

# Politics and Poetics of Belonging



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Edited by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
<i>Mounir Guirat</i>	
<b>Part One: Politics and Poetics of Belonging in the Literary Text</b>	
Chapter One.....	10
Literary Space in American (Meta)Fiction and the Fictionalizing of (No)Belonging: <i>Pierre, or the Ambiguities</i> and <i>The Book of Daniel</i> <i>Salwa Karoui-Elounelli</i>	
Chapter Two.....	32
Shuttling between New Homes and Origins: The Diasporic Journey in Sara Suleri's <i>Meatless Days: A Memoir</i> and Bharati Mukherjee's <i>Jasmine</i> <i>Henda Ammar Guirat</i>	
Chapter Three.....	51
The Residual and the Emergent in Andrea Levy's Representation of the Diasporic Journey for Belonging in <i>Fruit of the Lemon</i> <i>Mounir Guirat</i>	
Chapter Four.....	67
Re-Collection: Montage of Self, Nation, and Text in Jhumpa Lahiri's <i>Interpreter of Maladies</i> <i>Hager Ben Driss</i>	
Chapter Five.....	85
White Creole Subjectivity, Migrant Status and the Aporia of Belonging in the Writings of Caribbean Women <i>Salwa Mezguidi Jday</i>	
Chapter Six.....	96
Once an Alien, Always an Alien?: Politics and Poetics of Belonging in <i>Le Morte d'Arthur</i> and <i>Othello</i> <i>Wajih Ayed</i>	

Chapter Seven.....	116
To Be Longing for Belonging: Robert Frost’s “The Self-Seeker” and the Quest for Belonging <i>Lamia Jaoua Sahnoun</i>	
<b>Part Two: Linguistic Practices and the Formation of Categories of Belonging</b>	
Chapter Eight.....	130
Bi-longing: Identity and the Language Learner <i>Chokri Smaoui</i>	
Chapter Nine.....	150
Language Competence “Desirable”: Insights into Changing Attitudes towards Language Competence as a Feature of Belonging in Georgia’s Greek Community <i>Concha Maria Höfler</i>	
Chapter Ten .....	169
Developing National and Intercultural Identities in Tunisian EFL Classes: A Study of English Textbooks, Teachers’ and Learners’ Attitudes <i>Nadia Abid</i>	
Chapter Eleven .....	197
Developing Relational Identity in Humor in Intercultural Communication: A Semantic-Pragmatic Approach <i>Asma Moalla</i>	
<b>Part Three: Cultural Conformity as a Belonging Strategy</b>	
Chapter Twelve .....	214
The Strategic Purpose of Belonging in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” Speech: An African American Conforming to Americanness <i>Sadok Damak</i>	
Contributors.....	238

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# INTRODUCTION

MOUNIR GUIRAT

Belonging is a cultural and ideological endeavour that is predicated on an ongoing dialogue between individual and community. It could be imposed or chosen, sought or rejected, denied or granted. It relates to how individuals try to integrate within communities and seek approval through negotiating the terms of communal consent and individual assimilation. As such, it is a site of conflicts and struggles between those who are empowered to set the terms and requirements of belonging to a given community and the individuals and groups whose sense of identity cannot be defined within the boundaries set by these requirements. When belonging is set within fixed geo-political boundaries, it conflates with the nationalistic discourses in which culture, tradition, and language function as centripetal, unifying forces that interpellate individuals and groups. Home, in this case, becomes semantically and ideologically interconnected with national identity and its strongest determinant; and belonging becomes synonymous with roots. But what about those who are forced outside of home or choose to immigrate and put down new roots somewhere else? What about individuals and groups who feel that they belong to several places and cultures simultaneously? This is the point where the homogeneous portrayal of home as a place of cultural purity no longer holds as belonging becomes a matter of fluid and multiple identity. It challenges the rigid and fixed boundaries of geo-political entities constructing spaces of hybridity.

In a globalised village of multicultural societies, belonging has also become nomadic, creating a new nexus of concepts: belonging is not only about the interdependence of “home” or “roots” and “identity” but also about the new “routes” that make “becoming” possible. Belonging, in this sense, is no longer about longing to be but rather about longing to become; it is not about a fixed sense of identity but about the multiple possibilities offered by a nomadic, provisional and shifting subjectivity. It is the site in which individual choices, preferences, ideas, and achievements seem to take precedence over one’s pride in a particular community.

Belonging in the postcolonial and postmodern time of multiculturalism has made possible evading the dictates of the dominant culture. The individual enjoys more freedom and capacity to speak for oneself and enrich the cultural context that hosts them through devising their own code of adaptation and their own idioms of self-expression. Russell Ferguson (1990) argues that “[a]s we enter language we must simultaneously negotiate the crude classifications which are imposed upon us and create our own identities out of the twisted skeins of our background, families and environments” (13). This foregrounding of negotiation and creation as solid strategies for constructing one’s identity testifies to the role of the other in “resisting dissolution into the dominant culture” (Ferguson 1990, 13). To belong, then, is to open up a space for one’s voice through interrogating established and biased cultural hierarchies, to prove one’s worth and feel valued and recognised in spite of one’s difference.

