialist subject may be salved and placated, Shyam's London is a space of contradiction and novelty where the resilience of Gond aesthetics is not in need of the essentialist jargon of identity. In a sense, London is remade as an anti-felicitous space, a space of openness and contamination, exploration and human contact, where the subject can lose herself/himself with no fear, as it happens when Bhajju himself gets lost somewhere, before finding the way home with the help of a local Indian shopkeeper. The power of cultural transmission lies in accommodating cultural affiliation and novelty through the negotiation of distances, rather than in the imaginary projections of a subject threatened by otherness, as happens in Kipling's colonialist fiction. The hospitality of the guest is a fictional topography in which the narrating subject does not need to deny the encounter with foreignness to preserve his sense of identity. Rather, it is the sign of a certain openness to figurative affiliation, the ability to transform England into an emerald sari and yet recognise the unfamiliar

voices resounding in the scene of the arrival, and the proper or familiar voice becoming foreign for a moment. To quote the title of another story by Kipling, Bhajju Shyam reveals himself as someone able to go "beyond the pale," to get in touch with the other side without fear, and to adapt cultural resources to address an unexpected situation.

Coda: A Poetic of Custodianship

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate that *The London Jungle Book* may be read as an example of a postcolonial custodianship. This postcolonial custodianship can work in three registers: in the register of authenticity, where to keep in custody a specific cultural legacy means to challenge ideologies of both the authentic and the inauthentic and show that cultural traditions are authentically perceived when their historicity and "creative life" is fully recognised. In the register of commodification and the passage from culture to capital, custodianship does not mean an absolute rejection of the range of circulation and exchange that the market can provide. Rather, it means the maintenance of a space that is not reducible to the commodity, a crypt at the core of the commodity. The book – sold and resold all over the world, from Amazon to Waterstone's, where it holds a place under the "Travel Guides to London" section in the Piccadilly Circus store – is able to maintain a link between the sphere of the artistic and non-capitalist, popular and collective cultural traditions. In the articulation of an inventive expressive form, it resists the transformation of the creative resources of Gond aesthetics into the seclusion and singularity of both art and culture. In a sophisticated way, *The London Jungle Book* keeps Gond aesthetics in custody as a living reality which the mechanisms of production and consumption cannot completely annihilate and assimilate. In this regard, it may resist the total swallowing of popular cultures in massification, and it may contribute to the production of a popular consciousness.

As traveller in the West, Bhajju Shyam remains an organic artist, in a way that may be critical of a facile cosmopolitanism or the production of tribal art as object of global market exchange. Finally, in the register of topographical representation, the book resists a mapping of the West as ideologically charged "felicitous" space. By showing and keeping in play both contradiction and affiliation, a situation of foreignness is experienced and accommodated within the idiom of Gond visual and narrative tradition, without appropriating or possessing it. Custodianship may play across all these registers simultaneously, and it can be perceived as a resistance,

creative rather than critical, of traditional and local forms of expression in spite of their being exhibited on the international scene. As a conclusion, I would like to focus on a small, yet extremely significant part of the book, a dedication included on the very last page: "This book is dedicated to the memory of the late Jangarh Singh Shyam, my guru and inspiration" (*London Jungle Book*).

