

Re-memembering Diaspora: Punctuation, Prosopopoeia, Presence in Jamaica Kincaid's *Mr. Potter*

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1. **W**hen first reading *Mr. Potter*, aside from the very disconcerting sentences going round in circles of exasperating repetition — “Mr. Potter is my father; my father’s name is Mr. Potter” — one sentence truly surprises: “Mr. Potter slammed the door in my face.”¹ It recalls a moment when the narrator, as a little girl, came to ask him for a few pennies so that she might buy a notebook and learn to read and write, something he would never know how to do. The violence of that sentence is startling: the idea is violent, a father slamming the door in the face of a little girl, his own daughter’s face, but that violence is also an effect of its rhythm and sound. The first accent falls on ‘**p**’, “Mr. **P**otter” and is echoed by the ‘**d**’ of “**d**oor,” the door that he represents; the two accents that follow, anapests, double this effect, “slammed the **d**oor / in my **f**ace,” and the ‘**s**’ of “slammed” and of “**f**ace” sound together, as though the door were actually **slamming** in her face, just as “**m**” links **Mr.** — **slammed** and — **my**. By the time “my” is read, it is **my own face** that the door slams on, stunning literally. How did she, as a writer do that?
2. This reflection would examine how Jamaica Kincaid, out of her diaspora, uses punctuation, rhythm and sound to compose a prosopopoeia of this man, her father, who refused to recognize her in any sense, to then, from within that created motion/emotion/moment address him, “What am I to call you?” and in so doing re-situate her silenced voice in relation to him. I would propose to reflect on this in the three moments suggested by my title: the diaspora out of which she writes, from punctuation to prosopopoeia, and finally this prosopopoeia as a present critical instance.

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1 J. Kincaid, *Mr Potter*, 157 and again 160.

3. “Diaspora” comes from the Greek verb *diaspeireîn*, “to scatter apart.” It would name the Jewish or the African diaspora, both referring to moments locatable in time and place, while “archipelago”, that of the Caribbean, also refers to scattering, to “scattered islands,” adding the notion of *arche*, the scattering of something originally whole, implying a metonymic relationship among the scattered. In *Mr. Potter*, diaspora is a scattering into oblivion:

And Mr. Potter’s mother walked into the sea without even so much as despair, she did not have even so much as a sense of hopelessness and then going beyond that, she was made up only of what lay beyond that. (71)

4. In this work, diaspora is also literally *speireîn*, the “sowing” and subsequent scattering of all the daughters of the *archos*, the originator, daughters whom Mr. Potter never recognized, one of whom is Jamaica Kincaid herself. It is finally also her own personal diaspora, her having been “sent away” at sixteen to work as “a servant girl”² in New York to help pay for the birth of her brother whose biography, *My Brother*, she was later to write “as he lay there dying”³ of AIDS. And yet, she will advise a young writer to “think of yourself only as you. There is no one else.”⁴ The diaspora out of which she writes can then be thought of as in a tension between, on the one hand, being a part of the scattered into “what lay beyond words”⁵ and on the other hand, being only one’s self. It is from within this diasporic tension that she writes.
5. Understood as a tension, her “autobiographical experience” is also a resistance, an opening up of what Homi Bhabha called a “space of concerns,”⁶ a space wherein to write. If it is not, for her, an endless wandering, as some have defined “diaspora”, the idea of a diasporic tension raises the question of what referent of “I,” “only one’s self,” there might be in such a tension? How does she appropriate the arbitrary, wandering signifier such that it becomes a *symbolon*, literally “thrown together,” linked to her such that she will say: “these are *my own words*” (48). Bell Hooks, in speaking of a politics of location, has said, “These words emerge from suffering”⁷ and similarly, Derek Walcott in his poem “Names”:

My race began as the sea began,
With no nouns [...]
A sea-eagle screams from the rock,
And my race began like the osprey
With that cry,
That terrible vowel,
*that I!*⁸