Belonging in our postmodern time is about the longing of the margins to be acknowledged, accepted, and valorised by the centre. For, it is an “omnipresent [. . .] invisible centre which claims universality without ever defining it, and which exiles to its margins those who cannot or will not pay allegiance to the standards which it sets or the limits which it imposes” (Ferguson 1990, 13). Belonging, here, is not necessarily about substituting the margin for the centre; neither does it forcefully entail a passive kind of assimilation. It is rather an endeavour to redefine the dominant culture, remap it, and push its boundaries further. It is in this context that Cornel West (1990) valorises the new possibilities the new cultural politics of difference could offer:

The time has come for critics and artists of the new cultural politics of difference to cast their nets widely, flex their muscles broadly and thereby refuse to limit their visions, analyses and praxis to their particular terrains. The aim is to dare to recast, redefine and revise the very notions of “modernity,” “mainstream,” “margins” “difference,” “otherness.” We have now reached a new stage in the perennial struggle for freedom and dignity. And while much of the First World intelligentsia adopts retrospective and conservative outlooks that defend the crisis-ridden present, we promote a prospective and prophetic vision with a sense of possibility and potential, especially for those who bear the social costs of the present. (36)

West foregrounds the innovative and creative contributions of participants in the new cultural politics of difference and gives significance to their redefinition of established and biased notions that have always cast the other in the role of the deficient, marginalised subject who needs the white man’s help. In recreating and revaluing experiences that have been silenced and distorted, these active participants could surmount their

feelings of self-hatred and self-abasement and prove their capacity for producing new cultural values that could change the conservative cultural mindset that blocks their full belonging to the culture of the dominant.

As an outcome of globalisation, the new cultural politics of difference, then, has created a fluid form of belonging that is the result of the rise and proliferation of diasporic communities as well as the blurring of the boundaries between what is local, national, and global. In the words of Malcolm Waters (1995), globalisation is the product of a “social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding” (3). Gradually liberated from discourses of fixed origins, they become motivated by “a homing desire which is not the same thing as desire for a ‘homeland’” (Brah 1996, 180). This distinction is important as it makes possible the collapse of the boundary between self and other, leaving them without fixed anchorage and facilitating their possible cooperation in the formation of new subjectivities.

The old boundary upon which the dichotomy of self and other is predicated starts to collapse as Roger Bromley (2000) argues: “[b]y going beyond the discourses of boundary it is possible to understand these ‘new hybrid identities and cultures’, which impact not only upon the diasporic but also upon the members of the ‘host’ society to such an extent that in time the notions of ‘diasporic’ and ‘host’ may be rendered existentially and analytically redundant” (9). Even though it is impossible to ignore the reappearance and resurgence of racial and cultural conflicts in the life of communities, it seems that the centre/margin relationship has been drastically transformed into new configurations that give value to the crucial and pivotal transnational cultural formations rather than the parochialism of a small community or a nation. Both centre and margin are now seen as interdependent and reciprocally involved in the reconsideration of the conventional meanings of belonging and identity dependent on linguistic, political, and cultural boundedness.

It is the protean and fluid meaning of belonging and identity in the postcolonial and postmodern time that informs the new orientations of communities in the twenty-first century as they try to find alternative routes to reposition themselves in the global context. However, even for those who have never left their homelands, redefining one’s cultural identity becomes a necessity and an inevitable outcome of a globalised world. Belonging inside the geographical boundaries of the nation-state no longer grants us immunity from external and transnational happenings, issues, and debates. In a world that is increasingly characterised by mobility, prevalence of information, and a worldwide exchange of goods

and services, our national consciousness gets challenged and we find ourselves part of a process of constructing global cultural principles. Therefore, developing a trans-national awareness becomes a predictable outcome of our involvement in this global process.

## The book

*Politics and Poetics of Belonging* studies different discourses that explore the notion of belonging as constructed by linguistic, social, political, and cultural paradigms. It seeks to offer a thorough exploration of how the concept of belonging has been defined, encoded, acted out, and de/constructed through literary, linguistic, and cultural texts across time and space in order to understand the way we are included or excluded, accepted or rejected, represented or misrepresented. The objective of this book is to bring together different perspectives that attend to the ways belonging is constructed, articulated, and redefined as an essential determinant of identity.

This book is made up of three parts and twelve chapters. Part I focuses on the literary text and the way politics and poetics of belonging are addressed through different theoretical perspectives. Chapter 1, entitled “Literary Space in American (Meta)Fiction & the Fictionalizing of (Non)Belonging: *Pierre* or *The Ambiguities* & *The Book of Daniel*,” authored by Salwa Karoui-Elounelli, explores “the tendency in the American self-conscious novel to fictionalize the problematical relationship between writer and narrative space through a careful investment of the overlapping between the thematics and the poetics of (non)belonging.” Karoui-Elounelli’s reading of Herman Melville’s *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* and E. L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* is informed by Maurice Blanchot’s concept of “literary space” as a construct predicated on the inevitable banishment or exile of the author. In chapter 2, entitled “Shuttling between New Homes and Origins: The Diasporic Journey in Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days: A Memoir* and Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*,” Henda Ammar Guirat addresses Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days: A Memoir* and Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* as two narratives that artistically reconfigure the diasporic journey in terms of an ebbing and flowing movement between two chronotopic zones. In doing so, they redefine the diasporic experience and subject as sites of continuous debate between two cultures rather than a journey away from one’s origin. Both novels, the author argues, enact and re-enact imaginative homecomings that allow the two protagonists to redefine the self as subject in a continuous search for new idioms of expression. As a result, they opt for

