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The Tide that Riffles Back: Spiral Femininity in Carmel Bird's *Cape Grimm*

GERARDO RODRÍGUEZ SALAS
University of Granada, Spain

Abstract

This article explores Carmel Bird's novel *Cape Grimm* (2003) from a temporal and gender perspective in order to show how the author makes use of what Julia Kristeva theorizes as 'Women's Time', a cyclical temporality that is connected with femininity. Although the writer portrays an objective, linear and masculine narrative from the beginning of the novel, her intention is to recognize an alternative writing where subjective, superstitious and feminine visions may offer an alternative truth, probably more convincing than the historical one we have been brainwashed to believe in. The three main intersecting stories of the novel are analyzed to show that, behind a masculine unifying appearance, there lies the author's intention to highlight the importance of feminine, cyclical time as an alternative of change.

Keywords

Women's time, Kristeva, Carmel Bird, *Cape Grimm*, Australia, ethnicity, Aborigine

Palabras clave

Tiempo femenino, Kristeva, Carmel Bird, *Cape Grimm*, Australia, etnicidad, aborigen

1. Time: The Three Stories

CAPE GRIMM I SEE AS A PINPOINT FOCUS, A CONVERGENCE of lines of lives leading from all corners of the globe over time. You can do that to any place on the map, but I have chosen to do it with Cape Grimm. Because I am here. Because it is kind of nowhere. Because it is home" (Bird 21). Thus begins Carmel Bird's novel *Cape Grimm*, emphasizing the centrality of this geographical locus as a zero meridian where endless "lines of lives" converge cyclically. Departing from an objective, masculine, linear narrative, Bird's intention will be to acknowledge an alternative way of writing where subjective, superstitious and feminine visions can offer a parallel truth, probably more convincing than the historical one we have been brainwashed to believe.

Cape Grimm is Australian writer Carmel Bird's latest novel, the third in an ambitious project known as *The Mandala Trilogy*, which the author is planning to convert into a quartet with the novel she is currently working on (*Green Language*). Although freely bound up together, the pieces of this trilogy—*White Garden* (1995), *Red Shoes* (1998), and *Cape Grimm* (2004)—are connected by the concept of charisma that, when combined with evil, can cause extreme damage such as mass murder. In *Cape Grimm*, the youthful charismatic leader of a religious community in Tasmania, Caleb Mean, ends up incinerating his people. Three main stories are intertwined in this novel, all of them unified by Paul Van Loon, a central character as well as the narrator, who fits into the second story but is like a god-figure joining them all.

The first story is that of the *Iris* shipwreck in Bass Strait, a tragedy that joins the lives of its only survivors, Minerva Carrillo Hinshelwood and Magnus Mean. They manage to arrive at Puddingston Island, a tiny speck of land in Bass Strait, where they find out that a child has also been saved. Minerva and Magnus get married in 1852, eventually forming a family of three children and the religious community of Skye, at Cape Grimm, where Caleb Mean will be born.

The second story starts more than a century later, when Caleb is born in 1959. That day his grandmother, Minnie Mean, has a vision and this charismatic child becomes known as El Niño, or the boy prophet. In 1992, the day of his thirty-third birthday, Caleb drugs and incinerates the community of Skye, while only three survivors (himself, his partner Virginia, and their daughter Golden) have to jump over the cliff to commune with the air and the water of the ocean. However, this plan partially fails as they are caught by the police; Caleb is imprisoned in the prison facility where Paul works as a psychiatrist. Although Caleb manages to escape, he is trapped in a storm and swallowed by a giant squid. In turn, Virginia and Golden are first taken to a hospital/prison, from where a priest rescues them. After changing their names for security reasons, he takes them to a secret house in the Tasmanian wilderness with a doctor and his wife. Virginia and Paul eventually become a couple, so that it seems Paul is Caleb's alter ego who has usurped his place. Speechless since the conflagration, Virginia starts to have visions of a dead girl, and here is where the third story takes up.