2 B. Buchner, “Singular Beast: A Conversation with Jamaica Kincaid”, 46.

3 J. Kincaid, *My Brother*, 9. This becomes a leitmotif in the novel, an echo of Faulkner’s work *As I Lay Dying*.

4 B. Buchner, *op.cit.*, 469.

5 J. Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, 191.

6 H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 213.

7 B. Hooks, “Choosing the Margin as Space of Radical Openness,”16.

8 D. Walcott, *Sea Grapes*, 40 and 41.

6. Jamaica Kincaid echoes both authors when she says in an interview with Moira Ferguson, “you don’t know how long it will be that you can speak, maybe tomorrow you may be shut up again [...] For me, [writing] is a matter of saving my life.”⁹ If we recall now the sentence “Mr. Potter slammed the door in my face,” that door which sought to silence her, to scatter her, read in this light, would figure what she lives as an on-going menace, symbolically, a threat of death.
7. She has said, “I write out of my autobiographical experience,”¹⁰ “autobiography” understood here as writing or speaking in opposition to silence, to being silenced. There is such a thread, a trajectory that can be traced in her writings: the narrator in “Girl” (1983) listens silently, subserviently to her mother’s litany of “how to” avoid becoming a slut; in *Annie John* (1997), the daughter at first listens with all her heart, then talks back, walks away from the dialogue/diatribes, and finally leaves the islands; *Lucy* (1990), already in New York, refuses to open her mother’s letters; in contrast, her father systematically refuses to even speak to her. There is no *locus*: the diagonal line on her birth certificate where his name should have been becomes in *Mr. Potter* the oft repeated sentence, “a line is drawn through me.” For the critic Julia Everett, “There is thus an inability to find and establish the self — an identity concealed by the line running through it.”¹¹ If these four works can be read as “serial autobiographies” and *Mr. Potter* as a variation on an “orphan autobiography”¹², it becomes, as Jamaica Kincaid will say, “urgent”¹³ for her to write, “to write the father in order to write the self.”¹⁴
8. Among all the scattered daughters of Mr. Potter, she alone returns to him in writing, to that “paradoxical *locus* that is language” which Jean-Jacques Lecercle defines in *The Violence of Language* as both “body made up of sound and incorporeal *lekta*.”¹⁵ Her return in writing involves a poetics, what has been termed “the artist’s re-appropriation of memory”¹⁶ and what the late Edward Glissant identified as a way, a means of conceiving a relation to oneself and to another in the very act of expression.¹⁷ What we will examine here in Jamaica Kincaid’s writings and most especially in *Mr. Potter*, is not so much the story told as how it is told, her prosody. For Georges Dessons,¹⁸ this telling involves two subjectivities: the writer’s in his or her relation to expression and second,

9 M. Ferguson, “A Lot of Memory: An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid”, 169.

10 B. Buckner, *op.cit.*, 463.

11 J. Everett, “The Postcolonial Orphan’s Autobiography: Authorizing the Self in Jamaica Kincaid’s *Mr. Potter* and Calixthe Beyala’s *La Petite fille du réverbère*,” 54.

12 L. Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*, 97.

13 M. Ferguson, *op.cit.*, 166.

14 J. Everett, *op.cit.*, 46.

15 J.-J. Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, 51 and 233.

16 C. Hähnel-Mesnard, M. Liéard-Yeterian, and C. Marivas, *Culture et mémoire*, 8.

17 E. Glissant, *Entretiens*, 135.

18 G. Dessons, « Rythme et écriture », 188: “La lecture, étant le fait d’un sujet, est forcément « subjective » [...] Et s’agissant d’un texte, qui est la réalisation d’un sujet dans son langage, elle est même deux fois subjective”.

the reader's — Walter Benjamin's listener who "shares in this companionship" with the narrator: "*Wer einer Geschichte zuhört, der ist in der Gesellschaft des Erzählers; selbst wer liest, hat an dieser Gesellschaft teil.*"¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur compared this writing/reading or telling/listening to a score of music, perceived even as it is composed, as it is interpreted²⁰ such that the writer or the reader must enter into the movement of the notes, of the words, be it, as for Helen Scott, in speaking of *Mr. Potter*, "the constant flow of its mesmerizing sentences (sometimes irritatingly repetitive, long and meandering),"²¹ or, as for Jamaica Kincaid herself, as she describes beginning to write *Mr. Potter* in her essay "Those Words That Echo...Echo...Echo," "The three words 'and one day' left me bereft and exhausted and feeling empty; and that 'and one day' is just what I want in the process of encountering a certain aspect of my world."²²