narrative structures and strategies that emulate the protagonists' shuttling between new homes and origins. In chapter 3, entitled "The Residual and the Emergent in Andrea Levy's Representation of the Diasporic Journey for Belonging in *Fruit of the Lemon*," Mounir Guirat uses Raymond Williams's notions of the "dominant," the "residual," and the "emergent" to discuss the issue of diasporic belonging in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*. He argues that Levy incorporates homeland or origin in the diasporic experience in a way that suggests its functioning as a residual part in the formation of the diasporic identity. It, therefore, opens a space for the production of an emergent hybrid culture that challenges homogenisation and constructs a new framework for understanding the relationship between the residual and the dominant. In chapter 4, entitled "Re-Collection: Montage of Self, Nation, and Text in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*," Hager Ben Driss deals with nine short stories that revolve around issues of belonging and identity formation. The author focuses on "re-collection as a two-fold act: assembling and remembrance," identifying characters caught between their belonging to their country of origin and their diasporic experience in the host land. In chapter 5, entitled "White Creole Subjectivity, Migrant Status and the Aporia of Belonging in the Writings of Caribbean Women," Salwa Mezguidi Jday selects Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* to discuss the problematic white creole heroines' search for belonging and the difficulty of establishing a pure and authentic cultural identity. In subverting fixed identity categorisations, both novelists, Mezguidi Jday argues, participate in the redefinition of identity in the light of the possibilities offered by a third or hybrid space that foregrounds the plural nature of belonging and that endorses the articulation of shifting diasporic subjectivities. In chapter 6 entitled "Once an Alien, Always an Alien?: Politics and Poetics of Belonging in *Le Morte d'Arthur* and *Othello*," Wajih Ayed questions the notion of belonging and triangulates its politics and poetics through the dialectics of desire and fantasy. Using a theoretical model conjoining insights from Lacanian psychoanalysis and the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, the author makes a comparative analysis of its poetics in Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* and William Shakespeare's *Othello*. He contends that, while the racialized alien in the late medieval chivalric romance, Sir Palomides the Saracen, identifies with signifiers of sameness and therefore achieves a measure of belonging, Othello the Moor, remains an alien in Venice. Ayed therefore concludes that the poetics of belonging is predicated on a cultural fantasy which can be traversed by laying bare its politics of misidentification. Lamia Jaoua, in chapter 7, entitled "To be Longing for Belonging: Robert Frost's "The

Self-Seeker” and the Quest for Belonging,” seeks to demystify the connections between the abundant negatives in Frost’s narrative poem and its politics and poetics of belonging. The first section of the chapter briefly introduces negation and emphasises the role it plays in narration. Framed by Hwang’s “The Functions of Negation in Narration” and Ding’s “Implied Negation in Discourse,” the next three sections read the main moments in “The Self-Seeker” and explain the ways negation, whether explicit or implicit, dramatizes the tension that accompanies not only the protagonist’s but also the poet’s strong sense of attachment to the by then fading New England idyllic pastoral world.

Part II of this book focuses on the role of linguistic practices in the formation of categories of belonging. In chapter 8, entitled “Bi-longing: Identity and the Language Learner,” Chokri Smaoui addresses belonging from the perspective of second language learning, and more specifically identity in the process of acquiring a subsequent language. Various perspectives are dealt with, starting with what he dubs the ‘traditional SLA perspective’ covering key notions such as the ‘affective filter’, ‘acculturation’ and ‘personal factors’. Other perspectives of identity in the SLA process, he argues, can include the bilingualism perspective, the social psychology perspective, the ELF perspective, the critical SLA perspective, and finally the digital age perspective. All these angles, it is suggested, can inform us about how the language learner conceives of his/her position vis-à-vis the new language and culture s/he is exposed to. Chapter 9, entitled “Language Competence “Desirable”—Insights into Changing Attitudes towards Language Competence as a Feature of Belonging in Georgia’s Greek Community,” authored by Concha Maria Höfler, looks into Georgia’s multilingual Greek community and studies the issue of belonging in relation to this community. Höfler mentions two opposite discursive perspectives: one that associates belonging with language competence and one that predicates belonging on religious and ancestral affiliations. Through 49 semi-structured interviews, she identifies a shift in attitude towards associating language competence in Standard Modern Greek (SMG) with belonging. Discussing the interviewees’ answers, she points out that the category “desirable” emerges as “an interactive middle ground that enables the mediation between the adherence to the “modern” ideal equating language with belonging and the actual linguistic practice and competence found in Georgia’s Greek community.” In chapter 10, entitled “Developing National and Intercultural Identities in Tunisian EFL Classes: A Study of English Textbooks, Teachers’ and Learners’ Attitudes,” Nadia Abid deals with the potential that the Tunisian EFL classes have for developing learners’

national and intercultural identity. By examining the Tunisian EFL textbooks' cultural content and tasks, teacher's practices in relation to language-and-culture teaching and learners' perception of their national and international/intercultural identities, the author concludes that the Tunisian EFL class has little potential for the development of a sense of belonging to their nation as well as to the international community, which might negatively affect learners' perception of themselves as members of both their nation and the world. In chapter 11, entitled "Developing Relational Identity in Humor in Intercultural Communication: A Semantic-Pragmatic Approach," Asma Moalla investigates the co-construction of conversational humor among speakers of British English and Tunisian learners of English. She gives a literal representation of the necessary conditions that an utterance must meet to be considered funny (semantic analysis) as well as the inferences one can draw to pass a judgment on the playfulness of an utterance (pragmatic analysis). She argues that humor is generated by simultaneously activating different compatible yet incongruous script oppositions. This incongruity in the production of humor has an influence on the social functions of humor. While a sequentially preferred response to humor results in a bonding and unifying relationship, a dispreferred response results in a disaligning and dividing relationship.

Part III deals with cultural conformity as a belonging strategy. Chapter 12, entitled "The Strategic Purpose of Belonging in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech: An African American Conforming to Americanness," authored by Sadok Damak, shows how cultural conformity could guarantee belonging. Damak assumes that ethnic adversity incites the people it targets to assume identification stances indicative of their belonging. He demonstrates how Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. settled the question of belonging to Americanness in a subtle manner in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, mainly by having recourse to cultural conformity as a strategy of identification.