Jangarh Singh Shyam died in Japan in July 2001 and, as Bal ("Storytellers") reports, the circumstances of his death are still partly unknown. From the material that is available in newspapers and on the Internet, it emerges that Jangarh Singh Shyam committed suicide, crushed by circumstances in which the artist was required to sustain, all by himself, the pressure of an increasing demand for the production of traditional artistic material. Jangarh Singh Shyam, the first Gond artist internationally celebrated and recognised, may be said to have left his legacy in abeyance. The dedication of *The London Jungle Book* indicates that it is Jangarh's legacy that is may be transmitted through Bhajju's travels and images. Rather than Kipling or Elwin, a central intertextual reference point that this book may be said to maintain and rewrite is the art of Jangarh Singh Shyam. From this point of view, it might be argued that since its appearance on the international artistic scene, Gond aesthetics is marked by a certain potentiality of resistance. Jangarh's suicide is a case that Spivak would read as a call to recognise equivalence, a "comparativism in extremis" that needs to be heard as the extreme call for a response: "a plea to the political other to recognize equivalence, to respond, and, finally, to end oppression" (Spivak "Comparativism" 474). Rather than being caught between the strategies of abrogation and appropriation at the core of the poetics of the writing back, *The London Jungle Book* may continue Jangarh's call in a creative way. For this reason, Gond aesthetics may represent a positive idea of resistance, resistance as the transmission of a cultural legacy which is also a dedication, the maintenance of the memory of people who came before us. Jangarh's death is remembered, the inheritance of his work is not set aside as a thing of the past or the work of an individual artist active during the 1990s. Jangarh Shyam's legacy is today part of a Gond aesthetics that survives and continues, his story has not ended. By evading the concepts of appropriation, property and possessive individualism at stake in defining the passage from folklore or popular culture to a detached and secluded space of artistic discourse or the monolithic process of massification, Bhajju Shyam can suggest the beginning of a subaltern aesthetics which corresponds to the prefiguration of a popular consciousness, or a consciousness of the many possibilities and potentialities that may keep the diversity and multiplicity of stories

and histories alive. In works like *The London Jungle Book*, custodianship could be figured as a space of contact, communication and inventiveness, a field of conviviality produced by the transmission of cultural forms and the conservation of the memory of preceding generations. It is through different ways of resisting the positing of a cultural identity and through the accommodation of the unexpected in the inherited forms of expression, that cultural discourse could rethink authenticity as vitality and contemporaneity, and perhaps prefigure future forms of as yet unknown custodianship and transmission.

Conclusion

"Custodying" the Future

The reflections and readings proposed in this study have attempted to formulate an aesthetic of custodianship in postcolonial studies. While the term "custodianship" has not been previously adopted in a systematic way in this area of research, it might be argued that it has always been at issue, or at work, in postcolonial literature, theory and history. Custodianship could be the name for a common problematic, a knot, functioning as the ligand among discourses on liberation, resistance, representation, authenticity and commitment that have defined the postcolonial since its consolidation as academic discipline in the 1980s. In the conclusion of this research, I would like to summarise the main aspects of this concept. In order to do so, I will not go back to the chapters of this thesis or the authors already considered, but I will propose a synthetic description of the central questions involved in an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship. In particular, there are two senses of the term custodianship that could provide a useful re-stating of the main ideas already formulated. One the one hand, custodianship could be described as a form of fidelity, the act of keeping something that is precious or valuable, something that should not be lost – an act that might be referred to an "object" but also to a word, as fidelity to a promise, for example. Thus, postcolonial custodianship would consist in the fidelity to the promise of anti-colonial struggle and the continuing history of decolonisation. On the other hand, custodianship is a form of being in charge of something, an appointment or a responsibility.

The custodian does not usually possess what is given to her custody. For this reason custodianship involves a responsibility towards someone else, a responsibility towards the other. It could be past, present or future generations, peoples or inheritors, whose presence places, in a sense, the custodian in custody too. For these reasons, custodianship might involve both proximity and distance: the participation in a common struggle and acts of reception, which could provide a possible way of connecting the political to the poetic dimension of the postcolonial. The following pages will re-address some key aspects of custodianship as a chiasmatic overlap of a sense of fidelity and appointment. While "fidelity" could emphasise the worldly dimension of the postcolonial, "appointment" might be

referred to its aesthetic dimension.[40] Yet the worldly and the aesthetic, as shown throughout this research, are by no means divided or autonomous.

The fact that postcolonialism ought to be faithful to the promise of anti-colonial struggle entails a somehow less pessimistic, or less dismissive understanding of the postcolonial as a terrain of debate and research. First of all, as Bruce Robbins notices in an essay published in 1994, "the legitimacy and the institutional toehold enjoyed by such studies in the metropolis remain extremely fragile" ("Secularism" 25). While there is a potential of cooption and complicity in postcolonial studies today, it is by no means obvious that the fragile legitimacy of the study of postcolonial cultures should constitute a betrayal of the radical thrust of the political movements out of which it originated. In fact, there is a kind of postcolonialism which tends to replicate the mainstream agenda of liberal identity politics and Eurocentric culturalism. Yet, there could be other ways of teaching and transmitting the postcolonial that would be able to be part of the recent, renewed sentiment of anti-colonial resistance all over the world. Bruce Robbins writes some interesting remarks on the "success" of the postcolonial, a success that, more than ten years after the publication of his essay, is still seriously questioned. His observations should be mentioned in this context, because they could raise an interesting problem that has not lost its relevance today:

> Yes, the existence of (post)colonial discourse *does* express "newfound power" as well as agonies of identity on the part of its practitioners. And so? Would this not be the case for any successful intellectual movement, any movement that wins provisional popular and/or institutional support for its terms and agendas, whatever the criteria of progressiveness it is judged by? Or have we actually come to believe that any success in winning support is in itself a fatal sign of co-optation, or evidence that the movement was never progressive to begin with? (26)

The question that needs to be asked today does not concern institutional support as a problem for postcolonialism. Robbins's statement has to be be rephrased as a (real,

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[40] Here, as everywhere in my research, I am deeply indebted to the published work of my supervisor, Caroline Rooney, and the stimulating conversations we had during my PhD. Questions of "appointment" and "poetic fidelity" are addressed in her essay "The Disappointed of the Earth," and in a paper she gave at the "Locating African Culture" workshop held at the University of Stirling in September 2009: "Discourses of authenticity and poetic fidelity: Chenjerai Hove and Assia Djebar."

not rhetorical) question: how can the postcolonial be faithful to its promise of social transformation, the promise that its very name incarnates, a world freed from the injustice of colonial domination and its neo-colonial, neoliberal capitalist aftermath? Institutional support should provide the occasion for renewing the postcolonial promise, for reviving the struggle that oppressed people initiated through their resistance to colonial domination. Are not postcolonial intellectuals the inheritors, hence the custodians, of still unaccomplished, unending struggles for social justice, civil rights and decolonisation? How to continue these legacies? If the anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 1960s are the reference point of postcolonial studies, then the postcolonial is responsible for transmitting their legacy as a living inheritance, as something still relevant today and in need of attention and study. This is not a matter of restricting the scope of analysis to a canon of texts or exemplary experiences, but rather of learning how to maintain an inheritance through different experiences and changing historical transformations. Writing these words one year after the revolutions in the Middle East and at a time of continuing violence in Syria and Palestine, it appears to me with utmost clarity that the process of decolonisation has not ended and that it is still one of the most important driving forces of contemporary politics, culture and history. For this reason, postcolonialism should not be restricted to being an exercise in memory, the remembrance of a past at risk of being forgotten. Rather, it is the continuation of a legacy of anticolonialism and struggle against oppression, which is incomplete yet has gained some achievements and by no means has ceased to live. As Jennifer Wenzel points out:

> Anticolonialism is not merely a memory; it may have been forgotten, but it is not gone. The postcolonial state may be a development from within, rather than an erasure of, the colonial system and global capitalism, but that fact does not obviate its existence. Critiques of neocolonialism, as urgent as they certainly are, still risk another kind of amnesia, forgetting independence (even if it was not liberation) rather than forgetting colonialism. ("Remembering" 22)

The postcolonial should not forget its main responsibility, the continuation of the unfinished project of decolonisation, the redemption of the hopes of the past, as Wenzel intriguingly writes in her discussion of anti-imperialist nostalgia: "a desire not for a past moment in and for itself but rather for the past's promise of an alternative present: the past's future" (17). Wenzel dedicates her reflections to the

failed promises of anticolonial national liberation struggles. The struggle against colonialism offered the promise of a change that has not yet been fulfilled, as the persistence of neo-colonial power structures in supporting dictatorships in formerly colonized countries demonstrates. Wenzel is hence "nostalgic" for the promise, hope, and desire to change the world, and not merely interpret it, that struggles for decolonisation incarnated. If formerly colonised countries are now formally independent nation-states, the legacy of decolonisation should continue anticolonialism in new ways, as it is happening in places such as Taharir Square.[41] The desire for the past's future – an inheritance of the future which hints at an alternative present – that postcolonial custodianship incorporates is also a consciousness of those cultures, traditions and resistances that are still alive, those inheritances that have not been wiped out by colonial and neocolonial exploitation.

