

“Anti-novel” as Ethics: Lindsey Collen’s *The Rape of Sita*¹

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When *The Rape of Sita* came out in 1993 it was immediately attacked by a group of fundamentalists and by the State.² The main objection, from people who had not even read the novel, was to the title itself, simply for its linking the Hindu goddess Sita, symbol of chastity and purity, to the word “rape.” As Vicram Ramharai notes in his review of the numerous reactions in the press, the novel was hardly ever treated as being literature (11), by articles that say more about their authors than about the novel itself (14). In other words, all these social, religious and political reactions to Collen’s novel were “extra-literary.”

Although Collen’s *engagé* stories focus around political struggles, literature—and this has to be stressed in this context—is definitely not politics.³ However, I shall argue here that literature can be a form of social action through its ‘ethical’ dimension, which is both pragmatic and subversive. I shall take ‘ethics’ to mean the search for the ‘good life,’ posing the crucial question ‘How *ought* a life be lived?’ It is this sense that prevails in the contemporary turn to ethics in literature and in literary criticism,⁴ strongly influenced by Levinasian ethics, which rejects totality and privileges openness based on an “ethical relation,” as an encounter with the other.⁵ Now, if it is true that the *ought* which lies “at the dead centre of ethics” (Harpham 18) refers to an objective obligation independent of the opinion of the speaker, the speaker nevertheless has to be implied in what he says for his discourse to have an ethical impact. The tone or voice in the text, far from being objective, actually corresponds to the content of what is being said: What is put forward has actually been experienced and calls forth the experience of the reader by the tone, by the way of saying, which is

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the *ethos* of the text.⁶ Therein lies the pragmatic aspect of ethical discourse, namely making language a form of action. Ethics also has a subversive aspect.

Indeed, ethics differs from morality: morality is associated with deontology, with upholding an official system of rules of behaviour, whereas ethics is associated with the undetermined, with questioning. Morality is associated with a will to domination, whereas ethics “operates a kind of play within morality, holds it open” (Gibson 15); morality is associated with consensus and closure, whereas ethics introduces dissent and openness. Ethics privileges “the neither/nor, rather than the either/or” (Gibson 44) and is turned to the future, calling for change. Indeed, in her interview in *Triplopia*, Collen says she uses literature to reflect on concrete situations, to pose moral dilemmas, privileging “reciprocal” relationships rather than “cut-and-dried moral regulation” and as a way of “getting out of moral straight-jackets,” adding that literature is for her a way of sharing experiences and a mode of openness towards the “other.” Thus, literature itself becomes a “resignifying practice,”⁷ with the immediate pragmatic effect of re-describing the world from a different point of view.

I would like to suggest that *The Rape of Sita* is part of this postmodern turn to ethics, which uses language itself to make a political comment and suggest a new way of looking at history and at past events. To examine and review the story of rape, Collen re-writes an episode of the Hindu national epic poem, the *Ramayana*, which is re-contextualised in the secular and patriarchal Mauritian reality of the 1980s. In this re-contextualisation Sita is raped—contrarily to the Hindu goddess, who is saved by supernatural intervention. As Collen explains in *Triplopia*, it is the “patriarchal structure” itself with its rigid hierarchy that makes abuse of power possible:

what allows abuses like rape to exist at all [...] is something that is soaked in the whole fabric of society, and that when you add up all the insidious and often invisible aspects of patriarchy, then you end up with a balance of

forces between man and woman, which allows a man, if he wants to, to violate a woman, and to know that he can get away with it.

Intertextual relations with some of the famous literary texts of Western civilisation, especially T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), are used to further challenge the established social order. But, *The Rape of Sita* not only reverses points of view as it re-contextualises an old story. It actually re-tells a story of rape differently, 'doing things with words' in the use of writing as a resignifying practice. This is the aspect I shall focus on in this article, examining how *The Rape of Sita* calls for a change of attitudes and of mentality through its very narrative structure and symbolism.

