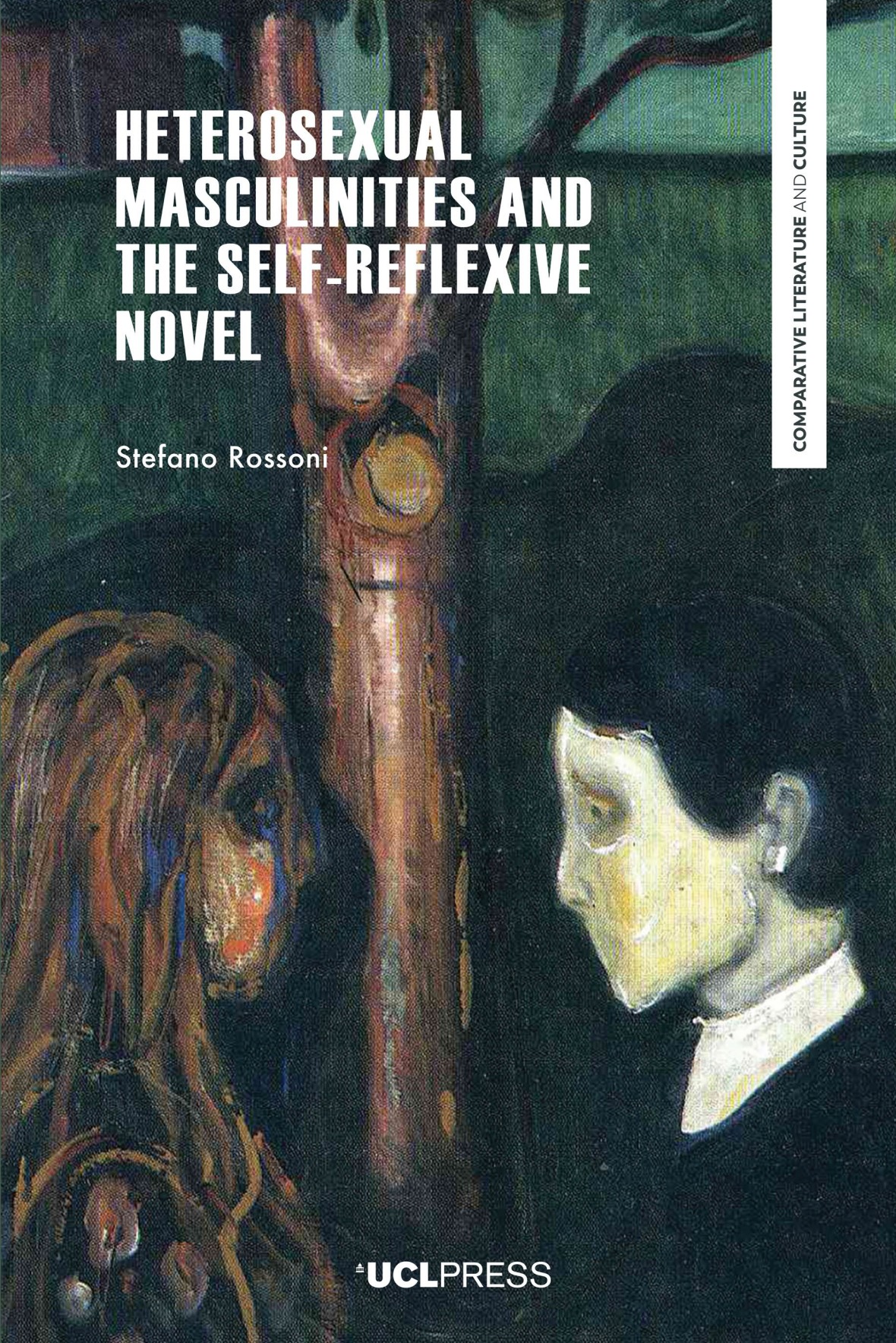
HETEROSEXUAL MASCULINITIES AND THE SELF-REFLEXIVE NOVEL

Stefano Rossoni

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CULTURE



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for Anna

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Note on the text

The words 'Quixotic' and 'Troubadours' appear with a capital letter except when they are quoted from other works which use the lower case.

American English forms have been left as they appear in the primary texts or in their translations.

Introduction

'How do I ever get to be what is described in the literature as a man?' asks the protagonist of Philip Roth's *My Life as a Man* (1974). This question is often quoted when discussing Roth's narrative, and the focus is exclusively on 'a man'. However, I believe that the meaning of the word 'man' cannot be separated from 'the literature' here. Referring to the above quotation, Maggie McKinley observes that 'Roth's representations of masculinity do not exist in a vacuum, but are informed by ongoing discussions and manifestations of gender identity in America' (2021: 275). McKinley is indeed accurate: cultural, historical and social discourses are key to understanding Roth's representations of masculinity as well as the depictions of men by the other key authors mentioned in this book, namely J. M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera and Mario Vargas Llosa. In contributing to the debates about masculinity raised by their narratives, I seek to interrogate how their novels create, continue and reshape the discursive histories of literary masculinities. I contend that they explore heterosexual masculinities by mobilising self-reflexivity as elicited by the novel as a literary genre.

My key words, masculinity and self-reflexivity, require clarification. Firstly, how do I interpret the notion of masculinity? My study sits within literary masculinity studies that examine the interconnectedness of narrative, gender identity and performances (Armengol et al., 2017; Horlacher, 2015, 2019; Knights, 1999; Lusty, 2014; Murphy, 1994; Robinson, 2000; Silverman, 1992; West and Lay, 1994). In particular, drawing on Stefan Horlacher, I look at masculinity 'as having a largely discursive, textual, or narrative relational structure' (2019: 76). Such an understanding of masculinity allows us to examine how narrative scripts and practices are embodied and inform men's gendered identity and relationships with other human beings (77). This notion is pivotal for my focus on self-reflexivity as a dual principle. On the one hand, I look

at self-reflexivity as men's means to examine the cultural and discursive components of their gender identity as well as their embodiments and performances. On the other, novelistic self-reflexivity is also a narrative site through which to reflect on literary creation and interpretation specifically informed by the tradition of the novel. Studying the tension between these two notions, I contend that Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa engage with the self-reflexive tradition of the novel, epitomised by Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (Alter, 1975; Brink, 1998; Kundera, 1988b, 1996b), and its ramifications to reflect on masculinity as a socio-cultural construction (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 2017; Reeser, 2010; Whitehead and Barrett, 2001). Examining the interconnectedness of gender and literary canon, I argue that novelistic self-reflexivity places the illusions of critical distance and emotional control at the heart of heterosexual masculinity and its performances, while simultaneously obscuring its gender inflections. Feminist and gender theory scholars have exposed how masculinity is conflated with the universal person rather than as a gender construct (Butler, 1990: 9; Kimmel, 1987: 10). Harry Brod underlines that men have been removed from our vision 'by being too much in the foreground' (1987: 41). In particular, the unmarked quality of the ethnic and gendered specificity of White men has been conflated with normativity (Robinson, 2000). My aim is to shed light on the entanglement between the particular understanding of self-reflexivity embedded in the novel as a genre and the configuration of heterosexual masculinities in the selected novels by Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa. I shall now contextualise my critical engagement with self-reflexivity in dialogue with masculinity literary studies, and in particular those contributions that examined men's struggle, to develop a language for self-reflection within fictions of masculinity.

Early examples of literary studies of homosocial relationships between men can be tracked back to Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1965), which describes the impossibility of adult heterosexual love for male characters, a theme that contributes to shaping the canon of the American novel, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English literature and male homosocial desire* (1985), which focuses on male homosocial relationships and the structures of patriarchy. The literary focus on masculinity has gained much impetus from sociological studies of masculinity in response to the intellectual challenges of feminism. In *The Dialectic of Sex* (1972), Shulamith Firestone regards the narratives of Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer as representative of what she calls the New Virility School in twentieth-century literature.

According to Firestone, the works of Hemingway and Mailer, among others, 'consciously present a "male" reality', featuring tough guys who reclaim their manhood in response to 'the growing threat to male supremacy' (1972: 152). A more developed insight into representations of masculinity in twentieth-century literature is offered by Peter Schwenger in *Phallic Critiques* (1984). Schwenger (1984: 14) describes the ambivalence towards the traditional masculine role – 'its sense of archetypal fulfilment, but also its limitations, its self-deceptions, its destructiveness' – in the works of several writers including, among others, Mailer, Hemingway, Yukio Mishima, Roth and Alberto Moravia. In examining the troubled sense of masculinity emerging from their narratives, Schwenger argues that self-consciousness has disconcerting effects on masculinity: 'To be self-conscious is to stand off from the self, to be alienated enough from it to observe its arbitrariness and artifice' (9). Drawing on modernist works, comics and contemporary debates about reflexivity, desire and modernity, Peter Middleton investigates men's self-consciousness in *The Inward Gaze* (1992), in which he examines the difficulties for men in writing self-consciously (and self-critically) about their gender, and 'the lack of a language for such a reflection' (3). In his discussion of post-patriarchal masculinities, drawing on Middleton, Berthold Schoene-Harwood (2000) focuses on men's emotional inarticulacy. According to Schoene-Harwood, 'Encouraged and authorised to cultivate a gender-specific lack of self-knowledge, men find themselves systematically incapacitated to behold and scrutinise, let alone enunciate, the condition of their singularly engendered interiority' (2000: ix). Lack of self-knowledge emerges thus as a defining trait of masculinity. My interest lies in men's struggle for self-reflexivity, brought to light by literary studies of masculinity. Is this lack of self-knowledge due to the conflation of heterosexual masculinities with the universal? How are the lack of self-knowledge and ignorance of one's own emotions culturally shaped?

This book aims to answer these questions by situating the masculine struggle for self-reflexivity – as explored by Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa – within the light of the European novelistic tradition inaugurated by Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and continued by Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, among others. I look at *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* not only as narrative texts but most importantly as theories of literature. The writings of Cervantes and Flaubert offer an insight into the ways in which literature influences lived experience. As Marthe Robert writes, 'Quixotism is a literary matter, an endeavour to portray … the problematic relationship between books and life' (1977:

50). With a protagonist who lives according to outdated literary models, *Don Quixote* invites the reader to interrogate how reading infiltrates our daily lives. Carlos Fuentes regards Cervantes as the initiator of the novel because he rooted 'the criticism of the [literary] creation within the page of his own creation' (1994: 33, my translation). The metaliterary interrogation of Cervantes' text is conveyed through Don Quixote's perils and his particular experience of readership: 'criticism of the creation', Fuentes writes, 'is a criticism of the very act of reading' (33, my translation). Don Quixote is representative of a form of literature that reflects a human order that is not as unquestionable and coherent as the religious and social orders of the past (71, my translation). The impossibility of separating life from fiction in *Don Quixote* elicits a multiplicity of interpretations, revealing how a univocal reading of our experience and the outside world is no longer possible.[1]

The influence of literature and the inquiry into the possibility of interpreting human experience correctly thematically link the writing of Cervantes and Flaubert. Flaubert explicitly acknowledged the influence of Cervantes' writing on his own: 'I can find my origins in the book that I knew by heart before I knew how to read, *Don Quixote*' (Fox, 2008: 104). Though *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* have often been compared (Girard, 1965; Ricard, 1999; Rossoni, 2018; Vargas Llosa, 1986a), they drastically differ from a narrative, stylistic and historical perspective. However, Soledad Fox (2008) details how, for Flaubert, the Cervantine text represented a model of ironic parody of the dominant narrative trends of his time. Like Don Quixote, who embodies a criticism of the chivalric and picaresque traditions, the character of Emma Bovary offers a critical perspective on romanticism. In this book, I also argue that Flaubert inscribes *Madame Bovary* into the Cervantine lineage. As a fictional reader, Emma radicalises the Quixotic theme of tension between fiction and experience. While with Don Quixote the reader learns that they are unable to separate fiction from experience and that the act of reading is destabilised by multiple interpretations of the same episode, *Madame Bovary* reveals that even our deepest emotions might be shaped by the emotional repertoires available within our literature and culture. By blurring the boundary between authenticity and imitation, through the character of Emma, Flaubert exposes the unreliability of human introspection (Bersani, 1970; Culler, 1985, 2007). *Madame Bovary* illuminates how the Quixotic tension between fiction and reality challenges not only the reader's ability to understand the 'outside' world and what is real, but also their ability to recognise whether their innermost feelings are authentic or not. Drawing on this literary legacy,

I propose that the novels of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa transfigure this Quixotic theme into an investigation of the dynamic between fiction and heterosexual masculinities. Obsessed by literature, their male narrators, writers, critics and professors seek to come to terms with masculinity and heterosexual experience through their own reading and writing. They examine the ambivalent representations of sexuality offered by Guillaume Apollinaire, Jorge Luis Borges, Lord Byron, Anton Chekhov, Vivant Denon, Flaubert, Witold Gombrowicz, Franz Kafka, Juan Carlos Onetti and Ezra Pound, among others, in search of a sense of identity and structures of feelings they can inhabit. In the manner of Cervantes' critique of fiction in *Don Quixote*, I argue that these masculine attempts to develop a language for self-reflexivity reverberate in the metaliterary, self-reflexive dimension of the selected novels by Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa.

As a comparative exploration of my chosen writers' responses to the forms of self-reflexivity developed within the novelistic genre, this study responds to Kundera's understanding of the novel as a product of European culture that took shape with *Don Quixote* (1988: 4–5).[2] Inspired by Hermann Broch (1984, 2002), who conceives of the novel as a means with which to achieve knowledge, Kundera examines the history of the novel as an inclusive translinguistic dialogue between different national literary traditions born in Europe but not geographically limited to it – he emphasises that the genre has been enriched by non-European writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Fuentes. Kundera emphasises the self-reflexive aesthetic of the novel inaugurated by *Don Quixote*: 'with Cervantes, we are in a world created by the magic spells of the storyteller who invents, who exaggerates, and who is carried away by his fantasies' (1996b: 60). Continued by Henry Fielding, this tradition embodies the authentic essence of the novel which was betrayed by the realist aesthetic. André Brink (1998: 6) warns the reader that Kundera's view may mislead them into believing in the existence of an 'authentic' history of the novel. Brink denounces Kundera's oversimplified interpretation of literary realism, which is reminiscent of Ian Watt (1957), for whom the novel is exclusively an expression of a realist aesthetic.[3] Aligning with Brink, I am sceptical of the idea of an authentic history of the novel. Kundera's history of the novel is also questionable because he only draws on works authored by men, in turn entirely ignoring women writers. Drawing on Kundera's insight into the novel as a form as much as into the flaws of his theory of the novel, what I am consciously pointing to in this work is the genealogy of literary masculinity that the novels of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa create, by establishing intertextual dialogues with men authors' expressions of literary self-reflexivity.

Several critics have studied the self-reflexive forms of the novel. Including exclusively men-authored texts, Robert Alter paints the history of the novel as a self-conscious form 'that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice' (1975: x). Even though the phenomenon of an artwork mirroring itself can be traced back to the bard within the *Odyssey* or Euripides' parody of tragedy, Alter underlines that, among all forms of art, the novel 'raised the fictional self-consciousness to a distinctive generic trend' (xii). Cervantes inaugurates this form through a protagonist who wants to be a book. A crucial moment in *Don Quixote* is when the protagonist enters a printing shop and assists in the process of typesetting, during which the readers 'can hardly forget that Don Quixote himself is no more than the product of the very process he observes, a congeries of words set up in type, run off as proof, corrected and rerun, and sold at so many reals a copy' (4). In tracing the history of the self-conscious narrative form from Renaissance Spain to the contemporary US and France, Alter highlights the continuity between literary works from the past and those belonging to a modern as well as a postmodern aesthetic. Brink focuses on the different forms that the self-consciousness of language itself can take and argues that the 'exploitation of the storytelling properties of language' which 'has so persistently been regarded as the prerogative of the Modernist and Postmodernist novel … *has in fact been a characteristic of the novel since its inception*' (1998: 6–7). Even more explicitly, Linda Hutcheon asks: 'does one not feel the need to point out the continuity as well between "postmodernism" and *Don Quijote*?' (1980: 3). Hutcheon focuses on a novelistic form that she describes as a self-referring narrative, which provides, within itself, a commentary on its own status as fiction and on its own process of production and reception. For Hutcheon, self-consciousness is paradigmatic of most of the cultural forms that Jean-François Lyotard describes as postmodern, but, by emphasising the analogies between postmodernism and *Don Quixote* in particular, she underlines that a postmodernist lens on self-consciousness in fiction is too limiting.[4] I should hereby underline that the emphasis contemporary critics place on the analogies between *Don Quixote* and postmodernism represents the most recent stage in the interpretation of Cervantes' work. Anthony Close describes the evolution of scholarly interpretation of *Don Quixote* from the seventeenth century to the contemporary period and emphasises that 'the theory and criticism of *Don Quixote* have interpreted it in the light of the ideology and aesthetic values prevailing at the time of interpretation, including the trends set by contemporary novels' (2008: 251–2). Specifically, Close argues that

the understanding of metafictionality in *Don Quixote* depends on the influence of writers who rejected traditional narrative premises, such as André Gide and Miguel de Unamuno, who 'subjected their own [fiction] to ironic scrutiny as well, by including within their fictional world a writer engaged in writing a novel very much like the one that we read' (248). Acknowledging this influence and the implications of reading *Don Quixote* in light of contemporary sensibilities and theories, shaped by critics and writers alike, I look at the creative responses to the understanding of the novel inspired by Cervantes as a means to interrogate heterosexual masculinities.

In his study of self-reflexivity in *Don Quixote*, Konstantin Mierau suggests that metafictional texts 'are instrumentalized in other textual spheres and epochs … contributing to the discourse on the effects of metafictionality on … non-fictional domains such as social/critical theory' (2020: 32). Examining the writing of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa within the self-reflexive tradition inaugurated by *Don Quixote* reveals how literary devices such as intertextuality and the story-within-the story become tools to articulate men's self-reflection on masculinity inspired by their practices of reading and writing. I propose that their self-reflexive novels elicit discourses on gender in response to the criticism of the patriarchy expressed by the second wave of feminism in Europe and the US. These responses are indirect and ambivalent: they examine the cultural construction of masculinity without fully acknowledging the ethical challenges raised by feminism (with Coetzee being the exception). They explore masculinity in literary terms and as a textual performance, conducting their critical investigation within the masculinist domain of the literary canon. Enquiring into changing and shifting trajectories of embodiment and gender formation, I discuss how their analyses of heterosexual masculinity in these novels inform a reflection that contrasts and, at the same time, overlaps with gender theory. My thesis is that the engagement of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa with the self-reflexive novel configures self-inquiry as a matrix of masculine behaviour that destabilises gender orthodoxy and acts as a subversive but not emancipatory force. Self-reflexive masculinity emerges in these novels as a textual performance that expresses the limits of self-inquiry and men's struggle with intimacy and emotions. Examining this ambivalent criticism of masculinity, I argue for the potential of teaching these texts to study the transforming power of empathetic relationships, within and beyond the self, as an antidote to self-absorption.

Why these authors

These authors' different geographical origins are crucial in investigating a global trend in contemporary narrative which goes beyond national and linguistic boundaries. In addition to the dialogue they have directly established with each other, which I shall discuss in the pages to come, I compare their novels based on the central role that heterosexual masculinities and self-reflexivity play in their narratives.

As Kaja Silverman (1992) observes, heteronormative masculinity has thus emerged as the dominant fiction, which sets patriarchal masculinities in contradistinction to femininity and subversive masculinities (Schoene-Harwood, 2000; West and Lay, 1994). However, as Daniel Worden warns us, 'masculinity cannot be easily divided into the binaries of "hegemonic" and "alternative"' (2011: 4). The selected novels offer an insight into the pluralities of heterosexual masculinities and the diversity of men's experiences. Coetzee's characters are White South African intellectuals. While in *Disgrace* (1999) David Lurie embodies the misogynistic and colonial legacies in post-Apartheid society, in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) JC migrates to Australia, where he experiences ageing and isolation. The identities of Kundera's characters emerge in relation to the political context of the former Czechoslovakia: in *Life Is Elsewhere* (1969) Jaromil is a young man who embodies the ethos of the Communist revolution; in *Slowness* (1995) Milanku is an adult migrant, reminiscent of Kundera himself, who fled Communism to move to France. Roth's protagonists are Jewish-American intellectuals whose problematic assimilation with White Angle-Saxon Protestant (WASP) society reverberates in their relationship with women. In *The Professor of Desire* (1977) the reader can observe how David Kepesh searches for meaning in European literature, first as a young man and then as an academic; in *My Life as a Man* (1974) Peter Tarnopol is a writer struggling with his marriage and divorce. Vargas Llosa's protagonists belong to the Peruvian upper middle class. Marito's sentimental life in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977) and Rigoberto's private utopias and marital struggles in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* (1997) take centre stage, leaving Peru's troubled political situation in the background. All these characters hold some degree of privilege, but their age, origin, ethnicity, social class, religion and relationship, and migratory status intersect, shaping different and shifting embodiments of Whiteness. Despite their different experiences, they are all bound by their self-reflexivity, which alienates them from that hegemonic discourse without necessarily detaching them from it.

The narratives of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa are also comparable for other reasons. Their works have led several critics to regard their narratives as an expression of a postmodern sensibility (Adams, 1993; Attridge, 2004; Atwell, 1992; Brauner, 2007; Brooker, 1994; Habrá, 2012; Parker Royal, 2007; Steinby, 2013).[5] Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa play with autobiographical information in their narratives, often featuring a character who has the same name as the author (Coetzee, 2008a, 2009; Kundera, 1992, 1996a; Roth, 1990, 1994, 2004; Vargas Llosa, 1989, 2002). This tendency is further and conversely developed in memoirs and fictional autobiographies (Coetzee, 1997, 2002; Roth, 1988, 1991; Vargas Llosa, 1994). In their fictional writings each of these authors engage with canonical works of European literature in addition to *Don Quixote* (Coetzee, 1986, 1994; Kundera, 1986a; Roth, 1972; Vargas Llosa, 2007a). Each reflects on the creative process and the act of writing itself: Coetzee features the writer Elizabeth Costello (1999a, 2003, 2005) and includes writings attributed to the fictional characters in his novels (1974, 1977, 1990); Kundera constantly exposes his narrators' thoughts on the nature of fiction; almost all of Roth's novels are centred on fictional authors; and Vargas Llosa investigates the act of writing in his fiction (1986b, 1989, 2007b).

Structure and scope

My corpus is composed of eight novels, two per author, published between 1973 and 2007. The aim is not to develop a chronological approach to these texts, nor to offer an overarching analysis of this 34-year period, but rather to reveal the thematic and stylistic interconnectedness of these authors' reflections on masculinity. Developing original comparisons which emphasise cultural and geographical discrepancies, each of my four chapters identifies and analyses a theme. These four themes – detachment, formation, authorship and intimacy – are key to examining how in the selected novels the characters' and narrators' struggles for self-knowledge are simultaneously fostered and hindered by literature. Driven by their practices of reading and writing, their attempts at self-reflection entangle and unravel their problematic investment into the literary discourses of masculinity. As the structuring themes of my chapters, detachment, formation, authorship and intimacy illuminate the tension between emotional illiteracy and the lack of a language for self-reflexivity, and the ramifications of this.

In Chapter One, I analyse Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the detachment that its protagonist, David Lurie, experiences from his emotions in his roles as a lover and a father. Lurie reads his relationship with women through a distorted ideal of seduction shaped by literature and embodied by Lord Byron. In particular, I focus on Lurie's alienation from his own desire and women, which culminates in the rape of one of his students. The analysis of Lurie's masculinity offers an insight into the history of violence towards women rooted in European literature and visual art. Drawing on his refusal to accept that he abused one of his students, I study the limits of his self-reflection, which is articulated through intertextual references to several texts, primarily *Madame Bovary*, and the composition of Lurie's opera *Byron in Italy*.

In Chapter Two, I seek the origins of the gendered detachment that Lurie experiences in the coming of age of Jaromil and Kepesh, the protagonists of Kundera's *Life Is Elsewhere* and Roth's *The Professor of Desire* respectively. I focus on their formation as young men, discussing the role played by literary mediation. Considering the interconnectedness of masculinity and literary practices, I address the influence on these texts of Polish modernist writer Gombrowicz, and his notion of form in particular, to shed light on Jaromil's and Kepesh's emotional immaturity and the illusion they have that they can acquire a coherent gender identity through literature. While in *Life Is Elsewhere* Jaromil's investment in lyricism and heterosexual love is fulfilled by the suppression of his self-reflexivity, in *The Professor of Desire* Kepesh's self-referential approach challenges the epistemological potential of novelistic self-reflexivity and reveals its performative dimension.

In Chapter Three, I examine the entanglement of heterosexual masculinity and authorship, which I define as authorial masculinity in the works of Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa. Firstly, Kundera's *Slowness* articulates a gendered ideal of authorship able to reflect on heterosexual desire and overcome masculine narcissistic urges. Secondly, Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* shows how the protagonist's rise to a discursive position of authority is developed through his writing, with a balance between authorial control and romantic sentimentality. Finally, Roth's *My Life as a Man* questions the possibility of shaping a narrative understanding of his protagonist's masculinity.

In Chapter Four, I examine the search for emotional intimacy by JC and Rigoberto, the protagonists of Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* and Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*. I argue that novelistic self-reflexivity can contribute to reshaping heterosexual masculinities within the domain of the patriarchy. Identifying Borges as a common influence,

I focus on the essayistic writing of both protagonists. I propose that JC's engagement with literature elicits a dialogue between emotions and intellect that emancipates him from his ageing body, while for Rigoberto literary self-reflection illuminates the emotional needs behind his sexual fantasies.

In the Conclusion, I interrogate the paradox of novelistic self-reflexivity as a dramatic discourse that reproduces heterosexual masculinities as a site of unintelligibility.

Notes

1 Fuentes sets Don Quixote in contraposition with the ideal of reading embodied by the epic that he considers univocal. For a wider view of the epic, see Massimo Fusillo (2006) and David Quint (1989).

2 Kundera identifies both Cervantes and Rabelais as the initiator of the novel: in *Art of the Novel* he focuses on Cervantes, in *Testaments Betrayed* on Rabelais (1996).

3 Although Kundera praises the discoveries of Flaubert and Balzac, his considerations (knowingly) ignore both the complexity underlying realism and the multiple trajectories opened up by the studies that realist works have inspired, such as readings of *Madame Bovary* proposed by Leo Bersani (1970) and Jonathan Culler (1985, 2007) or Christopher Prendergast's interpretation of realist works as a 'dynamic re-description' of experience which engages with socially shared orders of knowledge (1986: 235).

4 Similarly, in *Metafiction: The theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*, Patricia Waugh observes: 'Metafiction is a mode of writing within a broader cultural movement often referred to as post-modernism' (1984: 21).

5 This theme is also explored in Coetzee's *Doubling the Point* (1992), which incorporates conversations between the author and the volume's editor, David Attwell. Coetzee and Attwell focus on postmodernism in relation to Coetzee's writing while discussing topics such as Kafka (201–3), the poetics of reciprocity (62–3) and Beckett (27), among others.

1
Detachment

Coetzee's *Disgrace*

'For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well' (Coetzee, 2000: 1). The very first line of J. M. Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace* introduces its readers to its fundamental proposition: sex is a problem for its protagonist, David Lurie.[1] Lurie is a straight White literature professor in his fifties at the Cape Technical University in Cape Town. The free indirect discourse and Lurie's focalisation in the novel emphasise 'the transactional nature of reading' (Spivak, 2002: 22). The distance between character and narrator generates a space that the reader is invited to fill, questioning the significance of the narrator's words as well as Lurie's conduct, deciphering the enigma of his masculinity.

Since his early years, Lurie has shaped his gender identity in contrast to women: 'His childhood was spent in a family of women. As mother, aunts, sisters fell away, they were replaced in due course by mistresses, wives, a daughter. The company of women made of him a lover of women and, to an extent, a womanizer' (7). Caught in a process of othering, he came to perceive even the women of his family primarily in terms of gender opposition. Inherently relational (Connell, 2015: 39; Whitehead and Barrett, 2001: 22), Lurie's sense of self is deeply affected when he loses his magnetism to women because of his age. The anxiety brought into the protagonist's life by his ageing body drives him to have sex with his colleagues' wives, random tourists and prostitutes 'in an anxious flurry of promiscuity' (Coetzee, 2000: 7). Thanks to a sex worker called Soraya, he temporarily solves the personal crisis triggered by his physical change. Recalling Baudelaire's poem 'L'Invitation au voyage', Lurie regards the weekly meetings with Soraya as 'an oasis *of luxe et volupté*' (1). However, despite his emphasis on the voluptuousness

of their encounters, the description of Lurie's intercourse with Soraya offers a rather different perspective:

> In the field of sex his temperament, though intense, has never been passionate. Were he to choose a totem, it would be the snake. Intercourse between Soraya and himself must be, he imagines, rather like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest.
> Is Soraya's totem the snake too? (2–3)

The estrangement Lurie experiences from both Soraya and himself is expressed in terms of animality.[2] His relationship with sex appears contradictory, intense but not passionate, abstract but absorbed. These terms challenge the voluptuosity evoked by Baudelaire's poem. How can this estrangement be reconciled with the image Lurie has created for himself as a seducer? To answer this question, in this chapter I will focus on Lurie's unfulfilled investment in this literary ideal of masculinity, namely the discrepancy between his intellectual passion and lack of emotional involvement. Lurie's detachment evokes the sense of unknowability attached to desire in Coetzee's nonfiction writing. In *Giving Offense*, Coetzee writes that desire is 'complex, devious, inscrutable, and opaque' and that it 'does not fully know itself, cannot afford to fully know itself' (1996: 62, 74). Drawing on Lurie's literary education, *Disgrace* interrogates the opacity of his desire and relationships with women through literary means. I contend that this inquiry configures Lurie's masculinity as a site in which the gendered inflections of historical-racial discourses in South Africa and the European novel's colonial legacy intersect. In order to contextualise the metaliterary entanglements informing the emplotment of Lurie's masculinity in *Disgrace*, in the next section I examine Coetzee's reflection on the tradition of the novel embodied by *Don Quixote* and its potential to address the South African context.

'An admission of defeat'

With its explicit references to *Don Quixote*, Coetzee's 2013 novel *The Childhood of Jesus* revealed the influence Cervantes had on his writing. María López (2013) traces its origin to the acceptance speech Coetzee gave when he accepted the Jerusalem Prize in 1987.[3] Coetzee refers to Cervantes by recalling the speech Milan Kundera gave two years before, when he was awarded the same prize. Kundera (1988b: 155–65) celebrated the European novel as an expression of humour and ambiguity

which was recalcitrant to absolute truths, as epitomised by *Don Quixote*. In his own speech, Coetzee states that he would like to join Kundera in paying tribute to the legacy of Cervantes, but feels that not even literature allows South African writers to leave their geographical location behind:

> What prevents the South African writer from taking a similar path, from writing his way out of a situation in which his art … is … too slow, too old-fashioned, too indirect to have any but the slightest and most belated effect on the life of the community or the course of history?
>
> What prevents him is what prevents Don Quixote himself: the *power* of the world his body lives in to impose itself on him and ultimately on his imagination, which, whether he likes it or not, has its residence in his body. The *crudity* of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and rages, its greed and its lies, make it as irresistible as it is unlovable. The story of Alonso Quixano or Don Quixote – though not, I add, Cervantes' subtle and enigmatic book – ends with the capitulation of the imagination to reality, with a return to La Mancha and death. We have art, said Nietzsche, so that we shall not die of the truth. In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination. (1992: 98–9)

Coetzee's reading of *Don Quixote* is ambivalent and resonates with his own experience as a writer born in South Africa in several contradictory ways. Coetzee seems to project a colonial perspective onto South Africa, framing it as a hyper-reality that produces a more intense experience for the subject. Though the above fragment presents Quixote's act of using the imagination to escape reality as antithetical to the experience of a South African writer, Coetzee's reasoning unfolds over the axis of reality and imagination characteristic of Cervantes' work. Masculinity emerges as a subtle but visible presence: the ideal of the South African writer Coetzee mentions is conceived as male. This choice could be more deliberate than one might guess at first sight: in his 1997 essay dedicated to the writings of Nadine Gordimer and Turgenev, collected in the 2001 volume *Stranger Shores*, Coetzee (2001: 219) underlines her choice to adopt the masculine pronoun when referring in general terms to the Black writer. This gendering of the South African writer is consistent with

the literary genealogy largely dominated by male authors mapped out in his critical writing (López and Wiegandt, 2016: 119; Dooley, 2019), but contrasts with the prominent role that women writers hold in his thinking about African literature.[4] In his essay dedicated to Daphne Rooke (2001: 208–18), Coetzee emphasises the extent of women writers' influence on South African literature, including Gordimer, Sarah Gertrude Millin, Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith, while acknowledging Doris Lessing's contribution to the tradition of Southern African literature. More interestingly, the tension between European/Cervantine frameworks and South Africa also surfaces in his reflections on Millin and Gordimer. In *White Writing*, Coetzee observes how Millin confronted the issue shared by colonial writers of her generation: 'the problem of deciding which elements of the European novel were relevant to the colonial situation' (1988b: 161). The same concern emerges in Coetzee's discussion of Gordimer. In a 1997 essay, Coetzee focuses on how Gordimer distanced herself from Turgenev as a model for reading South African politics, while in a 2003 essay compiled in the 2008 volume *Inner Workings*, discussing Gordimer's late production, Coetzee observes:

> At the heart of the novel of realism is the theme of disillusionment. At the end of *Don Quixote*, Alonso Quixana [*sic*] … comes home sadly aware not only that he is no hero but that in the world as it has become there can be no more heroes. As stripper-away of convenient illusions and unmasker of colonial bad faith, Gordimer is an heir of the tradition of realism that Cervantes inaugurates. Within that tradition she was able to work quite satisfactorily until the late 1970s, when she was made to realise that to black South Africans, the people to whose struggle she bore historical witness, the name Zola to say nothing of the name Proust, carried no resonance – that she was too European to matter to the people who matter most to her. (2008b: 255–6)

The reflection on *Don Quixote*'s potential to convey the experience of living in South Africa, expressed at the Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, loses its abstract underpinnings and is located within the country's politics of race. Even though Coetzee regards it as a product of European imagination, *Don Quixote* is key to understanding his reflections on race and gender in South Africa.

In his 1988 article 'The novel today', Coetzee considers *Don Quixote* as a privileged standpoint from which to look at the relationship between literary and historical discourses. Adopting a Derridian term,

Coetzee observes that in South Africa novels are increasingly used to 'supplement' historical interpretations and denounces the idea that the novel has been colonised by the discourse of history (1988a: 3). Coetzee makes claims for the novel's autonomy and independence from history. He praises *Don Quixote* for suggesting that 'the authority of history lies simply in the consensus it commands' (4): while historical discourse aims to forge a view of the past which can be shared by a community, a novel fosters its own paradigms and myths. *Don Quixote*'s chivalric fantasies display the potential of a discourse which transcends the hegemonic discourse of history. In his 1983 interview with Tony Morphet, Coetzee resists deterministic readings of his literary works based on the South African political and historical context: 'I sometimes wonder whether it isn't simply that vast and wholly ideological super-structure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a "South African novelist"' (Coetzee, 1987: 459–60). Reading these words, one can only wonder whether Coetzee still regards the category of South African writer as an oppressive one being imposed on his writing or if he is now positioning himself within it. This ambiguity can be read within the legacy of Cervantes. As Coetzee writes in his 2005 essay on Gabriel García Márquez's *Memories of my Melancholy Whores* (compiled in the 2008 volume *Inner Workings*), *Don Quixote* teaches the reader 'to cultivate in oneself a capacity for dissociation' (2008b: 266). Praising Don Quixote's ability to distance himself from the dominant worldview and imagine alternatives to it, Coetzee's stance is reminiscent of Kundera's (1988b) understanding of the novel as a genre through which to engage with the ambiguity and contradictions of human experience.

Nevertheless, in one of the interviews with David Attwell collected in the 1992 volume *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee's scepticism towards the novel seems to have increased. Coetzee refers again to Kundera's acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize, drawing on his notion of the novel as a suitable way of engaging with Czech history and the political situation of the time due to its reluctance to abide by the univocal truths of totalitarianism. Referring to Kundera's praise of Cervantes' legacy, Coetzee writes: 'I would like to be able to say that proof of their deep social and historical responsibility lies in the penetration with which, in their different ways and to their different degrees, they [Cervantes and Kundera] reflect on the nature and crisis of fiction, of fictionalizing, in their respective ages' (1992: 66–7). Coetzee still believes that the understanding provided by the European novel cannot satisfy the social and historical responsibility required by South Africa. Even though

the potential of the novel depends on its power of reflection with regard to the nature of fiction itself, the case of South Africa poses a different question:

> In Africa the only address one can imagine is a brutally direct one, a sort of pure, unmediated representation; what short-circuits the imagination, what forces one's face into the thing itself, is what I am here calling history. 'The only address one can imagine' – an admission of defeat. *Therefore*, the task of imagining this unimaginable, imagining a form of address that permits the play of *writing* to start taking place. (67–8)

In this fragment, the notions of history and the real converge under the definition of 'unmediated representation'. Borrowing Jonathan Culler's words regarding *Madame Bovary* and Roland Barthes, Coetzee seems to wonder how the novel can confront the South African *effet de réel*, 'the facticity of a world that is just there, resistant to signification' (Culler, 2007: 694). It is difficult to establish whether Coetzee's words reiterate a colonial reading of South Africa or rather refer to the violence of Apartheid. In any case, the brutality he perceives as defining his country comes to embody the primordial character of experience, recalcitrant to the meaning human representations try to project onto it.

Coetzee's engagement with *Don Quixote* is complex. It encompasses the apparent irreconcilability of his understanding of the novel as a European genre and his reading of the South African historical and political context. In the following pages, I contend that Lurie's masculinity becomes the epicentre of these conflicting discourses. Drawing on Lurie's Quixotic delusions of being a Romantic seducer, I propose that in *Disgrace* Coetzee specifically adopts a Cervantine model to interrogate the potential (and limitations) of the novel in addressing South Africa as well as European colonial and misogynist legacies.

Don Quixote in South Africa

When Soraya suddenly retires, Lurie faces the 'problem of sex' again. His attention focuses on Melanie Isaacs, a student on his course. Lurie emerges as a particularly Quixotic figure in his sexual life. Whereas Don Quixote models himself on Amadís de Gaula and interprets the world and his love for Dulcinea according to chivalric romance, Lurie's promiscuous lifestyle finds a literary correspondence in Lord Byron, the Romantic poet who has been at the centre of his academic interest.[5]

Ignoring the student–teacher power dynamics, Lurie invites Melanie for dinner at his place. He quotes from Shakespeare's 'Sonnet I' to seduce her. The quotation alienates her from him: 'The pentameter, whose cadence once served so well to oil the serpent's words, now only estranges. He has become a teacher again, man of the book, guardian of the culture-hoard' (Coetzee, 2000: 16). Like Quixote with chivalric romances, Lurie appears to be the holder of a literary tradition which does not match the world in which he lives. At the same time, in reciting these seductive sentences, he feels he can give them life – 'Smooth words, as old as seduction itself. Yet at this moment he believes in them. She does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself' (16). Beneath his emphasis on Melanie's beauty lies a misogynistic entitlement which leads Lurie to deny her agency. Although Melanie avoids his insistent flirting and leaves, Lurie is determined. Impersonating a distorted idea of Romantic seduction in the contemporary era, Lurie conceives of Melanie as prey. Taking advantage of his access to her personal details, he phones to arrange lunch with her. When she is absent from his class the following day, he goes to her place, where he where he forces himself on her even though he is aware that she is unwilling: 'Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck' (25). When he is invited by Melanie's father for dinner at their house without Melanie, he remembers the moments before the rape. Lurie acknowledges to himself that the alcohol he served her 'was intended to – the word comes up reluctantly – *lubricate* her' (168). He remembers 'Her trim little body; her sexy clothes; her eyes gleaming with excitement. Stepping out in the forest where the wild wolf prowls' (168). Despite underlining the predatory nature of his behaviour, he still refuses to see how his masculinist ideal of seduction might be read as rape. Although the narration of events offered through Lurie's focalisation suggests that there is no physical violence involved and Melanie does not actively resist Lurie, her lack of consent is evident: 'the act [Lurie] commits is rape', as Lucy Valerie Graham observes (2003: 438).[6]

Disgrace not only exposes the influence of literature on Lurie, but also creates a dialogue with the literary traditions to which he refers. Lurie's lectures emerge as a standpoint from which to investigate how the dynamics of the idealisation he examines in Romantic poetry affect his own view of (heterosexual) desire and his tendency to objectify women. During a lecture dedicated to William Wordsworth, Lurie reads a fragment from *The Prelude* to his students:

we also first beheld

Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved

To have a soulless image on the eye

That had usurped upon a living thought

That never more could be. (21)

These verses describe the incapacity of the human eye to capture the image of the unveiled summit of Mont Blanc. In his comments, Lurie sets the poem in a Platonic frame and focuses on the expression 'usurp upon' and the distortion of 'The great archetypes of the mind, pure ideas' provoked by the limits of human senses (22). Faced with his students' silence and in order to clarify the meaning of the poem, Lurie compares the conflict between real and ideal expressed by Wordsworth to the experience of being in love: 'do you truly wish to see the beloved in the cold clarity of the visual apparatus? It may be in your better interest to throw a veil over the gaze, so as to keep her alive in her archetypal, goddesslike form' (22). Attraction is conceived within an unchallenged heterosexual frame, in which the woman is the idealised beloved produced by a male lover (Giles, 2019). *The Prelude* is used to express a Platonic variation of the conflict between reality and imagination that is characteristic of *Don Quixote*. Lurie's question echoes Coetzee's words about *Don Quixote*, beginning as a parody of chivalric romances but turning into 'an exploration of the mysterious power of the ideal to resist disillusioning confrontation with the real' (Coetzee, 2008b: 265). The tension between ideal and real that runs on the tracks of this Platonic interpretation of desire is crucial in Coetzee's reading of Cervantes that is included in his essay on García Márquez's *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. Commenting on García Márquez's novel, Coetzee sees an analogy between the aged protagonist's 'insistence that his beloved adhere to the form in which he has idealised her' and Don Quixote's idealisation of Dulcinea (Coetzee, 2008b: 90).[7] In *Disgrace*, Lurie idealises Melanie as well, but this leads him to conceive of her as impotent and defenceless: the young woman is not the beloved to be praised, but the perfect prey for Lurie's womanising ambitions. Despite resulting in an act of violence on his object of desire, Lurie's infatuation with Melanie conforms to the fundamental dynamic of Don Quixote's desire: the idealisation of the beloved.

After *The Prelude*, Lurie reads verses from Byron's poem 'Lara' to his students, comparing Count Lara and Lucifer. The evocation of Lucifer's fall from grace in 'Lara' prefigures Lurie's disgrace – as the narrator informs us, 'There is no way in which he can evade the poem' (32). Soon

a university committee is formed to evaluate his behaviour towards Melanie. Lurie sees the committee's investigation as a trial against the 'rights of desire' (89). The trial is symbolic of the tension between South African history and the evocation of *Don Quixote*. Indeed, Elizabeth Anker (2008), Rosemary Jolly (2010, 2011) and Rebecca Saunders (2005), among others, have linked the disciplinary hearing to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SATRC). Lurie is asked for an act of penitence by the men sitting on the committee in the same way the sexual perpetrators investigated by the SATRC were. However, Lurie declines to resolve the issue diplomatically, such as by acknowledging his fault publicly, and refuses counselling. More relevant still, he accepts Melanie's statement without reading it. This choice is emblematic of the moral ambiguity traversing the novel: if, by refusing to acknowledge Melanie's account of the events, he seems to silence her again, his refusal to show remorse might be interpreted as a display of honesty and integrity (Jolly, 2011: 99). Lurie's inflexibility is 'a quixotic trait' of his personality, as López suggests (2013: 93). The comparison between Lurie's behaviour and Quixote's irrational stubbornness is made evident by one of the members of the committee in the novel, who says, 'This is all very quixotic, Professor Lurie, but can you afford it?' (Coetzee, 2000: 49). Similarly, his daughter Lucy warns him that 'It isn't heroic to be unbending' (66). Like the Spanish knight, apparently unaware of the risks he is running, Lurie does not change his attitude, forcing other characters to take care of him. 'David, I can't go on protecting you from yourself' (58), the chair of the committee says to him. As he explains afterwards to his daughter, Lurie refuses to undergo any form of re-education because he feels this would amount to a 'Reformation of the character' (66). These words may refer not only to his personality, but also to the Romantic character Lurie is interpreting. In this regard, he enacts the definition of an erring spirit that he gives his students when discussing Lucifer as 'a being who chooses his own path, who lives dangerously, even creating danger for himself' (32). After the committee's investigation, Lurie leaves Cape Town to stay with his daughter Lucy, who lives in a farm near Salem in the Eastern Cape, and there he learns he has lost his job.

In Salem, Lurie and his daughter are assaulted, and she is gang raped. Lurie believes that the person behind this aggression towards them is Petrus, Lucy's neighbour, who wants to take over her property. Lucy does not report the crime, despite Lurie's attempt to persuade her. She willingly becomes one of Petrus's wives in a sexless marriage for protection, as she believes she is defenceless. Silence emerges as ethically ambiguous. Jolly reads Lucy's refusal to take her case to court in relation

to women who refused to testify sexual abuse at the SATRC as well as to the desire of Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist of Coetzee's eponymous 2003 novel, to preserve the secret of the violence she underwent: 'To the extent that the representation of the rape – be it of Elizabeth Costello or Lucy – would raise the spectre or the reality of re-victimizing both of them as shamed … silence would seem valuable in their cases' (Jolly, 2011: 108). Within the masculinist economy of gender-based violence evoked by *Disgrace*, acknowledging the 'unrepresentability of Lucy's rape' is for Carine Mardorossian a way to resist the process of the normalisation of rape (2011: 78). I read the unrepresentability of the rape of Lucy in relation to Coetzee's reflection of the European novel in South Africa.

The rape of his daughter is described as Lurie's 'disgrace' (Coetzee, 2000: 109) and seemingly forces him to face what Coetzee describes as the 'crudity' of South Africa. The novel hints at the fact that Petrus and Lucy's aggressors are Black without expressing it explicitly. In her study dedicated to the rhetoric of race-evasiveness in *Disgrace*, Susan Arndt (2009) shows how the text examines the symbolic order of race and the crisis of Whiteness in post-Apartheid South Africa, while avoiding explicit markings of race. Similarly, Mardorossian argues that the novel 'does not reproduce so much as expose the workings of racist ideologies and their inextricable link to gender' (2011: 73). *Disgrace* constantly evokes and, at the same time, eludes the history and politics of race that Coetzee felt were imposed on his work. Racialisation is a crucial component of the Otherness Lurie projects on women, as emphasised by Gillian Dooley, who observes that 'Soraya is certainly colored … and a Muslim' (2010: 129), and John Douthwaite, who contends that 'Melanie … is female, young, a student of his, and coloured' (2001: 136). Nevertheless, informing a subtext which might be more evident to a South African reader, in *Disgrace* racial tension is embedded within geographical and class dynamics conveyed by linguistic conflict. When Lucy is raped, the narrator signals that '[Lurie] speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa' (Coetzee, 2000: 95). In Africa, the European languages Lurie speaks are an expression of the intimate connection that the cultural elite of the country has kept with Europe. The climax of this colonial opposition is expressed in Lurie's desire to hear Petrus's story: 'But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa … Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus's story would come out arthritic, bygone' (117). For Lurie, English can only fail in attempting to come to terms with a man

like Petrus. Rather than illuminating their different ethnic and social backgrounds, this linguistic distance exposes the limits set by the White cultural elite.

This stress on language informs Lurie's Quixotic dimension and his alienation from 'the truth in South Africa' (117) and, simultaneously, evokes Coetzee's stance that acts of imagination cannot convey experience in South Africa, as expressed in his acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize and in his conversation with Attwell in *Doubling the Point*. Looking at *Don Quixote*'s influence on Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, Patrick Hayes refers to the way in which Cervantes invites the reader to recognise a '"collision of genres" between the Quixotic idealism of the old romance form, and the cruder, more prosaic realism of the new picaresque, which … defeats him [Don Quixote] every time' (2010: 135). According to Hayes, the collision between the romance and the picaresque staged in *Don Quixote* resonates with the friction in Coetzee's 1990 novel *Age of Iron* between the epistolary novel, evoked by protagonist Elizabeth in her letters, and a 'realist' narration more suitable for describing the events known as 'history'. Although there is no similar interplay of genres in *Disgrace*, López identifies Cervantes' influence on this novel. Quoting from Andrew Gibson's *Reading Narrative Discourse*, López shifts the focus from a metaliterary conflict between genres to the 'contrast … between the logic of the dominant narrative and the logic of the protagonist' (Gibson, 1990: 28). The opposition Gibson identifies lies in the discrepancy between the narrator's and Don Quixote's points of view. Equally, in *Disgrace* this 'contrast between two distinct modes of thought and perception' is displayed through the opposition between Lurie's European literary attitude and the dominant worldview of the South African countryside (28). This antagonism emerges in the arguments between the protagonist and his daughter. When Lurie learns that Lucy's neighbours are going to slaughter animals at home for a Saturday party, he considers the animals' destiny in relation to Descartes' philosophy and complains about it to his daughter, who answers 'Wake up, David. This is the country. This is Africa' (Coetzee, 2000: 124). After Lucy has been assaulted, Lurie tries to convince her to give the farm over to Petrus and to 'return to civilization' (151). Finally, when Lurie leaves Salem after an argument with Lucy, he thinks 'No country, this, for old men' (190), alluding to the first line of W. B. Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium'. Concerned with the struggles of ageing, in this poem Yeats imagines a spiritual journey to the holy city of Byzantium, where the sages would lead the poetic voice outside the bodily dimension of human existence. Quoting this poem in relation to Salem,

Lurie presents the South African countryside as a land impervious to wisdom. However, rather than reiterating such a view, the narration brings to light the inadequacy of Lurie's interpretative framework.

It is symptomatic that Lurie's distance from rural South Africa is expressed through a literary reference: 'The truth is, he has never had much of an eye for rural life, despite all his reading in Wordsworth' (218). Like Don Quixote, who sees giants in windmills, Lurie pathologically reads his experience and the outside world according to literary frames, even in moments where he senses the inadequacy of that approach. Lurie's tendency to interpret human behaviour in the light of religious concepts turned literary, such as punishment, salvation and expiation, is denounced by Lucy:

> 'Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?'
>
> 'No. You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can't help you.' (112)

The word 'misreading' is revealing. Lucy suggests that her father merely uses 'abstractions', pure ideas which are unable to engage with her concrete situation. The relationship between Lucy and Lurie is evocative of the interplay between the 'realist' Sancho Panza and the 'idealist' Don Quixote. The underlying Quixotic pattern of *Disgrace* confirms the power of Cervantes' work as a model through which to articulate the interaction between different narrative ontologies. As Harry Levin argues, *Don Quixote* broadened 'the province of prose fiction by bringing both realms together, not in a synthesis perhaps, but in the most durable antithesis that literature has known; by opening a colloquy between the romance and the picaresque' (1957: 87). By emphasising Lurie's Quixotic dimension, *Disgrace* puts on stage the limitations of European literary traditions to represent the South African experience and the challenges faced by Millin and Gordimer, who had to confront the colonial legacies of the literary traditions that informed their writing (Coetzee, 1988b). Embedded within South African history, *Disgrace* displays the impossibility of evading the very paradigm that its narrator is trying to elude: in the same way the ellipsis of Lucy's rape is at the centre of the narration, the unconcealed attempt to evade race makes it an invisible but pervasive presence. The narration evokes the metaliterary conflict

between the discourses of history and the novel Coetzee addresses in his critical writing, seemingly acknowledging its Quixotic defeat: the impossibility of the novel living outside history.

Cultural spectres of gender-based violence

In the previous section, I examined how, paradoxically, in the metaliterary dialogue displayed by *Don Quixote*, Coetzee has found a way to expose the inadequacy of European imagination in representing South Africa despite the scepticism he expressed in his articles towards the Cervantine novel. Drawing on Lurie's Quixotic behaviour and his inability to read his conduct as violent, I turn now to discuss how *Disgrace* explores the ways in which Europe's cultural history is imbued with gender-based violence, challenging its alleged colonial superiority. I propose that *Disgrace* continues the interrogation of men's models of knowledge and objectification of women at the heart of Coetzee's essays on pornography (1996) and Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (2001).