Beyond the personal accounts of the Mean family, this third story broadens its scope to narrate the silenced narrative of Van Diemen's Land's (Tasmania's) history. Through the ghost of a black dead girl, Mannaginna, Virginia witnesses the 1820s massacres of Tasmanian aborigines under the hands of white European whalers, sealers, soldiers, and farmers, who arrived in Van Diemen's Land in the nineteenth century. Virginia then becomes the "unofficial" key to understanding the real exploitation of natives, even when her credibility remains doubtful for being the mute lover of a mass murderer and a ghost visionary.

2. Women's Time and Semiotic/Symbolic Dyad

Bird's greatest achievement in *Cape Grimm* is that, although the three main stories occur at different historical times, they intersect in the novel, calling attention to the repetition of cycles. The thesis of this article is to prove that, even when Bird states a clear-cut distinction between linear, objective, rational temporality ("Time") and cyclical, subjective, superstitious time ("Tide"), she favors the last and links it with a feminine principle, both parodying and superseding the patriarchal association of women with

irrationality. Nevertheless, this bipolar and misleadingly feminist premise is further complicated by the fact that the narrator is a man who ends up communing with this alternative feminine realm. Julia Kristeva's theories of "Women's Time" and her distinction of the symbolic/semiotic dyad will help us explain Bird's strategy in *Cape Grimm*. Kristeva makes a distinction between "men's time," represented by the linear progression of history and politics, and "women's time," characterized by repetition and eternity, the two main traits that prevail in Bird's novel. Kristeva explains the idiosyncrasy of this last temporality: On the one hand, there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extra-subjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnameable *jouissance*. On the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence, there is the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word "temporality" hardly fits (Moi 191). Although Kristeva develops in this article her notion of women's time, in subsequent writings she fine-tunes her distinction of two temporalities. In *Proust and the Sense of Time*, she discloses the source of her dichotomy and acknowledges in Proust "a completely new form of temporality [that implies] a return journey from the past to the present and back again" (3, 6). This perception leads to the cyclical character of women's time, which she links, in turn, with time as developed in poetry.

Later, Kristeva goes back to the difference between two temporalities: the "imaginary," which she terms "story," associated with the myth in the Aristotelian sense of the word and, therefore, with the timelessness of the subconscious, and the "symbolic," which she calls "speech," linked with the linear time of syntax and its chronological progression between subject and predicate. This temporal dichotomy corresponds with her early distinction between women's and men's time, respectively ("Psychoanalysis" 191–2). The absence of linear advancement in her feminine temporality has led to its perception as closer to a spatial dimension. Thus, Kristeva links this feminine time with her concept of "chora" (1986a: 93–4, 98). In Plato's *Timeo*, this term means "space" and refers to a chaotic zone of the woman's/mother's body, characterized by a material aspect, as opposed to the abstraction that arises with the entrance in the symbolic order of language. It is the space shared by mother and son/daughter that resists any representation and is only perceived as desire. Kristeva defines it as constituted by drives and opposed to the symbolic domain of signification. She makes explicit the connection between women's time and this spatial dimension: "when

evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of the *space* generating and forming the human species than of *time*, becoming or history” (1986b: 190) and defines the *chora* as “preced[ing] evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality, [being] nourishing and maternal, [an] uncertain and indeterminate *articulation*” (1986a: 93–4, 98).

This distinction between women’s and men’s time is closely related to Kristeva’s realms of the symbolic and the semiotic. These two concepts derive from Lacan’s “symbolic” and “imaginary” respectively. Kristeva offers her own definition: What I call “the semiotic” takes us back to the pre-linguistic states of childhood where the child babbles the sounds s/he hears, or where s/he articulates rhythms, alliterations, or stresses, trying to imitate her/his surroundings. In this state the child doesn’t yet possess the necessary linguistic signs and thus there is no meaning in the strict sense of the term. It is only after the mirror phase or the experience of castration in the Oedipus complex that the individual becomes subjectively capable of taking on the signs of language, of articulation as it has been prescribed—and I call that “the symbolic” (Kristeva, 1986a: 133).

