Generic Displacement: Difference and Repetition in Anita Desai’s Indian Campus Novel

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This paper sets out to analyse *In Custody* in relation to the generic framework of the campus novel. Desai’s novel, in agreement with the laws of the genre, deals with the university as “a metaphor for the times” while treating academics according to the principle of desacralisation showing the ignoble in the noble. But *In Custody* is not built as a comic entertainment and its generic difference lies in its determination to show the transcendence of mediocrity in a prose which celebrates the poetry of the banal.

*In Custody* was published in 1984 just after Malcolm Bradbury’s exploration of the eastern European academic world in *Rates of Exchange* (1983) and Howard Jacobson’s polytechnic novel *Coming from Behind* (1983) and at the same time as David Lodge’s *Small World*, the campus novel gone globalised, and William Golding’s *The Paper Men*, a novel which, like Desai’s, portrays the relationships between a writer and an academic, but which, unlike Desai’s, privileges the point of view of the artist. The campus novel, also known as the academic novel (and sometimes as university fiction) was undeniably in vogue when Desai released her Indian version of an essentially Anglo-Saxon sub-genre. In this generic context the geographical translation to India appears hardly surprising considering that, besides the British and American locations, the academic novelists had already extended their field of investigation to the rest of Europe,1 to Egypt (D.J. Enright’s *Academic Year*, 1955) and, with Lodge, to Japan, Turkey and Australia. Similarly, the fictionalisation of Mirpore’s tiny Lala Ram Lal College seems to be inscribed in the logical continuity of the sub-genre which started with the Oxbridge colleges before moving to the redbrick universities (with Kingsley Amis, Lodge and Bradbury) and later to the polytechnics (with Tom Sharpe and Jacobson).

So from a western perspective, Desai’s novel represents a predictable contribution to a fictional domain which had started to spread worldwide: the Indian variation is almost a natural sprout of the campus novel’s generic growth. From an Indian perspective on the other hand, this particular generic choice inevitably seems questionable, external as it is to the national tradition. What this foreign frame allows Desai to achieve, nevertheless, is a double cross-fertilisation. On the one hand, the imported tradition provides a foreign pattern to accommodate domestic concerns, or rather an unfamiliar structure to organise familiar themes. On the other hand, through the appropriation of this overseas genre, Desai manages to procure new material for an established novelistic field, to hybridise, renew and enrich a western narrative practice, that is, to create, to coin a Rushdean phrase, a Delhi mix. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the mechanism, nature and consequences of these generic cross-fertilisations.

How is the university novel defined? For Proctor the genre is concerned with “the development of the university theme in fiction” (Proctor 3); for Carter the main generic condition is “that a significant part of each book’s action [be] centred in a university” (Carter 4); and Rossen contents herself with mentioning the portrayal of academic life as the constitutive feature of this type of fiction (Rossen 1). University fiction then is simply characterised by its academic referent which, it ought to be specified, concerns mainly the setting and

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1. For the French and German contributions to the academic novel see Bevan (1990).
the set of characters. *In Custody* has an academic protagonist, Deven Sharma, temporary lecturer at a private college, and its action is related to the hero’s repetitive departures from and inevitable returns to the university. Desai’s novel thus undeniably represents a contribution to the sub-genre of the university novel. I wish to stress from the outset that this does not mean that it is only a university novel. What the university novel purports to be and what *In Custody* aptly illustrates is the synecdochic value of academia. The part being organically linked to the whole, the specific context is to stand for the global context, and the academic microcosm is meant to be an image of the wider macrocosm. As Howard Kirk, the protagonist of Bradbury’s *The History Man*, puts it, the situation of the university is “a metaphor for the times” (Bradbury 16) and it stands for, “in encapsulated form, the history of modern times” (Bradbury 64). With its discussions of the hegemonic power of the sciences and the consequent decline of the humanities in the universities, *In Custody* seems particularly representative of a global conjuncture ruled by profitability. In such a context the hero’s poetic quest, which is by essence a disinterested and non-mercenary quest, acquires an especially topical and thought-provoking quality: how can such a non-profitmaking pursuit be carried out? Is the university (in the image of its society) refractory to such endeavours or on the contrary does it provide a favourable frame? It should perhaps also be added that Desai’s protagonist appears more typical of the common man than the average academic, because he is not shown cloistered in the privileges of an ivory tower but rather confronted with the terribly common problems of housing and economic subsistence. In the inclusion of the prosaic, pragmatic, everyday problems of life resides one of the specificities of Desai’s heterogeneous academic novel.