In *Disgrace*, Lucy criticises her father's tendency to look at the episodes of his life as the events in a plot:

> You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. (Coetzee, 2000: 198)

Relegating his daughter to the position of a secondary character is consistent with the egocentrism and misogyny Lurie exhibits with Melanie. Impervious to the ethical implications of his conduct with Melanie, Lurie cannot be reconciled to the idea that what he considers the act of a seducer may be compared to the violence inflicted on his daughter. Lurie finds himself thinking about the rape of Sabine women:

> In an art-book in the library there was a painting called *The Rape of the Sabine Women*: men on horseback in skimpy Roman armour, women in gauze veils flinging their arms in the air and wailing. What had all this attitudinizing to do with what he suspected rape to be: the man lying on top of the woman and pushing himself into her?
>
> He thinks of Byron. Among the legions of countesses and kitchenmaids Byron pushed himself into there were no doubt

> those who called it rape. But none surely had cause to fear that the session would end with her throat being slit. From where he stands, from where Lucy stands, Byron looks very old-fashioned indeed. (160)

Considering the value system held on Byron's sexual conduct within a historical context, Lurie questions Byron's character and, indirectly, his own: he seems unable to understand that non-consensual sex acts are not imposed solely through physical violence. The description above suggests that he is looking at Nicolas Poussin's *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1637–8), one of two paintings Poussin dedicated to the foundational myths of the Roman Empire, portraying the abduction of the Sabine women by the Romans. In her reading of *Disgrace*, Pamela Cooper describes this mythological narrative as the 'primal scene of violation in the Western imagination' (Cooper, 2005: 26). For Susan Brownmiller (1975: 209) and Elisabeth Vikman (2005: 27), this mythological episode is exemplary of the masculinist imagination that frames rape as one of the endeavours of men's imperial conquests and associates it positively with warfare. Discussing the aestheticisation of rape, art historian Diane Wolfthal focuses on the first painting Poussin dedicated to this myth, entitled *The Abduction of the Sabine Women* (1633–4), and observes that even though the painting displays the suffering of women, children and the elderly, 'Poussin's style – his frozen action, controlled emotional expression, and carefully ordered composition – serves to distance the viewer from the narrator of the event' (1999: 9). These elements are present in both of Poussin's depictions of the myth, which mainly differ in the gesturing of the Sabine woman at the centre of the painting, who, in the 1633–4 painting, is not resisting the Roman but rather walking with him – a reminder that the Sabine women accepted the abductors as their husbands. Poussin's paintings were inspired by the Roman concept of *raptus*, which is better translated as 'abduction' rather than 'rape': 'Although the sexual aspect is implied, intercourse is not explicitly depicted. Roman law did not view the crime from the woman's point of view. Rather *raptus* was a crime against the woman's husband or guardian' (Wolfthal, 1999: 9). The interpretation of this violent act as an offence against men within a patriarchal system, rather than a crime against women, is consistent with Lurie's sense that the violence his daughter underwent was his disgrace.

The allusion to this myth hints at the violence men impose on women as a point of convergence in the colonial opposition between European civilisation and the unmediated 'crudity' of South Africa evoked by Coetzee in his critical writing. *Disgrace* shows the reification of

women fostered through both cultural artefacts and violence. Examining the continuity between epistemic and physical violence against women, it draws on a binary understanding of gender and questions to what extent women are 'Other' to men. When Bev tells Lurie that he cannot understand what his daughter has undergone, Lurie feels 'outraged at being treated like an outsider' and asks himself, 'do they think that, where rape is concerned, no man can be where the woman is?' (Coetzee, 2000: 140–1). I believe that here Lurie is not arguing that men can also be victims of rape, but rather that men, more specifically well-read men like him, can empathise with women who have been sexually assaulted. Although he claims he can understand her trauma, Lurie feels so alien from his daughter that he thinks it would be easier for him to understand her if she were like her rapist: 'He loves his daughter, but there are times when he wishes she were a simpler being: simpler, neater. The man who raped her, the leader of the gang, was like that. Like a blade cutting the wind' (170–1). As for his daughter, Lurie oversimplifies her perpetrator, but the ease with which he believes he can read her perpetrator is in stark contrast to his inability to understand his own daughter. Within this binary understanding of gender, shared gender identity seems to be the precondition for intelligibility. Returning to Bev's comment, Lurie thinks 'he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself' (160). It is unclear whether the sense of proximity to Lucy's rapists that Lurie feels can be seen as stemming from his growing awareness that his conduct with Melanie was criminal, or rather from an essentialist view conceiving of rape as a basic expression of manhood. In any case, the colonial illusion which framed violence as an exclusive domain of the South African countryside that is unknown to European highbrow culture begins to erode.

It is significant that the name of Lucy's youngest rapist is Pollux. Conceived during the rape (or seduction, according to the different versions) that Zeus, in the form of a swan, carried out on Lena, Pollux (or Polydeuces) is one of the Argonauts who participated in abducting the daughters of Leucippus, according to Greek mythology. The effects of myth and those of intertextuality are intertwining: myth both encloses experience and reverberates within it, just as texts enclose others and reverberate within them. In *Disgrace*, sexual violence is not only a cultural legacy inscribed into myth but also a practice to be taught and learned. When Lurie asks about Pollux – 'and the third one, the boy?' – Lucy replies that 'He was there to learn' (159). Drawing on the legacy of mythical and actual violence men perpetrate against women, *Disgrace* voices Lucy's sense that men conceive of sex only as a form of violence:

> Hatred … When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder? (158)

Reminiscent of Andrea Dworkin's (1987) view of heterosexual relationships within patriarchal societies, Lucy regards all the sexual acts that men perform upon – or better said 'perpetrate' against – women as inherently violent. The connection between *Disgrace* and the radical feminism of the seventies has been addressed by Lianne Barnard (2013). Coetzee explicitly addresses feminist thinking in his essay dedicated to Catharine MacKinnon's criticism of pornography included in *Giving Offense* (1996). Focusing on MacKinnon's *Feminism Unmodified*, Coetzee examines her understanding of sexuality as 'the dynamic of control by which male dominance … eroticizes and thus defines man and woman, gender identity and sexual pleasure' (MacKinnon, 1987: 137). Coetzee regards MacKinnon's understanding of (hetero)sexuality and gender identity as deterministic and reductive. His criticism of MacKinnon partly aligns with Judith Butler's (1994); however, Coetzee focuses in particular on the 'striking … absence of insight into desire as experienced by men' (1996: 73). MacKinnon reads men's heterosexual desire exclusively as an expression of intelligible dynamics of power, while Coetzee emphasises the unknowability of human desire and points at literature as a field through which to explore men's models of knowledge and objectivation ('the twists and turns of erotic abasement in the novels of Dostoevsky are far more disturbing than anything likely to be encountered in commercial pornography') (1996: 73–4). Pervaded by Coetzee's sense that human desire is unknowable, Lurie's detachment from his sexuality invites the reader to interrogate the gendered inflections of such unintelligibility and its violent outcomes. Continuing this investigation on the tracks of literary representation suggested by Coetzee, I move now to his essay on the representation of rape in Richardson's *Clarissa* to address how the objectification of women emerges as an epistemological practice rooted in Western literature.

Examining Richardson's text, Coetzee argues that Clarissa's identity is shaped around 'a Christian understanding of virginity' (2001: 29). Her being a virgin would place her within a higher state (the 'virginal

state') than if she were married and induces men to treat her 'as an angel … a creature marked as of a higher order by its asexuality' (26). Interestingly, in this essay, Coetzee refers to the same verse that Lurie recites to Melanie from 'Sonnet I', and points out that 'Shakespeare took it over from Sidney's *Arcadia*, where it is addressed to a girl who has sworn to lead a virgin's life' (28). Coetzee underlines how Clarissa's conception of herself depends on her virginity in a 'hypertrofic reduction of human identity to sexual definition' (Miller, 1980: 84). In *Disgrace*, Lurie practises a similar reduction when he sees his daughter exclusively in the light of her homosexuality: 'Raping a lesbian is worse than raping a virgin: more of a blow' (Coetzee, 2000: 105). According to Coetzee, attracted to Clarissa's beauty, Lovelace is enraged at her self-enclosure and impenetrability to the point that he violates her. But his anger is not extinguished in his violent crime; indeed, his urge to impose the materiality of her own body on Clarissa leads him to imagine fathering children and imposing them on her as well, so as to further inflict the physicality of gestation and motherhood on her (Coetzee, 2001: 26). Similarly, in *Disgrace* the materiality of the female body informs a sphere that men are precluded from experiencing – 'Menstruation, childbirth, violation and its aftermath: blood-matters; a woman's burden, women's preserve' (Coetzee, 2000: 104) – and Lucy's body emerges as a space to be engraved – 'I think I am in their territory. They have marked me' (158).

The interpretation of the female body conveyed by *Disgrace* and Coetzee's essay on *Clarissa* seems limited to a specific context of gender-based violence; however, I propose that ontological violence pervades other literary models to which Lurie refers, in particular *Don Quixote*. In his reading of Cervantes' text, André Brink suggests that Dulcinea del Toboso should be considered 'as a near-empty signifier … to be filled in the course of the narration' (1998: 41). Don Quixote's idealisation of Dulcinea is analogous to Clarissa's elevation to angelic status, which is also enacted in Lovelace's violent imposition of materiality. In their antithetical perspectives, Don Quixote and Lovelace both conceive the female body as an empty signifier. The imposition of physicality on the beloved's body and the denial of the beloved's bodily existence are both attempts to shape the feminine and constrain it to a masculinist understanding. In his essay dedicated to *Clarissa*, Coetzee sees a crucial aspect of Western culture in this fantasy of dominance embodied by Lovelace:

> It is because of the conjunction of Lovelace's desire to know with the fantasy of Clarissa as the closed female body that the rape of Clarissa has become such a locus classicus in contemporary critical

> thought, in its project of uncovering the genealogy of the Western will to know. 'She is absolutely impenetrable, least of all by rape,' writes Terry Eagleton. The 'reality of the woman's body,' evinced by Clarissa even after the rape, is that it 'resists all representation and remains stubbornly recalcitrant to [the man's] fictions'. (2001: 32–3)

At the beginning of the chapter, I focused on how Coetzee questioned the possibility of literature representing South Africa, drawing on the Quixotic opposition between reality and imagination. In the above fragment, this Quixotic opposition is transfigured into the tension between the female body and its representation by men in fiction and philosophy. Presenting critical thought in Western societies as the domain of men and the female body as its object of knowledge, the quotation places this urge for dominance at the heart of the literary performances of masculinity. Expressing the ambition of an entire civilisation, Lovelace's desire to know is challenged by the reality of Clarissa's body as a signifier resistant to the meaning he is trying to engrave on her. Imposing representation on the female body makes it knowable only in the sense that it is violently maintained within the boundaries of men's comprehension, but nothing is revealed other than that masculinist urge for dominance.

Encompassing Coetzee's emphasis on the potential of literature to interrogate men's desire expressed in his essay on pornography and the critical feminist stance of his reading of *Clarissa*, *Disgrace* invites the reader to develop their ethical response to its depiction of gender-based violence. As Gayatri Spivak states, the confinement of the focalisation to Lurie's perspective and the resolute denial of Lucy's provoke the reader to counter-focalise in order to hear Lucy's absent voice: 'the second half of *Disgrace* makes the subaltern speak, but does not presume to give "voice," either to Petrus or Lucy. This is not the novel's failure, but rather a politically fastidious awareness of the limits of its power' (2002: 24). Similarly, Giles underlines how Coetzee 'draw[s] the reader's attention to male sexual violence in his oeuvre while refraining from exploitative representations of this violence' (2019: 9). Drawing on these insights into Lurie's focalisation and violence, in the following sections I will examine his self-interrogation of the nature of his violent act and his relationship with women. I will go on to examine how Lurie thinks of his own sexuality in literary terms and how his self-reflection is informed by his reading of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and its inquiry into human emotions.

Mediation and incestuous desire: the limits of self-reflexivity

I referred before to Lurie's denial of Lucy's agency. However, Lurie interrogates his own agency as he considers that 'perhaps he does not own himself either' (Coetzee, 2000: 18). When questioned by the committee about Melanie, Lurie replies:

> Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which, not being a poet, I will not try to describe. Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same.
>
> …
>
> I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcé at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros. (52)

Lurie describes in literary terms how the verbal exchange he had with Melanie was the origin of his desire, but words fail him when he has to recount what happened between them, since he is not a poet, he explains. Through his readings of Romantic poets, Lurie has created an idealised image of himself as a seducer, moved by the spirit of Eros. Lurie's estrangement from his desire is such that he fluctuates from sensing that it is foreign to his body to believing that he is driven by a superior entity (Peterson, 2013). Lurie is evocative of 'Coetzee's young male characters [who] tend not to be ruled by sexual desire, even though they might wish to be' (Dooley, 2010: 139). Even though his longing is not as intense as he wishes, or perhaps precisely because of that, Lurie anxiously looks to confer a transcendental dimension on desire. On reflection, Lurie realises that his answers were vain and empty: '*I was a servant of Eros:* that is what he wants to say, but does he have the effrontery? *It was a god who acted through me.* What vanity! Yet not a lie, not entirely' (Coetzee, 2000: 89). I contend that Lurie's conflicting conceptualisations of desire express his detachment from his experience, which is intertextually informed by his readings. In particular, I argue that Lurie's engagement with *Madame Bovary* offers an insight into the dynamics of eroticism and reading in *Disgrace*.

The dialogue between Lurie and the members of the commission is reminiscent of the comment made about Emma and Léon in *Madame Bovary*: 'They were both imagining an ideal self, and refashioning the past to fit it. Besides, speech … invariably enlarges and extends the emotions' (Flaubert, 2004: 208). Like them, Lurie reshapes his past according to an ideal image of himself and, recalling his encounter with Melanie, he

exaggerates the intensity of the emotions he experienced. *Madame Bovary* and *Disgrace* show the difficulty of verbally articulating sensations and emotions. Leo Bersani observes that 'language itself, for Flaubert, may separate us from both nature (or the external world) *and* the self' (1970: 175). In the same way, *Disgrace* engages with emotional alienation in language and in particular through a bombastic style derived from the Western poetic tradition. Both *Madame Bovary* and *Disgrace* address the irony (as well as the humanity) underlying the paradox of the Romantic rhetoric, presenting itself as the privileged language of love, but expressing love in the necessary artifice and conventionality of linguistic form. Lurie makes explicit references to Flaubert's novel. After having sex with Bev, a married woman, Lurie imagines her acting like Emma after her adulteries:

> He pushes the blanket aside and gets up, making no effort to hide himself. Let her gaze her fill on her Romeo, he thinks, on his bowed shoulders and skinny shanks.
>
> It is indeed late. On the horizon lies a last crimson glow; the moon looms overhead; smoke hangs in the air; across a strip of waste land, from the first rows of shacks, comes a hubbub of voices. At the door Bev presses herself against him a last time, rests her head on his chest. He lets her do it, as he has let her do everything she has felt a need to do. His thoughts go to Emma Bovary strutting before the mirror after her first big afternoon. *I have a lover! I have a lover!* sings Emma to herself. Well, let poor Bev Shaw go home and do some singing too. And let him stop calling her poor Bev Shaw. If she is poor, he is bankrupt. (Coetzee, 2001: 150)

Lurie reads Bev's behaviour according to literary frames and imagines her acting as a character. Led by his narcissism, he thinks of himself as her Romeo and acts like the protagonist in (what he believes to be) Bev's fantasies. The relation to *Madame Bovary* is dual. By using expressions such as 'horizon lies', 'crimson glow' and 'the moon looms', Coetzee seems to mimic Flaubert's writing and exploration of the influence of romances on Emma's imagination. Yet the Romantic landscapes and exotic scenes Emma fantasises about are replaced by 'a stripe of waste land', marking the distance of *Disgrace* from the European novel, and more specifically the Cervantine model, as well as the proximity.

Coetzee identifies Emma's Cervantine lineage in both his fiction and nonfiction writing. In *Slow Man*, the character of Elizabeth Costello stresses the shared passion of Don Quixote and Emma: '*We only live once*,

says Alonso, says Emma, *so let's give it a whirl!*' (2005: 228). In his essay on *Madame Bovary*, Coetzee describes Emma as 'a distant granddaughter of Alonso Quijano, the hero of Cervantes' epic of provincial life' (2017: 107). Drawing on Baudelaire's reading of *Madame Bovary* (2005), Coetzee describes her as '"bizarre and androgynous", a being of female form driven by an essentially masculine mode of desiring, imperious, dominating, and intent on physical satisfaction' (2017: 107). Read as the embodiment of an essentialist gendered mode of desiring, Emma emerges as a model for Lurie. *Disgrace* develops the comparison between Lurie and Emma beyond their masculine yearning. The intertextual dialogue with *Madame Bovary* informs Lurie's experience of pleasure and the way it is written. As Bersani argues, in *Madame Bovary* the detachment of the narrator allows for ecstatic and sensual descriptions that symbolise her pleasure 'to fill in Emma's mental blankness with a rhetoric which authenticates rather than deflates her illusions about life's possibilities' (1970: 177–8). Poetic effects express the intensity of Emma's flux of sensations and articulate the feverishness she experiences. In *Disgrace*, Lurie is never left to the stream of sensual and luxurious images and lyricism does not corroborate his sensations. The descriptions of the moments when he experiences intense physical sensation are rather detached and focus on the mechanics of sex. For example, when Melanie visits Lurie and they have sex, 'she hooks a leg behind his buttocks to draw him in closer: as the tendon of her inner thigh tightens against him, he feels a surge of joy and desire' (Coetzee, 2000: 29). Borrowing Bersani's expression, in *Disgrace* the intensity of Lurie's sensations is not fully 'authenticated':

> He thinks of Emma Bovary, coming home sated, glazen-eyed, from an afternoon of reckless fucking. *So this is bliss!*, says Emma, marvelling at herself in the mirror. *So this is the bliss the poets speak of!* Well, if poor ghostly Emma were ever to find her way to Cape Town, he would bring her along one Thursday afternoon to show her what bliss can be: a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss. (5–6)

The interaction between his desire and the quotations from the texts he compulsively returns to that have shaped and mediate his desire reveals the modest pleasure he derives from his sex life. Lurie displays a more explicitly reflexive attitude than Emma: it is within the limits of his self-reflection that I look for an insight into his desire. With its own focus on desire and the parallels he draws between Don Quixote and Emma Bovary, René Girard's notion of mediated desire is a suitable perspective with which to examine Lurie's sexual experience.

In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard (1965) studies the relation of the subject and object of desire as represented in literature. Regarding *Don Quixote* as an archetypal novel, he argues that the ideal existence of knight-errant that Don Quixote pursues is not the expression of a spontaneous desire. Don Quixote has surrendered the choice of object of desire to his model of choice: Amadís de Gaula. Taking into account the works of Stendhal, Proust and Dostoevsky as well as Flaubert, Girard argues that the subject is incapable of choosing the object of his own desire and borrows it from a third subject, a mediator. Girard proposes a triangular model of intersubjectivity to explain the dynamics of desire and its representation in literature. In an interview included in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee states that he read *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 'with a sense that something important was being said … about the effect of fiction on the lives of the readers' (1992: 104). This reflection is developed in his essay entitled 'Triangular structures of desire in advertising', where he writes of Don Quixote and Emma: 'Not only [do they] imitate the outward of behaviour of models they find in books, but they freely allow their desires to be defined for them by these models' (130). Though the parallel between Emma and Lurie suggests that the mediation of desire is a universal condition, its effects are gendered and shed light on Lurie's actions as a seducer and a father. Looking at *Disgrace* in light of Girard's starting notion, López (2013, 2019) suggests that Lurie is representative of Girard's mediated desire. Particularly, Lurie's attitude as a womaniser is in part inspired by Byron. The novel emphasises Lurie's obsession with Byron as he is working on the English poet, 'reading all he can find on the wider Byron circle' (Coetzee, 2000: 11). Lurie is particularly interested in Byron's *Letters* from 1820 about 'the tragedy of the fleeting nature of passion', echoing Lurie's own 'awareness of the waning possibilities of sexual passion' – as Margot Beard observes, 'a deeply Byronic concern' (2007: 63). Teasing her father, Lucy calls him by the expression used by Lady Caroline Lamb to describe Byron: 'Mad, bad, and dangerous to know' (Coetzee, 2000: 77).[8] However, unlike Don Quixote's and Emma's, Lurie's adhesion to a literary model is not wholly blinding. Despite recounting that he was led by the spirit of Eros, Lurie is lucid enough to recognise that the physical impulse he felt while courting Melanie was not so overwhelming as to prevent him resisting it: 'As for the impulse, it was far from ungovernable. I have denied similar impulses many times in the past, I am ashamed to say' (52). Lurie displays contrition for not experiencing uncontrollable sexual urges in the past as per the expectations of the logic of heterosexual desire he has interiorised. So what drove Lurie's behaviour? Lurie offers a literary frame to explain his interest in young

women: 'Half of literature is about it: young women struggling to escape from under the weight of old men' (190). But his fascination with women seems to be more complex than this observation suggests. I propose that the intertextual web of references in *Disgrace* produces a metaliterary representation of Lurie's readership: this representation offers the actual reader the opportunity to question Lurie's lucidity and the efficacy of his self-reflection, which is elicited as well as hindered by literature.

I return to Lurie's class again when he reads the poem he feels he cannot evade: 'Lara' by Byron. The fragment he reads to his students anticipates his own disgrace, focusing on the effects that the imagination has on Count Lara, the protagonist of the poem: 'A thing of dark imaginings, that shaped / By choice the perils he by chance escaped' (32). Just as Lara's dark fantasies have exposed him to danger, Byron's life and works affect Lurie's desire in ways that make him vulnerable. The continuation of the poem foreshadows the crime he commits against Melanie:

He could
At times resign his own for others' good,
But not in pity, not because he ought,
But in some strange perversity of thought,
…
And this same impulse would in tempting time
Mislead his spirit equally to crime. (33)

Commenting on the protagonist of the poem, Lurie points out that 'the source of his impulses is dark to him' (33). As a prefiguration of Lurie's misconduct, 'Lara' seems to invite the reader to ask whether the roots of Lurie's desire are obscure to him. In the text, Lurie's highest moments of excitement are marked by references to his daughter. With regard to Soraya, the narrator informs us that 'Technically he is old enough to be her father' (1). This applies even more to Melanie, to whom he makes love 'on the bed in his daughter's room' (29). Describing fatherhood to Lucy, Lurie tells her that 'being a father is a rather abstract business', using the same adjective he uses to describe his sexuality and his intercourses with Soraya (63). Rather than directed towards his daughter, whose breasts and hips Lurie twice describes as 'ample' (59, 65), sexual tension is raised in Lurie by the memory of her body when she was young: 'Without warning a memory of the girl comes back: of her neat little breasts with their upstanding nipples, of her smooth flat belly. A ripple of

desire passes through him. Evidently whatever it was is not over yet' (65). Even if the identity of this girl is not clear, this fragment is embedded between thoughts about Lucy, while Melanie, who might be a more obvious reference, is not mentioned here. In Coetzee's *Youth*, protagonist John wonders: 'Is that how taboo operates: creating desire by forbidding it?' (2002: 126). As a surrogate for his daughter, Melanie embodies the repression which produces Lurie's incestuous urge:

> She [Lucy] teases him as her mother used to tease him. Her wit, if anything, sharper. He has always been drawn to women of wit. Wit and beauty. With the best will in the world he could not find wit in Melanie. But plenty of beauty.
>
> Again it runs through him: a light shudder of voluptuousness. He is aware of Lucy observing him. He does not appear to be able to conceal it. Interesting. (78)

His desire is structured by the semantic antithesis of the women's names: Lucy derives from the Latin word for 'light', Melanie from the Greek word for 'dark' (Douthwaite, 2001). The connection between them, both victims of men's violence, can also be seen in the bitter irony with which Lurie addresses the man who he believes commissioned the rape of his daughter: 'Fatherly Petrus' (Coetzee, 2000: 162).

Incestuous longing intensifies Lurie's connection with Byron, who was forced to leave England because of his affair with his half-sister Augusta. Lurie is vague about the reasons that obliged the poet to leave and symptomatically omits any reference to incest – 'He went to Italy to escape a scandal, and settled there' (15) – as if he were trying to hide from himself what lies behind his own desire. In giving Lurie's observation on a poem which symbolises his own condition, Coetzee is exposing the limits of his protagonist's self-reflexivity. Lurie is unable, it seems, to see the incestuous pattern underlying his conduct: his reading of 'Lara' fails to create a moment of recognition, but simply prefigures the consequences of his behaviour. *Disgrace* resonates with the unknowability of desire addressed by Coetzee in his essay on pornography. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Coetzee expands on this idea: 'the heart of our desire is unknown to us and, perhaps even further, that it's in the nature of human desire not to know itself fully, to have some kind of kernel of the unknowable in it. That, perhaps, is what animates desire, namely that it is unknowable to itself' (Wachtel, 2001: 45). While in his interviews and essays Coetzee emphasises the limits of the human understanding

of desire, in *Disgrace* he specifically addresses how Lurie experiences the opacity of his own impulses as a literary, educated White man in South Africa. In the next section, I shall discuss how Lurie's quest for an understanding of his own sexuality is expressed through the composition of his opera *Byron in Italy*.

Byron in Italy: parody and dialogism in Lurie's self-reflection

Before losing his job as a professor, Lurie feels a growing dissatisfaction with the rigid forms of academic writing: 'What he wants to write is music: *Byron in Italy,* a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera' (Coetzee, 2000: 4). Lurie needs a freer form than academic writing through which to explore love, and he opts for composing an opera. At its centre are Byron and Teresa Guiccioli, his married lover in Ravenna. Lurie combines words and music, as he believes 'that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul' (4). Lurie's words are reminiscent of the constitutive incompleteness of the subject at the heart of Girard's theory of mediated desire. This poststructuralist notion of the subject is also evocative of the sense of a human ontological lack that Coetzee draws in his critical writing from Girard: 'the subject becomes aware of itself as the locus of a lack, a desire' (Coetzee, 1992: 131). By emphasising the urge to fill human emptiness through singing and speech, Lurie seems to suggest that, besides developing a desire from a mediator, there is another way of temporarily filling this ontological lack, namely by imposing on it a form through an act of creativity. This power Lurie now attributes to creative acts informs his composition of *Byron in Italy*, which emerges as a process through which to explore his experience of gender and sexual desire in terms of an ontological lack, but also to shape an understanding of his own masculinity.

In *Byron in Italy*, Lurie's cultural influences are absorbed in the fabric of his creative process. He considers borrowing words from other texts: '*Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt*: those will be Byron's words, he is sure of it' (Coetzee, 2000: 162). These Latin words from Virgil's *Aeneid*, which David West translates as 'there are tears for suffering and men's hearts are touched by what man has to bear' (Virgil, 2003: 16, v. 462), are uttered by Aeneas when he sees a mural depicting the Trojan war and the death of his countrymen. Later, Lurie imagines Teresa reciting verses in Italian from Giacomo Leopardi's 'Night song of a wandering shepherd of Asia' (Coetzee, 2000: 213). She repeats the words of the shepherd who, overwhelmed by solitude, enquires desperately

about the meaning of his life: 'Whatever is the meaning / Of this great solitude? And what am I?' (Leopardi, 2008: 155). The composition of *Byron in Italy* configures reading as a process of assimilation. Through the incorporation of fragments from these further works, Lurie uses the despair of Aeneas and the shepherd to give form to his own sense of lack and estrangement. I read Lurie's work in light of his engagement with Wordsworth, who is the subject of his book entitled *Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past*. In considering *Disgrace*, Wordsworth and Byron are set in opposition as 'two antithetical Romantic poets' (Beard, 2007: 70). Seemingly, Lurie's intellectual interest in Wordsworth contrasts with his behaviour, which is modelled on Byron and his seductions. According to Gary Hawkins, Lurie 'cannot survive the parallel with Wordsworth' (2009: 156). Likewise, Kai Easton writes that 'Lurie calls himself a disciple of Wordsworth, but he is ironically more of a counterpart to the legendary Lord Byron', as 'his "state of disgrace" … epitomises what has been termed the "Byronic"' (2007: 123). The engagement with the field of desire represented by Byron's poetry would prevent Lurie from reaching the horizon of self-mastery and harmony which Wordsworth inspires. The metaphor of disgrace that links Lurie's exile to Byron's is opposed to the concept of grace which is quintessential in Wordsworth's thinking (Beard, 2007: 63). Lurie describes himself as a 'disgraced disciple' of Wordsworth (Coetzee, 2000: 46). Although Coetzee plays with the conventional opposition between these poets, I would not dismiss the presence of Wordsworth in *Disgrace* as a mere counterpart to Byron. As the narrator underlines, 'For as long as he [Lurie] can remember, the harmonies of *The Prelude* have echoed within him' (13). I would like to argue that Lurie's response to Wordsworth can be seen as an inflection of the influence that *The Prelude* has on *Byron in Italy*.

Taking into account *Boyhood: Scenes from provincial life*, another of Coetzee's works which refers to Wordsworth, Pieter Vermeulen writes that *The Prelude* is 'a particularly strong instance of a literary work that double-times as the story of the genesis of its own poetical achievement' (2009: 50). Casting Lurie as an artist figure, *Disgrace* stresses its metafictional dimension. With a relationship between a young woman and an older man at its core, *Byron in Italy* is an echo of Lurie's life, inviting the reader to look within his own experience for traces that may explain the formation of his opera. In Salem, experiencing isolation and seclusion, Lurie alludes to the poem 'So, we'll go no more a roving', which Byron wrote inspired by the exhaustion of ageing and prompted by the Carnival celebrations: 'And the heart must pause to breathe, / And Love itself have rest' (Byron, 1976: 534). Evoking this poem, which contemplates a pause from desire,

Lurie feels like giving up on passion altogether: 'The end of roving … Who would have thought it would come to an end so soon and so suddenly: the roving, the loving!' (Coetzee, 2000: 120). This withdrawal from desire reverberates in *Byron in Italy*, which becomes 'a chamber-play about love and death, with a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than passionate older man' (180). Including death as one of its main themes, the opera shows Lurie's increasing anxiety provoked by his ageing body. Soon Lurie realises that the initial project can no longer express his feelings. He starts writing a new version in which Byron is long dead, focusing on Teresa as a widow in her middle age. The death of Byron gives Teresa the central role in the opera. Besides stressing Lurie's concerns with death and vanishing desire – 'Will an older Teresa engage his heart as his heart is now?' (181) – this change suggests a parallel with another event in his life. Indeed, after being told by Bev that he cannot understand Lucy's trauma, Lurie starts feeling an increasingly anxious need to establish empathy with women: 'The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?' (160). Paradoxically, his desire to be closer to Lucy conflates her identity with an essentialist idea of womanhood. Lurie's self-examination evokes once again Flaubert and his statement about his heroine Emma: 'Madame Bovary c'est moi' (1980: 203). In his essay on *Madame Bovary*, Coetzee observes that 'Flaubert must have inhabited her so thoroughly that in some sense he must have become her, become a woman' (2017: 107). However, as I have suggested, *Disgrace* casts doubt on the possibility of a man inhabiting a woman, or, more precisely, on what Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist of Coetzee's eponymous novel, calls sympathetic imagination, the capacity through which 'we can think ourselves into the being of another' (2003: 80). Being sure he can comprehend Lucy, Lurie forgets the warning he has given to his students, according to which 'there is a limit to sympathy' (Coetzee, 2000: 33). He writes a letter to his daughter but cannot establish any real contact with her. This frustrated urge to connect is diverted and channelled into his work, bringing to light not only his estrangement from his daughter but also his struggles in processing his traumatic experience as a witness to her assault.

The composition of *Byron in Italy* is a painful process; Lurie's efforts with the opera dominate the second part of the novel. This can be read as a further analogy with Wordsworth's work. Indeed, as Timothy Clark observes, in *The Prelude* the exposition of writer's block presents 'the text as enacting the space of composition itself' (1997: 92). In *Disgrace*, Lurie loses control of his work. His creative process emerges as an interaction of different elements that cause the plot to

change suddenly. The composition of the opera is centred on Teresa and yet suddenly a new character spontaneously appears that he had not planned:

> Teresa leads; page after page he follows. Then one day there emerges from the dark another voice, one he has not heard before, has not counted on hearing. From the words he knows it belongs to Byron's daughter Allegra; … *Why have you left me?* … she complains in a rhythm of her own that cuts insistently across the voices of the lovers.
>
> To the call of the inconvenient five-year-old there comes no answer. Unlovely, unloved, neglected by her famous father, she has been passed from hand to hand and finally given to the nuns to look after. *So hot, so hot!* she whines from the bed in the convent where she is dying of *la malaria*. *Why have you forgotten me?* (Coetzee, 2000: 186)

The appearance of Byron's neglected daughter, Allegra, exposes Lurie's sense of guilt and his inability to cope with Lucy's assault. Lurie's creative act sheds light on his suffocated emotions. Allegra's crying in *Byron in Italy* resonates with the request for help that Lurie hears from his daughter during a hallucination – 'He has had a vision: Lucy has spoken to him; her words – "Come to me, save me!"' (103). The presence of visionary experience emphasises the associative quality of the creative process. I propose that the selection of the banjo as an instrument for the music of *Byron in Italy* is connected to Lurie's traumatic experience as a witness to the violence his daughter has suffered. After her rape, Lurie suddenly remembers the country song 'Seven old ladies locked in the lavatory'. Recalling the lyrics, he feels mortified for allowing her aggressors to lock him in the lavatory while they abused her. The evocation of this song, which is performed on a banjo, seems to be at the heart of his unconscious decision to use this instrument to engage with 'his disgrace' (109). This musical medium is crucial to the development of his opera:

> … he marvels at what the little banjo is teaching him … It is not the erotic that is calling to him after all, nor the elegiac, but the comic. He is in the opera neither as Teresa nor as Byron nor even as some blending of the two: he is held in the music itself, in the flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings, the voice that strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back, like a fish on a line.

> So this is art, he thinks, and this is how it does its work! How strange! How fascinating! (184–5)

Lurie learns the real tone of *Byron in Italy* from this musical instrument, and that it truly belongs to the comic genre. The passage from the elegiac to the comic marks Lurie's abdication from the narcissistic and misogynistic delusion of himself as a literary seducer. However, this break exacerbates Lurie's detachment: while the Romantic aestheticisation of desire offered Lurie a way to avoid the estrangement he felt towards his sexual impulses and the ethical implication of his conduct, the parodic seems to shield him from the devastating impact of witnessing his daughter's sexual assault.

The parodic dimension of *Disgrace* finds an intertext in Lurie's critical work, *Boito and the Faust Legend: The genesis of Mefistofele*. The allusion to Arrigo Boito (1842–1918), whose *Mefistofele* 'makes fun of the bombast of a grand opera in the middle of a grand opera' (Sutcliffe, 2009: 174), anticipates the (self-)mocking outcome of Lurie's creative work inspired by Byron, which itself mirrors the parodic nature of Byron's own *Don Juan*. Let me refer to Charles Donelan's reading of *Don Juan*. He argues that 'in his cultural inversion of the Spanish myth Byron invests the hero with the feminine attributes of a passive sentimentalist' (2000: 18).[9] In Byron's poem Juan is seduced rather seducing, and the most compelling figures are female characters. Donelan underlines the pervasive irony of the poem, which opens with the invocation of a hero, Don Juan, who turns out to be 'little more than an excuse for the narrator to produce an international gallery of intriguing women' (173). Likewise, *Byron in Italy* sets Byron in the background to give voice to the characters of Teresa and Allegra. Echoing the 'satire of masculinity' that Byron's *Don Juan* brings to life (173), *Byron in Italy* mocks Lurie's understanding of heterosexual love and desire informed by literature. Its irony is expressed in the onomatopoeic representation of the sound of the banjo that intersperses the dialogue between Byron and Teresa:

> *Out of the poets I learned to love*, chants Byron in his cracked monotone, nine syllables on C natural; *but life, I found* (descending chromatically to F), *is another story*. *Plink-plunk-plonk* go the strings of the banjo. *Why, O why do you speak like that?* sings Teresa in a long reproachful arc. *Plunk-plink-plonk* go the strings. (Coetzee, 2000: 185)

The words of Lurie's Byron are taken from Madame de Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie*. Iris Origo tells us that the actual Byron sent the novel to Teresa with some passages marked, including this one (1949: 113). In his parody of the Romantic aesthetic, Lurie's Byron summarises the life of his author: Lurie has shaped his notion of love according to his favourite poet, but then he has had to face contemporary South African society. Framing Lurie as a modern Don Quixote again, *Disgrace* evokes the tensions that characterise Coetzee's reflections on European literature and South Africa. The metafictional representation of Lurie's creative process inscribes *Disgrace* into the legacy of Cervantes' aesthetic even more. The parodic effect created by the contraposition of solemn words and the banjo evokes Cervantes' aesthetic, which was praised by Byron himself in *Don Juan*: 'Cervantes smiled Spain's Chivalry away' (2004: 445). Throughout *Byron in Italy*, *Disgrace* embraces Cervantes' parodic stance in ridiculing Lurie's narcissistic fantasy of himself as a literary seducer, behind which he tries to deny the violence he inflicted on Melanie. However, despite expressing his trauma for the violence his daughter suffered, *Byron in Italy* does not help Lurie acknowledge these emotions.

As the composition of *Byron in Italy* advances, instead of producing an understanding of his and his daughter's pain, Lurie's creative act expresses his own sexual concerns:

> *My love*, sings Teresa, swelling out the fat English monosyllable she learned in the poet's bed. *Plink*, echo the strings. A woman in love, wallowing in love; a cat on a roof, howling; complex proteins swirling in the blood, distending the sexual organs, making the palms sweat and voice thicken as the soul hurls its longings to the skies. That is what Soraya and the others were for: to suck the complex proteins out of his blood like snake-venom, leaving him clear-headed and dry. Teresa in her father's house in Ravenna, to her misfortune, has no one to suck the venom from her. *Come to me, mio Byron*, she cries: *come to me, love me!* And Byron, exiled from life, pale as a ghost, echoes her derisively: *Leave me, leave me, leave me be!* (Coetzee, 2000: 185)[10]

Lurie compares Teresa to a cat in love and emphasises the biological aspect of sexual arousal. As a form of introspection, *Byron in Italy* configures Lurie's past relationships as a search for relief from sexual impulses. Far from expressing any empathy with the other sex, Teresa's singing addresses the instrumental role that these relationships had in

Lurie's life and the sense of alienation he experiences in relation to his own sexual urges. Rather than crystallising Lurie's creative design, *Byron in Italy* unveils the detachment he feels towards desire, which is conceived as a poison to be expelled from the body. The interplay of Teresa's and Byron's voices becomes the irradiating core of the opera: 'That is how it must be from here on: Teresa giving voice to her lover, and he, the man in the ransacked house, giving voice to Teresa' (183). Turning this dynamic into a compositional principle, *Byron in Italy* frames the lovers as the mirror of each other's Otherness: heterosexual desire becomes the locus at which the detachment Lurie experiences and the irreducible Otherness he projects onto women intersect.

The composition of *Byron in Italy* enacts a space which Lurie believes he can inhabit: 'his own ghostly place in *Byron in Italy* would be somewhere between Teresa's and Byron's: between a yearning to prolong the summer of the passionate body and a reluctant recall from the long sleep of oblivion' (184). Lurie does not search for a synthesis of his own opposing impulses, expressed in the voices of Byron and Teresa; on the contrary, his subjectivity emerges as the tension generated between them. Evocative of Coetzee's critical writing, Lurie's opera reveals how 'textualization brings the elusiveness into the being' (1992: 204). I read *Byron in Italy* in light of the influence of *The Prelude* on Lurie as 'an exercise in self-definition' (Clark, 1997: 92). Rather than creating an illusory stable self, *Byron in Italy* offers an insight into the detachment Lurie experiences in his gendered roles as a lover and father, which is conveyed by its unfulfilled dialogic dimension. Allow me to return to the appearance of Allegra's voice, which Lurie cannot explain: 'But from where inside him does it come?', he wonders (Coetzee, 2000: 186). I read Allegra's voice and *Byron in Italy* in view of the notion of writing as a whole expressed by Coetzee:

> Writing is not free expression. There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer's seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those countervoices in himself. (1992: 65)

Coetzee's remarks on writing are reminiscent of Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, 'as a *writing* where one reads the *other*' in Julia Kristeva's words (1980: 66). In *Byron in Italy*, Lurie is forced to listen to Allegra's voice, a reminder of the trauma of witnessing the violence his daughter underwent. However, Lurie is unable to enter into a dialogue with this

countervoice within himself, a dialogue that could have enabled him to establish an empathetic relationship with his daughter and to realise the violence he imposed on Melanie.

In the conclusion of *Disgrace*, Lurie realises his project will never come to fruition: 'the truth is that *Byron in Italy* is going nowhere … The lyric impulse in him may not be dead, but after decades of starvation it can crawl forth from its cave only pinched, stunted, deformed' (Coetzee, 2000: 214). Like the magnetism he once exercised on women, his creativity has decayed. Lurie's voice is disembodied, much like the voice of 'his' Byron. Sexual desire and creativity are both constrained to the materiality of his ageing body. Still far from the conclusion of his opera, he wishes he had composed at least 'a single authentic note of immortal longing' (214). Evocative of Girard's investigation of the human ontological lack, Lurie's ambition reiterates the illusion that the fluid dynamics of desire can be crystallised into a fixed form. *Byron in Italy* reveals the continuity between creative acts and heterosexual desire as a crucial site through which to make his masculinity intelligible.

Notes

1 Hereafter David Lurie referred to by his surname to avoid confusion with David Kepesh, the protagonist of Roth's *The Professor of Desire*, which is analysed in Chapter Two.

2 The expression of the estrangement from sexuality by reference to animality is not new in Coetzee (Peterson, 2013). In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the protagonist argues: 'Sometimes my sex seemed to me another being entirely, a stupid animal living parasitically upon me, swelling and dwindling according to autonomous appetites, anchored to my flesh with claws I could not detach' (1999b: 62–3).

3 Several authors have traced the influence of Cervantes on Coetzee's writing. To my knowledge, Patrick Hayes (2010) was the first to detect this influence. James Aubrey (2011) examines the references to Don Quixote in *Slow Man* in relation to its protagonist Paul Rayment's resistance to operate as a literary hero. In her review of *The Childhood of Jesus*, Urmila Seshagiri describes how David's reading of *Don Quixote* evokes 'the elusive meeting point of perception, reality, and expression, a meeting point that has always been a principal raison d'être of the novel in Western culture' (2013: 650). Examining realism within Western literary tradition, Peter Boxall (2015) discusses the tension between real and ideal in *Don Quixote* and *The Childhood of Jesus*. López (2019) also discusses Coetzee's engagement with Cervantes, focusing on the hurtful consequences of idealising women and (lack of) passion. Jana Giles (2019) examines the dialogue Coetzee's *Disgrace*, *Slow Man* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* establish with *Don Quixote* in view of Cervantes' and Coetzee's engagement with Plato's idealist theory of form.

4 Coetzee's *Stranger Shores* (2001) collects his essays 'Daphne Rook' (208–18), 'Gordimer and Turgenev' (219–31) and 'The autobiography of Doris Lessing' (232–48). *Inner Workings* (Coetzee, 2008b) includes 'Nadine Gordimer' (244–56). *Doubling the Point* collects 'The first sentence of Yvonne Burgess' *The Strike*' (1976) (91–3) and 'Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*' (1989) (382–8). Kannemeyer (2012: 177) provides details of the course on African literature that Coetzee taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo, including Gordimer, Lessing, Schreiner and Smith.

5 Kai Easton (2007) outlines that 'Byron is considered a "Romantic" today, but this designation was only applied to him after his death, as it was not until the late nineteenth century that Romanticism actually became a School' (123).

6 Lurie's sexual violence has been widely discussed. Drawing on the definition of sexual violence in South Africa's criminal law, Patrick Lenta (2010) observes that the definition of sexual violence includes '"abuse of power or authority by A to the extent that B is prohibited from indicating or her unwillingness or resistance." The fact that for Melanie sex is "undesired to the core" and the description of her behaviour … suggests submission to power: this appears to be an act of rape' (15). Whereas Graham and Lenta are categorical, Dooley observes that after their first intercourse, Melanie seeks refuge with Lurie and has sex one more time: 'It is hard to ignore the evidence that Melanie has far more ambivalent feelings towards David than Lucy has to her attackers' (2010: 132). Similarly, Lianne Barnard underlines that '[Melanie] did not report him for rape, but for sexual harassment or inappropriate consensual relationship' (2013: 24). Nonetheless, the reader should keep in mind that Melanie's contradictory feelings do not justify Lurie's misdeeds and that we have only access to his perspective on the events.

7 Giles underlines that 'Plato's idealist theory of forms appears to be the primary argument that Coetzee and Cervantes have in mind' (2019: 90).

8 In her memoirs, Lady Morgan (Owenson, 1863: 200) records the words Caroline Lamb used to describe her first impression of Byron.

9 Moyra Haslett (1997) underlines that while contemporary critics see Byron's Don Juan as naïve, vulnerable to women's seductions and subverting the traditional version of the myth, Byron's work was received by his contemporaries as a continuation of the Don Juan legend.

10 The dialogues between Teresa and the dead Byron in *Byron in Italy* might ironically refer to the séances that Teresa holds trying to recall the spirit of Byron. An account of these séances, along with an analysis of her idealising work dedicated to Byron, is offered by James Soderholm (1996: 103–30).

2
Form/ation

Kundera's *Life Is Elsewhere*

Kundera's bildungsroman

Life Is Elsewhere focuses on the life of the poet Jaromil from conception until death.[1] Kundera regards *Life Is Elsewhere*, which he originally meant to title *The Lyrical Age* (1988b: 31), as a phenomenological description of what he considers to be the lyrical attitude (Biron, 1979). This understanding of the novel is shared by critics who underline how this analysis unfolds within the tradition of the coming of age novel due to its focus on the development of a young man and his ambition to become a poet. Referring to the class of bildungsroman that focuses on the development of an artist, Tomislav Longinović observes that 'Kundera develops his critique of lyricism in the form of a grotesque Künstlerroman' (1993: 145). Kvetoslav Chvatik describes *Life Is Elsewhere* as 'a systematic "anti-bildungsroman"' due to its analysis of the role of narcissism in poetic creation (1995: 98). Similarly, Maria Němcová Banerjee argues that *Life Is Elsewhere* is a variation on bildungsroman, since the story of Jaromil's success as a poet is 'counter-pointed by a dubious quest for sexual manhood' (Banerjee, 1999: 16).

Before addressing the gendered implications of Jaromil's trajectory as a poet, two aspects of Kundera's writing should be discussed. Firstly, Kundera's approach to poetry. Seemingly *Life Is Elsewhere* conveys his negative view of poetry that can be seen in relation to his professed abandonment of lyricism (Steinby, 2013: 6–22). Even though Kundera denies that the novel is inspired by his own biographical experience (Biron, 1979: 17), *Life Is Elsewhere* is reminiscent of his understanding of poetry and the novel not simply as literary genres, but as stances on the world. Kundera regards the novel as a genre capable of engaging with the complexity and the ambiguity of the human experience and its

contradictory truths, while he regards lyricism as the expression of a self-centred tendency to read the world in light of one's own feelings (Kundera, 1988b, 2007, 2010; Wirth, 2016). As I shall discuss in the following pages, in Kundera's view the lyrical urge for an unchallenged interpretation of reality reveals its proximity to ideological truths. Secondly, *Life Is Elsewhere* marks the adoption of one of the most distinctive features of Kundera's novels – the 'authorial narrator': the narrator as a standpoint through which to articulate an inquiry (Ivanova, 2010: 205–9; Steinby, 2013: 48; Vibert, 2004–5). Kundera explains, 'it is me who is telling my novels, not a "narrator", that anonymous ghost from literary theory. It is me with my whims, my moods, my jokes, and (exceptionally) even my memories' (Vibert, 2004–5: 111, my translation). In claiming that the notion of the narrator as distinct from the real author is an abstraction produced by literary theory (Vibert, 2001, 2004–5), Kundera places himself at the centre of the narration and hints at his fallibility, or rather his impulsiveness and unreliability. Regarding *Life Is Elsewhere* Kundera clarifies: 'I don't show you what happens inside Jaromil's head; rather, I show what happens inside my own: I observe my Jaromil for a long while, and I try, step by step, to get to the heart of his attitude, in order to understand it, name it, grasp it' (1988b: 30–1). Although Kundera's understanding of the narrator may not be valid for other authors, his claim for the speculation conveyed by *Life Is Elsewhere* cannot be ignored. The notion of the authorial narrator leads Kundera to view his characters as an 'experimental self' through which to explore existential themes novelistically, the lyrical attitude in the case of Jaromil (31–4). Drawing on Kundera's understanding of the novel as a laboratory for experience (1988b), I contend that his analysis of the lyrical attitude is inextricably intertwined with a reflection on heterosexual masculinity.

Evocative of Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Kundera, 1988b: 160–1), the narration of Jaromil's life precedes his birth. The narrative starting point of *Life Is Elsewhere* is a feeling of alienation from the body. While *Disgrace* enquires into this estrangement exclusively within Lurie's experience, in *Life Is Elsewhere* this feeling is described in its different gendered implications through the lives of Jaromil and his mother, Mama. Mama's first name is never mentioned, which is the case for all the other characters in the novel except for Jaromil, his alter ego Xavier and the maid Magda. For Mama, the alienation from her own body is rooted in her childhood. She has always been 'conscious of her unobtrusiveness' (Kundera, 2000: 7). Mama evades this dissatisfying reality and, as a form of resistance, learns to love the emotional gravity of books. By taking refuge in the hypertrophic emotions narrated in novels,

Mama is reminiscent of Emma Bovary. This parallel grows stronger as Mama feels she cannot experience 'the great shared love she believed she had a full right to' (4). Kundera presents Mama's body as the grammatical subject of her actions, emphasising the hiatus between subject and body. Her body is presented as something lying simultaneously within and beyond her identity, such as in the following fragment focusing on Mama and the engineer, the future father of Jaromil: 'the body … gladly agreed with the engineer's ideas … she wanted to identify herself with the engineer's qualities, because in contact with them her sadly modest body ceased to doubt and, to its own astonishment, began to enjoy itself' (10). Feeling amorphous and devoid of any quality of her own, Mama feels reassured about modelling herself on the engineer's features. As a result, her corporality is no longer a foreign shield for her and she can enjoy her body: 'She handed her body over to the mercy of another's eyes … her body finally lived as a body' (7). Mama temporarily reconciles the hiatus from her body through her lover's gaze.[2] Kundera also investigates this process beyond relationships between lovers. Even though Mama's hopes for happiness within her marriage are to be unfulfilled (like Emma Bovary's), she finds her pregnancy a more enriching experience than romantic love. Mama, who has always felt ashamed of her nakedness and has been afraid of letting her body go entirely even while having sex, finds a new harmony with her body:

> Mama's body … entered a new phase of its history: ceasing to be a body for the eyes of others, it became a body for someone who could not yet see. Its outer surface was no longer so important; the body was touching another body by means of an internal membrane no one had ever seen … the body had finally attained total independence and autonomy. (8)

Through her pregnancy, Mama senses a complete self-sufficiency. She emancipates herself from the dynamics of desire in which she struggled for recognition. After giving birth, Mama experiences sensations associated with the intimacy of a lover in the physical relation with her baby, who fulfils her needs with a tenderness she has never felt before. Thanks to her son's physicality, Mama finally overcomes the repugnance for her own body that made her feel that emptying her bowels was degrading. She reaches what Kundera describes as 'an *Edenic* state', a new awareness in which her body is freed from mortifying superstructures (9). Breastfeeding represents the climax of their relationship: Mama imagines that 'along with her milk, her son was drinking her thoughts, her fantasies,

and her dreams' (9). This description of the bond between mother and son reminds me of Melanie Klein's understanding of epistemophilic impulse, the infant's desire to know by appropriating the contents of their mother's body (1948: 204). *Life Is Elsewhere* intensifies the patriarchal logic which defines motherhood as the most essential experience for a woman in order to stress the influence of the bond between mother and baby on the life of a poet.

Mama fantasises that Jaromil was not conceived with her husband, but had a divine father, the god of music and poetry Apollo. Her imaginary is the foundation of Jaromil's development as a character (Longinović, 1993: 146). Mama's fantasy also prefigures Jaromil's sense of himself in the future as an artist, while the figure of his father disappears. The account of Jaromil's childhood gives prominence to his artistic attitude: Mama shows Jaromil's drawings of human bodies with dog heads to a painter, who becomes interested in the inner world Jaromil's drawings portray, accepting him as one of his students. Jaromil shows the painter his secret sketchbook. After the first few pages of female nudes, inspired by the photographs of statues Jaromil has seen in his grandfather's illustrated books, the painter notices the drawing of a headless woman with a slit at the base of her neck:

> The slit in the paper had been made by Jaromil's pocketknife; there was a girl in his class he liked very much, and he often gazed at her, wishing to see her naked. To fulfil this wish he obtained a photograph of her and cut the head out; he inserted it into the slit.
>
> That is why all the women in the following drawings were also decapitated and bore the same mark of an imaginary axe; some of them were in very strange positions – for example, in a squatting posture depicting urination; at a flaming stake, like Joan of Arc; that execution scene, which I could explain (and perhaps excuse) as a historical reference, inaugurated a long series: sketches of a headless woman impaled on a sharpened pole, a headless woman with a leg cut off, a woman with an amputated arm. (Kundera, 2000: 29–30)

Jaromil's sexual curiosity about the scatological functions of the female body is shaped by scenes of violence. John O'Brien describes Jaromil's sketchbook as 'a subtext that directly critiques the representation of women by men': this foregrounding misrepresentation of women 'exposes rather than affirms the misrepresentations presented' (1995:

90–1). Jaromil's female nudes seem to respond unconsciously to the model of male violence towards women which *Disgrace* also addresses. This intersection between visual representation and violence towards women prefigures the conflictual relationship with the materiality of the female body that Jaromil displays in his poetic practices, as I shall discuss in the following pages.