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The chosen narrative technique, based on the oral tradition, is here significant. In addition to being introduced by a poem, the story is framed by a preface, in which the narrator, Iqbal, explains that the introductory poem is written by a woman called "Time." What follows is the written version of an oral account: Iqbal tells the story of the rape of Sita, the modern counterpart of the Hindu goddess. The narrative technique is thus inspired from that of the *Ramayana* itself, which was transmitted by several narrators before being fixed by writing, then translated, rewritten and reinterpreted by many poets and writers, resulting in countless versions of the same story. Nevertheless, as Collen explains in *Triplopia*, her narrative technique is also based on African traditions: "The tradition in which Iqbal is telling this story is the one I relate more to African traditions, both as I know them from my childhood in South Africa, and also as they live on in Mauritius." Indeed, the novel respects certain universal conventions of oral story telling.⁸

Iqbal's story is introduced by the characteristic formula: "Once upon a time," which is followed by "'Sirandann? Sirandann?' I sing out. [...] 'Sanpek!' comes the reponse" (RS 7). These ritual words, which open a session of oral story telling in Mauritius, are the equivalent of the

West-Indian "Crik, Crak." This opening formula is repeated and then immediately followed by the first again: "Once upon a time there was a woman called Sita" (RS 7). Such opening formulas have several functions: they introduce a break with the real world and invite the audience to enter into another world, into an imaginary universe; they announce the passage into another time and space, into an old story; they proclaim that this is a story *passed on* by others; they make sure that the audience is receptive, preparing the way for a dialogue between the story-teller and his audience.

Several narrative levels are present and the text keeps moving from one to the other.⁹ Iqbal's narrative of the story of Sita—as told to an audience—is regularly interrupted by accounts of the story-telling situation itself; Iqbal, the story-teller, typically enters into dialogue with his audience, who keeps interrupting and asking questions: "There is no limit to the interruptions allowed to my story. This is normal. It's a story. You have your rights. So now you want to know [...]" (RS 41). The written story is also interrupted by passages in which Iqbal, the narrator, directly addresses the reader to pose moral dilemmas in what could be termed 'asides'—"Here, dear reader, is the second dilemma" (RS 56). Thus, audience and readers are not mere spectators, but they become participants and players in the action. Moreover, Iqbal regularly explains to his audience that he is only telling stories told to him by others, situating himself in a chain of stories—"But it isn't my story. It's the story told to me by Jojo" (RS 70); or: "So Sita told me" (RS 99). In addition to moving in and out of Sita's mind, he sometimes hands the narrative voice over to another character, embedding another's oral story into his own narrative.¹⁰ The choice of such a multiple-levelled conversational method associated to the conventions of oral story-telling can be linked to the contemporary turn to ethics. As Andrew Gibson explains, such merging of story and narration, or of story and discourse, is the reverse of rhetoric, if it is understood to be linked to the will to totalize and master, and "closes off all possibility of dialogue with the other in her or his irreducible difference"; on the contrary, the dialogic structure

chosen “maintains the ethical relation with the other and the possibility of unsaying what is said” (Gibson 59), forcing the reader to cooperate.

Oral story telling, as an essentially dialogic form, is situated between creation and tradition, between memory and invention. A story is never perfect. The teller has to re-tell a true story anew each time. And it has to be different each time (cf. *RS* 8). Thus Iqbal incorporates the visions of others into his own to make a new story. He quotes what he told his audience: “I’m telling a very old story. Ancient. Only it is my duty, my bounden duty, to make it more true.” Then he further explains to the reader that: “For every one story-teller, as you and I know him, there are two trainees. One has to remember the story as it was, or as it is. And the other who has to retell it anew, and never the same. I am the second kind” (*RS* 8). Thus, in Althusserian terms, Iqbal is not only “interpellated”, or assigned a role—he can also “counter-interpellate.”¹¹ As a subject who is “constituted by the language” he speaks, and language is also the “condition of possibility” for him as a speaking subject (Butler 28). He thus “counter-signs,” adding to his ongoing subjection a “self-subjectification.”¹² Iqbal illustrates that to listen and read is to take place—not to subject oneself or the other to forceful allotment but to produce oneself or the other through replacement. He invites the reader to be active, to counter-sign in his turn, as he hands over his story at the end of the novel. The text he finally offers to the reader becomes an “unpredictable and virtual meeting point between the reading ‘I’ and the read ‘you,’ the meeting point of an ‘us’ [...] brought about by [...] a sudden, unexpected flow of boundaries.”¹³ The oral tale usually has a social and cultural function, being a way of transmitting values or of challenging accepted values. *The Rape of Sita* thus re-writes the story of rape differently, unearthing the secret functioning of patriarchy and calling for change.