Recent revolutions in Egypt and elsewhere could suggest, as Hamid Dabashi says in a recent interview ("Another People") and in his most recent book, *The Arab Spring*, a delayed defiance against a persistent colonial domination and the "end of postcolonialism." What is happening today in the Middle East could well be the end of a certain collusion between oligarchies of the North and dictatorial regimes in the South, yet it could also be interpreted as the continuation of the struggle, the fidelity to the incomplete movements of liberation and decolonisation culminated in the formation of national entities freed from imperial rule in the 1950s and 1960s. If there is a future for postcolonial studies, it is as custodianship of the promise, not realised, but not totally defeated either, of an alternative to the rule of capitalist imperialism. From this point of view, custodianship is the redemption of the past's future, a challenge to the alleged pastness of the past. This rescue of the promise of the past might be emphasised by the verb "custodying" – surprisingly absent from the English language, but maintained in some romance languages – suggested in the title of this conclusion, which would place an accent on the continuous coming into being of forms of resistance, on continuity and the living being rather than remembering of a dead past. The very beginning of a classic text in postcolonial studies, Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, offers some meditations on the act of transmission of something that is still living. In the first pages of his book, Said talks about those "appeals to the past" that are adapted as "strategies in interpretations of the present" (1). Writes Said:

[41] There is no space to address the continuation of the legacy of anticolonialism in contemporary social movements here. This is the subject of a broader project that I have embarked on and that I hope to develop in the next few years. Hamid Dabashi writes about this question in *The Arab Spring*.

> What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussions – about influence, about blame and judgement, about present actualities and future priorities. (1)

The problematic identified by Said in 1993, "whether the past is really past . . . or whether it continues," seems to be still relevant today, and his question about the unaccomplishedness of the past, not concluded but in ever-changing forms, should be asked today as a question of custodianship. The problem, in fact, lies in the ambivalent, problematic and complex acts of inheritance that acknowledge the continuation of the past, the past as something still living on. Said cites T.S. Eliot's famous essay on tradition and the individual talent, and comments on Eliot's remark that tradition is something that should not be merely inherited, but "can only be obtained 'by great labour'" (2). Following Lyndall Gordon, Said points out that Eliot's vision of present, past and future as implied and co-existing in each other was part of his own "idealistic," rather than materialist or worldly, conception of history. Yet Eliot's proposal of a "vision of literary tradition that, while it respects temporal succession, is not wholly commanded by it" (2) is important and could still be valid. Edward Said's reflections were directed to the role of culture in the experience of imperialism, somehow overlooked by studies of imperialism as a merely economic or political process. As Said explains in another passage from *Culture and Imperialism:*

> [T]he meaning of the imperial past is not totally contained within it, but has entered the reality of hundred millions of people, where its existence as shared memory and as highly conflictual texture of culture, ideology, and policy still exercises tremendous force. (11)

The persistence of imperial culture could be noticed in the recurrence of forms of imperial nostalgia, those revisionist currents of colonial history suggested, in the UK and the US, by the work of conservative historians like Niall Ferguson and journalists like Jeremy Paxman. In the face of these cases of persistent neo-imperialist feelings, and a tendency to delegitimise radical views in teaching and

research, it is the responsibility of the postcolonial scholar to recognise, and struggle to maintain and keep, the aliveness of anti-imperial and anti-colonial inheritances. The first aim of an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship should hence be the acknowledgement that it is not only imperialism that has not ended, but also anti-imperialism, in both the old and new political, social, and poetic forms that revolutions and resistances may take today. Following Eliot through Said, it might be said that the legacy of anti-imperialist movements should not simply be inherited, but rather consciously obtained, and shared, with "a great labour."