9. Where is the line between writing/reading and "feeling bereft"? Fónagy has argued that the study of cognitive discourse should be counterbalanced by another, [...] the study of emotive discourse.²³ It is an old question that Abraham Verhoeff asks: "should we understand a poem, or is it enough if we enjoy some deep instinctive rapport with it?"²⁴ It is a sticky theoretical question, "if you support the crusade against 'the metaphysics of presence,' [...] then you are bound to be an antivocalist about literature," as Selwyn R. Cudjoe remarks.²⁵ Jamaica Kincaid's position is at least clear, "and now I say, 'Mr. Potter,' but as I say his name, I am reading it also" (193). Derek Walcott takes a similar stance in his latest work, *White Egrets*, when he speaks of the "sounds that our eyes make upon meeting [the black marks on the white paper]."²⁶

10. Henri Meschonnic, speaking both in general and more specifically about Hebrew, goes so far as to claim that rhythm determines meaning. One might at least begin by saying that rhythm is an organization of the movement of a sentence; second, with Jacques Dürrenmatt, that this organized movement can be "specific and unique."²⁷ As such, rhythm is subjective,²⁸ it reflects the arbitrary decisions of the writer, most clearly in the use of punctuation, understood here as a representation of movement,

19 W. Benjamin, *Illuminationen*, 427: "A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares in this companionship," translation Harry Zohn, 100; in French, "Qui écoute une histoire forme société avec qui la raconte, qui la lit participe, lui aussi, à cette société" translation M. de Gandillac, 167.

20 P. Ricoeur, *Temps et récit III*, 256: "C'est une réception percevante, attentive aux prescriptions de la partition musicale qu'est le texte."

21 H. Scott, "Reading the Text in Its Worldly Situations: Marxism, Imperialism and Contemporary Caribbean Women's Literature", 87.

22 J. Kincaid, "Those Words That Echo...Echo...Echo", 2.

23 I. Fónagy, *La Voix vive*, 7.

24 A. Verhoeff, *The Practice of Criticism: A Comparative Analysis of W.B. Yeats's "Among the School Children"*, 2.

25 S. Cudjoe, *Resistance and Contemporary Literature*, 1049.

26 D. Walcott, *White Egrets*, 34.

27 J. Dürrenmatt, *Bien coupé, mal coupé*, 289: "La ponctuation est la visibilité de l'oralité [...] une organisation spécifique et unique du mouvement de la parole" (289).

28 G. Dessons, « Rythme et écriture », 188.

especially when its use transgresses rules and surprises. Taken literally, “punctuation,” puts holes in a text, figuratively speaking, one might say “intervals” that interrupt, opening up moments/places for reflection, for example, a period, an explanation point, a new chapter. To the extent that a particular, punctuated movement cannot be avoided, writing/reading becomes an experience of the specific rhythm of the other in language. For Jamaica Kincaid, two remarks in interviews speak to this: more generally, “Everything sets its own rhythm, everything I am writing”²⁹; and then explicitly about *Mr. Potter*, “It was how I felt the book had to be written.”³⁰ What then is *Mr. Potter’s* rhythm?

11. I would like to move now from punctuation to prosopopoeia, literally “the making of a face,” for Fontanier, a figure of speech in which an absent person is represented as speaking or acting.³¹ In “Autobiography as De-Facement,” the long regretted Paul de Man argued against voice, “to the extent that language is figure (or metaphor or prosopopoeia), it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute.”³² I would propose that Jamaica Kincaid redefines prosopopoeia. She does picture the way Mr. Potter vainly, imitatively, colonially dresses and she does portray his nose as the identifying feature of all his daughters, but the portrait she makes is primarily of what he does over and over and over again, of the repetition which composes his life, organizing, punctuating it. What she so originally makes is then a portrait, a prosopopoeia, in rhythm.
12. For Wimsatt, “verse in general, and more particularly rhyme [...] impose upon the logical pattern of expressed argument a kind of fixative counter-pattern of alogical implication.”³³ Speaking specifically of *Mr. Potter*, Nicole Matos extends this to include “repetitive syntax [which] calls attention to itself as syntax and thus to the role of syntax itself in the ability to think critically and abstractly, to self-reflect.”³⁴ In *Mr. Potter*, Jamaica Kincaid privileges prosody such that both the reader and she, in the act of writing/saying/reading, cannot avoid experiencing his particular rhythm. For Benjamin, “it is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening”³⁵ and Shoshanna Felman, in speaking of Benjamin’s essay, adds another dimension to repetition, “What is immortal is, in other words, not the narrator but the very story of the repetition, a story that, repeated at