Iqbal’s digressive narrative strategy, which he compares to a “bunch of grapes” (*RS* preface and 197), thus challenges traditional narrative methods in more ways than one, and corresponds to what Gibson

calls the "anti-novel," a form particularly suited to ethical questioning: "An ethics of the novel which emphasises multiplicity and the movement of the dissolution of cognitive horizons will tend logically to give a significant place to works in which the form of the novel itself seems to dissolve: anti-novels" (91). There is here no real source of authority, no real author, no creator, no fixed origin, only a chain of memories. There are no fixed answers, only an ongoing chain of questions. The hero is caught up in a chain of events, which he does not master. The implied spectator/reader, who is free to interpret and to pose questions, plays an active role and can influence the course of the tale.

Moreover, what Gibson calls an "ethics of dissolution" operates in the novel through "repeated and radical interruption of given horizons" (92-93). The form of the novel itself seems to dissolve as, "both text and reading are ceaselessly troubled by an irreducible alterity, an orientation away from the past and unity of being to the future and the multiplicity of becoming that nonetheless repeats a past in a certain way" (Gibson 99). The narrative movement forward is also a recoil back into the text, as Sita dives into her unconscious to recover the lost moment. In addition to the movement back and forth in time, there are constant deviations to the double mainstream story: that of Sita trying to remember her rape, and the actual story of the rape. These digressions serve to fill in information on other characters in relation to whom Sita herself is defined, e.g. her mother, Dharma, the Tarquin family, to pose moral questions and offer 'philosophical' comments about life,¹⁴ and to fill in historical details.¹⁵ Chapters are replaced by a proliferation of instances of varying length separated by typographical marks. Narrative summary alternates with signalled or unsignalled quoted dialogue and passages in traditional internal monologue or in stream of consciousness,¹⁶ all punctuated by short sentences and groups of words, generating a broken rhythm, both forward moving yet pulled back in time, as different voices and times merge. Italics are conventionally employed to stress particular words or to signal to the reader the alien origin of words (here quotations or

words in Creole), but all Iqbal's narratorial intrusions are also thoroughly italicized. As Frédéric Regard explains in his article on Jeanette Winterson, entitled "A Philosophy of Magical Rhetoric":

The italics simultaneously frame the character and forbid the reader to grasp his full existence. [...] a typeface of the sloping kind, the italics visually convey the impression that written language is [...] always in the process of becoming other. [...] The italics are eternally leaning towards an unknown future and, at the same time, towards an unknown past; [...] The italics magically produce the alien spirit in the very act of enunciation. (118-19)

Thus Iqbal's moral dilemmas gesture towards a new way of being, as his narrative stands against a fixed sequence in order to reenergize other ways of being, other styles of being. Indeed, he ends his narrative by calling for change: "Such are the hopes of Iqbal for another story. Another history. In the future" (RS 197).

Thus writing, like telling, becomes action. The performativity of the text—the words produce an effect, accomplish what they say—is enhanced by the *ethos* of the text, which is particularly obvious in an oral story, whereby the narrator calls for the reader to experience what is said. This also accounts for Iqbal in his narrative. Indeed, in addition to the moral dilemmas posed by him to the reader, the introductory poem—entitled "Time"—puts forward ethical questions and calls for action, directly appealing to the reader's sense of responsibility: "You oh human / [...] Are poised in eternal dilemma / What action for you / [...] Would be right? / What action for you / Would be wrong, / [...] Will this act / Make history progress / Or allow us / To slip back / Into the mud of the past?" In *Triplopia*, Collen explains that: "some of the assumptions about Time, about moral dilemmas, about life, lean heavily on what I see as an Indian perspective. [...] time and memory are central to the novel and its story of rape." She adds that Time acts as "a reminder of the human situation, our intense consciousness, our moral responsibility because of this consciousness, and we are situated in the eternal changes imposed by an amoral relentless Time." In other words, consciousness leads to the moral responsibility to act and ordinary people are urged to stop and pose the question as to what to

do in a given concrete situation, rather than simply unquestioningly remaining in a moral strait-jacket.

