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# Gail Jones's Intertextual Mirrors: In the footsteps of Virginia Woolf

## ≈ Resumen

En este artículo intento probar que la palabra (en su doble intención, ya que pertenece tanto al mundo de quien habla como al mundo de quien escucha) y que la vida “que no es vida” pero es todo lo que conocemos son el eje de las historias literarias y de toda la narrativa desde el modernismo. Tanto la noción de “diseminación” de Derrida como nuestros intentos individuales por resolverla están presentes en cada obra de literatura. En este artículo intento demostrar que, con una diferencia aproximada de tres generaciones, la australiana Gail Jones sigue de cerca las ideas de Virginia Woolf sobre las imágenes especulares y los espejos en tanto que piedras de toque para el reflejo y la reflexión sobre la cultura, la historia y el desarrollo individual. La vida y el día a día han de ser convertidos en historias para ser entendidos como “reales”, visibles, como una visión que permita abrir posibilidades al cambio y a los avances. Para hacer esto posible, se necesita un sujeto que reflexione, que pueda sacar adelante este hecho literario complejo, un sujeto que posea las características del sujeto *nómada* acuñado por Rosi Braidotti. Han de ser sujetos dispuestos a seguir las huellas dejadas por realidades aparentes, dispuestos a enfrentarse a su propio pasado y subvertir no sólo las certezas consideradas como la Verdad, sino también las normas dadas como obligatorias en su cultura para que sostengan esas “verdades ficticias”, como explicó Michael Riffaterre.

Palabras clave:

espejos; subjetividades; verdades ficticias; historias; intertextualidad

## ≈ Abstract

I aim to prove that the word, understood as “double-voiced”, as belonging to the world of the speaker and to the world of the interlocutor, and the life that is not life but is all we know, are the axis of storytelling and post modernist narrative. Derrida's notion of “dissemination” and our individual strife to solve it are present in every work of literature. In this article I intend to show that, with a difference of approximately three generations, Australian Gail Jones follows in the steps of Virginia Woolf's images of mirrors and looking glasses as cornerstones of reflection and reflexion about culture, history and individual development. Life and living have to be turned into stories in order to become “real”, visible, a vision that will open possibilities for change and advancement. To make this possible, writers need a reflective subject - a subject able to carry out this complex operation in contemporary literature has to possess the characteristics of a *nómada* subject, a term coined by Rosi Braidotti - that is, subjects ready to follow the traces left by apparent realities, ready to confront their own past and to subvert not only the certainties held as the Truth but also the norms that were given as a “must” in their contemporary culture in order to sustain those fictional truths, as explained by Michael Riffaterre.

Keywords:

mirrors; subjectivities; fictional truths; storytelling; intertextuality

The word is double-voiced.  
Not only because it refers back to the already said,  
but also because it reflects the present of the interlocutor  
as well as that of the speaker.  
(Marina Mizzau 1993)

Y entré en aquel espacio.  
Y, sostenida por su hilo,  
me investí de la seguridad del funámbulo  
para permanecer en equilibrio  
en ese punto  
de ser en lo imposible,  
donde la vida no es la vida  
y es toda la vida.  
(Clara Janés)

And I went into that space.  
And, pending from its thread,  
I invested myself with the security of the funambulist  
to maintain my equilibrium  
on that point  
of existing in the impossible,  
where life is not life  
and it is all our life.  
(Clara Janés)

**T**he word as “double-voiced”, belonging to the world of the speaker and to the world of the interlocutor, and the life that is not life but is all we know, are the axis of this article: the omnipresence of Derrida’s dissemination and our individual struggle to solve it. With a difference of approximately three generations, Gail Jones follows in the steps of Virginia Woolf’s images of mirrors and looking glasses as cornerstones of reflection of and reflexion about culture, history and individual development. Life and living must be turned into stories in order to become “real”, visible, a vision that will open possibilities for change and advancement. The subject able to carry out this complex operation nowadays has to possess the characteristics of a *nomadic* subject, a term coined by Rosi Braidotti in 1994 – that is, subjects ready to follow the traces left by apparent realities, ready to confront their own past and to subvert not only the certainties held as the Truth but also the norms that were given as a must in their contemporary culture in order to sustain those fictional truths.