It is in the field of novelistic structure that the relations between university fiction and *In Custody* happen to be most fruitful. Keeping in mind that an episodic structure revolving around the key moments of academic life constitutes the guiding principle of the sub-genre (Gutleben 31-34), one is forced to acknowledge that Desai’s novel has apparently adopted that principle. The eleven chapters of *In Custody* are made up of successive episodes in the life of a temporary lecturer and several of these episodes touch directly upon academic life, namely a course taught by the protagonist, the annual Board meeting, the ritual college festivities, an interview with the Bursar, a meeting with the Head of department, and dinner with a colleague. It is during these ritual moments that Desai comes closest to the playful spirit of the campus novel. The discrepancy between the scholars’ irreverent thoughts and their polite behaviour, the Principal’s clumsiness and unpredictable wife, the pettiness of the academics who drink up and eat up everything that is on offer to the last cashew nut, all this is part of the traditional stock of the campus novel’s debunking strategies. The *modus operandi* of the campus novel is desacralisation showing the ignoble in the noble, the physical in the spiritual, the scatological in the intellectual. This principle is clearly at work in *In Custody*, for example in the scene of Siddiqui’s vicious behaviour with young Chotu or in the passage relating Deven’s dreadful drunkenness. It should be added that the main literary mode used by the campus novel in order to deflate academic pretensions is the grotesque, a mode which is amply used in Desai’s novel. Insisting on the body, fluids, organs, and excreta, the grotesque is manifest in the various scenes of excessive eating and drinking which inevitably lead to bodily disorders and which illustrate the carnivalesque inversion of the lofty and the lowly. The playfulness at work in these scenes from academic life becomes also stylistic, and when Desai describes “such a sound

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2. For a thorough analysis of the grotesque, see Dvorak (2008, 49-90).
of splashing and spilling [...] of clinking and clattering, of sloshing and giggling" (99) during a college reception her boisterous alliterations and assonances merely reproduce the verbal games played by the campus novel during the occasions of collective misrule. When the narrative instance evokes a colleague’s reputation and uses the phrase “college gup-shup” (145) to refer to academic gossip, the Indian appropriation of the Anglo-Saxon campus novel appears blatantly in the linguistic embezzlement which, as Huggan would suggest, smacks of a strategic will to highlight and possibly exploit exoticism and “the booming alterity business” (Huggan vii).

In congruence with the laws of the sub-genre, Desai introduces in these ritual scenes instances of what might be called metafictional irony. When literary scholars who are often also would-be authors evoke their projects, their discussions are likely to concern not only their diegetic topic but also the extradiegetic frame in which they are included. A case in point can be seen in one of Deven’s colleague’s suggestions that he could turn his work with the poet Nur “into a work of imagination [...] You know, a few facts and some fantasy. It is said to be a fashionable form in— in other parts of the world” (104). While these suggestions refer to Deven’s biographical work within the fiction, they also affect Desai’s generic choices about fiction, and perhaps in particular the choice of the campus novel which is alien to the Indian scene and stems from “other parts of the world”. Similarly, Deven’s explicit difficulty in “separating prose from poetry, life from art” (169) and the resulting “bizarre pastiche” (198) have a two-fold referential scope, one related to the protagonist and one to the author, one to the fictional contents and one to the fictional container. The “bizarre pastiche” in question refers to the etymological meaning of *pasticcio*, a mixture of ingredients (and not to its literary definition which amounts to the imitation of a style, and this meaning has disquieting implications in the generic field. Besides the campus novel, what are the various ingredients of Desai’s pastiche? This question, raised ironically and in passing in the author’s multi-layered phrase, lies at the heart of the novel. By resorting to these utterances which operate both at the level of the story and at the level of discourse, which are both transitive and self-reflexive, Desai plays one of the favourite metafictional games of the campus novel.

