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It is with the Romantics that the child is reappraised and considered not only as a person in progress, still incomplete or even imperfect, but also as a highly interesting individual. Since then, children have figured prominently in literature as main characters, protagonists, or even as the main recipients of the literary production, giving rise to what we call children's literature, one of the most productive literary fields in the last century.

Although the title of the volume reviewed here seems to circumscribe the subject matter to childhood, the fact is that the frontier between the different stages in life is fuzzy and articles also delve into experiences of adolescence; therefore we conclude that the concept of "child" has to be understood here in opposition to a generic "adult", encompassing longer periods of time.

This volume edited by Rocío G. Davis and Rosalía Baena contains the contributions presented at the II Conference on English and American Studies at the University of Navarre and is remarkable for the coherence of the whole project, sometimes absent from collections of essays. The introduction, fifteen articles, and a final interview address among other issues, basic preoccupations in cultural studies, literary theory and criticism, postcolonialism and contemporary literature written in English.

Some of the contributions deal with the quest for self-knowledge; at times this search is conveyed in artistic terms by means of the *Bildungsroman*, when the child or adolescent achieves self-awareness and somehow foresees his artistic vocation. This process is illustrated by an incident whose protagonist is a very young Jean Paul Sartre who boards a train without either a ticket or money and spins a yarn to entertain the ticket collector and elude his responsibilities. As Paul John Eakin states, Sartre, a child of seven, starts to consider literature as an absolute in order to justify his existence (1985: 26).

Our present age is particularly keen on narratives about self-knowledge, both fictional and non-fictional. In fact, the many crises that took place during the 20th century, namely the two World Wars, the process of decolonization and the fall of the Berlin Wall have all favoured a move towards introspection. The literary

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territories covered in this volume, especially the postcolonial nations, belong to this category, due to the effect of general historic events and to the specific circumstances surrounding the building and demise of the Empires. In some cases, the process can be considered to have run smoothly (the status of Dominion still prevalent in countries as Canada is only an example) but in other cases the transition to independence involved varying degrees of violence. Frantz Fanon explains how colonialism ended up undermining the sense of personal identity "Because it is the systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I?'" (1963: 250). This is one of the reasons why the interrupted history of colonialism and the rise of new nations has run parallel to a personal quest for identity. As Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia point out in a recent work on Edward Said, cultural identity is a political construction; only through the appropriation of dominant forms can the assertion of identity be accepted and the postcolonial voice eventually heard (1999: 12-13).

The reading of the different pieces in the volume is cumulative; this makes the division into four sections only one of the alternatives to structuring the contents; the fact is that very often thematic lines cut across such headings. Although the first part is devoted to postcolonial writing, we soon realise that in the following two sections, devoted to autobiography and multicultural writing, the main issues in the postcolonial agenda also figure prominently. In this sense, a number of articles stress the importance for the postcolonial writer to dive into past experiences in order to forge a new self. Jagna Oltarzewska writes about this model in Atwood's *Cats Eye*. In an analysis of the same novel, Danielle Schaub says that "[o]nly by recapturing the past and actively counteracting its effects by neutralising them through some form of philosophical initiation can she [the protagonist] fully accept herself and live free of past behavioural constraints" (37). A similar exploration of the past is undergone when R.K. Krishnan writes that Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* engages in a dialectic of family, class, gender and politics through delineating the effects of history. Ana Moya, also devotes her article to *The God of Small Things* and accounts for the importance of the past by quoting Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin: "the problem of history is particularly crucial for the postcolonial writer, above all because historical narrativity structures the forms of reality itself" (356).

In "Daughters of the House: The Adolescent Girl and the Postcolonial Nation" Elleke Boehmer confirms previous assertions of postcolonial and feminist criticism about the subaltern condition of colonised women, extending this condition to the female child both in early postcolonial, nationalist fiction and in later writers such as Achebe, La Guma, Thiong'o, Soyinka or Rushdie. Even when the young woman should have benefited from the convenience of a new citizenship, the fact is that this freedom simultaneously entails the ascription of different gendered symbolic roles to men and women. Thus, Boehmer wonders: "Where the son in relation to the dominant father and the emblematic mother, is the normative national child and new postcolonial citizen, in what ways are daughters to articulate national selfhood?"