Virginia Woolf’s short story “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection” (published in 1929) offers an outline of the potential of mirrors to activate the imagination needed to effect subversion, change and the ensuing opening of minds if appropriate. Woolf looks at “reality” not directly but as it is reflected in the mirror hanging in the room, which attracts her involuntary attention and, while recording the distortions that this new perspective brings to the familiar view, she lets her imagination fly beyond the known facts of her everyday life. The looking glass has the power to highlight fragments of reality (“sliced off by the gilt rim”: Wolf 1929, 8), thus changing the usual perception of things.

But what interests us here especially is the change in appreciation of Isabella Tyson, the mistress of the house, who, seen from the distance effected by the mirror, loosens and loses her social definition and becomes a site for feasible personalities. Isabella

can no longer be defined by a few epithets (spinster, rich, owner and collector), her reflection makes her shadowy and symbolic. Woolf uses the cabinets in the room as a metaphor, to ponder on how each little drawer might hold a secret or a merely socially unknown episode in Isabel’s life, which would mean that she were “invested with a new reality and significance” (12). This thought becomes materialized through the letters just brought in by the mailman, each letter a page in Isabel’s life, a turn in her vital experience, something not known nor envisaged by the people around her – and this triggers a most important quote for our purpose:


one was tired of the things that [Isabel] talked about at dinner. It was her profounder state of being that one wanted to catch and turn to words, the state that is to the mind what breathing is to the body, what one calls happiness or unhappiness [...] for she was one of those reticent people whose minds hold their thoughts enmeshed in clouds of silence. (15)

What matters most here in order to understand Gail Jones’s following of Woolf’s train of thought is the phrase “to catch and turn to words”, because no life story becomes history till it is rendered into written language – thus becoming one more inevitable turn to fiction by the force of the logic of grammar and narration.

Not in vain, Isobel Armstrong concluded in 2008 that the mirror is never a true reflection of reality, but it adds one more fictional turn to the wheel of the fictional truth, it conveys the impossibility of ever grasping what we accept as reality or truth in order to be able to proceed with our everyday life. “Fictional truth” is the term coined by Michael Riffaterre in 1990 to inscribe the unattainable nature of Truth (with a capital letter), since we form the world through language, and language is mostly bound to the rules of grammar:

Narrative truth is thus a linguistic phenomenon; since it is experienced through enactment by reading, it is a performative event in which participation on the reader’s part can only serve to hammer the text’s plausibility into his experience. (1990, xiv)

Olga Vorobyova (2009) also abounds on the make-believe properties of the mirror, so she quotes Umberto Eco, when he says “the observer perceives [a form of reality] as if it were inside the mirror, while the mirror has no ‘inside’” (1986, 204). Thus, the deferring of consistent meaning defeats monolithic knowledge and welcomes research, thinking and observation, which is what Gail Jones and her characters do throughout her narrative, taking advantage of what Vorobyova proposes in analysing Virginia Woolf’s short story: “The reflection in a window pane refracts all shades of colours of today, while keeping memory of deaths, losses and sins buried in the past” (2009, 5).

Gail Jones, an Australian writer and academic, currently Professor of Writing in the “Writing and Society Research School” 

