

The Novel and Anthropology. A Colonial Tale for a Postcolonial World?

Jenny Mander
Newnham College
University of Cambridge

Albert Sánchez Piñol is an anthropologist and author of a satirical study on dictatorships in the republics of central Africa in the last century. He is also a novelist, living in Barcelona and writing in Catalan. His first novel, *La pell freda* (*Cold Skin*), published in 2002, has been something of a phenomenon. Not only was it awarded the prestigious *Ojo Crítico de Narrativa* but it has also been published in at least twenty-four countries, in twenty-two different languages. *La pell freda* has thus attained the rank of international bestseller projecting its author onto the world stage. What should we make of the international success of this tale of a solitary castaway who chooses to forsake civilisation for life on an apparently deserted island ‘perdut a l’oceà menys freqüentat [que] comparteix latitud amb els deserts de la Patagònia’? (22)¹

The authors of a recent report (Arenas and Škrabec), published jointly by the Institute of Catalan Letters and the Institut Ramon Llull on the position of Catalan literature and translation in a globalized world, note the commercial success of the novel but disparagingly imply that its worldwide diffusion is a function of its popular, generic style:

The global literary market has shown a certain predilection for literary works that shun roots in a specific culture, especially in the last few decades. A literary work that is a little clichéd, that does not require the knowledge of any historical context, which has simple language, narrative agility and respects conventions of drama and suspense can easily obtain success on the international market as in the case of *Cold Skin*. (Arenas and Škrabec 2007: 85)

¹ All references are to the 25th edition of *La pell freda* (2006), Barcelona, Edicions La Campana.

They go on to suggest that:

If the aim is to project Catalan literature overseas as part of an autonomous cultural world, and to achieve an overseas reception that takes on the social, cultural and historical complexity of Catalonia, then market forces cannot end up having more weight than any other factor. (2007: 85)

Seen from this perspective – notwithstanding the presence of Sánchez Piñol at this year's Frankfurt Book Fair as one of the invited representatives of Catalan culture –, *La pell freda* is not a good ambassador for the people of Catalonia. But can the novel be so easily dismissed as straightforward, commercial genre fiction? In responding to this question I shall suggest how Sánchez Piñol's narrative can in fact be read as the self-conscious literary response of an anthropologist to the ongoing problems of colonialism in a post-colonial world. I shall propose, furthermore, that the author's deployment of literary codes that are 'a little clichéd' is, in fact, integral to this reflexive discourse in which he plays between international and national perspectives without offering any easy answers.

The topos of the island is, of course, deeply engrained in Western culture, both 'high' and 'low'. Hans Blumenberg, considering how we inherit and transform myths within a broader study of the philosophical roots of the modern world, has indeed identified the island as a fundamental element within the rich repertory of nautical metaphors that humans have used since time immemorial to configure their lifetime's existence (1997: 7).

The Greeks, for whom the geography of islands was quite literally a feature of their daily horizons, were clearly fascinated by the literary and philosophical potential of the island as a motif. Plato's account of the mythical island of Atlantis comes immediately to mind as do the sojourns of Homer's Odysseus on the island-homes of Circe and Calypso – terrains variously used to represent dystopian and utopian possibilities and to project male sexual fantasies.

In more modern times, with the expansion of maritime travel from the beginning of the fifteenth century, the island acquired a new

metaphorical vitality, its contours informed in particular by reports about the West Indies, recently 'discovered' by Columbus (Connell 2003: 554-581). In *Utopia*, 1515, Thomas More was one of the first to fashion an idealised insular society based on stories brought back from the New World; a century later, Francis Bacon would also take up Plato's story in his *New Atlantis*, 1627, to promote another social idyll coloured by tales from the Americas.

Similarly, the emergence of more formal anthropological and ethnographic interests in the eighteenth century contrived once again to renew a heightened interest in islands. Perceived as isolated, autonomous spaces, they seemed to constitute an ideal laboratory for the empirical investigation of humanity at an apparently more primitive or authentic state of development. They also lent themselves to those working in other emerging disciplines of natural history such that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, just as islands continued to play a vital role in ethnographic fieldwork, they were also crucial in fields such as botany, entomology and zoology, and, of course, in the development of modern evolutionary theory, pioneered by Darwin.

At the same time as the island became such a privileged space in the establishment of the modern classifying disciplines, it also became a compulsive figure within fictional discourses, above all within the modern novel, of which Daniel Defoe's desert island story of *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719, has often been identified as the first example, and which has generated in its wake a veritable archipelago of island fictions down to the present day. Such literature, as we shall see, has a complex relationship with the development of nationalist and colonial thought – and also the history of anthropology.

In *La pell freda*, Sánchez Piñol demonstrates a self-conscious knowledge of this rich tradition, engaging playfully – yet pointedly – with the various ways in which the topos has been implicated in the history of European thought and political identity. Consequently, reviewers have been able to identify multiple affinities and affiliations between this novel and past writing. It has been repeatedly situated in relation to the oeuvre of the nineteenth-century novelists Robert Louis Stevenson and H. P. Lovecraft. But readers have also found intertextual traces of H. G. Wells, Edgar Allan Poe, Joseph Conrad,

Stephen King, Kafka, Sartre and yet others. There is no doubt that the global diffusion of this Catalan novel has been greatly facilitated by this pervasive sense of *déjà lu*.

As suggested in the report of Arenas and Škrabec, it is indeed the case that there is nothing very obviously Catalan about this novel other than the language in which it was originally written. The anonymous narrator is an Irish orphan who grew up in the years leading to the Easter Rising of 1916, the War of Irish Independence and Home Rule. He tells us that he had been a committed patriot, serving with the Republican army as a logistics expert but when faced with the realities of civil war he had abandoned the cause, or, as he puts it, 'la causa em va abandonar a mi' (44). As a result, he no longer thinks of himself as having a homeland (52). Having travelled from Ireland through France, Belgium and finally Holland, he has signed up with an international maritime agency for a posting that will allow him to flee the company of all men. The steam-ship that takes him half way round the world to the island has a crew of Scottish and Senegalese sailors and is captained by a man who had grown up near the docks of Hamburg but had later moved to Denmark (9).