In Kristeva’s words, the organizing and dictatorial role of patriarchy (or the symbolic order) is more than evident, as opposed to the marginality given to the feminine element. According to her, the semiotic, that heterogeneous realm linked with the feminine, does not have to be repressed, but she insists that even in its more intense manifestations, the semiotic must always retain the logical presence of the symbolic order, this being associated with the monolithism and power of patriarchy. Thus, in order for comprehensibility to exist, “a guarantee is needed—syntax” (Kristeva, 1986a: 97), that is, the organizing presence of a “coherent” language.

Kristeva’s verdict is very clear: without the organizing presence of the symbolic order, the semiotic drive of the *chora* would lead to extreme fantasy or, even worse, to psychosis (1986a: 103). Actually, she associates the *chora* with the “uncanny” (*unheimlich*), a term taken from Freud that means “stranger,” which she defines as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (*Powers* 4) or, as Anne-Marie Smith clarifies, “the speaking subject in revolt against oedipal identity and sexual specificity” (29). In being a disruptive force that comes to disturb the rationality of the symbolic, Kristeva speaks of abjection (*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*), but insists that this semiotic revolution can only happen within language, as opposed to hysteria (48). Thus, the feminine or semiotic principle needs the rational

impulse of masculinity and the symbolic.

3. Tide: The Butterflies of *Cape Grimm*

In *Cape Grimm* there is a pervasive dichotomy between linear/objective and cyclical/subjective time. The very structure of the novel underlines this polarity. Bird adds an appendix entitled "Time and Tide." The section on "Time"

comprises a chronology from 1500 BCE to the present time. It is a chronological listing of previous and simultaneous events, “a tuning fork that,” as Paul Van Loon declares, “hums and ripples back into the narrative” (247). The compiled events are a mixture of factual and fictional episodes from which the novel has been nourished. Many of these references are amplified in the section of “Tide,” which elaborates on the fairy tales, characters, and events that dominate the narrative, organized in alphabetical order. Although the part on “Time” is fundamental, the emphasis is on the “Tide” section, since these tales echo back randomly into the narrative, as cyclically and repetitively as the connection of the stories narrated in *Cape Grimm*. Actually, the author uses the image of the moonbird (also known as muttonbird or shearwater), which, in a figure eight, follows the path of the whole Pacific Ocean from north to south and back again. This movement is as cyclical as the connection of the stories, and the figure eight in a horizontal form means *ad infinitum*, the eternal return of charismatic and evil characters.

The division of the novel into twenty-four chapters is also a symbolic rendering of the hours that make up a day—Caleb’s heyday that, in a linear way, comes to an end. However, while the twenty-four hours and chapters indicate the different historical stages of the Mean family, the end of the novel and of the metaphorical day that its chapters represent anticipates the beginning of another day, very similar to the one we have experienced, if only lived by another apparently charismatic leader, his daughter Golden. The cyclical structure of the novel is undeniable, as the first chapter (“Dust”), with apocalyptic undertones, displays the meteorological and moral decay of humanity, while the last chapter finishes with a reference to “the end of the world.” Therefore, although linear advancement is necessary, the emphasis is on the “eternal return” of similar stories that open up an alternative truth, the truth of irrationality and the hidden realm of magic and superstition—the volatile truth of the feminine.

Curiously enough, the visionary figures of this alternative truth in *Cape Grimm* are women. In connection with Kristeva’s theory, they partake of a women’s time, closely related to the semiotic realm and the *chora* in that their truth is multi-faceted, unexplainable in rational terms, more a spatial than a temporal dimension. First, Minerva Carrillo is the woman ancestor that, together with Magnus, establishes the Skye community. When she boards the *Iris* together with her husband, Edward, Minerva witnesses the killing of an albatross by some members of the crew. This event precipitates the shipwreck, apparently as a result of the El Niño effect—a global climactic effect that plays a central role in the novel. However, behind the tragedy

there seems to be two superior, irrational forces: the bad luck after killing the albatross and the monster known as the Kraken, a giant squid with a mythical rather than real status (“Was it a myth?” 85). As a real visionary in the story, Minerva wears a pendant with a Claudina butterfly wing that will be passed on to the female members of the Mean family as the mark of their supernatural potential. Thus, during the shipwreck, while all the passengers think the real cause is the El Niño effect, Minerva is the only one who sees the Kraken:

Did she really see a giant squid? Did the Kraken really power up from the ocean floor and hug the *Iris* to its deadly bosom? Or did the twirling darkness of the thrashing waves throw up hallucinations to occupy the spaces of unreality, to explain the unexplainable, to, in a perverse way, comfort her, give some meaning to the loss of everything? Much later Minerva told Magnus of her visions, but he remembered nothing like that [. . .] The giant squid became, as you would expect, part of the folklore of the family, gathering a mythic strength and yet losing solid credibility as time went on (90–1).

In an interrogative rather than assertive tone, this scene shows the incredulity of the narrative voice toward s Minerva’s view. We have to bear in mind that the narrator is a man who seems to grow more understanding towards this feminine alternative truth as the narrative progresses, and thus, at this point, he shares the “Truth” of patriarchy that only gives credibility to objective facts. Like Virginia later, Minerva’s vision remains a mirage for years, until the end of the novel, when we discover that the Kraken was real.

In connection with Kristeva’s *chora*, Minerva’s semiotic vision is materialized in a spatial dimension: the ocean. This setting conceals one of the mercurial feminine truths of the novel: the mythical Kraken that society conceives as a dream. The sea is presented in *Cape Grimm* as the suitable realm for mystery and hidden messages: “Am I afraid of myself, as well as being afraid of the sea? ‘Worse things happen at sea,’ my mother used to say, when any little thing went wrong. Well yes, worse things certainly do happen at sea. I spend a lot of time gazing out towards the ocean, dreaming, imagining” (9). This initial description of the sea sets the tone of the novel and the locus where the alternative truth resides. Paul’s receptiveness to this feminine side can be implied from the indefinite reference to linear time (“a lot of”) he spends watching the sea and being infected by its semiotic undertones. On numerous occasions, the description of the sea/ocean in the novel resembles Kristeva’s semiotic realm: “the weeds and rocks and unknown corals that jumble and twist and loom in the

soundless, lightless world [of] eternity. Eternity" (16); "the bottomless swirling soundless darkness of the sea" (87). Close to the ocean depth, the Kraken is presented as the hidden truth momentarily revealed in infinitesimal moments of being, which is only apprehended by visionary people like Minerva: "Seen yet unseen the giant grey squid looped up out of the ocean, swept up its prey, and torpedoed down again into the cold cold Stygian darkness of the deep. To sleep again. To dream. To wait and wonder" (80). A visionary like her ancestor Minerva, Minnie Mean, anticipates the special gift of her grandson (Caleb) when on the day of his birth she has a vision "that told her the

child was the chosen one, the prince, the preacher, the prophet”: a manifestation of God in the form of a white umbrella from which flocks of butterflies flew and spelt out the name “Caleb” on the sky (50). This description suggests that Caleb is another visionary; however, Bird makes use of irony to imply that he is a fake prophet. Minnie also heard the ill omen in the cry of an owl and, when she thought Caleb was “the chosen one, [. . .] She seems to have ignored the ill omen of the owl” (50). He is an Anti-Christ with no charisma, “a false and artificial prophet” in Bird’s own words (Walker, “Conversations” 282). The key to this fake special gift is in the image of the butterflies. As Bird explains, “the butterfly can signify female sexuality, or an exciting metamorphosis” (Walker, “Conversations” 282); Caleb displays none of these traits, since even the clouds of butterflies that accompany him on his peregrinations are artificial, made of tissue paper, “part of the performance” (Bird 100). Besides, he is an inborn mimic, “he could imitate anyone, imitate anything, by action or sound” (98). Thus, the only male visionary figure in the novel turns out to be a charlatan. His only truth is the wickedness of incinerating a whole community under a divine disguise.