29 B. Buckner, *op.cit.*, 462.

30 M. Ferguson, *op.cit.*, 163.

31 P. Fontanier, *Les Figures du discours*, 404.

32 P. de Man, “Autobiography as Displacement”, 80.

33 W. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, 37.

34 N. Matos, *op.cit.*, 88.

35 W. Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, *Illuminations*, translated by H. Zohn, 159; “Sie senkt die Sache in das Leben des Berichtenden ein, um Sie wieder aus ihm hervorzuholen,” *Illuminationen*, 418; translated by M. de Gandillac, “Elle fait pénétrer la chose dans la vie même du narrateur et c’est à cette vie qu’ensuite elle l’emprunte”, 289.

least twice, is not simply individual. And the transmission must go on. The task of duplicating, now, [...] the prosopopoeia to the dead.”³⁶

13. First, on the level of just sound, one can speak of onomatopoeia, understood here not as imitating what the words might refer to, but as rhythm imitating, referring to, portraying him,

Mr. Potter breathed in his normal way, his heart was beating in its normal way, *up and down* underneath the covering of his black skin, *up and down* underneath his white knitted cotton vest next to his very black skin, *up and down* underneath his plainly woven white cotton shirt that was on top of the knitted cotton vest which lay next to his skin; so his heart breathed in its normal way. (3)

14. Here the narrative fills the pauses between the “up and down” of the heart beat that punctuates, composes the organized movement of this on-going sentence, representing his life.

15. On a much larger scale, the entire book is organized into twelve chapters, perhaps the twelve months of a year or hours of a day — “tomorrow is the same day as today” we are told. Each chapter begins with “And,”

And that day, the sun was in its usual place [...] And Mr. Potter turned his back [...] And many years after Nathaniel Potter’s death [...] And in the middle of the night [...] And Mr. Potter’s mother had smelled of onions [...] And Mr. Shepard acquired a car [...] And Mr. Potter was born with a line drawn through him [...] And on that day, the sun was in its usual place

16. To finally conclude or not conclude, “And to start again at the beginning” (188) and then, “Here again for the last time is Mr. Potter” (189). The book’s rhythm is punctuated as though it were a fugue constantly starting again, developing variations, but always on the same theme, “all had been one day [...] now is the definition of eternity” (178).

17. When speaking of jazz’s influence on writing, Alain Rice identifies several rhythms which seem to be illustrated here. One of them stresses non-closure and circuitousness. Surely what I have termed the “fugue”-like structure in “And” could be read as exemplifying this. Likewise, Kincaid’s final sentence both closes and in its repetition never closes the portrait of Mr. Potter — it is itself repeated twice, earlier on in the book: “Mr. Potter was my father; my father’s name was Mr. Potter” where each half of the sentence is the mirror image of the other half, except for the addition of the word “name” with which she gives him what he denied her.³⁷

18. A second jazz rhythm, a “riff,” is based on extended pauses and antiphony in a structure of “call and response,” which in Kincaid’s writing

36 S. Felman, “‘Angelus Novus’: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin”, 233.

37 The French translation erases, in the reflexive verb, this so important word, “name”: “Mr. Potter était mon père, mon père s’appelait Mr. Potter” (203).

here takes the form of the narrator's imperatives, her "calls," to the reader and the "responses" of a bell,

Oh, *hear* the bells of the Anglican cathedral *ring* in the city of St. John's, on the island of Antigua, not because this is a symbol of Mr. Potter's end or beginning, just hear them *ring* and see them *ring*, for I tell you that they do *ring* and you can read the words: the bell of the church *rang*; and it *rang* on the day Mr. Potter was born and it *rang* through out all the days of his life and it *rang* also on the day that he died and the bell *rang*, indifferent to Mr. Potter's coming and going (191)

19. Where the telling — "for I tell you..." composes the score to be "read" — "and you can read the words" — your/our "reading" composing yet another portrait in rhythm of Mr. Potter, that of the ever repetitive, colonial bell.