Because it affects the interpretation of the whole novel, the most crucial form of irony is Desai’s structural irony, at the expense of the weak-willed champion of Urdu poetry. The recurrent technique deployed to convey the irony is bathos. Again and again Deven sets off in “a gloriously successful pursuit” (34) in search of “beauty and illumination” (35) only to end up tidying the poet’s vomit or running away. The best example of this type of anticlimax occurs at the conclusion of the scene featuring a strife between Nur’s two wives. Thinking that this fight might endanger his heroic poet, the protagonist considers a personal intervention: “Deven would have to protect him. He scrambled to his feet, turned and fled” (93). In the discrepancy between the chivalric expectation and the cowardly reaction lies the bathetic effect disparaging the antihero’s inadequacy in the fulfilment of his quest. The abrupt juxtaposition of the two sentences and the paratactic absence of coordination further highlight the gap between lofty purpose and lowly conduct.

3. It might be argued that this definition also finds an illustration in the novel because the quotes form Nur’s poetry are all the result of Desai’s own creation, a creation resulting from the imitation of existing Urdu poetry. In this hypertextual practice Desai resorts to one of postmodernism’s favourite devices and foreshadows another famous campus novel using poetic pastiche: A.S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990).
repetitive clash between the dreams related to the Urdu poetry of the past and the harsh realities of the present can be seen the novel’s rejection of the academic’s wishful wistfulness, an idea shared by Pesso-Miquel when she remarks that “La nostalgie est pour elle [Desai] une tentation dangereuse, parce qu’elle falsifie, elle rend sentimental, elle pousse les écrivains à se réfugier dans un passé fantasmé et irréel, et elle les rend aveugles aux réalités du présent dans lequel ils vivent” (Pesso-Miquel 37). The central question raised by this form of structural irony concerns the analysis of the final episode and therefore the analysis of the novel’s global purpose.

If one reads the closing mention of the “branch of thorns” as a reference to Nur’s previously emphasised “throne of thorns” (43), the epitome of a grotesque parody of a sacred Christian image with a typical inversion from the spiritual to the scatological, then one may consider that the protagonist’s final endeavour is once again caught in the repetitive logic of grotesque inadequacy—and this all the more so since the “branch of thorns” is caught in his foot, the typical locus of the lowly as opposed to the lofty. The ending could then be construed as the beginning of yet another cycle beginning with Deven’s hopeful delusion that “he was custodian of Nur’s very soul and spirit” (226) and prefiguring another inevitable fiasco. The whole structure would then be endlessly repetitive and cyclical suggesting the hopelessness of the diegetic universe and a principal close to the absurd. In Custody would then be a satirical campus novel highlighting an ineffectual academic who stands for the representative of a doomed institution and culture.

Another interpretation is possible, contending that the ending can be likened to an epiphany and stressing its distinctive rather than repetitive elements. What does the protagonist’s epiphany consist in? To a large extent it concerns simply the understanding of his responsibilities, of his very concrete responsibilities, those that include taking charge of Nur’s bills. The acceptance of his new duties (“he had accepted”, “he could not deny”) can be seen in his physical attitude which bespeaks a mental change: he turns “to meet” his problems and even runs toward them—whereas previously he had always run away from his difficulties. When one thinks of the usual pattern according to which Deven was the passive agent who underwent the events and never took a personal initiative, this eager confrontational attitude marks a change that can be said to amount to a transformation. The fact that he breaks into a run shows that Deven has found a new impetus in his life. That this galvanisation should occur at the beginning of a new academic year might be a further indication of renewal. By a system of analogy the protagonist’s new life is reflected in his environment: “It [the sky] glistened upon a field of whit pampas grass which waved in a sudden breeze that had sprung up, laughing, waving and rustling through the grasses with a live, rippling sound” (226). In startling contrast with the usual grime and dust, this sprightly and animated setting is a metaphorical foil to Deven’s alteration from dullness to liveliness. According to the same analogic principle “[t]he faintly glimmering path” (225) followed by Deven must be read as a syllepsis, the path standing figuratively for Deven’s new course and the faint glimmer for the glimmer of hope shining on this course. The final image of Deven pulling out “a branch of thorns from under his foot” can then also be interpreted as the symbolical action of getting rid of an obstacle, an action which shows that hindrances, even hindrances of a lowly nature, henceforth do not block his progression anymore.