Once on the island – which, we are subsequently informed, had been ceded by the British to international control (94) – the only other man who is encountered, Batís Caffó (renamed Gruner in the American and English editions), speaks with the accent of an Austrian artilleryman (19). Still further diluting any sense of national specificity in the novel, we are told that the ship that comes to relieve the protagonist a little over a year after his arrival on the island, had embarked from Indochina in the direction of Bordeaux; its captain wears a cap emblazoned with the insignia of the French Republic and the crew are described as sailors from the colonies, mainly Asians or mulattos, each one a different shade (294). This sense of placelessness is yet more pronounced in the English version, which inexplicably omits the fifteen or so pages in Chapter 2 where the narrator gives details of his Irish upbringing. For English readers, this specificity is almost totally absent and the narrator is taken simply as being from somewhere in Europe.

Do these vaguely internationalist contours define *La pell freda* as a product of late-capitalist culture? Is it an example of what Emily

Apter has dubbed 'Americanized Euro-fiction' (2002: 288-289), that is to say a degraded form of so-called paraliterature, stripped of national particularities, sitting in a historical, geographical and political vacuum, conferring a new European identity that is not an identity at all? Before responding to these questions, it is important to situate Sánchez Piñol's narrative first of all in relation to the broader history of the genre of the novel and its relationship to trans-nationalism.

It is widely accepted that the history of the modern novel and the emergence of the nation state are closely intertwined. Benedict Anderson, who is often considered to be the first to have pointed out this convergence, has argued that together with the newspaper, the novel provided the technical means for representing the kind of imagined community that is the nation. These two new forms of print promoted 'the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time' which, he argues, is 'the precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history' (1991: 26). As Franco Moretti has put it, 'the nation state ... found the novel. And vice versa: the novel found the nation state. And being the only symbolic form that could represent it, it became an essential component of our modern culture' (1999: 17).

However, the sort of novel that was found by the nation state in the eighteenth century was the contemporary realist novel which, in the oft-cited words of Clara Reeve reflecting on the 'Progress of romance', privileged the 'picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written' (1930: 111). The process of nationalizing the novel, taken further by William Hazlitt and Sir Walter Scott, helped to consecrate this particular conception of the genre, setting it above and against the more timeless and placeless tradition of the romance. The latter became widely regarded as a sort of primitive ancestor, unworthy of serious attention – a position that would seem to characterise the perspective of some who have been charged to reflect on the fortunes of Catalan literature.

The development of literary studies in the nineteenth century coincided with the growing sense of national consciousness and this in turn brought the genre even more firmly within national boundaries as

scholars made not just the novel but more specifically the English, the French or the Spanish novel into the focus of their critical and historical study. Throughout Europe this gave rise to the conception of a series of parallel yet autonomous national traditions and, as Pascale Casanova explains, this is a state of affairs that still fundamentally shapes our thinking:

As a result of the appropriation of literatures and literary histories by political nations during the nineteenth century, although we do not always realize it, our literary unconscious is largely national. Our instruments of analysis and evaluation are national. Indeed the study of literature almost everywhere in the world is organized along national lines. (2005: xi)

Unfortunately, the effect of reducing literary traditions to the political and linguistic boundaries of particular nations has been essentially to obscure the trans-national dimension of literature that has also shaped its history. This is an issue, it might be argued, that is peculiarly relevant in the case of a linguistic community, such as the Catalan one, which – as the previously cited report indicates – is in the process of endeavouring to negotiate a place for itself within the broader European and global context.

In the case of the novel, however, the picture is gradually changing. Not least thanks to the efforts of Classicists to reclaim what they regard as the monopolisation of the genre by scholars of the English eighteenth century, of feminists who have sought to restore the position of romances hitherto eclipsed by the preoccupation with formal realism, and the more fundamental questioning of post-modern criticism of the validity of all categories including those of genre and of the nation state. In this way, the history of the novel is being re-mapped from a much broader temporal and geographical perspective using a much more flexible and capacious generic definition. As a result, we are beginning to understand in much greater detail how the novel has been inherently marked by border crossing before, during and indeed after the formation of the modern nation state.

By way of simple illustration, we need only point to the case of *Don Quixote*. Not only was Cervantes's novel widely read

throughout Europe and quickly translated into many other languages, spawning myriad imitations and parodies, the text itself internalises the trans-national geography of the novelistic genre through the fiction of its own origins, as recounted in the opening chapters. Captured in these fictional textual pre-histories, which long remained a characteristic of the genre, is the historical fact that the novel grew out of the popular tales which, prior to a developed print culture, circulated throughout Europe and beyond either in oral form or via chapbooks. Such tales became common property across Europe and their readers were generally unaware of where or when they originated (Andries 2007: 253).

Studies like that of Moretti, drawing on the growing bibliometric data being amassed by bibliographers and book historians, have furthermore served to show that with the development of a more commercial market, of which the novel was an early staple, the genre very much continued to be shaped by a cultural system that crossed national borders, underpinned by the global rise of capitalism. Translations were crucial in this European-wide expansion of the readership of the novel but, as Moretti (1999: 151) has emphasised, not all occupied an equal position in this international market. Core nations, initially Britain and France, remained the primary exporters of fiction whereas those on the periphery or semi-periphery mostly enjoyed imported texts. As a result, although from very early on the novel enjoyed a European-wide presence, the distinctive codes that came to define the modern genre were chiefly forged at the market's centre. Notwithstanding the nationalising of literature, the conventions that have shaped novelistic discourse have thus been profoundly defined by a trans-national history, substantially, although not exclusively, dominated by a few European nations, notably Britain and France.