at Western Sydney University, is the author of seven novels: *Black Mirror* (2002), *Sixty Lights* (2004), *Dreams of Speaking* (2006), *Sorry* (2007), *Five Bells* (2011), *A Guide to Berlin* (2015) and the recent *The Death of Noah Glass*, published in 2018. She has also published two collections of short stories, *The House of Breathing* in 1992 and *Fetish Lives* in 1997. Her work has been shortlisted and nominated for many literary prizes, and she won the “Western Australian Premier’s Book Awards for Fiction” on several occasions, the “Barbara Ramsden Award Book of the Year” in 1992, the “Hungerford Award”, the “Nita Kibble Literary Award” and the “Colin Roderick Award”. Jones initiated her career as a painter, which accounts for the profusion of colour metaphors in her narrative and the visual components that permeate her themes. Her writing exhibits elements of photography, cinema and painting, and she herself explains in an interview with Summer Block for *January Magazine* that her work often starts with an image – exactly the same idea often expressed by British author John Fowles. The most obvious instance of this is *Sixty Lights*, a story told as a series of sixty photographic images or flashes that illuminate the lives of the different characters. In the *January* interview, Jones reflects on the fascinating moment of the personal discovery of photography, when people experienced an “immense sense of affirmation, a kind of double self, that the self exists both in the material sense but also as a representation.” This idea will be extended to the moment of discovering the cinema and, even, the inside-out life in the mirror, at the same time that it implements contemporary notions within New Materialism, itself a movement to resume Modernist and Postmodernist critical innovations such as the interaction of body and mind, now fused into a “bodymind”, a concept that opens up the possibilities of intersectionality.

But the self, as Gail Jones conceives it, is not only the intersection of body, mind and representation; it is incardinated within the chronotope of History. Since subjectivity took a good century and a half to develop to reach what it is today, History has been always punctuated by gaps: people forgotten, people invisibilized, people silenced; there are more historical absences than actual presences, not only because of what Jones calls “historical amnesia” but also because of the importance granted to male action and thought, while women’s deeds were considered extravagant and redundant if anything. Consequently, Jones means to widen those interstices with her literary work in order to bring the experience of minorized groups to the fore. In her article “A Dreaming, A Sauntering: Re-imagining Critical Paradigms”, Jones declares her intention in writing: “[A]ll writing, in a sense, is an assertion against loss, a wish to commit to the figure, or figuration, what seems otherwise assigned to wordless compliance or surrender” (Jones 2006, 11). As British author Sarah Waters once said: “The past is absolutely teeming with untold stories” (Armitt 2007, 119).

What Jones does in order to recover not only memories but also the space in History that is due to people is to double characters to induce a Doppelgänger effect, a mirror image that will both help to face the worst in one and to enhance the positive aspects of life. This dualism of self and reflection is embodied into a discursive practice of present and past generally bridged by the creative power of one or both characters. According to Milica Banjanin mirrors “provide an opportunity for characters to engage in dialogue with themselves, while searching for their genuine I” (2014, 310).

Consequently, Jones’s first novel, *Black Mirror*, published in 2002, paves the way to analyse her fiction and her academic criticism. The two main characters, Anna and Victoria, interviewer and interviewee, in retelling the story of their life as they remember it, mirror each other, since they talk and evocate the same time in their respective lives that happened in the same place on the Australian map, while they recall the feelings and affects they went through in their personal and historical circumstances. But the mirror that unites and separates them is black, opaque, gives no reflection. Victoria, the older woman, says: “I stared into the mirror and saw darkness staring back” (2002, 246), and, later on: “I looked into the mirror and darkness looked back” (272). Given the importance mirrors have in constructing identities, it is no wonder that both women, especially Victoria, cannot find their image till they have accomplished a verbal and, alongside, written account of the many difficulties they went through, even though not all secrets can remake themselves as stories, as both characters find out. The accomplishment of explaining herself to herself means for Victoria the final blackout: “[I] tell my story and die” (3).

Their narratives are also tinted in black throughout. The space that surrounds their life is black: black is how they imagine the goldmine, spinal cord of their hometown, and black is the dark room of the photographer with whom Victoria fell in love. Black is the night that frightens Anna’s vigils. Even though this negative feeling, embodied and represented culturally in blackness, is alleviated by the fake darkness of the cinema, the “public camera obscura” (147) that offers them consolation from their everyday squalor. Dark are also the times that allow for social abuses, misery and death living side by side with absurd affluence, when workers have not enough for the bare essentials of life (Anna’s father) and owners collect all sorts of bric-a-brac useful for nothing and not even nice to look at (Victoria’s father).