Furthermore, the narrator himself/herself actually experiences what is said. According to Aristotle, in classical rhetoric the tone of what is said is as important as the content of the speech. If an orator wants to be persuasive, he must adopt the attitude and tone of what he is saying (see *Rhetoric* II, 1377b). The *ethos* of a text belongs to the voice of the narrator. But, instead of being considered as a real person, as an essential human subject, source and origin of discourse, the narrator is a textual effect, what Dominique Maingueneau calls the "Locuteur-L" (*Éléments* 80-81). The "Locuteur-L" is the one who actually adopts the tone and attitude of what he is saying, who actually feels what he says. For example, he is the one who says "phew!" in sign of actually felt relief, rather than the one who speaks about himself by saying "I feel relieved" (and who may be lying). In *The Rape of Sita*, both Iqbal and Sita have a very strong *ethos*. Sita herself experiences the rape she writes about in her article. She becomes all the women she quotes, as she addresses "Mowsi" ("moi aussi" or "me too"): "Oh, Mowsi, Mowsi, you are Everywoman" (RS 194). She is herself a political activist, belonging to a long line of rebel women, thus adopting the attitude she calls for. As for Iqbal, he announces at the beginning of his story that he "must almost become the heroine," and undergo a "metamorphosis" or "reincarnation" (RS 8). Indeed, at the end of the novel he announces that the transformation has occurred.

Iqbal, the narrator, plays a key symbolical role in this ethical turn. Indeed, nicknamed "Iqbal the Umpire" by Dharma, he is both absent and present. In Collen's own terms, "he is the most 'insider' person in the novel, and yet an 'outsider' to the central myth. He is also an outsider to the sex war" (*Triplopia*). His role is fundamentally one of mediation between different peoples' realities—he says he "used to stand around a lot, [...], just watching and listening" (RS preface). He is named after Sir Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), a foremost Muslim philosopher, poet, political leader and visionary, who preached a life of action—the sacrifice of one's ego for great causes—

rather than ascetic resignation and who insisted on the universality of human problems, which transcend all barriers of race, religion, etc. Iqbal also resembles *The Waste Land's* Tiresias, of whom Eliot says in his notes to the poem: "although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' [Tiresias] is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest" (note 218). In his poem, Eliot fuses characters into each other to give a sense of the oneness of all experience and the unity of all periods; he merges Christian symbolism, fertility rites and Eastern religions to call for spiritual renewal; and he ends on Sanskrit words which call for surrender to something outside the self.¹⁷ Such a reading invites a comparison of the role of Iqbal with that of Tiresias through his link with Ton Tipyer. Ton Tipyer, whom Iqbal describes as "the chorus" or "a wise man" (RS 41, 55), keeps cropping up in the story of Sita, whom he knows intimately; Ton Tipyer, Dharma and Iqbal are described as the "allies" of women by Sita (RS 193); Ton Tipyer was brought up and taught the *Mahabharata* by Hanumanjee, the watchman of a sand quarry—a metaphor for time (RS 63)—named after the monkey king guardian of society; he passed on his religious and political knowledge to Sita (RS 92-3), who in turn taught Iqbal to write.¹⁸ Ton Tipyer—in French: Tonton Petit Pierre—was a stonemason and was Iqbal's "god" when he was a child. Brought up in the sands of time, he is a carver of human destiny—"he meant transformation of nature [...] birth of new life out of rock" (RS 41). His name echoes that of the Biblical Peter—"Tu es Pierre et sur cette pierre je bâtirai mon Église" (Matthew 16:18)—and he is transformed into Krishna, as he changes clothes, discards bad drinking habits, begins playing the flute, is jokingly said to soon "be down at the stream watching the women washing and bathing" (RS 39) and looks "blue in the night light" (RS 196).¹⁹ Taking into account the belief that the legend of Krishna has its origin in the life of Christ, the religious symbolism of *The Rape of Sita* is linked to a call for openness to the other and, hence, implies the call for political action.

On a still deeper symbolic level, Iqbal, like Tiresias in whom "the two sexes meet,"²⁰ is both man and woman. The phrase, always in

italics, "*Iqbal was a man who thought he was a woman,*" is a leitmotiv in the text, being repeated no less than twenty-two times, with three slight variations—"who'd rather be" (RS 86); "who knew he was" (RS 88); "Wished he was" (RS 90). Iqbal tells the reader that his phrase, taken from the Beatles' song "Get back"—"*Jojo was a man who thought he was a woman*"—keeps running around inside his head (RS 8). It crops up when the events he narrates either make him feel ashamed of being a man or make him feel admiration for women. At the end of his narrative he stops singing it, explaining: "Progress has [...] been made. I am a man now. And I am a woman" (RS 197). This blurring of gender categories seems to be typical of a certain type of postmodern fiction,²¹ and the ethical emphasis on respectful non-violent encounter with alterity is embodied by the figure of the androgyne,²² i.e. by the narrator Iqbal.