Despite his training as a painter, drawing later fails to convey Jaromil's increasing desire. Staring with longing at the maid Magda, Jaromil finds a more fitting way to conceive of her in the poems of the French Surrealist poet Paul Éluard:

> He again leafed through the book the painter had lent him, reading and endlessly rereading Éluard's poems and falling under the spell of certain lines: 'She has in the tranquillity of her body / A small snowball the color of an eye' … and: 'Good morning, sadness / You're inscribed on the eyes I love.' Éluard had become the poet of Magda's calm body and of her eyes bathed by a sea of tears; her entire life seemed to him to be contained in a single line: 'Sadness-beautiful face.' Yes, that was Magda: sadness-beautiful face. (Kundera, 2000: 45–6)

The passage from the visual to the textual marks Jaromil's artistic career. In reading Magda's body through the verses from 'L'Unique' (The only one) and 'À peine défigurée' (Barely disfigured), Jaromil develops a sense of control over it and proclaims himself its master. Subsuming Magda's experience into a line from a poem, he feels he can understand the essence of her life and imposes this understanding on her. Obsessed with Magda, he spies on her in the bathtub through the keyhole. He is tempted to enter the bathroom to see her completely naked, but he cannot find the courage to commit an even worse crime. Interpreting this reticence to openly violate Magda's privacy as timidity, Jaromil is revolted. In search of relief, he opens his book of poems but cannot concentrate:

> Jaromil was overcome by a languorous desire and closed the book. He picked up a piece of paper and a pencil and began to write – in the manner of Éluard, Nezval, Biebl, and Desnos – short lines, one under the other, without rhythm or rhyme. It was a variation on what he had read, but the variation contained what he had just experienced: there was the 'sadness' that 'begins to melt and turns into water,' there was the 'green water' whose surface 'rises and rises until it reaches my eyes,' there was the body, 'the sad body,' the

> body in the water 'that I pursue, I pursue through endless water.' He read these lines aloud several times in a melodious, pathetic voice, and he was enthusiastic. At the core of the poem was Magda in the bathtub and he with his face pressed against the door. (49)

Inspired by Éluard's free verse, Jaromil's poems display his desire to be the poet of Magda's body, interrupting his feeling of self-estrangement: his process of self-affirmation depends on his ability to master the representation of her body. Even if his attitude is not as violent as the cultural landscape he depicted in his childhood drawing, the female emerges from his poems as an object to be shaped by men's fantasies. At the same time, 'pathetic', the adjective Kundera chooses to describe the voice Jaromil is searching for, anticipates the criticism of masculinity articulated by *Life Is Elsewhere*.

When Jaromil types out the poem he dedicated to Magda's body, he realises that written words acquire durability and autonomy:

> What Jaromil had experienced the day before was expressed in the poem, but at the same time the experience slowly died there … the poem he had written was absolutely autonomous, independent, and incomprehensible as reality itself … the poem's autonomy provided Jaromil a splendid refuge, the ideal possibility of a second life. (50)

The union between experience and poetry lasts merely for the duration of the poetic composition. When the contingent situation which has inspired them expires, the verses are no longer linked to what prompted them: 'he was no longer subordinate to his experience, his experience was subordinate to what he had written' (49). The verses become verbal sediments able to evoke new meanings. For Jaromil this creates the possibility of imagining a life beyond his actual existence. This turn to poetry intensifies the bond Jaromil has with his mother; indeed, Mama tells him that only her marriage prevented her from devoting herself entirely to literature. By becoming a poet, Jaromil realises one of the dreams Mama had hoped to transmit to him through breastfeeding: her desire to 'open his imagination to undreamed-of horizons' addresses the imaginary of romance-like and fulfilling fantasies dreamed of by Emma Bovary (Kundera, 2000: 83). While Mama's deferral of her literary vein results from her position within a marriage, her son can display his creativity thanks to his privileged position as a young male.

In the next section, I shall address the way in which Jaromil uses his poems to articulate the self-estrangement Mama has experienced in

an entirely private (bodily) dimension, specifically in her sexuality and pregnancy. From there I go on to study how, drawing on Jaromil's lyrical compositions, Kundera examines the elements involved in the search for masculinity.

Masculine anxiety and the denial of the female body in poetry

The relationship between Jaromil and Mama informs the background of Kundera's analysis of the lyrical attitude. A poet, Kundera contends, is raised in a female environment from which he desperately tries to turn away in search of his masculinity. The entanglements of masculinity and poetry become increasingly evident in *Life Is Elsewhere*:

> Poets come from homes where women rule: the sister of Trakl and those of Yesenin and Mayakovsky, the aunts of Blok, the grandmother of Hölderlin and that of Lermontov, the nurse of Pushkin, and above all of course, the mothers, the poets' mothers, behind whom the fathers' shadows pale. Lady Wilde and Frau Rilke dressed their sons like little girls. Are you wondering why the child looked so anxiously at himself in the mirror? 'It is time to become a man,' Jiri Orten wrote in his diary. During his entire life the poet searches for masculinity in the features of his face. (82)

Jaromil's search for masculinity unfolds a horizon of gender expectations and the sense that masculinity is a destiny stemming from the materiality of the body yet to be fulfilled by the individual (Connell, 1995: 45; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Concerned with the 'childish femininity' of his face (Kundera, 2000: 83), Jaromil stares at his reflection in the mirror and hopes that the receding chin he has in common with the Austrian poet Rilke may be a sign of predestination. In a manner reminiscent of Mama, he perceives his body as an external entity, but unlike her he believes it holds the secrets of a grandiose future evoked by the men poets he is fond of. The narration of Jaromil's life is juxtaposed against references to similar episodes from actual male poets' lives and quotations from their poems or diaries which support Kundera's proposition that poets, meaning here men poets, come from households ruled by women (but no reference to any female poet that could support or disprove him is made). *Life Is Elsewhere* is fuelled by Kundera's in-depth study of biographies and poems.[3] By analysing the cultural references and the ideal of poetry through which Jaromil is shaping his masculinity, Kundera investigates whether or not the proposition can be disproved and provides

an anthropological portrait of the figure of the poet (Steinby, 2013: 48). As I go on to argue, the apparent 'anthropological' depth offered by Kundera's authorial narrator seems only to provide an increasing sense of uncertainty about Jaromil's masculinity.

The anxiety that pervades Jaromil's search for his masculinity is reminiscent of the disquiet that Lurie, who also grows up surrounded by women, feels with the first signs of ageing in *Disgrace*. The recurrence of this feeling in different stages of these men's lives reinforces the sense of precariousness associated to manhood. As in Lurie's case, the anxiety about his body induces Jaromil to assert his masculinity through his relationship with women. During one of his rare dates, Jaromil becomes aroused when a girl puts her head on his shoulder. For Kundera, the moment is revelatory of Jaromil's sexual inexperience:

> That body was beyond the limits of his experience, and precisely for this reason he devoted countless poems to it. How many times did the female genitals figure in his poems of that time? But through a miraculous effect of poetic magic (the magic of inexperience), Jaromil made of these copulatory and reproductive organs a chimerical object and a theme of playful dreams.
> …
> It was so beautiful to wander over a female body, an unknown, unseen, unreal body, a body with no odor, no blackheads, no small flaws or illnesses, an imaginary body, a body that was the playground of his dreams! (Kundera, 2000: 93–4)

The poems Jaromil dedicates to female beauty during his puberty predictably expose his ignorance of the female body. Confining the female body to an imaginary dimension that excludes physicality, Jaromil's poem reiterates a form of ontological violence evocative of Don Quixote's idealisation of the beloved discussed in Chapter One. As the authorial narrator underlines, Jaromil 'fled from the tangibility of the body … he deprived the body of its reality' (116). For Jaromil, writing poems articulates not a yearning for carnal knowledge, but quite the opposite: an attempt to distance himself from the experience of physical intimacy. This inexperience plays a pivotal role in Kundera's narrative.

Kundera originally intended to entitle his most well-known novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *The Planet of Inexperience* (Steinby, 2013: 156). He uses these very words in *The Art of the Novel* to describe the human condition: 'We leave childhood without knowing what youth is, we marry without knowing what it is to be married, and even when

we enter old age, we don't know what it is we are heading for: the old are innocent children of their old age. In that sense, man's world is the planet of inexperience' (Kundera, 1988b: 132–3). In *Life Is Elsewhere*, by linking the notion of inexperience to poetry, Kundera proposes that lyricism is a protective screen through which the (male) poet preserves his innocence: the infantile tenderness and the fairy-tale tone of Jaromil's poems express his 'fear of the physical consequences of love' and his attempt 'to take love out of the world of adults (… with flesh and responsibility)' (Kundera, 2000: 94). The bond between poetry and childhood is strengthened further still by the physical resemblance between Jaromil and Arthur Rimbaud, as a friend of the painter underlines. Rimbaud, the author of poems dedicated to a child's mentality such as 'Le Bateau ivre' (The drunken boat) and 'Les Poètes de sept ans' (Seven-year-old poets), is a key figure in *Life Is Elsewhere*. As Robert Porter writes, the novel 'is haunted by the figure of Arthur Rimbaud above all other poets. In biographical and philosophical terms he … is at the back of the novel' (1981: 58). I shall return to the presence of Rimbaud in *Life Is Elsewhere*, but for the moment I would like to emphasise how the notion of inexperience invites the reader to look with suspicion at Kundera's inquiry into masculinity and the lyrical attitude.

While seeming to criticise lyrical poetry as a metonym for the abstract narcissism and infantilism of all poetry, Kundera also finds a form for our incapacity to see past the anthropological forms of our own (in)experience as we all inhabit the planet of inexperience, whether we are poets or not. I believe that this incapacity permeates the novel, since neither Jaromil nor the authorial narrator shows secure recognition of the influence of the cultural environment that have led Jaromil to focus on women's scatological functions and portray scenes of brutal violence against women in his childhood drawings. Or perhaps the aim of the investigation in *Life Is Elsewhere* contrasts with Kundera's claim to subjectivity as the authorial narrator who makes his unwillingness to discuss the content of Jaromil's drawings evident, just as he does before referring to scenes of violence against women as 'other situations it is better to be silent about' (Kundera, 2000: 30). While the authorial narrator does not discuss them, Jaromil's experience shows the violent shaping of women in a young man's mind: his attempt to avoid contact with female corporality seems to display an inability to engage with the female body in forms which are not violent or exclusively sexual. Kundera's sense of inexperience as central to the human condition emerges through Jaromil's own (in)experience gendered in the masculine.

Interrupting self-consciousness: the interaction of ideology, poetry and masculinity

Despite his ambition to affirm his masculinity by losing his virginity, in his poems Jaromil avoids confronting the corporality of sexual experience. This constant disembodiment through poetry discloses Jaromil's struggles with eroticism, which are evident when he meets a young woman who is attracted to him. Faced with the possibility of having sex, the fear of appearing inadequate is the trigger that pushes him to masturbate for the first time: his surprise at self-pleasure reveals that his ignorance is not limited to the female body but involves his own body. When the moment comes, and he moves towards her undressed body, Jaromil is filled with anxiety – 'he desired this body and he was afraid of it' (Kundera, 2000: 116) – his arousal vanishes and, faced with 'the immensely real body of an adult woman', Jaromil cannot regain his lost excitement (117). To avoid the humiliation associated with the inability to perform sexually, Jaromil lets the young woman believe that he is not attracted to her. When they next meet, they sit together and Jaromil gets aroused when she rests her head on his shoulder. But this time she rejects him. Tormented by this arousal, Jaromil feels 'that creature between his legs' is 'a prancing buffoon, a clown, an enemy making fun of him' (121). Jaromil's consciousness of his body inhibits his ability to perform sexually and experience sexual pleasure. As Peter Schwenger observes, 'To think about masculinity is to become less masculine oneself … Self-consciousness is a crack in the wholeness of his nature' (1979: 631–2). Kundera's investigation of the figure of the poet delves into Jaromil's fragile masculinity. The metaliterary dimension of *Life Is Elsewhere*, a novel examining poetic creation, emerges as a site to examine the tension between self-consciousness and masculinity.

In examining Jaromil's search for masculinity, *Life Is Elsewhere* provokes certain analogies between lyricism and the Communist revolutionary ideology. In the postscript to the 1986 English edition of the novel translated from the Czech, Kundera (1986b: 309) underlines that the title of the novel is a quotation from Rimbaud with which André Breton ends his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, and, at the same time, a piece of graffiti from the 1968 student riots in Paris.[4] *Life Is Elsewhere* further engages with political ideology through the incident where Jaromil listens with his family to the Czechoslovak Prime Minister Klement Gottwald's call to the crowd to set up new, revolutionary organs of power under the leadership of the Communist Party. Jaromil argues with his uncle and defends the values of the revolution. Kundera writes that 'Jaromil

abandoned his language and chose to be a medium for someone else … he did it with a feeling of intense pleasure; it seemed to him that he was part of a thousand-headed crowd … and he found that glorious' (Kundera, 2000: 108). Jaromil had already experienced a similar feeling during a discussion about art: he realised that he was not merely repeating his friend the painter's ideas, but that 'the voice coming from his mouth resembled the painter's, and that this voice also induced his hands to make the painter's gestures' (97). These two episodes in which Jaromil echoes others' words are evocative of René Girard's notions of imitation and mediation, which are pivotal in Kundera's narrative (Cribben Merrill, 2013). Like Coetzee, Kundera also praised Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, describing it as 'the best book I have ever read on the art of the novel' (1996b: 184). Drawing on Girard's literary theory, I focus on the role of mediation (literary and non) in the construction of masculinity in *Life Is Elsewhere*.

Being able to hide behind the protective mask of a painter temporarily suppresses Jaromil's self-consciousness: he stops 'feeling shy and self-conscious' (Kundera, 2000: 97). During another discussion with the painter and his friends, Jaromil adopts Rimbaud's pronouncement, often quoted by his master the painter – 'It is necessary to be absolutely modern' – but interprets it in new terms. For Jaromil, the absolutely modern is not expressed by Surrealism itself, but depends on responding to Surrealism's revolutionary zeal, its desire to advance revolution through poetry by creating a new art in the image of ongoing revolution. One of the painter's friends claims that Jaromil's poems would never be published under this regime. Even though Jaromil agrees with her, he explains that this was not an argument against revolution: his adherence to the imperative of the absolutely modern is totalising. *Life Is Elsewhere* prefigures Kundera's observation on the notion of the absolutely modern included in his 1991 novel *Immortality*: 'to be *absolutely* modern means: never to question the content of modernity and to serve it as one serves the absolute, that is, without hesitation' (1992: 218). In renouncing his poetry in the name of the revolution, Jaromil feels he is ultimately acquiring the manliness for which he has been longing for years. In *Life Is Elsewhere*, the absolutely modern is linked to the enactment of masculinity, an unstable horizon of contradicting expectations whose fulfilment requires the suppression of any doubt or hesitation and total adherence.

Jaromil's farewell to poetry is temporary: once again, sexuality is the motor of his creativity. Seduced by the redheaded young woman, Jaromil loses his virginity and feels that she has brought him into adulthood. He would like to recite one of his poems to her but realises that she would

not like any of them, since a 'girl of the crowd' could understand as poetry only a poem which rhymed. Suddenly, Jaromil understands that to join the revolution he does not need to abandon poetry, but to reject the free verse adopted by Éluard and other surrealists, which in an ironic reversal he sees as a product of bourgeois culture, and to write poems in rhymed form that can be appreciated by everybody, 'poems that were absolutely modern' (163). Jaromil's sense of modernity now resembles the seductive but reductionist meaning of revolutionary slogans. Poetry becomes a means to merge with the crowd: 'Now that he had landed on the shore of real life (by "real life" he was referring to the density created by the fusion of the crowd, physical love, and revolutionary slogans), all he had to do was give himself up entirely to this life and become its violin' (163). By modelling his poetry on the vibrations of the crowd, Jaromil is not so much driven by an altruistic will to give voice to an unvoiced mass, but by a 'desire for a *boundless embrace*' (165). Jaromil looks at the revolution as a substitute for the maternal universe and its unconditional love. Kundera develops his notion of the intimate connection between poets and their mothers by bringing in Jiri Orten's poem about a child who experiences his birth as an awful death, and who wants 'to go back, back inside its mother, back "into the very sweet fragrance"' (186). For Kundera, the poem is emblematic of the immaturity of the poet, who throughout his life feels a longing for the unity and safety he has experienced in his mother's womb, a protective shield which excludes the Otherness of the relativised adult world. The sense of the initial stress on motherhood in *Life Is Elsewhere* is linked to this 'anthropological' hypothesis Kundera tries to probe in the novel, even though Kundera's approach to the relationship between poet and mother might seem more psychoanalytical than anthropological.

As a poet and revolutionary, Jaromil aims for the idyll that his mother found in her pregnancy. The significance of the relationship between the infant and mother also emerges from the poetry of Rimbaud, whose presence is pervasive in *Life Is Elsewhere*. The most obvious instance is Rimbaud's poem 'Enfance' (Childhood) (2002a). The dominant presence of female figures in this poem focusing on infancy is reminiscent of the way in which Kundera portrays Jaromil's childhood:

> Ladies promenading on terraces by the sea; toddlers and giants, gorgeous black women garbed in gray moss-green, jewels set just so into the rich ground of the groves, the unfrozen gardens-young mothers and elder sisters, faces flushed with pilgrimage, sultanas, princesses pacing in lordly gowns, girls from abroad, and sweetly melancholy souls. (2002: 224)

In his analysis of the first verses of the poem, Charles Minahen comments on the proliferation of female figures. He observes that the enfant lives in a prelinguistic imaginary in which their gender is not determined and their identity is presented 'as an extension of the mother's body' (Minahen, 2005: 222). This approach to the bond between mother and infant is echoed in Kundera's account of the corporeal communion between Mama and her son. The allusion to 'Enfance' grows ever stronger, since, as Minahen observes, the poem 'traces the passage from a fabulous state of infant, selfless absorption in the world to a feeling of loss, lack, and disillusionment as the child's self-consciousness develops and matures' (224). Minahen reads this process in light of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage (Lacan, 2006: 75–81). Even though Kundera does not himself draw on psychoanalysis, Minahen's psychoanalytical insight into the poem supports Kundera's account of the infant's subjectivity as a space of indeterminacy, prior to becoming a self-conscious bodily being separated from their mother. Exploring the formation of subjectivity and its dynamics, *Life Is Elsewhere* examines the paradoxical continuity between Jaromil's desire to assert his masculinity and his longing to return to the infant's prelinguistic and totalising condition.

Jaromil feels that the redheaded woman's 'body had finally linked him in a completely physical way to the crowd' (Kundera, 2000: 154). He fails to acknowledge her beyond her corporality, while, at the same time, he deflects the materiality of her body by making of it a symbolic bridge to reach the crowd from which he desires total acceptance. When Jaromil learns that she has had another lover before him, he starts to feel increasingly jealous and tells her that he is disgusted by her body touched by other men. As in *Disgrace*, the female body is presented as flesh to be marked through sex with men. *Life Is Elsewhere* addresses this phallocentric logic through words which seem to emerge from Kundera's own memory as author-narrator:

> 'You must be mine to die upon the rack if I want you!' John Keats's cry resounds through the centuries. Why should Jaromil be jealous? The redhead is his now, she belongs to him more than ever: her destiny is his creation; it is his eye that watches her urinate into the bucket … she is his victim, she is his creation, she is his, his, his. (179)

Jaromil displays a misogynistic urge for control and possession. Only when he looks at her relieving herself does Jaromil have the sense that the redheaded woman belongs to him. Rather than growing a feeling of intimacy, the vulnerability associated to corporal functions sharpens

Jaromil's desire for possession, which is expressed through the obsessive repetition of the possessive pronoun 'his'. Jaromil feels he can accept her 'only under one condition: … that she be entirely submerged below the surface of Jaromil's words and thoughts' (178). His desire to shape her identity exposes his fear of not finding unconditional acceptance from her as well as the fragility behind his masculinist and narcissistic fantasy of possession. In exploring the lyrical attitude further, Kundera links Jaromil's narcissism to the desire for glory he finds in poems by Victor Hugo, Jiri Orten and Jiri Walker. Jaromil's urge to be admired is reaffirmed in his dream in which his alter ego Xavier is pleased by the suicide of a young woman desperate for his love. These self-centred fantasies gravitate towards the ideal of masculinity Jaromil draws from his poetry: 'he is looking for a form for himself; he wants the photographic chemical of his poems to firm up the design of his features' (180). In the next section, I shall interrogate Jaromil's search for a form capable of fulfilling his masculinity, suppressing self-doubt and satisfying narcissistic desire.

To be absolutely modern, to be absolutely pure: the urge for form

In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera writes, 'The desire to be modern is an archetype, that is, an irrational imperative, anchored deeply within us, a persistent form whose content is changeable and indeterminate: what is modern is what declares itself modern and is accepted as such' (1988b: 141). In underlining the absolute adherence that it seems to demand, Kundera describes the ideal of modernity as an urge impressed in our unconscious and manifesting itself as a drive for constantly renewed forms. This pursuit offers a different perspective on Jaromil's response to Rimbaud's imperative. As Porter underlines, 'the seminal work … from which Kundera takes his epigram, *Une Saison en enfer* [A Season in Hell] is a violent and at times self-contradictory work' (1981: 61). The need for a reduction of Rimbaud's complex statement to a slogan and an imperative is further addressed by Kundera in his essay *The Curtain*. In this essay, Kundera reads Rimbaud's motto in dialogue with the narrative of the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz: '"ONE Must BE ABSOLUTELY MODERN," wrote Arthur Rimbaud. Some sixty years later Gombrowicz was not so sure' (Kundera, 2007: 55, upper case and lower case as in the original). Here Kundera refers to Gombrowicz's anti-bildungsroman *Ferdydurke*. Accused of immaturity, Joey, the 30-year-old protagonist, is forced to go to school again and live with Zuta, a schoolgirl 'absolutely modern in her modernity', and her modern family (Gombrowicz, 2000:

105). *Ferdydurke* reveals that the ideals of modernity and maturity, as well as any other defining ideal, expose people to the risk of feeling estrangement: 'We will soon fear our persons and our personalities, because it will become apparent that they are by no means truly our own' (85). By opposition, Gombrowicz praises the potential of resisting the crystallisation of the personality in alienating forms (Gombrowicz, 2012: 485–6). Critics have considered the influence of Gombrowicz on Kundera. Longinović (1993) looks at *Ferdydurke* and *Life Is Elsewhere* as expressions of the borderline poetics emerging from the cultural and political landscape of Central Europe as it resisted the influence of Russian culture as well as the ideological turmoil brought by Nazism and Communism. Liisa Steinby argues that Kundera is indebted to Gombrowicz for the concepts of immaturity and the absolutely modern (2013: 70). Eva Le Grand reads *Life Is Elsewhere* 'as a variation-homage' to Gombrowicz and underlines that in *Ferdydurke* lyricism is the main target of his 'satire on immaturity, on youth and its modernist imperative' (1999: 52–3). In considering Kundera's engagement with lyricism, Le Grand also refers to François Ricard, who writes that 'with *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*, *Life Is Elsewhere* is perhaps the harshest work ever written against poetry: Poetry as the privileged space of affirmation, intoxication and "authenticity"' (Ricard, 1999: 197). Similarly, Le Grand connects Kundera's depiction of poetry to *Madame Bovary* and *Ferdydurke*, and presents *Life Is Elsewhere* as 'the most devastating criticism of a certain poetry which sets up all feeling (loving, revolutionary, religious) as an absolute value' (1999: 53). However, I suggest that what is being explored in these texts is not precisely a criticism of a certain type of poetry, but the way in which lyricism affects and forms our emotions and desires. These novels explore the way lyricism does, in the end, give form to our affective impulses, whether we might approve of that or not, and whether or not we believe we are in control of our impulses. My next step is to sharpen the comparison between *Ferdydurke* and *Life Is Elsewhere*: I propose that Kundera's and Gombrowicz's critical engagement with the notion of form offers an insight into the discursive practices through which Jaromil inscribes himself into gender and politics through poetry.

I refer in particular to one of the two digressions interrupting the main plot about Joey. In a section entitled 'Preface to "The Child Runs Deep in Filidor"', Gombrowicz addresses the question of form:

> Certainly art is the perfecting of form. But you seem to think – and here is another of your cardinal mistakes – that art consists of creating works perfect in their form; you reduce this all-encompassing,

> omni-human process of creating form to the turning out of poems and symphonies; and you've never been able to truly experience nor explain to others what an enormous role form plays in our lives … And just as beetles, insects chase after food all day, so do we tirelessly pursue form, we hassle other people with our style, our manners while riding in a streetcar, while eating or enjoying ourselves, while resting or attending to our business – we always, unceasingly, seek form, and we delight in it or suffer by it, and we conform to it or we violate and demolish it, or we let it create us, amen. (2000: 79–80)

Form is a pivotal notion in Gombrowicz's writing, and *Ferdydurke* is described as his most vitriolic illustration of his conception of form (Goddard, 2010: 26). For the Polish writer, form is not limited to the spheres of art and literature but involves all aspects of human experience. Agnieszka Sołtysik underlines how form in Gombrowicz's writing encompasses 'the ideas, identities, behaviors, and discourses (based on and including nationality, culture, class, gender, occupation, age, etc.) available to the subject, by which the self is circumscribed and through which it constructs and expresses identity' (1998: 245). Displaying a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity (Gömöri, 1978: 122), Gombrowicz's notion of form conceives of artistic practices, political affiliation and gender identity as intersecting discursive and performative repertoires through which the subject can perpetuate the illusion of personhood (Sołtysik, 1998: 249). In his writing, the pursuit of form represents a basic urge governing human experience: any human action is inscribed in a form and enters into relation with other forms. I would like to draw on this understanding of form to examine the interaction between masculinity, poetic composition and revolutionary ideology in *Life Is Elsewhere*, and the interaction of these elements in Jaromil's own urge for form.

In emphasising the continuity between poetry and political ideology, *Life Is Elsewhere* draws a parallel between the revolutionary and the poet based on their common pursuit of what Kundera describes as a lyrical form:

> 'Join me in delirium!' Vitezslav Nezval cried out to his reader, and Baudelaire wrote: 'One must always be drunk … on wine, on poetry, or on virtue, as you wish …' Lyricism is intoxication, and man drinks in order to merge more easily with the world. Revolution has no desire to be examined or analyzed, it only desires that the people merge with it; in this sense it is lyrical and in need of lyricism. (2000: 163–4)

The search for lyricism responds to the male poet's and the male revolutionary's need to lose themselves in their own feelings and ideals. In order to devote themselves completely to their aesthetic imperatives and political ideas, the poet and the revolutionary have to banish the shadow of doubt. Calling Schwenger to mind, in the suspension of their self-reflexivity the poet and the revolutionary each find a path along which to enact their masculinity. Driven by a misogynistic logic of reification which is evocative of Lucy's rapists in *Disgrace*, Jaromil sees the 'impurity' he believes previous lovers have cut into the redheaded woman's body as an opportunity to prove the intensity of his feelings. In his poem he writes: 'there is nothing in her soul, in her body / not even the putridity of her old lovers / that I will not drink to intoxication' (177). The intoxication Jaromil strives for involves an imitation of those intense feelings that are characteristic of lyrical poetry. By dramatising his feelings, Jaromil seeks to anaesthetise his fears and his sense of inadequacy.

In *Life Is Elsewhere*, the stress on feelings and emotions is seen in opposition to other narrative representations of sexuality. When the older poet encourages him to sleep with another woman, Jaromil explains that the redheaded woman is his one true love: 'having his girlfriend was having all women; that his girlfriend was so protean, her love so infinite, that he could experience with her more unexpected adventures than a Don Juan with his 1,003 women' (204). The opposition between Don Juan and the ideal of a single love represents one of the most salient themes in Kundera's narrative. I shall engage with this dichotomy in a more comprehensive way in the following chapter, but for the moment I want to focus on the ideal of having one true love, referring to another formulation of this idea which Kundera offers in *Immortality*:

> *Homo sentimentalis* … a man who has raised feelings to a category of value. As soon as feelings are seen as a value, everyone wants to feel; and because we all like to pride ourselves on our values, we have a tendency to show off our feelings.
> …
> No one revealed *homo sentimentalis* as lucidly as Cervantes. Don Quixote decides to love a certain lady named Dulcinea, in spite of the fact that he hardly knows her. (1992: 218)

Like Coetzee, who regards Don Quixote as an embodiment of the idealising lover, in Cervantes' work Kundera sees the clearest analysis of the elevation of feelings as the principle guiding human action. In this short passage from *Immortality*, Kundera's response to *Don Quixote*

combines the practice of form he carries out in the novels themselves with the theory of form conveyed in *The Art of the Novel*. Just as in *Don Quixote*, feelings become self-justifying criteria and moral values, a response that corresponds to Jaromil's creative practice. Kundera writes:

> The poet has no need to prove anything; the only proof lies in the intensity of his emotion.
>
> The genius of lyricism is the genius of inexperience. The poet knows little about the world, but the words that burst forth from him form beautiful patterns that are as definitive as crystal; the poet is immature, yet his verse has the finality of a prophecy by which he himself is dumbfounded. (2000: 180)

The metaliterary discourse of *Life Is Elsewhere* presents the urge for lyrical form as stemming from a hiatus between feeling and experience. Kundera continues the exploration of the unconscious complexity of emotion characteristic of *Madame Bovary*. In Chapter One, I compared the ways in which Lurie and Emma Bovary exaggerate the intensity of their emotions, arguing that *Disgrace* and *Madame Bovary* reveal the paradoxical role of Romantic rhetoric and the Western poetic tradition more generally: although Romantic poetics express love in artificial and conventional forms, such forms offer a unique voice for the intensity of these feelings. For Lurie, lyricism fails to corroborate his feelings. Jaromil's case shows that the intensity of feelings may not originate from the relationship with the loved one but may instead derive from the pursuit of an emotional form itself. With no discernible difference between the actual feeling of love and the idea of love, between feeling love and imagining being in love, *Life Is Elsewhere* portrays the disquieting scenario in which there may be no authentic core beyond what men believe to be their deepest feelings. Conversely, what defines them is precisely their ability or inability to inhabit emotions and feelings they have learned to experience, and to model their affective responses in terms of emotional frames through which their feelings have been socially codified.

In Kundera's narrative, the Quixotic idealisation of the beloved reverberates with Gombrowicz's investigation of form, and the way the search for form transcends artistic practice and pervades every aspect of life, emotion and, in particular, sexuality. The analysis of the dynamics of form is key to understanding Jaromil's coming of age and Kundera's view of the lyrical poet. Exemplary of this figure, Jaromil's formation articulates a masculinist, reductive urge for definition which reverberates

in the creation of both gender identity and poetry. In the following pages, by focusing on Roth's *The Professor of Desire*, I go on to examine how Gombrowicz's notion of form offers an insight into the intertextual nature of heterosexual desire as expressed by its protagonist, David Kepesh, and the way his struggle to understand his own masculinity matures.

Roth's *The Professor of Desire*

Immaturity and literary seduction

Described as a bildungsroman (Witcombe, 2015a: 57, 2021: 91), *The Professor of Desire* addresses the role of literary models in shaping young male subjectivity in the manner of *Life Is Elsewhere*. Roth focuses on Kepesh, who appears in two of his other novels, namely *The Breast* (1972) and *The Dying Animal* (2001). Even though the Kepesh trilogy was not included in the Roth canon for a long time, it has been increasingly explored by critics (Brauner, 2016; McDonald and Roden, 2016; Shipe, 2022; Witcombe, 2015a, 2015b, 2017, 2021).

The opening of *The Professor of Desire* focuses on Kepesh's childhood and his relation to Herbie Bratasky, a comedian who entertains guests at the hotel owned by Kepesh's family. Herbie performs private shows for Kepesh and displays a surprising ability to reproduce the sounds of human scatological functions. From the beginning of the novel, comedy and imitation are presented as the axes defining Kepesh's trajectory. As he grows older, Kepesh finds a new passion in acting but soon realises that his acting is driven by vanity. Ashamed of that vanity, Kepesh longs for a definite identity. It is a longing which echoes Jaromil's desire for manhood:

> At twenty I must stop impersonating others and Become Myself, or at least begin to impersonate the self I believe I ought now to be.
>
> He – the next me – turns out to be a sober, solitary rather refined young man devoted to European literature and languages … taking with me as companions those great writers whom I choose to call, as an undergraduate, 'the architects of my mind' … but above all it is that I am an absolutist – a *young* absolutist – and know no way to shed a skin other than inserting a scalpel and lacerating myself from end to end. I am one thing or I am the other. Thus, at twenty, do I set out to undo the contradictions and overleap the uncertainties. (Roth, 1978: 9–10)

Configuring identity (and gender) as an act of impersonation, this fragment reveals the paradoxical role of imitation as a source of alienation and fulfilment. As Ross Posnock writes, 'to be a man is to imitate being a man' (2006: 87): the new version of himself Kepesh wants to turn into is an ideal of masculinity woven out of his passion for European literature;[5] 'self-dramatization' and 'self-laceration' are the key dynamics of his act of impersonation (Brauner, 2016: 67). Kepesh can be imagined as one of the young people whom Kundera describes in *Life Is Elsewhere* as the 'emissaries of the absolute' (2000: 186), who adhere to their ideals and deny the slightest possibility of self-contradiction, such as the figure of the poet and the revolutionary embodied in Jaromil. Comparing Kepesh and Jaromil, I read their gender performances in light of the notion of form developed by Gombrowicz.

Roth is clearly familiar with Gombrowicz's narrative (Roth, 1985: 146). From 1974 to 1989 he worked as a General Editor for Penguin Books and oversaw the publication of a paperback series entitled Writers from the Other Europe dedicated to Eastern European novelists, including Gombrowicz and Kundera (Roth Pierpont, 2013: 93). In *Philip Roth's Rude Truth* (2006), Posnock suggests that it is Gombrowicz's concern with immaturity that emerges and is developed in Roth's fiction.[6] Posnock (2006: 61) argues that Gombrowicz's characters embody two different trends: 'immature maturity', which *Life Is Elsewhere* depicts vibrantly, based on abstraction, rationalism and absolutism, and 'mature immaturity', modelled on scepticism, relativism and anti-foundationalism. Even though Posnock does not mention *The Professor of Desire*, I regard Kepesh's desire for an absolute identity as emblematic of the condition of 'immature maturity'. While Jaromil is driven by the idealisation of the lover, Kepesh follows the path of Don Juanism. Both *Life Is Elsewhere* and *The Professor of Desire* engage with the influence of literature on their protagonists' masculinity and do so respectively through two literary models which Kundera describes as antithetical to each other. As Roth writes:

> Not that, for all my reading, underlining, and note-taking, I become *entirely* selfless. A dictum attributed to no less notable an egoist than Lord Byron impresses me its mellifluous wisdom … 'Studious by day… dissolute by night.' For dissolute I soon find it best to substitute 'desirous' – I am not in a palazzo in Venice, after all, but in upstate New York … Reading Macaulay for English 203, I came upon his description of Addison's collaborator of Steele … 'A rake among scholars, a scholar among rakes.' Perfect! I take it to my

> bulletin board, along with the line from Byron, and directly above the names of the girls whom I have my mind to *seduce*, a word whose deepest resonances come to me, neither from pornography nor pulp magazines, but from my agonized reading in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. (Roth, 1978: 14)

By referring to Venice and Giacomo Casanova's erotic adventures, Kepesh tracks his adhesion to the ideal of seduction. Through the practices of textuality (reading, underlining and note-taking), Kepesh shapes his own identity on Byron's words much like Lurie does in *Disgrace*. However, while Lurie's education echoes his belonging to the cultural elite of South Africa, Kepesh's literary culture should be read in connection to the subordinated position in which Roth's protagonists find themselves as Jewish men in the American WASP society, as Maggie McKinley underlines in her discussion of the representation of masculinity in Roth's narrative (2021: 280).[7]

Kepesh's engagement with European culture is not limited to books. Thanks to a Fulbright scholarship, he spends a year in Europe. His journey evokes 'the longing for Europe as an unworthy impulse to adultery', which Leslie Fiedler discusses in the 1920s US novels that describe their protagonists' experiences in the Old Continent (1965: 24). Emulating his literary idols, Kepesh turns his visiting fellowship into 'erotic daredevilry' (Roth, 1978: 39). He has sex with prostitutes in Soho despite being scared of dying of syphilis like Maupassant. Excited by European women, whom he considers to be more sexually available than Americans, Kepesh has a ménage à trois with two Swedish women, Birgitta and Elisabeth. In their sexual role-play, Kepesh plays the dominant role and fulfils his fantasies as a libertine seducer. But along with pleasure, Kepesh starts feeling a sense of increasing estrangement from his body:

> When, depleted, we lay together on the threadbare rug – for it was the floor, not the bed, we used mostly as our sacrificial altar – when we would be lying there, dead limbs amid the little undergarments, groggy, sated, and confused … My arms, my hands, my words didn't seem to be of any use to anyone at that point. The way it worked, my arms, hands, words meant everything – until I came. (31)

Reminiscent of Georges Bataille (1962), Kepesh thinks of intercourse as a sacrificial act. Still anaesthetised by pleasure, he feels that body and language are equally meaningless. Any act which is not inscribed into a sexual dynamic, such as Birgitta's gestures of affection towards

Elisabeth, who struggles with guilt triggered by their erotic practices, is incomprehensible to him. Kepesh searches for a literary frame: 'I am trying with what wisdom – and what prose resources and literary models – is mine to understand if in fact I have been what the Christians call wicked and what I would call inhuman' (Roth, 1978: 33). His lack of empathy for Elisabeth aligns with the alienation he feels from his own body. Kepesh cannot make sense of his body outside his sexuality, which is not only totalising but also annihilating. As Witcombe observes, sex is 'an act of epistemological desperation' in Roth's narrative (2015a: 3).

Kepesh's sense of his intense investment in the erotic is revealed to be delusional. He cannot live up to these libertine fantasies and be the 'shameless carnal force' he wishes he were (Roth, 1978: 45). Despite conceiving of sexual drive as an impulse devoid of moral implications, he cannot tolerate the burden of sexual transgression and its emotional consequences. Unable to fulfil this erotic and literary legacy, Kepesh decides to go back to the US, relinquishing the fantasy of himself as a literary seducer informed by European literature. When he tells Birgitta his decision, she merely replies that he is a boy, and then leaves. He admits: 'Not the masterful young master of mistresses and whores … and something of a fledging rapist too – no, not the merely "a boy"' (45). While Kepesh regretfully acknowledges that he cannot inhabit the scenarios of sexual violence and misogyny that fascinated him and informed his literary fantasy of manhood, the comparison with Birgitta reveals the immaturity and shallowness of the literary fantasies through which he fashioned his masculinity. As Kepesh observes, for Birgitta, 'flesh was very much there to be investigated for every last thrill' (51). The strength of her will to explore all her pleasures including submission is evocative of the search for bodily knowledge that Peter Brooks considers characteristic of modern narrative (1993: xii). Her willingness to play passive roles in their sexual interplay is not a sign of weakness but instead reflects 'the erotic investment in the desire to know' (112). In Kepesh's eyes, Birgitta is capable of living up to the search for erotic pleasure that defined his ideal of literary masculinity and to the epistemological potential of sex. Moved by an anxious urge to confer a form to his masculinity, Kepesh has imitated the misogynist attitude of the seducers who populate his literary imaginary to actualise an artificial image of himself as a womaniser that prevented him from engaging with his sensations or developing any self-knowledge. Symbolically, Kepesh leaves Europe after having visited La Bastille, where the Marquis de Sade was imprisoned. In the next section, I

shall describe how Kepesh's failure to define his personality through *libertinage* leads to an attempt to reshape his desire and emancipate himself from the epistemological lure of his literary models.

Contrasting fantasies: Chekhovian delusions and unmediated experiences

Having returned to the US, Kepesh finishes his studies successfully and becomes a lecturer at Stanford University. His life proceeds without trouble until he meets his future wife, 26-year-old Helen Baird. Two years his senior, Helen is different from Kepesh's previous university student partners. At 18 she had run off to Hong Kong with a journalist twice her age, who was already living there with a wife and three children, and spent eight years following her lovers through Asian countries, only to then escape from them. 'Instantly I am ready to attribute her "candor" to a popular-magazine mentality' (Roth, 1978: 48). Kepesh responds to her as a modern Emma Bovary whose fantasies have been shaped by the rhetoric of screen romance and popular magazines. Struggling to believe in her adventures in the exotic locations he has read about in Joseph Conrad's novels, Kepesh has contrasting feelings for her: 'by Helen I am not only intrigued and aroused, I am also alarmed … Hers seems to me sometimes such a banalized conception of self and experience, and yet, all the same, enthralling and full of fascination' (52). Despite Kepesh suspecting that Helen's accounts might be infected by her imagination, he is fascinated by her, which he finds alarming. On the other hand, Helen immediately senses the influence that literature has had on his life and pushes him to stop reading and to 'Dip a foot back into the stuff itself' (54). Helen emphasises the negative effects of reading and argues that literature fails to reproduce human experience and converts it into something different: 'something worse. Something ghastly' (54). Nevertheless, Kepesh obsessively returns to literature. He describes Henry James's *The Ambassadors* as an exemplum of the direct engagement with life that Helen has proposed. Kepesh emerges as a modern Don Quixote, much like Lurie in *Disgrace*, in the way that he is unable to approach his own experience without the mediation of literature. The dialogues between Helen and Kepesh are reminiscent of the exchanges between Lurie and his daughter Lucy. Helen urges Kepesh not to underestimate her: 'Oh, don't simplify me *too* much. And don't romanticize my "nerve" either – okay?' (55). Warning him about the risk of living according to his literary fantasies, she says to him, 'You're misusing yourself, David. You're hopelessly intent on being what you're not. I get the sense that you

may be riding for a very bad fall' (55). Like Lurie, Kepesh is destined to confront a world and a sexual life which do not conform to his literature-fuelled fantasies.

As a woman's critique of a man's literary pretension, Helen's words may be also seen in dialogue with Kundera, in the passages where he evokes Jaromil's distance from his experience and his fear of women's bodies: as if one of the women in Kundera's novel were speaking back to Jaromil. Kepesh realises himself that he has been superficial in reading Helen as a screen romance character and compares his past with Birgitta to his current life:

> Looking back to Birgitta, it seems to me, from my new vantage point, that we were, among other things, helping each other at age twenty-two to turn into something faintly corrupt, each the other's slave and slaveholder … we had created a richly hypnotic atmosphere, but one which permeated the inexperienced *mind* first of all: I was intrigued and exhilarated as much by the idea of what we were engaged in as by the sensations, what I felt and what I saw. Not so with Helen … but soon, as understanding grows … I begin at last … to see these passionate performances as arising … out of that determined abandon with which she will give herself to whatever strongly beckons, and regardless of how likely it is so to bring in the end as much pain as pleasure. I have been dead wrong, I tell myself, trying to dismiss hers as a corny and banalized mentality deriving from Screen Romance – rather, she is *without* fantasy, there is no *room* for fantasy, so total is her concentration, and the ingenuity with which she sounds her desire. (56)

In reading his past in light of Helen's observations, Kepesh uses an expression, 'inexperienced *mind*', evocative of Kundera's own notion of inexperience. Moved by his desire to fulfil his ideal of literary seduction, Kepesh was more responsive to the fantasies that allowed him to carve his masculinity more than his physical sensation. Framing his relationship with Birgitta in a way that is evocative of Hegel's master–slave dialectic, Kepesh seems to acknowledge that with her he sought a moment of recognition. The sense of her ability to explore pleasure fades as he projects his own experience onto her. Uninterested in entertaining what Birgitta's sense of their relationship might have been, Kepesh seems to fall for another delusion. He conceives of Helen's desire as an 'unmediated' sexual experience alien to any fantasy, informing his delusion of a purely physical dimension to sexuality devoid of any cultural element.

Although Kepesh feels he is approaching a more direct contact with his pleasure, he begins to struggle after they marry and his attachment to literary paradigms grows stronger. This is expressed in the self-referential attitude towards literature which emerges during his lectures: 'when we study Chekhov's stories … every sentence seems to me to allude to my own plight above all' (66). Kepesh finds in Anton Chekhov's narrative a literary correspondence with his own suffering. The protagonist reads quotations from 'About love', a tale from Chekhov's late work, which is part of a trilogy which includes 'Man in a shell' and 'Gooseberries' and features two travellers, Burkin and Ivan Iványč.[8] In 'About love', the travellers visit their friend Alëkin, who shares his reflection on love with them. For Alëkin, Russians tend to make love poetic and endow it with existential questions: 'when you love you must either, in your reasoning about that love, start from what is higher, more important than happiness or unhappiness … or you must not reason at all' (Roth, 1978: 66–7). This tendency also seems to contaminate Kepesh. Much like in *Disgrace* and *Life Is Elsewhere*, quotations and references in *The Professor of Desire* elicit a reflection on masculinity informed by literary reading. In *Life Is Elsewhere*, the intertextual web of references strengthens the resemblance between the experiences of Jaromil and the poets Kundera quotes (Steinby, 2013: 90). As Le Grand observes, 'Jaromil is Lermontov, but he is also Pushkin, Byron, Shelley, Rimbaud, Mayakovsky, Wolker, or Halas all at once' (1999: 80). By opposition, in *The Professor of Desire* the gravity of Chekhov's tales is juxtaposed with Kepesh's daily misery and the challenges generated by his wife's alcohol abuse. The reference to Chekhov's text exacerbates the alienation Kepesh feels within his marriage. As in *Disgrace*, the lectures delivered by the protagonist becomes a stage to read quotations and comment on them:

> I speak of the amount of human history that Chekhov can incorporate in fifteen pages, of how ridicule and irony gradually give way, even within so short a space, to sorrow and pathos, of his feel for the disillusioning moment and for those processes wherein actuality seemingly pounces upon even our most harmless illusions, not to mention the grand dreams of fulfillment and adventure. (Roth, 1978: 68)

Rather than incorporating Chekhov's voice, this intertextual dimension expresses Kepesh's desire to be absorbed in Chekhov's literary universe: unable to confront the banality of his everyday unhappiness, Kepesh tries to confer literary dignity and solemnity on his pain.

After Helen has left him, Kepesh learns that she has been arrested in Hong Kong. The story of her arrest is reminiscent of her previous adventures: she was trying to inform the wife of her former lover, Jimmy Metcalf, that he has a plan to kill her. Kepesh flies there to rescue her. Here, *The Professor of Desire* displays the conflict between two narrative orders: the Chekhovian inquiry into love and Helen's screen romance adventures:

> On the plane there is time to think … It must be that I want her back, that I can't give her up, that I'm in love with her whether I've known it or not, that she is my destiny –
>
> Not one word of this stuff convinces me. Most are words I despise: Helen's kind of words, Helen's kind of thinking … Kid stuff! Movie stuff! *Screen Romance*! (80)

This fragment displays Kepesh's resistance to the model of heterosexual love envisioned by screen romance as a genre. At the same time, the interplay between Kepesh's experience and Chekhov's texts peaks when, on the flight back, Kepesh reads the essay on Chekhov written by one of his students, Kathie Steiner:

> I cry for myself, I cry for Helen, and finally I seem to cry hardest of all with realization that somehow not every last thing *has* been destroyed, that despite my consuming obsession with my marital unhappiness and my dreamy desire to call out to my young students for their help, I have somehow gotten a sweet, chubby, unharmed and as yet unhorrified daughter of Beverly Hills to end her sophomore year of college by composing the grim and beautiful lament summarizing what she calls 'Anthon Chekhov's overall philosophy of life.' … 'We are born innocent,' the girl has written, 'we suffer terrible disillusionment before we can gain knowledge, and then we fear death – and we are granted only fragmentary happiness to offset the pain'. (87)

Kepesh reads Kathie's exam as if it were about his own life. The description of tragic human destiny is conveyed through the words of a young student, who a few pages before was described eating chocolate and drinking soft drinks. The emphasis on Kathie's childishness and inexperience conveys the sense that her existential reflections are rather juvenile and conventional. Once more Kepesh's engagement with literature resonates with the notion of immaturity which *The Professor of*

Desire relentlessly connects to his masculinity. Indeed, when they break up, Helen says to him: 'Why didn't you take me into your world like a man!' (84–5). Helen's accusation is reminiscent of Birgitta, who describes Kepesh as a boy. While Birgitta's words hint at his inability to live out his transgressive erotic fantasies, Helen's frustration addresses Kepesh's ineptitude as a husband.

As with Birgitta, Kepesh experiences impotence for a second time with Helen. Kepesh's divorce marks the climax of his alienation from his own pleasure: he feels that his 'flesh [is] slowly taking its revenge' and his body is a 'benumbed and unsexed carcass' (95, 141). Like Jaromil, his erotic failures interweave with the role that literary texts play in his sexual life: while Jaromil's poems exclude the tangible existence of the female body, Kepesh (mis)reads his desire through ennobling literary frames. As he says to his therapist, Dr Klinger, his self-reflection is affected by his readings of Chekhov:

> Dr. Klinger, I assure you that I am sufficiently imbued by now with the Chekhovian bias to suspect as much myself. I know what there is to know from 'The Duel' and other stories about those committed to libidinous fallacy. I too have read and studied the great Western wisdom on the subject. I have even taught it. I have even practiced. (94)

Nevertheless, the knowledge about the 'fallacies' of eroticism Kepesh acquired throughout his literary education does not prevent him from repeating the same mistakes of the protagonists of the texts he is fond of, revealing the conscious quality of his reflection and its limits. The therapy sessions with Klinger seem to expose Kepesh's inability to imagine Helen outside of literary frames, as Klinger insists that Kepesh needs to 'demythologise' Helen: 'Look, she isn't the Helen born of Leda and Zeus, you know. She's of the earth, Mr. Kepesh – a middle class Gentile girl from Pasadena, California' (90–1). Unable now to process the sensations of sex in a libertine erotic frame in his youth, in his marriage Kepesh longs for an emotional intensity and meaning through a different literary frame.

To move on with his life, Kepesh accepts the position at the State University of New York that his friend Arthur Schonbrunn offers him. Here, Kepesh becomes friends with Ralph Baumgarten, a resident poet who is not to be reappointed because of his 'undeferential attitude toward the other gender' (115). Unmarried and lascivious, Baumgarten describes husbands like Arthur as 'vizzied' or 'vizz-ridden', as they 'slavishly conform to standards of propriety and respectability which … have been

laid down by generations of women to disarm men and domesticate men' (115). Baumgarten's male-oriented disdain for relationships between men and women induces Kepesh to wonder if his bad marital experience is emblematic of all the relations he can establish as a man with women. Because of his manners, Baumgarten has earned the disregard of Arthur's wife Deborah, who describes him as a 'murderous, conscienceless womanizer' who 'hates women' (117). When she learns about the friendship between Kepesh and Baumgarten, in view of Kepesh's grudge towards Helen, she describes Baumgarten as 'Kepesh's "alter ego," "acting out fantasies of aggression against women"' (118). Although he resents Deborah's words, Kepesh senses Baumgarten may well be a reflection of himself:

> Indeed, there are times when, listening to him speak, with such shamelessness of the wide range of his satisfaction, I feel that I am in the presence of a parodied projection of myself. A parody – a possibility … I am a Baumgarten locked in the Big House, caged in cannels, a Baumgarten Klingered and Schonbrunned into submission – while he is a Kepesh, oh, what a Kepesh! with his mouth frothing and his long tongue lolling, leash slipped and running wild. (131–2)

Kundera's Jaromil also imagines an alter ego, Xavier, who would be able to live up to his manly desires (Longinović, 1993: 155; Steinby, 2013: 120). While Jaromil's fantasies of freedom from social mores and personal limitations are saturated with the urge for abstraction and absolutism that Posnock describes as characteristic of 'immature maturity', Kepesh's feelings towards Baumgarten's machismo destabilise the illusion of a coherent identity. The anxiety Jaromil feels in confronting the abstract imperative to be a 'man' in *Life Is Elsewhere* leaves space in *The Professor of Desire* for the increasing awareness of the multiple shapes that Kepesh's masculinity might take on.

I will return to the meaning of parody in *The Professor of Desire* in the next pages, but I would like now to stress that Baumgarten is more than a misogynistic projection of Kepesh's narcissism. What strikes Kepesh the most is the fact that Baumgarten has never written a single line about his tragic childhood or unhappy family. Contrary to the conception of poetry and lyricism proposed in particular by Kundera in *Life Is Elsewhere*, Baumgarten's own poetry does not stem from the inflation of personal feeling. He rejects the emotiveness associated with the subject of the Jewish family which dominates his personal history.

When Kepesh asks him if writing poems about his family might give him access to other emotions, Baumgarten replies: 'Let the other guys have the other feelings, okay? They are used to having them. They *like* having them' (130). The silence Baumgarten imposes on his feelings is indicative of the emotional closeness between men that Schwenger finds expressed in Ernest Hemingway's fiction (1984: 24–5). But while in Hemingway the silencing of emotions reiterates a homosocial code enacted by 'true' men, Baumgarten's suppression of feelings gives rise to a heterosexual tension, and it is this that impresses Kepesh:

> … after a week of Baumgarten as bedtime reading, the interest I have long had in the fittings and fixtures of the other sex seems to me just about sated. Yet, narrow as his subject strikes me – or, rather, his means of exploration – I find in the blend of shameless erotomania, microscopic fetishism, and rather dazzling imperiousness a character at work whose unswerving sense of his own imperatives cannot but arouse my curiosity. (Roth, 1978: 128)

In Baumgarten's poems the focus on desire is such that even Kepesh feels a surfeit of it. Baumgarten's devotion to flesh proceeds by delving into sexuality in unrelenting and unrestrained ways, to the point where Deborah says she has never read anything so dehumanised in her life. Resistant to feeling, his poems are restricted to a representation of the materiality of the human body outside of any sentimental/emotional frame or cultural/historical perspective, which is what the professor who reviews Baumgarten's second book of poetry in *The Times* denounces. By focusing exclusively on his sexual urges, Baumgarten's poetry destabilises the binary opposition in *The Professor of Desire* between the notion of desire as culturally embedded and the fantasy of an unmediated experience of sexuality. The marginal presence of Baumgarten in the novel, and the fact the reader has no direct access to his verses, but can only read comments about them, casts uncertainty on his poetry. Whether his lyrics passively respond only to his sexual imperatives or represent an attempt to exorcise them remains unknown.

On the other hand, Kepesh's feelings towards Baumgarten emerge more clearly when Kepesh alludes to Franz Kafka's famous tale 'A hunger artist'. Kepesh compares Baumgarten to the panther that replaces the hunger artist, who has died from starvation because he was so alien to himself that he was unable to decide what food he liked. The artist's starvation emerges as a metaphor of the alienation Kepesh lives in relation to his sexuality. The allusion to Kafka's 'A hunger artist' prefigures

a general transition in Kepesh's fantasies from the Chekhovian solemn imaginary to the oppressive and alienating world of Kafka's fiction, and I shall now examine how this new influence on Kepesh exacerbates his struggle for self-reflexivity.

