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GRADUATE SECTION

Triumph of the Ego: The Conflict of the Individual and Human Rights in Ayn Rand’s Fiction

by EMILY HALL

Abstract: Ayn Rand’s novels are often misread and misinterpreted as texts that promote hedonism and ruthless gain. While it can certainly be argued that the characters that populate her novels are ambitious, it is notable that Rand strives to clarify that her characters may be driven, but they are not inherently evil, nor do they seek to subjugate those others. This paper provides a close reading of her novels *Anthem*, *The Fountainhead*, and *Atlas Shrugged* in order to elucidate the difference between Rand’s “egoist” protagonists and her egotistical villains. Ultimately, this paper argues that Rand sought a forum in which man could pursue his talents and perform his work in an atmosphere in which such desires were celebrated rather than castigated. This paper also places Rand’s work in a philosophical conversation with Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault, both of whom queried man’s relation to himself and to society. Whereas many scholars may claim that Rand’s work promotes mere selfishness, this paper suggests that Rand’s beliefs surrounding selfishness too nuanced to support that generalization. Instead, through an analysis of her texts, it becomes obvious that Rand deems fostering one’s ego as an essential human right.

In *The Fountainhead*, protagonist Howard Roark valiantly proclaims, “The first right on earth is the right of the ego” (Rand 682). Roark’s essential characteristics: a stringent work ethic, an unparalleled brilliance, and an intense passion for his trade, are the same traits that can be found within the heroes and heroines in Ayn Rand’s *Anthem* and *Atlas Shrugged*. The protagonists that populate these novels are devoted to the cultivation of their own ego. These characters dedicate their lives to their unique abilities, whether it be re-creating electricity in a backwards collectivist society (*Prometheus, Anthem*), designing avant garde structures (Howard Roark, *Fountainhead*), or developing the most advanced motor the world has seen (John Galt, *Atlas Shrugged*). However, the aforementioned protagonists are not met with admiration when they present their inventions to the world. Instead, the societies in which they live reject both their creations and the characters themselves, and the brilliant heroes and heroines in Rand’s work find themselves confronted with the reality that society does not adhere to the belief that cultivating one’s ego is a human right.

The fundamental conflict in Rand’s fiction is that the protagonists and society have disparate views of what cultivating an ego entails. Society perceives the act of nurturing an ego as selfish. Rand labels her protagonists “egoists,” as they live to satisfy their egos. Yet Roark, when prompted, feels the need to qualify his status as an egoist, explaining that the term “ego” has been bastardized by the masses: “Rulers of men are not egoists. They create nothing. They exist entirely through the persons of others. Their goal is in their
subjects, in the activity of enslaving them […] But men were taught to regard second handers—tyrants, emperors, dictators, as exponents of egoism. By this fraud they were made to destroy the ego, themselves, and others” (682). Roark is correct when he asserts that society was made to “destroy the ego.” As society has been inculcated to warp the conceptualization of “ego,” they revolt against the protagonists.

Indeed, the societies in which Rand’s protagonists dwell continuously attempt to undermine their work. In Anthem, the collectivist society that Prometheus lives in stifles his intellectual capabilities. When the counsel summons him in order to explain what his life-long career will be, he is appalled by their decision: “For the lips of the oldest did not move as they said: ‘Street Sweeper’” (Rand 26). In the collectivist society, no one is allowed to pursue one’s passion, as it is subordinate to the needs of the whole. Yet readers understand that Prometheus has been damned to the role of street sweeper because he is brighter than those around him, which is an unpardonable offense: “It was not that the learning was too hard for us. It was that it was that the learning was too easy. This is a great sin, to be born with a head that is too quick” (21). When Prometheus single handedly discovers how to make electric light, the collectivist society, which has chosen to regress, is infuriated by his invention. As punishment, he is whipped, and they attempt to destroy his electrical unit: “It is true that our tunic was torn and stained with brown stains which had been blood” (69). Prometheus’ fate is shared by the protagonists in Rand’s other novels. In The Fountainhead, Roark is put on trial simply because his modern, avant garde buildings are perceived as heinous: “He [Roark] should have known better. It is a scientific fact that the architectural style of the Renaissance is the only one appropriate to our age” (353). Additionally, when Galt in Atlas Shrugged has the fortitude to develop the best motor ever created, he is met with demands that he make his product more readily available, so that others may compete with him. Thus, society impinges upon man’s human right to nurture his ego.

Through her fiction, Rand illuminates the plight of the man whose human right to an ego is thwarted by society. For Rand, the inability to cultivate the ego has detrimental ramifications on the egoist’s psyche. At nearly every turn, society strives to fetter the egoist’s potential inventions. In The Fountainhead, Steve Mallory, a talented sculptor, is forced to sculpt kitschy recreations of people’s infants. The lack of intellectual stimulation and creative license spurs Mallory to shoot Ellsworth Toohey, a columnist who glorifies the mediocre and censures visionaries (322). As Toohey’s popular column calls for Mallory to be black-balled, he cannot find meaningful work. When Roark goes in search of Mallory in order to recruit him to sculpt a sculpture for the temple he designs, he finds a broken man: “Mallory jerked himself away from him [Roark], and dropped face down on the bed, his two arms stretched out, one on each side of his head, hands closed into fists. The thin trembling of the shirt cloth on his back showed that he was sobbing” (328). Hence, Rand suggests that self-aware men, whose egos need to be indulged, are incapable of living an existence in which they cannot pursue their passion. In The Care of the Self, Michel Foucault observes that society is often hesitant to allow someone to “cultivate” his/her self. Tracing his argument back to the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers who held similar views, he notes that when man is not permitted the right to cater to his/her self-interest, the possibility for depression emerges: “All men should desire to be most happily, and should know that they cannot so live in any other way than by cultivating the soul” (45). Thus, Foucault notes that the argument for man’s imperative right to cultivate his ego has been a battle long fought through the centuries.

Whether intentionally, or unintentionally, the corollary of society’s impingement upon the cultivation of the ego is that the egoists feel the compulsion to flee the society. The egoists are not retreating, but rather, choosing self-exile in order to preserve their psyches. In Atlas Shrugged, egoists Hank Rearden and Francisco
d’Anconia discuss whether or not it is pusillanimous to disappear from society. Francisco, who vehemently disputes Rearden’s claim that it would be cowardly to escape, provides the following scenario: “If you saw Atlas, [...] blood running down his chest, his knees buckling, his arms trembling but still trying to hold the world aloft with the last of his strength, and the greater his effort the heavier the world bore down on his shoulders—what would you tell him to do?” ‘I don’t know. What could he do? What would you tell him?’ ‘To shrug.’” (422).