In a context of academic discourse, there is a second aspect of an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship that should be underlined. It is the construction of a sense of appointment, or responsibility. While this is an ethical imperative with social and political value, it is not reducible to political discourse. Rather, it might be figured in literary, artistic and poetic forms. A postcolonial aesthetic should become the site to raise, again and again, the ethical and historical stakes of the postcolonial. As regards this second feature, I would like to make reference to the conclusion of the first edition of an important volume, Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism,* published in 1998. In the last pages of her book, Loomba writes:

> If postcolonial studies is to survive in any meaningful way, it needs to absorb itself far more deeply with the contemporary world, and with the local circumstances within which colonial institutions and ideas are being moulded into the disparate cultural and socio-economic practices which define our contemporary "globality." This globality is often reduced to discussions of literatures written or translated into English, reminding us that in many ways postcolonial studies is simply a reworking of the older concepts of "Commonwealth literatures" or "Third World literatures." (256-257)

This passage raises some central issues that are of vital importance in postcolonial studies: the confrontation with globality, the use of English – the concern, in postcolonial studies, mainly with literatures written in English – as well as the legacy of commonwealth literatures. Loomba rightly advocates a sort of reconnection of postcolonial studies with cogent issues in the contemporary world, which is something that definitely needs to be done. Yet this should also entail a continuation, and expansion, of the legacy of "Commonwealth literatures" or "Third World literatures." This legacy should now include literatures written in languages

other than English, a view that Spivak has proposed on many occasions, especially in her book *Death of a Discipline,* which generated many responses, some of them now collected in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization.* Postcolonial criticism should be animated by an anti-Eurocentric attitude, whereby new voices, histories and languages are introduced in the discussion. An extension of the postcolonial debate beyond the works of English-speaking authors or translators is something that is already happening and that can significantly enrich the postcolonial debate. Saree Makdisi's reflections on the postcolonial in Arab literature (Makdisi, "Postcolonial Literature") are an excellent example of the multiple ways in which the postcolonial problematic can be translated and continued. But this should not result in excluding experiences, voices or works, or in defining a new type of "expertise." As Spivak emphasises, translation is an intimate act of reading. Linguistic knowledge should become an exercise in close reading, a "training of the imagination" to understand experiences different from our own. In my view, reading postcolonial literature should become a way of inheriting the other. In my thesis, I have addressed works in English, or through translation, because I believe that central works in postcolonial studies such as *Imaginary Maps* or Anita Desai's novels may still have something to say and to teach. The need to introduce new languages should not eclipse those interesting works in English, which have raised and continue to raise urgent social, ethical and political questions. On a personal note, I need to add that in a supposedly "Western" country such as Italy, where I did my undergraduate studies and masters degree, the works included in my thesis are not so famous and "canonical" as in the UK. It would be really a surprise to me, and a real achievement, if one day I could find, even in translation, Mahasweta Devi's and Bhajju Shyam's works widely circulated in bookstores and university curricula in Italy.

If the postcolonial is a conflictual field, the responsibility of the postcolonial scholar is to keep this conflict alive: to read "Commonwealth literatures" in English alongside works in different languages, opening the postcolonial story to new influences and borrowings rather than simply replacing the books available on bookshelves. The fact that the postcolonial may be a "reworking" of concepts of commonwealth and Third World literature is something that could constitute a suggestive form of postcolonial custodianship. In fact, on the one hand, postcolonial custodianship is fidelity to the promise of decolonisation. On the other hand, postcolonial intellectuals may learn from literature and popular expression the ethical dimension of their role as transmitters and custodians. The postcolonial has

inherited "Commonwealth" and "Third World" literatures and there are reasons for considering these corpuses still relevant and worthy today. In this work, I have attempted to demonstrate that literary works are important in their specific aesthetic dimension rather than for the literal, directly political message that they are supposed to deliver. The ethical dimension of postcolonial studies should never be detached from the ability to read the figure. Indeed, postcolonial aesthetics and ethics should be deeply linked. As Paul Guyer writes in his contribution to a recent volume on ethical criticism: "responses to the ethical content or significance of a work are not separable from the response to it as a work of art, and ethical criticism is thus part of aesthetic criticism, or the criticism of a work as a work of art, not independent from it" (20).