Reading Kafka: self-referential masculinity

During his new relationship with 24-year-old teacher Claire Ovington, Kepesh finds the stability needed to continue and complete his book dedicated to 'the subject of romantic disillusionment' in Chekhov's narrative (Roth, 1978: 147; Sánchez-Canales, 2014). Along with a search for intimacy, romantic disillusionment is one of the two recurring themes of Chekhov, as Philip Callow observes in his biography of the Russian author (1998: xii). This sense of disillusion emerges in 'Lady with the dog', a tale about an extramarital affair which Kepesh reads to his students.[9] Returning to the writing of his book on Chekhov, Kepesh concentrates his attention on the lovers' suffering and the impossibility of their illicit love:

> I am watching how Chekhov, simply and clearly, though not quite so pitilessly as Flaubert, reveals the humiliations and failures – worst of all, the destructive power of those who seek a way *out* of the shell of restrictions and convention … out of the painful marital situations … into what they take to be a vibrant and desirable life. (148)

Evoking a horizon of expectations that are never satisfied in Chekhov's narrative, Kepesh's observations address the distance between the public and private lives of his characters which drama scholar Geoffrey Borny would go on to place at the heart of 'Chekhov's vision of reality' (2006: 79). Borny writes that 'Chekhov systematically creates a gap between his characters' two lives. The gap between the inner world of his characters' private beliefs, aims and hopes, and the outer world of their public actions and relationship with other characters is presented in terms of their failure to realise their aspirations' (79). This binary understanding of experience in Chekhov's narrative evokes *Madame Bovary* (and *Don Quixote*): Kepesh himself emphasises the analogy between Flaubert and Chekhov. The contrast between inner and outer lives resonates in the opposition between Kepesh's romantic expectations about love and his everyday life with Helen. While the disillusionment of Emma Bovary and Don Quixote stems from the impossibility of living up to the expectations moulded by their reading, Kepesh is inspired by Chekhovian characters who directly experience disillusionment, and in fact identifies with them

because of it. This identification informs 'Man in a shell', the long essay Kepesh dedicates to Chekhov and names after the title of Chekhov's tale. Kepesh believes he has lived a self-imposed imprisonment like the protagonist of 'Man in a shell' Belikov, who lives a grey existence shaped by his own inhibitions. In this critical work, Kepesh addresses the question of literary mediation by describing Layevsky, the protagonist of 'The duel', as a 'literary-minded seducer' and seems to allude to his own experience (149). Similarly, the account of the romantic misadventure that turns the landowner into a misogynist in 'Ariadne' may hint at the disillusionment Kepesh experiences during his marriage and after it. Having completed his work, Kepesh hopes he has overcome his personal crisis. He has the feeling that Claire's dedication to ordinary life can protect him from his own imagination – 'There's no dreaming going on there – just steady, dedicated *living*' (149). From the standpoint of his new life, Kepesh wonders if his marriage represented the continuation of 'a longish and misguided youth' out of which he has finally emerged (151). The completion of his critical work offers Kepesh the sense of having entered into the sphere of adulthood and emancipated himself from the youthful fantasies that permeated his marital life.

Kepesh and Claire travel to Europe, starting with 'Byron's Italy' (67). Seeing the places he visited with Birgitta, the memories of her total sexual availability start to awaken Kepesh's dissatisfaction. In confronting Claire's rejection of certain erotic practices, Kepesh starts feeling what he describes as a 'sexual despair' which becomes the inspirational core of his future teaching (162):

> I have with me paperbacks by Mishima, Gombrowicz, and Genet, novels for next year's comparative literature class. I have decided to organize the first semester's reading around the subject of erotic desire, beginning with these disquieting contemporary novels dealing with prurient and iniquitous sexuality … and ending the term's work with three masterworks concerned with illicit and ungovernable passions, whose assault is made by other means: *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Death in Venice*. (169)

Kepesh's academic readings reverberate with his sexual concerns, as he now sees his desire as disquieting, reminiscent of the ways in which Lurie interrogates his desire using literary references in *Disgrace*. Among the authors he selects for his course, in Kafka's narrative Kepesh finds a literary form through which to explore his sexual despair.[10] Before travelling to Bruges, where Kepesh is going to read a paper about 'Kafka's

preoccupation with spiritual starvation' (156–7), he and Claire visit Prague. In the city of Kafka, Kepesh talks with Soska, a dissident who lost his job as a professor after the Russian invasion. The ambiguous nature of Kepesh's engagement with Kafka emerges from their conversations:

> What I started to say about Kafka, about reading Kafka, is that stories of obstructed, thwarted K.'s banging their heads against invisible walls, well they suddenly had a disturbing new resonance for me. It was all a little less remote, suddenly, than the Kafka I'd read in college. In my own way, you see, I had come to know that sense of having been summoned – or of imagining yourself summoned – to a calling that turns out to be beyond you, yet in the face of every compromising or farcical consequence, being unable to wise up and relinquish the goal. (163)

Kepesh acknowledges that his relationship with Kafka's writing has changed. His approach to Kafka seems to be increasingly defined by self-indulgency, self-absorption, solipsism – elements often emphasised in the criticism of Roth's fiction (Parker Royal, 2012: 5). In reconsidering his previous sexual relationships, Kepesh now has the sense that his erotic struggles were Kafkaesque, since he reads Kafka exclusively in the light of his own sexual anxieties: 'I sometimes wondered if *The Castle* isn't in fact linked to Kafka's own erotic blockage – a book engaged at every level with not reaching a climax' (163). By stressing the protagonist's farcical self-oriented approach to Kafka's narrative, *The Professor of Desire* questions the extent to which this orientation can be avoided.

What is the calling to which Kepesh feels summoned? In order to explore the meaning that Kafka and his narrative assume in *The Professor of Desire*, I would like now to examine Roth's engagement with Kafka in a wider narrative context including the 1972 novella *The Breast*, in which the character of Kepesh appears for the first time, and the 1973 experimental essay '"I always wanted you to admire my fasting"; or Looking at Kafka'. Inspired by Kafka's 'The metamorphosis' as well as Nikolai Gogol's 'The nose', *The Breast* is a satire in which Kepesh's sudden, inexplicable transformation into a huge breast opens the narration up to an interrogation of masculinity and subjectivity (Shostak, 1999). 'Looking at Kafka' is composed of an essay reading Kafka's narrative in the light of his masculinity and a short tale in which a boy named Philip Roth tells the story of the relationship between his aunt and his teacher, whose nickname is 'Kafka'. Roth focuses on the passages from 'Letter to his father' which express Kafka's aversion to marriage:

> 'I am mentally incapable of marrying,' he writes his father in the forty-five page letter he gave to his mother to deliver. '… the moment I make up my mind to marry I can no longer sleep, my head burns day and night, life can no longer be called life.' He explains why. 'Marrying is barred to me,' he tells his father, 'because it is your domain. Sometimes I imagine the map of the world spread out and you stretched diagonally across it. And I feel as if I could consider living in only those regions that are not covered by you or are not within your reach. And in keeping the conception I have of your magnitude, these are not many and not very comforting regions – and marriage is not among them.' (Roth, 1985: 306)

Roth underlines that Kafka's resistance to marriage derives from the conflictual relationship with his father. Kafka felt that marriage was an extension of his father's will: becoming a 'man', by being a husband (and eventually a father), meant fulfilling his father's expectations. For Roth this provides a key not only to Kafka's life, but also to his narrative: 'We know that the "illusory emptiness" at which K. gazed, upon first entering the village and looking up through the mist and darkness to the Castle, was no more vast and incomprehensible than the idea of himself as husband and father was to the young Kafka' (1985: 308). What Medin describes as 'Kafka's interpretative elusiveness' (2010: 12) allows for a proliferation of interpretations of his writing, including Roth's gendered reading. The interconnectedness of Kafka's writing and masculinity expressed in 'Looking at Kafka' prefigures Kepesh's self-referential interpretation of Kafka in view of his own struggles with sexuality and gender identity. In *The Professor of Desire*, Kepesh focuses on 'Letter to his father' as well, as he remembers that he taught a course on Kafka at university, for which his students were required to read all of Kafka's fiction, including his diary and his letters to Milena, in addition to the biography written by his best friend and editor, Max Brod. Kepesh returns to one of the questions he asked in the final exam for that course: 'What does Kafka mean when he says to his father "My writing is all about you," and adds, "yet it did take its course in the direction determined by me"?' (1978: 157). Underlining Kafka's claim for ownership of his writing, the question reveals how – despite Kafka feeling unable to emancipate himself from his authoritative father – his writing and bachelorhood display his resistance to that paternal influence (Hawes, 2008: 132–43). Recalling Posnock's distinction, Kafka's recalcitrance to marriage and the conventional male role seems to emerge as an expression of 'mature immaturity' of his own. Nonetheless, as Louis Begley's (2008) analysis of

Kafka's letters to his lovers shows, Kafka's feelings about marriage were more conflictual than Kepesh describes. As in the case of the reading of Rimbaud's motto proposed by Kundera's authorial narrator in *Life Is Elsewhere*, I am more interested in the way Roth's insights into Kafka's narrative reverberate in *The Professor of Desire* than in discussing the plausibility of this reading itself.

The novel's engagement with Kafka is further developed through the lectures that Kepesh imagines giving his students. Reminiscent of the ape protagonist of Kafka's 'A report to an academy', Kepesh addresses his students as 'Honored Members of Literature 341' (1978: 171). He translates the meta-discourse of the ape on his experience as a man into a metaliterary discourse on the best approach to literature. Kepesh invites his students to restrain themselves from using terms such as structure, epiphany and persona: 'I suggest this in the hope that if you talk about *Madame Bovary* in more or less the same tongue you use with the grocer, or your lover, you may be placed in a more intimate, a more interesting, in what might even be called a more *referential* relationship with Flaubert and his heroine' (173). Kepesh recommends that his students avoid applying critical notions and devices which would render sexual impulse abstract and banal when reading *Madame Bovary* and the other texts he has selected for his course. By insisting on the need for a more referential, unmediated dialogue with literature, Kepesh urges his students to 'locate these books in the world of experience' and to 'learn something of value about life in one of its most puzzling and maddening aspects' (173–4). If *The Professor of Desire* seems to imply that a self-oriented approach to literature is unavoidable, Kepesh's own lecture is more ambitious and perhaps more delusional: it constitutes a metaliterary manifesto which presents self-referentiality as the only productive approach to literature, the only one able to connect immediately and directly with its effects. Rather than conceiving of reading literature as part of our everyday experience, Kepesh looks at literature and experience as two separate domains which are, however, subject to the same dynamics and hermeneutics, reminiscent of Gombrowicz's understanding of form. While Gombrowicz's narrative stressed the pervasiveness of form, Kepesh's emphasis is on how the interpretations of texts and the self are inextricable: this narrative understanding of experience opens up the metaliterary discourse articulated by *The Professor of Desire* to deeply Quixotic concerns.

Kepesh interrogates his own narcissistic desire to have his life read by his students – 'What makes it compellingly necessary, or at all appropriate, that I present myself to you young strangers in the guise

not of your teacher but as the first of this semester's texts?' (174) – while, at the same time, he seems to resist textualisation, as he tells his students: 'I am devoted to fiction, and I assure you that in time I will tell you whatever I may know about it, but in truth nothing lives in me like my life' (175). His urge to preserve the authorship of the fiction of his own life is reminiscent of the character of Don Quixote, who, in the second volume written by Cervantes, learns that someone has written a book inspired by his life and that characters in this book have read it. The book Don Quixote refers to actually exists; it was written by Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda during the 10 years between the two volumes written by Cervantes, which were published respectively in 1605 and 1615. For the first time in the history of literature, a character can realise he is being read by someone and tries to reappropriate his own story. The words Américo Castro wrote on this episode fit Don Quixote as well as Kepesh: both characters represent a 'human-literary figure' and call for 'the literary interpretation of flesh and blood' (1969: 161). Kepesh's longing for authenticity is presented through this parallel between himself and Kafka: 'Franz Kafka was real, Brod was not making him up. And so am I real, nobody is making me up, other than myself' (Roth, 1978: 188). Roth addresses the way Max Brod shaped the critical understanding of Kafka and his work. Revisionism about the reception of Kafka has increasingly stressed the intrusive role that Brod played as an editor in creating the figure of Kafka as an artist. In his introduction to a collection of Kafka's stories, the British novelist Adam Thirlwell comments on Brod's editing of the works by Kafka. Thirlwell regards Brod as the most influential interpreter of Kafka, but strongly criticises the reading of Kafka that Brod proposes: 'Brod's overall project' was 'to sanctify Kafka, to make him a writer of teleological scruple, a great writer with a message of existential loneliness without God' (Thirlwell, 2012: xxv). Brod's idealised reading of Kafka expresses his own feeling of friendship and admiration for the author. Even though Kepesh claims that Brod did not invent Kafka, he resists Brod's canonical interpretation of Kafka by reading his narrative in the light of a supposed erotic blockage. Embracing and resisting Brod's personal reading of Kafka, *The Professor of Desire* reminds the reader of the inevitability of a self-oriented approach to literature: it places the debate between lived experience and fiction that Cervantes incepted in the origin of the novel at the heart of its examination of masculinity and desire (Alter, 1975; Brink, 1998; Waugh, 1984).

Of flesh and text

Kafka's writing emerges as a means for Kepesh to express his alienation from his own life when he paraphrases 'A report to an academy' in the opening of the imaginary speech he gives to his students: 'an open account to you of the life I formerly led as a human being' (Roth, 1978: 175). Even though Kepesh has overcome his ambition to be a literary seducer and to live the romantic delusion, he still feels that his desire and his body are foreign to him as much as Kafka's ape is alien to life as a human being. Kepesh's estrangement enlivens his self-absorption: Soska's story of struggles against an authoritarian regime does not arouse much sympathy in Kepesh but only inspires another way of expressing alienation from his body: 'I can compare the body's utter single-mindedness, its cold indifference and absolute contempt for the well-being of the spirit, to some unyielding, authoritarian regime' (Roth, 1978: 162). Comparing his body to a dictatorship, Kepesh conveys the oppression he feels because of a lack of control over his impulses (along with his lack of empathy towards his interlocutor, who actually struggled against a political regime). In his review of *The Professor of Desire*, Kundera describes Kepesh's sexual struggles as exemplary of contemporary men's relationships with their bodies:

> … in Philip Roth sexual freedom is nothing more than something given, acquired, universal, banal, codified: not dramatic, tragic, or lyrical.
>
> …
>
> Man no longer finds himself in opposition to laws, parents, and conventions. Everything is allowed – the only remaining adversary is our own body, stripped, demystified, unmasked. Philip Roth is a great historian of American eroticism. He is also the poet of that strange solitude of the man, abandoned, face to face with his own body. (1988a: 165)

Kundera situates Roth's writing within the context of US society in the seventies and depicts a paradoxical scenario. Interpreting the changes of customs associated with this decade as a magical removal of the societal and moral discourses disciplining sexuality (Foucault, 1990), Kundera believes men are confronted with a body which is foreign to their identities. Kepesh's difficulties strike me instead as arising from the oscillation between an eroticised body and one stripped of desire. Considering Kepesh's fascination with Kafka's spiritual starvation

symbolised by 'A hunger artist', it appears that hunger and appetite also characterise his affair with Claire. In the climax of their passion, Kepesh and Claire 'have come to the very brink of tearing flesh with cannibalized jaws', but when they 'no longer *succumb* to desire', their bodies seem to lose their meaning outside the dynamics of desire: 'Teeth … are simply teeth again, and tongues are tongues, and limbs are limbs' (Roth, 1978: 188–9). For Kepesh, the eroticised body and its imperatives stimulate the generation of literary meanings, but the body devoid of desire is a meaningless space he cannot inhabit.

The tension between literary meanings and the body permeates *The Professor of Desire* and Kepesh's engagement with Kafka. Not even in his dreams can Kepesh be emancipated from Kafka's universe. He dreams of meeting a tour guide, who turns out to be Herbie, the comedian readers hear about at the start of the novel. Herbie offers Kepesh the opportunity to interview Eva, an older sex worker whom Kafka used to visit. The oneiric vision confirms the impact that Herbie's scatological humour had on Kepesh. Derek Parker Royal suggests that Herbie's influence on Kepesh is more significant than Chekhov's and Flaubert's, describing him as Kepesh's Virgil: '[Herbie] Bratasky becomes the professor's guide … into the very depths of Kafkadom, at the very centre of which sits Kafka's aged prostitute' (Parker Royal, 2007: 23–4). The meeting with the sex worker radicalises Roth's ironic attitude to Kafka already expressed in *The Breast*, by desacralising not just his literary works but also the sanctity of the figure of Kafka as created by Brod. This vitriolic irony fully emerges in Kepesh's interview with Eva, whose biblical name prefigures the 'othering' to which she is subjected. The questions about Kafka's childhood that Kepesh asks Eva and his comments to her answer seem to mock his own critical attempt to link Kafka's biographical details to his oeuvre. The self-mockery of this metaliterary analysis of Kafka illuminates the interconnectedness of sexual experience and fiction as Kepesh's imaginary speech unfolds: 'Next question: What, if any is the relationship between Kafka's whore and today's story, "The Hunger Artist?"' (1978: 178). Interrogated about Kafka's sexual performances, Eva offers to show him her genitals, which Herbie regards as 'a national literary monument' (181). Consenting to look at Eva's genitalia, Kepesh provocatively converts her body into an 'epistemophilic project' and 'a prime vehicle of narrative significations' (Brooks, 1993: xvii, 5). He presents her genitals to his students as a site of literary knowledge that is key to understanding Kafka: 'You must face the unseemly thing itself! … There, *there* is your final exam' (1978: 181). By presenting her body within a misogynistic and ageist frame, Kepesh configures her genitals as the object of abjection at the heart of Kafka's sexual experience and narrative.

Visiting Kafka's grave, Kepesh wonders: 'Where better for irony abound than à la tombe de Franz Kafky?' (1978: 166). The comic potential of Kafka's works has been emphasised by Roth himself, who has acknowledged that his writing was influenced by 'a stand-up comic named Franz Kafka and a very funny bit he does called "The metamorphosis"' (2014: 69). But to what extent is this desecrating reading subverting Kafka's legacy? I would like to suggest that by choosing Kafka's narrative as a means through which to ironically explore his inability to read his masculinity and heterosexual desire, Kepesh is inscribing himself into a literary genealogy that connects Kafka to Flaubert. To clarify this point, let me refer to Thirlwell, who argues that Kafka should be read in the context of European fiction and Flaubert in particular:

> For Kafka's tradition is the ironic and stylish tradition of European fiction, deriving from Flaubert. As such, it is an examination of psychology; more precisely it is an examination of the constant temptations of vanity and other illusions, the constant inability of humans to introspect correctly.
>
> In his third blue octavo notebook, for instance, Kafka writes: 'How pathetically scanty my self-knowledge is compared with say, my knowledge of my room. (Evening.) Why? There is no such thing as observation of the inner world, as there is of the outer world. At least descriptive psychology is probably, taken as a whole, a form of anthropomorphism, a nibbling at our own limits. The inner world can only be experienced, not described.' (Thirlwell, 2012: xxi–xxii)

In exposing the limits of Kepesh's self-reflexivity in understanding his life and his masculinity, *The Professor of Desire* reflects Kafka's and Flaubert's scepticism about the ability to introspect correctly. The web of intertextual references Kepesh draws on in attempting to read his heterosexual desire (the interpretations of his first sexual experiences as libertine adventures, and of his relationships with Helen and Claire as Chekhovian texts) fail to provide him with any understanding about the nature of his own feelings and – in Kafka's words – his inner world. Irony allows for a critical distance that illuminates his ignorance of emotions while simultaneously protecting him from the emotional costs of engaging with their elusiveness. In Kafka, Kepesh discovers the expression of a literary lineage in which the failure of introspection and the elusiveness of emotions are bundled into a performance of masculinity. Kepesh's reading of 'Letter to his father' and his celebration

of Kafka's resistance to marriage are reminiscent of the way in which Kafka identified himself with Flaubert as a man and writer. The influence of Flaubert on Kafka is well known: in a 1912 letter to Felice Bauer, whom he was twice engaged to, Kafka writes that he has always felt like Flaubert's 'spiritual son, albeit a weak and awkward one' (1974: 42). Kafka admired Flaubert for his decision to not get married and dedicate himself to literature (Mingelgrun, 1971). 'I am bachelor and a recluse', Flaubert wrote about himself (1954: 186). Flaubert's and Kafka's resistance to the imperatives of heteronormativity illuminates the co-dependency of masculinity and literature at the heart of the literary genealogy which validates Kepesh's failure of introspection.

The irreconcilability of masculinity and self-knowledge in *The Professor of Desire* is expressed by Kepesh's interest in Colette. In surveying the American literary landscape, Kepesh cannot find anyone 'as sympathetic to the range of the body's urgings, as attuned to the world's every sensuous offering' as Colette, 'a connoisseur of the finest gradations of amorous feeling' (Roth, 1978: 191). Just like in the case of Birgitta and Helen, Kepesh projects his masculine fantasy of a total consonance with pleasure onto the female, reiterating again his sense of a masculine inability to access pleasure. However, Kepesh's description of Colette reveals a further insight into his delusion. He describes Colette as 'the most pragmatic of sensualists [due to] her capacity for protective self-scrutiny in perfect balance with the capacity to be carried away' (191). Kepesh connects her capacity to abandon herself to her desire with her capacity for introspection. Experiencing pleasure is presented as conditional on awareness of one's sensations and emotions. Furthermore, Colette is described as 'immune to fanaticism of any sort' (191): an expression which seems to hint at Kepesh's blinding investment into literary notions of desire which have emerged as an obstacle to his self-understanding.

Let me return to Kundera's reading of *The Professor of Desire*. Kundera interprets Kepesh's feeling of isolation, 'the solitude of a man confronted by sex', in opposition to the love between his parents (1988a: 165). The spectre of an ideal, romantic love as the right way to experience heterosexual desire is introduced from the beginning of the novel, when Elisabeth writes in her letter, 'I was in love with someone and what I did had nothing to do with love. It was like I no more was human being' (33). This ideal of love that Kepesh cannot experience in his marriage is embodied by his parents. Their presence pervades the novel with 'the nostalgia for the love itself, for that moving and old-fashioned love of which the modern world has been deprived' (165). The search

for an emotional frame in which to embed erotic impulse lies at the heart of Kepesh's intellectualism, and is symbolised by the love between his parents:

> This is not the futile intellectual exhibitionism of that type of literature which narcissistically refers back to itself. Rather, it is a way to preserve the past within the novel's horizon, and not to abandon the characters of fiction to an empty void in which the ancestral voices will no longer be audible. (165–6)

Unlike Kundera, Hermione Lee reads intertextuality in *The Professor of Desire* as a subversion of literary legacy driven by the irreconcilability of body and mind: 'The desecration of Kafka's image in the dream violently subverts the lecture's attempt to reconcile the conscientious, dedicated life of the mind with the shameful secret life of the body' (Lee, 1982: 68). I believe the concepts of desecration and preservation interwoven in the intertextuality of *The Professor of Desire* outlined by Kundera and Lee are complementary. Interpreting this oscillation in light of Gombrowicz's understanding of form, I contend that they encapsulate the multifaceted relationship that Kepesh establishes with literary and cultural forms of heterosexual desire. As the narrator of *Ferdydurke* says about our relationship with form, 'we conform to it or we violate and demolish it, or we let it create us' (Gombrowicz, 2000: 80). Kepesh continues the literary ironic tradition of Flaubert and Kafka, while simultaneously desecrating it. Equally, his desire to transgress the sanctioned forms of heterosexual love echoes his nostalgia for the intimacy shared by his parents and his fascination for Chekhov's romantic disillusionment. While Gombrowicz diagnoses 'Heterosexual Form … as a site of masquerade, restriction and insincerity' (Sołtysik, 1998: 259), for Roth it exposes how the need for cultural and literary models to conceive of desire coexists with the relentless urge to challenge and destabilise them, revealing their epistemological potential as well as their inadequacy and contradictions. As David Brauner argues, Roth's writing radically deconstructs men's heterosexual desire: 'it emphasizes the inescapably embodied nature of sexuality while at the same time demonstrating its imaginative, discursive possibilities … sexuality is contingent on particular cultural and historical contexts but also insists on the ways in which it can resist dominant value systems' (2021: 293). In *The Professor of Desire*, the tension between the materiality of the body, the socially embedded forms of heterosexual love and the literary models of masculinity enlivens an increasing sense of indeterminacy. At the end of the novel, Kepesh can only shift from

one literary model to another – 'I am no sympathetic, unspectacular sufferer out of a muted Chekhov tale of ordinary human affliction. No, more hideous by far, more like Gogol's berserk and mortified amputee' (Roth, 1978: 247). But does the impossibility of introspection exhaust the narrative function of intertextuality in *The Professor of Desire*?

Kepesh asks his students why it is 'compellingly necessary' for him to present his life as a text (174). The title of the novel stresses that he is a 'professor'. Considering his academic role, 'professor' might be interpreted as 'expert'; however, the novel repeatedly underlines that Kepesh does not have any knowledge about the nature of desire. He tells his students that he hopes to learn something about it when planning their course. As Kevin West suggests, a more accurate definition for the word 'professor' in the title is '"to affirm or declare one's faith in or allegiance to"': 'Kepesh […] indeed proclaims this allegiance and faith – professes himself – in the contemplated address to his erotic desire students' (2005: 236–7). Understanding Kepesh's investment in heterosexual masculinity as an act of faith sheds light on the performativity of his desire while conferring a mystical dimension to the unintelligibility of his urgings: 'the time has come', Kepesh tells his students, 'to begin to disclose the undisclosable – the story of the *professor's* desire' (Roth, 1978: 174). Rather than suggesting that any knowledge of his desire might be revealed, by conceiving of his life as a Quixotic text to be read to his students, Kepesh seems to invite his readers into perpetuating his profession of desire and its irreducible contradictions.

Notes

1 Originally written in Czech, *Life Is Elsewhere* was first published in France in 1973. My analysis is based on the French version of the novel, which Kundera has personally revised and considers 'equal in authenticity to the Czech text' (Kundera, 2000: 263). The quotations included here are from the English edition of the novel translated from the revised French version by Aaron Asher in collaboration with Kundera.

2 In his feminist criticism of Kundera's misrepresentation of women, O'Brien underlines the exploitation of 'images of female weakness' and 'male sexual control' in *Life Is Elsewhere* (1995: 45, 60). Mama's opportunity for self-definition is 'associated with her being a man's sexual object' (60). This reading of Kundera's narrative is challenged by Karen von Kunes, who considers the representation of women's lack of opportunity rather realistic in view of the social context of Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. Underlining Western critics' limited insights into the enclosed society of Czechoslovakia, von Kunes argues that dismissing Kundera as a misogynist is a 'simplistic conclusion' (2019: 152).

3 Robert Porter highlights the depth of the study driving *Life Is Elsewhere*: 'Lermontov provided much material, as did indeed the inter-war proletarian poets, Orten and Wolker. The greatest single inspiration for the novel was Wolker's mother's memoirs. Moreover, all the major events in Jaromil's life find a factual basis in the lives of the great poets' (1981: 58).

4 Kundera's statement is partly inaccurate. As Frédéric Martel observes (2021: 14), Rimbaud is often quoted incorrectly. Rimbaud's original formulation from the poem 'Foolish Virgin'

included in *A Season in Hell* is 'La vraie vie est absente', which Wyatt Mason translates as 'Real life is elsewhere' (2002b: 204). In his manifesto, Breton writes 'L'existence est ailleurs', which Richard Saver and Helen Lane translate as 'Existence is elsewhere' (1969: 47). *La vie est ailleurs* – the title of the French version novel which Kundera considers the authentic version of the text – mixes Rimbaud's and Breton's words.

5 Examining Kepesh's alienation and self-disgust, Brauner (2016) offers a persuasive queer reading of *The Professor of Desire*.

6 In addition to Posnock, Marek Parys (2014) offers a comparative analysis of the linguistic performances of the narrators in Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* and Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* as a form of resistance to cultural determinism.

7 The scholarship examining Jewish tropes and the Jewish-American experience in Roth's narrative is extensive. To learn more about the topic, see: Hermione Lee (1982), Alan Cooper (1996), Stephen Wade (1996), Mark Shechner (2003), Timothy Parrish (2007) and Jennifer Glaser (2021).

8 The English translations of the titles from Russian vary: 'About love' and 'Man in a shell' are translated as 'Concerning love (1898)' and 'A hard case (1898)' respectively in *The Oxford Chekhov* collection (1975).

9 'Lady with the dog' is translated as 'A lady with a dog (1899)' in *The Oxford Chekhov* collection (Vol. IX: 125–41).

10 Several critics have focused on Kafka's influence on Roth. Geoffrey Green (1997) argues that, for Roth, Kafka is a literary father. Morton Levitt (1982) takes a different stance and argues that Roth's engagement with Kafka should not be seen as an attempt to establish a Jewish literary genealogy. Although Kafka makes of Jewish experience in Central Europe a universal symbol, in his narrative the world 'Jew' never appears. By opposition, the theme of Jewishness is pervasive in Roth's fiction. Daniel Medin's *Three Sons* (2010) is significant for my study, since it identifies in Kafka a common genealogy for Roth and Coetzee even though it does not focus directly on *The Professor of Desire*.

3
Authorship

Kundera's *Slowness*

Nostalgia and masculine archetypes in Kundera and Roth

While Kundera's previous fictional works were originally written in Czech, *La Lenteur* was written in French and went on to be translated into English, entitled *Slowness*. This novel completes Kundera's gradual shift towards French as his language of choice for fiction and nonfiction writing (Woods, 2006), which attests to the importance that his move to France held in his life (Søren, 2008). Although the novel is generally considered a break from those that came before it (Miletic, 2008: 231; Ricard, 1996; Scarpetta, 1996), I intend to argue that *Slowness* draws on the reflection on masculinity and literary models of heterosexual desire that was so seminal in Kundera's previous work.

My starting point is the dialogue on the literary archetypes of masculinity that Kundera and Roth have established in their personal encounters (Roth Pierpoint, 2013: 91–4) and their fictional and nonfiction works. In 'Some notes on Roth', Kundera addresses *The Professor of Desire* and considers the idea that desire seems to have been freed by moral and religious concerns in the twentieth century. Kundera's reflections evoke those of Dr Havel, the protagonist of 'Symposium' and 'Dr. Havel after twenty years', two of the short stories included in his *Laughable Loves*. Havel focuses his attention on the figure of Don Juan, saying: 'Don Juan, after all, was a conqueror … A Great Conqueror. But I ask you, how can you be a conqueror in a domain where no one refuses you, where everything is possible and everything is permitted? Don Juan's era has come to an end' (Kundera, 1991: 140–1). Echoing his character Havel, in 'Some notes on Roth', Kundera touches on how the sexual revolution eased the ways in which Western societies disciplined sex. This societal change deprived the figure of Don Juan of its tragic dimension stemming

from the transgression of rigid Christian morality and the law of the father (Dumoulié, 1993: 27; Macchia, 1991). In the contemporary scenario Kundera describes, Havel is a comic version of Don Juan who aims to seduce women who have not been educated to resist their impulses. Havel himself states, 'I am at most a figure of comedy' (Kundera, 1991: 142). As I shall discuss in the following pages, this sense of the ridiculous is crucial in interpreting the representations of masculinity of Kundera and Roth.

Laughable Loves continues the dialogue of Kundera and Roth. In 1974, Roth wrote the introduction to its US edition. He observes that in these stories 'Don Juanism is viewed as a sport played by a man against a team of women' and 'a way of life in which women … willingly participate as "sexual objects"' (1985: 262–3). Besides presenting the relationship between men and women as antagonistic and hinting at the objectification of women in Kundera's narrative, this review, published three years before *The Professor of Desire*, particularly strikes me because it anticipates the conflicting feelings of Kepesh, the central character in that novel. On the one hand, it outlines the scenario in which Kepesh's fantasies as a seducer are to be frustrated by Birgitta's emancipation. On the other hand, in the story entitled 'Let the old dead make room for the young dead', Roth notices a 'detached Chekhovian tenderness' that echoes in the feeling of nostalgia experienced by his own character Kepesh (1985: 262–3). The 'concern with the painful and touching consequences of time passing and old selves dying' that Roth detects in *Laughable Loves* is a theme characteristic of Chekhov's narrative which strongly emerges when Kepesh's father pays him a visit. Kundera underlines how *The Professor of Desire* is permeated with the nostalgia for the way Kepesh's parents love each other: this idea of love is set in opposition to the solitude Roth's characters experience when confronting sexual freedom, as discussed in Chapter Two. This sense of nostalgia is the focus of Eva Le Grand's study of Kundera's fiction, entitled *Kundera, or The Memory of Desire*. In examining primarily Kundera's works written in Czech, Le Grand (1999: 93) argues that his narrative engages with Don Juan's 'double textual journey, both scriptural and erotic'. Kundera's modern Don Juans express 'a desire for memory – borne by a nostalgic gaze back to Europe's past, to its "erotic dream"', as Havel witnesses (Le Grand, 1999: 6). Le Grand shows that Don Juan is not the only figure of eroticism structuring Kundera's fiction: his novels are pervaded by the tension between Don Juan and another mythical literary figure of Eros: Tristan. While Don Juan emerges as an expression of 'asentimental eroticism' in Kundera's characters, Tristan characterises the archetype of the 'sentimental love' which fascinates Jaromil in *Life Is Elsewhere* and is described as the defining quality of the

homo sentimentalis in *Immortality* (Le Grand, 1999: 5). Referring to Denis de Rougemont's *L'Amour et l'Occident* (translated into English as *Love in the Western World*), Le Grand underlines that, while Don Juan and Tristan are traditionally presented as antithetical to each other, Kundera 'shows the two figures of desire in double exposure in their disturbing proximity and interchangeability' (97). I return to *Life Is Elsewhere* to contend that Jaromil displays the proximity of these two archetypes: despite exploring sentimental/lyrical love in his poems, he dreams of being a seducer called Xavier. Le Grand's analysis is essential in identifying two recurrent models of heterosexual masculinity whose tracks, as I argued in Chapter Two, we can find not only in Kundera's narrative, but also in the fictions of Roth.

This 'erotics of dialogue' between Roth and Kundera illuminates the role they each attribute to these literary archetypes in shaping heterosexual desire (Brauner, 2021: 293). Kundera's narrative creates several variations on the archetypes of Don Juan and Tristan, articulating their opposition in different ways while also challenging it. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera imagines womanisers who act according to the impulses embodied by both Don Juan and Tristan, describing them in terms of literary forms: the lyrical seducer projects his ideal of love onto one lover after another and can be seen as a serial *homo sentimentalis*, while the epic seducer considers a woman merely for the aesthetic features he wants to add to his list of conquests (1999: 197). In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera (1988b: 137–8) returns to this classification and explains that he has derived the distinction between the epic and the lyric from Hegel: 'the lyric is the expression of a self-revealing subjectivity', while 'the epic arises from the urge to seize hold of the objectivity of the world'. In the manner of *Life Is Elsewhere*, a monolithic understanding of literary genres is entangled with the attitudes a man can take in his relationships with women. Kundera regrets that he had to change the translations of this opposition in the French version of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in order to adopt notions more familiar to the French reader, turning 'the lyrical womanizer into the romantic fornicator, and the epic womanizer into the libertine fornicator' (1988b: 138).[1] However, insofar as the archetype of Kundera's epic seducer stems from the figure of Don Juan, Don Juanism and *libertinage* should not be confused. I adopt here the term *libertinage*, following Jean-Pierre Dubost (1998), who underlines the heterogeneity of libertine works and argues that we cannot identify a genuine libertine discourse which would justify the use of 'libertinism'.[2] Kundera's adaptations reveal how he uses literary genres to model the typologies of masculinity he conceives in a way that reveals his struggle to think of masculinity beyond the realms of heterosexuality

while, at the same time, compressing the expressions of heterosexual desire into a dyad (Dean and Fischer, 2020). Nevertheless, *Slowness* offers a further insight into the way Kundera thinks about the relation between literary models and masculinity. Its narrator, the fictional author Milanku, reflects on heterosexual relationships by adopting not a masculine archetype as a model, but rather the figure of a female seducer from a libertine novella. Drawing on past literary representation in a more conscious way than the protagonists of *Disgrace*, *Life Is Elsewhere* and *The Professor of Desire*, Milanku's masculine fantasy of femininity is at the heart of his authorial creation, which emancipates him from an acritical assimilation of the archetypes of the seducer and the romantic lover.

Ridiculous men and imagined women

Milanku describes the encounter he had had thirty years before to an American woman. The meeting is dated back to the sixties, 'the era of *total abandon*' as Kundera describes it, quoting from Roth in his study on *The Professor of Desire* (1988a: 164). The woman lectured him on sexual liberation and depicted what Milanku defines as 'The religion of orgasm', the reduction of coition to an obstacle to overcome as quickly as possible to reach sexual climax (Kundera, 1996: 4). Recalling this meeting, Milanku asks himself: 'Why has the pleasure of slowness disappeared?' (4). He elucidates the ambiguous notion of the 'pleasure of slowness' by reference to Vivant Denon's *Point de lendemain*, a libertine novella published in 1777 and translated into English as *No Tomorrow*, detailing the night of love between Madame de T. and the young Chevalier. The metaliterary dimension of *Slowness* responds to the very words Kundera wrote about *The Professor of Desire*:

> The rapidity with which history unfolds … confronts a novelist with a quite new task: to preserve that sense of continuity which is being lost … and to indirectly demonstrate the parallel between our way of living (of feeling, of thinking, of loving) with the half-forgotten ways of our predecessors. (1988a: 165)

By examining the notion of desire embodied by Denon's *No Tomorrow* and incorporating it into his writing, Milanku exemplifies the task that Kundera designs for the novelist. His reading of *No Tomorrow* as the text holding the secrets to the pleasure of slowness displays the will to remember our predecessors' way of loving. Milanku is revealed to be the creator of the storylines we read in the moments when his characters start

populating the dreams of his wife Véra: 'you're the victim of my crazy imagination', Milanku says to her, 'As if your dreams are a wastebasket where I toss pages that are too stupid' (1996: 77–8). Through this metaliterary device, the novel Milanku is writing emerges as a means through which to articulate his thoughts in the way Kundera does with his novels, as I discussed about *Life Is Elsewhere* in Chapter Two. Finally, the fact that Milanku is a writer is the last of a series of elements which correspond to Kundera's own life: Milanku, the common nickname of Milan, is a fictional Czech writer who lives in France, and his wife is called Véra. Milanku's status as a migrant does not undermine his authority. His decision to adopt the use of the French language mirrors Kundera's own engagement with French culture 'as a conscious way of opting for a cultural and literary space that accommodate the breadth of his theoretical and fictional literary production' (Knoop, 2011: 15). Even though *Life Is Elsewhere* also features a projection of Kundera as the character referred to as the man in his forties – the character closest to him in his own words (1988b: 129) – and who appears to oppose Jaromil's emotional immaturity and narcissism, I would like to stress that Kundera's decision to design an alter ego of himself in *Slowness* so explicitly invites us to look at this choice with suspicion, and to fundamentally doubt that Milanku completely mirrors the voice of the author, even if his ideas are reminiscent of the positions Kundera expresses in his essays and interviews. As I shall argue, we need to carefully observe the intricacies of the particularly narrative function that Milanku's narratorial reading of *No Tomorrow* plays within the novelistic structure of *Slowness*.

In addressing the interconnectedness of authorship and masculinity in Milanku's writing, my first step is to describe the ways in which *No Tomorrow* is assimilated in *Slowness*, and how Milanku's reflections on seduction and heterosexual relationships inspired by the figure of Madame de T. elicit an analysis of masculinity. Summarising the plot of *No Tomorrow*, Milanku guides the reader through his own interpretation of the novella. The narrator, referred to by Milanku as 'The Chevalier', is the lover of the Comtesse. One evening, the Chevalier goes to the theatre, where he meets Madame de T., a friend of the Comtesse. The Chevalier is surprised when Madame de T. invites him to see her house because he knows her lover, the Marquis. While his wife Véra is sleeping, Milanku thinks about the walk Madame de T. and the Chevalier take together. He focuses on Madame de T.'s words by quoting from Denon's work. After kissing the Chevalier, Madame de T. turns away and walks on. Milanku observes that behind her behaviour lies a wish to extend their meeting: 'What stagecraft! After the initial befuddlement of the

senses, it was necessary to show that love's pleasure is not yet a ripened fruit … it was necessary to create a setback, a tension, a suspense' (1996: 29). In Denon's original text, the narrator senses: 'All this was like an initiation rite' (1997: 742). The enjoyment Madame de T. and the Chevalier experience while together has to respect the rules of an appropriate rite of seduction, which is followed and developed in their conversation. Milanku observes, 'conversation is what organizes time, governs it, and imposes its own laws, which must be respected' (Kundera, 1996: 28). In prolonging their rendezvous and increasing the Chevalier's excitement and her own, Madame de T. displays her mastery in the art of conversation, giving him 'a short course in sentimental education' and 'her practical philosophy of love' (31).[3]

The morning following their night of love, the Chevalier meets Madame de T.'s lover, the Marquis. The Marquis believes that Madame de T. wanted to spend time with the Chevalier to distract her husband from the idea that she and the Marquis had a relationship. The Chevalier realises that Madame de T. has lied to him, her husband and her lover all at once. He decides not to divulge his night of love with Madame de T. to the Marquis, keeping her secret. He plays the untenable role that Madame de T. has given him in the version of the story she has told her lover. Insofar as the Chevalier cannot read beyond the veils of Madame de T.'s deception, Milanku imagines her as a figure of knowledge:

> Denon gives no description of Madame de T.'s physical appearance … I imagine her to have 'A round and supple waist' (these are the words Laclos uses to characterize the most coveted female body in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*), and that bodily roundness gives rise to a roundness and slowness of movements and gestures … She possesses the wisdom of slowness and deploys the whole range of techniques for slowing things down. (32)

Milanku's interpretation of Madame de T. as an embodiment of the art of protecting pleasure intertwines with his masculine impulse to shape her body. Reiterating the logic of intertextual desire governing the sexual responses of Lurie, Jaromil and Kepesh, Milanku cannot conceive of Madame de T. outside a literary frame. Paradoxically, Milanku shapes his mental image of her by quoting from *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the novel he presents as antithetic to *No Tomorrow*. In considering the measured quality of the calculation underlying her seduction, Milanku believes that she is not motivated by 'the pitiless reason of the Marquise de Merteuil', the protagonist of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*; on the contrary,

she is driven by 'a gentle, tender reason, a reason whose supreme mission is to protect love' (31). While Laclos's characters are motivated by the desire for conquest more than pleasure, for Milanku, Madame de T. materialises the possibility of living 'in pleasure and for pleasure' (121). Examining *libertinage*, Milanku addresses two works in which a woman plays the dominant role. In the case of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, as literary critic Giovanni Macchia argues, 'the real Don Juan is not Valmont, but the Marquise de Merteuil' (1991: 63, my translation). *No Tomorrow* inverts even more radically the libertine relation of power based on an asymmetrical relationship between men and women. As Catherine Cusset (1999: 159–64) notices, while the revelation of the Marquise's plots in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* provokes a catastrophe, Madame de T.'s manipulation instead incites the admiration of the narrator. The decision to place this libertine novella at the heart of *Slowness* offers an insight into Kundera's sceptical account of the possibilities of sexual liberation conveyed in 'Some notes on Roth'. Even though, in this nonfiction work, sexual liberation is presented as the principle element, relegating the seduction of women by men to the past, Kundera's novels depict a more variegated scenario. While Havel's nostalgia for Don Juan-like figures can be seen as a longing for a system of unequal relations between men and women, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Sabina shows that seduction is still possible and is not exclusively a male domain. In her study of Kundera's engagement with *libertinage*, Marie-Ève Draper (2002: 71) underlines that his view of the sexual revolution echoes that of Jean Baudrillard, who looks at seduction in a way that goes beyond an opposition between the sexes shaped by the hegemonic phallic discourse and the feminist resistance to it. For Baudrillard, seduction is mistaken for a mere expression of political and sexual power, and rather 'represents mastery over the symbolic universe' (1990: 8). In Milanku's mind this mastery over the symbolic meaning of sexuality is wielded by Madame de T.'s 'art of the conversation, which lets no gesture without comment and shapes its meaning' (Kundera, 1996: 28). Through her words, Madame de T. weaves a ritual which intensifies the Chevalier's experience of pleasure as well as her own (Miller, 1998: 17). Her heightened relationship with pleasure depends on her ability to remediate her impulses through a ritual of seduction. Her control of her own sensations brings to light the exploration of the authenticity of emotions unfolding in *Life Is Elsewhere*: the intensity of Madame de T.'s sensations and those of her lover do not seem to be based on their actual experience, but on the suggestions generated by the ritual she designs. Once more, Kundera questions the

limitations of our (in)experience, of our ability to understand desires or distinguish the (in)authentic.

For Kundera, Madame de T.'s seduction represents a standpoint from which to reconsider the way contemporary men and women experience eroticism. Kundera's reflection develops through the plot lines Milanku imagines for his own future novel. Among these plot lines, I would like to focus on the meeting between Vincent and Julie. Milanku underlines Vincent's fascination with the Marquis de Sade and 'the frame of mind we call "libertine"' (9). During an entomologists' conference, he meets Julie in a bar. After a stroll in the park, they kiss. Milanku presents their encounter in parallel to the one between Madame de T. and the Chevalier: 'They are transported, without knowing by what; but I know: they are hearing Madame de T.'s river, the river from her nights of love; from the well of the past, the age of pleasure is sending Vincent a quiet greeting' (75). Soon the impression that Vincent is truly absorbed by the libertine worldview is refuted, as he alludes to Sade merely to impress Julie. The superficiality of his fascination with *libertinage* is unveiled by his reaction when he sees Julie under the light of the moon:

> [Vincent] is bewitched: the white light has endowed the girl with the beauty of a fairy, a beauty that surprises him, new beauty he did not see in her before, a fine, fragile, chaste, inaccessible beauty. And suddenly, he cannot even tell how it happened, he imagines the hole of her ass. Abruptly, unexpectedly, that image is there, and he will never be rid of it (76).

Despite his desire to act as a libertine, Vincent tends to idealise women: he cannot reconcile Julie's fairy-tale beauty with her corporality. In confronting the idealised image of her created by the moonlight, her anus, the emblem of the materiality of her body, represents a paradox that obsesses him: 'The more he thinks about her ass hole, the more Julie is white, diaphanous, and angelic' (77). Milanku directly addresses Vincent's sudden interest in the anus and observes that the lyrical attitude pervades it: 'he is incapable of discussing his fine libertine obsessions except by making them lyrical; by turning them into metaphors. Thus he sacrifices the spirit of libertinage to the spirit of poetry' (84). Milanku's understanding of the spirit of poetry is reminiscent of *Life Is Elsewhere*: Vincent uses metaphors to make the scatological functions of the female body tolerable in the manner of Jaromil. Here the meaning that Milanku gives to *libertinage* is consistent with Cusset, who describes *libertinage* as a 'violent rejection of transcendence … based on the metaphysical

idea that even the most beautiful woman is nothing in the end but bones, blood, and shit' (1998: 4). By describing the moon as 'the ass hole of infinity' (Kundera, 1996: 84), Vincent translates his libertine fantasies into a lyrical style and dispossesses their subversive charge.

When Julie takes off her clothes and gets into the swimming pool, Vincent hardly even registers that she is naked. Unlike his character Vincent, Milanku offers a different image of Julie's body: 'The simple-hearted Vincent has no idea, but what I myself see here, at last, is a nudity that represents nothing at all, neither freedom nor filth, a nudity divested of all meaning, nudity denuded, just that, pure, and bewitching to a man' (99). Although Milanku argues that he can conceive of her nakedness as devoid of any meaning, the reader of *Slowness* cannot forget Milanku is not actually seeing Julie's body but imagining it as he composes his novel, just as we imagine it when reading Kundera's novel (Pamuk, 2011). Furthermore, though Milanku declares the female body to be beyond any cultural frame, he is able to describe Madame de T.'s body only by reference to Laclos's words. Milanku's constant appropriation of literary texts emerges once again when he opposes Vincent's fantasies about Julie's anus with two poems that Guillaume Apollinaire sent in letters to his lovers from the trenches of the First World War. The first one, entitled 'En Allant chercher des obus' (In search of shells), was written to Lou on 13 May 1915; the second, entitled 'Les neuf portes de ton corps' (The nine doors to your body), to Madeleine on 21 September of the same year.[4] As Milanku observes:

> The poems … differ in their imagery but are constructed in the same fashion: each stanza is devoted to one portal of the beloved's body: one eye, the other eye, the right nostril, the left nostril, the mouth; then, in the poem for Lou, 'the portal of your rump' and, finally, the ninth portal, the vulva. But in the second poem, the one for Madeleine, there occurs at the end a curious switch of portals. The vulva recedes to eighth place, and it is the ass hole, opening 'between two pearly mountains,' that becomes the ninth portal: 'yet more mysterious than the others,' the portal 'of the sorceries one dares not speak of,' the 'supreme portal'. (82)

Reiterating the masculinist urge to construct and shape an illusionary idea of the female, Apollinaire re-maps the female body and configures the anus as 'the supreme portal … the most mysterious, the most secret' (83). While denouncing the risks of lyricism, *Slowness* underlines the power of a lyrical poem in addressing women's corporality. In this way, it becomes

clear that Kundera's own novel presents a more complex view of poetry than his authorial narrators propose. Unlike *Life Is Elsewhere*, *Slowness* offers an example of poetry capable of exploring the materiality of the body, which reminds me of Baumgarten's erotic poems in *The Professor of Desire*. The reference to Apollinaire's poems suggests the need to carefully reconsider the role of poetry in Kundera's narrative, distinguishing poetry from lyricism: poems can emancipate themselves from a lyrical expression of emotions and embody a rejection of transcendence expressed in the spirit of *libertinage*. *Slowness*'s novelistic discourse fosters critical thought beyond the perspective of its authorial narrator and seems to contradict the understanding of the lyric as a form of self-display and an exacerbation of emotions that Kundera provocatively puts forward in *Life Is Elsewhere* and *The Art of the Novel*.

After Julie has undressed, instead of getting close to her, Vincent swims away. Once again, his actions are reminiscent of Jaromil. Despite their obsession with the female body, when they have the opportunity to have sex, their sexual drive disappears. While Jaromil's desire responds mainly to his narcissism, Vincent's libido is linked to external factors, as he seems to regain his excitement in the presence of a potential audience for his sexual acts: 'True, the amphitheatre is empty, but even though it is empty, the audience, imagined and imaginary, potential and virtual, is there, is with them' (100). Staged for an audience, no matter if real or imaginary, Vincent's desire displays 'the modern trend of performing as though permanently in front of a camera' (Jones, 2009: 65). The impact of the logic of the media on Vincent is such that he feels his acts make sense only in the presence of a third party. The radical difference between Madame de T.'s performance and Vincent's, is that, while Madame de T.'s acts give life to a ritual designed to prolong her lover's excitement and her own, Vincent cannot engage directly with his own pleasure and is only interested in catching the attention of strangers. While Jaromil is driven by his narcissism and anxiety towards a total merge with an anonymous crowd, all Vincent looks for is the temporary satisfaction of being at the centre of attention. Despite the sense of a moralistic judgement on these narcissistic drives, they emerge as the authenticity of emotion itself in Kundera's narrative and they inform his characters' masculinity fundamentally.

When Vincent believes that someone may be able to hear him, he shouts at Julie, 'I'll tear open your ass hole for the whole world to see!' (Kundera, 1996: 102), revealing his belief that verbal violence and bravado can strengthen his masculinity. Realising he cannot have an

erection, he simulates sex instead. To express Vincent's estrangement from his desire, Milanku gives voice to his character's penis:

> Why is it so small?
>
> I put that question directly to Vincent's member and frankly, astonished, it replies: 'And why shouldn't I be small? I saw no need to get big! Believe me, the idea really didn't occur to me! I was not alerted.'
>
> …
>
> The member was telling the truth. (102–3)

The dialogue between Milanku and Vincent's genitalia is an example of the irony with which Kundera narrates men's erotic ambitions. In considering Kundera's first works, including *Laughable Loves* and *Life Is Elsewhere*, John O'Brien argues that 'Kundera's critique of masculinity is principally translated into an open parody of male behaviour and either/or thinking, leaving male characters seeming more ridiculed than "critiqued"' (1995: 107). The use of the comic further connects Kundera's fiction to Roth's (Scarpetta, 1999: xvii). Interviewing Kundera, Roth observes that Kundera's early works 'find their denouement in great scenes of coitus' (2002: 99). Kundera confirms this impression and explains 'that a scene of physical love generates an extremely sharp light that suddenly reveals the essence of characters and sums up their life situation' (Roth, 2002: 99). With these words in mind, I look at Vincent's erotic failure as emblematic of his masculinity. Similarly, Kundera's and Roth's men are illuminated by their heterosexual struggles. What strikes me the most is the irony permeating the exposition of their protagonists' sexual difficulties. In *The Professor of Desire*, the ironic insight into Kafka's sexuality and manhood leads to paralysis in Kepesh's self-reflexive exploration of his masculinity; however, in *Slowness*, the ironic dialogue between Milanku and Vincent's penis displays Vincent's inability to account for his impulses while at the same time reinforcing Milanku's discursive position as a man who can fully grasp the dynamics of heterosexual desire through literary knowledge. Evocative of the relationship between the authorial narrator and Jaromil in *Life Is Elsewhere*, Milanku's ironic authority rests on the manipulation of a fictional and inexperienced man.