As Rand and her protagonists view the cultivation of the ego as an inalienable human right, it is only natural that when these rights are infringed upon by society, a revolt will occur. With the exception of Mallory, the heroes and heroines of Rand’s novels do not take up actual arms against society. Instead, they revolt against society, punishing it by removing themselves from the social paradigm. In *Anthem*, Prometheus, along with the woman he loves, Gaia, escapes from the collectivist society and sets up house in an abandoned domicile (Rand 84). In *Atlas Shrugged*, John Galt eliminates himself from the social scene to the extent that the question “Who is John Galt?” is posed whenever anyone wants to ask an unanswerable question. Galt, d’Anconia, and several other egoists take refuge in Galt’s Gulch, where they perform whatever action (lectures on physics, concerts, etc.) nurtures their egos. When fellow egoist Dagny Taggart accidentally stumbles upon their utopian society, she accuses them of giving up their fight. However, Galt attempts to put their retreat into perspective by clarifying their withdrawal: “The men who have carried the world on their shoulders have kept it alive, have endured torture as sole payment, but have never walked out on the human race. Well, their turn has come. Let the world discover who they are, what they do and what happens when they refuse to function. This is the strike of the men of the mind” (677).

Galt’s impassioned speech to Dagny elucidates the paradox that society creates when it punishes the egoist, who is only trying to *further* the civilization. Indeed, the society that despises Galt for his refusal to compete with others also clamors for his motor to be reinstated. Thus, the egoist is first hated for creating an innovative invention, and then is loathed for refusing to share this gift with all of society. What recourse can the egoist have in such a diseased atmosphere? Yet the egoist is repeatedly castigated by those around him for disregarding society’s needs. Rand’s refusal to concede that man must abandon his needs in order to satiate the needs of others is often perceived as an avowal that man should live for greed. However, the point that Rand and her protagonists raise is that it is unnatural for man to live for others. Foucault notes that even philosophers such as Plutarch and Seneca affirmed that “the chief objective one should set for one’s self is to be sought within oneself, in the relation of oneself to oneself” (64-65). Hence, Galt, Prometheus and Roark cannot accept the idea that they must relinquish their ego in order to satisfy the needs of those who despise them.

Additionally, Rand’s characters are targeted as greedy, immoral individuals who live in order to cause societal chaos. However, characters who earn their money through subjugating others are reviled by Rand’s egoists. Indeed, when Francisco d’Anconia amasses great wealth by becoming a playboy, rather than through utilizing his keen intelligence, egoists Rearden and Dagny view him as a “bum” (60). Throughout *Atlas Shrugged*, the refrain resurfaces that the most depraved human being on earth is “The man without a purpose” (98). While it is later revealed that d’Anconia has been pretending to be a playboy to further Galt’s cause, the fact remains that the egoist cannot tolerate a man whose interest lies solely in money lust. For Rand’s characters, the moral issue of idly accruing wealth surfaces because one is not actually *doing* anything. As cultivating an ego is perceived as virtuous, the antithesis of this would be wasting one’s abilities. In *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant provides his exemplar of an immoral man: “A third [man] finds in himself a talent which with the help of some culture might make him a useful man.
in many respects. But he finds himself in comfortable circumstances, and prefers to indulge his pleasure […] than to take pains in enlarging and improving his happy natural capacities” (40). Yet one is prompted to ask how the determination is made between indulging an ego for insipid reasons and indulging an ego in order to nurture its unique talents. Kant’s perspective is that one should extend one’s probable action across the entirety of society: in other words, if everyone copied the citizen’s action, would society fall into disarray? Rand’s criteria for determining the validity of the act is a bit more nebulous. In Virtue of Selfishness, Rand asserts that it is important to scrutinize man’s driving force, as a distinction must be made between the egoist and the glutton: “There is a fundamental moral difference between a man who sees his self-interest in production and the man who sees it in robbery. The evil of a robber does not lie in the fact that he pursues his own interests, but in what he regards as his own interest” (xii). Whereas the epicure desires wealth without work, the egoist craves a work that he enjoys. Hence, the hedonist and the egoist will forever be locked in combat, as their perceptions of work and money are incongruent. While readers may believe that the egoists are greedy, the reality is that the egoist’s essential passion is for his trade, and not for baseless power and affluence.

If Rand’s protagonists’ goal is to work at their trade, and not to easily accumulate wealth, then why the conflict with society? Rand’s work is often scrutinized because it is mistakenly believed that the egoist’s human right to an ego has a detrimental effect on society. As previously stated, the egoist does not want to oppress his brethren. Instead, the conflict between the egoist and the masses is partially a result of society’s inability to fully support the egoist’s right to cultivating his ego because it perceives the egoist’s actions as purely selfish ones. When Rearden attempts to share a piece of the innovative metal he has created by giving his wife a bracelet of the metallurgical marvel, his wife and friends’ reaction is to declare: “‘God, Henry, but you are conceited!’” (42). Rearden is bewildered by their response, and cannot fathom why they believe he is conceited. Thus, the characters’ views on pride are dichotomous. Rearden’s friends and family believe that he flaunts his abilities, and by giving his wife a bracelet of the metal, he indulges his vanity. Conversely, Rearden cannot comprehend their anger over his gesture. Rearden does not give his wife the bracelet in order to ostentatiously showcase his talent. Instead, Rearden’s act is a supreme gesture in which he tries to include those around him in what he loves best: “He did not know that he stood straight and that the gesture of his arm was that of a returning crusader offering his trophy to his love, when he dropped the chain of metal into her lap” (41). Once he realizes that the others around him cannot grasp his enthralment with his invention, futility of his gesture sweeps over him, and he is flooded with “an immense exhaustion” (42).

Despite the egoist’s disjointed relationship with society, his goal is never to incite battles. The egoist, despite popular belief, is capable of pitying those in desperate situations. At the end of Anthem, Prometheus vows that he will return to the collectivist society and aid all those who aspire to leave: “I shall steal one day, for the last time, into the cursed city of my birth. I shall call to my friend who has no name save International 4-8818, and all those like him, Fraternity 2-5503, who cries without reason, and Solidarity 9-6347 who calls for help in the night, and a few others” (Rand 101). Prometheus’ devotion to help his brothers escape shows that egoists are concerned for the welfare of society. In other words, they do not exhibit the “Love, Thy Neighbors? No!” mentality that Slavoj Zizek in his work In Defense of Lost Causes accredits to the Freudian belief that no man truly loves his neighbors, as he is only concerned with his ego (37). In Rand’s fictional realms, the egoist dedicates his life to ensure that man can access his human right to an ego. Hence, when Prometheus swears that he will help the others, his proclamation originates from his unshakeable conviction that his brothers should be able to take

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advantage of their right to an ego: “For the coming of that day I shall fight, I and my sons and my chosen friends. For the freedom of Man. For his rights. For his life. For his honor” (104). As Rand posits that all mankind has a right to an ego, the egoists in her novels make certain that mankind is aware of this right.