If the protagonist has succeeded in pursuing his ethereal quest while managing to cope with the contingencies of the real then the novel’s whole structure needs to be reas-
sessed. The cyclical, repetitive pattern suggesting a never-ending recurrence of pathetic and bathetic failure must then be replaced by a teleological structure leading to an epiphanic transformation which provides the possibility of hope for the protagonist, for the weak in general (such as they are represented by In Custody’s anti-hero) and for the transmission of a dying culture. On the assumption of such a final understanding, not only are the preceding episodes so many illustrations of the academic protagonist’s mishaps and humiliations, but they acquire the ritual aspect of scenes of initiation. If the narrative is divided into a series of rites of initiation leading to a teleological ending which marks the protagonist’s anagnorisis, then one might go so far as to consider the novel not only as a campus novel but also as a sort of Bildungsroman.

The enlargement of the generic scope can also be traced in the very structure of the novel. While Desai’s novel complies with the episodic structure of the academic sub-genre, its crucial scenes clearly do not take place within the realm of the university, nor do they directly deal with academic matters. The key moments of In Custody, those which overwhelm the life of its protagonist, take place in a poet’s shaded room in a bazaar of Old Delhi or in the shabby outskirts of Mirpore along a banal walking path. This displacement of the diegetic action out of the university helps the novel escape the narrow limits of a thematic genre. Because of its astoundingly prolific nature, university fiction inevitably appears hackneyed and repetitive. This iterative quality is pinpointed and regretted by all its critics (Proctor 1, Carter 15, Rossen 2), manifestly due to a restricted chronotope, range of actions, characters and themes. When the generic scheme becomes too formulaic, the works which decline to conform to the law of series have to sidestep the generic rules, to diversify, modify or subvert the established conventions, which is precisely what In Custody does by adding to the traditional academic topoi scenes concerning a poetic quest, the complexity of family relations or the mental process of self-understanding. Desai’s is not a conformist logic but a logic of association, variegation and amalgamation.

By thus getting round one of the structural laws of the university novel, In Custody modifies not only the dramatic contents of the genre but its original spirit. It must indeed be recalled that the episodic organisation of the academic novel is directly derived from its picaresque origins and that these origins determine not only the structure of the novel but also its main modality. In Desai’s novel this picaresque mode is restricted to the exploration of various layers of society in various geographical places. The playful, detached, roguish and humorous perspective of the protagonist is absent. While in university fiction the protagonist or the narrator (and often both) revel in tricks, hoaxes and deceit, there is just no such figure of a picaro in In Custody (Murad’s deceitfulness comes to mind but his role is too insubstantial to amount to a picaro, who has to be a central figure, if not the central figure). The facetiousness of the picaro and hence the light, often comic, tonality of the campus novel are the most striking generic features that are forsaken in Desai’s Indian version of the genre. This crucial divergence is first and foremost reflected in the narrative strategy. The comic effect, as has been shown (Emelina 29-42), requires a distance between the teller and the victim of the comic anecdote, which is why university fiction favours heterodiegetic narration and zero focalisation in order to present the academic foibles as a spectacle. In Custody on the contrary is largely presented in internal focalisation and since the focaliser is bereft of a comic vision enmeshed as he is in his vital struggles (“Deven’s risibility had long ago been numbed and paralysed”, 157) university fiction’s global purpose of entertainment is here circumvented. In many respects, Deven Sharma acts and behaves like
a fool, conforming in that to “the powerful stereotype of the clownish academic” (Bevan 1990, 29) who, according to Proctor, can only be “either villain or fool” (Proctor 12). What distinguishes Deven as a fool is that his misfortunes are experienced from his own point of view. When he conducts an interview with a national celebrity in Urdu poetry and totally mismanages the tape-recording or when he gets dreadfully drunk during a dinner with a colleague (an indispensable passage in university fiction ever since *Lucky Jim*) the protagonist’s behaviour fits into a long line of fictional academic puppets. Yet where *In Custody* proves unprecedented is in the account of the deeply-felt sense of an almost sacred loss ensuing the former episode and in the ethical questioning of the protagonist’s incapacity to endorse any form of power resulting from the latter. Clearly then the academic man of letters is being downgraded and humiliated like in any campus novel, but what primarily interests Desai is not the comic possibilities of these carnivalesque uncrownings but rather the individual suffering behind daily humbling and the antidotes to this suffering.