The contributions gathered in this volume bear witness to the fact that belonging is a multi-faceted concept that necessitates different and shifting idioms of expression. It continually requires reconsideration and redefinition of our affiliations in response to the rapid social, cultural, and political changes of our world. The literary paradigms, linguistic practices, and cultural formations of belonging testify to the impossibility of confining it to conventional and established structures of knowledge. The different reflections on belonging introduced in this book are instrumental in reassessing and remodelling the general assumptions that have informed its definition and representation. The current global reality and the self-

other encounter make inevitable the continuous search for new forms of belonging that are in tune with one's evolving and changing sense of self. Theoretically informed by and substantially grounded in lively and heated debates on cultural identity and belonging, this book proposes new critical directions in understanding national and transnational belonging.

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**PART ONE:**

**POLITICS AND POETICS OF BELONGING  
IN THE LITERARY TEXT**

## CHAPTER ONE

# LITERARY SPACE IN AMERICAN (META)FICTION AND THE FICTIONALIZING OF (NO)BELONGING: *PIERRE, OR THE AMBIGUITIES* AND *THE BOOK OF DANIEL*

SALWA KAROUI-ELOUNELLI

“Art [...] describes the situation of one who has lost himself, who can no longer say “me,” who in the same movement has lost the world, the truth of the world, and belongs to exile”

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* 74

Art is the enactment of one’s belonging to exile! This kind of critical outlook has occasionally been explored and discussed in the light of Blanchot’s seminal work on the nature and implications of the space(s) that literature creates. One of such discussions links the investment of the notion of “literary space” to the importance of distinguishing the approach to the poetics of literariness from the sociological notion of “field”, and so to signal the tendency of literariness to resist (its) dissolution in social fields and issues (Garnier and Zoberman 2006, 6). If literary space is conceptually dependent on the notion of limits and engages a rethinking of the network of relations that connects it to other discursive spaces (Garnier and Zoberman, 9), then the space of narrative literature is more than likely to engage the questioning of the terms or modes of (non)belonging through its rethinking of the relations connecting it to other representational spaces, namely the topographical space. This is often achieved by problematizing the location of a character’s or an action’s meaningfulness, especially in narratives that maintain a tension between the represented spaces (the topographical setting) and the constructed narrative space, or a competition between opposed representational spaces.

Thus, when James's narrator in *The Portrait of a Lady* suggests that Isabel Archer fits in the art gallery she is discovering in the Touchetts' house and that she could be another painting among the pictorial works she gazes at, he emphatically unveils an already existing ironic tension between the belonging of literary characters to the invented space of fictionality (Isabel as a verbal painting) and a dimension of belonging that depends on the reader's 'suspension of disbelief' (Isabel as an American rising woman whose life is ruined by the European experience). Actually, in the literary texts that thematize their own processes, the formal and aesthetic issues related to writing and to literariness, the plurality of competing levels of meaningfulness is often shrouded in the disruptive overlapping of a thematized (inter)textual space with a mimetic one. In such texts, metafictional or metapoetic as they are, the terms of the controversial issue of belonging and exile are more significantly articulated at the level of the narrative's poetics than that of its thematics. In other words, it is in the questioning of literary representation, or of the relation between writing, or the emerging literary space, on the one hand, and authorial voice or authorial presence (especially when such voice or presence is itself fictionalized) on the other, that the self-conscious literary text invests and questions the poetics of (non)belonging.

This chapter aims to explore the tendency in the American self-conscious novel to fictionalize the problematical relationship between writer and narrative space through a careful investment of the overlapping between the thematics and the poetics of (non)belonging. In the two selected novels, Herman Melville's *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* and E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, the question of the author's (non)belonging to the space of literature (to the narrative space that his writing produces) is fictionalized through the creation of the author's double and explored through the highly ironic terms in which the thematics of familial and national belonging are revisited. In the two self-reflexive narratives, the fictionalized figure of the artist or writer does not experience the space of literary creativity as a substitute to the cultural spaces of familial or national belonging, nor as a sublimation of a spiritual or ideological exile. In *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* and *The Book of Daniel*, the figure of the emerging writer and his struggle with the act of writing are grounded in the unsolved tension between the imaginative world of (his) art (abstract and aleatory) and the given social, cultural world in which he is expected to ground a basic sense of being and belonging. What is at stake is not only the claim of authorial control over the act of writing (an easily recognized theme in metafictional narratives in general); it is also the writer's very belonging to (or banishment from) that literary space and the

extent to which such (non)belonging relates to his worrying about his sense of selfhood. In both narratives, Melville's and Doctorow's, the unceasing questioning of the writer's relation to the literary space created in the process of writing is similarly raised from an angle that problematizes the relationship binding the writer's surrogate (Pierre and Daniel) to the family institution and to the nationalist ideology. The writer's surrogate's ambiguous relationship to the family and/or the nation does not allow the literary space to emerge as a refuge or as a realm of satisfactory sense of belonging, it rather contributes to his painful disillusionment about the discursive and uncontrollable core of those non-literary institutions; it is a discursivity that, like the uncontrollable specters haunting the space of writing, can only induce a radical uncertainty in the authorial figure's sense of belonging, and ultimately in his sense of being.

### **Literary space and the concept of homelessness in theories of the novel**

Maurice Blanchot assimilated the creation of the literary space to the writer's movement towards his/her exile (his/her exile from the very work that his writing creates). His description did not merely announce the death or disappearance of the author; it rather announced the highly polemical terms that relate the writer to the constructed space. "Writing", says Blanchot, "begins only when it is the approach to that point where nothing reveals itself" (1982, 47); if the space of literature is one from which the writer is exiled, "to write is to find this point "at which here coincides to nowhere" (1982, 49).