In Rand’s novels, society consists primarily of people who have abdicated their right to cultivating their ego. While Rand wrote extensively on her distaste for Kant’s philosophical outlooks, especially in her text *Philosophy, Who Needs It?*, her novels actually reflect Kant’s warnings about how an individual’s moral transgression negatively affects society. Indeed, Kant propounds, “To secure one’s happiness is a duty, at least indirectly; for discontent with one’s condition, under a pressure of many anxieties and amidst unsatisfied wants, might easily become a temptation to transgression of duty” (15). The duty referred to by Kant is the duty to promote a moral society. Here, Kant makes an open declaration for the cultivation of the ego, as he notes that when man chooses to ignore his basic need to foster his ego, he will become embittered and act out against society. In Rand’s novels, the society that fights so hard against the egoists consists of those who have forsaken their egos. When Roark is nearly defeated by society, the type of people who celebrate his downfall are as follows: “This was solidarity […] the bookkeeper who wanted to be a pianist, but had the excuse of a sister to support, the businessman who hated his business—the worker who hated his work […] all were united as brothers in the luxury of common anger that cured boredom and took them out of themselves (Rand 623). Had the aforementioned characters devoted themselves to their true passion/talent, they would never dream of restraining the egoist’s potential. However, the “transgression” of limiting the egoist is a result of the inhabitants of society’s inability to recognize their own gifts, and they transgress in the hopes of assuaging their own feelings of unhappiness.

While the misperceptions that surround the egoist’s level of arrogance and the relationship with his brethren hinders the embittered society from embracing the human right to an ego, the fundamental reason why society clashes with the egoist is due to society’s inability to fathom the egoist’s reverence for mankind. When Roark is brought to trial because society considers his temple repugnant, Dominique Francon, Roark’s champion, hypothesizes that the temple is regarded as monstrous because it exalts man: “Howard Roark built a temple to the human spirit. He saw man as strong, powerful, clean, wise and fearless. He saw man as a human being. And he built a temple to that” (Rand 355). Rand asserts that people have been taught to believe the worst about their selves and this lack of self-confidence is erroneously perceived as humility. Roark’s temple is a projection of his belief that man is a glorious being whose sole function is to ensure that he cultivates his ego. Thus, society finds the temple repulsive because it has been trained to think that man is bestial. Conversely, the egoist believes in the absolute exaltation of man, man’s mind, and man’s abilities. Until society can revel in the grandeur that is man, there will always be a rift between the egoist and the masses.

The egoists always triumph at the end of Rand’s novels. After making radio speeches or testifying in trials, the lengthy monologues that the egoists make to society convinces enough people to begrudgingly allow the egoists access to their right to cultivate their ego. At the end of *The Fountainhead*, after Roark has proselytized egoism to the courtroom, he is permitted to design the avant garde structures that he loves. The novel does not end with him proclaiming his unending love for money. Instead, he is victoriously working: “She [Dominique] saw him standing above her, on the top platform of the Wynand building. […] She passed the pinnacles of the bank buildings. She passed the crowns of courthouses. She rose above the spires of churches. Then there was only the ocean and the sky and the figure of Howard Roark” (Rand 694). Throughout all of her novels, the protagonists only want the freedom to cultivate their ego. This cultivation will not harm society, it will not perpetuate greed. Yet
society will do its best to hinder the egoist until it embraces how truly magnificent man and his abilities can be. But the egoist will not give up his rights easily, since his desire to access his human right to an ego is essential to his happiness, his psyche, and his spirit. As the egoist is consumed by a love of mankind and the belief that man should never live for others’ needs, he never tires of trying to convince others that nothing is more glorious than one’s ego, and no one on earth should have the ability to curtail its cultivation.

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UNDERGRADUATE SECTION


by ANCA PIRNOIU

Abstract: Bernard Malamud’s Black Is My Favorite Color offers an insight into Black-Jewish relation(ships), by portraying their implications on the ethnic other, and thus emphasizing the limit to which such connections are allowed to be extended. Whether the attempt to establish a fruitful communion is noble, this does not always work out the way one expects, for the response tends to be contrary to one’s beliefs and true desires.

Bernard Malamud, one of the best known authors of the 1950s-1960s Jewish-American Renaissance, offers us the opportunity to understand, as well as interpret, the way in which Black-Jewish relations can be established at the outset of the Civil Rights era. My paper argues that he most poignantly does that in his 1963 story “Black Is My Favorite Color,” by casting some light upon the boundaries to which one can extend the desire for social and racial harmony, since harmony and boundaries are co-dependent, being impossible for either one to survive if attempting to cross the boundary line.

I shall begin my analysis with the words of critic Adam Zachary Newton who explores Black-Jewish relations in his 2004 book, Facing Black and Jew. Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America. In this study, the critic conceives the positive Black-Jewish encounter as “[a] cross-road of two othernesses, [which] welcomes the foreigner without trying him down, opening the host to his visitors without committing him” (4). Despite their sense of openness, his ideas simultaneously sustain the conundrum of a person who adopts positive discrimination, a situation faced by Nathan, the Jewish-American narrator-protagonist of Malamud’s story. This transpires from the following paragraph:
If they knew what was in my heart towards them but how can you tell that to anybody nowadays? I’ve tried more than once but the language of the heart either is a dead language or else nobody understands it the way you speak it. Very few. What I’m saying, personally for me there’s only one human color and that’s the color of blood. I like a black person if not because he’s black, then because I’m white. It comes to the same thing. If I wasn’t white my first choice would be black. I’m satisfied to be white because I have no other choice. Anyway, I got an eye for color. I appreciate. (187)

We are shown here how the narrator’s true and pure thoughts are unlikely to be understood in their completeness in a society whose legacy of discrimination has made people lose any sense of trust in the ethnic/racial other, an idea which perfectly corresponds to another point Newton makes in his study. As he claims, “[d]amaged patrimony, a non-inalienable place in a society, expulsion or captivity: these make up the loss now oriented to a would-be restitution, that bear witness to Levinas’s assertion: ‘The first question in the interhuman is the question of justice’” (Newton 3). If one lacks this intrinsic need to make justice, it is clear that any type of racial connections is almost impossible. This happens because the past has put its mark upon people’s soul and mind in such a way that it has made them internalize its negative contours, resulting in an individual’s detachment from the ethnic other, as well as from one’s own community, as we shall see later on.

Another important aspect to be mentioned is that of the implications of this lack of understanding upon the protagonist of the story. On the one hand, there is his sense of solitude which he hoped to end for himself and a Black neighborhood boy, Buster, by becoming friends. In this he fails, though, because of Buster’s discouraging attitude: “My idea was to be friendly, only he never encouraged, he discouraged. Why did I pick him out for a friend? Maybe because I had no others then …” (187). On the other hand, one counts the consequences of Nathan’s failure to be accepted as a friend by Buster which are of a painful emotional order: “One day when I wasn’t expecting it he hit me in the teeth. I felt like crying but not because of the pain. I spit blood and said, ‘What did you hit me for? What did I do to you?’” (187).