But worst of all is their appreciation, in looking back, that good-for-nothing rich heirs can kill those they feel aggravated by with no social or political cost at all. This instance is the darkest episode of all in the novel and also the most important, because if prudence had been the norm, it could have linked Victoria and Anna forever, as grandmother and granddaughter, and, if we reverse the situation, had impunity not been allowed to happen, both women would have enjoyed their relationship from the first moment Anna opened her eyes to the world, and the lives of both would have been very different, probably easier and happier – but then society would not be what it is and *Black Mirror* would not exist as we know it.

The world around Victoria and Anna, the early and mid-twentieth century, is one of the darkest in civilization insofar it has been chronicled: it is a century of wars and genocides, colonialism, wild industrialism, exploitation, slavery, rape, misplaced honour, manslaughter and homicides, terrorism, bullying and isolation. And both women, in their iconic female role, suffered much of the list in one instance or another. It is a vast accumulation of human darkness, so many instances of “debil-debil” (sic) as dark Lily-white (ironic name for an aboriginal person) cleverly puts it. Anna’s cry to her black lover “Teach me not to be afraid of the dark” (102) is shrewdly placed, because Winston is but a transient presence in her life and has enough darkness on his shoulders as it is. No wonder Lily-white “believed white people violated any number of spiritual laws” (183); and so they did, well

~ can she assert it. Among so much darkness, invisibility becomes the key word for identity.

Victoria, paradoxically, has a first epiphany of her personal importance in London, when she attends a Surrealist exhibition (Genoni 2004, 63) and realizes her possibilities within the artistic world. Paradoxically because the Australian landscape where she grew up and her own life in it are surrealist by definition – as Frida Kahlo said about magic realism, where she came from that (magic and surrealist events) is common day experience.

Gail Jones plays wittily with Anna's name to describe how Victoria reads this young woman's personality and how she is instrumental in the development and outcome of the novel. At different points in the narrative, Victoria refers to Anna as "Anna-leptic", "Anatomical", "Anna-esthesia", "Anna-chronos" and "Anna-lytical" in that order; and, towards the end of the novel, Anna herself completes the sequence by thinking: "*Here I am: Anagnorisis*" (276), which rounds up Victoria and Anna's life-histories and surprises the reader. This idea is encrypted in the thought itself – "anagnorisis" expresses the moment in which the hero (heroines in this case) is recognized as such by those around him/her. There is no heroic deed if there is no anagnorisis, hence the importance of Anna's recognizing herself as instrumental in the developing of the narrative. Furthermore, it makes Victoria's tirade significant; what sounded as whimsical was indeed descriptive of the dialogical method both characters were following.

This Anna-sequence is, as I see it, the backbone in the structure of *Black Mirror*. If we change its order slightly, it follows the logic of Anna's role as a biographer and accounts for Victoria's narrative. Let us start with "analytical", which means visualizing, articulating or conceptualizing complexities – all of them applying to Victoria's many lives in several locations under varied circumstances, which Anna will put in place and order. Consistently, the narrative is "anachronic" in all senses, it is given not only without chronological order but it is out-dated insofar as it is prompted by mnemotechnic devices: questions, odours, colours or objects. Anna is also performing an "anatomic" dissection of Victoria's life, picking up parts of it at different times and analysing them while comparing them inadvertently with the bits and pieces of her own biography; and she does that with care, "anesthetically", to prevent unnecessary pain, not to upset elderly Victoria in her last days. The final result is not only a good novel, *Black Mirror*, but also an "analeptic" exercise for Victoria and Anna, restoring their peace of mind and invigorating them: for Victoria it meant dying quietly and composedly and for Anna, finding the tranquillity she needed to proceed with her life after the final recognition ('anagnorisis').