In this context Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* occupies a crucial place. With the broadening of the approach to the history of the novel, traditional claims that this English tale represents the first modern novel are now highly contestable, as would be any assertion that it was the first fictional desert-island narrative. Nonetheless, this story of a plantation owner, shipwrecked on an island near the mouth of the Orinoco river, undeniably holds a pivotal position in the history of the

novel, not least as regards the convergence between imaginative fiction and European colonial ideology.² It enjoyed an unprecedented and lasting popularity, reaching a wider readership than any previous book written in English and by the end of the nineteenth century it been translated into an astonishing number of languages, including Inuit, Coptic and Maltese and had generated quite literally thousands of adaptations and imitations (Engelibert: 1997).

Significantly, *Robinson Crusoe* – translated into French in 1720 – was the only novel Jean-Jacques Rousseau ([1762] 1991: 184-185) allowed his pupil, Émile, to read in his highly influential pedagogic treatise, finding in it a paradigmatic example of self-sufficiency predicated upon the empirical reading of the book of nature. But where the French philosopher saw a transparent and harmonious relationship between an isolated individual devoid of prejudice and the natural world, modern criticism has found the dynamics of power associated with European colonialism. Robinson's efforts to domesticate the alien territory in which he finds himself, building a fenced in habitation, raising goats, growing corn, learning to make pottery, etc., make him, in the words of James Joyce, the true prototype of the British colonist.

As Diana Loxley explains in her important study of the implication of nineteenth-century English island literature within the wider project of nationalism and colonialism, the desert island represents the ultimate gesture in simplification. It offers a substitutional space in which British/European identity can be implicitly articulated in terms of colonial ideology but in a safely sanitised context that, in the absence of a native population, neatly sidesteps the real tensions and contradictions of colonial politics (Loxley 1990: 102).

² *Robinson Crusoe* should not be seen as the first novel to be implicated in the wider politics of imperialism. Drawing on Bakhtin, Diana de Armas Wilson (2000 & 2007) has shown how conquest, exploration and colonisation resonate through Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1615) and *Persiles* (1617) and, centuries before that, in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*. B. W. Ife and R. T. C. Godwin (2007) suggest how the chronicles of the early conquistadors shaped novelistic discourse in their attempts to communicate quite literally novel experiences in the New World to a European audience.

The deserted nature of Robinson's island renders his self-appointed title of 'king' and his reference to the island as his 'colony' seemingly innocuous. It also justifies his efforts to impose order not only on his environment but more crucially also on others when they make their appearance. If these 'invaders' do not allow themselves to be assimilated and, in the process, subordinated to Robinson's rule of reason (as does Friday rescued by the protagonist from the cannibals), their 'savagery' necessitates his own violent action in the name of self-defence. In this context, the deployment of firearms – the product of the technological advances of European civilization – serves effectively as a demonstration of the superior humanity of the European settler in relation to those who are characterised by him as inherently barbarous and inhuman. The feared non-European thus becomes an indispensable prop in the construction of European identity.

The basic plot of *Robinson Crusoe* was endlessly reworked throughout the nineteenth century. Moreover, these apparently innocent adventure stories were given a deliberate propagandist role within children's education (Loxley 1990: 73-89). Tales like *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Coral Island*, *Treasure Island*, and Jules Verne's *Mysterious Islands*, serialised in *Boy's Own* magazine, were self-consciously employed to foster normative notions of masculinity and a sense of Britishness. So familiar was this fictional discourse that it seemed – and to many readers perhaps still seems – to express timeless truths about human nature and society; yet simultaneously it helped bolster the myth of civilized Western authority and fashion: what Mary Louise Pratt calls, after Gayatri Spivak, the 'domestic subject' of Euroimperialism (1992: 4).

Desert-island fiction has thus become bound up with the historical reality of European identities. If these identities are to be understood and critically examined, the conventions underlying familiar fictions must also be exposed and explored. Arguably this project lies behind critically esteemed novels such as Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (1967) and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986). To see Sánchez Piñol's first novel in this light might suggest that this 'popular' piece of fiction also merits more serious consideration.

La pell freda has been described by Harriet Klausner in her online review as a 'dark Robin Crusoe like thriller'; for Gilbert Cruz (2005) it is 'a tightly wound thriller and a fantastical horror novel.' Writing in the *Independent on Sunday* Laurence Phelan (2006) views it as the 'literary equivalent of the low-budget early horror movies of George Romero and Sam Raimi.' I want now to argue that in transforming Defoe's classic tale into novelistic version of a B-movie, the Catalan author deliberately plays with multiple codes of both 'high' and 'low' culture in order to produce a highly unsettling tale that forces each reader to confront – wittingly or not – the dark side of colonial history that is so deeply embedded in European culture.

One of the first signals that traditional expectations are not going to be comfortably satisfied is the relocation of Sánchez Piñol's desert island from the tropics to the southern extremities of the Atlantic Ocean, just short of Antarctica. The warm seas, blue skies and apparently bounteous nature of the Pacific, which was the setting of the vast majority of *Robinsonades* and which offered a welcome contrast to the grey skies and urban industrial landscape of Europe, are now replaced by 'una terra esclafada entre els grisos de l'oceà i del cel' (8) on which the British had previously planned on building a jail for prisoners of the Boer War (94). From the outset a darker side of colonial history is thus implicitly brought to fore: the seductive images of palm fringed beaches and voluptuous women that circulated in the wake of Bougainville and Cook's first voyages to Tahiti, reinforced by the stories surrounding the mutiny on the *Bounty*, the sensual paintings of Gauguin and, of course, still promoted by today's travel brochures are displaced by memories of more sinister penal colonies on Melanesian islands where the hostile natives were considered part of the punishment (Connell 2003: 579).