The young male subjectivities depicted by Roth and Kundera fail in their exploration of desire. Madame de T.'s heightened relationship with her pleasure brings Kepesh's reference to Colette to mind. As I discussed in Chapter Two, in praising Colette as 'a connoisseur of the

finest gradations of amorous feeling', Kepesh underlines 'her capacity for protective self-scrutiny in perfect balance with the capacity to be carried away' (Roth, 1978: 191). Colette's alleged ability to introspect and her self-awareness lie at the heart of her faculty to live 'all that desire longs for and promises' (191). This combination of self-consciousness and desire is paradoxical for Jaromil and Kepesh as well as Vincent. The idealisation of Colette resonates with the depiction of Madame de T. in *Slowness*. Both accounts highlight the alleged concealment of fictional and real women: Milanku celebrates the secrecy of Madame de T.'s seduction, while Kepesh emphasises Colette's protective self-scrutiny. Reminiscent of the inability to fully know women as expressed in *Disgrace*, Milanku and Kepesh project their fantasies of a fulfilment of desire onto the female; a desire made whole. Nonetheless, echoed in their relationships with women, in the novels I have analysed, these characters' experience of estrangement from the body is inflected in different ways by each author. For Kundera, this estrangement emerges as a generalised sense of semiotic-erotic confusion; in Coetzee, this feeling of estrangement intersects the most controversial aspects of a cultural legacy of violence towards women and its political consequences; finally, for Roth, it reveals subjectivity as a space of indeterminacy generated by the tension between textual dynamics and a sense of an unmediated prelinguistic experience. In the next section, drawing on my reading of Milanku's discursive position, I shall describe how his authorial status within Kundera's novel articulates the self-conscious authorial dimension of *Slowness*. I shall further examine how the particular figuration of the practice of authorship through Milanku is epitomised by Madame de T.'s practice of seduction.

The Don Juan of form

From the privileged position he reaches at the expense of his own character Vincent, Milanku seems to invite the reader to question his interpretation of *No Tomorrow*. He declares that he is manipulating the original work by calling the male protagonist 'Chevalier' and provokes his readers by saying they have never heard of *No Tomorrow* and will probably never read it. Most of all, *Slowness* exposes the alleged lack of seriousness in Milanku's creative attempt. The metafictional dialogue between Milanku and Véra reported at the centre of *Slowness*, in the 26th chapter out of the 51 that compose the novel, is significant. Milanku confesses he is writing a novel whose characters have populated Véra's dream. Véra warns him: 'You've often told me you wanted to write a novel someday with not a single serious word in it. A Big Piece of

Nonsense for Your Own Pleasure. I'm frightened the time may have come' (Kundera, 1996: 79). The fact that the reader of *Slowness* is told that the narrative they are reading responds to Milanku's own pleasure prompts me to examine the interconnectedness of pleasure and form in Madame de T.'s art of seduction and how this feeds into Kundera's understanding of the novel as a medium to preserve the ways of loving and feelings of our ancestors.

As a seducer, Madame de T. differs from Kundera's previous Don Juans, who embody the epic search for all the peculiarities of the opposite sex. In their pursuit of knowledge through sexuality, Kundera's seducers have often been described by reference to the figure of the Don Juan of knowledge, imagined by Nietzsche in *Daybreak*, whom philosophers and poets have not yet discovered (Nietzsche, 1997: 161) and whose will to knowledge leads him to sacrifice his happiness in the name of an ethics of desire (Dumoulié, 1993: 199–213). Stemming from this figure, Liisa Steinby (2013: 166) argues that Thomas, the seducer in the *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, is driven by the desire to investigate the behaviour of his sexual partners. Jørn Boisen identifies an analogy between the Don Juan of knowledge and the novelist in Kundera's narrative: 'Behind the erotic longing, it is the desire for knowledge that pushes forward the Kunderian Don Juans. In this respect, the myth of Don Juan imposes itself like the myth of the novelist. In both cases, the attitude is essentially enquiring, sceptical and ironic' (2005: 109–10, my translation). For Kundera, the novelist and seducer share the will to knowledge. In *Slowness*, this resemblance unfolds when Milanku argues that the greatness of libertine art 'consists not in some propaganda or other for hedonism but in its analysis', and praises Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* for its examination of the characters' desire (1996a: 9). Thanks to its epistolary form, Laclos's novel exposes the characters' yearning to tell the story of their conquests. In uncovering both his characters' thoughts and their desire to share them, Laclos's use of the epistolary form provides disclosure. I believe that the dialectics of form and knowledge, pivotal in Kundera's theory of the novel, characterises Madame de T.'s art of seduction as well. As Milanku observes:

> By slowing the course of the night, by dividing it into different stages, each separate from the next, Madame de T. has succeeded in giving the small span of time accorded them the semblance of a marvelous little architecture, of a form. Imposing form on a period of time is what beauty demands, but so does memory. For what is formless cannot be grasped, or committed to memory. Conceiving

> their encounter as a form was especially precious for them, since their night was to have no tomorrow and could be repeated only through recollection. (34)

Madame de T.'s seduction is driven by the urge to shape her lover's experience of their encounter and her own. Through her seduction, she allows the Chevalier and herself to give their pleasure a form to be remembered. Her knowledge lies in the code of eroticism she transmits to the Chevalier and the rite of seduction to which she gives life. As well as a Don Juan of knowledge, I suggest that Kundera's reading of *No Tomorrow* configures Madame de T. as a Don Juan of form.

Let me return to *No Tomorrow* and its place in Kundera's unfolding novelistic discourse. Regarding Denon's novella, Cusset writes:

> Physical pleasure is never articulated in words. Words express only feelings. But the text clearly shows what words serve to hide and where they ultimately lead: ellipsis points and silences are stronger than social and sentimental words. Through this silence in the text the body speaks and unmasks codes.
>
> …
>
> … the text shows that what we usually call reality is nothing but a hypocritical appearance that serves to hide our true reality, that of our body. (1999: 153)

Cusset highlights that in *No Tomorrow* silence conveys the inarticulable experience of the body. The connection between silence and the idea of a prelinguistic experience is a trope in the analysis of the function of silence in *Madame Bovary*. Gérard Genette (1966) calls the 'silences of Flaubert' those descriptive moments in the text which are devoid of a causal connection to the narrative, and which evoke an external reality that is resistant to human sense-making. Jonathan Culler (2007: 694) describes this phenomenon in terms of Roland Barthes's concept of the *effet de réel*. In light of Genette's and Culler's analyses of *Madame Bovary*, *No Tomorrow* may be seen as shifting this sense of a primordial experience from external reality to the materiality of the body, and accordingly removes the discursive element of seduction and its interface with pleasure. This reading is supported by the narrator (whom Milanku calls the Chevalier), who claims 'we are such *machines*' (Denon, 1997: 742). As Cusset notices, the sentence 'seems to reveal the libertine conception of desire in *Point de lendemain*: … that desire itself is but a mechanical

artifice acting independently of people' (1999: 155). Milanku's reading of Madame de T.'s seduction configures sexuality as a formless set of impulses and sensations, which can be comprehended exclusively through the act of giving form. Once again, Milanku evokes Baudrillard, who describes sex as '*the disenchanted form*' of seduction (1990, 21), and Octavio Paz (1993), who argues that while sexuality is animal, eroticism is human. For Paz, seduction represents a social phenomenon which 'consists of deviating or changing the reproductive sexual impulse and transforming it into a representation' (1993: 106, my translation). In focusing on the literary representation of seduction as much as its rituality, Milanku's examination of heterosexual desire hints at a formlessness which is reminiscent of Gombrowicz's understanding of human experience.

In Chapter Two, I discussed Gombrowicz's understanding of form in relation to *Life Is Elsewhere*. As Ariel Denis writes, Gombrowicz's literary creations chart the history of his 'fight against Form (social, aesthetic, etc.) to reveal the changing, anarchic absence of forms that Life is' (1971: 269, my translation). While Gombrowicz exposes the absurdity of the forms social life has shaped in *Ferdydurke* and the cognitive process through which we engage with the outside world through the act of giving form in *Cosmos*, Kundera explores the forms in which heterosexual experience have been crystallised through previous literary traditions. Kundera's investigation is echoed in Milanku's examination of heterosexual desire in which he interweaves an intertextual analysis of *No Tomorrow* with Vincent's story. The idea of crystallisation responds to two notions that I have argued are pivotal in Kundera's narrative: the notion of inexperience and the questioning of the (in)authenticity of feelings. The forms of masculine desire crystallised by literature are the frames through which male characters model their desire and from which they derive a range of emotions to long for. Besides marking the crucial influence of Girard on Kundera's narrative, this desire for desire, or 'desire for memory', as Le Grand (1999: 6) also describes it, translates the urge for literary frames through which to enact erotic impulses. This need suggests that the confusion of authenticity and imitation is unresolved in the investigation of the dynamics of sex and text.

Milanku's creative attempt culminates in the recognition that the figure of the Chevalier embodies the secret of living pleasure: 'I have the vague sense that on your capacity to be happy hangs our only hope' (Kundera, 1996: 132). What strikes me the most is that Milanku ends his reflection by referring not to Madame de T., whose art of seduction he celebrates throughout the novel, but rather to the Chevalier and his ability to assimilate her lesson. Milanku's creative attempt as a novelist

and Madame de T.'s ritual as a seducer converge in giving form to the figure of the Chevalier, who escapes the masculine archetypes of both Don Juan and Tristan. The Chevalier embodies a fantasy of masculinity based not on the objectification/idealisation of the feminine, but rather on the ability to experience pleasure. Thanks to Madame de T.'s practice of seduction, which gave a form to his impulses, he escapes the alienation from one's own body experienced by Vincent, Jaromil and Kepesh. The Chevalier also overcomes the narcissistic urges that envelop Vincent, Jaromil and Kepesh by accepting the role Madame de T. has designed for him in the story she tells her lover, however ridiculous. The Chevalier's ability to distance himself from masculinist urges mirrors Milanku's own ability to create intellectual distance from his art expressed by his ambition to write a novel without a serious word: the potential of adulthood and masculinity culminates in Milanku's authorship. In the next section I go on to examine the gendered ideal of authorship – namely authorial masculinity – that protagonist Marito configures in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, assimilating the rhetoric of emotions from romances and exercising control over his textual practices.

Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*

Marito's sentimental education

Set in Peru, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* tells the story of a 17-year-old young aspiring writer, Marito, who falls in love with Julia, the 32-year-old sister-in-law of his uncle Lucho. The plot is inspired by Vargas Llosa's first marriage: when he was 19, the author married Julia Urquidi, his uncle's sister-in-law (Oviedo, 1978a: 154–9). In the novel, the relationship is narrated by an older version of the protagonist, who has become a successful writer. Recounting his story from a more mature perspective, he underlines the rigidity of his approach to life and literature as a young man, establishing an interplay reminiscent of the relationship between Milanku and 'his' character Vincent in *Slowness*.

Driven by the ambition to become a writer, Marito reminds me of Kepesh's absolutistic engagement with literature as a means of shaping his personality:

> I told her [Julia] the whole story of my life – not my past life, but the one I was going to have in the future, when I lived in Paris and was a writer. I told her I'd wanted to write ever since I'd first read Alexandre Dumas, that since that moment I'd dreamed of going off

> to France and living in a garret, in the artists' *quartier*, dedicating my heart and soul to literature, the most marvelous thing in the world. (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 93)

Here, Marito is giving life to the fiction of his life as a writer. He explains to Julia that love was invented by the Italian poet Petrarch and the Provençal Troubadours. Reminiscent of Kundera, Marito addresses the way in which literary forms have shaped our understanding of sexuality and emotions. While, in order to impress Julia, Marito exhibits scepticism about love and argues for an asentimental model of sex – what he calls his 'erotico-biological theory' (12) – the narrator emphasises the superficiality of Marito's words, which he says express the latter's insecurity. Marito repeatedly expresses his desire to be considered an adult man – 'Nothing irritated me as much as being called "Marito". I had the impression that this diminutive automatically put me back in short pants' (6). Besides representing a key to manhood, Marito's engagement with literature articulates his alleged cultural superiority in relation to Julia: 'We talked a great deal about literature as well; or rather, Aunt Julia listened and I talked' (133). Marito highlights the influence of popular cultural and sentimental romance on his partner:

> [Julia] (like all the women I'd ever known thus far in my life) was terribly aliterary. I had the impression that during her many long, idle hours on her Bolivian hacienda the only things she'd ever read were Argentine magazines, some of Delly's trashy books, and no more than a couple of novels at most that she considered memorable: *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*, by a certain E. M. Hull. (95)

Marito refers to the so-called 'sex-novels' (or 'desert-love novels') of E. M. Hull (Melman, 1988; Raub, 1992), which were considered works 'written mostly by women, for women, and cheap enough to be enjoyed by lower-middle-class and working-class women' (Chow, 1999: 73). Likewise, the reference to Delly, the pen name of Marie Petitjean de la Rosière, is significant to the conservatism of the gender stereotypes her works express.[5] Marito's derogatory tone conveys an understanding of romance as a cheap mass-produced product, and of women as 'the sentimental sex … narcissistically inclined to consume stories that reproduce and embellish their personal dramas' (Holmes, 2006: 1). This view portrays intellectual engagement and creativity as exclusive spheres of masculinity. In addressing the role of literary reading in the construction

of gender and subjectivity, in the following pages I contend that Marito's notion of authorship as an ideal of manhood is challenged by the model of sentimentality that romances express.

As its title suggests, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* gravitates towards another figure in addition to Julia, namely the Bolivian scriptwriter Pedro Camacho, the most popular Latin American writer of radio soap operas. Like Julia, his figure stems from the fictionalisation of Vargas Llosa's personal experience. Pedro is inspired by the work and psychological struggles of the Bolivian scriptwriter Raúl Salmón, whom Vargas Llosa met when he worked at Radio Panamericana (Oviedo, 1978a: 154–9). The pivotal roles of Pedro and Julia are reflected in the novel's binary structure, in which the odd-numbered chapters tell the story of Marito and Julia, while the even-numbered chapters offer what at first sight seem to be the soap opera episodes written by Pedro. Pedro starts working at Radio Panamericana, which is owned by Don Genaro and his son, who also own Radio Central, where Marito works. Marito's friendship with Pedro offers him an insight into the life of a professional writer and a standpoint from which to reflect on his own writing.

Pedro is an extremely prolific writer: 'He's not a man – he's an industry!' says Marito's boss (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 7). Pedro writes all the radio serials for Radio Panamericana, directs them and plays the male lead in every one of them. Initially, he seems to embody the commodification of literature (Brooker, 1994: 54–74): Marito underlines that 'his goal was quantitative, not qualitative' (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 152). Nearly illiterate, Pedro does not read anything except a volume entitled *Ten Thousand Literary Quotations Drawn from the Hundred Best Writers in the World* because he fears that other writers may influence his style. By opposition, Marito strives to find his own voice among several literary models and cultural references. The short story Marito intends to entitle 'The qualitative leap' hints ironically at his search for a highbrow output: 'I wanted it to be as coldly objective, intellectual, terse, and ironic as one of Borges's' (45). The reference to Borges's erudition, which I shall discuss in Chapter Four, and his image as an intellectual reinforce Marito's desire to engage with literary tradition. Afterwards, Marito thinks about writing a story inspired by a senator from Arequipa whom Julia is dating and the gossip around the small size of his genitals, and describes it as 'something light and entertaining, in the manner of Somerset Maugham, or perversely erotic, as in Maupassant' (49). For Marito, erudition is not only a source of inspiration, but also a defining element in his masculinity as a young intellectual in the manner of Kepesh, who regards his favourite writers as the architects of his mind. However, the model of masculinity and

authorship Marito longs for is parodied by Pedro, whose attractiveness and intellect are constantly undermined. In addition, Marito's literary ambitions are perceived by his family as an obstacle to his manliness. When Marito dances with Julia, his uncle Lucho says ironically, 'Our intellectual's becoming perverted' (61), and when Julia learns that Marito aspires to be a writer, she comments: 'We'll have to watch out that Dorita's boy doesn't turn out to be a queer' (7). In addressing writing as a demasculinising practice, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* presents the paradox of writing: although the literary canon is mainly composed of men, writing still supposedly expresses lack of masculinity (Still and Worton, 1993: 50). Evocative of Jaromil's anxious search for masculinity in *Life Is Elsewhere*, Marito's ideal of authorship informs his double path, writerly and erotic, towards manhood.

Marito's relationships with Pedro and Julia interweave. Julia appears in Marito's life on the same day that he hears about Pedro: 'I remember very well the day he spoke to me of this genius of the airwaves [Pedro], because that very day, at lunchtime, I saw Aunt Julia for the first time' (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 5). Julia tells Marito that their relationship is reminiscent of Pedro's soap opera: '"The love affair of a baby and an old lady who's also more or less your aunt," … "A perfect subject for one of Pedro Camacho's serials"' (96). In view of the continuity between their liaison and Pedro's stories, Philip Swanson highlights that 'Camacho's stories also echo their relationship, based as they are on convention-versus-desire, scandalous love affairs, the trials and tribulations of romance and the conflict between age and youth' (1995: 64–5). Marito records that in their nocturnal conversations 'Aunt Julia sometimes gave me a résumé of certain episodes that had impressed her, and I in turn gave her a rundown of my conversations with the scriptwriter, and thus, little by little, Pedro Camacho became a constituent element in our romance' (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 98). The interaction of the romances evoked by Julia and Pedro's practice of writing go on to shape Marito's masculinity. In his conversation with Charles Ruas, Vargas Llosa explains that *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* 'is not only about the apprenticeship of literature but also about the apprenticeship of love, of a sexual relationship' (Ruas, 1982: 15). Despite his initial dismissiveness towards feelings, Marito falls deeply in love with Julia and plays the role of the romantic lover who overcomes difficulties to be with his beloved. When their relationship gets more serious, Marito writes book reviews and articles for literary supplements and periodicals published in Lima – 'prostituting my pen' (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 132) – so as to be able to pay for their dates. Facing his family's disapproval of their relationship, he decides to marry Julia while still

completing his studies and struggles to earn a living based on his artistic vocation. Through this relationship, Marito emancipates himself from his abstract understanding of sexuality; but on the other hand, he starts to live the naïve and excessive sentimentality of the romantic rhetoric he has despised (Magnarelli, 1986: 195).

In order to illuminate the role that romantic rhetoric plays in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, I intend now to address the understanding of romantic rhetoric Vargas Llosa develops stemming from *Madame Bovary*. Along with *Don Quixote* and its exploration of the tension between lived experience and fiction, *Madame Bovary* has emerged in my analysis as a crucial text through which the writers I discuss interrogate the authenticity and intensity of emotions and desire and their emplotment in narratives of heterosexual masculinity. In Chapter One, I discussed the way in which, through references to *Madame Bovary*, *Disgrace* explores Lurie's detachment drawing on the paradox of Romantic rhetoric, which appears as the only way to convey love while also expressing feelings in artificial and conventional forms. In Chapter Two, I referred to *Madame Bovary* to describe the intoxication of feelings Jaromil longs for in his sexual experience and which he expresses in his poems. I propose now that Vargas Llosa's critical interpretation of *Madame Bovary* sheds light on his protagonist's emancipation from the illusions of a purely intellectual stance on human experience.

Let me start with Diana Holmes's study of romance in twentieth-century France. Emma's inability to recognise the irreconcilable discrepancy between reality and her dreams configures *Madame Bovary* as 'The novel that consecrates the divide between the intellectually and aesthetically serious novel, and the foolishly feminine romance' (2006: 8). Likewise, in his study dedicated to *Madame Bovary* entitled *The Perpetual Orgy*, Vargas Llosa highlights the tension between Emma's passion and her romance-driven illusions. However, while for Holmes romances represent a cheap and tasteless narrative in *Madame Bovary*, Vargas Llosa praises Flaubert for incorporating melodramatic elements into novelistic discourse. In particular, Vargas Llosa is interested in Emma's overly sentimental behaviour:

> My fondness for melodrama has … [to do with] a primarily emotional identification with this material, by which I mean a total obedience to its laws and an orthodox reaction to its excitement and its effects. Melodramatic may not be the precise word to express what I am trying to say, since it has a connotation closely linked to theatre, films, and the novel, and I am referring to something

> broader that is present above all in real things and real people. I am speaking here of a certain distortion or exacerbation of feeling, of the perversion of the recognized 'good taste' of each era, of that heresy, counterpoint, deterioration (at once popular, middle-class, and aristocratic) to which, in every society, the aesthetic, linguistic, moral, social, and erotic patterns established by the elite as models fall victim; I am speaking of the mechanization and vulgarization to which emotions, ideas, human relations are subject in everyday life … This material does not interest me intellectually but emotionally. (1986a: 17–18)

By examining how narrative can inform emotional repertoires and produce sensual responses, shaping the models through which we live and express feelings, Vargas Llosa addresses a larger phenomenon: the mutability of emotions and the dynamics they undergo in everyday experience. For Holmes, *Madame Bovary* is the quintessential expression of realism understood 'as the very antithesis of the emotion-centred, idealizing mode of romance' (2006: 9). Vargas Llosa offers an antithetical view: 'Flaubert's "realism" is not so much a romanticism rejected as a romanticism carried to completion' (1986a: 217). In converting the exacerbated emotion into a theme to be investigated by the novel, *Madame Bovary* not only widened the range of elements realism could address, but also offered a new way of looking at how narrative affects how we experience emotions. Vargas Llosa's interest in 'melodrama' recalls Kundera's exploration of the forms in which our emotions have been crystallised in literature. While for Kundera, with *Madame Bovary*, 'Flaubert unmasked the mechanism of sentimentality, of illusions; he showed us the cruelty and aggressiveness of lyrical sentimentality' (Elgrably, 1987: 6), Vargas Llosa is sympathetic towards the effect of sentimentality on Emma and his own characters. Following Flaubert, Vargas Llosa investigates dynamics, such as distortion and exacerbation, mechanisation and vulgarisation, that characterise emotions as intimately individual but socially embedded experiences. The lexicon Vargas Llosa configures the comprehension of human feelings as a question of form in the manner of Gombrowicz's understanding of intersubjective experience. On this basis, in the next section I shall address how Marito's emotional response to Julia and to the sentimentality of the romance intersects with the control and mastery he develops through his textual practices over Pedro's soap operas, presenting the crystallisation of subjectivity into manhood as a question of form.

Masculinity and discursive authority

'I write. I write that I am writing. Mentally, I see myself writing that I am writing and I can also see myself that I am writing' (Vargas Llosa, 2002: iv). This passage from Salvador Elizondo's *El grafógrafo* (*The Graphographer*), which serves as an epigraph to *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, conveys the pivotal role of writing, which emerges as the practice through which Marito can enact his masculinity. Marito sees 'a vocational paradigm' in Pedro (Oviedo, 2020: 258). Indeed, despite the success of his radio soap operas, Pedro lives like a beggar in an empty room the size of a cell. The austerity of his life and his total dedication to writing fascinate Marito, who wonders:

> How could he [Pedro] be, at one and the same time, a parody of the writer and the only person in Peru who, by virtue of the time he devoted to his craft and the works he produced, was worthy of that name? … It was becoming clearer and clearer to me each day that the only thing I wanted to be in life was a writer, and I was also becoming more and more convinced each day that the only way to be one was to devote oneself heart and soul to literature … The person I'd met who came closest to being this full-time writer, obsessed and impassioned by his vocation, was the Bolivian author of radio serials. (2002: 212–13)

Pedro embodies Marito's idea of writing as a totalising vocation and calls Marito's prettified view of the writer into question. Pedro's example leads Marito to negatively reconsider those 'alleged' writers more educated than Pedro who dedicate most of their time to activities unrelated to literature and have professions and fulfilling lives. The centrality of the figure of Pedro is such that Vargas Llosa wanted to discard *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* as a title for his novel and give it a new one which was 'more that of a picaresque novel: *Vida y Milagros de Pedro Camacho* [*The Life and Miracles of Pedro Camacho*]' (Oviedo, 1978a: 164–5). Vargas Llosa's reference to the picaresque is as fascinating as it is ambiguous. Michael Wood underlines how the perils of Marito and Julia 'assume the proportions and the pace of a picaresque novel' (2012: 59). I read the reference to the picaresque in relation to the collision of genres – chivalric romances and picaresque – at the heart of *Don Quixote* which I discussed in Chapter One (Hayes, 2014: 135). In line with Cervantes's text, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* offers a synthesis between two different narrative orders: Pedro's textual excess and Marito's sentimental education.

During their time working together, Marito observes Pedro writing his radio soap opera scripts without any hesitation, as if he were typing a text he knew by heart in a hallucinatory state. Flowing 'directly from the subconscious, bypassing the censorship of reason' (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 140), Pedro's creative process makes Marito think of the French Surrealists' notion of automatic writing (Andreu, 1986: 24). Pedro subsumes into his soap operas the idea of poetry as 'a debacle of intellect' that André Breton and Paul Éluard formulate in opposition to prose (1989: 274). In examining Breton's understanding of hallucination, Suzanne Guerlac underlines that 'in hallucination … the difference between reality and dream … cannot be distinguished' (1997: 141). Reminiscent of Surrealist automatic writing, the confusion of reality and dream, imagination and real, pervades the creative process of Pedro. Hosting Julia and Marito in his home, Pedro reveals that he finds inspiration by wearing different costumes and transforming himself into the characters who populate his fictional worlds. In responding to the amazement of Julia and Marito, Pedro says:

> And why shouldn't I have the right to become one with characters of my own creation, to resemble them? Who is there to stop me from having their noses, their hair, their frock coats as I describe them? … What does it matter to anyone if I lubricate my imagination with a few bits of cloth? … What better way is there of creating realistic art than by materially identifying oneself with reality? And doesn't the day's work thereby become more tolerable, more pleasant, more varied, more dynamic? (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 146)

This continuity between creator and creation exacerbates the Quixotic tension between life and fiction. The Quixotic dimension of Pedro's practice also emerges in his search for pleasure. When Marito asks him why he does not use the scripts he wrote in Bolivia as a basis for his new stories, Pedro says he has not saved any of his work. He claims excitedly that 'Pleasure stems from variety' and 'the complete change of place, milieu, mood, subject, and characters reinforced the exhilarating sensation that one was starting afresh' (144). The pleasure Pedro finds in writing evokes the experience of reading that Don Quixote describes to the Canon in Cervantes's text: 'read these books, and then you will see the pleasure you derive from them … is there any greater joy than seeing, before our very eyes, you might say, a great lake of boiling pitch … enclosed within the seven castles of the seven enchantresses which lieth beneath this blackness' (Cervantes, 2003: 455–6). The dialogue between

the Canon and Don Quixote is regarded as 'Cervantes' most complete and profound statement of a theory of literature' (Forcione, 2015: 91). While the Canon's recalls a Platonic condemnation of poetry (92), for Don Quixote reading should not have any educational or ethical concern, other than to provide pleasure (Rossoni, 2018). Similarly, Pedro's writing is driven by the incessant desire to renew his pleasure: as Marito observes, 'For him [Pedro] to live was to write' (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 141). His obsession with writing alienates him from his life in the same way that reading does for Don Quixote, leading him to have a mental breakdown.

The odd-numbered chapters telling the story of Marito contain many clues that Pedro's soap operas are becoming too extreme. For instance, Marito hears Aunt Olga saying that Pedro has gone too far with the story of the minister who castrates himself with a letter opener in front of the judge, in order to prove he had not raped a 13-year-old girl. In addition to the increasing presence of morbid elements, Pedro's soap operas start to lack consistency: characters who died in previous episodes return to life, while others move from one soap opera to another without any explanation. Questioned about these issues, Pedro experiences a mental health crisis and weeps hysterically: he explains that he can no longer remember the plots of his soap operas nor to which soap operas the characters belonged (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 376). A physician suggests that Pedro is no longer fit to work: 'his psyche is undergoing a process of deliquescence' (376–7). Due to Pedro's mental exhaustion, Marito is asked to continue writing Pedro's soap operas and is given back the typewriter he had had to give to Pedro when the Bolivian scriptwriter started working for Radio Panamericana. Drawing on this symbolic event that marks Marito's emergence as a creator, my next step is to explore how his masculinity emerges as a form of discursive authority.

As the narration proceeds, it appears that, since the even-numbered chapters are not written in a dialogical form as radio soap operas should be, they cannot be identified as Camacho's dramas, but rather as their narrative adaptations realised by Marito. Vargas Llosa himself observes that 'Pedro's dramas are not presented in scripts but are described by Varguitas, who transforms them. That is the apprenticeship he passes through' (Ruas, 1982: 15). The juncture between the two narrative lines becomes explicit in the 20th and last chapter of the novel, which does not include another soap opera like the previous odd-numbered chapters, but instead incorporates the continuation of Marito's story. *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* may be described as one side of a Möbius strip and regarded as an example of what Steven Kellman defines as a self-begetting novel, a work which represents 'the development of a character to the point

at which he is able to take up his pen and compose the novel we have just finished reading' (1980: 3). As an account of Marito's marriage and literary apprenticeship, the text of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* unfolds the initiation rite through which Marito enters 'into textuality as well as into adult sexuality' (Still and Worton, 1993: 42). Besides displaying Marito's apprenticeship for mastering the craft of storytelling, the even chapters also portray Pedro's decay as a writer. In his reading of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, Carlos Alonso emphasises the rivalry between the serious writer Marito and the scriptwriter Pedro: 'the scriptwriter's collapse' should be seen in relation to 'the narrator's rise to a position of discursive authority' (1991: 50). In view of Marito's appropriation of the 20th chapter, and of the rigid alternation which would have assigned this space to Pedro, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* expresses an 'agonistic view of the universe of discourse' in which 'becoming a writer is equated … with the vanquishing of one's precursors as well' (Alonso, 1991: 51). After his struggles to find his voice among several literary influences, Marito succeeds in shaping the account of his rise as an author through the literary 'murder' of his precursor. Marito's story evokes the notion of influence as a competitive mode through which Harold Bloom interprets poetic creation: 'poetic strength … is reached only through trespass', he writes (1975: 237). By incorporating his adaptations of Pedro's work, Marito distances himself from his model and surpasses it. Influence and rivalry are also inscribed into the Cervantine model by addressing the tension between fiction and experience which constantly emerges in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. I referred before to Vargas Llosa's flirtation with the picaresque. In *Don Quixote*, Gines de Pasamonte, the character embodying the picaresque genre, claims to be the author of a book about his own life. Just as Don Quixote reads his life as a chivalric adventure worthy of *Amadís de Gaula*, Gines's writing is driven by his desire to create a better text than *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the novella founding the picaresque genre. Asked if his book is worth reading, Gines answers, 'It's so good … that it's too bad for *Lazarillo de Tormes* and all the other books of that genre that have been or will be written' (Cervantes, 2003: 184). Gines evokes the competitive mode that Bloom situates at the heart of poetic creation. More importantly, his figure emphasises the impossibility of disentangling writing and experience: Gines explains that his book is entitled *The Life of Gines de Pasamonte*, but it is unfinished, as his life is not finished yet. In the same way, in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, Marito 'writ[es] himself a life through his fiction' (Oviedo, 1978b: 167), by cannibalising Pedro's fictions to write his own life. In a Cervantine fashion, Marito's life is the very story the reader is reading (Wood, 2012: 59).

Let me return to the moment when Marito witnesses Pedro disguising himself. Marito asks Pedro whether he acquires customs to fit his characters or he invents them based on disguises he already owns. Pedro replies: 'It's plain from your question that you're still very young … Don't you know that in the beginning is the Word – always?' (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 146). In this exchange, Pedro states his position of authority in relation to a young writer. His claim for the centrality of the written word in the creative process is evocative of the opening sentence of the Gospel of John. Pedro's vocation and religious investment into writing inspire the young writer. Marito assimilates Pedro's texts as a counterpart to his biographical narrative and imposes his aesthetic on Pedro's. The mastery that Marito attains resonates in the symmetry of the novel. As Swanson writes:

> The evolution from the labyrinthine structural forms of his earlier works towards the more rigid symmetry of *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, coupled with the neutralisation of both the youthful uncertainty of the love-struck Marito and the rampaging 'fantasmas' of Pedro Camacho by the framing of the novel from the controlling perspective of a mature and successful husband and author may suggest that the driving force behind the text is to combine all these multiple and interpenetrating elements and reduce them to a single principle of coherence. (1995: 63)

Swanson underlines the rigid organisation of the binary structure of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and how it differs from Vargas Llosa's other novels, such as *The Time of the Hero* (1966), *The Green House* (1968) and *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1975), in which different narrators' perspectives alternate and narrative planes overlap. The principle of coherence Swanson highlights in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* is informed by the position of authority Marito reaches at the end of the novel, as both a writer and a husband. Self-reflexivity informs Marito's path to authorship and manhood: in shaping the story of his marriage as well as his maturation, he is critical towards his own pretensions and emotional immaturity as a young man.

In his interview with Ruas, Vargas Llosa calls into question the different approaches to literature of Marito and Pedro: Pedro 'is a natural storyteller without any kind of sophistication, a genius at that level, with a tremendous capacity to transform reality and fiction into his own form', while Marito 'wants to be a writer but is self-critical. This rigor, in his case, is a kind of impotence' (Ruas, 1982: 15). In drawing on

Pedro's material, however, Marito overcomes the impotence induced by his excessive self-criticism. Marito's difficulties remind me of Jaromil's struggle to enact his erotic impulses due to being overly self-conscious: self-consciousness and self-reflexivity represent obstacles to enacting masculinity. Jaromil's and Marito's creative practices evoke the parallel between creativity and masculinity that Peter Schwenger formulates by rephrasing Archibald MacLeish's verse 'A poem should not mean / But be' in 'the perfect male "must not mean but be"' (1979: 632). Marito finds a balance between self-criticism and writing in the narrative account of his life shaped by the metaliterary interplay between his biographical account and the soap operas he writes in the style of Pedro. Compared to Kundera's *Life Is Elsewhere* and Roth's *The Professor of Desire*, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* represents the narrative of a young man's sentimental education in which the artificial and conventional way in which emotions are expressed does not have alienating effects. While for Jaromil and Kepesh literary mediation contributes to their estrangement and exacerbates their ignorance of emotion, Marito reconciles himself through his writing with the emotional repertoires conveyed by the romances of which Julia is fond. But what is the nature of the maturation of Marito and the self-awareness he supposedly gains in the novel?

While in *The Professor of Desire* Kepesh's failure at reading his own desire is evident, Marito's inability to see the motive behind his urges is more subtle. Although Marito and Julia have no blood connection, their *liaison* evokes an incestuous relationship between mother and son. The novel repeatedly presents Julia as a surrogate mother figure: she tells Marito that she could be his mother: 'I'm very nearly old enough for you to be my son' (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 94), 'The fact is, I *could* be your mama' (175). Marito himself wonders 'what was I doing, wasting my time with a woman who … was almost old enough to be my mother?' (169), and he is teased by municipal employees: 'So you want to marry your mama, do you?' (301). Alonso observes, 'In choosing his aunt as an object of sexual desire, [Marito] transgresses the boundaries established by the laws of kinship' and that 'the even-numbered chapters delineate the aspiring writer's successful seduction of a symbolic mother figure and link that accomplishment to his attainment of authorial mastery' (1991: 51–2). For Alonso, this para-incestuous relationship mirrors the symbolic murder of Pedro at the heart of Marito's process of discursive empowerment, strengthening the oedipal subtext of the novel. In a poststructuralist fashion, Marito's masculinity unfolds as a textual performance driven by his incestuous impulses. After the end of his marriage with Julia,

Marito gets married again, this time to his cousin Patricia. In describing his family's reaction to his new marriage, Marito observes that it did not create an uproar, since they 'could predict … my blackest misdeeds' (Vargas Llosa, 2002: 393). This new transgression of the law of kinship increases the ambiguity of Marito's formation as a writer. The conclusion of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* insinuates doubts as to whether Marito is marrying the woman he loves or repeating a path of transgression. Marito inscribes himself into manhood and authorship through writing; but whether this textual performance is based on a necessary cessation of self-doubting or a suppression of Marito's innermost feelings is unclear. In the next section, I shall examine how the tension between self-reflexivity and writing depicted by Roth in *My Life as a Man* challenges the suggestions that writing opens up masculinity to an effective reflection, as in the case of Milanku in *Slowness*, and that the rise to authorship can fulfil manhood and its illusions, as it does for Marito in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*.

Roth's *My Life as a Man*

A man's fall: literature, Jewish-American legacy and heteronormative discourse

My Life as a Man juxtaposes the autobiographical narrative of the 34-year-old writer Peter Tarnopol, entitled 'My true story', with his short stories 'Salad days (or, serious in the fifties)' and 'Courting disaster'. Considering this dual structure, I shall firstly focus on the supposedly autobiographical account of Peter's experience. Secondly, I shall discuss how these autobiographical elements reverberate in Peter's fictions exploring his masculinity.

Written between 1966 and 1967, during Peter's sexual quarantine on an artist retreat, 'My true story' focuses on '*his nightmarish marriage*' to Maureen, '*a barmaid, an abstract painter, a sculptress, a waitress, an actress (and what an actress), a short-story writer, a liar, and a psychopath*' (Roth, 1993: 99). Curiously, like *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, *My Life as a Man* is inspired by its author's first marriage (Shipe, 2022: 36).[6] While in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, marriage marks the transition from youth to manhood, *My Life as a Man* offers an antithetical view. Peter's account goes back to 1958, when, at the age of 25, he has already published stories inspired by his boyhood in literary quarterlies. As it does for Marito, Peter's engagement with literature defines his character: 'I was distinguishable from the mass of my contemporaries: I read books and I

wanted to write them. My master was not Mammon or Fun or Propriety, but Art' (Roth, 1993: 175). Peter's fascination with complex moral issues as represented in literature permeates his everyday life:

> I was not about to settle for complexity and depth in books alone. Stuffed to the gills with great fiction – entranced not by cheap romances, like Madame Bovary, but by *Madame Bovary* – I now expected to find in everyday experience that same sense of the difficult and the deadly earnest that informed the novels I admired most. (195)

Like Emma Bovary, Peter is a Quixotic reader whose sense of reality is modelled on his readings. Peter describes his dedication to literature as a 'Flaubertian vocation' (175). For him, Flaubert is the 'genius' who 'form[ed] my literary conscience as a student and an aspiring novelist' (240–1). Peter's first novel, *A Jewish Father*, is based on his experience as a corporal in Germany and his parents' reaction to his relationship with a Gentile girl, a German student nurse. Ten years after the Second World War, the young German woman is unaffected by the fact that Peter 'was a dark Jew and she a blonde Aryan' (180), while Peter's self-conscious struggle with their relationship lies at the heart of *A Jewish Father*. The problematic assimilation of his Jewish legacy and his sense that he is transgressing this legacy echo in his search for Gentile women. Simultaneously, Peter exacerbates the feeling of inadequacy towards the 'performance of Gentile masculinity that seems so representative of an American ideal, against which he recognises himself as an "other"' (McKinley, 2013: 93). As *A Jewish Father* suggests, Peter's writing unfolds the interconnectedness of his search for Gentile women as a Jewish-American man and his desire to delve into his lived experience to discover the depth and complexity of the masterpieces of European literature.

Flaubert's journey to Egypt inspires Peter to look for a relationship that can add interest to his life, 'that temptingly unknown creature of a young man's eroto-heroic imaginings, *an older woman*' (Roth, 1993: 176). Evocative of *Sentimental Education* and *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, Peter's desire is satisfied when he meets Maureen. Twenty-nine years old and twice divorced, Maureen is a Gentile woman who embodies a world unknown to Peter's literary (in)experience, much like Helen in Roth's later novel, *The Professor of Desire*. Despite their initial attraction, Peter desires to end their relationship because of constant arguments. After they split, Maureen claims to be pregnant by Peter and rages at his refusal to marry her:

> I've taken enough from men like you in my life! You're going to marry me or I'm going to kill myself! … You selfish, spoiled, immature, irresponsible Ivy League bastards … With your big fat advance and your high Art – oh, you make me sick the way you hide from life behind that *Art* of yours! I hate you and I hate that fucking Flaubert, and you are going to marry me, Peter, because I have had enough! I'm not going to be another man's helpless victim! (187–8)

Maureen's anger reflects her conflictual relationship with men. She claims she was a victim of her first violent husband Mezik and deceived by her second husband Walker, who hid his homosexuality from her. Emphasising Peter's privileged social position as a well-educated man and belonging to the middle-class American life (Shipe, 2022), Maureen feels that by not recognising her right to be a wife, he is turning her into a victim of men once again. Not only does her rage reiterate the masculinist logic by which her existence as a woman depends on a man, but also strengthens the heteronormative expectations imposed on men. After their relationship deteriorates, Maureen complains about Peter's inadequacy as a lover: 'even *Walker*, the homosexual who was her second, knew more about how to satisfy a woman than the selfish, inept, questionable heterosexual who was I' (135). While Marito is called a 'queer' because of the alleged effeminacy of writing, Peter's demasculinisation arises from his failure to satisfy a woman sexually and his refusal to form a family. In both novels homosexuality emerges as the horizon against which hegemonic masculinity reconfirms itself (Connell, 2015: 43–5). Nonetheless, unlike *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, *My Life as a Man* engages explicitly with the social and historical situatedness of heteronormative discourse. Peter links his masculine experience to the dynamics of power between men and women characteristic of 1950s US society (Robinson, 2000: 89–101):

> Decency and Maturity, a young man's 'seriousness,' were at issue precisely because … in that the great world was so obviously a man's, it was only within marriage that an ordinary woman could hope to find equality and dignity. Indeed, we were led to believe by the defenders of womankind of our era that we were exploiting and degrading the women we *didn't* marry, rather than the ones we did … It was up to us then to give them the value and the purpose that society at large withheld – by marrying them. (Roth, 1993: 170)

Challenging seriousness is a pivotal notion in Roth's oeuvre. Although Roth has dedicated his writing to a relentless search for the 'unserious' since the publication of his irreverent 1969 novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, at the beginning of his career he established himself as a serious intellectual and, when criticised, he argued for the seriousness of his work in his essayistic writing (Gobblar, 2011: 33–57; Posnock, 2006). At the beginning of his career, Roth 'imagined fiction to be something like a religious calling, and literature a kind of sacrament' through which he could express 'the ethical striving that [he] had absorbed as a Jewish child' (Roth, 1985: 77–8). For Roth, to be serious meant to engage with the legacy of prominent writers and contemporary society, carrying out an 'investigation of our times and the impact of those times upon human personality' (Roth, 1961: 226). In *My Life as a Man*, seriousness is presented not only as an artist's concern, but also as a core value for the ideal of Jewish-American masculinity that Peter has self-fashioned. In this ideal, Peter's religious upbringing and his vocation as a writer are intertwined with the hegemonic masculinity envisioned by US society in the fifties. Peter's stress on the notions of Decency and Maturity (both capitalised) evokes Gombrowicz's exploration of the forms of maturity that society imposes on men and through which Peter is trying to define his masculinity. My next step is to investigate Peter's failure to live up to the configuration of the social expectations, historical and geographical locations, and personal ideals that inform his idea of masculinity.

Maureen deceives Peter by showing him the result of a pregnancy test taken with a urine specimen she had bought from a pregnant woman in a park. Knowing that Peter does not want children, she promises she will have an abortion if he marries her. Even though Peter thinks she is lying, he accepts. The moment in which Peter makes his decision is revealing:

> It seemed then that I was making one of those moral decisions that I had heard so much about in college literature courses … Perhaps if I had not fallen so in love with these complicated fictions of moral anguish, I never would … arrived at what seemed to me the only 'honorable' decision for a young man as morally 'serious' as myself. (Roth, 1993: 195)

Evocative of Kepesh in *The Professor of Desire* and Jaromil in *Life Is Elsewhere*, Peter's fascination with literature informs his masculinity as a young intellectual. Maureen's pregnancy satisfies Peter's urge to experience the moral anguish of high literature. The co-dependency of

Peter's literary understanding of his experience and the social values at the heart of heteronormativity shape the script of masculinity to which Peter adheres (Still and Worton, 1993: 39). Like a modern Don Quixote, Peter's literary expectations clash with his experience. His marriage to Maureen exacerbates pre-existing tensions. When Peter visits his brother Morris, the stress he suffers in his marriage is expressed at a physical level: 'I was in the bathroom by this time; Moe … kneeled down in that tiny tiled room beside the toilet, where I was sitting on the seat, watery feces running from me, sweating and simultaneously trembling as though I were packed in ice' (106). The somatisation of his traumatic relationship with Maureen brings to light his corporality, challenging the poststructuralist critical trend towards the disembodiment of the author which seems to be displayed in Marito's discursive rise as a figure of authorial masculinity. Rather than achieving maturity through his marriage, Peter undergoes a regression: his brother Morris calls him by his childhood nickname 'Peppy' and comforts him as if he were a child sitting on the toilet. Reminiscent of Baumgarten in *The Professor of Desire*, Morris calls Peter a 'poor, pussy-whipped bastard' when he learns how Maureen has forced Peter to marry her (126). In addition to being an object of critical attention (Gooblar, 2012; McKinley, 2021; Shostak, 2004, 2021; Witcombe, 2018), the antagonistic view of heterosexual relationships Roth's characters convey have provoked accusations of misogyny (Allen, 1976; Gornick, 1978, 2008; Koenig Quart, 1983; Spacks, 1976) and, more recently, of toxic masculinity (Lipsyte, 2018; Newman, 2018; Schwarz, 2018). Roth's strongest criticism possibly came from Vivian Gornick, who, in her 1978 essay 'Why do these men hate women?', argues that the lack of distance between character and author in *My Life as a Man* configures Peter's hatred for his wife as a statement of the author.[7] Gornick's 2008 volume extends her criticism to Roth's novels published to the date, stressing that in these narratives 'the women are monstrous because for Philip Roth women are monstrous' (125). A more productive insight is offered by Debra Shostak, who acknowledges that Maureen 'exemplifies the trope of the monstrous female' (2021: 268) but suggests that these allegations of misogyny should be seen 'according to the logic that misogyny emerges from a perceived threat to symbolic masculine power' (2004: 22). Drawing on Shostak, I propose that in *My Life as a Man* Peter's troubling identification with the symbolic power he is imbued with as a heterosexual man in Maureen's eyes intertwines with his search for the gravity and seriousness of highbrow literature in his romantic relationships.

To evade his marriage, Peter has an affair with one of his students, Karen Oakes, violating the ethics of the teacher–student relationship and taking advantage of his position of power. Karen soon ends their relationship, explaining she cannot be the one saving him from his marriage. According to Peter, after having listened to him imploring Karen to come back on the phone, Maureen simulates a suicide attempt. Afterwards, she tells Peter she knows about his affair, but she will forget about it if he forgives her for lying about her pregnancy. Outraged by the revelation, Peter ends their relationship. In response, Maureen tries to slit her wrist with a razor blade. Peter's attempt to stop her escalates into a fight in which they end up covered in blood, an event which results in Peter's mental health episode. He runs into their room, where he tears his clothes off and wears Maureen's underwear, begging her to let him go. The scene exhibits Peter's desire to abdicate the power and responsibilities he is given against his will as a heterosexual man by a patriarchal society – 'as a man I surrendered', he says (Roth, 1993: 173). Conversely, Maureen embodies an extreme response to the 'sense of defenselessness and vulnerability' which patriarchy projects onto her (173): as Kundera underlines in his reading of *My Life as a Man*, 'Maureen's aggressiveness resides in her weakness' (1988a: 162). Peter's autobiographical account denounces the inadequacy of the gender roles American society envisions and the fallacy of what he calls 'the myth of male inviolability' (Roth, 1993: 173). His crisis reveals the vulnerability and fragility that hegemonic masculinity denies to men.

Even though Peter presents himself as a victim, 'My true story' exposes his violent behaviour. After one of their fights, Peter questions his conduct: 'my idea of manliness had little to do with dishing out physical punishment … To find Maureen's blood on my hand was in fact *un*manning' (183–4). Peter's ideal of an intellectual masculinity contrasts with the patriarchal belief that violence is a man's feature. Nonetheless, guilt and regret do not prevent Peter from hitting her again. After convincing Peter to meet in his apartment to agree on the divorce, Maureen declares she is never going to divorce him and starts reading him her short story 'Dressing up in mommy's clothes', about a serious writer who wears his wife's underwear. In the fight which follows, Peter hits her repeatedly and observes, 'I was not even really in a rage any longer. Just enjoying myself thoroughly' (283). The pleasure Peter feels illuminates the patriarchal violence he has interiorised. The conversation he has with his therapist reveals his joy derived from enacting this distorted notion of masculinity: 'In retrospect, one of the high points of my life! I thought … "She wants a beating, I'll give it to her!"' (289). His satisfaction seems to come from his

ability to perform the gender-based violence characteristic of Maureen's previous relationships. Peter highlights the performative nature of his gendered violence: 'You should have seen that performance' (290). Only Peter's new partner, Susan, denounces this violence. Underlining that Maureen is mentally unstable, Susan addresses the paradox of Peter's behaviour: 'You keep trying to do the "manly" thing, and all you ever do is act like a child' (293). Having lost the sense of the ennobling literary frames he has projected onto his masculinity, Peter emerges as an abusive partner and wonders, 'How do I ever get to be what is described in the literature as *a man*?' (302).

Susan is a widow with a history of psychological problems, and Morris is explicit about the dynamics of Peter's desire: 'A pretty face … plus a good strong dose of psychoneurosis, and a girl is in business with my little brother' (162–3), and again, 'Fucked-up shiksas … you can't resist them, Pep' (169). Drawing on Morris' words, Peter's attraction to troubled Gentile women could be linked to a desire to transgress his Jewish legacy. However, Peter himself explains: 'What I liked … was something taxing in my love affairs, something problematical and puzzling to keep the imagination going even while I was away from my books' (180). While Susan's neediness seems to satisfy Peter's narcissism, his relationship with Maureen alienates him from the literary world to which he aspires. When Maureen is hospitalised after another attempted suicide, Peter visits her on his lawyer's advice. At the hospital he meets Flossie, a member of the support group for women Maureen has joined, from whom Peter learns the different account of her life Maureen has told the group. In this version, Maureen was abused by her father in her childhood (an account which reminds Peter of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*) and despite Peter's affair, she still loves him and has told the group all the details of their time in Italy. Observing Flossie's involvement with their fate, Peter realises: 'We … were her own private soap opera: she was the audience to our drama, our ode-singing chorus; this was the Fortinbras my Deep Seriousness had called forth. Fair enough, I thought – this Fortinbras for this farce!' (307). The reference to *Hamlet* displays how Peter's urge for experiencing literary seriousness is nourished by tragedy, but with Maureen, 'instead of the intractability of serious fiction', he gets 'the intractability of soap opera' (196). The tension between high and low culture and the flirtation with soap opera characterise both *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *My Life as a Man*. As in Vargas Llosa's novel, the cultural synthesis displayed by Roth has been interpreted in relation to the postmodern aesthetic and as a reflection of 'broader aesthetic and cultural shifts in the States in the late 1970s' (McDonald and Roden,

2016: 60). This aesthetic fall in the domain of a mainstream genre conveys Peter's estrangement, which is then exacerbated by Maureen's death in a car accident. He cannot accept it because he considers her sudden death an event too fortuitous to fit into a realistic plot: 'Defies credulity' (Roth, 1993: 113). As a biographical account, 'My true story' presents the dialogical tensions between literary, social, religious and emotional discourses underlying Peter's masculinity and the ways in which he projects meaning onto his heterosexual urges. In the following section, I will explore how Peter tries to synthesise these different discourses and confer meaning on his experience by translating it into fiction.

'To be a man': an unfulfilled tragedy

Peter's dependency on literary categories and his sense of not living up to the gravity of serious fiction characterise his search for masculinity. Patrick Hayes (2014) reads *My Life as a Man* within the context of Roth's engagement with the tragic and his attempt to redefine it. Hayes connects this attempt to Alain Robbe-Grillet's writing, 'Nature, humanism and tragedy' (1965). On the one hand, *My Life as a Man* offers a narrative representation of Robbe-Grillet's reading of the tragic in the modern novel as the human tendency to anthropomorphise experience, projecting meaning onto objects and events devoid of meaning. Peter's urge to read his life through fictional frames displays the 'narcissistic falsification of life' that Robbe-Grillet describes (Hayes, 2014: 75). On the other hand, *My Life as a Man* veers away from the aims of the Nouveau Roman, 'most especially from Robbe-Grillet's positivist conviction that the anthropocentric bias of the novel can ultimately be overcome' (78). Stemming from Hayes's insight, I rather intend to read *My Life as a Man*'s engagement with the tragic and the metafictional in light of Peter's struggle to achieve an understanding of masculinity. I draw on Schwenger, who examines Peter's aspiration to fulfil his masculinity through writing: '[Peter]'s literary endeavours' are 'an attempt to write his own manhood' (1984: 150). Peter is obsessed about writing a narrative account of his marriage:

> *That* book, based upon my misadventures in manhood, I still, of course, spent maddening hours on every day, and I had some two thousand pages of manuscript in the liquor carton to prove it … what impressed one upon attempting to penetrate that prose was not the imaginary world it depicted, but the condition of the person who'd been doing the imagining: the manuscript was the message, and the message was Turmoil. (Roth, 1993: 241)

Peter's urge to make sense of his life and masculinity pervades his writing. The act of penetration (and its failure) is the metaphor Peter chooses to articulate self-seeking: 'Over the three years I had tried easily a hundred different ways to penetrate that mystery … obsessed, I was as incapable of not writing about what was killing me as I was of altering or understanding it' (104). Unable to complete his work, Peter's investigation of his experience is conveyed in 'Salad days' and 'Courting disaster', featuring his alter ego Nathan Zuckerman as a protagonist.[8] While 'Salad days' focuses on the childhood and youth of Nathan, 'Courting disaster' focuses on his marriage. The increasing emotional proximity to the experiences which inspired them is marked by the transition from a third-person narrator to a first-person narrator. Peter's exploration of masculinity through writing calls to mind the role that Lurie's *Byron in Italy* plays in *Disgrace*: 'Salad days' and 'Courting disaster' also induce the reader to look into Peter's experience for traces that explain the formation of his writing. However, while in *Disgrace* the reader only has access to fragments of *Byron in Italy* as Lurie is composing it, in *My Life as a Man* Peter's stories are complete and available to the reader in their entirety. The differences between Peter's experiences narrated in 'My true story' and their literary transpositions generate an interpretative space that the actual reader has to fill. Nonetheless, the actual reader's attempt is anticipated, and partly inhibited, by the interpretations of Peter's writing that other characters provide within the novel. Can Peter (or the reader) overcome this sense of circularity in interpretation generated by the metaliterary dimension of *My Life as a Man*?

