Resurgence: Introduction

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Introduction

He was keen to note the survivals that are the key to so much that has now disappeared but that once existed.


Je te suis, imprimée en mon ancestrale cornée blanche ;
monte lécheur de ciel
et le grand trou noir où je voulais me noyer l’autre lune
c’est là que je veux pêcher maintenant la langue maléfique de la nuit en son immobile verrition !

Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, 65.

The epigraph taken from Jane Urquhart’s novel epitomizes what her fiction is about. Since the past keeps resurfing in her protagonists’ lives, they end up paying careful attention to traces of lives once lived, to remnants of a vivid history that is reimagined in her stories. Urquhart was guest of honour at the 48th SAES congress in Orléans in May 2008, the theme for which was “resurgence,” and a panel was devoted to her work in the “New Literatures” workshop. In a congenial exchange with the audience, she mentioned how her writing is often triggered by actual objects from the past—for example *The Whirlpool* stems from a brooch that had been passed down along with stories about her husband’s family. Similarly inspiring was the cluttered kitchen table that Urquhart remembers from her days as a young writer, mother, and homemaker; she would find that “every single object on the table was pregnant with meaning.” She also evoked how, earlier in life, as a young reader in Canada, she experienced the feeling of being “starved for books that reflected our own lives.” Moving from the object to the book in her novels, Urquhart has brought into light untold stories from the Canadian past—in the present.

Aimé Césaire’s poetry is full of allusions to stagnant, dirty, lifeless water, suggesting how the water of life has been drained from the lives of so many colonized Caribbeans. But as the second epigraph above taken from the ending of *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* shows, Césaire’s poetry is also a call to look up rather than down, to draw on the history of colonization to find the strength to struggle against the oppressor, to revitalize all that stagnant water and turn it into the source of a fresh language of one’s own. Césaire’s long life, which ended on 17 April 2008, not long before the congress which this issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* results from, roughly spans the twentieth century and its upheavals,

1. “I follow you, imprinted on my ancestral cornea / rise sky-licker / and the great black hole where I wanted to drown a moon ago / This is where I now want to fish the night’s malevolent tongue in its immobile revolution.” (Césaire, *Notebook* 135)
from colonization to decolonization and the postcolonial era. Césaire saw it all, and in his 1955 *Discours sur le colonialisme* he bears witness to his times, well beyond the limited horizon of the French colony he was born in. His death has made us look back and ponder.

Urquhart and Césaire stand at the two ends of the spectrum of the (post) colonial experience: from settler colonies like Canada, where the culture of the colony was more or less eagerly embraced, to occupied colonies, via plantation colonies, where the relationships between colonizer and colonized were oppressive and violent. These two writers also belong to different generations, genders, languages, and histories. However, the diversity and range of experiences they embody is also part of the experience of postcolonialism, and a sign that postcolonial issues resurge in the present in ways in which differences often collide, creating new patterns. Curiously, the recent presidential election in the United States, that other former British colony, also epitomizes the process of resurgence as it is approached here. It caused the resurfacing of old wounds inherited from the communal past, it involves redefining the country's links to the rest of the world (which instantly turned the new president into an icon), and it looks ahead at another, better future.

The essays contained in this issue deal with the process of resurgence in that part of the English-speaking world known as the Commonwealth, and the various consequences this process entails. The first section of the issue focuses on cultural resurgence and the role of symbolic objects in that process in Canada, with articles on the fiction of Jane Urquhart and Alice Munro. The second section addresses the recurrent motif of the resurgence of history and the metamorphoses this leads to; it examines the work of writers from Guyana and Africa (South Africa and Zimbabwe), and raises the questions of the cultural survival of native Indians, and the heritage of violence in Africa. Finally, the third section gathers articles that look at works in which the resurgence of the past has an influence on artistic creation, for writers hailing from South Africa, Nigeria (born in Guyana), Trinidad (of Indian ancestry) and the Caribbean at large. Through these articles taken together, the trope of water recurs, in its association with the surfacing of the subconscious. Literary and cultural resurgence is also at work, in particular through intertextuality (including oral traditions), but also through emblematic objects. Finally, the metamorphoses prompted by resurgence lead to creativity and the emergence of new forms that subsume struggle and catharsis.