The setting may have changed but the baggage quite literally imported onto the island is all too familiar. The anonymous narrator brings – or rather he has brought over for him by twenty sailors in four dinghies – 'les provisions d'un any sencer, i a més baguls i pertinences que duia amb mi'(10). While he may consider that he has turned his back on his past and severed all links with his homeland, the contents of the carefully labelled trunks speak eloquently of his origins and outlook, most notably the stacks of books and the

'instruments de mesura, afortunadament intactes, els registres de temperatura,, tres moduladors diacrònics i la farmaciola, molt completa'(27).

Posted on the island as weather official, his life on the island was, in his own words, to be that of a fact-collecting hermit (27-28). But these scientific ambitions quickly become the object of an elaborate authorial joke, largely shared by the narrator himself, as he unpacks from trunk 22-E (a label that in itself constitutes a parody of the rational classificatory mind) a series of projects that can only be described as caricatures of the militant geography of early colonial exploration and exploitation that was associated with international scientific projects supported by national learned societies and private capital.

Exploration and colonialism, of course, went together with the development of natural history, involving specimen gathering and the naming of new species, designed to categorize all plant forms on the planet. The structures for this classificatory project were laid out in 1735 by the Swedish naturalist, Carl Linné, a year which also saw the launching of Europe's first major international scientific expedition to determine the exact shape of the earth. As Pratt has pointed out (1992: 15), the scanning eye of the natural historian was also an imperial I, on the look out for European gain under the cover of capitalist 'improvement'. This resulted in a European discourse of landscapes that rendered indigenous peoples invisible, portraying exotic territory as occupied by only plants and creatures. Connections with the desert island tradition are thus obvious.

Displaying similar attitudes, Russian researchers from Kiev University have asked the protagonist to conduct an experiment involving the breeding of long-haired dwarf rabbits from Siberia so that passing ships (of which there are none) would be able to obtain a supply of fresh meat. Unfortunately, it would appear that all the supplied rabbits have been turned into rabbit stew by the ship's cook during the voyage. The Geographical Society of Berlin has sent complex instructions, translated into eight languages, requesting that he collect interesting autochthonous insects, providing that they are classified as *Hydrometridae Halobates* or *Chironomidae Pontomyia*, which are not averse to water (28). The learned gentlemen of the

society have, however, omitted to explain what this species might actually look like. A company from Lyon has requested his assistance in the field of mineralogy, more precisely in prospecting for gold, insisting that the weather official report any such discovery to them without delay. Finally, ironically evoking another fundamental motivation that has accompanied the history of European overseas exploration, a Catholic missionary, deeply misinformed as to the narrator's destination, was hoping that he might evangelize the Bantu chiefs on the island (29).

The narrator is better qualified to fulfil his duties as weather official, having been trained in oceanography, meteorology and communications – a formation, it is to be noted, that he explicitly links with the repressive structures of colonial rule (31-32). However, this job is also abandoned from the outset because 'savages' – an essential and ubiquitous element of desert-island fiction, be it in the form of cannibals as in *Robinson Crusoe* or monkeys as in *Treasure Island* – make their appearance on the very first night:

A la part inferior de la porta hi havia una mena de gatera. Un forat rodó sobre el qual descansava una petita trapa mòbil. El braç entrava per allà dins. Un braç sencer, nu, llarguíssim. Amb moviments d'epilèptic buscava alguna cosa per l'interior. Potser el pany? No era un braç humà per bé el quinqué i el foc no m'oferien una llum gaire intensa, al colze s'hi podien apreciar tres ossos, molt petits i més punxeguts que els nostres. Ni un gram de greix, musculatura pura, La pell de tauró. Però el pitjor de tot era la mà. Els dits estaven units per una membrana que quasi arribava a les unghes. (54)

In this twenty-first century *Robinsonade*, the foreigner is thus represented quite literally as a monster, a blue-blooded amphibious creature with eyes like eggs, pupils like needles, holes instead of noses, no eyebrows, no lips, a huge mouth (55). Reason and knowledge are henceforth employed by the narrator – who has become a self-declared pacifist – almost exclusively towards winning his battle against these creatures, which, like the monsters of ancient myths, emerge out of the ocean. The contents of two remaining crates,

left untouched by the narrator when first unpacking, now assume overriding importance:

Vaig alçar la tapa, vaig estripar el cartró i a dins, protegits amb palla, hi havia dos fusells de la casa Remington. La segona caixa contenia dues mil bales. Em vaig posar a plorar com un nen, de genolls. Per si cal dir-ho, era un obsequi del capità. (63-64)

The new settler on the island will not turn to books or collections of insects in order to demonstrate his moral superiority against the island's 'monsters', but to firepower. His library is in fact converted into a defensive weapon when, in an ingenious reprise of the *Quixote*, it is thrown onto a fire to help it blaze more furiously to keep the monsters at bay:

Adéu Chateaubriand! Adéu, Goethe, adéu Aristòtil, Rilke i Stevenson. Adéu Marx, Laforgue i Saint-Simon! Adéu Milton, Voltaire, Rousseau, Góngora i Cervantes. Estimats amics, se us venera, però que l'admiració no es barregi amb la necessitat, sou contingents. (62)

From now on, all his resourcefulness will be directed to ways of defeating the 'enemy': digging trenches, consolidating fortifications and in due course dangerously raising stacks of dynamite from a nearby shipwreck using an old diving suit – initiatives which bring Michael Eaude (2006) to describe the novel innocently in his review as 'an adolescent boy's adventure story'. Anna Godbersen (2005) also missing the colonial-critical thrust of the novel, writes likewise in her reflection: '*Cold Skin* reads like a mash of genres, from sci fi to political fable, and would seem to have everything to please the teenaged boy (Guns! Fatalism! Sex with fantastical creatures!)' Even the narrator's efforts to 'map' the island contribute to this project of domination insofar as they enable the space to be more easily policed. In this regard, the lighthouse where the narrator finds refuge with Batís Caffó not only serves as their fortress, but also as a crucial instrument of control, its beam having been redirected from the purposes of guiding shipping out at sea to that of nocturnal surveillance of the interior.