The ethico-political value of poetic forms requires a form of custodianship in that it is not simply a matter of what art critics call the propositional content of a work of art. Custodianship is not a matter of gaining knowledge or instructions from a text, but of learning to respond to something that, both within and outside the text, might be called the "figure." In fact, it is the figurative aspect of literature and art, rather than the letter of political discourse, that could hint at the responsibilities of the custodian, the ability to respond to "a call that cannot be grasped as such" (see the Introduction). Beyond the politics of representation, literary figuration could point to a new role for the intellectual and the literary critic, who should be able to read and respond to experiences that are not her own or his own. This is something that "Commonwealth" and "Third World" literatures have been and are still able to pose. As aesthetics, rather than politics, custodianship's object does not lie in the letter or the text or the script, but rather in the weaving of figuration. From this point of view, custodianship as staged in works of literature, art, or cultural forms is the responsibility of the recipient to respond to and not to betray.

The term custodianship itself is borrowed from Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*, a work able to suggest the continuation of a legacy while recognising a certain inability to represent or reproduce it. The aim of a renewed postcolonial aesthetic could be a move away from the current critical mode in literary studies, and the suggestion of a way of reading that takes responsibility for an inheritance that is always imperfectly passed on.[42] As the reader will have probably noticed, there are

[42] I agree about the continuing relevance of "critique," and the need to refine critical intellectual tools, following Bruno Latour ("Why has Critique") and, from a different perspective, Hal Foster ("Post-Critical"). What I am trying to suggest here is that custodianship should not be "mere" critique, especially when critique is a means for establishing oneself as professional academic. Custodianship should be a form of social critique, but the responsibility suggested by the concept

some currents and countercurrents in the chapters composing this thesis, some common elements that may be identified in the creative relation between poetry and prose, the speakable and the unspeakable, the figure and the letter. While these terms cannot be substituted for one another, they can overlap and constitute a new constellation, a topography of multiple points, trajectories and territories that could help re-orient the discussion about ideas of Commonwealth, Third World, and postcolonial literatures and their relation to the real. What might be suggested in this context is that the literary medium, in all its forms and genres, from poetry to the novel, the essay, the short story, the oral or visual narrative, is able to raise a consciousness of those aspects of reality which are not encompassed by politics, ideology or economics. Literature is important because it is able to speak to a reality that would otherwise remain untold. Accordingly, if literature takes part in political struggle, it is in fact only as literature, through the mediation of its figurative being. If literature can be defined as partly political, it could be in the way in which aesthetics and politics can participate in what Jacques Rancière calls "the redistribution of the sensible":

> Politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals. (*Aesthetics* 25)

"Redistribution of the sensible" means learning to listen to the voices of those who "had been perceived as mere noisy animals." Spivak would call this process an "aesthetic education": the ability to perceive what is constantly excluded and marginalised. Following Rancière, the relation between politics and aesthetics could be conceived of from another register, in a way that does not conflate the two, or annihilate the emancipatory, even though contradictory and ambivalent, potential of artistic forms. The politics of aesthetics is the potential that forms of art, understood as forms of art, have to redistribute the sensible, to redefine what is heard and seen, recognised and included in "the common of a community." More importantly, a radical aesthetic does not depend on the representative content or on the adherence to identities and conflicts. As Rancière explains:

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of custodianship should not be trapped in purely academic attacks on other authors or scholars, as so often happens in literary studies.

> Art is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world. Neither is it political because of the manner in which it might choose to represent society's structures, or social groups, their conflicts or identities. It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space. (23)

An intriguing aspect of Rancière's observation is that art seems to become political not by being directly political, but rather by instituting a different time and space, including peoples and voices that had not been heard, seen or recognised, and redefining what constitutes the common, the commonality among peoples and, on a more general level, human beings. Rancière defines the political value of the aesthetic – something that is radically opposed to any aesthetisation of politics – as "the generative principle for a world without domination" (37). This should not be read as a return to a Eurocentric, bourgeois reference to an abstract ideal of humanity, but rather as a different way of understanding the radical potentiality of poetic forms. It is through a distance from literal forms of representation that art can have the capacity to represent the previously unrepresented, speak the unspoken, thus countering the exclusion of plurality and dissent, and the rejection of any form of otherness from within the inside of communities defined by identity and belonging.