Teaching a night course in creative writing, Nathan meets his future wife, Lydia. Five years older than him, Lydia is a divorced woman, mother of 10-year-old Monica. Lydia's story includes childhood miseries, her father's sexual abuse, a violent husband called Ketterer and mental health struggles. The details of Lydia's life are inspired by the different accounts Maureen gives Peter and Flossie. Peter himself elucidates that 'Courting disaster' is a fictional meditation on his marriage: 'what if Maureen's personal mythology had been biographical truth?' (113). Nathan starts a relationship with Lydia, although he believes this will ruin his life and he feels no attraction for her. Nathan describes her body as 'mannish, awkward' (33). Lydia is extremely dismissive towards herself and tries to dissuade Nathan from dating her because she is older and unable to experience pleasure. Nathan's initial concern with Lydia's body focalises then on her genitals exclusively:

> … it seemed to me curious that I should be *so* repelled by her flesh as I was that first night … Earlier, caressing her body, I had been made uneasy by the unexpected texture of her genitals. To the touch, the fold of skin between her legs felt abnormally thick, and when I looked, as though to take pleasure in the sight of her nakedness, the vaginal lips appeared withered and discolored in a way that was alarming to me. (71)

The adjective 'alarming' conveys the repulsion Nathan feels towards Lydia's body. Interestingly, the same adjective is used to describe Helen in *The Professor of Desire*. As well as reinforcing the dismay Roth's protagonists feel towards women, this adjective anticipates Nathan's consideration a few pages later about his very tendency to project literary meaning onto his desire: 'what was "hideous" – alarming, shameful, astonishing – was the significance that a young man of my pretensions should attach to his lust' (76). Nathan's self-reflection addresses how Peter tends to turn his desire, in the words of Hayes, into an 'inauthentic literary construct' (2014: 76). However, 'Courting disaster' does not only mirror Peter's habit of reading his life through a literary frame, but also examines Nathan's inability to fully commit to these literary interpretations of his experience.

The description of Lydia's genitals articulates the tension between Nathan's erotic practices and his imagination:

> But where she was dry, brownish, weatherworn, I pressed my open mouth. I took no pleasure in the act, she gave no sign that she did; but at least I had done what I had been frightened of doing, put my tongue to where she had been brutalized, as though – it was tempting to put it this way – that would redeem us both. (1993: 72)

Sex between them is removed from the sphere of pleasure. The hyper-realistic description of Lydia's genitals is juxtaposed against the literary fantasies it inspires. Focusing on the redemption he and Lydia might obtain through oral sex, Nathan develops a parallel with *Madame Bovary* in the manner of Peter in 'My true story': 'Where Emma Bovary had read too many romances of her period, it would seem that I had read too much of the criticism of mine' (72). He is intrigued by the idea that performing oral sex might be a sacrament but nevertheless resists it. Reflecting on his experience via his literary alter ego, Peter acknowledges that life events do not conform to narrative dynamics and admits the influence of literary criticism on his life. 'Courting disaster' unfolds Nathan's urge to

give significance to his masculinity and, at the same time, his awareness of and resistance to this impulse. As in *Disgrace*, the comparison between the protagonist and Emma highlights their awareness of the influence of literature on their lives. Nevertheless, this realisation does not emancipate Lurie and Peter/Nathan. Their awareness seems to trap them in a self-reflexive loop they cannot break out of. This trend is exacerbated by the continuation of Nathan's story.

After Lydia has taken her own life by cutting her wrists with a metal can opener, the object Peter believes Maureen used as a dildo, Nathan and Monica, or Moonie as he calls her in their intimacy, become lovers and move to Italy: 'Under the guise of father and daughter, we touched and fondled one another's flesh … but in the end, as though she were my own offspring or my own sister, I honored the incest taboo' (82). Re-enacting Lydia's tragic past, Nathan continues the 'cycle of disaster' (78). While in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* the transgressive charge of the para-incestuous relationship with Julia informs Marito's masculinity and creativity, for Peter it elucidates how the consequences of Nathan's transgression do not live up to literary imagination. Nathan is surprised that Monica is not as unhappy as Anna Karenina was with Vronsky in Italy, and he is not as unsettled as Aschenbach is by his passion for Tadzio.

The reference to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* is significant. Roth mentions Aschenbach as the archetype of the serious writer and, quoting from *Death in Venice*, refers to Aschenbach's text: '*The Abject* which taught a whole grateful generation that a man can still be capable of moral resolution even after he has plumbed the depths of knowledge' (1985: 272). *Death in Venice* strengthens *My Life as a Man*'s engagement with tragedy. Many critics have read *Death in Venice* in connection to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (Von Rohr, 1992: 141; Heller, 1961: 104; Sizemore, 2014: 235–41): the story of Aschenbach could represent the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, which, for Nietzsche, are the elements whose interaction defines Greek tragedy as the highest form of art and the ultimate expression of the human condition. Aschenbach is a mature writer embodying the Apollonian model who confronts the Dionysian impulses that the 14-year-old Polish boy Tadzio awakens in him. By opposition, in his illicit love with Moonie, Nathan does not find the tragic sublimation Aschenbach experiences in his passion for Tadzio: 'I had expected more agony; with my self-dramatizing literary turn of mind' (Roth, 1993: 83). His ambition is also hindered by the social changes induced by the sexual revolution that have made Nathan and Moonie's exile unnecessary. Nathan notes that they may return to America, 'where we will live, we two lovers, like

anybody else – like *everybody* else' (86). This sentence is evocative of the dialogue between Kundera and Roth I discussed at the beginning of the chapter. Their texts explore heterosexual men's relationships with women at the sunset of the rigid morality projected onto sexuality by Western patriarchy, and their struggle to leave behind its symbolic domain whether they endorse its values or not. While Kundera blames the sexual revolution for the disappearance of the pleasures of seduction, *My Life as a Man* offers an opposing insight into the effects of the sexual revolution, according to which people should not be blamed for their sexual life. As Hayes observes, 'With the sexual revolution the tragic intensity generated by his troubled relationship now seems merely misplaced' (2014: 79). However, despite the illusion of permissibility that the novel proposes, for a contemporary reader, Nathan's relationship with a minor 'make[s] for very queasy reading', as Brauner observes (2021: 291). Paradoxically, it is Nathan who resisted the acceptance of his relationship with Moonie: 'The country may have changed, I have not' (Roth, 1993: 86).

Presenting himself as the author of 'Courting disaster', Nathan systematically questions his conduct, hinting at the inconsistency of Peter's analysis of his own behaviour as symptomatic of a social phenomenon. Even more ambiguously, Nathan emphasises the implausibility of his behaviour. He reveals that he had no sexual desire for Lydia and claims that his reader shares his incredulity: 'to the reader who finds himself unable to suspend his disbelief in a protagonist who voluntarily sustains an affair with a woman sexless to him and so disaster-ridden, I should say that in retrospect I find him nearly impossible to believe in myself' (79). By emphasising the implausibility of his narrative arc, Nathan acknowledges his failure to identify the reason for his fall. As Coetzee writes in his review of Roth's 2010 novel *Nemesis*, 'a rule of tragedy' is 'that only in retrospect can you see the logic that led to your fall' (2010: 15).[9] Questioning the logic behind Nathan's fall, 'Courting disaster' mirrors Peter's frustration at being unable to live up to the intensity of tragedy or what he deems serious fiction. Though what is left for Peter, if not even the archetype of incest can satisfy the narcissistic fulfilment he longs for in his fiction?

'A character out of a farce': a Jewish-American self-inscription

Peter's attempt to de-fatalise the account of his marriage also pertains to the legacy of Jewish-American writers. For Nathan, Lydia, Ketterer and Monica are 'figures out of the folk legend of the Jewish past' and 'the embodiment of what my grandparents, and great-grandparents …

had loathed and feared' (Roth, 1993: 95). Bringing to light the question of the Jewish integration into American WASP culture, *My Life as a Man* addresses a trope of Jewish-American literature, namely Jewish-American men's sexual relationships with Gentile women. Commenting on 'Courting disaster', Morris says to Peter:

> What is it with you Jewish writers? Madeleine Herzog, Deborah Rojack, the cutie-pie castrator in *After the Fall*, and isn't the desirable shiksa of *A New Life* a kvetch and titless in the bargain? And now, for the further delight of the rabbis and the reading public, Lydia Zuckerman, that Gentile tomato. (118)

The intertext Morris draws on includes Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*, Arthur Miller's *After the Fall* and Bernard Malamud's *A New Life*. The creation of Lydia would complete the collection of Gentile women described by Jewish-American writers. Morris' words may also evoke the novels Roth wrote before *My Life as a Man* focusing on the relationships between Jewish-American men and Gentile women, such as *Goodbye, Columbus*, *Letting Go* and *Portnoy's Complaint*. In 'Some new Jewish stereotypes', Roth explicitly writes that 'the Jewish women are mother and sister. The sexual yearning is for the Other' (1985: 199). In his studies of Jewish-American literature, Giordano De Biasio (1989: 29–50; 1992) argues that the second generation of Jewish-American writers, including Bellow, Mailer and Malamud, embraced the latent misogyny of the founding fathers of American literature (Fiedler, 2008). However, in their works the American literary tendency to exclude women undergoes a reversal: their protagonists desperately seek the female figures that the male characters in the American canon ignored. While Huckleberry Finn rejects the social and familial obligations that society imposes on men, the protagonists of Jewish-American narrations long for exogamous relationships with Gentile women, through whom they enact and convey the ambivalence they feel towards American WASP culture and their own Jewish heritage. In this respect, I should underline that Gornick's aforementioned criticism of misogyny in Roth's narrative addresses the works of Bellow, Mailer and Roth, overlooking the role that misogyny has in the American narrative tradition and the specific significance it holds for Jewish-American authors. *My Life as a Man* consciously continues this misogynist tradition through the creation of Maureen, 'the most frantic and destructive' of all Roth's female characters (Lee, 1982: 77), and simultaneously challenges and complicates it, by exposing it. In addition, the attraction to non-Jewish women represents for Peter the opportunity

to experience the gravity of serious fiction. Hermione Lee underlines that the Gentile women to whom Roth's protagonists are attracted 'stand … as Dionysian or daemonic influences opposed to the Apollonian reason and wisdom of the male analysts and writers' (1982: 77). Articulating the contrast between the elements that define tragedy for Nietzsche, these exogamous relationships seem to promise the fulfilment of Nathan's identity as a Jewish-American writer. However, 'Courting disaster' casts an ironic light on Peter's attraction towards Gentile women at both the social and the sexual levels. The emphasis on the redeeming power of the cunnilingus he performs on Lydia hints at the Christian rite of Eucharist, in which the sacramental bread put on the tongue of the faithful represents the body of Christ whose sacrifice redeemed humanity from their sins. Parodying the narcissistic fulfilment for which Peter longs, Nathan imagines an ironic absolution which satisfies the literary fantasy of seriousness informing his identity as a Jewish-American man. Peter's irony emerges in the title of the thesis Nathan would like to write about his life, 'Christian temptations in a Jewish life: A study in the ironies of "Courting disaster"', which refers to the story the actual reader is reading.

Linking the metafictional dimension of the novel to a postmodern aesthetic, David Brauner underlines 'its relentless interrogation of the nature of reality and its own fictional status' (2007: 61). However, 'Courting disaster' escapes all the interpretations Peter suggests. Alluding to Maureen, who hinders Peter's desire for seriousness and gives him the sense of living in a soap opera, Nathan describes the year in which he meets Lydia as 'fateful' and underlines that 'if it smacks of soap opera, that is not unintentional' (Roth, 1993: 61). For Nathan, the conflicts between Monica and Lydia as 'amalgams … of soap opera (that genre again), Dostoevsky, and the legends of Gentile family life that I used to hear as a child' (92). Nathan's para-incestual relationship with Moonie interweaves the gravity of Dostoevsky's novels, the fear of his grandmother's Jewish legends and the cheapness of soap operas, rehearsing them and, at the same time, transgressing them. This oscillation between different genres reminds me of Lurie's realisation during the composition of *Byron in Italy*: 'It is not the erotic that is calling him after all, nor the elegiac, but the comic' (Coetzee, 2000: 184). If Lurie's ambition to achieve self-knowledge is mocked by the outcome of *Byron in Italy*, Nathan wonders if he should convert the protagonist or the narrator of 'Courting disaster' into 'a character out of a farce' (Roth, 1993: 81). Peter's flirtation with the temptations of the comic strikes me because in the novels I have discussed so far, the criticism of masculinity tends to result in mockery. This often leads to a paralysis of its hermeneutic potential, as in the case

of Kepesh's engagement with Kafka's masculinity or Milanku's reflections on Vincent. Whether Peter/Nathan's rejection of the comic displays a struggle to protect masculinity from this paralysis or whether it displays those masculine narcissistic urges to project literary meaning onto his life is unclear. Stemming from this observation, in the final section of this chapter, I shall explore how Nathan's quest for seriousness is related to the fulfilment of the authorial masculinity that Peter models on Flaubert, and how the engagement with Flaubert's ideal of aesthetic detachment relates to the self-conscious form of *My Life as a Man*.

A masculine legacy: Flaubert's aesthetic detachment and authorship

At the end of 'Salad days', the narrator comments on the contradictions at the heart of Nathan's masculinity: 'the spiritual aspirations and the lewd desires, the softy boyish needs and the manly, the *magisterial* ambitions' (Roth, 1993: 31). Nathan's literary ambitions are presented as the key to manhood and in opposition to his boyish urges. The adjective 'magisterial' links Nathan's masculinity to the authority he can reach through his literary practices, confirming the co-dependency of authorship and masculinity unfolding in *Slowness* and *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. Schwenger (1984: 150) observes that Peter's aspiration to fulfil his masculinity 'involves the drive towards a certain self with a certain kind of knowledge'. I contend that the knowledge Peter longs for is epitomised by Flaubert's detached irony. Roth wrote about his struggle to liberate himself from his literary models, in particular commenting that Flaubert's 'detached irony … had [him] obsessively thumbing through the pages of *Madame Bovary*' (1988: 157). Explaining his failure to write a fictional account of his marriage which he hoped would have offered him an understanding of his masculinity, Peter quotes from Flaubert's letter to Louise Colet: 'You wrote with a personal emotion that distorted your outlook and made it impossible to keep before your eyes the fundamental principles that must underlie any imaginative composition. It has no aesthetic. You have turned art into an outlet for passion' (Roth, 1993: 240). In another letter to Colet, Flaubert (1954: 140) elucidates the relationship between emotion and writing: 'the more personal you are, the weaker … *The less you feel a thing, the fitter you are to express it as it is*'. Drawing on Flaubert, Peter believes that the suppression of his emotions is necessary for literary creation. Traces of the Flaubertian ideal of the writer can also be found in the figure of Aschenbach, an Apollonian artist who disciplined his

instincts and committed to his craft (Heller, 1961: 104; Sizemore, 2014: 236).[10] My next step is to suggest that, although Flaubert's ideal of creativity as a process of emotional detachment lies at the heart of the form of authorial masculinity Peter aspires to, he nevertheless transgresses it constantly.

Though 'Courting disaster' is the only means through which to engage directly with Peter's fictionalisation of his marriage, 'My true story' casts several interpretations of it, including the ones by Peter, his brother and sister, his therapist and different editors. Among them, I would like to focus on the interpretation offered by Karen, the student whom Peter has an affair with, which is presented as a paper for an imaginary course taught by Nathan. The title of her paper, 'The uses of the useful fictions: Or, Professor Tarnopol withdraws somewhat from his feelings', refers to her epigraph from Sartre's *What Is Literature?* which, reminiscent of Flaubert, recites that an author's 'decision to write supposes that he withdraws somewhat from his feelings' (Roth, 1993: 227). Karen examines Peter's fictionalisation of his marriage:

> Professor Tarnopol invents cruel misfortunes … to validate and deepen Lydia's despair and to exacerbate Nathan's morbid sense of responsibility – this plenitude of heartache, supplying, as it were, 'the objective correlative' for the emotions of shame, grief, and guilt that inform the narration.
>
> And that informed Professor Tarnopol's marriage. (229)

For Karen, Lydia's past is a literary device through which to sublimate Peter's emotions. By translating Maureen's lies into a narrative form, Peter is trying to emancipate himself from the pain he and Maureen inflicted on each other in search for a 'Flaubertian transcendence' (233). In his reply to Karen, Peter acknowledges that his artistic experiment failed, and he should write a character inspired by Henry Miller or Céline rather than Flaubert: 'I won't be such an Olympian writer as it was my ambition to be back in the days when nothing called personal experience stood between me and aesthetic detachment' (231). The notion of aesthetic detachment relates to what critics have described as Flaubert's impersonality. Concerning *Madame Bovary*, Stephen Heath observes:

> Impersonality must replace exposition of the author's personality; art and its producer are distinct, as artist the writer has no right to the expression of personal opinion: inspiration, passion, emotional

> intensity of the self, all the romantic elevations of the poet, are the very reverse of what is involved in the realisation of a work of art. (1992: 104)

In her study of impersonality, Emily Mi Sun observes that this notion 'finds a formal counterpart in the developing detachment of [Flaubert's] narrative practice' (2003: 120). This meant the abandonment of the first-person narration, along with all references to a relationship between narrator and reader, and of authorial intrusions in which he expressed opinions and judgement on his texts. Stylistically, with its first-person narration, authorial interventions and direct comments to the reader, 'Courting disaster' violates all Flaubert's formal dictates. The greatest violation of all is his fundamental principle: 'a writer must not be his own theme' (Flaubert, 1954: 186). This systematic transgression casts ambiguity on Peter's attempt to follow his model and on the self-referentiality of 'Courting disaster' that Flaubert would supposedly abhor.

My Life as a Man exposes the prominence of Peter's experience over his textual practices. As Hayes underlines, '*My Life as a Man* does not try to create the "neutral," de-anthropomorphized novelistic discourse to which Robbe-Grillet aspired, but insists instead that the novel's metafictional process must deal primarily with the intractability of human situatedness in cultural forms' (2014: 78). The intractability Hayes and Peter emphasise is rooted in the traumatic relationship with Maureen that Peter cannot transcend through art: Peter realises that 'struggling with a woman over a marriage' has occupied him 'in the way that … writing *Madame Bovary* had occupied Flaubert' (Roth, 1993: 174). Ironically, Peter acknowledges the role she plays in his life by adopting a line from her diary as an epigraph for the novel: 'I could be his Muse, if only he'd let me' (313). The ideal of authorship Peter projects onto Flaubert contrasts with his urge to write an account of his masculinity. In view of the inextricable connection between authorship and masculinity, I would like to return to the notion of the self-begetting novel – one which depicts the life of the protagonist as he grows up until his decision to write a novel which resembles the text the reader is reading – that I introduced when discussing *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. In the list of self-reflexive fictions included at the end of his essay, Kellman also includes *My Life as a Man* (1980: 145).[11] Even though Kellman does not adopt a gendered perspective, I believe that the tension between writing and the realisation of the self that the notion of the self-begetting novel captures can illuminate the gendering implications of writing and authorship as a specific form of masculinity. Flaubert's ideal of authorship – the ideal into which Peter's and Nathan's struggles to

inscribe themselves – emerges as a gender configuration dictating how emotions should be disciplined to achieve mastery and control. Peter's obsession with writing an account of his marital life is intertwined with the heteronormative discourse prescribing marriage as the fulfilment of man's adult heterosexual life and his aspiration to live up to the ideal of authorial masculinity embodied by Flaubert. Comparing *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *My Life as a Man*, I shall go on to discuss how Roth's and Vargas Llosa's engagement with Flaubert reveals the ways in which their respective practices reiterate the effects of gender.

Vargas Llosa elucidates his theory of the novel in *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio* (*García Márquez: Story of a deicide*) and discusses the co-dependency of an author's experience and his writing:

> The *reason* why a novelist writes is viscerally blended with *what* he writes *about*: 'demons', facts, people, dreams, myths … [which] engraved themselves in his memory and tormented his spirit … and which he will try to recover and exorcise simultaneously, with words and fantasy, in the practice of that vocation which originates from them and is nourished with them, in those fictions in which they, disguised or identical … appear and re-appear over and over converted into 'themes'. (1971: 92, my translation)

Like Coetzee in his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, Vargas Llosa conceives of the writer as a male. José Miguel Oviedo (1978b: 173) and Swanson (1995: 66) have drawn on Vargas Llosa's view of the writer to discuss the figure of Pedro in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. Efraín Kristal (1998: 96) argues that Pedro's fanaticism and compulsion to write fiction are a consequence of his personal humiliation, which would result from being left by his wife who was a sex worker. Oviedo describes Pedro's inner world as 'an inferno of psychopathic obsessions looking for a way to express themselves' (1978b: 174). If we compare *My Life as a Man* to *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, neither Peter nor Pedro can use writing to overcome the obsessions their marriages have engraved on them. As Peter explains, 'the artist's success depends as much as anything else on his powers of detachment' (Roth, 1993: 242). In contrast, Marito succeeds in taking control of the fictionalisation of his experience by juxtaposing the biographical account of his relationship with Julia against his rewriting of Pedro's creations. The centrality of the notions of distance and control reveals the interconnectedness of the narratives of Roth and Vargas Llosa and hints at Flaubert as a common influence. In *The Perpetual Orgy*, Vargas Llosa further develops the theory of narrative creativity he introduced in

García Márquez by focusing on *Madame Bovary*. Vargas Llosa describes the rigorous composition and rational control of intuition through which Flaubert converted his concerns into a work of art. He praises Flaubert's impersonality, objectivity and obsessive attention to form: 'the novelist must be above all else an artist, a tireless and incorruptible craftsman of style' (1986: 218). This Flaubertian ideal intertwines with the forms of heterosexual masculinities Roth's and Vargas Llosa's characters strive towards; expressed by the textual practice which informs Marito's masculinity in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, it is projected onto Lydia in *My Life as a Man*.

The stories Lydia writes for Nathan's class are inspired by the childhood recollections of her father's sexual abuse. Nathan admires the control she exhibits in her writing:

> To say that I was drawn to her story because it was so lurid is only the half of it: there was the way the tale was told. Lydia's easy, familiar, even cozy manner with misery, her droll acceptance of her own madness, greatly increased the story's appeal – or, to put it another way, did much to calm whatever fears one might expect an inexperienced young man of a conventional background to have about a woman bearing such a ravaged past. Who would call 'crazy' a woman who spoke with such detachment of her history of craziness? Who could find evidence of impulses toward suicide and homicide in a rhetorical style so untainted by rage or vengeful wrath? No, no, this was someone who had *experienced* her experience, who had been *deepened* by all that misery … she had, without benefit of books or teachers, mobilized every ounce of her intelligence to produce a kind of *wisdom* about herself. For surely it required wisdom to recite, calmly and with a mild, even forgiving irony, such a ghastly narrative of ill luck and injustice. (Roth, 1993: 45–6)

Nathan sets his inexperience as a young man against Lydia's tragic past, emphasising the pivotal role of life experience. The catharsis Lydia achieves through her writing inscribes her life in that tragic dimension Peter sets as the horizon of artistic endeavour. Her wisdom is reminiscent of Barthes's description of tragedy in relation to Robbe-Grillet as 'a means of recovering human misery, of subsuming it, hence of justifying it in the form of a necessity, a wisdom, or a purification' (1972: 92). Her ability to create a narrative account of her violent background informs the literary wisdom Nathan longs for. Lydia embodies the drive to tell one's own story despite its emotional burden:

> … the Lydia I had chosen … detested *this inheritance herself*. In part what was so stirring about her (to me, to me) was the price she had paid to disown it – it had driven her crazy, this background; and yet she had lived to tell the tale, to *write* the tale, and to write it for *me*. (Roth, 1993: 94)

As a literary figuration of Peter's narcissism, Nathan looks at Lydia's ability to write about her traumatic past from the standpoint of his own literary ambitions. While in *Slowness* Milanku assimilates Madame de T.'s wisdom, Nathan is unable to do the same: 'I am able to make no connection at all between its [literature's] wisdom and my existence' (86). Literature emerges as an obstacle to Peter's masculinity. His desire to write a fictional account of his marriage reiterates the impossibility of his acquiring self-knowledge: 'as far as I can see there is no conquering or exorcising the past with words … as there seems to be (for me) no forgetting it. Maybe I am just learning what a past is. At any rate, all I can do with my story is tell it. And tell it. And tell it. And *that*'s the truth' (233). Peter's self-oriented writing reveals his urge to tell the story of his masculinity over and over, which highlights his distance from Flaubert's control and impersonality. As the epigraph from Simone de Beauvoir that opens Karen's essay suggests – 'On ne peut jamais se connaître, mais seulement se raconteur' (One can never know oneself, but only narrate oneself: my translation) (227), for Peter, writing articulates his compulsion to tell the story of his masculinity, the mystery he cannot penetrate. In commenting on Peter's struggle, Roth himself explains:

> … for Tarnopol the presentation or description of himself is what is most problematical – and what remains unsolved. To my mind, Tarnopol's attempt to realise himself with the right words … is what's at the heart of the book, and accounts for my joining his fictions about his life with his autobiography. When the novel is considered in its entirety, I hope it will be understood as Tarnopol's struggle to achieve a description. (Saxton, 1992: 80)

In view of Peter's struggle, I suggest that *My Life as a Man* represents a failed attempt at self-begetting, or, more specifically, the failure of forging his masculinity. The different outcomes of Peter's and Marito's writings are apparent in terms of the structure and composition of the novels. I have described how the symmetrical architecture of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* crystallises his authorial control. In *My Life as a Man*, Peter's creative struggle is expressed by the intratextual texture of what Peter

describes as a 'novel-in-chaos' (Roth, 1993: 241). The book Peter wants to write about his manhood may be the very text the reader is reading, as suggested by the letter Peter imagines receiving from Maureen after her death: 'Good luck with *My Martyrdom as a Man*. That *is* to be the title, is it not' (227). The fragmented structure of *My Life as a Man* and the intratextual tension between its parts articulate a 'continuous process of (self)-erasure and (self)-inscription that never comes to unity or completion' (O'Donnell, 1988: 156). The stories that compose *My Life as a Man* form and de-form Peter's masculinity and his endeavour to inscribe his gendered identity in literary horizons which can give meaning to his experience.

In this chapter I have discussed the tensions between masculinity and authorship emerging from the novels of Kundera, Vargas Llosa and Roth. In *Slowness*, Milanku's discursive position arises from his ability to assimilate the literary legacy of *libertinage*, establishing his authority to the detriment of the immaturity of his character. *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* displays how the control Marito achieves over the fiction of his masculinity seems to be based on the suppression of his innermost emotions, and of the incestuous urges which are the heart of his creativity. Finally, in *My Life as a Man*, Peter's writing explores the process of self-inscription through which masculinity aims to give meaning to itself as a compulsion rather than a form of self-discovery.

Notes

1 Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* also refers to the idealisation of women and seduction as the trends defining men: 'Men have always been divided into two categories. Worshipers of women, otherwise known as poets, and misogynists, or, more accurately, gynophobes. Worshipers or poets revere traditional feminine values such as feelings, the home, motherhood, fertility, sacred flashes of hysteria, and the divine voice of nature within us, while in misogynists or gynophobes these values inspire a touch of terror. Worshipers revere women's femininity, while misogynists always prefer women to femininity' (1996: 180–1).

2 Examining both the continuity and the differences between Don Juan and libertines, Macchia observes that, in entering libertine discourse, the figure of Don Juan loses his original cockiness and is intellectualised, in line with libertine seducers, who tend to declare their libertine doctrine and a Machiavellian view of love (1991: 58–66). For Dubost, Don Juan 'expounds … the most fundamental paradigms of libertine desire' and 'anticipates in a very coherent manner the genuine libertine problem of disenchantment and the erosion of values' (1998: 54).

3 Catherine Cusset (1999) offers a different perspective on *No Tomorrow* and argues that Denon's approach to the rituals of seduction is parodic.

4 Kundera writes that 'En Allant chercher des obus' was sent to Lou on 11 May 1915, but the exact date is 13 May 1915 (Apollinaire, 1969: 362–5).

5 Diana Holmes (2006: 141) recognises the appropriateness of feminist criticism towards Delly but argues that an analysis of the reactionary politics which her narrative embodies fails to account for why women found pleasure in reading romances. According to Holmes, romances offered a fantasy of evasion which shaped a utopian solution to their dissatisfaction caused by living in the patriarchal French society at the beginning of the twentieth century.

6 Bernard Rodgers underlines some analogies between the lives of Roth and Peter Tarnopol: 'Both writers had similar childhoods. As young, beginning writers, both were dedicated to art of the "earnest moral variety." In 1959, at the age of twenty-seven, both published highly praised first books, and both married divorcées. Both received Guggenheim grants, spent time in Rome, gave a public lecture in California in 1960, and taught during the same years at large Midwestern state universities. Both were separated from their wives and underwent psychoanalysis between 1962 and 1967; and both of their estranged wives died violent deaths in auto accidents in Central Park' (1978: 152).

7 Roth (1985: 118–19) refers to this essay in his interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

8 In *My Life as a Man* Nathan Zuckerman is a creation of the fictional author Peter Tarnopol. Another character named Nathan Zuckerman appears in several of Roth's novels: he is the protagonist of *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *Anatomy Lesson*, *The Prague Orgy*, *The Counterlife* and *Exit Ghost*; a secondary character in *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain*; and the fictional author of a letter commenting on Roth's autobiographical manuscript in *The Facts*. The Zuckerman who appears in these novels has only one brother, Henry, and has never married a woman named Lydia, while *My Life as a Man*'s Zuckerman is the widower of Lydia and has two siblings, Sherman and Sonia.

9 Coetzee (2004) also reviewed Roth's *The Plot Against America*.

10 The complete letter is included in Flaubert's *The Selected Letters of Gustave Flaubert* (1954: 164–5).

11 Kellman's list of self-reflexive fictions corroborates the thesis of the interconnectedness of masculinity and the self-reflexive novel: out of 53 authors, only four of them are women, and only six of the 78 novels listed are written by women. All the male authors are white.

4
Intimacy

Prelude: desire and rebellion in Vargas Llosa's essayistic writing

In 'Four centuries of *Don Quixote*', Vargas Llosa highlights how *Don Quixote*, originally conceived as a criticism of chivalric romances, becomes 'a fiction about fiction, about what fiction is and how it operates in life' (2008b: 4). Vargas Llosa's interpretation of *Don Quixote* aligns with his theory of literary creation, according to which fiction originates in the dissatisfaction with which men and women experience 'the realities of their existence' that leads them to 'live in dreams – in the story they tell' (5). Uninterested in the philosophical debates on its social construction, for Vargas Llosa 'reality' emerges as a lived experience inspiring a narrative, which the storyteller aims to evade through a further narrative: 'Thanks to writing, … alternative lives created to fill the gap between reality and desire obtained the right to citizenship and the ghosts of imagination became part of life experience' (5). Literary writing provides readers and writers with archetypes and nourishes personal mythologies. Vargas Llosa associates the fundamental need to invent stories with subversive charge:

> The appearance of a great novel is always a sign of a vital rebelliousness taking the shape of a fictional world – one which, while resembling the real world, actually questions and rejects it. That may explain the fortitude with which Cervantes appears to have endured his difficult circumstances: by taking revenge on them through a symbolic deicide, he replaced the reality that mistreated him with the splendor which, drawing strength from his disappointments, he invented to oppose it. (6–7)

According to Vargas Llosa, *Don Quixote* is, for Cervantes, a way to take revenge on a world that does not satisfy our desires. The notion of deicide is at the heart of Vargas Llosa's theory of the creative act, which he elucidates in *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio* (1971). For Vargas Llosa, each novel is a symbolic assassination of God that replaces reality with a parallel world created by the novelist. The fictional versions of the world we create constitute both 'an act of rebellion against the limitations of real life' and an attempt 'to fill the gap between reality and desire' (2008b: 5–6). Both elements emerge in Vargas Llosa's reading of *Madame Bovary*:

> Emma wants sexual pleasure, she is not resigned to repressing this profound sensual need … she wants to surround her life with pleasing and superfluous things, elegance, refinement, to give concrete form by way of objects to that appetite for beauty that her imagination, her sensibility, and her reading have aroused in her … Emma's rebellion is born of one conviction, the root of all her acts … I want my life to be wholly and completely fulfilled her and now. (1986a: 13)

Stemming from the idea of a world that denies the fulfilment of our desires, Vargas Llosa's reading of *Madame Bovary* strictly resembles his interpretation of *Don Quixote*. If the most obvious analogy between the novels lies in the protagonists' desire to emulate the models they have absorbed in their reading, chivalric romances, or the heroines of the romance novels, Vargas Llosa emphasises the interconnectedness of the fulfilment of desire and rebellion.[1] In the following pages I shall explore how both these elements are pivotal in the adult and older masculinities in Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) and Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* (1998): the resistance to the world and gender expectations interlocking with political and economic systems that the protagonists of these novels, JC and Rigoberto respectively, convey in their essays interweaves with a newly found desire for intimacy.

Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*

A 'revenge on the world for declining to conform to my fantasies'

Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* consists of two sections: 'Strong Opinions. 12 September 2005 – 31 May 2006' and 'Second Diary'. Each is formed of multilayered pages. The first pages of 'Strong Opinions' comprise two

narrative levels. At the top of the first page, the reader can see an entry entitled 'On the origins of the state', while the bottom level is cast as a diary entry describing the meetings between JC, a South African writer who emigrated to Australia like Coetzee himself, and his neighbour Anya, a Filipino to whom he is attracted. JC offers her the job of typing up the audio recordings of his contribution to *Strong Opinions*, a volume to be published by a German publisher. In this way, JC is revealed as the fictional author of the essayistic entries of the upper narrative level. As JC explains to Anya, *Strong Opinions* gives him and the other five authors contributing to the volume the opportunity 'to say their say on any subjects they choose, the more contentious the better. Six eminent writers pronounce on what is wrong with today's world' (Coetzee, 2008a: 21). JC controversially engages with a wide range of topics, including philosophical discussions on the origins of the state and forms of government. The layout of *Diary of a Bad Year* changes when Anya accepts the job as a typist for JC: another horizontal line appears, creating a third narrative level featuring the entries from Anya's own diary. These entries mainly refer to her thoughts and her dialogues about JC with her boyfriend, Alan. This three-layered layout is interrupted in the last entry of 'Strong Opinions', involving a new series of opinions dedicated to themes such as kissing, compassion, birds and children that Anya calls 'Soft Opinions'. Through this multilayered structure, the novel creates a polyphony of different voices, including those of Alan, Anya and both JC's authorial tone and his more intimate diaristic one (Meljac, 2009). The biographical details shared by the character JC and the author Coetzee create an ambiguous fictive autobiography and a further intertext that invites the reader to identify analogies between Coetzee's opinions on authors and topics and those expressed in *Diary of a Bad Year* (Attridge, 2020: 92; Wittenberg, 2010: 44, 48–9).

When Anya asks JC the reason why a novelist has agreed to contribute to a nonfiction work such as *Strong Opinions*, JC explains that the volume is 'An opportunity to grumble in public, an opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to my fantasies: how could I refuse?' (2008a: 23). Attwell links *Strong Opinions* to 'what Immanuel Kant (1784) famously called the public performance of reason: a tradition … associated quintessentially with an Enlightenment concept of the public sphere' (2010: 214). JC's essays engage controversially with contemporary issues, including Guantanamo Bay Prison and Al Qaida, and criticise politicians including George W. Bush and Tony Blair. Even though initially JC's discontent is not transfigured into a creative act, the controversial nature of his essays offers an insight into JC's combative

intellectual attitude. JC's essayistic writing displays the feeling of dissatisfaction that drives Vargas Llosa's view of fiction, emerging 'as both a testament to and a source of our nonconformity' (Coetzee, 2008b: 7). Let me recall Coetzee's collection of essays dedicated to the theme of censorship, *Giving Offense*, in which Coetzee quotes from Vargas Llosa and refers to his understanding of literature as a form of resistance that is not merely political: 'The congenital unsubmissiveness of literature … strikes equally at everything [that] stands for dogma and logical exclusivism in the interpretation of life, that is, both ideological orthodoxies and heterodoxies … *it is a living, systematic, inevitable contradiction of all that exists*' (Vargas Llosa, 1978b: 36). By resisting the fundamental assumptions of Western culture, such as democracy and Darwinism, JC fulfils the tasks Vargas Llosa assigns to the writer and embodies literature's resistance to any given truth. In commenting on Vargas Llosa, Coetzee argues that 'the writer occupies a position that simultaneously stands outside politics, rivals politics, and dominates politics' (1996: 47). In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the sense of this rivalry with the contemporary world is expressed in the dialogue between JC and Alan generated by the layout of the novel. As I shall argue, their dialogue articulates a particular confrontation between two antithetic models of knowledge, which offers a standpoint from which to examine the relationship between rationality and hegemonic masculinity.

Alan is a 42-year-old businessman who describes himself as a self-made man. Brought up in an orphanage, he has made his fortune after getting his degree in business. Anya highlights that Alan constantly reads economic newspapers, goes to presentations on the most recent thinking to keep his mind sharp and has made himself an expert in mathematical modelling. Alan advocates for an instrumental understanding of the world driven by Kant's rationalist legacy. As he listens to the audio recordings of JC's opinions from which Anya is working, Alan expresses his belief in Kant's philosophy – 'everything is perception. This is Kant proved. That was the Kantian revolution' (Coetzee, 2008a: 90). However, Alan fails to see that Kant's agenda was 'a moral one' (Giles, 2019: 90). He argues that JC cannot understand the dynamics of Australia's advanced economy, since he reads them through a moral lens: 'It is all a morality play to him, good versus evil. What he fails to see or refuses to see is that individuals are players in a structure that transcends individual motives, transcends good and evil' (97). By hinting at Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* and its philosophical questioning of conventional morality, Alan argues that modern states have emancipated themselves from the moral imperatives

raised by issues such as violence and crime. For Alan, overcoming these emergencies would mark the end of politics in favour of a self-regulating market and a modern view of the state. Examining the ways in which modern philosophy contributes to a Western sense of gender identity, Victor Seidler (1989: 5) underlines the relationship between masculinity and historically situated notions of reason and progress in the West. From this perspective, Alan's appropriation of the language of reason and progress can be read as an expression of the gender dynamics enforcing imperialism and neoliberalism. Alan's reductionist perspective on Africa is expressed in comments on JC's South African origins – 'that is where he is stuck, mentally. In his mind he can't get away from Africa' (Coetzee, 2008a: 95), while Alan's allegiance to neoliberalism can be seen in his dismissiveness towards the ethical and political ideals driving the writing of JC, whom Alan calls a 'sentimental socialist' (199).

While Alan is confident in human perception and the human interpretation of the world, JC contends that the human apparatus is ontologically flawed and cannot understand the world. Engaging with Darwin's theories in order to oppose Kant's philosophical thinking, he writes: 'An intellectual apparatus marked by a conscious knowledge of its insufficiency is an evolutionary aberration' (86). JC's opposition to the world Western societies have shaped stems from his vision of this ontologically limited understanding. Literature plays a crucial role in JC's contestation of Western understanding and rationality. JC refers to Jorge Luis Borges's tale entitled 'Funes, his memory', whose protagonist is the Uruguayan country boy Ireneo Funes. After falling from his horse at the age of 19, Funes perceives the world with a hyper-stimulated sensitivity and remembers everything in full detail, including the shape of the clouds and the muscular and thermal sensations linked in his body to every visual image. This extraordinary power of memory emancipates Funes from the normal limits of human memory and of its capacity to retain thoughts and sensations. Funes develops a method of counting that is not based on a numerical system and sets aside the principles of economics by giving first names to quantities: 'for instance, "Máximo Pérez"; instead of seven thousand fourteen' (Borges, 1998: 136). JC comments:

> Borges' kabbalistic, Kantian fable brings it home to us that the order we see in the universe may not reside in the universe at all, but in the paradigms of thought we bring to it. The mathematics we have invented (in some accounts) or discovered (in others), which we believe or hope to be a key to the structure of the universe, may

> equally well be a private language – private to human beings with human brains – in which we doodle on the walls of our cave. (Coetzee, 2008a: 96)

By hinting at Plato's allegory of the cave, JC uses Borges's fiction to present paradigms as the way in which we as particular individuals formulate the world, as opposed to approaching paradigms as a sign of immutable systems. This insight into Borges evokes Floyd Merrell's response to the Argentine writer's narrative as 'the project of unthinking traditional Western thought' (1991: x). Borges challenges established modes of thought such as mathematics and logic by engaging with philosophical concepts, mathematical constructs and religious beliefs in the light of their aesthetic value. Borges's narrators refute supposed truths but without providing the reader with an alternative theoretical ground, and constantly assume different metaphysical and narrative positions. Engaging with the critical insights Borges's creative writing brings to light, JC questions the fundamental assumptions of Western culture to reveal the limits of its way of thinking and to sketch the different paths it may take. His reference to Borges's interest in the Kabbalah recalls Coetzee's description of Borges 'as an outsider to Western culture, with an outsider's freedom to criticize and innovate' (2001: 142). Like Borges, JC tries to emancipate himself from Western models and to find alternative perspectives through which to consider the limitations of our mentality and their effects on our formulation of the world. His refusal to unconditionally accept transmitted forms of knowledge echoes with the capacity of dissociation Coetzee praises in *Don Quixote*, which I highlighted in Chapter One. In addition, the fragmented nature of JC's essays seems to respond to Borges's disruptive aesthetics and his attempt to escape systematic and systematising thinking (Milleret, 1967: 116). Borges describes himself as 'a man of letters who turns his own perplexities and that respected system of perplexities we call philosophy into the forms of literature' (1969: ix). Similarly, JC distances himself from his work – 'The opinions you happen to be typing do not necessarily come from my inmost depths' (Coetzee, 2008a: 91) – and makes the same point in referring to his German editor, who says that JC's opinions are 'opinions subject to fluctuations of mood' (127). Through Anya's response, *Diary of a Bad Year* also expresses the actual reader's difficulties in engaging with such a variety of opinions: 'It is difficult to get into the swing when the subject keeps changing' (30). By exposing its own fragmented nature, *Diary of a Bad Year* combines philosophical reflections, essayism and narrative to present novelistic discourse as a form of (un)thinking.

The contrast between JC's and Alan's approaches evokes the conflictual dynamic between scientific and narrative knowledge that Jean-François Lyotard (1984) describes as characteristic of postmodernism. JC's inquiry addresses the limits of scientific understanding: 'What is stated in probabilistic terms can be interpreted only in probabilistic terms … Can one imagine the Sphinx foretelling that Oedipus will probably kill his father and marry his mother? Can one imagine Jesus saying that he will probably come again?' (Coetzee, 2008a: 101). Even though probabilistic understanding offers a better comprehension of the universe than previous deterministic models, JC argues that it still cannot convey the intensity or pathos of the human experience like mythical frames can. In response, Alan relies on scientific evidence and on a system of legitimation which embraces a theory until it is refuted. Alan displays the postmodern tendency to incorporate scientific knowledge into the dynamics of productivity. In her diary, Anya records Alan's rage at JC's attempt to question mathematical models through literature: 'Mathematics is not some arcane mumbo-jumbo about the nature of the number one versus the nature of the number two … Mathematics is an activity, a goal-directed activity, like running' (104). Concerning numbers Alan says: 'They are what we utilize when we work with mathematics in the real world. Look around you. Look at bridges. Look at traffic flows. Look at the movement of money. Numbers work. Mathematics works. Probabilities work. That is all we need to know' (111). Alan rejects JC's search for an alternative, narrative understanding based on the efficiency of technology, or what Lyotard defines as the criterion of optimal performance: 'Technology is … a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency' (1984: 44). Consistent with the drive to overcome moral concerns that Alan sees in modern economies, this criterion seems to further inform Alan's idea of efficiency as a self-sufficient principle, suppressing all those forms of criticism not aimed at improving performativity. A self-made man, Alan expresses his investment in the beliefs and values of late capitalism and seeks to expose the anachronism of the ideal of authorship embodied by JC.

Commenting on *Diary of Bad Year*, David Attwell observes that its 'overriding subject … is the practice of authorship itself' (2010: 217). As a literary man, JC embodies the ideal of intellectual authority Marito and Peter long for respectively in Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and Roth's *My Life as a Man*. While Alan fiercely tries to legitimise his position, JC emphasises his own lack of authority. In his essay 'On authority in fiction', JC refers to the way in which Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault challenged the authority of the author. Drawing on

formalist Russian critics of the 1920s, JC emphasises the role of rhetoric in Tolstoy's storytelling: 'the authority of the author has never amounted to anything more than a bagful of rhetorical tricks' (Coetzee, 2008a: 149). In addition, JC observes that Tolstoy and Walt Whitman were regarded as sages, but 'neither had much wisdom to offer … They were poets above all; otherwise they were ordinary men with ordinary, fallible opinions' (151). All these references contribute to undermining the prestige of poets and authors and, consequently, JC's own authority as a writer. Once again, JC's words are reminiscent of Lyotard, who argues that 'narrative knowledge does not give propriety to the question of its own legitimation' (1984: 27). Alien to Alan's yearning for efficiency, JC rather emphasises the lack of reliability characteristic of literary knowledge. Alan responds to this loss of authority in the Humanities and, regarding the publication of JC's opinions in Germany, argues that while the ideas of 'sages with white beards' are still welcome in '*Old Europe*', in English-speaking countries intellectuals have to compete for attention with gossip stars and politicians (Coetzee, 2008a: 207). Starting from opposite positions, Alan and JC agree about the loss of prestige literary knowledge has undergone. Nonetheless, unlike Alan, JC advocates the role of literature. By hinting at Diderot and Sterne, authors 'who long ago made a game of exposing the impostures of authorship' (149), JC embraces the novelistic tradition that challenges realist conventions and that Kundera regards as the authentic tradition of the novel inaugurated by Cervantes (Kundera, 1988b, 2007). In his essay 'On Dostoevsky', JC writes that he is moved to tears by Ivan's protest against God in the final chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Reading these pages, JC feels extremely vulnerable even though he does not share Ivan's view:

> So why does Ivan make me cry in spite of myself?
>
> The answer has nothing to do with ethics or politics, everything to do with rhetoric … Far more powerful than the substance of his argument, which is not strong, are the accents of anguish, the personal anguish of a soul unable to bear the horrors of this world. It is the voice of Ivan, as realized by Dostoevsky, not his reasoning, that sweeps me along.
>
> Are those tones of anguish real? Does Ivan 'really' feel as he claims to feel, and does the reader in consequence 'really' share Ivan's feelings? The answer to the latter question is troubling. The answer is Yes. (225–6)

The impact of literature on our life does not depend on the validity of the argument a character expresses or an author articulates, but rather on the empathic relationship the reader can establish with them thanks to rhetoric, and which challenges the parameters of rational reasoning espoused by Alan. In the following pages I shall describe how JC's intellectual combativeness, addressed against the post-industrial neoliberal society personified by Alan, loses its vigour as JC starts focusing on his physical experience of ageing and his emotional response to Anya.

Bodily deterioration and writing

The multilayered structure of *Diary of a Bad Year* also conveys the way in which JC's search for a narrative understanding interweaves with his estrangement from his ageing body. In his essay 'On the body', JC compares the instinctive and immediate experience of animals to the distance human beings feel from their bodies, and explores how the English language objectifies the body. While possessive adjectives imbue the relationship between the subject and its body parts with a sense of possession, they also induce us to conceive of the body as an interface which can never entirely be equated with 'us'. JC's mobile estrangement from his body is echoed in his relationship with his mother tongue. In the entry to 'Soft Opinions' entitled 'On the mother tongue', JC writes: 'as I listen to the words of English that emerge from my mouth, I have a disquieting sense that the one I hear is not the one I call myself. Rather, it is as though some other person (but who?) were being imitated, followed, even mimicked. *Larvatus prodeo*' (195). Adopting the Latin phrase that Descartes used to describe acting as a metaphor for life and his role as a spectator (Cottingham, 2017: xxvii, n. 25; Rodis-Lewis, 1999: 30), JC hints at the estrangement he feels from his experience and the role that imitation plays in generating the illusion of identity, as I discussed in Chapters Two and Three, and reveals how men's struggle with their sense of selfhood is not only characteristic of youth, but also permeates old age. JC wonders whether his own situation is emblematic of the only relationship speakers have with language as a whole: 'Perhaps it is so that all languages are, finally, foreign languages, alien to our animal being. But in a way that is, precisely, inarticulate, inarticulable, English does not feel to me like a resting place, a home' (197). These words call the case of Coetzee himself to mind, that of a writer whose first language is English, but who has not grown up in an English-speaking country. *Diary of a Bad Year* explores this sense of linguistic estrangement through JC's sense of his physical decay and its reverberations in his writing.

JC highlights that he finds writing reassures him more than speaking. The possibility of rewriting gives JC the sense of some control over the words he writes. Nonetheless, his metaliterary reflections on language and writing expose the limited control the writer has over his own literary creation:

> Stories tell themselves, they don't get told, [JC] said. That much I know after a lifetime of working with stories. Never try to impose yourself. Wait for the story to speak for itself. Wait and hope that it isn't born deaf and dumb and blind. I could do that when I was younger. I could wait patiently for months on end. Nowadays I get tired. My attention wanders. (55)

Diary of a Bad Year displays the alleged irreconcilability of creative writing and ageing. When Anya asks JC why he is not writing a novel instead of a set of opinions, a miscellany, JC explains, 'I don't have the endurance anymore. To write a novel you have to be like Atlas, holding up a whole world on your shoulders and supporting it there for months and years while its affairs work themselves out' (54). JC's writing reveals the symptoms of his body decaying: 'there is no denying my handwriting is deteriorating. I am losing motor control. That is part of my condition. That is part of what is happening to me. There are days when I squint at what I have just written, barely able to decipher it myself' (31). While, in *Disgrace*, Lurie addresses his feelings of ageing thematically through *Byron in Italy*, *Diary of a Bad Year* addresses JC's experience of ageing materially: the sense of his physical deterioration is also an exhaustion he feels in the act of writing.

In JC's 'On authority in fiction', references to the critical notion of the author's death are intertwined with his awareness of living the last stage of his career as a writer. The interplay between the symbolic death of the author announced by Barthes and JC's sense of his own physical decay culminates in his reflection on death in the last entry of 'Strong Opinions', entitled 'On the afterlife', and in the first entry of 'Soft Opinions', 'A dream'. The crucial position of 'On the afterlife' is indicated by a suspension of the multilayered structure of *Diary of a Bad Year* generally. 'A dream' is characterised by the temporary absence of JC's diaristic entries, and it narrates a dream in which JC has died but has not left the world and is living out the first days of his death, 'listening carefully for signs that my dead body was faltering' (157). The image of his corpse represents the ultimate fantasy of objectification of the body and conveys the estrangement JC examines in 'On the body'. The dream is populated with images expressing

the deterioration of the flesh such as a stream of urine turning into blood and the feeling that his 'internal organs were decaying irremediably' (158). JC derives 'An intriguing idea: to write a novel from the perspective of a man who has died, who knows he has two days before he – that is, his body – caves in and begins to fester and smell' (158). These fantasies of death inform JC's metaphors of writing as an ageing man. The novel he would like to entitle *Desolation* would focus on the loneliness of death. The experience is explored through his reading of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as a story about 'the solitariness of death' in which 'Orpheus leaves his beloved behind and returns to his own life' (159). Observing that Orpheus's love is not strong enough to rescue Eurydice from death (Danta, 2018), JC feels that this myth conveys a view of the afterworld truer than the Christian view of it. For JC, not even love can mitigate the solitude of approaching death. This tragic acknowledgement would go on to be the thematic core of his imaginary novel *Desolation*.

What's more, the reference to Eurydice and Orpheus is significant because in his dream JC is in the company of a living woman, younger than him, who is supposedly with him when he dies and then does 'her best to soften the impact of death' (Coetzee, 2008a: 157). Despite her protectiveness, the young woman tells JC that he can no longer live. In one of his diary entries JC hints at this dream and wonders about the young woman who guides him to the gateway to oblivion: 'is she the one who has been assigned to conduct me to my death?' (60). JC is referring to Anya (Kossew and Harvey, 2019: 9). Indeed, having met her, he cannot stop wondering about the scenario in which the typist would find his body. The pervasive presence of death and bodily decay in JC's writing echoes in this fantasy, which displays the intensity of his new feelings for Anya and, at the same time, his sense of the impossibility of their union given their age difference and his inability to express love physically. In examining how JC's intellectual reflections become increasingly self-referential, my next step is to address his considerations on Ezra Pound's fascination with the ideal love celebrated by the Troubadours, and to suggest that this idealised love represents a form of desire through which JC will be able to experience his love for Anya.