In Malamud’s story, this sort of violent reject is what happens when a person’s kind attitudes are not enough to be accepted by the other, for they might be thought to hide something underneath, something mischievous. To this amounts Buster’s suspicion of Nathan’s good intentions. One could explain this through Newton’s ideas that “the mutual recognition” Nathan is after “owes its success to its temporary nature, and it would be torn by conflicts, if it were to be extended” (Newton 4). In support of this claim, the last question of Malamud’s text shows how, in the wake of having known discrimination, Black persons are likely to have a deterministic conception of the whites given their deeply implanted Jim Crow experience. Put differently, in light of the burdened legacy of segregation, young Blacks are likely to take for granted the fact that the new white generation must be as guilty and discriminating as the old generation, even though the latter have done nothing against them. This may also happen due to an in-group “‘shared boundary line’ of suffering” adopted by the Black community which “obscures perhaps a deeper clef common to American Black and Jew alike: the gap between present and past” (Newton 21).

If we are to think of the type of relations that can be created between people of different skin colors, we can understand the non-white group’s wary sense of perception given the white-imposed sense of the Blacks’ economic and intellectual inferiority in slavery times and, later, under Jim Crow society in the U.S. Given this previous experience of discrimination, for members of the Black community, coming in close contact with outside white others is seen as a case of submission,
of enslavement. By comparison, in the early twentieth century Jews were themselves considered less than white by the American mainstream; they were relegated to an inferior socio-economic position by the racist talk of the 1911 Dillingham report which led to the 1921-1924 discriminatory Quota Laws. Yet, the large flow of Jewish-Americans into the professions and their material success since World War II have resulted in a perception of Jewish-Americans as no longer a suffering minority, but as part of the white mainstream. Norman Podhoretz explains why this initial sense of shared pain is finally supplanted by a sense of rift between the Black and Jewish situation in the States:

For much of the twentieth century blacks and Jews had felt an alliance as targets of discrimination in the United States, and Jews had extended help to blacks as lawyers and union bosses. But under the patina of this partnership there had been resentment on both sides. Jews, as Baldwin wrote, were businessmen and landlords, ‘they operate in accordance with the American business tradition of exploiting Negroes, and they are therefore identified with oppression and are hated for it. (Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son 68 qtd. in Podhoretz 327)

Bernard Malamud also implements this characteristic in his story in relation to the narrator’s business, and leaves us to identify it: “My store is Nathan’s Liquors between Hundred Tenth and Eleventh. I also have two colored clerks, Mason and Jimmy, and they will tell you I pay good wages as well as I give discounts to certain customers” (192).

The result of such an economically-imposed superiority which places the Jews in the position of the powerful discriminating white group is answered by African-Americans’ urgently-felt need to fight the threat of losing one’s identity and specificity. That is why the image that the Black community adopts is that of a wild, savage beast, unwilling to submit and with full rights of turning to revolt as a means of protection. Malamud specifically highlights this in his story, especially in the scene when Nathan’s Black house-cleaner, “Charity Sweetness sits in the toilet eating her two hardboiled eggs while I’m having my ham sandwich and coffee in the kitchen” (186). Charity Sweetness offers us here the sense of self-imposed segregation, of acceptance of lower status in light of which she refuses any contact with the whites outside the professional sphere. Simultaneously, we can identify here the previous mentioning of better economic status and social condition of the Jews by comparison to that of the Blacks as an unbreachable cross-racial line. This instance is similar to the previously mentioned scene in which Buster aggressively dismissed Nathan by anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as Shylock-like symbols of greed and manipulators of political power through command of economic and entertainment money: “Take your Jew movies and your Jew candy and shove them up your Jew ass” (189).

One last aspect that might be of interest in our discussion is the way in which engaging in an intimate relationship with the ethnic/racial other is almost impossible for the well-intentioned Jewish-American Nathan, due to the limitations that a Black person has, as provided by the community of “brothers” and “sisters.” As Newton successfully underlines, what “ties American Black to American Jewish experience … makes Blacks and Jews vexedly at home but also strangers to themselves and to each other” (Newton 6). Malamud portrays this aspect in the paragraph below, showing the impossibility of intermarriage between Jewish Nat and Black Örnita because it would almost certainly subsume Black community’s aggressiveness on the couple as well as Örnita’s need to break from her Black family and heritage: “I have family there and don’t want to move anyplace else. The truth is I can’t marry you, Nat. I got troubles enough of my own” (193).

The same Newton continues by stating that “[i]n preparing for the clash that predictably follows
wrecking Nat’s and Ornita’s chances for Black-Jewish relations, the text sequences” a version “of the latter” (Newton 123), which implies maintaining a distance from the one you love for the continuance of social and inter-racial harmony, if it ever be such. Otherwise, one faces the risk of being oppressed by other members of the black community, as it happens to Nat on accompanying Ornita home: “Shut your mouth, Jewboy”, said the leather cap, and he moved the knife back and forth in front of my coat button. “No more black pussy for you”” (192).

To conclude, the harsh reality portrayed in Malamud’s story is that the boundaries to which the desire for human inter-racial communion can be pushed is limited from the very beginning, from the very few attempts of wanting to integrate in order to promote a discrimination-free society, where feelings can stand as answers on their own without being misinterpreted, and where deeds are not seen as signs of temptation for the others to embrace and be considered weak for doing so. The boundaries basically stand for the heritage of prejudice inherited from the past and internalized cross-generationally. Meanwhile, reality hurts even more when trying to build up an inter-racial relationship and seeing that it is only deceiving and heart-breaking when society is against it. As Nat himself voices it: “That’s how it is. I give my heart and they kick me in the teeth” (193).

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BOOK REVIEWS

Writing Visually for Another Crack in the Wailing Wall: Jonathan Safran-Foer’s Tree of Codes. A Review

by DANA MIHĂILESCU


Published on November 15, 2010 by Visual Editions, Jonathan Safran-Foer’s new book, Tree of Codes, sublimely expands the boundaries of the literary field. Written by one of America’s most promising young authors, this book is a ground-breaking work in the field of literary creation formally, structurally, and content-wise. Foer’s fourth full-length book grew out of the author’s desire to explore and experiment with the die-cut technique. As a result, on a formal level, each page offers readers not just the usual sequence of words forming a narrative, but also the holes
resulting from the author’s cutting a previous narrative. Through these holes, layers upon layers of words from other pages are constantly visible and forever distracting one from purely linear perusal. Readers’ constant alertness is therefore ensured and the act of reading ceases to be mechanical. Meanwhile, the holes explicitly draw our attention to our partial grasp of reality, and the predominance of holes over words per page signals the overwhelming degree to which individual knowledge is limited. Just as the same holes manage to capture the importance of the smaller gaps in-between words and pages, which most often fail to catch our attention, given their orderly, disciplined, same-length character. All these formal visual choices wonderfully add a sense of embodiedness to the narrative by which consciousness of self-limitation and outside complexity beyond our grasp become obvious.