Fear of the monstrous ‘other’ thus determines the entire plot. It is the only basis for the alliance between Batís Caffó and the narrator – that is to say, for their microcosmic society – and it determines their actions. Indeed, as the narrator later recognises, it has become the structuring principle of at least the lighthouse keeper’s entire existence:

Va bestialitzar l’adversari, amb la qual cosa substituïa el conflicte per la barbàrie, l’antagonista per la bèstia. La paradoxa era que el raonament es mantenia gràcies a les seves inconsistències. El combat per la vida tot ho absorbia [...] I en el cas que es demostrés que no eren bèsties, l’ordre d’en Batís es destruiria amb més violència de la que amagaven els arsenals militars de tota Europa. (236)

It is to be noted that the protagonist does not include himself within this statement. The narrative, however, betrays the fact that he too constructs his sense of self in opposition to the concept of the monstrous, bringing him to define himself also against Caffó. The lighthouse keeper appears to him to be almost as bestial as the amphibian creatures, especially when he discovers that he regularly fornicates with a female monster, which he has tamed and made into his domestic and sexual slave.³

Interestingly, the narrator unconsciously finds Batís Caffó sexually disquieting from the time of their first encounter on account of the thick hair (a feature often attributed by early ethnographers to the native savage) that even covers his sexual organ:

El pit apareixia cobert per una catifa de pèls, que s’enfilaven per les dues espatlles com plantes silvestres. Al sud del melic la densitat del borrisol era de jungla. Vaig veure un membre distès però gegant. El fet que també estigués cobert de pèls, gairebé fins al prepuci, em va espantar. Què fan

³ The fornication with the ‘monsters’ is one of the key elements of this novel that readers have also found most disquieting. Cheuse (2005) comments as follows: ‘horror isn’t for everyone, especially horror with such an odd sexual element.’ McKie (2006) also expresses the view that: ‘the description of the sexual encounters with Aneris, the amphibian woman, are markedly repellent.’

els teus ull aquí, em vaig dir, i els vaig desviar fins al rostre del nostre interlocutor. (19-20)

Such a passage seems deliberately designed by the author to guide the reader towards a phallic interpretation of the lighthouse, encouraging this prominent erection on the island to be read as a visible and critical expression of the gendered contours of European exploration and colonisation which, as noted above, have promoted particular models of masculinity. Insofar as these same contours have also been associated with the project of traditional anthropology, which has implicitly sought to penetrate spaces that have been typically conceived of as female, Sánchez Piñol's playful activation of the obvious symbolic potential of the lighthouse also implicates the ethnographer precisely with reference to the aggressive nature of colonial travel and survey.

The narrator initially distances himself from Caffó and his 'zoophilia' by a show of apparently detached scientific curiosity, asking questions about the 'mascot' such as whether she suffers from dyspareunia, then following these up with a more thorough-going physical examination of her anatomy (120). But the evident brutality of his scientific study is scarcely veiled by the ostensibly objective style of his discourse, pointedly reminiscent of early ethnographic texts, and does little in the reader's eyes to confirm his sense of superior humanity. Anyhow, like many a colonial traveller before him, physically he finds it impossible to maintain his condescending distance; he too becomes ensnared by the female 'monster' that he regards as less than human.

Tapping into the deeply embedded cultural associations between islands and sexual fantasies that can be traced from the *Odyssey* through to eighteenth-century representations of Tahiti as the New Cythera and down to the present day, as evinced by certain reality TV shows (associations which, it can also be observed, have served to further eroticize and feminize island geography), Sánchez Piñol portrays the insatiable female monster as the very embodiment of male desire. However, smelling strongly of authorial irony, the narrator's use of a hyperbolic language that might have been lifted

from the page of any airport bodice-ripper helps check any vicarious participation in his ecstasy:

El seu cos era una esponja viva, escampava opi, m'anul·lava com a ser humà. Oh, Déu meu, allò! Totes les dones, honorables o de taverna, no eren més que patges d'una cort que mai no trepitjarien, aprenents d'un gremi que encara no s'havia inventat. [...] Europa ignora que viu en la castració perpètua. La seva sexualitat estava despresa de qualsevol llast. (160)

The nature of the author's relationship with his narrator is an important issue to which we shall return. As regards the narrator, however, physical intimacy with the 'mascot' brings about what is at least ostensibly a rather dramatic transformation in his ethnographical outlook. Unsettled by the conflict between the extraordinary physical pleasures he experiences with the female monster and his sense of shame having broken what is in his eyes a fundamental taboo, he begins to rethink his classification of the creatures that Batís Caffó calls the toads, partially recognising that this may be simply an exercise in self-justification.

He starts to find the female monster's form and mannerisms so human that he declares it is hard for him not to try and enter into conversation with her, at least, that is, until he is confronted with the brain power of a chicken (135). Gradually he realises that even his presupposition as to her innate stupidity might need to be revised as he notices that she appears to have emotions making her capable of tears (208) and later laughter (215) suggesting that the monsters may in fact be creatures of some intelligence. The narrator reaches another turning point when she silences him during one of their illicit love-making sessions in order to conceal their activities from the lighthouse keeper (226). This enables him to conclude that she is capable of dissimulation, a capacity that is famously foregrounded in Turing's classic test for human-like intelligence, used by those in the sphere of artificial intelligence and computer programming. From this moment on, he finds it impossible to see the sea-creatures any longer as monsters and is rendered incapable of shooting them (227).

The development of these apparently more enlightened, liberal attitudes towards the 'other', which replace his more straightforwardly imperialistic ethnographical mode of thought, are greatly encouraged by his increasing contact with the amphibian creatures' young, ironically initiated on the day when he descends into the dark ocean depths to recover dynamite from a Portuguese wreck with a view to destroying the enemy on a massive scale. It is through playing with these children and in particular with one to whom he gives the name of the Triangle, that he begins to perceive that their submarine world not only has a social structure but also that it is one that has points of similarity with his own: they would appear to have mothers, fathers and, indeed, orphans like himself. At about the same time he realizes that behaviour that he had previously interpreted as a clear sign of cannibalism was in fact a struggle to save brothers-in-arms from enemy fire, perhaps reminding the reader, as Ife and Godwin explain (2007: 66-70), of how Columbus helped build up the myth of Carib cannibalism on the basis of sign language used by his local informants that he may well have misunderstood.