According to Gibson, such "a destabilization of gender categories in the framing narrator is inseparable from a destabilization of narrational categories" (47), which, instead of being hierarchically opposed, are reversed, and then incorporated one into the other. Such privileging of "the neither/nor, rather than the either/or," counters the strategy of domination that pits the "I" against the "Other" (32). It moreover challenges the "logic of binary oppositions [that] is also a logic of subordination and domination,"²³ as the "ego is deposed [...] and enters into [...] dialogue" (25). When Iqbal, through sensibility as openness to others, reaches the conclusion, "We will all be man and we will all be woman. [...] And then we will be free. [...] And then we will become equal" (RS 197), she/he seems to echo Levinasian ethics, which "opens a breach in the present and looks towards the future" (Gibson 40).

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Collen's re-writing of an Indian myth in a contemporary Mauritian context from the point of view of the underprivileged is also a revision of the patriarchal social structures that allow rape as abuse of

power to be possible in the first place. It moreover implies a plea for a change of attitude and of mentality. In Judith Butler's terms, "repetition [is] both the way that trauma is repeated but also the way in which it breaks with the historicity to which it is in thrall" (37). Consciousness may lead to moral responsibility, which, then, in turn leads to action. But the novel is not simply a political manifesto—it works as an act of language, which generates "another story" (RS 197). If rape is the "encoded memory of a trauma [...] that lives in language and is carried by language" and "if the subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that she or he speaks, then language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression" (Butler, 36, 28), repetition with a difference can break free from the binary strictures of established power and from its traditional narrative methods, suggesting the possibility of reconfiguration and resignification.

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NOTES

¹Lindsey Collen was born in South Africa in 1948. Married to a Mauritian, she lives in Mauritius and all her novels are concerned with Mauritian reality. Collen is a political and human rights activist, founder of the left wing party, *Lalit* (which means "struggle" in Creole and "beautiful" in Hindi) and active in the *Muvman Liberasyon Fam* (Women's Liberation Movement). *Lalit* and *Muvman Liberasyon Fam* are both in Mauritian Creole and mean in French, respectively, *La Lutte* and *Mouvement pour la Libération des Femmes*. *The Rape of Sita* (1993) is Collen's second novel. She has also written: *There is a Tide* (1991), *Misyon Garson* (1996)—a novel written in Mauritian Creole—*Getting Rid of It* (1997), *Mutiny* (2001), *Boy* (2004)—an English adaptation of *Misyon Garson*, which won the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Africa Region. She is writing (April 2005) a new novel, *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours*. *The Rape of Sita* won the 1994 Commonwealth Writers' Prize in the category of African literature and was long-listed for the Orange Prize. The Commonwealth Writers' Prize is divided, in a first stage, between four regions: (i) Africa, (ii) the Caribbean and Canada, (iii) Eurasia (Europe and Asia) and (iv) South-East Asia and the South Pacific. The final winner is selected from the four winners.

²See Vicram Ramharai’s article on the reception of the novel for a clear and thorough review of reactions in the newspapers.

³Literature and politics do function according to different temporalities—the political has a far more immediate and tangible effect, as is illustrated by the immediate social effects of Collen’s novel—, not only does literature hold in abeyance the convictions and certitudes which are so crucial to political functioning (see Gibson 5, 85), but literature indeed exists on a different plane to its object. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle points out in *L’Emprise des signes*, the link between literature and politics concerns neither the author’s political action, nor the text’s reflection of reality, but “it is deeper and concerns language” (244; my translation). The political is a disruption or reconfiguration of the order of what is visible or perceptible. Like politics, the act of writing is understood as the disruption of an established order that claims to be total. According to Rancière, literature breaks up consensus by “making an effect in reality,” by “reconfiguring sensibility” (*Le Partage du sensible* 62; he writes: “Les énoncés politiques ou littéraires font effet dans le réel. [...] Ils reconfigurent la carte du sensible.”). It does so by what Rancière calls an introduction of a “he/she” into the two “Is,”—the subject who writes and the subject who tells—(“L’Inadmissible” 142; “La littérature [...] défait le consensus en faisant traverser le je qui consent, convient et contracte par un il.”). It works through what Gibson in *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* calls “the power to be affected,” whereby sensibility is taken to mean “susceptibility or openness to the event” (164), i.e. to a concrete social context—rather than a return to a form of emotivism that is recalcitrant to the intellect—thereby “put[ting] sensibility back into sense” (167).