20. On another level, the work is composed of a fundamental juxtaposition of two movements, one of which portrays Mr. Potter, a rhythm of endless repetition, and a second which would interrupt his repetition. This tension, this opposition, begs the question of the relationship of diagesis to the affects of prosody. On the one hand, a life of on-going repetition, that of his heart, the bell, here of his words, his songs, his thoughts, of what he saw and yet did not see, for example, his repetition of words,

then, or at any time, the words to come out of his mouth were, "Eh, eh!" and then "Eh, eh!" a continuing series of those words, those sounds, "Eh, eh!" (26) in such blankness he, Mr. Potter, existed. (29)

or the repetition of his songs,

"Pennywheeler! Uhm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm Pennywheeler! Uhm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm Pennywheeler!" repeating the words to this tune over and over (39-40).

or equally well what he saw,

Walking to Mr. Shoul's garage to begin his day of sitting in Mr. Shoul's car and taking passengers to and fro, to and fro [...] He saw a dog [...] but he did not think that this dog, pregnant and weary from carrying her pups, seeking shelter from that sun was a reflection of any part of him [...] and Mr. Potter saw a man sitting in a doorway and this man was blind [...] Mr. Potter did not think that any part of him was reflected in this sight before him [...] Going toward Mr. Shoul's garage, Mr. Potter saw a boy going to school [...] and none of this reminded him of himself in any way (130)

or this thoughts,

at the end of his life, all he had been seemed like a day (59) He had no thoughts no private thoughts [...] he had no thoughts about his past, his future, and his present which lay between them both. (30)

21. In opposition to these variations on repetition are juxtaposed moments of, attempts at interruption, perhaps the most symbolic of which is her waving to him,

I waved to Mr. Potter [...] this little child girl of four, who was innocent [...] I had waved at him, I had stood before him and wished him a good morning, and I had said, through gestures only that he was mine and that I was his [...] And when Mr. Potter saw me wave [...] he only rolled his shoulders, both at the same time, forward and backward, backward and forward, and looked at the spot on the street which I occupied [...] Not only did he ignore me, he made sure that until the day he died, I did not exist all. (126-7)

22. His response to what was not repetition, to interruption, remains systematic throughout the work,

And Mr. Potter turned his back and walked out (29)

he drove along the road [...] and the world was blank and the world remained blank (34)

[another] day, a holiday, a special day designated to commemorate an event full of significance in the history of Mr. Potter's long-standing and overwhelming subjugation, Mr. Potter looked up and saw Mr Shoul looking down on him [and their] gazes met [...] and Mr. Potter walked on. (175)

23. Gayatrie Spivak has noticed Jamaica Kincaid's use of parataxis, literally "placing side by side," "punctuating two or more sentences as if they were one [...] often without conjunctions, often with 'and', 'but', [or] 'so'."³⁸ In commenting on this, Nicole Matos concludes that the punctuation of *Mr. Potter* sets up "connections that can be attested to grammatically, but that refuse logically to hold" thereby composing rather than "a connective structure," an "additive one"³⁹ and that this leaves the reader with the responsibility to construct causality. I would rather say that the reader is left, willingly or unwillingly, repeating the repetitions of Mr. Potter, that Kincaid's use of repetition entangles the reader in the other's, Mr. Potter's, repetitions, his "fundamental way of organizing the world" (178). Perhaps the best illustration of this is the moment when he, as chauffeur, is driving tourists to their resort,