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In the first section, the authors of the first essay propose a reading of Jane Urquhart’s novel as a confirmation of Canadian literature’s coming-of-age. Objects play a key role in the process of cultural resurgence in Urquhart’s fiction in general. In *The Whirlpool*, objects, language and books pertaining to an imported culture resurface in Niagara Falls, while bodies float back to the surface
of the whirlpool that epitomizes the turmoil of emigration. Urquhart’s tone mixes both fondness and irony towards Browning and Victorian culture in general, in a way that acknowledges that cultural inheritance as part of Canada’s culture, but also implies that the colonial nostalgia of old for things British has receded. This is what Catherine Lanone and Claire Omhovère argue in “Mourning / Mocking Browning: The Resurgence of a Romantic Aesthetics in Jane Urquhart’s The Whirlpool (1986).” Urquhart’s novel thus echoes Margaret Atwood’s vision in her poem “The Immigrants”: “as they step on shore / the old countries recede” (Atwood 66). Marta Dvorak, in “Resurgences of the Extra-textual and Metatextual in Jane Urquhart’s The Stone Carvers,” relies on Linda Hutcheon’s theory of postmodernism to examine a double process which is at work in The Stone Carvers: that of objects mentioned which are sites of resurgence in the narrative, and that of Urquhart putting back the Book in the World, through her use and foregrounding of language. In “Family Furnishings,” by Alice Munro, the furniture of the title is the overbearing object that triggers a shift in the narrative, signalling through a powerful silent revelation the resurgence of a past that was repressed in the stories people tell. This double process of secret and resurgence is what Corinne Bigot examines closely in “And now another story surfaced”: Re-emerging Voices, Stories and Secrets in Alice Munro’s ‘Family Furnishings’.

In the second section, the resurgence of history in the present leads to adaptations and metamorphoses that may variously serve to alleviate pain or to cast light on still complex contemporary situations. The title of Kerry-Jane Wallart’s article, “Einstein, Evelyn Waugh and the Wapisiana Indians: Ventriloquism and Eclipses in Pauline Melville’s The Ventriloquist’s Tale,” hints at the collision between European views and Indian beliefs that took place under colonialism, when science and mythology collided. It resulted in the repression of Indian culture, without it being entirely defeated by European rationalism. Yet the resurgence of repressed Guyanese Indian voices, myths and languages, in the forms of scraps and fragments, is perhaps to be read as a sign of loss rather than retrieval and revival. In The Heart of Redness, the South African writer Zakes Mda “resurrects” past quarrels in order to point at new ways of addressing contemporary issues, writes Richard Samin in “Nongqawuse Resurrected: Legend and History in Zakes Mda’s The Heart of Redness.” The resurgence of the past is a way not to forget what happened in colonial times, but the past is also maintained at a distance: ancestral values and historical events, such as the Cattle Killing ordered by prophetess Nongqawuse, are transformed to suit modern times. In her last two novels, the Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera addressed the motif of the resurgence of repressed memory, both individual and collective, in terms of the pain caused by this process. This is what Fiona McCann analyzes in “‘The past a repast’: Past and Present in Butterfly Burning and The Stone Virgins by Yvonne Vera.” The complexity of Zimbabwe’s difficult past is represented in the layers of memory in the characters’ minds, and the weight of the past is a source of disillusionment, confusion and violence in the present.
The third section underscores how certain writers foreground the impact of the resurgence of the past through their artistic creativity. This is the case with the South African writer and visual artist Breyten Breytenbach in his latest novel, which Sandra Saayman offers an intimate reading of in “The Resurgence of Prison Imagery in Breyten Breytenbach’s A Veil of Footsteps.” Alternately taking a broad view of the narrative and focusing on specific episodes such as “The Catastrophe,” Saayman shows how various evocations of prison life and interrogation create a disturbing impression of open or underlying violence on the reader. Mélanie Joseph-Vilain, in “The Hangman’s Game: Karen King-Aribisala’s ‘Diary of Creation’,” analyzes the subversive effect of various forms of resurgence, ranging from remembered fairy tales and nursery rhymes to a rewriting of the slave narrative. They challenge conventional forms of narrative, creating a complex web of interconnections between past and present, between life and art, and giving rise to a new form which Linda Hutcheon called historiographic metafiction. In “Resurgence and Creative Resistance in Shani Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night,” Patricia Donatien-Yssa studies how Mootoo shifts from graphic depiction of violence to forms of self-recreation in order to deal with the wounds and traumas of history, be it personal or collective. In “Scarlet Ibis and the Poetics of Relation: Perse, Walcott and Glissant,” Kathleen Gyssels examines how certain tropes, inherited mainly from Saint-John Perse, reappear in Derek Walcott’s and Edouard Glissant’s poetry and writing: birds, as in Aimé Césaire’s poetry, become a symbol for resistance and survival, as expressed in images of flying or diving. Gyssels reads this shared creativity, which is often downplayed by poetic and personal rivalry, as a sign of what Glissant called the “Poetics of Relation” in the Caribbean. From Urquhart to Césaire and his Caribbean fellow-poets, these proceedings thus reflect our interpretation of processes of resurgence through the diversity of the postcolonial situation.

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Works cited