Abounding on the fuzziness of the self and the impossibility of establishing boundaries to individual experience linked to the importance of the historiographical chronotope we all share, in subsequent fiction Gail Jones opened up one more possible double: the contradiction, officially insisted upon, that science and humanities are polarized and antagonistic. She does this in *Dreams of Speaking*, a superb novel that was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards in 2006. The very title points to the diffused limits of speech and to the amazing length of time that language needs to become dialogical, that is, to communicate the complex interior life of a character so that it has an effect on the narratee, as we have seen in *Black Mirror*.

The historiographical chronotope has been one of the cornerstones of Postmodernism, insofar as it influences basically all the instances of discourse. Australian Paul Carter coined the term 'spatial history' to cover the subjects as yet not included in History. Spatial history alludes to the "spatial forms and fantasies through which a culture declares its presence", that is, it makes visible material presences and immaterial fantasies because they indicate

concisely and poetically, the cultural place where spatial history begins: in the act of naming [...]. [T] he namer inscribes his passage permanently on the world, making a metaphorical world-place which others may one day inhabit and by which, in the meantime, he asserts his own place in history. (1987, xxiv)

As we have seen in *Black Mirror*, space bears the inscription of those who inhabited it, and lays it open to new inscriptions, to "the primary act of perception as interpretation" (324).

The exchange of perceptions among characters construct a richer cultural world, a watershed of knowledge where the efforts of each individual converge into a common cultural waterway, to everybody's gain. As Homi Bhabha put it in *The Location of Culture*: "It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha 1994, 2). This cultural dialogue has stitched up an always new, contemporary subject, unstable and nomadic for the last half century.

Following on these ideas, in *Dreams of Speaking* Jones inscribes, as one of the two main characters, Mr. Sakamoto, a humanist who is rendering the history of modern discoveries because he maintains that History should be made up of the development of technical findings, which will benefit everybody, instead of what we now understand as History: an endless enumeration of wars, genocides and senseless struggles for power. He who reigns or the name of battles are not of general importance, what matters is what humans achieve in positive terms. This idea is endorsed by Michel Foucault himself, when he writes that "[d]iscursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse," but are "embodied in technical processes" (cited in Jacobs 2006, 191). Furthermore, however important the practical discoveries are, they are not only reached through human intelligence but are to be used by and among human beings. Therefore, society is in need not only of scientists and engineers but also thinkers in humanities who may find ethical paths for that use.

Both Mr. Sakamoto and the other main character Australian Alice Black (an emblematic last name following the discussion maintained above) and their respective families and personal histories embody the fusion of all that is meant by modernity in contemporary thought. Through their research and their conversations they enact the development of the devices that make our life easy and that favour communication: from the "discovery" of cellophane to the neon lights and the bar-code, from telephone, radio, cinema and television to x-rays ~



and magnetic resonance, from xerography to aeroplanes. All those momentous inventions appear in the novel, marking the inception of the Modern World, a world “made both destructible and glorious by its many technologies” (103), because the earth is “a perpetual motion device” (201) as Foucault’s pendulum has already shown in its time. Modernity (our own globalized, planetary Place) is made up of progress, no doubt, but also of grief. For all its discoveries, it cannot prevent horrors like Hiroshima and Nagasaki, disease and death, love-defection and love-pains, teenage terror and homicide, family secrets and lies.

Enclosed in the cabin of a jet, flying over Frankfurt, Alice says: “I feel like God – watching the night illimitably unfold [...] watching modernity” (20). But this is just a fleeting perception, and as soon as the aircraft lands she plunges into her prosaic problems: insistent ex-lover, bare dwellings, loneliness and alienation. Consistently, the novel delves into the difficult personal lives of Chester F. Carlson, Guglielmo Marconi, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison or John Logie Baird, to name but a few of the biographies that are given in the novel via Mr. Sakamoto.