On a structural level, the book is cut out of an existing narrative which the author has identified as his favorite book. Cutting into the sentences of an existing text, Safran-Foer creates a new story; as such, he becomes an archeologist of words and structures who, on the one hand, revitalizes readers’ interest in the original text which served as source of cutting and reworking, and, on the other hand, offers new valences of meaning. In the meantime, Tree of Codes blurs the distinction between de-construction and (re-)construction which cease to inhabit clear-cut binary positions and become simultaneous co-existent categories of creation.

As to content, Tree of Codes resulted from the author’s use of an English language edition of Bruno Schulz’s Street of Crocodiles, cutting into its pages and constructing a new story. A talented Polish-Jewish writer who was imprisoned in the Drohobych ghetto from 1941, Schulz (1892-1942) became a drawer of Gestapo officer Felix Landau’s murals from his child’s playroom. Soon afterwars, however, the talented Jewish artist was to be killed by another Nazi, Karl Günther, in an act of revenge on Landau after this one had himself shot dead Günther’s own favored Jew. The murals drawn by Schulz were discovered sixty years later (in 2002) by documentary filmmaker Benjamin Geissler who rubbed the white walls of the former Landau abode till colors and then shapes started to surface. Hence came to life forms and figures which must have given their artist a sense of temporary release—“fairies and nymphs, mushrooms, animals, and royalty” (Foer viii)—and which are now on display in Israel’s Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem. In his introduction to Schulz’s 1933 The Street of Crocodiles, Safran-Foer commends the book for its unique ability to create a universe of hyper-intense experiences which make one aware of the mundane and triviality of everyday life. In the afterword to his own book, Safran-Foer further notes this book’s ability to get closer to living under extreme tension since “The language is too heightened, the images too magical and precarious, the yearnings too dire, the sense of loss too palpable—everything is too simultaneously comic and tragic. I could not help but feel that Schulz’s hand must have been forced, that there must have existed some yet larger book from which The Street of Crocodiles was taken” (139). Like Geissler who rubbed layers upon layers of walls till Bruno’s forms and figures came to life, in Tree of Codes, Safran-Foer rubbed Schulz’s narrative and offered “a small response to that great book,” trying to find a new story within an existent narrative by cutting a great amount of its words.

Schulz’s collection follows the story of a merchant family from a small Galician town via a mythical perspective. The story mainly recounts the out-of-the-ordinary experiences of the Father who is not only the head of the family, the merchant running a textile shop in the marketplace, but also an eerie experimenter endowed with extraordinary abilities who lives on the edge between life and death, between the world of reality and imagination. Yet the protagonist is his son, Józef, who also serves as narrator of the text and through whose lens we discover the seemingly hyper-real surrounding world.

In his afterword to The Tree of Codes, Safran-Foer notes how on the Germans’ seizure of
Drohobycz in 1941, Schulz entrusted his writings to gentile friends yet after his death only two slim collections of stories were retrieved, *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*. The rest was lost for good. Starting from here, Foer deems the choice of this source-text as a difficult but right endeavor because it gave him the opportunity to go beyond mere experimentation of the die-cut technique, allowing him to use the act of erasure not as an impoverishment but as a continuation of Schulz’s original creation. As Foer writes,

Like the Wailing Wall, Schulz’s surviving work evokes all that was destroyed in the War: Schulz’s lost books, drawings and paintings; those that he would have made had he survived; the millions of other victims, and within them the infinite expressions of infinite thoughts and feelings taking infinite forms.

Or is Schulz’s work more like a bound version of those disparate prayers left in the wall? (138)

In Foer’s hands, the main story becomes that of the father’s gradual extinction in front of his wife and boy, as seen through the latter’s “naked” eyes. It is a story of personal and communal loss and mourning, of the impossibility to find answers or understand, of how, in the end, only the haunting presence of the lost ones remains to make eerie sense. First, the story captures the father’s gradual decomposition towards helplessness and complete interiorization (26–27), forever choking in a “dialogue swollen with darkness” (29). The boy’s terribly lucid conclusion, “My father was wilting before our eyes” (30), cleaves open the narrative wound. In its turn, this one gives place to life as a series of arbitrary senseless shifts. So we learn of father’s death, of the child’s initial suffering and then forgetting of such pain once he becomes engrossed in the larger cityscape, while drily acknowledging: “We gave Father up—we got used to it” (101). However, the outside world itself turns out to be a mere “tree of codes,” a failed attempt to simplify the complexity of life to reduced frames of “pretense” (95). Trapped in this absurd universe, the boy goes on to experience imprisonment at the hands of an anonymous outside mob and the story finally shifts to all’s attempt to save themselves as the end of the world is announced. But as “life returned to its normal course,” the father’s haunting presence alone seems to prevail and the last lines read “my father alone was awake, wandering silently through the rooms” (134). Hence, *Tree of Codes* can stand for yet another of Schulz’s lost works, it is yet another exhumation of a dead past or of a dead parent, of unimaginable skewed life frames under extreme conditions and beyond.

Just as the father’s ghost goes on to haunt the boy-narrator at the end of the story, Foer’s book is a haunting narrative whose innovative character shakes readers away from the comfortable realm of life’s complacency towards permanent urgency and alertness as to life’s infinite possibilities.
Between Worlds: The Burden and Blessing of the Past. A Review of Mihaela Moscaliuc’s *Father Dirt*

by LAURA E. SAVU


It’s a certain burden, this Americanness. If you come from a small nation, you don’t have that.

Willem de Kooning

You do have that, i.e. the burden of national consciousness, especially if you were born and raised in communist Romania and then, in your twenties, came to the U.S. to further your education and forge a new life.

Or at least this is what Mihaela Moscaliuc would argue, for her first volume of poetry, *Father Dirt*, published in 2010, testifies to what it means, or rather how it feels, to cross the ocean with a “saddlebag of ghosts,” both personal and collective.