Ceasing to position the 'other' quite so categorically as the inferior object of his rational gaze, the narrator comes to realize that it might be more of a question of what he can learn from these apparently primitive creatures rather than what they can learn from him. In order better to communicate, he attempts to learn their language, working out through more careful listening to the mascot's singing that her people are called the Citauca and her name is Aneris – another ludic touch by the author who thus encodes through inversion the aquatic nature of the creatures and the mascot's siren powers.⁴ Most importantly, the narrator begins to see things from what he imagines is the Citauca's point of view:

⁴ This semiotic play that is a feature of the authorial reflexivity is also to be found in the naming of the lighthouse keeper in terms of a 'batís caffó' or bathyscope, inviting – yet never confirming – symbolic interpretations on the part of the reader. A different literary trail is teasingly opened up in the English version by the name Gruner which may be taken from the Sherlock Holmes story, 'The Adventure of the Illustrious Client', which features an Austrian villain of the same name.

Esforci's una mica, Batís. Tenen mil greuges contra nosaltres. Pensi-ho així: som invasors. Aquesta és la seva terra, l'única terra que tenen. I nosaltres l'hem ocupat amb un fortí i una guarnició armada. No li sembla prou motiu perquè ens ataquin? (228-229)

By dint of the narrator's efforts to understand the amphibian creatures in their own terms, the reader is encouraged to entertain idealistic hopes that differences might somehow be bridged and conflict overcome. Yet the profoundly unsettling dimension of *La pell freda* is that we are ultimately denied any satisfying moral conclusion that might portray peace as something that can be achieved through greater mutual understanding between different cultures – an understanding to which the anthropologist (or even empathetic tourist) might hope to have contributed and which might grant self and other greater equality within a more global epistemological framework that embraces cultural relativity.

Hope is dashed in the first instance by Caffó, who breaks what is effectively a cease-fire by shooting at a party of Citauca who have come in peace (270-271). It is more fundamentally quashed, however, by the narrator's painful realisation that once the lighthouse keeper is gone, presumed dead, Aneris does not in fact emerge out of her cocoon like a beautiful butterfly. He had believed that Caffó's brutal treatment of her had reduced her into something between a meek dog and an evasive cat (225), suppressing the humanity that he thought he glimpsed when they were alone and he had flattered himself that under his sole protection she would somehow be transfigured. Yet she remains as cold and indifferent as ever and he recognizes he will never be truly close to her nor understand her mind or culture. Just as he had initially realised during his voyage to the island that his fate was to stand on the threshold of a border he would never cross (referring then to the fact that the island was located just short of Antarctica thereby depriving him of the majesty of the far south and its icebergs [8]), he now has to acknowledge that he will never cross the boundary that separates him from the creature he has come to possess.

Nonetheless, powerfully evoking in the reader's mind the thought of many a colonial power, the narrator refuses to give her – or her island – up. And this locks them both into an impossible

relationship in which he is continuously reminded of his own impotence to make her truly his and thus of his fundamental isolation; and she suffers from his vain attempts to assert his authority through exactly the same pattern of behaviour – punctuated by aggressive love-making and cruel beatings – that he had formerly so much despised in Batís Caffó. The lighthouse now stands as a sorry, ironic symbol to the objectives of enlightenment that have typically shaped so much European activity overseas. The narrator, who has tended to think of himself – in contradistinction to his co-inhabitant – as the emblem of civilization and who, from the author’s perspective, has been used to outline the position of a more enlightened or liberal anthropology, has clearly failed to bring Aneris within his implicit project of cultural development. Worse still, he himself regresses to the type of possessive egocentrism of the caveman that had been personified by the previous lighthouse keeper.

The story thus comes full circle. A relief boat eventually arrives but the narrator refuses to exchange the prison bars of his insular existence for the native land and European society that he believes has failed him: ‘Un home que havia escollit el desterrament al desordre, i que ja no seria capaç de resistir el viatge invers’ (298). Doubtlessly awaiting the same fate as his predecessor, he watches on passively as the weather official who has been sent to replace him embarks on the exactly the same journey as he himself had taken a year previously.

How should we interpret this ending that manufactures what is described in the publicity notice of the French edition as ‘une histoire parfaitement cyclique’? (Sánchez Piñol 2004) Does it encourage us to read the narrative as a fable of the eternal warlike nature of humanity and, as Luan Gains has it in his online review, ‘a provocative study of the cyclical nature of civilization’?

In this context we might take up the invitation to follow the rather heavily signposted trail to Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1922) – a trail that once again underscores the reflexivity of Sánchez Piñol’s writing. To what extent could this anthropological study, written using methods that are now derided and at a time when the civilizing mission of Europe had not yet been

brought seriously into question, offer a key to this novel of a twenty-first century anthropologist?

In *The Golden Bough*, described ambivalently by the narrator as either 'una genialitat del pensament o una insubstància magnífica' (21), Frazer explores the ancient legend of the priest-king of Nemi who was ritually slain by his successor. It is a story of cyclical violence and deposition that would appear to be analogous to the rotation of lighthouse keepers on Sánchez Piñol's Atlantic island. Moreover, Frazer's comparative approach to his anthropological subject seems to encourage such a parallel for he saw the curious rite of the *rex nemorensis* as but one instance of a more fundamental dynamic of death and rebirth shared by ancient and modern cultures throughout the world

However, Frazer's objective in drawing together diverse cultures within a single interpretative framework was strongly directed by what has since been exposed as a Eurocentric imperialist ideology that made him look down on what he saw as primitive cultures and their fallacious beliefs. To use *The Golden Bough* in any straightforward way as a framework for interpreting *La pell freda* would therefore seem highly problematic. One particular aspect of the classical myth explored in this highly influential study, nonetheless, merits highlighting in relation to Sánchez Piñol's narrative. The contest against the 'king of the grove' was said to have been only open to escaped *slaves* and not to freemen. This, I suggest, helps foreground the importance of precisely those pages that are oddly omitted from the English translation – pages which give the story of the struggle for control of the lighthouse a far more specific historical significance.