The second feminine truth in the novel is brought forward by Virginia Mean, also Minerva’s descendent. Virginia becomes another perfect spokesperson for the semiotic, supernatural dimension. In accordance with the unintelligible semiotic discourse, Virginia makes use of silence as the way to “express” herself. She seems acquiescent and passive at the beginning, thus retaliating into silence, but, paradoxically, she will end up being the real prophet. Manuela Palacios González explains the value that silence has been given recently as a powerful weapon to counterattack patriarchal linguistic dictatorship: [S]ilence as a strategy for resistance can only be envisaged as a first stage in the production of alternative ideologies. It is difficult to imagine how it can win other individuals and increase its power if it is not in circulation. In spite of its limitations and of our awareness that silence is the effect of power, it may be considered as a potential temporary strategy for the destabilization of hegemonic interests (203).

Even when she has no self-esteem and is used to Caleb speaking for herself, Virginia seems to foreshadow the power of her silence: “Unable to use my voice, I therefore write this chronicle, this diary, in which I seek to document my observations, my thoughts, my feelings. Silence is a shield, a defense; it is also a weapon” (Bird 69). This silence is only the first step to the superior truth that she will discover. She admits: “My mind has been unable to absorb and process all that I have seen, all that I have experienced—

and there f o r e I am mute” (70). Silence is superseded by writing a secret chronicle and, although this diary remains as mute as silence because it is meant only for Virginia, it ends up in Paul’s hands and, through him, Virginia will be able to spread her word to the readers of *Cape Grimm*. Although Virginia will be one of the mouthpieces for the spiral, feminine truth of the novel, she shares Bird ’s ambiguous position between Time and Tide:

If there were times in the dead heart of night when I sensed myself coldly retreating down the *spiral* staircase of life towards the *bottomless* pool of death, the jasper waters of *endless* and *eternal* oblivion, I am now freed from them, those times, and I am able to ascend, step by *winding* step, towards the light, guided only by my pen as I fill the furling leaves of this book [. . .] Beloved book of hours and days and months and years (70 , emphasis added)

At this initial stage, influenced by patriarchal models, she believes the only way to express one’s truth is through the objectivity of linear time—the hours, days, months and years of her book. However, she takes some time to realize that it is precisely that spiral staircase of life that will lead her, not to oblivion, but to the real truth that has been covered by the system in which she believes, represented by Caleb and his fake truth.

Thus, she becomes the real prophet who can see the ghost of a black dead girl, Mannaginna, and, through her, she witnesses the 1820s massacres of Tasmanian aborigines under the hands of white European whalers, sealers, soldiers, and farmers. While there had been only one “white official” record of this mass slaughter by George Augustus Robinson, Virginia becomes the “unofficial” key to understanding the real exploitation of the indigenous people, even when her credibility remains doubtful for being the mute lover of a mass murderer, and a ghost visionary. However, the contrast between Caleb’s and Virginia’s truths is evident. Caleb’s is never apprehended: “They will never understand. Understanding was obliterated in the conflagration, purified in the light, in the flame, and it is gone” (76). Under the cover of divine truth, Caleb’s real message is never spread, simply because it does not exist. The faithful believed it blindly, without questioning its validity behind the mysterious halo.

On the contrary, Virginia is subsequently presented as a credible figure, although only to us readers, not to the world, who will never believe her visions: “she held the key to something deeply important” (191), as deep as Minerva’s ocean, as the semiotic truth that pervades the story. When Virginia is asked, “But how can you prove this to other people?”

her answer seems to express Bird's concern with the strength of marginal discourses: "If nobody believes this, it makes no difference. It is true" (193–4). After all, this is what Bird does in her novels; she departs from facts, but the result is a self-sufficient microcosm that, like Virginia's "own phantom world of truth," remains "untroubled by the marketplace of history-making and media limelight" (194).