By putting such a strong emphasis on individual feelings and presenting the bulk of the narrative through the protagonist’s point of view, Desai places the choices of her main character at the centre of her novelistic apparatus. Now one can wonder what kind of protagonist Deven Sharma is precisely. What is remarkable is not the fact that he should be an anti-hero (which is again a steady component of university fiction) but the extent to which he lacks attractive features. Besides his already mentioned but decisive absence of “risibility”, Deven also confesses to being a bad teacher, father and husband and the narrative does indeed illustrate his lack of interest in and generosity towards his students, son and wife. His most consequential shortcoming in Desai’s postcolonial context is his spurning attitude toward the other. For Levinas (1935) openness to the other is indispensable to exceed the confines of the self. Deven’s rejection of alterity condemns him then to a self-centred narrowness of scope. At no point in the novel does Deven show any curiosity nor any benevolence for the other, whether that other be social (like the good-willing passengers he meets on his journeys to Delhi), generational (like the young apprentices who are placed at his disposal), or gender-based (as with the poet’s second wife who asks for Deven’s consideration). This latter example appears particularly revealing, because it concerns not only gender but also poetry: Imtiaz’s letter and enclosed poems invite Deven to discover a new poetic voice, a female version of Urdu poetry, that staunchly male tradition. Yet Deven cannot find the courage even to read the poems, so afraid is he that they may shatter his system of values. This refusal of novelty and the related withdrawal to a safe old axiology (within which, I wish to emphasize, the novel places Urdu poetry) appear self-defeating in the referential context of an India in metamorphosis.

*In Custody* is clearly not constructed solely so as to illustrate the failings of its academic protagonist. In fact, Desai takes up the challenge to configure such an embodiment of failure in order to highlight his victories, however small, and to suggest his redeeming virtues, however subsidiary. Because they are of a highly personal and subjective nature, the protagonist’s worthy achievements give birth to scenes of epiphany (a rare moment of complicity between father and son, a intensely brief communion with the poet, an understanding of his difficult mission) which insist on the transcendence of meanness and triviality and stand apart in the satirical or derisive landscape of university fiction. Similarly, the intensity and constancy of Deven’s love for poetry (for which the recourse to internal focalisation is so important) runs counter to both the internal logic of perpetual defeat and the generic logic favouring action over reflexion, exhibition over introspection.
What Desai also fundamentally alters by disclaiming the dominantly comic mode of university fiction is the rhythm of her narration. As Jean Sareil has convincingly demonstrated, a quick rhythm constitutes the decisive element in comic narrations (Sareil 151), which is why university fiction privileges the succession of narrative scenes and avoids descriptive pauses. The campus novel shuns hypotyposes, Desai on the contrary cultivates them. Her numerous descriptions slow down the rhythm of her narrative and create a pace which is suited to her purpose, a purpose emphasizing contemplation and reflexion rather than action and entertainment. In the sheer weight of the descriptive fragments can be seen another specificity of *In Custody*: the quest for a poetic prose. It is in descriptions that prose narratives can acquire a poetic quality affirms Jean-Yves Tadié (Tadié 181); it is on descriptions therefore that Desai lingers. There is a distinct effort in her prose to associate phonetic patterns and aim at musicality through a syntagmatic selection in which the acoustic image of the signifiers (the sounds) take precedence over the signified (the sense) – which is one possible definition of a poetic endeavour. Besides a liking for paronomastic combinations such as “blackness and blankness” (138) or “rattled and rustled” (222), the most common musical device used in *In Custody* is the multiple and sustained alliteration-cum-assonance illustrated in the following examples: “[o]n each fingernail a pale cuticle loomed bleakly” (11); “lush grounds of green, waving grain and bougainvillaeas that ran rampant” (17); “the scattered carcasses of cattle that littered the landscape” (21). The euphonic quest manifest in Desai’s novelistic prose has often been remarked upon (Liotard 21, Sharma 14). What has perhaps not been stressed enough is that these poetical efforts are applied to ordinary, commonplace and sometimes tawdry topics. What is at stake then in Desai’s novel is nothing less than a resolution to aestheticize the ordinary or to poeticise the trivial. Since the Urdu-poetry-loving protagonist is impervious to this kind of poetry, I would like to tentatively suggest that Desai’s poetising of the trivial might go hand in hand with a trivialization of poetry. The question of Desai’s English apocryphal version of Urdu poetry is a very complex one, but there is certainly one sense in which Urdu poetry is presented as an incapacitating refuge in obsolescence, a criticism which finds an echo in *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Desai’s previous novel dealing with the topic, in which Urdu poetry is decried for its mawkishness and for the repetitive quality of its themes. If one is justified in establishing a metonymic link between the poet and his poetry, between the artistic milieu and the art, then the corruption that characterises the pile-ridden poet and his sycophantic followers cannot reflect favourably on the novel’s representation of Urdu poetry. For Yaqin also the “morally decrepit Muslim aristocracy collapsing from drink, debauchery and decay” is a metaphor for “the decay of Urdu” (Yaqin 135). It is of course not Urdu poetry as such which might be held to blame but the conservative and intolerant way in which it is put to use in these particular diegetic circumstances. To come back to our generic approach, what remains indisputable is that Desai’s project of poetising ordinary academic life appears daring and singular in the context of university fiction.