Pound and the Troubadours in *Diary of a Bad Year*

In one of his 'Soft Opinions', JC refers to Pound and explains that a decade before, following in the footsteps of Pound and the Provençal poets Pound loved, he had cycled along some of their routes they took in Provence:

> What I achieved by doing so I am not sure. I am not even sure what my illustrious predecessor expected to achieve. Both of us set out on the basis that writers who were important to us (to Pound, the troubadours; to me, Pound) had actually been where we were, in flesh and blood; but neither of us seemed or seem able to demonstrate in our writing why or how that mattered. (141)

JC's statement that Pound's writing does not reveal the influence that the Troubadours had on him is questionable, since traces of Pound's engagement with Provençal poetry can be found in his translations, poems and essays (Makin, 1978; McDougal, 1972). JC himself briefly summarises Pound's studies in Provençal poetry: he enrolled in a course in Provençal Studies at Hamilton College and went on to study at the University of Pennsylvania with the ambition of becoming a scholar of the poetry of the late Middle Ages. Pound was expected to follow the path of his mentors in Provençal Studies when he was named a Harrison Fellow in Romantics at Pennsylvania (Paden, 1980). Despite leaving academia, Pound did not give up his studies of Provençal poetry and continued researching manuscripts. His translations of Provençal poems are crucial in understanding his fascination with Provence and Provençal forms. In *Ezra Pound and the Troubadour Tradition*, Stuart McDougal argues, 'In his early translations Pound is seeking a suitable form of English for Provençal poetry … Moreover, translation is a way of penetrating an alien sensibility and culture and making it one's own' (1972: 8–9). Highly interpretative, Pound's translations display how the Troubadours' notions of love are absorbed into the fabric of his own creative process. For instance, in his version of Bertran de Born's 'Dompna pois de me no'us cal' (1933), Pound evades mention of Troubadour's carnal desire as described by Bertran, instead emphasising the most spiritual aspects of love, conferring an ethereal quality on the lady and making of her an abstraction (Capelli, 2003: 144). Pound changes a carnal and illegitimate passion into a Platonic and spiritual relationship. I propose that the meaning of the Troubadours' influence on Pound, about which JC is uncertain, lies precisely in Pound's sense of a love ethic stemming from the idealisation of women.

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, referring to Pound, JC traces Troubadour poetry back to Greek culture and hints at the assimilation of the Troubadours' legacy in the Italian thirteenth-century poetry of the *Dolce Stil Novo*:

> As a field of study, Provençal literature was more fashionable a hundred years ago than it is today. People of a secular-humanist bent traced the spirit of civilization, modern Western civilization, first back to Greece, then forward again to twelfth-century France and thirteenth-century Italy. Athens defined civilization; Provence and the Quattrocento rediscovered Athens. (Coetzee, 2008a: 139)

The references to Greek culture and the Italian Quattrocento illuminate Pound's engagement with the Troubadours and its reverberations in JC's mind. JC believes that the Troubadours' spiritual love reverberates with the Greek notion of Platonic love, and the role of Italian poetry is pivotal. JC's comments about Pound's interest in the Troubadours and Quattrocento poetry are consistent with McDougal, who writes: 'In his search for values with which he can confront the chaos of the contemporary world, Pound has retraced his steps through Tuscany to Provence' (1972: 101). He realised that the notion of the ideal lady he had been studying in Provençal poets was fully developed in Tuscan poetry: 'Although Pound's early work bore evidence of his tacit acceptance of this notion of love,' McDougal writes, 'it did not become the cornerstone of his love ethic until he had immersed himself in the poetry of Guido Guinizzelli, Guido Cavalcanti, Dante' (101). Drawing on the observations of McDougal and JC, I would like now to show how the ethics of love that Pound found in the poetry of the Troubadours, and in its assimilation in Guinizzelli, Cavalcanti and Dante, resonates in the relationship between JC and Anya.

The narration of the first meeting between JC and Anya unfolds as follows:

> My first glimpse of her was in the laundry room. It was midmorning on a quiet spring day and I was sitting, watching the washing go around, when this quite startling young woman walked in. Startling because the last thing I was expecting was such an apparition; also because the tomato-red shift she wore was so startling in its brevity. (2008a: 3)

Mina Roces (2023) reads Anya's clothing in connection to the Australian White stereotype of the Filipino woman. Roces underlines how Anya transgresses the normative ideals of femininity within Filipino culture, and she is hypersexualised in a way that reproduces the stereotype of Filipino women in Australia as mail-order brides (2023: 114–20). Anya talks explicitly about her intense sexual life with Alan, refers to previous lovers and intentionally tries to capture JC's attention: 'As I pass him,

carrying the laundry basket, I make sure I waggle my behind, sheathed in tight denim. If I were a man I would not be able to keep my eyes off me' (25). On the other hand, Hermann Wittenberg emphasises how the characterisation of Anya is absent in *Diary of a Bad Year*: 'What Anya really looks like remains elusive; and the term Coetzee uses to represent her, "an apparition", is an apt sign of the lack of descriptive detail' (2010: 47). Pointing out how the description of Anya differs from other descriptions of female presence in Coetzee's *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Wittenberg observes that Anya is 'almost completely reduced to [her] sexualized essentials' (48). I read the emphasis on Anya's sexuality and the descriptive elusiveness, emphasised by Roce and Wittenberg respectively, in view of JC's fascination with Pound. His first meeting with Anya is characterised by an emphasis on sight, which is one of the main features of the Troubadours' idea of love. In JC's eyes, Anya is an apparition. In his work on Dante and the Troubadours, Henry Chaytor underlines that in the transition from Provençal poetry to Italian Quattrocento, 'The cause of love, however, remains unchanged: love enters through the eyes; sight is delight' (1902: 105). Although Anya's physical features do not conform to the imaginary of the angelic woman – 'She has black black hair, shapely bones' (Coetzee, 2008a: 6) – the way JC describes Anya is reminiscent of the ideal lady: 'A certain golden glow to her skin, *lambent* might be the word' (6); 'a derriere so near to perfect as to be angelic' (8); 'so celestial a paramour' (11); 'this earthly incarnation of heavenly beauty' (190). For the reader, it is hard to determine whether JC's assimilation of this legacy is conscious or unconscious: the lucidity through which JC describes the continuity between Greek culture, the Troubadours and Italian poetry contrasts with the sense of uncertainty he feels about the Troubadours' influence on Pound.

JC's love for Anya displays a man's idealisation of a beloved woman, which has emerged in *Disgrace* and in the narratives of Kundera and Roth. The references to Provençal poets in *Diary of a Bad Year* evoke the notion of *homo sentimentalis* Kundera presents in *Immortality*, as discussed in Chapter Two. I now want to stress that Kundera also identifies the origins of this notion in the Troubadour tradition:

> The transformation of feelings into a value had already occurred in Europe some time around the twelfth century: the troubadours who sang with such great passion to their beloved, the unattainable princess, seemed so admirable and beautiful to all who heard them that everyone wished to follow their example by falling prey to some wild upheaval of the heart. (Kundera, 1992: 218)

By hinting at the origins of the idealisation of women in Western culture, *Diary of a Bad Year* confirms the recurrence in Coetzee's narrative of this archetype of heterosexual love, which I examined in *Disgrace* and in his essay on García Márquez. *Diary of a Bad Year* inflects this theme through JC's experience of ageing:

> As I watched her an ache, a metaphysical ache, crept over me that I did nothing to stem. And in an intuitive way she knew about it, knew that in the old man in the plastic chair in the corner there was something personal going on, something to do with age and regret and the tears of things. Which she did not particularly like, did not want to evoke, though it was a tribute to her, to her beauty and freshness as well as to the shortness of her dress. Had it come from someone different, had it had a simpler and blunter meaning, she might have been readier to give it a welcome; but from an old man its meaning was too diffuse and melancholy for a nice day when you are in a hurry to get the chores done. (2008a: 7)

JC describes the arousal of his desire for Anya as a metaphysical pain: an ambiguous expression that may address either the passion he can no longer feel or the awareness that his body is too weak to live up to the intensity of his desire for her. JC's metaphysical pain may also be seen in light of the tension between real and ideal. Let me recall here the words Lurie says to his students about Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and the experience of love: 'do you truly wish to see the beloved in the cold clarity of the visual apparatus? It may be in your better interest to throw a veil over the gaze, so as to keep her alive in her archetypal, goddesslike form' (Coetzee, 2000: 22). Lurie's words seem to reiterate the impossibility of experiencing love in the clarity of senses. Nonetheless, JC's painful emotion may contradict this logic. An insight into the metaphysical nature of Coetzee's desire for Anya can be found in Pound's essay on Cavalcanti, which argues that 'The whole break of Provence with this world, and indeed the central theme of the troubadours is the dogma that there is some proportions between the fine thing held in the mind, and the inferior thing ready for instant consumption' (1968a: 151). A few lines later, Pound adds: 'The term metaphysic may be used if it were not so appallingly associated in people's minds with unsupportable conjecture and devastated terms of abstraction' (151). JC's metaphysical pain may derive from an encounter with the embodiment of an ideal of beauty that he has imagined until then only as an abstraction.

Initially, JC is unable to understand his emotional and erotic response to Anya. His sense of displacement is expressed in his diary: 'this woman with whom … I seem to have grown obsessed, to the extent that a man can be called obsessed when the sexual urge has dwindled and there is only a hovering uncertainty about what he is actually after, what he actually expects the object of his infatuation to supply' (Coetzee, 2008a: 88–9). JC is unsure about the nature of his desire, since he cannot explore it physically. In the manner of the reinterpretation of the Provençal tradition by Dante and Pound, 'the lover is swayed by a spiritual and intellectual ideal, and the motive of physical attraction recedes to the background' (Chaytor, 1902: 105). Even though the way JC is stimulated physically by Anya is unclear, she affects his writing deeply. Anya encourages JC to change the subject of his work and to write about his own experience: 'Write your memoirs … The kind of writing you do doesn't work with politics … Write about the world around you' (Coetzee, 2008a: 35). Her influence starts emerging in the final essays of 'Strong Opinions', which are characterised by a more intimate approach, focusing on JC's admiration for Provençal poems as well as Romantic composers. No longer purely controversial, JC's entries are now about kissing, writing, compassion, ageing, birds and children, which allow him to translate his emotional response to Anya into writing. This change reflects the increasing distance JC feels from the combative attitude which has occupied the core of his identity as a man and an intellectual. *Diary of a Bad Year* challenges the Kantian separation of emotions, feelings and desires from reason that lies at the heart of the performance of hegemonic masculinity (Seidler, 1989: 6). At the same time, the novel seems to foster the binary vision of gender in which masculinity and femininity emerge as realms of intellect and emotionality respectively, a worldview which evokes the fiction of Robert Musil, as I argued in my 2016 essay (Rossoni, 2016). Like Musil's protagonists, JC tries to reconcile these two spheres which are constructed as antithetical.

The importance of Anya's role is emphasised by JC. Replying to Anya's letter in which she announces that she will no longer work for him, JC writes: 'You have become indispensable to me – to me and to the present project. I cannot imagine handing over the manuscript to someone else' (121). It is Anya who gives the name 'Soft Opinions' to the entries included in the second part of *Diary of a Bad Year* (193). 'Soft Opinions' equally represents JC's attempt to establish an emotional connection with her. Alan describes JC's behaviour as 'galant' (178) and as a 'courtship of a particularly devious kind' (201). Though Alan is being

ironic, he recognises that the composition of 'Soft Opinions' is a form of seduction. JC's affective response to Anya and his desire to be with her become explicit after Anya quits her job and leaves Alan. In his letter to Anya attached to his 'Soft Opinions', JC writes:

> PS, … I am beginning to put together a second, gentler set of opinions. I will be happy to show them to you if that will persuade you to return. Some of them take up suggestions that you let drop … A gentle opinion on love, or at least on kissing between a gentleman and a lady. Can I induce you to take a look? (145)

Though not a pure act of seduction, JC's 'gentler' opinions are an explicit attempt at persuasion. What Alan overlooks about JC's love for Anya is its spiritual dimension. When Anya asks him if she has been included in his book, JC tells her, 'you are in the book – how could you not be when you were part of the making of it? You are everywhere in it, everywhere and nowhere. Like God, though not on the same scale' (181). In addition to resonating with Flaubert's description of the novelistic author – 'An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere' (1980: 173) – the fact that JC describes Anya as a spiritual but not entirely divine presence evokes Pound's fascination with the *Stilnovisti*, and the idea that the beloved is a means through which to reach God drawn from the Troubadours. In *Provence and Pound*, Peter Makin emphasises that for Pound the awareness springing from the courtly-love relationship 'is a quasi-religious experience … there is no clear break between the ordering of the higher faculties and perception of the overall "coherence" which is divinity operating within the universe' (1978: 117). JC himself addresses the spiritual dimension that Provençal poetry held for Pound: 'In Pound's eyes, Provence marked one of the rare moments when life and art and the religious impulse cohered to bring civilization to a point of rich flowering' (Coetzee, 2008a: 139). In the case of JC, the sense of an imminent death, the increasing detachment from his body and his encounter with Anya, cohere to open his writing to a new form, expressing his new feelings and spirituality. In the next section, I go on to discuss the way in which JC conceives of 'love, passion, emotion as an intellectual investigation' in the manner of Pound (Pound, 1968b: 343). I propose that his opinions convey a new configuration of authorship and masculinity centred on the new dialogue between intellect and emotions.

Writing between diary and essay

In an entry of 'Soft Opinions' entitled 'On the writing life', JC returns to the sense that his creativity has been exhausted and focuses on the notion of inspiration. He quotes from *The Fragrance of Guava* by García Márquez, who does not consider inspiration 'as a state of grace', but rather 'as the moment when, by tenacity and control, you are at one with your theme' (Coetzee, 2008a: 192). JC writes that he has experienced such moments of creativity. However, he reiterates that his writing has been exhausted and underlines the interconnectedness of creativity and desire:

> Growing detachment from the world is of course the experience of many writers as they grow older, grow cooler or colder. The texture of their prose becomes thinner, their treatment of character and action more schematic. The syndrome is usually ascribed to a waning of creative power; it is no doubt connected with the attenuation of physical powers, above all the power of desire. Yet from the inside the same development may bear a quite different interpretation: as a liberation, a clearing of the mind to take on more important tasks. (193)

These words frame the exhaustion of desire as a liberation. By connecting the waning of desire to a clearing of the mind, the fragment suggests that JC's attraction for Anya is liberated from the physical urges that characterised his previous relationships and becomes the new creative drive for 'Soft Opinions'. Aware of the impact she has had on JC's writing, Anya writes to JC, saying that if their ages were more compatible they could have lived together and she could have become his 'resident inspiration' (204). Knowing she is more than a reified source of inspiration, Anya describes herself as 'the little typist who showed you [JC] the way' (222). Her influence on JC opens up an alternative perspective, a different awareness about the priorities of a writer.

In the last essay of 'Strong Opinions', 'On the afterlife', JC observes that the idea of an individual who is endowed with the faculty to think is so inherently rooted in our culture that it emerges even in religious conceptions of the afterlife. JC highlights 'an incapacity to think of a world from which the thinker is absent' (154). While the essays composing 'Strong Opinions' are confined to the development of an argument, I believe that 'Soft Opinions' displays the understanding of narrative knowledge to which JC has tried to give voice in the first part of *Diary of a Bad Year*. To clarify this point, let me return to the figure of Borges. In his

introduction to a collection of Borges's fiction, Coetzee observes that the stories of *The Garden of Forking Paths* 'use as model the anatomy or critical essay, rather than the tale' (2001: 143). In focusing on the essayistic form that Borges develops in works such as *Fictions* (including 'Funes, his memory') and *The Aleph*, Coetzee wonders: 'What do the operations of fiction offer this scholar-writer that enables him to take ideas into reaches where the discursive essay, as a mode of writing, fails him?' (2001: 145). The same question should be asked about the essayistic writing characteristic of 'Soft Opinions', which combines the essay form with the intimacy of the diary, an interaction which is also echoed in the tension between literary genres generated by the multilayered layout of *Diary of a Bad Year*. Revelatory of Anya's influence on JC's writing, the affection and confidentiality characteristic of diaristic entries not only subvert the combativeness associated with JC's intellectual (and romantic) rivalry with Alan, but also configure personal experience as a theoretical source (Seidler, 1989: 4), opening up his intellectual reflection to new speculations on topics such as kissing, writing, compassion and ageing. This new form of reflection responds to the question JC poses in his strong opinion 'On avian influenza', 'what if there are equally powerful modes of "thinking," that is, equally effective biochemical processes for getting to where your drives or desires incline you?' (71). While Borges searches for a perspective beyond Western culture by exposing the limitations of its theoretical assumptions, JC attempts to overcome the constraints of rational thinking by interweaving it with his emotional response to Anya. Through the composition of 'Soft Opinions', a form of writing capable of integrating reason and emotion, logic and instinct, JC embarks on an exploration of affect and develops a grammar of his emotions. I contend that, as a form of writing and (un)thinking, 'Soft Opinions' is responsive to Pound's reading of the Troubadours, the other main literary influences on *Diary of a Bad Year*.

Pound writes: 'The cult of Provence had been a cult of the emotions; and with it there had been some, hardly conscious, study of emotional psychology' (1952a: 116), and he wonders if chivalric love has led to an 'interpretation of the cosmos by feeling' (1952b: 94). The study of emotions also marks the continuity between Provençal poetry and the Italian Quattrocento, as Pound emphasises 'that there was a profound psychological knowledge in Medieval Provence, … that men … have there displayed considerable penetration; that this was carried into early Italian poetry' (1968b: 344). In the manner of the Troubadours' and *Stilnovisti*'s poems that Pound admires, the dialogue between JC's emotions and his intellect elicited by his interest in Anya develops into an examination of

human feelings. 'On music', one of the last 'Strong Opinions', investigates the transitory nature of our feelings by examining their translation into music: 'Music expresses feeling, that is to say, gives shape and habitation to feeling, not in space but in time. To the extent that music has a history that is more than a history of its formal evolution, our feelings must have a history too' (Coetzee, 2008a: 130). JC looks at the history of music as an archive of how human feelings have been crystallised. His approach is reminiscent of Kundera, who investigates the ways in which heterosexuality has been envisioned in European literary culture, as I discussed in Chapters Two and Three, but also goes on to address the relation between music and affect. In *Immortality*, Kundera stresses the connection between *homo sentimentalis* and European music: 'Europe: great music and *homo sentimentalis*. Twins nurtured side by side in the same cradle. Music taught the European not only a richness of feeling, but also the worship of his feelings and his feeling self' (1992: 229). Kundera emphasises the role of music in shaping feelings and in moulding them to human consciousness. Furthermore, like Milanku in Kundera's *Slowness*, JC is critical of the contemporary understanding of sexuality, which he believes to be epitomised by the image of athletes having sex: 'vigorous activity, followed by a burst of orgasm, rationalized as a kind of reward to the physical mechanism' (Coetzee, 2008a: 134). JC criticises what he regards as the notion of 'the American body' (133), a biological machine aimed at the best performance which deprives the human being of its soul. In this conception of the body, JC underlines how the spiritual component is replaced by 'the model of the self as a ghost inhabiting a machine' (133). Resisting this conceptualisation, JC's examination of the history of European music is a search for a form of erotics that is able to include spirituality. JC describes how, in the nineteenth-century art of song, a singer was trained to sing from the depths of her thorax to emit a tone which displayed 'the contrast between the mere physical body and the voice that transcends the body, emerging from it, rising above it, and leaving it behind' (131). This urge to transcend the body is at the root of JC's sense of bodily deterioration. JC goes on to praise the pursuit of transcendence in Romantic composers who created a music of 'spiritual transfiguration' (135) within the bounds of symphonic form. JC's intellectual exploration of the feelings conveyed by Romantic music provides him with a way to live the passion for Anya that his body denies him: 'the music we call Romantic has an erotic inspiration – that it unceasingly pushes further, tries to enable the listening subject to leave the body behind, to be rapt away … ?' (138). JC is fascinated by the potentialities of erotic desire to transcend his ageing body. He emphasises

'the striving toward transcendence' of Romantic music and recognises 'the quality of yearning' of its 'erotic idealism' (135). The metaphysical ache that creeps over JC when he first sees Anya evokes the 'metaphysical hunger' he deems characteristic of Romantic music and its drive to live physical urges philosophically as an erotic idealism (138). JC's interest in the yearning towards transcendence illuminates the interconnectedness of Romantic music and Provençal poetry in his writing and, at the same time, highlights the transcendental dimension of love embodied for him by Plato's philosophy and Provençal poetry. Presenting Pound's sense of courtly love as 'a cult for the purgation of the soul by a refinement of, and lordship over, the senses' (1952b: 90), 'Soft Opinions' articulates JC's attempt to emancipate himself from those forms of carnal desire he can no longer realise and his search for a new spiritual dimension. My final step is to explore how *Diary of a Bad Year* continues Coetzee's interrogation of gender-based violence and idealisation of the beloved woman that lies at the heart of *Disgrace*.

A disturbing proximity: ideal love, mental rape and Anya's voice

In this final section, I would like to focus on the character of Hungarian photographer Gyula, a friend JC writes about in 'On the erotic life', and Anya. Gyula has been overlooked in discussions of the interconnectedness of gender-based violence and the idealisation of the beloved woman (Giles, 2019; López, 2019). JC recalls the conversation he had with Gyula one year before he died by suicide. Their conversation is centred on desire as Gyula knew it in his late years (Coetzee, 2008a: 175). Gyula used to be a womaniser, but in growing older his 'need to make love to women in the flesh receded', even though 'he remained as keenly receptive to feminine beauty as ever' (175). Unable to physically enact his attraction for women, Gyula found another way via his imagination:

> [Gyula] had mastered the art of conducting a love affair through all its stages, from infatuation to consummation, wholly within his mind. How could he do that? The indispensable first step was to capture what he called a 'living image' of the beloved, and make it his own. Upon this image he would then dwell, giving breath to it, until he had reached a point where, still in the realm of the imagination, he could begin to make love to this succubus of his, and eventually conduct her into the utmost transports; and this whole passionate history would remain unbeknown to the earthly original. (175)

Gyula uses the expression 'living image', which reminds me of the fragment from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* that Lurie reads to his students. The fragment focuses on the impossibility of the human eye perceiving and preserving the image of the unveiled summit of Mont Blanc, a 'living thought'. While *Disgrace* addresses the limits of human senses, Gyula praises his own ability to capture the essence of a woman through sight, crystallising it into a living image: 'Once that unique movement was caught, the erotic imagination could explore it at leisure until the woman's every last secret was laid open' (177). Gyula believes his mental seductions are representative of European culture, Greek in particular, and Platonism. However, he inflects the notion of Platonism sensually – 'What I speak of is ideal love, poetic love, but on the sensual plan' (178) – differing from the erotic idealism that animates JC. Modelled on courtly love, JC's yearning for transcendence is inspired only by Anya, while Gyula's ideal love concerns all the women to whom he is attracted and emerges rather as a form of mental Don Juanism or *libertinage*. As I discussed in Chapter Three, courtly love and Don Juanism are traditionally conceived as antithetical. Camille Dumoulié describes courtly love as the counterpoint of the myth of Don Juan (1993: 205), while Cusset describes *libertinage* as opposed to the notion of transcendence. In conferring an erotic charge on the ideal of a Platonic love, Gyula's imaginary seductions challenge the Platonic emancipation from the body and, in the manner of Kundera's narrative, reveal the paradoxical and disturbing proximity of these two forms of love.

JC is perplexed by Gyula's paradoxical erotic-ideal love. Questioned about the nature of his desire, Gyula explains: 'A woman and a womanizer belong naturally together' (Coetzee, 2008a: 177). With an emphasis on the relationship between a male seducer and a woman, Gyula reinforces Kundera's stance on the centrality of the archetype of Don Juan and the importance of seduction in Western culture. Gyula emerges as a deeply Kunderian character and reminds me of Martin, the protagonist of Kundera's short tale 'The golden apple of eternal desire' included in *Laughable Loves* (1991). Happily married, Martin flirts with other women and the idea of illicit sex, even though he never cheats on his wife nor intends to. Like Martin, Gyula is driven more by the possibility of sex than by sex itself. Their behaviour reveals their need to rehearse those seductive practices which are supposed to define their manhood. Unrelated to sexual satisfaction, seduction is presented as a performance to satisfy heterosexual men's narcissistic urges and identity. Kundera and Coetzee address their characters' behaviour in different ways. While Kundera's narrative does not offer a criticism of Martin's

view but is rather aimed at analysing the paradoxes that drive his seductions, in *Diary of a Bad Year* JC addresses the ethical implications of Gyula's erotic fantasies.

JC is sceptical of Gyula's fantasies, as he believes that no fantasy can replace the authenticity of erotic experience: 'we cannot do without the real thing, the real real thing; because without the real we die as if of thirst' (179). Challenging the possibility of recreating sexual experience through the imagination, JC is evocative of the Quixotic dialectic between the real and the ideal (Vargas Llosa, 2008b: 4), a recurrent trope in Coetzee's narrative, as discussed in Chapter One. Gyula, on the other hand, is reminiscent of Lurie in *Disgrace* in embracing the masculinist legacy of European culture. In addition to his heterosexist framing of men as womanisers, Gyula's notion of a woman's 'erotic essence' reduces women's subjectivities to their sexuality and implies a logic of domination which allows a man to possess this alleged 'essence'. JC wonders if a misogynistic component underlies Gyula's practice: 'had he ever reflected that the wish to ravish women in the privacy of his thoughts might be an expression not of love but of revenge – revenge upon the young and the beautiful for disdaining an ugly old man like him' (176). Ageing increases the distance between men and women and exacerbates the masculine tendency to flatten the feminine into the categories of beauty and youth. JC goes further and defines Gyula's imaginary sexual performance as a 'kind of mental rape' (179). If having erotic fantasies about someone is considered legitimate, or at least inoffensive, JC investigates the drive of a man's erotic imagination, which may not be aimed at providing him with pleasure, but rather at imposing an undesired act on a woman and domination generally.

In displaying JC's resistance to Gyula's view of seduction, *Diary of a Bad Year* ambiguously presents similarities between the two characters. I have previously stressed JC's gaze on Anya during their first meeting. Anya often records her sense of being observed: 'when I make my silky moves I can feel his eyes lock onto me', 'his eyes avid upon me' (28, 30). These elements conform to Gyula's belief that 'no woman can be unaware of the gaze of desire settling upon her' (175). JC has erotic fantasies about Anya. At first, he tries to reject them – 'God, grant me one wish before I die, I whispered; but then was overtaken with shame at the specificity of the wish, and withdrew it' (8) – then he cannot stop himself from visualising Anya having sex with Alan: 'the devil waylays me, sends me an image of this Anya on a sweaty summer night, convulsed in the arms of ginger-haired, freckle-shouldered Alan, opening her womb in gladness to the gush of his male juices' (53). Furthermore, in her letter to JC, Anya writes

that she would like to hear more about whether Gyula actually existed or is instead a figment of JC's imagination. The hypothesis that Gyula is a mask of JC may originate in the fact that Gyula finds it acceptable to be erotically interested in children, which recalls JC questioning the relativity of the concept of paedophilia. If this were true, JC's creation of Gyula would exemplify Coetzee's notion of writing as the process of 'awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them' which also emerges in Lurie's composition of *Byron in Italy*, as discussed in Chapter One (Coetzee, 1992: 65). *Diary of a Bad Year* would explore the dialogic nature of writing as a means to examine the estrangement JC feels towards his own drives.

Anya reassures JC that she was aware of his interest in her. In her letter, she writes that although the idea of being the object of other men's fantasies bothered her, she did not mind being the centre of his attention: 'I was never embarrassed by your thoughts, I even helped them along a little. And nothing has changed since I left, you can go on having thoughts about me to your heart's content … And if you want to write and tell me your thoughts, that is OK too, I can be discreet' (211). In welcoming JC's fantasies, Anya confirms the Platonic level of their love. Their closeness grows as Anya proposes herself to be a confidant for JC's most intimate thoughts. Anya's acceptance of JC's desire and the emotional bond she has established with him are the result of her own self-affirmation. At the beginning of *Diary of a Bad Year*, Anya feels frustrated because her voice is unheard:

> Señor C has opinions about God and the universe and everything else. He records his opinions (drone drone) which I dutifully type out (clickety clack) and somewhere down the line the Germans buy his book and pore over it (*ja ja*). As for Alan, Alan sits all day hunched over his computer and then comes home and tells me his opinions about interest rates and Macquarie Bank's latest moves, to which I dutifully listen. But what about me? Who listens to my opinions? (101)

The adverb 'dutifully', which she repeats both in relation to JC and Alan, suggests the sense of responsibility Anya feels towards the men in her life, which might display the interiorisation of the gendered expectations projected onto Filipino women (Roces, 2023). Tired of her subordinate position, Anya confronts Alan's dominant attitude, rejecting his plan to steal JC's money and then breaking up with him. Similarly, Anya's decision to quit her job as a typist is revelatory of her agency.

The interrogation of men's violence against women in *Diary of a Bad Year* is not limited to Gyula's imagination. We learn from JC's diary – displayed in the second narrative level of the novel – that Anya and a friend were raped by three American college students. Anya's account is recorded by JC as free direct speech without quotation marks. Without providing any details of the violence she was a victim of or the aftermath, Anya recounts her decision to report the perpetrators to the police as she challenges the association of being a victim of rape and dishonour that the title of *Disgrace* hints at. Anya emphasises that dishonour falls on the perpetrators rather than the victim. While JC might be seen to align with Anya's words, since he explains that he feels he is dishonoured by Anya's rapists because of their shared gender identity, he challenges the idea that Anya does not feel dishonoured by their crime. Like Lucy in *Disgrace*, Anya responds to a male protagonist's attempt to impose his understanding of gender-based violence on women: 'From her eyes beamed a ray of pure cold rage. *Don't you tell me how I feel!* … *What do you know!*' (2008a: 115). The next morning Anya quits her job with a note: 'This is the last typing I can do for you. I cannot stand your undermining of me. A.' (117). As I have discussed, by mitigating JC's intellectual and controversial engagement with politics and society, she has a deep influence on his life and makes him more receptive to his own feelings but also the contemporary world: 'I did feel that you were taking a risk, being so isolated, so out of touch with the modern world' (196). Anya's voice articulates a change in understanding of sexual violence linked to the idea of modernity. She confronted the police officer who tried to dissuade her from reporting her rape: 'This is the twentieth century, *capitano* (it was still the twentieth century then). In the twentieth century, when a man rapes a woman it is the man's dishonour' (101). Challenging JC's strong opinions, she says to him: 'You have got it wrong, Mister C. Old thinking. Wrong analysis, as Alan would say. Abuse, rape, torture, it doesn't matter what: the news is, as long as it is not your fault, as long you as you are not responsible, the dishonour doesn't stick to you' (105). Emerging as an ethical counterpoint to JC's worldview, Anya embodies a contemporary sensitivity that does not blame the victims for the violence they underwent.

Anya's agency also emerges in her ability to experience her affection for JC within her terms. JC's emotional response to Anya is not the only one narrated in *Diary of a Bad Year*; Anya's own feelings for JC are crucial too. They emerge when she reads JC's account of his dream about his death:

> I remember you once told me you would not put your dreams in the book because dreams don't count as opinions, so it is good to see one of your soft opinions is a dream, the dream you told me long ago about yourself and Eurydice. Naturally I wonder if it doesn't contain a secret message about needing help. It is a pity you are so alone in the world. We can all do with someone by our side, to help us. (197)

JC's solitude arouses Anya's pity. Although Anya is not in love with JC, she understands the depth of his feelings. Unconsciously, Anya seems to evade the courtly frame JC is projecting onto their relationship. In the tradition of courtly love, the knight addresses his beloved lady as 'domina', but Anya resists this power dynamic and the role given to women in this tradition, since she refers to JC as *señor*. 'This young woman who declines to call me by my name, instead calling me *Señor* or perhaps *Senior*' (60), JC observes. Anya is not only an object of desire. Her awareness of JC's feelings – 'I was the one he was in love with' (225) – is at the heart of her growing sense of responsibility for him. This bond does not relegate her to the submissive role that she feels her job as JC's typist assigns to her: 'he is supposed to be the big writer and I just the little Filipina' (29). The sense of her agency grows along with her desire to help JC. Anya promises herself she will be with JC when his life draws to an end:

> I will hold his hand. I can't go with you, I will say to him, it is against the rules. I can't go with you but what I will do is hold your hand as far as the gate. At the gate you can let go and give me a smile to show you are a brave boy and get on the boat or whatever it is you have to do. As far as the gate I will hold your hand, I would be proud to do that. (226)

Although she escapes the roles given to the sexes in courtly love, Anya's sympathy for JC expresses the ethical dimension of Troubadour love that Pound praises. The interconnectedness of Anya's words and JC's dream strengthens the sense of dialogue between their sensitivities. In my analysis of *Disgrace*, I discussed Lurie's attempt to give voice to his daughter and, more generally, the Otherness he projects onto women. While the dialogic interplay of *Disgrace* exposes Lurie's self-absorption and his inability to understand the Other, the multilayered structure of *Diary of a Bad Year* displays the empathic bond JC and Anya are nonetheless able to establish. Finally, for the first time in the male-centred narrations I have considered so far, the subjectivity of a female character is not drawn exclusively in light of her gender, but rather through the

ethical dimension of her behaviour. In the next section, I go on to explore the masculine fantasy, expressed in works of art and literature, informing the imagination of Rigoberto in Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Rigoberto*. I shall focus on how Rigoberto's fantasies, nourished by literary *Don* texts, are turned into a stage for self-reflection, as well as exploring his emotions and articulating his search for intimacy.

Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*

The struggle against hegemonic masculinity in Rigoberto's essay-letters

The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto is the sequel to *In Praise of the Stepmother* (1988), which narrates the story of Don Rigoberto discovering that his second wife Lucrecia is having an affair with his son from his first marriage, Fonchito. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* continues their story after the separation of Rigoberto and Lucrecia.[2] In the manner of *Diary of a Bad Year*, through the fragmentation of its narrative, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* juxtaposes its protagonist's thoughts expressed in an essayistic form with accounts of his emotional situation. While in *Diary of a Bad Year* JC's and Anya's impressions are collected as confessional memoirs, an extradiegetic narrator recounts the lives of Lucrecia and Rigoberto.

The fragmented structure of *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* consists of nine chapters and an epilogue. Apart from the second, each chapter has four sequences. The first sequence is based on the meetings between Fonchito and Lucrecia, with the young boy trying to ensure his stepmother reconciles with his father. The second is an essay in epistolary form written by Rigoberto to express his views and opinions on a range of topics. The third narrates the sexual fantasies of Don Rigoberto during his separation from Lucrecia, which are inspired by literary works as well as pictures and reproductions of famous paintings. The fourth consists of short letters, which might be the anonymous letters written by Fonchito that Lucrecia receives in the first sequence of the novel. The second chapter is the only one not to completely follow this structure, since the fantasy it describes is divided into two distinct parts.

Written in the form of essays, Rigoberto's letters display his resistance to the contemporary world much like JC's 'Strong Opinions'. Rigoberto critically engages with religion, social utopias, patriotism,

sport and pornography, while celebrating individual and sexual freedom. In 'Letter to a Rotarian', Rigoberto describes his struggle in the following terms:

> Since the world is moving so quickly toward complete disindividualization and the extinction of that historical accident, the rule of the free and sovereign individual … I am mobilized and combat-ready, with all my five senses, twenty-four hours a day, prepared to delay, as much as I can and in areas that concern me, this existential calamity. (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 112)

Rigoberto's letters convey his rivalry with the world and address the acceleration of the twentieth-century world described by Milanku in *Slowness*.[3] His battle against 'the planned, the organized, the obligatory, the routinized, the collective' is pervaded by the same pessimism that characterises JC's opinions (113). Both Rigoberto's letters and JC's opinions are contentious in conveying their scepticism concerning human procreation and the prospects of humanity as well as in discussing the relativity and mutability of the understanding of paedophilia. Both Rigoberto and JC look with nostalgia at past ways of life and how their significance has deteriorated in contemporary life. But while JC finds an ideal in Romantic music and its yearning for transcendence, Rigoberto searches for pleasure through the exaltation of the body and the senses. For instance, in 'Diatribe against the sportsman', Rigoberto thinks of sport as practised in ancient Greek as a way to stimulate the body and enrich men's pleasure (85). His hedonistic approach is antithetical to JC's search for a transcendental love.

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the interplay between Alan and JC evokes the dynamics between functional and critical knowledge. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* addresses another aspect of 'post-industrial society', as Rigoberto calls it (87): the incredulity towards metanarratives that Lyotard regards as the defining feature of postmodernism (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). By metanarratives, Lyotard means cultural frames which represented an apparatus of legitimisation in modern societies, such as religion and science. In 'An exaltation and defense of phobias', Rigoberto confesses he was 'a worshipper of social utopias' and, as a militant Catholic, he spent his youth working to build a homogeneous society based on Christian values, a 'collectivist utopia of the spirit' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 143). Critical of the efforts of his youth, Rigoberto writes that he and his companions tried to homogenise 'the vortex of incompatible particularities which constitute the human conglomerate' (143). In 'Letter

to a Rotarian', Rigoberto explains that his militancy in Catholic Action opened his eyes to 'the illusory nature of all social utopias' and raised his 'defence of hedonism and the individual' (112). Rigoberto believes that social phenomena including patriotism, ideology and religion lead to the loss of freedom and individuality, reducing the subject to 'the condition of mass-man' (112). Whereas in *Diary of a Bad Year* a thematic core cannot be found in JC's opinions, all of Rigoberto's letters are motivated by a fierce defence of individual freedom.

For Rigoberto, the loss of individuality is implicit in any form of human aggregation, independent of the fairness of the aims it pursues. Despite being sympathetic with feminist struggles for equal rights, Rigoberto still despises feminism for falling 'into the collectivist intellectual category': more important than the right to education, employment or health is 'the right to pleasure' (57). Rigoberto sees the division of humanity into two sexes and its construction on that basis as a denial of freedom. In addressing this gender binary, he refers to Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Myths of Gender* (1985), which conceives of five sexes (male, female, merm, ferm and herm). Rigoberto welcomes her research and praises the research of scientists like her as 'powerful allies for those who believe … that the Manichean division of humanity into men and women is a collectivist illusion marked by conspiracies against individual sovereignty – and therefore against liberty' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 58). For Rigoberto, Fausto-Sterling's alternative model increases the possibilities of sexual experience and its singularity beyond the constraints of a binary understanding of human biology. Rigoberto writes, 'With regard to sex, we humans represent a gamut of variations, families, exceptions, originalities, subtleties. To grasp the ultimate, untransferable human reality in this domain, as in all others, one must renounce the herd instinct, the crowd view, and have recourse to the individual' (59). Antithetical to Jaromil's longing to merge with a crowd in *Life Is Elsewhere*, Rigoberto's desire displays a desire for autonomy. Interpreting Rigoberto's reflections as Vargas Llosa's, Rosi Braidotti describes the reading of Fausto-Sterling proposed by *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* as 'a conservative rejection of gender dualism' (2002: 37). In addition to the obvious differentiation between author, narrator and character, it should be noted that Rigoberto's and Vargas Llosa's oppositions to feminism might be complementary but still differ, as they respond to different times. While Rigoberto criticises the second wave of feminism for promoting a binary understanding of sexual difference that flattens sexual experience, Vargas Llosa (2018, 2019) rather opposes the moral and ideological approach to literary texts that he believes the #MeToo movement is promoting. Regardless, Braidotti's

assertion that 'gender pluralism' in the novel is instrumental 'to defend the uniqueness of the individual as a socio-political entity' is accurate (2002: 38). Rigoberto's reading of Fausto-Sterling 'does nothing to alter the balance of power and the political economy of sexual dialectics, which is one of the motors of the phallogocentric regime' (Braidotti, 2002: 38). Though I agree with Braidotti that *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* is not subversive of patriarchal and heteronormative relationships, I believe that the significance of the novel lies exactly in its destabilisation and reconfiguration of masculinity within the limits of neoliberal patriarchy.

The idea that liberal ideology nourishes Rigoberto's defence of individuality is proposed by Roger Zapata (2002), who argues that Rigoberto's understanding of pleasure as a liberating principle is reminiscent of the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille. Bataille in particular is a crucial influence on the novel. Though his name is never mentioned in the novel, Roy Boland (2012: 106) observes that Bataille's vocabulary (including words such as transgression, desire, pleasure, perversion and ectasis) permeates the novel. Efraín Kristal underlines that Vargas Llosa is in debt to Bataille for the notion of *sovereignty*, understood as 'a human being's claim to the erotic, to desire and pleasure' (1998: 175). While, for Bataille, pleasure is impossible without the transgression of those values that make collective life possible, the power of transgression praised by Rigoberto seems to be limited to the protection of the individual against the post-industrial society.[4] Pedro Koo argues: 'The essays included in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* work also as a subversive element which questions and deconstructs the metanarrative that represents the hegemonic masculinity in the novel' (2005: 37, my translation). Rigoberto criticises a set of patriarchal institutions and discourses such as the Rotary Club, sport and pornography, which Koo (2005: 41) describes as agencies engendering boys and men. Rigoberto regards men's social clubs which deny membership to women as misogynistic, observing how physical exercises and sports brutalise contemporary man 'by catering to his most ignoble instincts: tribalism, machismo, the will to dominate' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 87). Drawing on Koo's insights into the novel, I intend to argue that Rigoberto's rejection of machismo is linked to his resistance to the role gender plays in the formation of collective identity.

Rigoberto's view of sexuality emerges most clearly in his essay-letter entitled 'Letter to the reader of *Playboy*, or a Brief treatise on aesthetics', which is an attack on readers of *Playboy*. For Rigoberto, a *Playboy* reader renounces his erotic imagination and lets his fantasies be led by the erotic content of a magazine. Rigoberto writes:

> … you … succumb to the municipal vice of permitting your most subtle drives, those of the carnal appetite, to be reined in by products that have been cloned, and by seeming to satisfy your sexual urges actually subjugate them … serializing and constricting them in caricatures that vulgarise sex, strip it of originality, mystery, and beauty. (193)

Rigoberto's understanding of the commodification of desire as a denial of individual freedom resonates with Harry Brod, who investigates the alienating effect of pornography on male sexuality. Brod argues that sexual freedom is the 'radical freedom *to* construct authentically expressive sexualities' and sets it in opposition to pornography understood as 'a vehicle for the imposition of socially constructed sexuality' (1988: 278). Even though Rigoberto's and Brod's observations draw on different assumptions (Brod's study stems both from feminist and Marxist theories), they converge in describing the interconnectedness of sexuality and freedom. For both Rigoberto and Brod, the space of self-definition expressed by sexuality is threatened by the representations and practices that the imaginary of pornography and adult magazines convey. In Rigoberto's eyes, magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse* deprive sexuality of the secrecy and the subversive charge which nourish erotic fantasies:

> This kind of magazine symbolizes the corruption of sex, the disappearance of the beautiful taboos that once surrounded it and against which the human spirit could rebel, exercising individual freedom, affirming the singular personality of each human being, gradually creating the sovereign individual in the secret and discreet elaboration of rituals, actions, images, cults, fantasies, ceremonies which by ethically ennobling the act of love and conferring aesthetic distinction upon it, progressively humanized it until it was transformed into a creative act. (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 194)

By presenting sexuality as an act of rebellion against moral taboos, Vargas Llosa evokes the notion of seduction as both a ritual and a creative act, both of which are embodied by Madame de T. in *Slowness*. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* emphasises the role of creative practices and literary mediation in shaping sexual pleasure and explores the individual's struggle for cultural (re)appropriation of sexual desire from its commodified and collective representations in post-industrial society.

Rigoberto links his notion of individuality to fetishism, which he considers 'a privileged form of expression of human particularity that allows men and women to define their space, mark their difference from others, exercise their imagination, express their anti-herd spirit, and be free' (145). For Rigoberto, the sexual gratification provided by a fetish is a source of individuality which opens one's imagination to new forms of desire. Although fetishism increases the ways in which excitement can be raised and satisfied, Rigoberto's idea that it represents a space of active and conscious self-definition is debatable, since the choice of a fetish may be unconscious or involuntary. In 'An exaltation and defense of phobias', Rigoberto writes that 'the solitary individual can – by acting on his appetites, manias, fetishes, phobias, or preferences – create his own world, one that approaches … the supreme ideal in which experience and desire are one' (146). The pursuit of sexual desire offers the individual the possibility of displaying their creativity and living temporarily at the height of their imagination. Confronting the ontological dissatisfaction that lies at the heart of Vargas Llosa's view of fiction, Rigoberto projects all the power of imagination onto sexual fantasies as a way to fill the gap between experience and desire. On this basis, in the next section I shall discuss the way in which references to literary texts, visual art, movies and music exhibit the masculine imagination expressed in the history of Western arts and nourish Rigoberto's erotic fantasies. I shall read the interconnectedness of the eroticism, erudition and imagination that pervades *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* in light of Borges's influence.

Eroticism and Borges's erudition in Rigoberto's fantasies

Rigoberto's first essay, 'Instructions for the architect', reverberates with the 'insoluble dialectic between the real and the ideal' which Vargas Llosa praises in *Don Quixote* (2008b: 4). In this letter, Rigoberto explains the principles of his new library to his architect: 'in the small constructed space that I will call my world and that will be ruled by my whims, we humans will be second-class citizens; books, pictures, and engravings will have first priority' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 8). Included in the first chapter, Rigoberto's radical worldview resonates throughout the novel:

> It was in no way easy for me to adopt a position that contradicted the ancient traditions … of anthropocentric philosophers and religions in which it is inconceivable that a real human being, an organism of perishable flesh and bone, can be considered less worthy of interest

> and respect than the invented one that resides (if it makes you more comfortable, let us say it is reflected) in the imagery of art and literature. (9)

The supremacy of the written word over the flesh radicalises the aesthetic of *Don Quixote*. Investigating the ways in which fiction influences life, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* examines how Rigoberto's fantasies, nourished by his intellectual interests, affect his sexual life. Still desperately in love with the woman who cheated on him with his son, Rigoberto spends his free time in his library compulsively looking at books, paintings and vinyls to stimulate his imagination. The epigraphs from Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion* ('Man, a god when he dreams, barely a beggar when he thinks') and Montaigne's *Essais* ('I cannot keep a record of my life through my actions; fortune has buried them too deep: I keep it through my fantasies') express the key role of imagination as expressed in literature, visual art, music and cinema in the novel.

Rigoberto's fantasies obsessively feature Lucrecia in transgressive sexual scenarios. In the first of them, 'The night of the cats', Lucrecia tells Rigoberto about her erotic encounter with a faceless man. The imaginary dialogue between Lucrecia and Rigoberto is juxtaposed with Lucrecia's narration and her dialogue with the faceless man. Dialogic juxtaposition is characteristic of Vargas Llosa's prose: in his study, José Miguel Oviedo calls 'telescopic narrations' the narrative device in which two dialogues from different temporal lines interweave, one present and the other evoked and made present by the first (1982: 172). *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* offers a variation on this technique by interweaving imaginary dialogues happening at two different moments and in two different places. The faceless man asks Lucrecia to undress in front of him in a room full of kittens. In imagining the scene, Rigoberto hears a sonata by the Italian composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi: 'He [Rigoberto] understood why that sonata had been chosen: the eighteenth century was not only the time of disguise and confusion of the sexes; it was also the century par excellence of cats' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 11). Connecting the presence of cats to a scenario involving disguise and sexuality, Pergolesi's sonata corroborates Rigoberto's fantasy in which the faceless man scrupulously covers Lucrecia's skin with the honey from the bees on Mount Hymettus described by Aristotle, letting the kittens lick her skin. Lucrecia explains to Rigoberto that she has agreed to undergo this practice to please him because she is still in love with him. The juxtaposition of these two narratives offers an insight into the way in which Rigoberto's erotic fantasies are created: 'Had he begun to apply honey? Yes. With

a painter's fine brush? No. With a cloth? No. With his bare hands? Yes' (13). Rigoberto is unable to anticipate the development of his fantasy, which surprises him. 'The vision was so clear, the definition of the image so explicit, that Don Rigoberto become fearful' (14). The degree of distinctness of his fantasies scares Rigoberto, as he is confronted with erotic dreams that can compete with his lived experience.

Rigoberto wonders where such a fantasy might have originated from and he considers a book by the Dutch animalist Midas Dekkers, Fernando Botero's painting entitled *Rosalba* (1969), a woodcut by Félix Vallotton known as *Languor* (1896) and, finally, the languid girl represented in Balthus's *Nu avec chat* (Nude with cat) (1949). Rigoberto cannot find the answer he is looking for in any of them. Alluding exclusively to men's paintings featuring female nudes, Rigoberto confirms the masculine imaginary at the heart of his fantasies. Hedy Habrá (2012: 76) shows how Rigoberto borrows manias from artists and focuses her attention on Balthus, who transforms the cats within his paintings and nudes into voyeurs, doubling the viewer's voyeurism and stressing the intimate relationship of the painter with the model. The intimate bond between (a male) creator and (a female) model, which Habrá regards as characteristic of Balthus's art, also emerges at the climax of Rigoberto's fantasy when his words start resonating with those of the faceless man – '"Open your legs, my love," asked the faceless man. "Open them," pleaded Rigoberto' (15). The overlapping between the two narratives shows Rigoberto's lack of distance from his creation: 'The invisible man was no longer invisible. His long, oiled body silently infiltrated the image. Now he was there too' (16). Rigoberto's increasing involvement is demonstrated by his own appearance in the fantasy to which he devotes life. Drawing on Girard's theory of triangular desire, to which I referred in my analysis of *Disgrace* in Chapter One, Zapata reads Rigoberto's desire as mimetic: '[Rigoberto's] desire is no more than the voracious cannibalization of other texts and images: it is an intertextual hunger which presupposes previous readings, views and sounds' (2002: 221). In contrast, I suggest that in search of artworks that can stimulate his imagination, Rigoberto is not only mimetic but productive. By subverting the plots of movies and narratives, he assimilates their erotic charge into the fabric of his fantasies and intensifies it.

I contend that this fabric is illuminated by Vargas Llosa's reading of Borges and by the way he assimilates Cervantes' legacy. In his second essay on *Don Quixote*, entitled 'A novel for the twenty-first century', Vargas Llosa emphasises the metafictional dimension of Cervantes' novel:

> The central theme of *Don Quixote de La Mancha* is fiction, its raison d'être, and the way it infiltrates life, forming and transforming it. Thus, what would seem to many modern readers the Borgesian theme *par excellence* (from 'Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius') is actually a Cervantine subject, which, centuries later, was revived by Borges, giving it his own personal twist. (2005: 126)

For Vargas Llosa, Borges has revitalised Don Quixote's reading of the world as pure fiction. His interest in Borges lies in the self-reflective aspects of his narrative. In 'The fictions of Borges', one of four essays on Borges, Vargas Llosa observes that the central concerns of Borges's fiction are 'conjecture, speculation, theory, doctrine, and sophism' (1988: 1330). In this interconnectedness of narrative form and intellectual speculation, Vargas Llosa's fascination with Borges is reminiscent of Coetzee's but still distinct.[5] While Coetzee wonders why Borges chose fiction as a way to develop a thought rather than writing an essay, Vargas Llosa is more concerned with the way erudition nourishes Borges's literary imagination (Rossoni, 2022).[6] Often confused with exhibitionism and pedantry, Vargas Llosa instead describes Borges's erudition as an 'inseparable complement' to his stories (1988: 1331). Literary but also historical, philosophical or theological references and associations lose their exclusively scientific charge and 'fulfil an essentially narrative (i.e. fictive) function' (Vargas Llosa, 1978a: 470). Central to Vargas Llosa's understanding of Borges is John Sturrock's *Paper Tigers: The ideal fictions of Jorge Luis Borges*. Sturrock suggests that cultural references and philosophy in Borges's creations support his imagination and abstractions and become subjects usable by literature 'for [their] power to attract or astonish' (1977: 22). Drawing on Vargas Llosa's reading of *Paper Tigers*, my next step is to examine Sturrock's observations about Borges as a key to understanding how the affective crisis Rigoberto lives through with Lucrecia spurs his intertextual masculine desire.

In his 1978 essay 'A reality against reality', Vargas Llosa emphasises that Sturrock focuses on three elements, namely isolation, inspiration and idealisation, which are presented as prototypes of Borges's fiction. Isolation simultaneously signifies 'the physical solitude of the author, his breaking off communications with the world, and the distance which his consciousness must take from its surroundings in order to effect the "separation" from reality that is the essence of narrative creation' (Vargas Llosa, 1978a: 470). In Borges's stories, creators find themselves confined in catacombs, like Tzinacán, the Mayan magician set on deciphering tigers' stripes in 'The writing of God', or Don Isidro Parodi, who solves

police mysteries from the depths of a Buenos Aires prison cell in *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi*, which Borges wrote together with Adolfo Bioy Casares. Similarly, Rigoberto isolates himself in his library after the trauma of separating from his wife – 'He rediscovered the fluid silence of the Barrancan night, the solitude in which he found himself, surrounded by mindless engravings and books' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 127) – even alienating himself from his son, Fonchito. The second element Sturrock identifies in Borges's narrative is inspiration, which Borges's narrators experience as a state of physical ebullience enabling them to generate fiction. When his feelings for Lucrecia are at their most intense, Rigoberto's mind becomes the stage for imaginary adulterous acts committed by his former wife and inspired by paintings, movies, photos and novels. Regarding Borges's creators, Sturrock writes: 'The writer's first act is to isolate himself, his second … to be in two places and to be two people at once. He withdraws … into a peculiar and imaginative state of mind' (1977: 39). This duplication of the self emerges in dialogues which present Rigoberto as a creator of his fantasies, a voyeur and one of their protagonists all at the same time. Finally, the third prototype is idealisation, understood as the process 'to derealize reality by means of a particular use of language and of literary tradition' (Vargas Llosa, 1978a: 470). In trying to evade the pain caused by the separation from Lucrecia, Rigoberto uses both visual art's iconic language and literary references to create scenarios in which he reconciles with Lucrecia. The will to 'derealize reality' is pivotal in Vargas Llosa's theory of fiction. In this regard, I should underline that the Spanish title of 'A reality against reality' is 'El deicidio borgeano', literally 'The Borgesian deicide'. The title clearly recalls Vargas Llosa's *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*, which, as I illustrated earlier in this chapter, is an account of his conception of fiction.