Gail Jones is a painter herself so, understandably, art is a prominent part of the cultural common knowledge. Her last novel, *The Death of Noah Glass* (2018), inquires into the global intertext, made of painting, writing, loving, moving in time and in space... in a word: living. Such intention to round up the complexities of life is complicated by making one of the characters deaf and another blind. What Jones is probably implying with these shortcomings in her characters is that there are other ways of seeing and other ways of hearing, as important as those we consider ‘normal’. She also portrays other extreme ways of living, such as the leprosarium for aboriginal people in the northwest of Australia. Opposing experiences, implementing what is considered the norm with the diversity of life (as varied as persons are, and even varied in time for each individual) Jones expounds that reflections and representations are “a source of knowledge and empowerment [to show that] people are not alone and, through this specular activity, they can learn about themselves” (Budziak 2011, 47).

Martin, Noah Glas’s son, lives his maturity immersed in the black cocoon of his own decaying fame as a painter at the time of his father’s apparently accidental death. He felt as if he were “walking into a dark room, fumbling for a switch and finding the electricity gone” (5). He is forced to scramble out of himself in order to solve the family puzzle and, in so doing, finds his sister, Evie, also in need of some luminous lifesaver to lift the veil with which “she prohibited her own reflection” (31). Martin and Evie trigger memories and feelings in each other and, step by step, find some colour in their lives. One of their first positive recollections is condensed in the sentence “How blue is the sky?” (23), which reminds them of the near thirty shades of blue possible during one day.

Martin realizes that “he needed to be anchored by Evie” (55) in an epiphany reminiscent of James Joyce’s in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916):

Martin had a vision of her on the harbour, sailing away into sunlight, her thin form receding into a silhouette. The leporello opera house, the restless ferries, the dazzle that made any foregrounded figure black. It was a vision of her leaving. It implied her impermanence. The force of her image passed over him like the shadow of a bird. (55–56)

This intertextual wink at Joyce implemented by the memory of a past experience, reinforced by words such as “vision” and “image” contrasted with “silhouette” and “shadow”, reminds us of the multiple meanings of any text as intimated in Jacques Derrida’s *Glas* – not to underestimate the coincidence in the naming and the meaning of the philosopher’s title: clamour, the calling of a bell tolling – where the instability and unpredictability of the text is embodied in the cartography of the printed language itself. Martin and Evie had to recognize themselves as part of the “ceaseless flow” (58) of life before they could assemble a personal structure to rely upon in order to benefit from the connotations and metaphors that everyday life offers us so that we can survive our intimations of mortality, grasping some form of reality as if “the future had been made physical” (60) by handing the baton from generation to generation.

There are other images, other metaphors in *The Death of Noah Glass* that abound in the fuzzy boundaries of reality – they are like visitations, like steppingstones that Noah has grounded to bring both siblings forward amidst the inevitable shadows of their lives. The fact that he is found dead in a pool, “a water basin that reflects and refracts light”, is important because a pool acts, according to Olga Vorobyova “as a memory depository as well as a generator of individual and collective recollections and remembrances” (2009, 9). It is also significant that Martin found the light he needed in his deaf young daughter and, alongside, Evie found the love she was looking for in a blind suitor, to whom she recounts movies as they develop on the screen: “Connecting sound and image, the consideration of time in cinema, imagining –did she dare it?- a blind man’s world” (146). This would be a good quote, even a matrix, to summarize the novel, a world of presences and absences, of half-truths and delayed explanations, just sound and image that can and cannot be grasped at the appropriate time, which leaves us imagining, as in a Derridian dream or, often, nightmare.