And Mr. Potter's words emerging from his mouth were consoling and soothing to the many passengers he ferried from one part of the island of Antigua to another [...] and they asked him about the things to be seen through the windows of the taxi: the fields of sugarcane, *and just a quick glance revealed the hardship* of labor involved in cultivating it, the fields of cotton plants in flower *and just a quick glance revealed the hardship* of labor involved in cultivating and bringing it to harvest, [...] and Mr. Potter would say, "Yes, Yes, Yes!" [...] and Mr. Potter's voice was so consoling and soothing. (140-50)

24. Here, the repetition of "and just a quick glance revealed the hardship" becomes by cumulative effect an emphatic apostrophe to the

38 G. Spivak, "Thinking Cultural Questions in 'Pure' Literary Terms", 337.

39 N. Matos, *op.cit.*, 90.

reader/listener, whereas Mr. Potter's response is not one, it offers nothing but empty, "consoling and soothing" repetition, "Yes, Yes, Yes" so as to remain in indifference, absent.⁴⁰ "So as to" already inscribes a causal construction, an intention, whereas, the colonizing consequence of repetition, is rather more what is at stake. If in theory, sound exists in prosody to support the scene - Alexander Pope's oft quoted verse in his "Essay on Criticism," "the sound must seem an echo to the sense" - in *Mr. Potter*, it steals the scene, reflecting him back as a portrait of repetition and reflecting the narrator as choosing, through her use of repetition, to make felt his not choosing, indeed, his willing or unwilling subjugation.⁴¹

25. If we now recall the sentence "Mr. Potter slammed the door in my face," its rhythm and sounds simultaneously accuse him and also oblige the reader, caught, that is, colonized, as they read, to enter into the prosodic violence of the sentence. It is not a dual voice of free indirect speech as Jonathan Rée defines it,⁴² rather, there are three "voices," first that of Mr. Potter's continual repetitions in the place of response, second the embedded accusatory "voice" of the narrator's own frustrated, long silenced anger and third, the apostrophized, called to witness, implicated "voice" of the reader reading, colonized as they read, thereby illustrating what Jean-Jacques Lecercle, in speaking of a sketch by Harold Pinter, observed, "every utterance becomes a speech act to be interpreted in terms not of meaning but of effect."⁴³ Jamaica Kincaid uses sound and rhythm not just for their repetitive effect, but as engaging, *investissable*.⁴⁴ The imperative "hear the bell", quoted earlier, exemplifies this. Here is a second, insistent, imperative,

See the motherless Roderick Nathaniel Potter [...] See him a small boy!
Eating his penny loaf with no butter on it [...] See his clothes [...] See him walk
across a yard, the soles of his feet bare [...] See the small boy, so tired, so hungry
before he falls asleep [...] See the small boy [...] see the small boy awake in the
world of his corner of the kitchen [...] See him round the corner of an alley, any
alley [...] See him as a small boy (71-81)

26. She thereby composes a prosopopoeia of her father in such a way that his repetitive, unengaged, absent presence to his world implicates the reader who cannot follow the words without repeating this repetition

40 I would like to thank Chantal Delourme for her questioning how to read "Yes, Yes, Yes": in the absolute, there is, of course, no objective, pre-defined, single way of reading. These three words thereby raise both the question of "voice" in any text and that of its relation to meaning. And yet, in the specific context of Kincaid's use of punctuation, rhythm, and sound in this work, their reading as blank repetition would seem arguable.

41 For Nicole Matos, "repetitive syntax calls attention to itself as syntax and thus to the role of syntax itself in the ability to think critically and abstractly, to self-reflect," *op.cit.*, 88.

42 J. Rée, "Funny Voices: Stories, Punctuation and Personal Identity," 1048: "Free indirect speech, in terms of a rough idea of its function: it serves, they say, to represent a portion of thought or speech (or writing for that matter) in words which mix the idiom, voice, or point of view of the character to whom it is supposed to belong with those of the narrator who is revealing it to us. It is in short a curious hybrid of quotation and narration, the deployment of a 'dual voice.'"