The thrust of the back-story of the narrator's upbringing in Ireland during the struggle for independence after the Great War is to bring Sánchez Piñol's otherwise apparently timeless desert-island fiction firmly within the context of European colonialism and its ongoing ramifications in a postcolonial age. Although the conflict between the lighthouse keeper and the narrator takes place on an island half way round the world, the historical location outlined in Chapter 2 gives significance to the Austrian and Irish backgrounds of the two protagonists: the former might be understood as representing

the ways of the old, repressive European empires and the latter as evoking a country which had just achieved freedom from the imperial yoke. Poignantly, it is their shared political history rather than their common humanity which renders them unable to break the colonial cycle of brutality and move forwards.

The narrator explains how, following the departure of the British from his native soil, he had discovered that the newly empowered Irish leaders were no less oppressive than their predecessors. He had fought for his country because he wanted a fairer society, but the new regime made it evident that it was only interested in power as an end in itself. He concludes:

Per tant, l'expulsió anglesa havia de ser el pròleg d'un món diferent, més amable, més equitatiu. En canvi, els dirigents de la nova Irlanda es limitaven a reemplaçar els noms dels ocupants pels seus. Van canviar els colors de l'opressió, res més [...] i, per tant vaig optar per escapar-me a un món sense homes. (43-45)

As depicted here, the history of Britain's first colony offers a paradigmatic illustration of political patterns that have been repeated throughout the world in the wake of decolonization, not least in Africa, the geographical space of Sánchez Piñol's professional focus. In the words of the narrator, reflecting on the unedifying conclusion to the Irish struggle for power: 'Tot demostrava que els homes eren esclaus d'una mecànica invisible, però destinada a reproduir-se' (44). Given such a despairing conclusion, can there be any hope? As far as the narrator is concerned, there is none. He is left chained to a past that sentences him to solitary exile for the rest of his days. He is disillusioned with society and, as we have already seen, he rejects the collective wisdom represented by his books by burning them. And his position remains unchanged at the end of the tale where he again devalues all forms of scholarship, countering the French captain's boast that scholarship had moved on since the composition of *The Golden Bough* with the observation: 'Uns homes que, mentre ell parlava dels cims de l'intel·lecte denigraven tot el que tocaven [...] si tinguéssim una balança el reptaria a posar tots els seus llibres en un platet i l'Aneris en l'altre' (228-229). The narrator thus cynically

decries the value of civilization; but at the same time, island life also fails to offer him a safe place of retreat, let alone an idyllic Rousseauvian return to nature.

As a Catalan, part of a collective emerging from a long history of repressive centralist control, Sánchez Piñol is no doubt highly sympathetic to his anonymous narrator's youthful commitment to the Irish cause. One might also speculate that having studied the succession of local dictatorships in post-colonial Africa, he might also identify with the narrator's subsequent disillusionment with nationalist uprisings which have often been the only form of resistance open to those oppressed by colonists, both inside and outside Europe, but which have typically failed to inaugurate fairer regimes.

Yet his response to the world around him and to his own position within that world is ultimately very different from that of his anonymous narrator, despite various points that they might have in common. Whereas the narrator turns his back on the society of men and their writings, Sánchez Piñol turns instead to writing his own book. But why, as an anthropologist, should he have chosen to write a book of this particular kind?

The answer might be provided by the deliberation of another anthropologist, Michael Taussig. Author of *Shamanism, colonialism and the wild man* (1991), Taussig identifies a crucial problem that faces anyone wanting to write against political oppression: that is to say, how to communicate terror effectively when it is simply not enough to try to tell things exactly as they are or were. Conventional historical accounts of the dark side of empire, however carefully researched and underpinned by facts and figures, deprive terror of its very essence by trying to bring it within the structures of reason. What is needed instead are 'special modes of presentation whose aim is to disrupt the imagery of natural order through which, in the name of the real, power exercises its dominion' (Taussig 1991: xiv).

What is particularly pertinent for an understanding of *La pell freda* is that Taussig illustrates his argument with reference to the anti-colonial writing of Joseph Conrad and Roger Casement, figures of special interest also to Sánchez Piñol. The Catalan author has openly acknowledged the influence of the former on his writing; the importance of Casement becomes evident as he becomes a character

in his second novel, set appropriately in the Congo. But readers may well catch a glimpse of Casement's profile in the anonymous narrator of *La pell freda*, not least on account of their shared history of militant support for the Irish cause.

Moreover, an interest common to Conrad and Casement – and perhaps every anthropologist – was a fascination with distant lands and peoples. But already sensitised by their own position as exiles or quasi-exiles from imperialised European societies (Poland and Ireland) they were also violently repulsed by their first-hand witnessing of colonial abuses in Africa in the 1890s.

Conrad's response to the terror of the rubber boom in the Congo was to write *Heart of Darkness*; that of Casement, on the other hand, took the form of what Taussig describes as the 'studied realism' of staid, sober reports prepared for the Foreign Office. These documents, further doctored by officials in order to excise any remaining hints of emotion, probably did far more than all Conrad's art to denounce colonial brutality in the Congo; yet, for Taussig, they also illustrate the problems of what he describes as 'objectivist fiction', which he further explains as 'the contrived manner by which objectivity is created, and its profound dependence on the magic of style to make this trick of truth work' (1991: 10-11). He points out how, in stark contrast, Conrad used the very different medium of the novel to work powerfully with the *mythic* dimension of imperialism. In *Heart of Darkness* the terror is not explained away 'as in the forlorn attempts of social science':

Instead it is held out as something you have to try out for yourself, feeling your way deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness until you do *feel* what is at stake, the madness of the passion. This is very different from moralizing from the sidelines or setting forth the contradictions involved, as if the type of knowledge with which we are concerned were somehow not power and knowledge in one and hence immune to such procedures. (37)

In transforming *Robinson Crusoe* into a horror story, Sánchez Piñol likewise brings readers to experience the terror of a colonial situation for themselves. And he does this, I suggest, precisely by playing

between the two positions of the objective realist and the novelist that for Taussig are represented by Casement and Conrad.