This conception of literary writing as the creation of the writer's own movement towards his exile, the creation of his non-belonging, is given a forceful turn in the theorizing of the novel formulated by Lukàcs and Bakhtin, as they use the trope of homelessness in their respective theoretical descriptions of the novel's generic identity. In Lukàcs's melancholy thesis<sup>1</sup>, the form of the novel is "an expression of transcendental homelessness" (1963, 35). The condition of the novel, according to Lukàcs, is informed by a double banishment: from a transcendental *Heimat* (home) and from ancient Greece where the transcendental became immanent in social formations. Bakhtin's rethinking of the novel's generic identity led him to a similar assertion,

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<sup>1</sup> See John Neubauer's analysis in "Bakhtin versus Lukàcs: Inscriptions of Homelessness in Theories of the novel," *Poetics Today* 17. 4 (Winter 1996), 533 and 540.

though he locates that condition of homelessness in the very (presumed) “verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world” from which the novel begins. That is, the novel begins, according to Bakhtin, by presuming “a certain linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness” (1981, 367). What is qualified by Bakhtin as the “linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness” is generated by heteroglossia: the plurality of voices and discourses in the novel, which confers upon its writer a sort of “otherness” (a variation on the very “otherness” of any world- “l’autre de tout monde” (Blanchot, 89) which is the only affirmation, according to Blanchot, that art is capable of.

In the experimental metafictional novel, this condition of homelessness or non-belonging is often unveiled through a pattern of relations in which the struggle of the writer’s surrogate for meaningfulness induces the perversion of his cultural or familial belonging. Such perversion manifests itself mainly in some kind of radical uncertainty that marks the ‘fictional’ writer’s attempts at self-expression, or his/her claim of self-knowledge through the identification of his relationship to his environment. As the narrative assumes the inter-textual nature of its literary space, as well as its competition with other representational spaces, the fictionalized writer in the experimental novel sees his evolution, not as one towards a full sense of being and belonging, but as an irrevocable process of disappearance; his banishment becomes the very condition of the text’s literariness.

### ***Pierre or the Ambiguities: From a thematic of homelessness to an aesthetics of non-belonging***

Herman Melville’s *Pierre or the Ambiguities*, a novel that has recently been re-discovered in the light of modern and poststructuralist theories of writing and authorship, develops a highly challenging image of the figure of the writer within a narrative mode that is marked by the tone of derision. While the novel’s connection to the novelistic traditions of domestic realism and of the Gothic romance has often been specified in terms of parody, of ironic repetition (Silverman 348-9; Crimmins 440; Bercovitch, 252), its deliberate pondering on the metafictional themes of writing, verbal and pictorial representation, and creativity has occasionally been assimilated to Melville’s growing uncertainty about language (Baym 915 ), or also to his concern with American literary nationalism (Miles 158). In my reading, *Pierre* articulates its themes of national and familial belonging within a sustained degree of literary self-reflexivity that constantly frames *and* subverts the thematic of filial and national belonging. Such subversion is carefully grafted upon the consistent

thematization of literariness or literary space. As the metafictional themes of writing and artistic representation become more and more prominent, Pierre's belonging to family and nation becomes increasingly meaningless: thematizing the literary ends up usurping the writer figure's (Pierre's) place in the narrative. The emerging literary space generated by the self-reflexive dimension of Melville's narrative (a literary space that is the narrative's form but also its theme) gradually inscribes Pierre's "otherness". Melville's subversive appropriation of the literary tradition of the domestic sentimental novel is the strategy through which Pierre's otherness or non-belonging is inscribed, and, in turn, Pierre's non-belonging frames the narrative's thematizing of its own aesthetic construct, of its own literary space.

The thematics of national and familial belonging frame much of the perverse form that is conferred upon the tradition of the sentimental and domestic novel in Melville's narrative. Those themes are central in the ironic undermining of the traditional novelistic paradigms adopted in the narrative. They are, in turn, subverted by the metafictional issue of literary and artistic representation. The metafictional theme is mainly developed through two devices: the motif of competition between verbal and pictorial representation, and the theme of writing which is assigned a particular significance in the plotline.

The thematic significance of Pierre's familial relationships has often been discussed by Melville's critics through a particular focus on the motif of incest. Gillian Silverman (2002, 353-55) has examined Pierre's "incestuous activity" as implying a satiric message that targets the Victorian image of marriage as a variation on the ideal unity experienced among siblings. By "literalizing" the Victorian ideal of social cohesion, *Pierre* sustains its ironic perversion of the Victorian novel of domestic realism. And yet, what is equally significant is that Pierre's play with incest is a *linguistic* game that begins with the re-invention of the terms he and his mother would use to address each other: "[i]n the playfulness of their unclouded love [...] they were wont to *call* each other brother and sister. Both in public and in private this was their usage" (5, emphasis added)). Calling the mother sister, then the sister (Isabel) wife, and the wife (Lucy) sister, Pierre indulges, thus, in the game of subverting the normative role of linguistic representation<sup>2</sup>. It is a game that seems to reinvent the terms of his belonging to the Glendinning family (especially

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<sup>2</sup> Lee E. Heller developed a psychoanalytic (Lacanian) reading of this game, see his "The Stranger in the Mirror: Incest, Text, and the Making of Meaning", p. 391 and 392. He also links the psychoanalytic significance of the mirror and image motifs to the issue of representation (396).

that Pierre himself claims to be in full mastery of this playfulness), but part of the narrative's irony emanates from the fact that this game does not allow him to take the representational role of language out of the existing cultural and moral categories: Pierre's invention is entrapped in an already existing system of signification from the perspective of which his subversive game is called incest.

The thematizing of literary and artistic representation constantly undermines the theme of familial belonging as the narrative focus repeatedly shifts from the family saga in which Melville's protagonist evolves to the "story" of the various representational moves or tools within which Pierre and also other members of his family attempt to construct the value or meaningfulness of the family saga. Those representational moves and the consequent thematization of representation *per se* are foregrounded in two major motifs: painting and pictorial representation, on the one hand, and letter writing and (by extension) verbal representation, on the other.