1 Don DeLillo quotes Willem de Kooning, a painter, in his seminal essay, “The Power of History,” where he discusses the representation of American history in his novels. For DeLilo, “the sweeping range of American landscape and experience can be a goad, a challenge, an affliction and an inspiration, pretty much in one package.” The same, I argue in my essay, holds true of Moscaliuc’s poetic representation of her own country, albeit for different reasons.
The electrifying appeal of her poems derives, however, not so much from their being ghost-haunted, as from the hauntingly beautiful, fine-grained sense of English and from the way she positions herself between the Old World and the New World, the past and the present, one foot planted firmly in each.²

A traveler between cultures, Moscaliuc straddles languages, mixes genres and shifts language registers that reflect her existence as a child, immigrant, wife, and mother. She digs up the communist past, even as she sets down new roots in America, reinventing herself as a Romanian-American who celebrates her adopted country but also honors her ancestors as well as others who have moved or inspired her in different and meaningful ways. Like variations upon a musical theme, the poems revolve around or gravitate towards the central pull of memory, as the medium through which the past is filtered for the purpose of understanding the present and shaping the future. Hence the quote from Milan Kundera, “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting,” that serves as the epigraph to the third and last section of the book.³ The past and the present commingle in the metaphoric life of language, investing the latter with a bittersweet quality:

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² Moscaliuc received a Master of Arts from Salisbury University, a Master of Fine Arts in poetry from New England College, and a doctorate in American literature from the University of Maryland. She has written extensively on Eastern European American immigration literature, Roma/ Gypsy culture, and translation theory, and she lectured on these topics at universities in the U.S. and in Europe. Her translations of Romanian poetry and her poems, reviews and articles have been published widely. Her poems, reviews, and translations appear in New Letters, The Georgia Review, Prairie Schooner, Pleiades, Connecticut Review, Poetry International, Subtropics, and elsewhere.

³ Other writers to whom Moscaliuc acknowledges her indebtedness include Mark Doty, Nancy Mitchell, and Khlaed Mattawa, as well as her husband Michael Waters, who is also a poet.

I thicken coffee with chocolate, language with accented mistranslations, love with foreign words oblong and trammed and plum-branded.

I like the smell of yesterday's clothes. It insists we resume where we left off. (“Portrait”)

Terry Lucas has called Moscaliuc a “dialogical poet,” not merely “a poet of witness,” but rather “a voyeur who compels us to watch, along with her, the daily love-making between experience and language--not just in the bedroom, but in the schoolroom, the bathtub, the graveyard, the kitchen.” Each of these spaces constitutes a site of poetic and cultural memory that evokes terror and sometimes tenderness. Moscaliuc taps into history, mythology, folklore, and popular culture, unearthings those individual (his)tures that do not fit easily into the prescribed idiom and purpose of official discourse. More to the point, in crossing the boundaries of thought and pushing those of form, she highlights the constitutive role of others, and alterity in general, in the structure of the poet’s self, in national identity and cultural perception. The multifaceted, Whitmanesque portrait that emerges integrates different perspectives that complement and enhance each other.

The opening poem, “How to Ask for My Hand at My Grandmother’s Grave,” sets up the dynamic tension—as well as the dialogue—between the Old World and the New World, and makes us aware of the power that the dead hold over the living. Addressing the man who has crossed the ocean to marry her, the speaker warns him:

We carry cemeteries in our heads
in our bellies, round our ankles
We carry them to work
and we carry them to sleep
and when we make love
they moan, they rattle, they sing.
The warning gives concrete weight to the intangible concept of strigoi: “I knew only one of them, but they’re all mine / these dead turned strigoi …” The use of the collective “we” identifies the poet with other Romanians haunted by the spirits of the dead, the most restless of which is her grandmother’s:

Don’t tell her about ashes thrown to winds, don’t say you’ve never spilled red wine onto the earth to quench your father’s thirst, or that you never read him the Sunday paper.

The grandmother embodies a world of magic, mystery and rich spirituality that stands in sharp contrast to the secularism of the pragmatic, modern world from which the American beloved comes. As for the speaker, she inhabits the twilight zone between the sacred and the profane, between faith and doubt, her life unfolding in two distinct and parallel temporal frames, one historical and irreversible, the other mythical and recurrent: “We’ll offer walnut breads and gossip, and she’ll forgive and bless us, / then send me back across the ocean with a saddlebag of ghosts.”

Many of the poems that follow illuminate the substantial presence of “ghosts,” some terrifying, others sustaining, but all unnervingly real. A recurring presence throughout the collection, the grandmother lives on in the poet’s heart and memory as a cheerfully inclined woman—“I want to consecrate my grandmother’s laughter,” begins “Taste of Earth,”—down-to-earth yet God-fearing: “—And that yard, blessed with dandelions and brome / don’t shave it to the ground, it’s sinful.” Above all, she knows exactly who I am: the girl who dreamt her escape while handpicking potato beetles and singeing pork ears who now fuels homesickness with immigrant tales.

Notice again how these lines gesture towards the past, present, and future, reinforcing the strong ties that bind the poet to her grandmother even beyond death. It is therefore fitting that the most important gift the latter bequeathed to her granddaughter is love:

I carry my love the way you carry fresh loaves: in both arms, swaddled in white towels, but for one corner—so heat can escape and the crust seal in true flavor.

Love, these lines intimate, saves both the poet and her poetry from unremitting narcissism; for though, as we will see shortly, Moscaliuc’s poems have emotional stakes, their essential reach, indeed their ethical vision lies in the poet’s critical engagement with history, as well as in her nuanced understanding of difference. Moreover, echoing Emily Dickinson’s famous line, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant,” the lines quoted above offer a meta-commentary on the function of poetry, which is to “seal in true flavor,” i.e. to capture the authentic feel of experience. Such reflective awareness of the writing process also informs “Cranes,” where lovemaking, whether between birds or humans, brings to mind poetry, in that both involve a “suspension of habitual prose,” a “fierce conversion of desire and need.”

With image after arresting image, the poet describes how it felt to grow up under communism, charts her process of coming of age, and connects her own dreams and fears to Romanians’ collective drama. By the same token, she sees individual lives as shaped by historical forces—the Holocaust, Communism, the Cold War, Chernobyl, the fall of the Berlin Wall—and those forces present in the texture of the intimately personal. A poignant episode concerns the onset of puberty and the speaker’s reaction to it:
But I knew nothing of desire,  
Or blood, so when, at fourteen, I  
emerged  
from the unlit bathroom with crimson  
streaks on both thighs,  

I was convinced my body had split  
open  
to let death in.  

Mixed with her fear is also a sense of the  
exciting possibilities latent in this rite of  
passage:  

Later, hunched among drunks on  
grым trains,  
I’d ease my eyes through drapes of  
smoke  
onto her shaped brightness, conjure  
my raffish twin  
jazzing behind the Iron Curtain.  
(“Luna”)  

In Moscaliuć’s poems, bodies are  
vibrant, sensual living things, as well as sites  
at which power is negotiated. Borrowing its  
title from Lenin, the poem “Destroy the  
Family, You Destroy the Country,” takes us to  
a high-school setting where female students  
were given a “fertility” check, as required  
after Ceausescu passed a decree stipulating  
that each family reach the goal of having five  
children. When a disembodied voice calls an  
emergency assembly to praise a student that  
has just been found pregnant, we get a sense  
of the institutionalization of the student body:  
“our uniformed bodies pleat into a perfect  
rectangle.” The students’ unspoken,  
subversive thoughts are juxtaposed to the  
controlling voice of the state, reminding us of  
the double-think imposed by the regime:  

What bad luck, we think, and promise  
smilingly  
to come see the baby.  