An ultimate generic divergence ought to be underlined. While the campus novel is genetically linked to romance (in addition to the picaresque), *In Custody* maintains this architextual influence only superficially⁴. University fiction apparently cannot make do without a little amorous exploration and even a little sexual exploration (in keeping with the entertaining purpose of the genre), but Desai’s novel breaks free from this addiction. The few licentious remarks uttered by the parasites surrounding the poet (42, 173) are

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⁴. See Dvorak’s discussion of the novel within the framework of romance.
highly disapproved of by the indignant focaliser and appear therefore out of place. Since the love quest is discarded, it is the plot’s emphasis, and even the whole generic emphasis, which is displaced. The ups and downs of an academic’s love life are replaced by the constant reflection about and progressive discovery of his role as a family man and as a man of letters. By weakening the centrality of the comic mode and the narrative emphasis on romance, Desai creates a university novel unaffected by the unbearable lightness of the genre. Concentrating on the qualms, mediocrity and nobility of a despondent lecturer, In Custody takes the shape of a serious campus novel, a phrase which is meant to have oxymoronic connotations in view of the laws of the genre.

In the final analysis, that which distinguishes In Custody as a campus novel is the seriousness of its purpose—which does not prevent ironic effects intended to debunk the ineffectuality of the novel’s men of letters. The carnivalesque account of academic misrule is only marginal in the novel. What matters to Desai is to conduct and request an exacting and lucid reflection among others upon the range of action of a humble academic and upon the place of the humanities in contemporary society. That the role of the university and the role of Urdu poetry are treated in parallel can best be seen in the conclusion of the novel, in which the ambiguity of the title becomes blatant. During the bulk of the narrative the university, surrounded by its “fences of rusted barbed wire” (112), is associated to the paradigm of the prison (12, 141-142) just as Urdu poetry is presented as a secluded territory in which the protagonist isolates himself against the evolution of his environment. But in the final scene of epiphany the trapped anti-hero understands that his destiny is to be the custodian of this poetry and that the university, towards which he is last seen running however arduously, is the only framework in which he can fulfill his mission of transmission. Referring to both a prison and a privilege, the ambiguous notion of custody applies aptly to the representation of the university in Desai’s indomitable portrait of academic struggle for survival. The nuances of the academic and poetic axiologies are reflected in the nuances of a life of mediocrity in a process of qualification which extends far beyond the scope of academic fiction, and it is of course in the transcendence of the limits of the genre that resides In Custody’s singular achievement.

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