(62). Boehmer is obviously asking a question that has long been answered, among others, by Jamaica Kincaid, Margaret Atwood, or Margaret Laurence. In their works conflict with parents (mainly mothers) features prominently; to some the frequent arguments within the family are merely a reflection of the political fracture of independence and the severing of links with the metropolis.

Rosalía Baena is very illustrative when relating the increasing importance of childhood as subject matter in Western Literature to a similar process in postcolonial writing. Quoting Richard Coe (the author of a deep comparative study on European, American and Australian autobiographies centered on children), she will make it clear that postcolonial texts have some specific traits which she analyses in J. M. Coetzee's Bildungsroman *Boyhood*. Her view that "[o]ne way of revisiting that historical past is through life writing ... the autobiographical exercise offers an interesting ground wherein facts intersect with fiction" (123) is also explored by other contributors, such as Janice Burrow in her essay on children's novels. Isabel Durán also quotes Richard Coe, to study the cases of Jewish American Alfred Kazin and Chicano Richard Rodríguez and concludes that, unlike what happens to characters in several canonical works analysed by Coe, bicultural or hyphenated individuals tend to search into their past experiences in childhood in a quest to fill the vacuum of their suppressed cultural roots.

The volume includes other interesting contributions which, focused on different contemporary literary works, explore unconventional ways to portray or address children. Morag Styles discusses how the representation of children has been idealized since Romanticism (with some remarkable exceptions she notes: Blake, Christina Rossetti or R.L. Stevenson), following a common pattern which includes the writer's longing for his or her mythical past. Styles argues that contemporary British poetry has not only broadened its social, racial and gender scope but has also shifted towards a new tone that deconstructs previous assumptions of literature as a pedagogical, instructive and serious activity, giving rise to forms such as "urchin verse". Likewise, landscape descriptions move from previously dominant rural settings to corrupting and troubling citiscapes.

Connected to these ideas is Laura Tosi's article on Roald Dahl; she concludes that children's cultural discourse is valorized in Dahl's fiction, although some may read him as subversive or even offensive, as he portrays the adult world full of hypocrisy and dubious morality. Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz provides us with further examples of how time has changed the perception and portrayal of childhood. He describes how ethnic-minority authors "air more naturally and freely their angst for the future" (143) giving rise to what he calls narratives of suspended socialization where the characters face the hard environments of ghettos, reservations or barrios in the United States. W.H. New connects the departure from idealism in the representation of children in literature to the socio-political circumstances in postcolonial nations: "It also makes sense —realizing that postcolonial texts characteristically dismiss rather than accept the colonial convention of being the 'daughter-nation' of a great and glorious motherland— to read childhood in these

fictions not as an innocent and unmarked utopia but as a site of turmoil and vexed heritage" (25).

One of the most suggestive articles, by John Stotesbury, deals with autobiographical accounts by visually handicapped writers, focusing on the production by the Finnish American Stephen Kuusisto and Indian Ved Mehta. The discussion includes references to sighted figures such as H.G. Wells and his short story "The Country of the Blind" and Tony Blair's blind minister, David Blunkett, whose memoirs are obviously tinged with the activity which has given him more notoriety: politics.

In the interview that aptly puts an end to this collection of papers, Rocío G. Davis interviews Paul Yee, a Canadian writer of Chinese ancestry whose personal circumstances make him and his work representative of many of the aspects discussed above. Yee stresses the importance of writing for some individuals and communities, such as the Chinese-Canadian one he belongs to: "The effect of not knowing our own history was that we were spiritually bankrupt: ... telling our own stories, in whatever medium, would be our expression of who we had become as a community" (202). Yee represents the circumstances of the postcolonial writers in many ways. We should bear in mind that some of the best known are also hyphenated individuals, since they share roots, nationalities, languages and other relevant features of their personalities and careers. Yee resembles the condition of other contemporary writers in English just as many of those mentioned in the articles by Durán, Otano, Ibarrola or Condé. Some of them come from postcolonial backgrounds but the fact is, as we have already stated, that the issues raised in postcolonial criticism easily overreach this realm and can be similarly found in other fields and writers. Davis and Yee engage in an interesting debate over the use of terms such as multicultural, intercultural, mosaic or ethnic to refer to the diversity of Canadian society and its different cultural minorities. This is yet another of the very relevant issues for our global society addressed in this volume and one more reason to read with utmost interest this well-edited volume.

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