Pregnancy was encouraged as “an act of deep  
patriotism,” and the student/woman worker was held  
up as a model to the other students/citizens. This  
absurd management of natality ultimately served to  
marginarlize women in the exclusivist economy of  
the collective body, for abortion4 was deemed an  
affront to the communist state’s goals and met with  
public reprobation:  

Another emergency assembly—  

Dear comrade teachers and united young  
communists, your former fellow student  
Mara Pop, has committed a most reprobate  
act: killed her unborn, betrayed our  
trust, mocked the party’s directives. She’s  
here to talk about her crime—Mara  
Pop, take the microphone. Louder, girl!  
Louder.  

The silence that befalls the assembly speaks volumes  
about the psychological terror inflicted by the  
regime:  

I do not lift my eyes from the runs in her  
stockings, each gone its own  
distance, each strangled with red nail polish.  
Applause. Assembly dismissed. Mara  
leaves with the village cop and we return  
to Marx and Lenin.  
Her words hang above us, curved blades  
without handles. (italics mine)  

Throughout the book, Moscaliuć takes a hard  
look at the entire spectrum of injustices committed  
during communism: the socially policed mind and  
body boundaries, the mechanisms of surveillance  
and control, the politics of deprivation and  
discrimination. She places her own body alongside  
the body politic’s disenfranchised “no-bodies”—the  
Gypsies, orphans, street children, mole people, Jews,  
dissident intellectuals—who lie outside but also  
inside the speaker, unsettling the dynamic of self and  

4 Another poem that touches on abortion is “Red Gloves,” in  
which the arrest of a “midwife neighbor” causes the speaker’s  
flat to “explode into quiet” while “whispers and cries sieved  
through kitchen walls: confessed they know the list your  
name last abortion / better than prison ...”
other and, implicitly, the homogeneity of the national body. Not only are these delicately rendered figures deemed worthy of poetry, but they are also given a voice and a name—a historically situated and sometimes ethnically marked identity that is neither autonomous, nor reducible to its socially constructed identities. “The Naming,” for instance, focuses on the plight of artists and intellectuals who, under communism, were taken to working camps in the south to “trench useless canals” so as to be disciplined and “reformed.” Stripped of identity and relegated to invisibility, Nichita, Barbu, Marina, Dinu

Entered the room naked, unidentified.

Entered our kitchen, as furtive glances, settled around the dinner table, guests of smoke and steam.

If at nine, the poet was “too young to match each story with its face,” now, through her poem, she gives them their due, honoring their creative work and preserving their memory.

Another aspect typical of Romanians’ daily lives of “quiet desperation” were the long lines for food, which Moscaliuc brings up in “Good Friday” and “Blood Oranges for Easter.” It was “good luck” to be “first to spot the ration truck,” but even better, a dream come true for the poet’s brother,

three-hour shifts”) and feeling (the siblings’ sheer, secret delight at recognizing the crates when the truck doors snap open) into metaphor (“blood oranges”) to recreate the almost visceral experience of tasting the forbidden fruit (the oranges, a classmate thinks, are filled with “gypsy blood”):

But these oranges differ from the Christmas imports: skins soured in blood, as if birds have thrashed inside. We bag our fruit in silence. The empty-handed do not protest. At home, I dissect each sliver, stare at the meat hewn with uneven patches of red, bite into the plump striations savor the pleasantly bitter juice.

The “blood oranges” stand for anything/anyone marked out as “different”—that transgressed the social boundaries imposed by the regime. Hence their association with Gypsies, who figure in several of Moscaliuc’s poems as objects of racial “othering,” marginalized and ostracized:

Once I broke a window and for three months had to share the first-row desk with you, Ovidiu, Gypsy boy, whose companionship teachers used as punishment.

Years later, while in the throes of labour, the speaker is seized by terror at the thought that she too might have been cruel toward Ovidiu, and worse yet, that she blotted out the memory of her cruelty:

Did I make sure my leg never brushed against, yours, did I dodge your look by convincing myself the ink stains on my palm required full attention, did I believe the coarse charges, or wonder, at least once, about your mother, a nurse, admonished publicly at the biweekly meetings?

if the next truck haul[ed] not
bread, fish, or flour, but oranges—
hard sweet foreign fruit brighter than our full moon.
I cannot ask him if I’ve guessed:
we never say our wishes aloud,
we never name our fish. (“Good Friday”)

In “Blood Oranges,” too, she rigorously distills fact (“We secure our spot in line with

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Her shame, compounded by the fact that she still cannot remember Ovidiu’s voice, is offset by the sense of shared suffering:

... and I could say this we all suffered. At ten we each had at least one alcoholic parent (your father the only one mentioned) at twelve we used few words to seal friendship, fearing each other—anyone could be the informer, even this baby, waiting to turn in the birth canal.

As both “Annunciation” and a note at the end of the book make clear, the fate of Roma/Gypsy newborns was often decided by the State, which took them away and placed them in state orphanages. Their mothers were then sterilized, as were many other Roma women receiving assistance for other medical conditions:

When the State seized her boys—“saved” them—she wished she’d never had them, and when they cried out her last—“dead fish”—she didn’t know they’d scraped and clamped her clean, blind with pain on that spilling mattress, but not deaf—“dirty sow,” “retarded gypsy.”

Other lost souls in Moscaliuc’s poems take their fate into their own hands—a teenage girl whose suicide is frowned upon as “the ultimate insult/ To our harmonious communist life” (“Suicide Is for Optimists, Cioran Said”), or a “71-Year-Old Couple Descending into the Sea,” after failing to “outlive the legacy of communism,” as the epigraph to the poem reads.

A black-and-white photograph that prefaces and heightens the pathos of the poems in the middle section shows several children huddled together at a grate window of Pascani orphanage. The sadness of their condition is brought into sharper focus by the voices Moscaliuc lends them in poems such as “Sunday Mother” and “I Met Her Once, When I Was 8: Ionuț Speaks.” Here is how the former begins:

Gica’s and Leila’s faces beam when parents—always others—unlock the rusty gate and inch forward with lowered heads.

Gica, Leila, Iorgu calls, arrowing out of a cluster of rowdy boys, That’s my mom, let go.

With a tone that moves seamlessly between longing and melancholy, Moscaliuc lets us into the heart of the little boy who can only enjoy his “ration” of love on Sundays:

He needs to hear his Sunday mother unspool another measure of her yarn

So he can weave his childhood back one jagged lilt at a time.

The poet’s intense recollections of children like Iorgu, or others we meet in this section (Mitica, Ionuț, Florina, Stela, etc.) issue from fragments of overheard voices and grubby faces glimpsed in the orphanages she visited or in the street, but also from direct interactions with them. In assuming their perspectives, the poet allows them to claim a viable and resistant subjectivity and to express distrust of, if not disgust with, authority, in its many forms. Not surprisingly, the title phrase “Father Dirt” reads like a curse in the poem that opens the middle section, “Everything Touched by Darkness Knows Itself,” which describes the speaker giving a bath to Mitica, “street-child-blessed-with-lightning-fists:”

When I daub his shoulders with olive soap

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5 Some of the poems are accompanied by explicit dedications to those children who inspired them.
he prays for my bleached soul in quiet
tones,
asking that in the name of Father Dirt
I be granted absolution until my
tongue
learns the texture of rubble, the taste
of clay.