If Defoe's narrative has been often hailed as the first modern novel, this is above all on account of its style of objectivity that provides the illusion of a transparency of perception of the outside world (Loxley 1990: 6 & 84). The narrator of *La pell freda*, confessing that he has little taste for poetry, adopts a similar language, purporting to tell things just as he saw them, drawing periodically on his journals for greater immediacy. These journals remind us, moreover, that this style of objectivity is not just a feature of the realist novel; the latter imitates the 'truth discourse' deployed by many non-fictional disciplines in the empirical and social sciences where authority is cultivated through what Anthony Pagden (1993: 51-87) has discussed in his chapter on the 'autoptic imagination' which gives rise to a rhetoric which seeks to command the reader's belief by virtue of the claim that what is reported has been witnessed first hand.

This style of objective realism is exploited in *La pell freda*. At the same time, however, it is turned against itself. In the first place this process is in fact set in motion directly by the narrator himself. Perhaps because the latter comes to realize that even through his more liberal endeavours he cannot appropriate the viewpoint of the Citauca to his own rational gaze, he has also come to glimpse that his way of seeing things may be rather more limited and subjective than he had once thought. Sceptically challenging the equation between seeing and knowing that is fundamental to the authority of empirical knowledge, he warns the reader that his account may well be unreliable: 'Això és el que jo podia veure. Però, el paisatge que veu un home, ulls enfora, acostuma a ser el reflex del que amaga, ulls endins' (16).

The narrator thus encourages us to interpret events on the island as a sort of hallucination and he renews this invitation in the final pages of the novel when he suggests once again that the monsters are somehow a figment of the disturbed imagination. The protagonist tells the young man who has come to replace him, for example, to look into the water and tell what he saw, causing him to collapse 'com un ninot desmanegat' and to begin to cry. 'Podia [jo] endevinar el que havia vist. Naturalment que podia. Si fos un d'aquells homes capaços de veure una altra cosa mai no hauria arribat a l'illa' (305).

However, as is evident from the reception of *La pell freda*, such rationalizations are not enough to contain comfortably the fear that is generated within the narrative by the monsters or the monstrous; they do not neutralize the power of the novel as a horror story. Readers may be told in so many words that they are entering a phantasmagorical space, yet precisely due to the authoritative style of reporting used by the narrator they are nonetheless still forced to experience the terrors of this inner landscape as objectively real. They are no better placed than the narrator to understand the minds and motives of the Citauca which/who remain forever inscrutable; locked within the narrator's perspective, readers have to relive his nightmares personally and finally share his sense of isolation.

In this way, Sánchez Piñol recharges the traditional motif of the desert island with the experiences of postmodernity and late capitalism which, at least according to certain commentators, have resulted in the loss of a sense of community and belonging, atomizing people, alienating them against from each other as theorists like Jameson (1991) have elucidated. Indeed, by dint of its highly allusive style which shapes the text with reference to an eclectic mix of both 'high' and 'low' genres, by dint also of its own successful integration within the mass commercial culture industry, *La pell freda* itself might well be classified as a typical postmodern cultural product and therefore potentially accused of further contributing to this sense of placelessness and fragmentation.

At the same time, however, it is a text that also actively engages with – and goes some way towards embracing – the influences of postmodern theory: as we have seen, the scientific, universalistic explanations of earlier generations of ethnographers, initially adopted by the narrator, are brought into question and his subsequent narratorial scepticism coupled with the many authorial games bring readers instead into a much more radically reflexive relationship with the discourses of both narrative fiction and also of anthropology.

Arguably, however, Sánchez Piñol does not leave his readers enfolded within a reflexive gaze that offers nothing other than nihilism and despair. And here, once again, it is helpful to refer to the example of Taussig. The latter is not just preoccupied with the formal problem

of how to convey the terror of political oppression; drawing inspiration from the practice of shamanism, he also sets out to show how terror can also be mobilized for healing. David Stoll explains that Taussig's own writing constitutes a sort of literary *yage* experience. The first effect of this hallucinogenic liquid on truth-seekers is to make them vomit and lose control of their bowels. The violence of the purge then tends to be accompanied by images of danger such as wild animals and devils and the *yage* drinker may fear that he is about to die. But these fantastical images drawn out from the collective unconscious can, under the shaman's guidance, constitute a magical healing experience. Stoll helpfully points up from his reading of Taussig how "Terror and healing can therefore come out of the same "epistemic murk." Most importantly, moreover: "Taussig believes that, just as shamans exorcize evil from their patients, their example can help us exorcize the demons of our own culture and history" (1997: 9).

In a similar way we might also suggest that Sánchez Piñol offers up the hallucinatory experience of reading *La pell freda* as a type of purge, a way of encouraging his readers to come to terms with their own problematic place within the history of colonization and decolonization. The relevance of such speculation to the particular case of minority nations is thus self-evident. But in so doing the Catalan writer self-consciously draws on a series of familiar discourses that are so embedded within the European tradition that they are indeed more than 'a little clichéd'; but allowing what is habitually oppressed and repressed by such discourses to re-emerge in the form of the uncanny, Sánchez Piñol transforms these *topoi* into a profoundly unsettling yet potentially healing narrative that enriches both the tradition of the novel and that of anthropology by exploring and exposing the possibilities and limitations of each.

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