As Paul states, Virginia "crosses time" (191), a clear indication of her eternal link with feminine temporality.

The last feminine visionary figure is Golden Mean (Caleb's and Virginia's daughter). Although the initial impression is that, being Caleb's offspring, she could be as

fake as her father, we must not forget that she is also Virginia's daughter and endorses the feminine visionary line of the family. In accordance with the symbolic import given to bracelets and pendants, at the end of the novel Golden is digging in the garden and comes across a wooden statue of El Niño, whose little arm is broken off at the shoulder (242). On the one hand, Golden partakes of the El Niño myth that has marked her family through Caleb; on the other, the missing arm is reminiscent of the bracelet given to Niña, so that Golden will be the figure merging both the masculine and feminine principles, anticipating the last novel of the quartet, *The Green Language*, with its return of the feminine (Walker, "Conversations" 278).

As a hybrid, Golden is a complex character. In her, Caleb's wicked side is latent. Her Anti-Christ character is foreshadowed: "A most strange creature will come from the sea marsh, as a punishment for iniquity, and his hair and his teeth and his eyes shall be as gold . . ." (238). Her thirst for power can be inferred from this comment: "She says she hopes to grow the tallest sunflower in the world—the tallest one so far being, apparently, seven metres high" (242). The sun as a symbol of power and its golden color—as if the sunflower were a scepter—anticipate that in Golden there is the return of another charismatic, leading figure. However, the implication is that this hybrid will also be a fake. This is Shirley Walker's idea, although she does not elaborate on it: "Golden Mean, which should by rights indicate the perfect proportion, the reconciliation of opposites, is ironic" ("All the Way" 275). Wickedness for the sake of it is not part of the spiral femininity that Bird seems to defend. Golden closes the novel anticipating the end of the world in an apocalyptic tone that scares even the narrator (Bird 243). However, the implication is that she does not belong to Minerva's and Virginia's feminine league of visionaries since "she went on digging, searching for the arm, which she did not find" (243), the arm of Niña's bracelet that would embrace her into this spiral temporality to which she most possibly does not belong.

Therefore, in Bird's novel there is a feminine truth that hides behind the appearance of charismatic leaders. Golden herself seems to be aware of this deeper truth, although, as a fake visionary, she thinks it is her truth (as Caleb thought of his): "I suppose one day everything under the earth and everything under the sea will probably come up to the surface" (243). In *Cape Grimm* it has most definitely come to light; Virginia's supernatural truth about the history of Tasmania and Minerva's truth about the Kraken, which, at the end of the novel, is seen by everyone in newspapers and television (226). However, this is not the truth offered by the charismatic leaders of the novels, but by the feminine forces kept in the shadow.

Nevertheless, although the semiotic force is fundamental in Bird's novel, we cannot forget the weight of the masculine principle. As the writer admits herself:

It occurs to me that the leading narrator of each novel, the one who starts the ball rolling, is a man. Although there are also female story-tellers [. . .] it's interesting for me to reflect on the fact that I take the lead with a male voice [. . .] and I certainly hear a man's voice in my head when I write as a man. I begin each narrative as a man (Walker, "Conversations" 287).

Like Kristeva, Bird acknowledges the importance of the masculine principle—symbolic force in Kristeva's words—to organize the shapeless and chaotic impulse of the semiotic. It is significant that Paul Van Loon is an advocate for the objectivity of historical time and fact, the organizing masculine principle that endows the novel with rationality and prevents it from feminine hysteria. The factual details in the work are extremely well documented and faithful to history, as can be inferred from the detailed "Time" section. Even when Paul falls in love with Virginia and starts believing her visions, he still demands an empirical truth so that people can believe her too: "But how can you prove this to other people?" (193). Virginia does not care for the symbolic, rational explanation to her semiotic truth: "If nobody believes this, it makes no difference. It is true." And Paul explains: "She was going to keep her ghosts close to her heart, safe in their own phantom world of truth, untroubled by the marketplace of history-making and media limelight" (194).