Pretty metaphors, then, are useless in the real
world, and the poet who has been touched by
“darkness” knows it. While she loves
metaphors for “the way they dive below the
earth, then slither up moist with ocean”—the
way they allow for both depth and breadth of
vision—Moscaluic also admits that she does
not trust them because they are too fuzzy and
abstract, “mak[ing] love to you in the thin
hour between here and some improbable
elsewhere, fingers humming with celestial
music.” She fears, too “their facile gait, the
glib take on trenches and borders. They leap
back and forth with such ease, without caring
to suffer transgression.” As the real stories
behind these poems have shown her,
boundary-crossing is much harder than
breaking away from conventional ways of
using words. This explains why, at the end of
“Metaphor,” she turns to prose, grounding her
imaginative flight in painfully palpable
details:

I knew a boy who called himself a
gypsy because he possessed nothing.
He would become a thief, he said,
since he never learnt to play the violin
or the accordion. What am I to do
with the metaphor that has swollen up
his future, tell me.

His future, we realize in reading “Visit
Home,” is bound to be bleak:

My orphans grew up and disappeared
below the earth.

Twice a day they ascend, cross the
boulevard

sniffing aurolac, flapping plastic bottles.

They all crave affection and nurturing, and so when
both their families and society fail them, their souls
are likely to “shrive,” just as flowers shrivel in
darkness.

Sometimes different “stories” spill into each
other, as in “Watching My Son in the Bathtub,
Thinking of 16-Year-Old Mara,” where an episode in
the present—her son “hypnotized” by the discovery
of his “puta,” his penis, as he bathes—triggers a
flashback from her Romanian past—a pregnant
friend bathing with delight and “staking out her
roundness.” Or when the happiness brought by love
makes it easier to forget the body’s sores (“Minds
Touched by Happiness Tend to Forget Their Bodies’
Sores”) and the same poem offers another reason for
the speaker’s happiness, one that has to do with the
past, namely, the execution of the dictators:

When the firing squad punctured their hearts
a hundred times and they crumpled like
ragged dolls
I wept with happiness.

Just as the content of the poems stays close to
incidents in Moscaluic’s own life, rendered in a way
that feels at once confessional and universal, so their
splendidly observant language is attuned to the
fragile, contingent things of the world, to the
physicality of time and place, and last but not least to
the elusive fleetingness of beauty, like that found in a
field of snowdrops:

Found them waiting in clumps
our winter’s virginal knells.
three milk-clotted lobes flared
to reveal the trim of petticoats. (“Revenge of
the Tongue”)

By turns sensual and subversive, buoyant and
grim, tender and gritty, plainspoken and artfully
wrought, the poetic diction enters the heart with
force and velocity. The language does not merely
suggest; it reinvigorates the senses, as the poet
summons the sights, sounds, flavors, and smells of
her life in the Old World. Notice, for instance, the
opening lines to “You Ask Where These Poems Come From:”

my motherland’s hunger lines and secret
lairs, shepherd coats and Russian hats
on deer hooks, abandoned flesh
propped against ravaged trash bunkers
vaguely familiar graves which I feed
fresh daisies and pickled rain

At other times, the poet’s delight in the word-related pleasures of memory “translates” into Romanian words such as luna, mătusă, cofetărie, perinita, tuică, mămăligha, stea, and gălbenele, which are italicized, spelled with Romanian diacritics, and explained in end notes for an American audience.

To put it differently, the language of Moscaliuć’s poetry has sting, venom and honey. One of my favorite poems, “You Ask Why I Answer You with Bees” can be interpreted as an allegory of the “cross-pollination” involved in the constant making and remaking of immigrants’ identities:

When flowers appeared,
bees gave up insects, altered
history, forged lasting dependencies: some thrive
on a single type of flower, some flowers
give themselves to one kind of bee,
the queen survives and is loved, though she remains foreign.

On this reading, the speaker is the “bee” that has “fastened” her life to “this new continent” (“Luna”) on which she is now thriving. Dangerously seductive as metaphors can often be, the bee metaphor does serve a purpose here: it enacts a mode of discursive agency that is both empowering and liberating. Before the “insects” were overthrown and history altered its course, Romanians were “trained to despise your [America’s] parasitic life,” but the poet still “found you beautiful and dreamed of being you” (“Cold War Redux,” italics mine).

This leads us to the last poem, “Dreaming in Romanian,” which speaks to the poet’s deep-seated need to break away with the past and carve out her own niche. If in “Portrait,” the  ars poetica that appears early in the collection and that I quoted at the beginning of this essay, she states that she likes “the smell of yesterday’s clothes,” here, she insists,

I want dreams that don’t wade into yesterdays’ waters.

I want dreams in the American idiom—
ys and ws braising in the oven of my mouth
Hunk and honk braiding their difference
Fuck and cock and cunt shaming my tongue

Dreams with popcorn plots and slick endings
Dreams with heirloom seedlings, dreams
Never in need in translation

The lack of punctuation at the end of this last line signals the open-endedness of the poet’s search for identity, an identity that remains bound up with others.

Drawing on the weight-bearing reality of actual people and events, Moscaliuć’s poems reflect both change and continuity, both the burden and the blessing of the past. Equally important, they encourage compassion and solidarity with those who suffer injustice and oppression. Hence the ethos of care and cultural relatedness at the heart of this wonderful poetry collection: identity hinges on the self’s capacity to relate to and care about others, to reach beyond itself, its family, and even its country. A work of profound insight and linguistic sophistication, Father Dirt will resonate with audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.
WORKS CITED


SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

[Inters]ections is a peer-reviewed quarterly publication.

Submission Deadlines for 2011

The 2011 submission deadlines are as follows:

- January 31st for our late March issue
- April 30th for our late June issue
- June 30th for our late September issue
- October 31st for our late December issue.

After you have sent us your submission, you will receive a confirmation of receipt, and our peer-reviewing team shall receive a blind copy for review. Ideally, it should take us no more than 2 weeks to review your submission, but – depending on the volume of submissions – this may take up to 1 month or more. You will have 1 more month to make the required changes. If your paper requires no changes at all, we shall add it to our database and it will be published in our next/one of our next issues.

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We accept papers between 1,500 and 7,000 words, longer book reviews and shotgun reviews (under 500 words) as well as relevant interviews. All submissions must be accompanied by a short bio (no more than 200 words; please do not attach CVs) and an abstract of the piece you are submitting (no more than 200 words). Alternately, you may wish to fill in the following submission form:

Name:

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Bio (no more than 200 words):

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