43 J.-J. Lecercle, *op.cit.*, 224.

44 The bi-lingual dictionary of Robert and Collins would propose as a rather unsatisfactory translation of "*investissable*": "to put a lot into" a relationship or one's work.

anymore than, in so doing, they can avoid being apostrophized by these imperatives to hear, to see. What might be described as the interruption, the gap, created by the door slamming in her face, reducing her to silence, foreclosing the *locus* of language, scattering her, that diasporizing gap becomes, in the prosodic *locus* of her writing, a present, moving moment. This is very close to Paul Ricoeur's reflection in *Temps et récit III*, first, "a work, acting upon a reader, affects him or her" ("une oeuvre, en agissant sur un lecteur, l'affecte"),⁴⁵ more precisely, "attentive to the prescription of the musical partition that is the text [the sayer/writer/reader] finds himself/herself confronted with the experience of the other, whose very otherness is both revealed and attested to by the text."⁴⁶ In this passage Ricoeur is himself reflecting on Jauss's "reader response" theory in *Petite apologie de la perception esthétique (Kleine Apologie der Ästhetische Erfahrung)*. Jauss does not say "entangles the reader" anymore than he uses Ricoeur's word "affecte," rather he speaks of "auslösen"; the French translation reads "déclenche dans le lecteur," but that is not quite right, as it is not about something "déclenché" in the reader: the work of art, here written, remains the source; Dr. Brigitte Brinkmann would suggest "entices the reader." What is alluded to is the capacity of the work of art to provoke, to startle — Walcott speaks of "surprise," "prose that startles itself with poetry's surprise"⁴⁷ — here, to call into question repetitive ways of thinking, of acting. Jamaica Kincaid's prosodic writing clearly succeeds in making repetition felt with the figure of Mr. Potter. The reader is enticed, startled into recognizing this alterity. To quote Jauss in the French translation, "en face d'un monde de plus en plus voué à la fonctionnalité, une tâche [...] opposer à l'expérience étioyée et au langage asservi d'une société de consommateurs la perception esthétique comme instance critique du langage et de création;" in German, the final verb is "entgegensetzen," to place across from, in opposition to, to confront; and the sentence begins with the two elements that are to be set against each other, "der verkümmerten Erfahrung und dienstbaren Spracher der Konsummertengesellschaft die sprachkritische und creative Funktion der ästhetischen Wahrnehmung entgensetzen." Between the French and the German, the important difference lies in the words "instance de critique" and "Funktion." The word "Instanz" exists in German, but it has largely legal, juridical connotations which it can also have in French, but of course "instance" evokes psychoanalytic, linguistic and philosophical connotations as well.⁴⁸ More importantly, the word Jauss chose, "Funktion"

45 P. Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, 303: "Si l'on veut bien restituer au terme d'esthétique l'amplitude de sens que lui confère l'*aisthesis* grecque, et lui donner pour thème l'exploration des manières multiples dont une oeuvre, en agissant sur un lecteur, l'affecte".

46 "[...] attentive aux prescriptions de la partition musicale qu'est le texte" (256/320); "le lecteur se trouve confronté avec l'expérience de l'autre, dont le précieux témoignage se révèle dans l'altérité du texte" (257).

47 D. Walcott, *Collected Poems*, 92.

48 According to Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de psychanalyse*, in Freudian thought, "instance is [...] both more dynamic and more structural [than system]" (202); in linguistics, "instance of discourse" intends the production of discourse, including its specific characters (addresser, addressee, situation) (Petit Robert). (For « instance of discourse, see Mary Elizabeth Meek's translation of E. Benveniste, U of Miami Press, 1971).

connotes an on-going process such that the work of art would entice the on-looker, the reader in an on-going calling into question; “Funktion” also, so I understand, belongs to an entire philosophical tradition in German; whereas “instance de critique du langage et création” leads one to think “critique”, in Latin “criticus” as a crisis, or following the Greek verb “kritein”, to decide, to judge, here, decisive, something punctual and with authority.