This male narrator will become the catalyst to express Virginia's secret truth publicly. Indeed, even though he is a man, he has a special sensitivity to apprehend the feminine hidden reality in the novel. He is a writer himself, described as working in a white tower with an "eye" that resembles that of a "great giant squid," himself a "watcher," "a great sea monster peering from the deep" who spends "a lot of time gazing out towards the ocean, dreaming, imagining" (9). It reminds us of the Romantic image of the bard, isolated from the world in an ivory tower in his almost godlike visionary status. That is why, even when he looks for the empiricist side to life, the Mean family's, and particularly Virginia's, testimonies make him ascertain the semiotic power: "When people can listen with the heart to dreams and poetry, then they will know the truth" (190). Paul becomes the catalyst fitting the volatile semiotic order into the symbolic moulds of history; after acknowledging Virginia's vision as truthful, he begins "to feel the excitement of a new discovery, the thrill of being on the threshold of a fantastic link with the truths of history" (191).

Even at the risk of being considered himself “mad” (192), he will “write” *Cape Grimm* and spread the word around, using Virginia’s semiotic discourse as a very important source, although always sieved through his symbolic, rational standpoint—the guarantee of his “syntax.”

Paul’s, and we should say Bird’s, writing seems to answer Kristeva’s rhetorical questions when talking about literature and its connection with the semiotic. His catalyst position as a poet asks the very same questions:

Is it because, faced with social norms, literature reveals a certain knowledge and sometimes the truth itself about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret, and unconscious universe? Because it thus redoubles the

social contract by exposing the unsaid, the uncanny?
And because it makes a game, a space of fantasy and
pleasure, out of the abstract and frustrating order of
social signs, the words of everyday communication?
(1986b: 207)

4. “Heb Dhu Heb Dhim”

Despite Paul’s masculine superiority, women are the true survivors in *Cape Grimm*. The semiotic force of superstition seems to be the weapon for survival. The image of the albatross is a recurrent motif in the novel, as an ill-omen bird that is disregarded by men and feared by women. Thus, Minerva’s scientific husband, Edward, and the rest of the passengers in the Iris die after a group of men kill an albatross, Minerva being the only one who takes the ill omen seriously. The same happens with Virginia’s father, also characterized as a very rational man against the extreme religiosity of the Skye community, who chokes himself to death on an apple next to his wife while watching an albatross. Even Caleb dies because his supernatural gift is just a mask, and when he undervalues the semiotic power of the sea, he is engulfed by the mythical Kraken.

In this sense, the title of the final chapter is quite revealing. “Heb Dhu Heb Dhim” is the Welsh motto of the Mean family. Without knowing its meaning, it looks almost like a conundrum, even for the members of the family, since Magnus Mean was originally from Scotland while, curiously enough, the motto of the family is Welsh. It means “If I have God I have Everything” (106). This is the key to the story: God, Fate, or whatever supernatural force that we cannot explain but the novel brings to light. In this semiotic, feminine realm lies an alternative two-folded truth, characterized by repetition—death by sea is recurrent in the story—and eternity; the truth of Virginia’s ghost is eternal, as the ghost itself that supersedes death. After all, the “Time” section begins with a flower (the Iris) and the “Tide” section ends with a flower (the Zinnia), emphasizing the pervasive feminine circularity in the novel. The organizing force is masculine (Paul), but the real material comes from the feminine visionaries and the cyclical fairy tales that underline *Cape Grimm: The Tide that Ruffles Back*.

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GERARDO RODRÍGUEZ SALAS earned his doctorate from the English and German Department at the University of Granada in September 2003. Currently, he is an assistant professor at the University of Granada. His research interests are modernist women writers, particularly Katherine Mansfield, and the short story genre. In Spain, he has published with *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, *The Grove*, *Odisea*, and *ANILIJ*. Abroad, he has published with *Bilingual Review*, *FEMSPEC*, *Agora*, *Aztlán*, and *Perspectives on Evil and Human Wickedness*.