The painterly motif intrudes in the narrative through the particular significance assigned to the two oil portraits of Pierre's father. The narrative potential of the two portraits is repeatedly stressed by the heterodiegetic narrator who insists that together, the two portraits stand as a visual narrative of the father's youth and adulthood (73). Consequently, a competition is suggested to exist between verbal and pictorial storytelling as the portraits are seen to incarnate a condensed biographical narrative, especially that the characters and the narrator equally agree on interpreting the portraits from the angle of their *narrative* potential, even if their interpretations diverge. Indeed, the narrator's description of the father's portraits as components of the same narrative (73) stands in sharp contrast to their interpretation in the fictional world. Pierre sees them as incomplete fragments of the father's story (83), while his mother perceives them as antithetical versions of that story: a shameful version is associated with the portrait that she keeps hidden in the closet, and a respectful one (the "chair portrait") is displayed in the drawing room (72). Thus, and as the characters acknowledge the narrative nature of the portraits, their interpretations sustain the competition between the verbal and pictorial media of storytelling. But this is soon eclipsed by another kind of competition, the one between two stories: the family's and the painting's. Indeed, the story of the painting's creation (and even of its offering to Pierre by Aunt Dorothea (74)) soon usurps the narrative space so far devoted to the family's past. The painting's story is even further complicated by the fact that it involves a hypothetical artist (the "spiritual artist" imagined by the narrator, (72)) and an actual one (Ralph, the

cousin). The painting's story is also one in which representation is assimilated to voyeurism: Ralph was "stealing the father's portrait" (77); he pretended to be painting something else while urging Pierre's father to carry on the narration of his story with the immigrants. The painting's story ends (or seems to) with the scene of Pierre throwing it in the burning flames and painfully undergoing the father's (imagined) gaze (198).

Thus, as the story of the painting usurps the narrative space of the family saga, the theme of representation gains prominence. An ironic tension is also sustained between Pierre's interpretation of the painting's story and its aesthetic effect: Pierre approaches the painting as a *device*, a tool that is likely to offer him meaningful revelations about the family's secrets and so to help him develop an accurate conception of the terms of his belonging to the Glendenning family. At the level of the narrative space, however, the painting's story repeatedly induces a suspension of Pierre's story (it suspends even his attempt at reinventing it). At stake is the usurped narrative space, that is its thematic and generic features. The peak of the irony is that Pierre's own preoccupation with the family story is often expressed in pictorial terms: his continuous obsession with a *face* - before and after he discovers Isabel's existence- is a visual (not verbal) condensation of this obsession which is not soothed after the temporary resolution he reaches when he comes to assimilate it to the face of Isabel herself. In fact, Pierre's imagination contributes to the survival of the visual motif of the face until the scene in which he throws the father's portrait in the fire: Pierre "sees" the father's face staring at him from the midst of the flames. As it survives the portrait itself, the face is definitively assimilated to a purely<sup>2</sup> imaginative, aesthetic arena: it continues to usurp the narrative space in a way that problematizes Pierre's familial belonging. In other words, the father's face and gaze (the now purely imaginative motifs) confer upon Pierre an otherness that informs his sense of familial identity with a radical uncertainty. In his psychoanalytic reading of Pierre's anxiety about familial identity as expressive of an anxiety about the possibilities of meaning, Lee E. Heller (1989. 390) points to the parallel development in Melville's novel of the issue of genealogical belonging and that of competition between visual and verbal representation: "The tension over genealogical repetition and identity has its aesthetic counterpart in anxieties about image and narrative".

The novel's repeated foregrounding of the theme of writing contributes to a similar problematization of Pierre's sense of familial belonging. Writing is mainly thematized through the exchange of letters between Pierre and other family members. While Isabel's letter is often suggested to be a turning point ("Pierre's great life-revolution, the receipt of Isabel's

letter" (225))<sup>3</sup> in Pierre's attempted construction of a selfhood through the pursuit of a sense of familial belonging, Isabel's oral storytelling (which comes as an extension of letter writing) soon becomes, for Pierre, an object of interest in its own right. What Pierre perceives as "simplicity" and fluidity in Isabel's tone of storytelling (137-8) announces another kind of competition over the narrative space: it is the competition between the written and the oral constructs. Pierre comes to see Isabel herself as an "airy" and fluid entity (151), similar to a musical note. Actually, musical composition itself is evoked by the characters as another competitor to verbal narrativity and storytelling; Isabel attributes this role to the guitar, emphasized in her storytelling as a key element to the meaningfulness of her narration: "the guitar shall sing to thee the sequel of my story" (126). Once more, the means of representation (the competition, this time, between the verbal-written medium and the audible-aural one) overwhelms the narrative space, so much so that it becomes its own content.

Pierre's epistolary exchange with his cousin Glen Stanley is reported by the narrator immediately before the protagonist's movement to the city as part of the preliminary preparations for that tremendous change in Pierre's life. It is significant that the texts of the letters are excluded from the narrative space; what we have access to, instead, is the narrator's selective and interpretive report on them. Consequently, Pierre's own writing creates the context of his very banishment from the narrative space: the narrator's selective report (in the free indirect style) and his interpretation of the letters- being the only 'version' of the epistolary exchange to which we have access- undermine Pierre's authorial voice by usurping its narrative space. The motif of writing ironically sustains the paradoxical status of Pierre's authorial role. This ironic undermining of Pierre's authorial self is reinforced by the implications attributed to the "Terror stone" that Pierre discovered and "fancifully christened" as "Memnon stone" (132-35). The initials engraved on the stone and that "seemed to point to some period before the era of Columbus's discovery of the hemisphere" (133) announce Pierre's gradual banishment from the very narrative space that moves towards the announcement of his emergence as author, at the same time as they ironically challenge the possibility of a literary national identity in the emerging American literary

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<sup>3</sup> As Pierre is about to change completely the course of his life, the narrator sums up the whole first part of the narrative by insisting on the decisive impact that Isabel's letter had on the character: "commanding Pierre to fly to her, and do his highest and most glorious duty in the world [...] that duty consist[ed] in stubbornly flying in the marble face of the Past" (174).

scene. The engraving denies Pierre his pursuit of ‘originality’ (that is, the possibility of his being the origin of the constructed space of writing) in the same way it undermines the myth of the “*New World*” in which American nationalism would be grounded.