In the fantasy of the second chapter, which is narrated in two sections entitled respectively 'Pluto's dream' and 'The ideal week', Rigoberto imagines finding in his notebooks a letter addressed to Lucrecia from Pluto, a man she rejected many years before. In his letter, Pluto invites Lucrecia to spend a week with him visiting New York, Paris and Venice: 'join me for this ideal week, cherished in my mind for so many years, which circumstances now permit me to make a reality' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 28). Pluto's desire to make a reality of the ideal week he has dreamed about for years displays the Quixotic tension between ideal and real. When Lucrecia comes back from her trip with Pluto, Rigoberto asks her to talk about the infidelity he has imagined. In *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, desire and narrative seem to respond to the protagonist's urge for pleasure. Don Rigoberto's desire to hear about her adultery responds

to Borges's quotation which opens 'Pluto's dream': 'In the solitude of his study … Don Rigoberto repeated from memory the phrase of Borges he had just found: "Adultery is usually made up of tenderness and abnegation"' (27). The account of the nights Lucrecia and Pluto spent together satisfies Rigoberto's pleasure: his wife's infidelity has become the horizon of his desire. At the same time, by making the narration of this infidelity an act of love, tenderness and abnegation, as ambiguously defined by Borges, Rigoberto is attempting a symbolic reconciliation. Soon Pluto's words become Rigoberto's: '"I love you and admire you," said Don Rigoberto. "I love you and admire you," said Pluto' (42). Pluto's love for Lucrecia illuminates Rigoberto's feelings for her: '"For him you meant something more subtle," Don Rigoberto observes. "Unreality, illusion, the woman of his memory and desires. I want to worship you the same way, the way he does"' (36–7). Absent from his everyday life, Lucrecia reappears on the plane of illusion, becoming the fulcrum of the Quixotic interplay between real and imagination, lived experience and fiction.

The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto is thus a profoundly Borgesian work. The originality of the incorporation of Borges's legacy into this novel lies in charging imagination with an intense eroticism. In 'The fictions of Borges', Vargas Llosa writes, 'What is singular about Borges is that in his world the existential, the historical, sex, psychology, feelings, instincts, and so forth, have been dissolved and reduced to an exclusively intellectual dimension' (1988: 1311). Similarly, in 'A reality against reality', Vargas Llosa underlines that 'the intellectual always devours and destroys the mere physical' (1978a: 470). Vargas Llosa here builds on the trope of the absence of sex in Borges's writing. Among the critics who have discussed the absence of passion in Borges, I focus on Humberto Núñez-Faraco (2006), who offers an insight into the influence of the Troubadours on Borges, an influence which I discuss in relation to Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*. According to Núñez-Faraco, the rhetorical tradition of the Troubadours reached Borges via Dante's *Vita Nuova* and *Commedia*: Borges's early poems would reveal passion but through the notion of spiritual love. Núñez-Faraco underlines the 'contemplative mood striving to reach the mysterious, transcendent essence of the beloved, who is now seen in the angelical purity of a heavenly abode (quite consonant with the woman-angel *motif* of the troubadours and the *stilnovisti*)' (2006: 132). This trend would continue in Borges's later writings in which 'the allusions to love and sex … are entwined in such a dense fabric of literary references as to become inaccessible' (149). However, the idea of the absence of physical desire in Borges's narratives has been challenged by Ariel de la Fuente's 2018 study on the role of sex

and desire in Borges's writing and rectified by Vargas Llosa in his 2014 article dedicated to Borges's *Atlas*. Vargas Llosa observes how Borges's poems included in *Los conjurados* present physical love as an enriching experience. Nevertheless, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* stems from Vargas Llosa's early reading of Borges's use of cultural references as a way to avoid physical experience. The novel embraces Borges's erudition but subverts its alleged logic of avoidance by permeating Rigoberto's fantasies with sexuality. Cultural references are not reduced to sex, but rather ennobled by it. What is most significant is that Rigoberto's attempt to de-realise the reality of his separation from Lucrecia interweaves with his need for the materiality of her body.

I now draw attention to the way in which the description of Lucrecia's body in 'Pluto's dream' is carried out through references to paintings such as Goya's *Naked Maja* and Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World*:

> … she began to open her legs, revealing her inner thighs and the half-moon of her sex. 'In the pose of the anonymous model of *L'Origine du monde*, by Gustave Courbet (1866),' Don Rigoberto sought and found the reference, overcome by emotion to discover that the exuberance of his wife's belly, the robust solidity of her thighs and mound of Venus, coincided millimeter by millimeter with the headless woman in the oil painting that was the reigning prince of his private collection. Then eternity dissolved. (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 39)

Drawing a parallel with the title of Courbet's painting, Lucrecia's body is the origin of Rigoberto's fantasies. The realism of Courbet's representation of a woman's genitalia confers materiality to the evocation of Lucrecia's body. In *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, plastic representations of the body convey an illusionary sense of immediacy. In the fantasy entitled 'The Corsican brothers', named after the 1941 movie inspired by Alexander Dumas's eponymous novella, Rigoberto draws on Man Ray's *La Prière* (1930) and *Kikí de Montparnasse* (1925) to imagine Lucrecia's body. Driven by the illusion of a more realistic representation of 'reality' associated with photography, Rigoberto is certain that Lucrecia's back perfectly resembles Kikí's back as represented by Man Ray, ignoring how the sound holes Man Ray painted on Kikí's body affect the representation of female corporality. Playing with the illusion of transparency, Vargas Llosa explores the spaces of pleasure that these men's representations of the female body open up for Rigoberto's imagination. Here, the novel

seems to echo the interconnectedness of eroticism and visual art that Vargas Llosa expresses in his essay 'Botero: A sumptuous abundance'. Vargas Llosa observes that 'Botero paints as if he were making love' and the pleasure that his paintings emit comes 'from the pleasure with which they have been painted' (1996a: 265). Drawn at least in part from Botero, the notion of art 'as an activity that is justified by the pleasure that it produces and displays' unfolds through Rigoberto's fantasies (267).

In addition to visual art, the interaction of literary references expands Rigoberto's spaces of pleasure so as to incorporate human scatological function. In 'The scent of widows', Rigoberto evokes an image of Lucrecia sitting on the toilet through Pablo Neruda's poem entitled 'Widower's tango', which recites: 'And to see you urinate, in the dark, at the back of the house, as if you were pouring out a slender, tremulous, silvery, obstinate stream of honey, I would give up, many times over, this choir of shades I possess and the clang of useless swords that echoes in my soul' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 119). In imagining Lucrecia urinating, a new figure, Manuel of the Prostheses, arises in Rigoberto's mind. Manuel is Lucrecia's childhood friend and a motorcycling champion who, due to a serious accident, was castrated by the cross he wore for divine protection and then had his genitals replaced with a prosthesis. Since childhood, Manuel was aroused listening to women's physical functions, but in all his relationships his desire had been unfulfilled. Eventually Manuel finds the courage to ask Lucrecia to go to the toilet leaving the door open so that he can listen to her, and she accepts:

> Her odor was there, no doubt about it: corporeal, intimate, with marine touches and fruity reminiscences. Closing his eyes, he breathed it in avidly, his nostrils very wide. I am smelling the soul of Lucrecia, he thought, deeply moved … Ah yes, how well he understood the mutilated motorcyclist. But it was not necessary to … undergo a prosthetic procedure to assimilate that culture, convert to that religion, and, like the poisoned Manuel, like Neruda's widower, like so many anonymous aesthetes of hearing, smell, fantasy … who felt themselves transported to heaven as they watched and heard the squatting or sitting beloved creature interpret that ceremony, in appearance so trivial and functional, of emptying a bladder, who elevated it into spectacle, into amorous dance, the prologue or epilogue (for the mutilated Manuel, a substitute) to the act of love. (126–7)

Manuel becomes a means through which to celebrate the scatological function of the female body. While in Kundera's *Life Is Elsewhere* and *Slowness* and Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, idealisation expresses a denial of flesh, in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* idealisation is rooted in bodily dimensions to the extent that Lucrecia's urine ironically becomes an expression of her soul, and Manuel's fetishism is described as a religion. Even though the figure of Lucrecia is eroticised by Rigoberto, his rejection of the abstractions imposed on the female body by notions of ideal love informs a notion of the female that is inclusive of women's corporality. Nonetheless, how does Lucrecia respond to Rigoberto's imaginary? In the next section, I investigate the ways in which the intertextual expressions of Rigoberto's desire affect Fonchito as well as Lucrecia herself.

Mirrors of masculine desire

The primary narrative line of *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* relates Fonchito's visits to Lucrecia. In their encounters, Lucrecia constantly struggles to avoid the ambiguity of Fonchito's words and the sexual connotations he confers on any circumstance. Referring to the events of *In Praise of the Stepmother*, Fonchito apologises for leading Lucrecia into temptation and tries to regain her trust. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* plays with the ambiguity of the figure of Fonchito and with a cultural background in which it is more 'tolerable' for an adult woman to have sex with an underage male than vice versa. However, as Zapata argues, their relationship could place the novel in the category of child pornography (2002: 223). Regardless, Rigoberto is untroubled by the experience his son has undergone and blames Lucrecia only for deceiving him. On the one hand, despite being a minor, Fonchito is perceived by Lucrecia to be a manipulative seducer – 'He, he had been the seducer. With his youth and cherubic face, he was Mephistopheles, Lucifer in person' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 191). Along with Rigoberto's lack of concern for the safety of his son and the emphasis on Lucrecia's attempts to resist Fonchito's flirtation, the continuous overlap between Fonchito's figure and his father – which I discuss in more depth in the following pages – makes the eroticisation of Fonchito in the context of the novel ambiguous rather than criminal. On the other hand, the narration desexualises him by stressing his young age – 'Doña Lucrecia could feel the fragile form trembling, the delicate bones, the small body on the verge of the adolescence, that age when boys could still be mistaken for girls' (108). While Rigoberto's fantasies are inspired by several sources, the encounters between Fonchito and Lucrecia gravitate towards one pivotal figure: the Austrian painter Egon Schiele. Fonchito

constantly talks with Lucrecia about him and his art. Fonchito believes he is the reincarnation of Schiele and that he will die of Spanish influenza at the age of 28 just as Schiele did. Lucrecia believes that Fonchito's passion for Schiele is 'pathological' but could be revelatory of his future 'as an eccentric creator, an unconventional artist' (187). Fonchito explains to Lucrecia that he has read 'everything there is about [Schiele] in my papá's library' (22). The source of father's and son's fantasies is the same micro-world Rigoberto has created. In this regard, the figure of Schiele seems to illuminate Rigoberto's worldview. As art historian Alessandra Comini writes, 'the elusive element which this Expressionist artist [Schiele] sought in his portraiture accurately mirrors the collective cultural quest of his time: the inner self-psychological man, rather than the political, religious or economic man of time past' (1974: 1–2). Schiele's focus on his inner psychological life and that of his subjects echoes Rigoberto's disenchantment with socio-economic and religious utopias as well as the world he and Schiele reject. Schiele's new expressionist aesthetic would foster 'a violently subjective interpretation of reality' which reverberates in Rigoberto's radical approach in 'Instructions for the architect' (Comini, 1974: 7). As Fonchito emphasises, 'Only through Schiele could I understand what [Rigoberto] meant' (52). Schiele's art strengthens the connection between father and son. Simultaneously, his 'obscene' and 'sacrilegious' imaginary provides Fonchito with a frame in which to interpret his incestuous relationship with Lucrecia (107). Commenting on Schiele's relationship with his sister Gertrude and his sister-in-law Adele, Fonchito says: 'The books say so, Stepmamá. I mean, he did things with both sisters. That's probably where his inspiration came from' (23). The account of incest as a source of inspiration alludes to *In Praise of the Stepmother* and also evokes the incestuous tension of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* discussed in Chapter Three.

In the section entitled 'The picture game', Fonchito convinces Lucrecia to pose like the woman in Schiele's *Reclining Nude in Green Stockings* (1914) with the participation of her maid, Justiniana. Having Lucrecia wear green tights and pose for him, Fonchito hints at Schiele's creative process and tries to turn himself into a creator, as he positions their bodies to recreate Schiele's painting. Vargas Llosa's own assimilation of visual art can be seen in light of Roman Jakobson's (1959) concept of intersemiotic translation or transmutation, the interpretation of verbal signs by means of a non-verbal sign system. Vargas Llosa's engagement with Schiele's painting is also an example of *ekphrasis* (Boland, 2012: 110–14; Habrá, 2012), which James Heffernan describes as 'the verbal representation of visual representation' (1993: 3). In addition to the

ekphrastic account of Schiele's paintings carried out by Fonchito, images representing parts of Schiele's paintings are included at the end of each chapter of the novel. This intermediality represents another intertextual component of this novel (Wagner, 1996: 17). Finally, even though the notion of intertextuality is usually associated with literary texts, the meaning which is given to a painting arises from a constellation of elements, including other paintings, the art-historical concepts of the period in which they were produced, genre, style, subject and the subtexts from literature, myth or sacred writings (Steiner, 1985). Vargas Llosa's ekphrastic account intertwines with the imitative games of his characters. Both Lucrecia and Justiniana get deeply involved in the game. Lucrecia's response is produced by the role Fonchito plays as a creator of erotic scenarios. When Justiniana and Fonchito pose like the characters of Schiele's *Mother and Child* (1914), Lucrecia is 'caught up in a desire for perfection' and, holding the book with the reproduction of Schiele's painting, she leans over Justiniana and Fonchito to make sure they are faithfully imitating the painting with their postures (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 55). Lucrecia's desire evokes Gombrowicz's idea that any human action is inscribed into a form or exists in relation to other forms, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, highlighting how form rules sexual experience as well as creative practice. Lucrecia is surprised by her excitement:

> … in response to that pressure, Justiniana's fingers clasped her right thigh and made her feel what she was feeling. She was aroused. Of course she was; that intense, heavy, disturbing odor, where would it come from if not Justiniana's body? Or did it come from her? How had they ever gone so far? … had the boy made them play this game? (56)

The erotic scenario depicted by Fonchito/Schiele enhances the excitement generated by the proximity of their bodies. The scene once again confirms Lucrecia's willingness to act as the object of the male gaze, as the novel seemingly never contemplates the possibility that the forms of men's desire expressed in artworks might be denied.

Following Fonchito's instructions about how to pose, Lucrecia observes that Fonchito has 'a subtle, precociously mature intelligence, a psychology as complex as Rigoberto's' and he has 'inherited his tortuous imagination, his manias, his power of seduction' (107, 54). In recognising the similitudes between father and son, Lucrecia hints at what attracted her to a man without physical charms like Rigoberto: she had the sense that there was 'something complicated and mysterious in his life' (100).

Her attraction for Rigoberto seems to lie in the erotic fantasies that animate his private life. This emerges when Lucrecia realises that Fonchito has read Rigoberto's notebooks, learning the details about his sexual life with Lucrecia. In 'The anonymous letter', Fonchito tells Lucrecia he is aware that she used to pose like the female characters in her erotic games with Rigoberto: 'you'd imitate the paintings to give him pleasure' (136). Lucrecia denies it, but secretly remembers how Rigoberto's fantasies enriched 'her life – her nights – with endlessly renewed fictions' (137). The reader learns that Lucrecia and Rigoberto enjoyed his erotic fantasies together. In the same way, Lucrecia's illicit attraction towards Fonchito does not seem to depend on the boy's strategy for seduction, but rather on her responsiveness to the erotic imaginary Rigoberto has shaped through art and literature, and in which Fonchito takes part through his obsession with Schiele, 'a siren song calling her down to the abyss' (21).

In the last episode of the first narrative line entitled 'The date at the Sheraton', Rigoberto's imagination definitively permeates Lucrecia's mind. Lucrecia receives an invitation to the Hotel Sheraton to meet a mysterious man. As in the other fantasies of the novel, the narration is juxtaposed with another dialogue in which Lucrecia and Justiniana comment on the meeting. At the Sheraton, Lucrecia pretends to be a sex worker and meets a young girl who looks like one of Schiele's models, and it turns out to be Adelita, the daughter of Fonchito's godmother. When the mysterious man appears, Lucrecia describes him as a version of Fonchito that is 10 years older and looks exactly like Schiele. The mysterious man tells her that he will wait for her in the bedroom and asks her to enter the room naked. Lucrecia is pleased that the mystery man does not only remind her of Fonchito and Schiele, but also of Rigoberto, 'a Fonchito-youth, almost-man, or to a rejuvenated and beautified Rigoberto, a Rigoberto-youth-almost-boy' (218). The analogy between father and son reaches its climax when they are regarded as expressions of the same individuality, differentiated only by age. Lucrecia is glad – 'The idea made her smile' (218) – she may be playing a role able to satisfy the fantasies of both Fonchito and Rigoberto. Despite what Lucrecia anticipates, the mysterious man does not try to have sex with her but welcomes two other guests: Adelita and an overweight man whose body could have been created by Botero, except for having moles. Adelita and Lucrecia have sex with him. The mysterious young man stays on the top of a ladder placed close to the bed. Lucrecia notices that the young man is intent on drawing the whole scene and that 'his virile member … had forced its way out of his trousers … A flying serpent … contemplating her with its great Cyclopean eye' (221). By converting the male organ into an eye, *The Notebooks of Don*

Rigoberto symbolises the intimate connection between gaze and masculine desire and offers a plastic representation of Rigoberto's urge to visualise Lucrecia as the protagonist of his fantasies (Berger, 1972). At the same time, this phallic eye illuminates the connection between art and sexuality conveyed by the novel (in consonance with Vargas Llosa's view of art exposed in his essay on Botero) and Rigoberto's sense that artworks are crystallisations of an artist's desire. Once the sexual encounter has ended, Lucrecia hears a voice telling the painter not to let the participants go:

> It was the boy, her stepchild, Rigoberto's son. Was Rigoberto there too? Yes. Where? Somewhere, hidden in the shadow in that room of miracles … And at last she found them, reflected in a great oval mirror where she saw herself as well, repeated like one of Egon Schiele's models. The half-light did not dissolve them; instead, it revealed father and son, sitting next to each other. (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 221–2)

Lucrecia's fantasy is articulated through a series of questions reminiscent of Rigoberto's. However, while Rigoberto's erotic fantasies reveal his emotional discomfort, Lucrecia's imagination displays her sexual fulfilment. Lucrecia feels 'overflowing, intoxicated, grateful, full to the brim, thinking now of Fonchito, now of Rigoberto' (221). In the manner of Madame de T. in *Slowness* and Birgitta in *The Professor of Desire*, Lucrecia emerges as the product of a male mind projecting fantasy of total sexual satisfaction onto a female character. Lucrecia's art-based fantasy suggests that she has interiorised the intertextual logic of Rigoberto's masculine desire, framing herself as a 'feminine figure [who] functions as a sign whose signified is masculine creativity' (Bronfen, 1992: 174). Through her fantasy and the explicit comparison between the bed on which she had sex and a theatre stage, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* confirms the presence of the female exclusively under the male gaze, subject and object of a man's fantasy at the same time.

As I have shown, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* offers a view of women which includes its scatological aspects and resists the abstraction of the female body explored in *Diary of a Bad Year*. Nonetheless, unlike *Diary of a Bad Year*, in which Anya's sensitivity is brought to light by dialogic interplay and has a deep impact on JC, Lucrecia's erotic fantasy is subsumed by Rigoberto's imaginary and responds only to his fragility. The various representations of the female in these novels shed light on the limits of their protagonists' different understandings and their inability to recognise women's autonomy and complexity. In the final section, I shall

examine how Rigoberto's self-reflexivity is elicited by Juan Onetti's novel *A Brief Life* (2008). Emphasising its emancipatory charge, I propose that Rigoberto's fantasies articulate a longing for emotional intimacy.

Masculinity and self-reflexivity in Rigoberto's reading of Onetti's *A Brief Life*

In the fantasy entitled 'The professor's panties', Rigoberto finds his notes on Patricia Highsmith's *Edith's Diary*. Rigoberto describes *Edith's Diary* as 'An excellent novel for understanding that fiction is a flight into the imaginary which emends life' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 152). Published in 1977 and set in the suburban US, *Edith's Diary* describes the life of Edith Howland, a housewife-writer with liberal ideas who lives with her husband, Brett, and son, Cliffie. Her life severely deteriorates when Cliffie exhibits the problematic and antisocial behaviour that leads him to alcoholism. Brett abandons his responsibilities and leaves Edith for a younger woman, while Edith must take care of Brett's dying senile uncle. Edith confronts these problems and frustrations, but starts to record in her diary an imaginary, successful life in which Cliffie is a well-established journalist and is happily married with children. In commenting on *Edith's Diary*, Rigoberto writes:

> But fiction is only temporary remedy … it removes her [Edith] from life's struggle, isolating her in a purely mental world. Relationships with her friends are weakened or ended; she loses her job and becomes destitute. Her death seems melodramatic, but from a symbolic point of view it has coherence; Edith moves physically to the place she had already occupied in life: unreality. (152–3)

Rigoberto addresses the effects of imagination and fiction on Edith's life. His criticism emerges as a form of self-reflection: in recognising the similarities between his behaviour and Edith's, he wonders, 'Would he, like Edith, eventually slide into ruin because he abused fantasy?' (153). Edith's choice to give life to an 'unreality', a fictional version of her life is reminiscent of Don Quixote's knightly life. Rigoberto presents this dynamic as unaffected by gender, failing to recognise the family responsibilities at the heart of Edith's struggles. By describing her story as emblematic of 'the merciless struggle between reality and desire' (153), Rigoberto inflects the Quixotic tension between lived experience and fiction, presenting them as a dynamic rather than a conflict to be resolved.

While visual art informs erotic scenarios in which Rigoberto's desire unfolds, literary references play a more ambiguous role, interrupting the flow of his fantasies and leading the reader to question their meaning. In the fantasy entitled 'Damned Onetti! Blessed Onetti', Rigoberto is awoken by the image of Lucrecia lying on an operating table after a mastectomy. Reading his notebooks, Rigoberto realises that the image was inspired by *A Brief Life*, a novel by Uruguayan writer Juan Carlos Onetti:

> Here were the dreadful citations: 'I thought of how difficult it would be to look without disgust at the new scar Gertrudis would have on her chest, round, complex, with red or venations that time would perhaps transform into a pale confusion the same color as the other scar, thin, flat, as brisk as a signature, that Gertrudis had on her belly and that I had traced so often with the tip of my tongue.' (175)

In this fragment from *A Brief Life*, protagonist Juan María Brausen imagines the repulsion he will feel looking at the new scar of his wife Gertrudis, whose body he could recognise by the touch of his tongue in their erotic encounters. Echoing Brausen's feelings, Rigoberto's fantasy is interrupted by the spectre of death and mutilation projected on the female body, which is no longer a source of eroticism. Published in 1950, *A Brief Life* narrates the life of Brausen, who is devastated by the mastectomy Gertrudis has undergone. About to be fired from the advertising agency for which he works, Brausen sees an opportunity to earn extra money when given the opportunity to write a movie script for his friend, Julio Stein. The script Brausen writes is set in Santa María, a fictional city in which a doctor named Díaz Grey meets a new patient, Elena Sala. While Díaz Grey emerges as Brausen's fictional double, Elena Sala is inspired by Gertrudis, but with her breasts unaffected. Soon Elena convinces Díaz Grey to get involved in the illegal selling of morphine. At the same time, Brausen becomes interested in a prostitute, La Queca, who moved in next door on the night Gertrudis underwent her surgery. At the beginning, Brausen can hear only the noises coming from her room and imagines her. Brausen enters her life by presenting himself as a pimp named Juan María Arce. Having created this violent version of himself, Brausen/Arce starts sleeping with Queca and beating her. Considering his double life with Gertrudis and Queca, Brausen thinks: 'I was dissolving myself in order to permit Arce's birth. Sweating in both beds, I was saying goodbye to the prudent responsible man putting up an appearance based on limitations that others have placed on him' (Onetti, 2008: 185). Brausen's violent instincts and masochistic desires expressed in the character of

Arce intensify to the point where Brausen plans the murder of Queca in order to fulfil Arce's identity definitively. His plan does not come to fruition solely because another pimp, Ernesto, kills Queca before he can. When Brausen/Arce helps Ernesto to escape to Santa María, the city he has created in his fiction, the overlap between experience and literature, life and dream is indissoluble.

In *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, Brausen's creation of multiple selves presents a literary version of the multiplication of the self that is characteristic of Schiele's self-portraits, as Fonchito emphasises: '[Schiele] doubles, even triples himself. *Triple Self-portrait*, 1913 … That's how he saw himself, as if he had several Egon Schieles inside him. Isn't that schizophrenic?' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 138). Similarly, thinking about his affinities with Brausen, Rigoberto wonders: 'Are Brausen and I nothing but a couple of schizophrenics?' (178). Brausen's fictions of the self grow to the detriment of his everyday life: 'Meanwhile I was almost not working and scarcely existing; I was Arce at the regular drunken parties with La Queca, in the growing pleasure of beating her, amazed that it was easy and necessary to do it; I was Díaz Grey, writing or thinking about him, astonished by life's richness and my power' (Onetti, 2008: 141). The proximity of Brausen's fictional persona (Díaz Grey) and his violent alter ego (Arce) suggests that writing Díaz Grey and impersonating Arce are performances of evasion. Intertwined, gender-based violence and writing emerge as the masculinist means through which Brausen is seeking to evade his own experience. Nevertheless, these key aspects of Onetti's representation of masculinity are placed in the background in Vargas Llosa's fiction and nonfiction writing, which rather focuses on Onetti's literary lineage.

In his analysis of *A Brief Life*, James Irby (1968: 453) describes the novel as a reflection on fantasy and evasion whose central theme is fiction itself. Likewise, Josefina Ludmer (1977: 16) argues that *A Brief Life* expresses a theory of the imaginary and an ideology of literature. Vargas Llosa creates a similar focus on Onetti's novel in his lengthy essay *El viaje a la ficción* (The Journey to Fiction) entirely dedicated to Onetti's narrative. For Vargas Llosa, *A Brief Life* continues the tradition inaugurated in *Don Quixote* by investigating the effects of fiction on lived experience:

> Is Brausen crazy? He is in the way of other memorable literary characters whom the seduction of imaginary life, which is the one of knightly romances in the case of Don Quixote, or the romantic love romances in the case of Madame Bovary, leads to replace their real life with the life of their desires. (Vargas Llosa, 2008a: 98)

Reminiscent of the integration of theory and practice in Vargas Llosa, Rigoberto's own analysis of *A Brief Life* addresses the role of fiction in Brausen's life:

> The memory had come back not to drown him but to help him or, as Brausen said when describing his own feverish imagination, to save him. Isn't that what he said when he transported himself out of the real Buenos Aires and into the invented Santa María, and fantasized a corrupt physician, Díaz Grey … ? Didn't he say that this transposition, this move, this carefully elaborated act, this recourse to fiction, *saved him*? Here it was in his notebook: 'A Chinese puzzle box. In Onetti's work of fiction his invented character, Brausen invents a fiction in which there is a doctor, Díaz Grey, based on himself … confronting reality with dream is his defense against reality, his way of annihilating the horrible truth of his life with the beautiful lie of fiction.' He was overjoyed, ecstatic at his discovery. He felt as if he were Brausen, he felt redeemed and safe. (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 177–8)

Fiction emerges as a defence against the world and its discontents, a haven that promises redemption, safety and salvation. Rigoberto's reading of *A Brief Life* strictly resembles his observations about *Edith's Diary*. His sense of these two novels is illuminated by a quotation from Kipling's 'If': 'If you can dream – and not make dreams your master' (178). Rigoberto fears he is no longer the master of his fantasies, but rather that his life is dominated by them, like in the narratives of Don Quixote and Madame Bovary, Brausen and Edith. As a metaliterary reflection on their stories, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* explores the ambiguous nature of fiction as a form of evasion, which brings pleasure along with the risk of losing contact with the world. Aware of the influence of fiction on his life, Rigoberto refers to Emma Bovary in the manner of Lurie in *Disgrace* and Peter/Nathan in *My Life as a Man*, still ignoring the implications of gender.

Rigoberto's observations evoke Vargas Llosa's analysis of *A Brief Life* in *Letters to a Young Novelist*, a collection of essays published in Spanish in 1997 (the same year as the publication of *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*). Vargas Llosa writes that *A Brief Life* 'revolves entirely around the artifice of the Chinese box, which Onetti manipulates masterfully to create a world of delicate superimposed and intersecting planes, in which the boundary between fiction and reality is dissolved' (2003: 106). The description of this literary device illuminates the interconnectedness of *Don Quixote*

and *A Brief Life* because Vargas Llosa also praises Cervantes for 'the variety and diversity of Chinese box stories in *Don Quixote*' (104). While the traditional use of the Chinese Box is limited to an overlap between different narrative layers, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* develops this mechanism through the interaction of different art forms. Rigoberto's reflections on *A Brief Life* are juxtaposed with another fantasy of his, in which he imagines Lucrecia telling him that she washed herself in a bathroom in the company of the Algerian ambassador's wife. The scene is inspired by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's painting *The Turkish Bath* (1862), and explicitly compared to it, but the dialogue between the two women is driven by Rigoberto's memories of *A Brief Life*. Lucrecia explains to Rigoberto that the ambassador's wife has undergone reconstructive surgery after the removal of her breast. Lucrecia insists that no shadow of a scar is left on her. The interaction of visual art and literary references intensifies as Rigoberto finds a note in his notebooks concerning 'an erotic dream of Juan María Brausen ("taken from paintings by Paul Delvaux that Onetti could not have known when he wrote *La vida breve* because the Belgian surrealist had not even painted them yet," said a brief note in the parentheses)' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 182). In imagining that Brausen's erotic dream was inspired by Delvaux's works which he had not yet painted, Rigoberto interweaves temporal planes and uses time in a manner reminiscent of *A Brief Life*. As Vargas Llosa observes in *El viaje a la ficción*, Onetti replaces linear and chronological time 'for another, not realist, in which past, present and future, instead of following each other, rather coexist and intersect each other' (88, my translation). In inflecting Onetti's technique of the Chinese Box through the use of cultural references, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* is reminiscent of Borges's erudition and brings together the literary aesthetics of the two writers. Vargas Llosa addresses the artistic affinity between Onetti and Borges, which he believes has been overlooked by critics.[7] Even though Onetti presents Brausen's fictional world under a realist mask, Vargas Llosa recognises the influence of Borges in Brausen's attempt to interpolate a fictional world with his own reality.[8] Vargas Llosa shows a common genealogy: the literary tradition embodied by *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* explores the proximity between Borges and Onetti by combining their narrative procedures while distancing itself from these models. While Rigoberto's erudition differs from Borges's because of its erotic charge, as I previously discussed, I propose now that Rigoberto's fantasy echoes the search for intimacy that Onetti's narrative suppresses.

Vargas Llosa argues that the overlapping of different narrative levels is mirrored in the psychology of Onetti's protagonists:

> Holing themselves up in this lucid delirium, in madness, or pushed to suicide for their incompatibility with the world they live in, the characters of Onetti evolve in a world which is not fantastic nor realist, but an alliance of both … in which we are constantly passing from one side to the other of this border that in real life divided the lived life and dreamt life. (2008a: 227, my translation)

In *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, while initially the confusion between dream and desire echoed in the interplay between different media seems to exacerbate Rigoberto's mental condition, his readings of *Edith's Diary* and *A Brief Life* are at the heart of his self-reflection, offering him a standpoint from which to examine his behaviour. The figure of Brausen is fundamental to an examination of Rigoberto's situation:

> Would he end up like Brausen? Was he Brausen already? A failed man … as an irremediable libertine individualist and agnostic hedonist or a creator of private enclaves of the highest fantasy and artistic good taste, a man defeated by everything, the woman he loved, the son he fathered, the dreams he tried to embed in reality, decaying day after day, night after night, behind the repellent mask of an executive in a successful insurance company, transformed into the 'purely desperate man' mentioned in Onetti's novel, into a copy of the pessimist masochist in *La vida breve*. (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 182–3)

In the above fragment, for Rigoberto, Brausen becomes the spectre of his own failure as a man, husband and father. The evasion from experience embedded in the lineage of Cervantes and Borges is now examined in its gendered inflections. Onetti's writing becomes a means for Rigoberto to engage with his own despair. The nature of Rigoberto's self-oriented reading and misappropriation is illuminated by replacing the traumatic image of Gertrudis/Lucrecia's cancerous breast with the image of the surgically reconstructed breast of the ambassador's wife. Though Vargas Llosa does not address it explicitly, representations of male subjectivity and the female body play a crucial role in *A Brief Life* and, in general, in Onetti's narrative (Millington, 1987). As with Lurie in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, for Brausen, women represent an irreducible Otherness whose identity is rooted in the materiality of their bodies. Gertrudis's cancerous breast

is the traumatic event which triggers Brausen's fantasy and epitomises his problematic relationship with women. *A Brief Life* is pervaded with the wider sense of loathing Brausen experiences in relation to female corporality. Scholars of Onetti including Irby (1968: 456–7) and Mark Millington (1987: 363–4) highlight the repugnance Brausen feels for the female body, which becomes an expression of the mystery and the rhythms of the natural world, with Gertrudis's breast cancer representing the decay of the universe. Similarly, Judy Maloof emphasises that in Onetti's fiction women represent 'an essential category, rather than a socially and historically constructed one' (1995: 3). Brausen's existential crisis is generated by the indifference of the world embodied by the female body. In his essay on the representation of women in Onetti's narrative, Millington offers an insight into the alienation from women that Brausen experiences: 'The woman's status as a signifier in male discourse is clear from this key fact: there seems to be no need for emotional reciprocity in the relationships with women, there is no stress on love' (1987: 360). This lack of a search for emotional reciprocity in Onetti's characters is linked to a reticence about sex. As Millington writes, 'Sexual relationships are frequently implied in the narratives but there is a perennial silence about them. The narratives elide reference to sex, indeed there is little mention even of physical contact' (1987: 360). Contrary to this reticence, explicit sexual representation is abundant and plays a pivotal role in *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*. This contrast illuminates the misappropriation of *A Brief Life* carried out by Rigoberto. Even though Rigoberto does not emancipate himself completely from male hegemonic discourse, he resists the cultural frames disciplining women's corporality. Through his fantasy, Rigoberto displays his acceptance of the female body and praises its scatological function as an erotic inspiration. The fundamental difference between the male subjectivities depicted in *A Brief Life* and *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* lies in the nature of Rigoberto's sexual fantasies: the narrative space opened by erotic narrations is filled by Rigoberto's urge for intimacy which is denied in Onetti's narrative.

When discussing *Diary of a Bad Year*, I examined the objectification of women in Gyula's sexual fantasies. His case offers an interesting point of comparison to better understand the emotional needs driving Rigoberto. While Gyula's erotic idealisations involve a multitude of women, Rigoberto can only think of Lucrecia – 'I am monogamous. I can make love only to my wife' (109). Whereas Gyula carries out intercourse in his mind, Rigoberto never imagines himself having sex, and in his imaginary erotic scenarios he appears as a voyeur listening to Lucrecia's account of her sexual experiences. Though initially these fantasies satisfy

Rigoberto, soon he can no longer imagine successful outcomes and starts displaying his innermost feelings. In 'The Corsican brother', the dialogue between Lucrecia and Rigoberto after Narciso has left her alone in the bed is revelatory: '"Do you understand any of it, Rigoberto?" he heard her ask. "Only that I love you," he replied' (100). In 'The professor's panties', the imaginary erotic scene is interrupted by Rigoberto bursting into tears and begging Lucrecia for forgiveness. Lucrecia tries to soothe him: 'Calm yourself, Rigoberto. Don't cry anymore, my love, my heart. It's over, it's finished now, nothing has changed … I forgave you … Dry your tears, sneeze, go to sleep. Hush, baby, hush' (157). In addressing him as a child, her words reveal his emotional distress. It is only in the second half of the novel, in the section entitled 'Damned Onetti! Blessed Onetti', that Rigoberto understands that what he desires the most is a reconciliation with Lucrecia, as he says to his mental image of her: 'What I want is to have you here, flesh and blood, not a phantom. Because I love you' (182). Rigoberto realises that the depth of his sorrow has nourished his private utopias made of fantasy and literature and alienated him from his life and son. Quoting Brod, Rigoberto reproduces the idea that 'men look to sex for the fulfilment of non-sexual emotional needs' (1988: 270). In his fantasies, Rigoberto re-enacts the intimate bond between creator and the woman-model characteristic of Balthus's painting, expressing his need for a surrogate to compensate for the loss of intimacy with Lucrecia.

The outcomes of Rigoberto's erotic fantasies hardly offer him any sexual pleasure or relief but display the emotional trauma caused by the separation from Lucrecia. In bringing to light Rigoberto's love for her and the pain of their separation, his fantasies articulate his need for emotional reciprocity. Rigoberto's search for intimacy is symbolic of the masculine struggle to create a space in which to experience the emotions which are excluded by Onetti's novel and the other texts I have discussed so far. Unable to incorporate affectivity into the forms of masculinity and heterosexuality they have found in his literary models, Lurie (*Disgrace*), Jaromil (*Life Is Elsewhere*), Kepesh (*The Professor of Desire*) and Vincent (*Slowness*) try to suffocate their anxieties and fail to gain any understanding of their condition. In contrast, the need for emotional reciprocity is at the centre of the constellation of Rigoberto's self-oriented readings and misappropriations: while Brausen creates the masks of Díaz Grey and Arce in order to avoid confronting his wife's mutilated body, Rigoberto learns from his reading of Brausen's experience of alienation that he needs a reconciliation with Lucrecia. Intertextuality emerges once again as a source of literary self-reflection in the last fantasy of the novel entitled 'Dream is a life'. Inspired by Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play

Life Is a Dream (1958), Rigoberto models Lucrecia on the character of Rosaura. He quotes from Calderón and comments:

What is life? Confusion.
What is life? Illusion,
a shadow, a fiction;
its greatest goods are small,
life is a dream, and all
our dreams another dream

> 'It's a lie,' he said aloud, slamming the desk in his study. Life was not a dream, dreams were a feeble lie, a fleeting deception that provided only temporary escape from frustration and solitude in order that we might better appreciate, with more painful bitterness, the beauty and substantiality of real life, the life we ate, touched, drank, the rich life so superior to the simulacrum indulged in by conjured desire and fantasy. Devastated by anguish … he clung desperately to Lucrecia-Rosaura's body, using these last few seconds to achieve an impossible pleasure. (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 238)

Without disregarding the lesson of Cervantes and Borges and their ontological challenges to the Western understanding of the real, Rigoberto succeeds in establishing a critical distance from his readings. He acknowledges the alienating effects of disengaging from lived experience to cultivate fantasies of the self. The comparison with Brausen sheds light on the gendered implications of the ways in which the protagonists of *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* and *A Brief Life* fashion their masculinities in their fantasies. Transfigured by literary and artistic projections, Lucrecia's body becomes the symbol of an impossible pleasure, the integration of desire and reality that Vargas Llosa places at the heart of the Quixotic quest. In realising that his pain is provoked by their separation more than Lucrecia's betrayal, Rigoberto forgives Lucrecia and aims to re-establish his connection with her (and the world). He transcends the moral imperative that induced him to break up with her. By embracing his feelings for Lucrecia, Rigoberto translates Bataille's notion of sovereignty and transgression from the fields of eroticism and intellect into affectivity: his claim for the right to live his love for Lucrecia transgresses the social dictum to reject the adulteress. By conceiving of her adulteries as acts of love enacting the erotic imaginary he longs for, Rigoberto's fantasies

substantiate the quotation from Borges regarding adultery – 'Adultery is usually made up of tenderness and abnegation' (Vargas Llosa, 1998: 27) – which sets off Rigoberto's attempt at a reconciliation with her.

Based on his feelings, the reconfiguration of Rigoberto's sense of ethics evokes JC and his newfound emotional maturity once again. In the manner of JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*, Rigoberto has reached an awareness of his feelings that the mature Lurie and the young Jaromil, Kepesh and Vincent are unable to attain. The examples of JC and Rigoberto offer an insight into the potential of literary practices to reconfigure masculinity beyond the illusion of self-reflection. While JC develops a grammar of his feelings through a more intimate form of writing responsive to Anya's emotional impact on him, Rigoberto's readings help him confront his emotional discomfort and the affective burden caused by his separation from Lucrecia.

Notes

1 Flaubert explicitly acknowledges the influence of *Don Quixote*: 'I can find my origins in the book that I knew by heart before I knew how to read, *Don Quixote*' ('Letter to Louise Colet of June 12, 1852', quoted in Fox, 2008: 104).
2 Rigoberto, Fonchito and Lucrecia also appear in Vargas Llosa's 2013 novel *The Discreet Hero*.
3 In the manner of Kundera, Vargas Llosa also seems to hint ironically at the opinions they express in their interviews and nonfiction works (Kristal, 1998: 179).
4 My observation is supported by Kristal, who compares *In Praise of the Stepmother* to Bataille's *My Mother*: 'While in Bataille's novel the sexual impulse culminates in death, in Vargas Llosa's novel this impulse is checked when it threatens Don Rigoberto's personal sense of moral comfort with the behaviour of his wife' (1998: 178).
5 For a comprehensive discussion of Borges's influence on Vargas Llosa, see Rossoni (2022).
6 The emphasis on Borges's erudition is partly based on the image of the writer promoted abroad from the 1960s. Nevertheless, Borges's references did not exclusively include high culture. Philip Swanson (2013) underlines Borges's engagement with popular culture, including gauchos, Buenos Aires hoodlums, pirates, classical Hollywood movies, detective stories and tango.
7 Hugo Verani (1981: 18) argues that the narratives of Borges and Onetti represent a rupture with traditional narrative forms of Hispanic-American literature, shaping a new model which has become dominant in contemporary literature. Without advocating a special affinity between Borges and Onetti, Mark Millington (1999) compares the way in which space is used to articulate subjectivity in Onetti's 'Jacob y el otro' (Jacob and the other man) to Borges's 'The house of Asterion'.
8 Vargas Llosa's impression is shared by Verani, who observes that Onetti's creative imagination is never metaphysical or intellectual as Borges's is, and that the fictional world forged by Brausen in *A Brief Life* is a projection of the profound reality of his sordid life (1981: 43). Similarly, commenting on interplay between dream and reality in Onetti's narrative, Juan Angel Rama observes that in Onetti 'dreams are encysted within a realistic narration' (1969: 93).

Conclusion
Novelistic self-reflexivity as a lack of self-knowledge

In this book, I have discussed how the narratives of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa offer a standpoint from which to address the inscription of heterosexual masculinity into Western literary legacy and the ways in which masculinity is refashioned in contemporary self-reflexive novels. Building on the analyses I have developed throughout the chapters, I propose now that the novelistic self-reflexivity displayed by these texts paradoxically reproduces this gendered lack of self-knowledge.

In his study of Flaubert, Jonathan Culler writes: 'The novel is an ironic form, born of the discrepancy between meaning and experience, whose source of value lies in the interest of exploring the gap and filling it, while knowing that any claim to have filled it derives from blindness' (1985: 24). For Culler, the significance of novel form depends on the analysis of the discrepancy between meaning and experience that cannot be resolved or fully understood. In my analysis I have shown how the self-reflexive narratives of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa actualise this understanding of the novel. Each of them finds in the novel a suitable genre to address themes which define human experience as indiscernible: the unknowability of desire for Coetzee, the notions of (in)experience and (in)authenticity of emotions in Kundera's writing, the interpretative elusiveness fostered by textuality and self-referentiality in Roth's narrative and Vargas Llosa's view of literary creation as an attempt to exercise control over unconscious urges and exorcise them. Not only do their different intellectual concerns point to a fundamental unintelligibility of experience to be examined via novelistic writing, but they are also embedded in an investigation of their protagonists' masculinity and struggle for self-reflexivity.

Examining these narratives, the notions of men's lack of self-knowledge and emotional illiteracy, emphasised by literary masculinity

studies, have been key to my analysis (Middleton, 1992; Schoene-Harwood, 2000; Schwenger, 1984). In Chapter One, looking at Coetzee's *Disgrace*, I examined how Lurie's detachment from his emotions as a lover and a father reverberates in the alienation he experiences in the field of sex and in his estrangement from his ageing body. While the intertextual references in the novel shed light on Lurie's tendency to interpret his life via a lens of literature and its alienating outcomes, the composition of *Byron in Italy* echoes the unknowability of desire that Coetzee expresses in his critical writing. *Byron in Italy* frames heterosexual desire as the *locus* in which the detachment Lurie experiences and the irreducible Otherness he projects on women intersect. At the same time, the opera offers an insight into Lurie's struggles with his emotions: self-mockery is the only way he can conceive of his desire to establish a connection with his daughter and his own trauma as a witness of the violence of which she was a victim.

In Chapter Two, seeking the origins of this inarticulability of emotions in the coming of age of Jaromil and Kepesh, I focused on the literary education of the protagonists of Kundera's *Life Is Elsewhere* and Roth's *The Professor of Desire*. I examined how Kundera's use of an authorial narrator and intertextual references in *Life Is Elsewhere* articulates a reflection on heterosexual masculinity which focuses on the hiatus between feeling and experience. Reprising the intertextual dialogue that *Disgrace* establishes with Flaubert, I addressed the co-dependency of emotional education and literary language that *Life Is Elsewhere* interrogates. I would like now to refer to Ronald de Sousa, who draws a parallel between emotion and language: 'Our emotional repertoires in some ways resemble our languages. Like language, emotions frame our possibilities of experience … our emotional life is the ultimate in "method" acting: the role we play teaches us how to feel' (1987: 332). The intensity of feeling Jaromil conveys in his poems involves an imitation of the powerful feelings expressed in the lyrical tradition: through his poems Jaromil attempts to inhabit emotions and feelings which do not derive from his relationship with his beloved, but from the pursuit of an emotional form itself. This confusion between authenticity and imitation in *Life Is Elsewhere* evokes both Don Quixote's idealisation of the beloved women and Flaubert's exploration of the complexity of emotions in *Madame Bovary*. Inscribing itself in the tradition of *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*, *Life Is Elsewhere* fosters the idea that literary language is what separates us from the self (Bersani, 1970: 175).

While Jaromil suppresses the spectre of doubt and self-consciousness through an immature and narcissistic refashioning of his

fragile masculinity, in *The Professor of Desire* Kepesh's impersonation of his libertine fantasies does not persist beyond his youth. Kepesh is confronted with the same questions that Culler imagines Flaubert's readers ask themselves: 'What if, when readers had composed their lives as novels, they found them unintelligible? What if, instead of learning how to unify their dispersed selves into a personality and the disparate events of their lives into a meaningful destiny, they found that when put together according to novelistic models things still did not fit together?' (1985: 85). Unable to read his experience through Chekhov, Kepesh searches for a literary form through which to explore his sexual and emotional despair in Kafka's narrative. At the end of the novel, Kepesh's attempt at developing self-knowledge is unfulfilled, as he can only affirm his allegiance to a desire recalcitrant to interpretation, which he has experienced as totalising and annihilating. But can any lessons be learned from the failure of introspection depicted by *The Professor of Desire*? In one of his lectures, Roland Barthes said that 'literature feeds knowledge into the machinery of infinite reflexivity. Through writing, knowledge ceaselessly reflects on knowledge, in terms of a discourse which is no longer epistemological, but dramatic' (1979: 463–4). As a metaliterary attempt to reflect on self-knowledge, Kepesh's self-referential approach to literature is dramatic rather than epistemological: driven by Kafka's narrative elusiveness, it does not mark any progression in his introspection but instead fosters a renewal of its inquiry. Conceiving of his own life as a Quixotic text about his desire to be interpreted and misinterpreted by his students, Kepesh elicits a self-perpetuating inquiry destined to be ceaselessly eluded.

In Chapter Three, examining the entanglements of masculinity and writing, I observed how critical distance and emotional control are at the heart of the ideals of authorial masculinity proposed by Kundera and Vargas Llosa, and partly by Roth. In *Slowness*, through his re-creation of the figure of Madame de T., Milanku looks at seduction as the process through which men and women give meaning to their sexuality. In a manner evocative of Kundera's approach to the literary forms of love and desire, Milanku examines men's ability to inhabit their sensations, exploring the impossibility of distinguishing spontaneous emotions from those elicited by the desire to live according to literary frames. Critical distance and irony inform the novelistic self-reflexive practices through which Milanku dissects his characters, Vincent in particular, living up to the ideal of authorship and adult masculinity to their detriment.

However, as a site of gender emplotment, masculinity reveals its instability and the multiplicity of its heterogeneous discourses. The

metaliterary dimension of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *My Life as a Man* challenge Kundera's ideal of authorship. Drawing on Steven Kellman's notion of the self-begetting novel, I interpreted the writings of Marito and Peter as attempts at forging masculinity. The rigorous structure of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* displays Marito's apprenticeship in the craft of writing and the control he achieves over his personal experience. Nevertheless, in writing his masculinity, Marito enacts the incestuous compulsion at the heart of his creative practices, rather than illuminating it. Foreshadowing incest as the underlying motive of their protagonists, *Disgrace* and *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* address the 'split between behaviour and consciousness' which Middleton places at the heart of masculine performance (1992: 189). Revealing how authorial control produces only an illusion of self-awareness, Marito's account of his path to masculinity unfolds as an unfulfilled quest for self-discovery.

My Life as a Man offers an even more radical view. Roth's novel gravitates towards Peter's attempt to emancipate himself from the emotional burden generated by the problematic assimilation of his Jewish legacy and his troubled relationships with women. Peter's fetishisation of Flaubert's notion of impersonality configures emotional detachment as an essential process through which to articulate an understanding of his masculinity. In being conflated with the notion of authorship, masculinity depends on having control over one's emotions. Though Flaubert's ideal of authorial control deconstructs the illusion of writing an account of his masculinity, for Peter writing simply reiterates the unknowability of his desire, much like reading does for Kepesh. The superabundance of textual allusion and interpretation that enfolds Kepesh's sexuality in *The Professor of Desire* parallels the proliferation of writing in *My Life as a Man*. In Roth's narratives the compulsion to write, to read and to interpret literary texts displays the relentlessly unresolved tension between textuality and sexuality. Returning to Barthes's words, the paradox of novelistic self-reflexivity emerges as a dramatic discourse that elicits the perpetuation of heterosexual masculinities by configuring them into a site of unintelligibility.

Can this culturally shaped sense of unintelligibility associated with masculinity be destabilised? Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* and Vargas Llosa's *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* expose heterosexual masculinity to a newfound consonance with emotion, challenging the opacity associated with men's emotions that pervades the other novels discussed. The intertextual references marking Rigoberto's increasing lucidity into the nature of his desire offer an opposing point of view to the limits of literary self-reflexivity elicited by the act of reading that *Disgrace* and

The Professor of Desire represent. Rigoberto recognises the pain provoked by the separation from his wife and decides to reconcile with her. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* reveals how emotion can lead to a reframing of values and moral codes. Let me refer again to de Sousa, who writes: 'Whatever their own susceptibility to rational criticism, they [emotions] themselves give us frameworks in terms of which we perceive, desire, act, and explain. Their reputation for irrationality is partly due to their power to reinterpret the world' (24). Acknowledging that he is in pain, Rigoberto transgresses the moral code which would impose the rejection of the adulteress. *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* is open to the possibility of reconfiguring masculinity through a self-reflection generated within the limits of a literary canon informed by men's hegemonic discourse and gaze. The efficacy of such a reconfiguration is, however, ambiguous. Rigoberto becomes aware of the alienating effects of literature through his reading of Onetti's *A Brief Life*, but he is unaffected by the misogyny of Onetti's narrative. In addition, just as Marito does not recognise the incestuous tension at the heart of his creativity, Rigoberto fails to see that Lucrecia's para-incestuous relationship with Fonchito epitomises his own erotic fantasies and delusions of betrayal.

The empathic bond JC establishes with Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year* seems to present a more radical challenge. JC's emotional response to Anya leads him to overcome his intellectual and polemical disengagement with the world. Inspired by the masculinist idealisation of the beloved carried out by the Troubadours' poetry and by Pound, JC searches for a form of transcendence from the erotic impulses he can no longer satisfy physically. His emotional and textual dialogue with Anya leads him to a heightened understanding of his emotions, expressed by the combination of essayistic and diaristic writing in his 'Soft Opinions'. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, JC's readings of the Troubadours and Pound configure novelistic self-reflexivity as a matrix through which to explore the cultural models and emotional repertoires available for the expression of heterosexual desire, revealing a space for creativity and self-determination even within culturally embedded forms of heterosexual masculinity.

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Heterosexual Masculinities and the Self-Reflexive Novel examines how the narratives of four world-renowned authors, namely J. M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, Philip Roth and Mario Vargas Llosa, offer a standpoint through which to address the inscription of heterosexual masculinity into Western literary legacy and the ways in which masculinity is re-fashioned in contemporary self-reflexive novels.

Considering the interconnectedness of their narratives for the first time, the book explores unexamined patterns of dialogue among Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa while also contextualising their writing in the light of the European literary tradition inaugurated by Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and continued by Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Rather than building on conventional theoretical approaches to literary studies, Stefano Rossoni develops a fresh and engaging approach by looking at these two works not only as narrative texts but most importantly as theories of literature. In dialogue with critical contributions that examined men's emotional illiteracy and struggle to develop a language for self-reflection, the book argues that the narratives of Coetzee, Kundera, Roth and Vargas Llosa engage with the tradition of the self-reflexive novel and its ramifications to reflect on masculinity as a socio-cultural construction. Ultimately, their writing reveals men's novelistic self-reflexivity as a site of unintelligibility.

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