The politics of aesthetics lies in the ability of artistic forms to produce a ground of commonality and redefine a sense of having and being in common. If there is any political value in literature, it is not in the letter of its political or ideological contents, but rather in the figuration of another distribution of the sensible, another perception, or another reality principle, as Herbert Marcuse wrote in *Eros and Civilisation*, which will be free from domination. From this point of view, an aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship also corresponds to the custodianship of the promise of the aesthetic. Perhaps, this promise can be located in that power of articulation or figuration that constantly weaves and interweaves the link between the poetic and the real, which this thesis has attempted to explore. Furthermore, Rancière's mention of the reconfiguration of our sense of time could be an implicit meaning of custodianship. The time of custodianship would be the time of inheriting

the unacknowledged and the unsuccessful, those other voices that have been silenced, other narratives that might be useful to an understanding of reality and history. Postcolonial custodianship would not be the production of an abstract and singular idea of the past, but rather a way of giving voice to the multiplicity of the unheard. The time of custodianship could be oriented toward the future, yet not as break, but as a temporality of overlaps, bridges and contacts constituting what art theorist Gerald Raunig, in his recent book *Art and Revolution*, which provides an analysis of activism in European twentieth-century art forms inspired by the concept of transversality elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari, calls the intersection between art machine and revolutionary machine (adopting the term "machine" from Marx, and Deleuze and Guattari's reinterpretation of this Marxist term as an assemblage of different elements that work together without being totalised in a synthesis or a programme). Raunig writes:

> This is certainly a history of currents *and* bridges, outside the realm of flat notions of linear progress or a movement from one point to another. As the overlaps of art and revolution cannot at all be described as a linear learning process, but have always engendered new attempts . . . the exposition of these attempts is in no way indebted to a historical philosophical concept of linear progress. The aim is to break open the constructed continuum of a homogeneous time, not to compound the catastrophes . . . with the reiteration of violence that makes up the methods of historicist, objectivistic historiography. (20)

The movement connecting art to revolutions, the aesthetic to radical politics, literatures to anti-imperial resistance, this connection becomes visible in a time of coming into being, a continuous and constituent emergence of new forms and new contents, a time that the postcolonial should be able to address, participating in it without reducing it to prediction or programming. The aesthetic of postcolonial custodianship advanced in this thesis could ultimately be understood as nothing more than the fidelity to a promise; that the resistance of all those peoples persistently subjected to colonialism and neocolonialism will be continued, that it will continue to live. It is for this reason that the past, rather than weighing like a nightmare on the brain of the living, should provide us with the poetry for revolutions that as yet, as Spivak ("Revolutions") writes in a rephrasing of Derrida,

have no model.

This thesis has addressed works that are widely taught and recognised in higher education institutions in countries where the postcolonial is part of the curriculum. In addition to the widely studied works of Anita Desai, Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy, I have engaged with the work of an emergent tribal artist whose experience may be really interesting from the perspective of the problematic investigated in my research. These works do not define a canon but rather, they may constitute a beginning. In spite of their provenance from the Indian subcontinent, the wide range of experiences that they concern does not allow the critic to group them under the label of "Indian" literature. I have considered these works because, in my view, they all pose the question of custodianship in nuanced ways; they share a common reference to the question of custodianship, which is at the centre of my inquiry. Their provenance from the Indian subcontinent may indicate that various contexts in India – contexts of vanishing tribal cultures, pre-colonial aristocratic urban cosmopolitanism, caste oppression in rural areas, national and religious separatism in Kashmir, environmental degradation in Central India, and all the multiple situations to which the stories considered in this thesis may refer – are witness to the ambivalences and unfinished histories of decolonisation, but by no means exhaust the postcolonial problematic. I hope that someone will extend, modify, and further elaborate on the question of custodianship in other postcolonial contexts such as, for instance, Africa and the Middle East. However, this is something that I will leave for future works. I have read some texts as cases and practices of postcolonial custodianship, a concept that has always been somehow latent in postcolonial criticism, but that nobody else seems to have taken seriously so far. Throughout the chapters of the present work, custodianship has been defined as a responsibility towards the other in forms of cultural transmission. Future derivations of the problematic of custodianship could be adapted in fields outside the academy, for example by redefining the role of the art curator, the translator, as well as all those in the role of having to transmit inheritance that are not their own, but that come from somewhere else and that place ourselves in the position of someone else, in an infinite relay that links peoples and stories beyond the barriers that history and language may sometimes create.

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