Pierre’s national belonging is another thematic axis the intrusion of the metafictional issues (that of authorship and of genre) increasingly problematizes. Robert Miles developed an approach to Melville’s novel as the expression of the romantic (transcendentalist) pursuit of literary nationalism (199; 158-9), while William Spanos (2008, 9; 20) stressed the constant questioning of national identity in Melville’s fiction of the 1850s as a whole and its skeptical attitude towards the ideology of American exceptionalism. The abortive nature of Pierre’s pursuit does not only manifest itself in the Gothic turn that the narrative assumes in its last chapters (in particular with the murder of Pierre’s cousin Glen)<sup>4</sup> but equally in the numerous literary and mythological allusions through which both the narrator and the protagonist (that is Pierre himself) interpret Melville’s artist figure. The numerous allusions to Shakespearean and mythological figures- when Pierre sees himself as a *repetition* of Hamlet (109-10), of the Biblical son of Hager, or of the Promethean figure (107), or when his writings are said to duplicate the tradition of love-sonnet (245)- can only undermine the championed literary nationalism that Melville’s protagonist incarnates.

The protagonist’s association with literary nationalism is paradoxically emphasized and undermined (as literary nationalism itself becomes the target of the novel’s satire) through the absurd gratuitousness that informs Pierre’s emerging public image as a successful author. Much of the narrative space is devoted to readers’ and publishers’ reaction to Pierre’s success (245-6), not to Pierre’s own literary production: Pierre’s writings, described by the narrator as “gemmed little sketches of thought and fancy, whether in poetry or prose” (245), become the ironic double of the spectral face in the novel’s first part. Shrouded in the ambiguous borderline between visibility and invisibility (absence and presence), Pierre’s writing(s) inscribe, thanks to their very absence from Melville’s narrative space, the character’s own ambiguous sense of homeliness and

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Miles interprets Pierre as the incarnation of a romantic pursuit of literary nationalism, a pursuit that is ironically defeated by the Gothic elements in the novel’s last pages (especially the motif of murder), and that re-inscribe Melville’s novel in the Euro-American tradition of Gothicism (“Tranced Grievs: Melville’s *Pierre* and the origins of the Gothic,” 158-9)

estrangement<sup>5</sup>. With Pierre's book project, the ironic paradox reaches its peak.

First, the book project comes as a reaction to the offer made by commercial professionals in the book industry; the letter sent to Pierre by tailors who had recently been converted into the publication trade (with the constant confusion in it of the two registers of paper and cloth (247)). The irony consequently gives in to comic derision. Moreover, the book project is supposedly carried on simultaneously as the protagonist engages in "plotting" against his domestic environment (Lucy, Glen, and Fredric): we do not have access to the literary plot that Pierre's book is likely to contain (even though the narrator unveils Pierre's tendency to plagiarize his own life experience (302)). What the reader has access to is rather his vicious "plotting" (337-8) against Lucy and Glen. The authorial figure falls short of "emplotment" and gets entrapped in plotting; such 'sliding' announces a conflation of the absent literary space that Pierre's creativity is said to have produced, with the disappearing authorial figure. The novel's irony is largely induced by the paradox that Pierre's union with his 'work' becomes possible only in the radical negativity of absence.

The allegorical significance assigned to the domestic and cultural spaces is quite vital in the narrative's foregrounding of Pierre's incarnation of literary nationalism. The intrinsic link created between the emergence of Pierre's authorial image and his movement from the rural area of Saddle Meadows to New York City is highly symbolic of the formation of the American literary scene in an age of a growing urbanization. From this perspective, Melville's satirization of American literary nationalism is thematically connected to the novel's problematization of Pierre's belonging to both rural and urban America.

Part of the irony generated from Pierre's incarnation of the myth of agrarian America emanates from the fact that Melville's protagonist is often depicted as *crossing* the extended landscapes of Saddle Meadows (in opposition to an initial description of him as "planted" by Nature in the countryside (13)): the idyllic landscapes of agrarian America are hardly experienced by Pierre as spaces of belonging. In addition, the extravagance of the rhetorical and stylistic excesses that mark the

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<sup>5</sup> Like the specter of the mysterious face that obsesses Pierre in the narrative's first part, and that "accosted him in a very common and homely scene" while inducing in him a puzzling sense of estrangement (43), his writings do not only haunt the narrative space without ever becoming part of it, but they also sustain his alienation, his failure to develop a self-image that would correspond to his reputation: for instance, he wonders why, the presence of the classics, should his work be solicited by editors (251).

description of Pierre's life in Saddle Meadows is hardly compatible with the recurrent images of stone and wall (which are, throughout the narrative, connotative of both decay and entrapment): the pseudo-mythic image of Pierre and Lucy riding across the idyllic space of agrarian America is a striking illustration:

Soon the swift horses drew this fair god and goddess nigh the wooded hills, whose distant blue, now changed into a variously-shaded green, stood before them like old *Babylonian walls*, overgrown with verdure; while here and there, at regular intervals, the scattered peaks seemed mural towers; and the clumped pines surmounting them, as lofty archers, and vast, out-looking watchers of the glorious Babylonian City of the Day. Catching that hilly air, the prancing horses neighed; laughed on the ground with gleeful feet. Felt they the gay delightsome spurrings of the day; for the day was mad with excessive joy; and high in heaven you heard the neighing of the horses of the sun; and down dropt their nostrils' froth in many a fleecy vapor from the hills. (66)