In her much praised first collection of stories, Gail Jones had already tackled most of these themes. *The House of Breathing*, which won the TAG Hungerford Award in 1991, the Barbara Ramsden Prize in 1992, the Steele Rudd Australian Short Story Award and the Western Australian Premier’s Book Award, both in 1993, starts with a short story, “Modernity”, where Jones defines the diversity of human existence and the influence of the image in our existence. In seven pages, a young girl travels from sheer “reality” (extreme cold, poverty and isolation) to the, to her, terrifying fourth row in a warm, crowded cinema in a big city. The steps she took dealt with “Integrity”, “Space”, “Time”, “Setting”, “Density”, “Narrative”, “Identity”, “Voices”, “Bodies” and “Faces” – in that order and in short epigraphs so named by the author. The fact that “Space” is defined by “the lack of conclusion to her horizon”, “Time” is directed by her grandmother’s voice and “Bodies” are determined by “Illnesses. Births. Deaths. Copulations” helps the young girl to define her identity as consistent:

the wooden dolls for which Siberia is famous, dolls which sit, one inside the other, in a series of smaller and smaller otherwise identical versions. These dolls give the girl an image of self: she may be different with, say, Babushka and father, but these selves are all uniform, and neatly composed and contained. She has the conservative’s assurance of inner conformity. She knows her self-sameness. Symmetries abound. In the mirror, unquestionably, is her exact adequation. (14)

But that conformity is shattered to pieces when she is met, for the first time, by the frames on the screen, when she experiences “the metaphysics of fragments”. The overwhelming feeling of other lives looming over you, the close-up of moods and deformity, the distortions and dissolving of elements, made her face “in chimerical vision her own perilous vulnerability” (18). As in other narratives by Jones, this character was met with life.

The book ends with the story of the title, “The House of Breathing”, which, consistently with the issues dealt with in the collection, stands for a safe, familiar place, where one can even sleep feeling secure. This craving for safety develops from the extreme dual experience of the Titanic, from being awed by light, luxury and glamour to being surrounded by freezing, menacing waves, destruction and death. Grandmother in the story is a survivor from that shipwreck, a maid in a third-class cabin that, “because she was young and unknowing, because she was on an adventure, and dazzled, bewitched by spectacle and allayed by sweet music, she did not really believe that the Titanic would sink” (155). But it did. And in order to understand the potential of such an event, she had to transform it into a vision, a narrative (her sole story) that can be passed (again) from generation to generation.

In another intertextual turn, Gail Jones might be recollecting Virginia Woolf’s words in “The Lady in the Looking-Glass”:

the looking-glass reflected [events] so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality unescapably. It was a strange contrast –all changing here, all stillness there [...] coming and going like human breath, while in the looking-glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality. (5)

Grandmother’s vision, therefore, is compounded by all the possibilities of light and darkness she can conjure to overturn both “stillness” and “fixity”, “to pick something light and fantastic and leafy and trailing, traveller’s joy” (6). For Grandmother, the Titanic is a lighthouse amidst the darkness of the ocean night: all lights ablaze, resplendent and brilliant – its ornamental dome, made of glass, was a bubble of light. “It was like a terrible trick” (155) to make you feel secure in order to strike at you fatally. And so life goes on, from survival in a Nordic ocean to life in the Australian desert, Grandmother passes on her obsession with drowning to a granddaughter who has never known the abundance of water. This same obsession recurs in *Black Mirror*, where Victoria, after moving from her Australian desert town to Paris, has the recurrent dream of drowning in the Seine, while, when awake, she sits by the river and weeps and weeps for herself, for her lover, for occupied Paris and for a world in ruins. When rain begins to fall persistently, Victoria realizes that her “drought” life is definitely left behind and she is bound for “[s]till more immersion. Still more immersion” (12).

I wish to conclude as I started, with a poem, since poetry embodies, by definition, our earthly linguistic struggle to encapsulate in words our emotions, our self, ourselves and common experience. The Peruvian poet Blanca Varela sums up all these feelings in a few poetic lines:

Perhaps the other side exists  
and it is also our gaze  
and all this is the other  
and that is this  
and we are a form that changes with light  
till we are only light, only shadow.  
[“Mask of some god” 1963]

[Tal vez el otro lado existe / y es también la mirada / y todo esto es lo otro / y aquello esto / y somos una forma que cambia con la luz / hasta ser sólo luz, sólo sombra  
[“Máscara de algún dios” 1963]]

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