⁴See Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*; Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Getting it Right*; Andrew Gibson, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*; and Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker (eds.), *Negotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy and Theory*.

⁵See especially *Totality and Infinity* and *Time and the Other*.

⁶See Maingueneau, *Nouvelles tendances en analyses du discours* 31-33.

⁷See Butler, *Excitable Speech* 98.

⁸I have taken my definition of oral story-telling essentially from Nicole Belmont’s *Poétique du conte: Essai sur le conte de tradition orale*.

⁹In *Figures III* (see 225 ff.), translated by J. E. Lewin as *Narrative Discourse* (see 212 ff.), Genette makes the distinction between story and discourse, between the contents of a story and the actual telling of the story (the enunciation or narration): “any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed” (*Narrative Discourse* 228). Genette regards “the transition from one narrative level to the other,” for example the intrusion of the narrator into his diegetic universe, as a metalepsis (*Narrative Discourse* 234-35).

¹⁰For example, Jojo’s story of Dharma, *RS* 71-75.

¹¹In his famous essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser provides an example of a scene of interpellation: as the policeman hails the passerby with "hey you there," the one who recognises himself turns around, thereby acquiring a certain identity. The address thus brings the subject into being.

¹²This may even be regarded as a form of "self-subjunctivication." As Frédéric Regard explains in "Autobiography as Linguistic Incompetence: Notes on Derrida's Reading of Joyce and Cixous," Jacques Derrida, speaking of H  l  ne Cixous in a conference at Cerisy, sketches his own line of approach. Derrida uses the French word *puisse*, the subjunctive of the verb *pouvoir*, to signify the magic of wishful thinking that he calls the "might of the may," which is brought about when one interprets a text. The subject is thus "subjunctified" at the same time as he is "subjected."

¹³Regard, "Autobiography as Linguistic Incompetence" 14.

¹⁴E.g., "They were separated. She got this information from Rowan. She remembered this discovery that they were separated very vividly now, and that it had alarmed her. Beyond reasonable measure. Shows how much we know and don't know what we know: otherwise why was she alarmed beyond measure. [...] *This may be the place, the very point where Sita made an error. [...] This may very well be the break-off point. Here may be the culpability. Inasmuch as there could possibly be guilt*" (132-33; emphasis in original).

¹⁵For example: "We now celebrate the organization's birth as having been 11th April, 1982. [...] It was a Sunday, and on Sunday, 11th April, at the Socialist Party's delegates assembly, we had announced our collective resignation from the Socialist Party, on the ground that we didn't agree with the leaders' politics of what they pompously but accurately called New Social Consensus with the bosses, nor with the allegiance that we had bitterly fought to prevent, with the right-wing populist party of Huriasing, the Social Democrat Party" (53-54).

¹⁶"he or she sita for there is no he nor she but only both sita all alone lying on sand-dune between sea and land in hidden hollow under sole *badam* tree hiding sun no cloud she sita lying naked half asleep shade from leaves caressing his or her body letting heat and cool dance on his or her tummy and hand of one side touches nipple of the other which stand up and hand of other side turns lips of yoni inside out for sun to see for sea air to breathe thereinto and to cause rivers to flow thereoutof and on wet the sand and like time ever to be born from the universal woman round and round the clitoris round and round and eyes closed she or he loves oneself fully and comes" (78).

¹⁷See Brooks 80-86.

¹⁸"[...] Sita taught me to read and write when I was only three, writing in the sand at Rianbel" (Preface).

¹⁹Krishna is a reincarnation of the god Vishnu, preserver of the universe. The mischievous pranks of his youth, related in the *Mahabharata*, include his taking away the clothes of damsels bathing in the river and climbing up a tree till they came to him naked to recover them. He is represented with a flute in his hand and

is associated with the colour blue, blue being the symbol of peace in Hinduism; see *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology* 160 ff.

²⁰Cf. Eliot’s note 218 to the poem.

²¹I.e. the fiction where “gender is increasingly emerging, [...] as an activity, a performance, a becoming, or a site where identities may intersect, proliferate and undo one another” (Gibson 42).

²²This idea is central to Levinas’s thought and “finds its most potent illustration in the figure of the androgyne that refuses closure and in doing so vindicates the taking into account of the other” (Ganteau 236-37).

²³Benhabib qtd. in Parker 3.

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