As Pierre also perceives the idealized rural and domestic space through the lenses of Flaxman's visual illustrations of Dante's hell in the *Divine Comedy*, the incongruity of his perception sustains the narrative's ironic undermining of the myth of agrarian America and of Pierre's sense of his belonging to it<sup>6</sup>:

That blessed sereneness which lurks ever at the heart of sadness [...] that sweet feeling is now mine, and cheaply mine [...] I feel so blessed now. Dearest Lucy!--well, well;--'twill be a pretty time we'll have this evening; there's the book of Flemish prints--that first we must look over; then, second, is Flaxman's Homer--clear-cut outlines, yet full of unadorned barbaric nobleness. Then Flaxman's Dante;--Dante! Night's and Hell's poet he. No, we will not open Dante. (78)

It is significant that a similar derisive tone informs Pierre's urban experience in which his movement to the city is strongly assimilated to the promise of his emergence as a figure of national American literature. Pierre's dwelling place in the city, the "Church of the Apostles" is suggested to be a spatial allegory of the young American nation, or at least of the literary scene in New England<sup>7</sup>, with the spectral frame of

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre repeatedly develops a self-image built around a confused identification with Dante's inferno (85)

<sup>7</sup> The narrator's detailed account of the Church's history and of the recent reinvestment of its space for secular activities, as it came to be stratified into sections associated with distinct professional activities (lawyers and artists),

Puritanical culture (like the decaying architecture of the ancient Church of the Apostles) haunting the rising literary nationalism. Once Pierre takes lodging in that spectral space, we see him still dreaming of another tower (similar to the Babylonian tower and the mural towers that emerge as a result of optical illusion in Saddle Meadows, and distinct from the tower-like top floor in the Church where he now lives):

There, then, on the third night, at twilight, by the lofty window of that beggarly room, sat Pierre in the rear building of the Apostles'. He is gazing out from the window now. But except the donjon form of the old gray tower, seemingly there is nothing to see but a wilderness of tiles, [...] the desolate hanging wildernesses of tiles, slate, shingles and tin, wherewith we modern Babylonians replace the fair hanging-gardens of the fine old Asiatic times when the excellent Nebuchadnezzar was king. (270)

The narrator's use of "we modern Babylonians" does not only situate Pierre's contemplation or longing in a collective, national project ("juvenile American literature"), but it also grounds it in a mood of derision, suggestive of an obsolete analogy between the mythic hanging gardens of the mythic Babylon and the project of literary nationalism incarnated by Pierre: the American national project (with its spatial counterpart displayed by the modern, vertical, urban architecture) stands as a grotesque distortion of both the ancient biblical myth, and of the national myth of the wilderness as well. The deep melancholy and sense of estrangement that Pierre experiences in the Apostles is thus largely induced by the failure of the urban space (the allegorical incarnation of an emerging literary nationalism) to embrace a mythic ideal of human creativity and defiance:

From the lofty window of that beggarly room, what is it that Pierre is so intently eying? There is no street at his feet; like a profound black gulf the open area of the quadrangle gapes beneath him. But across it, and at the further end of the steep roof of the ancient church, there looms the gray and grand old tower; emblem to Pierre of an unshakable fortitude, which, deep-rooted in the heart of the earth, defied all the howls of the air. (271)

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emphatically highlights its allegorical significance. "Such, then, was the present condition of the ancient Church of the Apostles; buzzing with a few lingering, equivocal lawyers in the basement, and populous with all sorts of poets, painters, paupers and philosophers above. A mysterious professor of the flute was perched in one of the upper stories of the tower" (269-70).

Thus, what is questioned through Pierre's urban and creative experience is not so much his sense of national belonging as it is the very *possibility* of literary nationalism that he incarnates. The novel's literary space is built around (and at the expense of) Pierre's own banishment: the reader is denied access to the protagonist's creative writing and to the achievements of literary nationalism that his experience stands for. Melville's novel builds its literary space around the banishment of its very thematic center (the emergence of the young American writer), as if the narrative's core were the competition between the space that emerges from Melville's narrative and the one that is expected to emerge from Pierre's creative writing. Melville's novel, as a pre-modern instance of literary self-reflexivity, illustrates, thus, the experimental writer's tendency to acknowledge *and* challenge the inevitable death or disappearance of his authorial image in the very literary space that his creativity generates. By duplicating the authorial figure (not only Pierre but even the narrator claims to be a 'free' author (244)) and advocating a plurality of creative spaces (verbal and pictorial), Melville's text announces the major strategy of postmodern metafiction: seeking in self-irony an ultimate literary expression of authorial resistance to (or acceptance of) his irrevocable banishment from (his?) literary space.

### **Uncertain Americanness, tragic Jewishness and the impossible historical truth in E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel***

In Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, the writer's surrogate (Daniel Isaacson, or Daniel Lewin) has also to emerge from an intricate network of family and cultural relations in his pursuit of the truth about his parents' guilt (or innocence). Daniel's quest, which is to be recorded in his book project (his doctoral dissertation), is intrinsically related to a rethinking of his Americanness and his Jewishness. The plurality of novelistic forms in Doctorow's narrative (historical novel/bildungsroman/political novel/detective novel) sustains a substantial questioning of the possibility of historical truth: it is upon the outcome of such questioning that Daniel's sense of (non)belonging depends. In addition, the play of intertextuality in the novel frames the unfolding of highly uncertain connections between Daniel, on the one hand, the family unit, his Jewishness and his Americanness, on the other. Doctorow's novel, as an instance of what Linda Hutcheon (1988, 105-123) describes as "historiographic metafiction", displays the experimental writer's rethinking of the connection between the novel's literary self-reflexivity and its concern with cultural thematics. E.L.