27. Both the German and the French versions — one thinks of Benjamin’s “Task of the Translator” — seem pertinent here. Kincaid’s art of “writing the father” composes, in the musical sense, a *locus* wherein Mr. Potter’s “destructive discourse,” in this case the moving, repetitive presence of on-going scattering, of blankness, — “he withheld himself from the world,” (35) and “I did not exist,” (126) — makes itself felt to such an extent that the writer/reader’s own experience is confronted with it, is provoked by it, is called into question both as a process “Funktion” of writing/reading and as a created “critical instance” within which to utter what Greg Winton has termed “a subversive response.”⁴⁹

in the middle of everything, I found my voice [...] and I said to Mr. Potter [...] What should I call you? [...] And that very question, What am I to call you? seemed to re-arrange not only a singular world but a whole system of planetary revolutions, for in that simple statement, and it was a statement, not a question, I raised the issue of what he was to all these girls and what he was to himself and who he was to me. (168)

28. Her question both repeats her waving to him as a little girl and joins to it the voices of all the daughters scattered by him, the “archipelago of daughters”, “bound” (161), as she says, to him. And yet, we are told, he turns his back and returns to repetition,

And Mr. Potter receded into his own world, which was his life, and he turned his back to the world, the world as it is made up of that great big thing: a shared commonality, feelings of love for something ordinary, like his own child regardless of the shape of her nose, and the sun which shone overhead day after day [...] and Eh, eh is what Mr. Potter said to himself and “Eh, eh” is what Mr. Potter said out loud sometimes (172-3)

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29. I would beg your patience here as I read more closely “in the middle of everything” as a scene and also the temporality of “I found my voice.” For Kincaid writing is a “process of encountering a certain aspect of my world” — something close to Jauss’s word “Funktion”. Writing “and one day” which left her feeling “bereft”, was “moving” in both senses as motion and emotion — so too, the prosodic writing of this prosopopoeia here making a certain aspect or relation to Mr. Potter felt, present, both provoking, “auslösen”, and calling into question, creating a confrontation which leads to her addressing his silent, empty repetitions from within what seems to be a moving moment, wherein Lacan’s “autre, petit *a*” of her

49 G. Winton, “Reluctant Indians: Irish Identity and Racial Masquerade”, 168.

address, “What am I to call you?” from within this “instance critique” also “speaks” on the level of “l’Autre, grand A symbolique” that is, it “seemed to re-arrange [...] a singular world.” But here I am on fragile ground.

30. What is then the temporality of “I found my voice”? In a very banal way, it is an event in this biography, on the same level as the door slamming or her waving to him at one point or another in the story. And yet, this particular scene such as it is presented is strange,⁵⁰ Mr. Potter would have come to visit her in New England in the comfortable living-room almost as though his appearing were engendered by her writing, analogous to the effect of writing “and one day” such that we must distinguish between Kincaid as writer, as figure in the work of art, the construction, and also as witness: there is a testimonial dimension to her work here as well as in *The Autobiography of My Mother* and the biography of *My Brother*.
31. As a created, moving moment and as a testimonial to the reader, “found” can be understood as Jacques Derrida liked to think it, in the Latin sense of inventing, literally coming across, finding her voice, here in the act of writing. At one point in this scene, speaking of our five various senses, she writes “the world held in the mind’s eye — not nose — is brought to life through words” such that the prosodic prosopopoeia of her father would function not on a platonic level, but as an aesthetic perception, made felt.⁵¹
32. Finally, “I found my voice” is also that of the reader reading, caught up in the work of art as an irritating story, as punctuating, and as apostrophies that implicate him or her as subjugators/subjugated, such that, here, “I found my voice” belongs to the time of each reading, each repetition and acquires the dimension Felman intended, that would be Jauss’s hope for the work of art.

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33. To conclude: if as Leigh Gilmore has suggested, Jamaica Kincaid’s “creativity is catalyzed by the threat of death, indissoluble from it and from mourning”⁵² — of being silenced again, I would add, there is also longing in *Mr. Potter*, a longing that goes back endlessly, “his mother Elfrida walks into the sea and he never sees her again [...] he never sees her again and for the rest of his life he longs for her in some form, imagined or real, but

50 “And Mr. Potter hovered over it, my life, with his line drawn through me [...] And at that time...I was living in a place far from where I was born, comfortably [...] And Mr. Potter and I were standing in a room with three windows [...] in which I now lived [...] a light filled the room [that] was made up of fear and mistrust and anger and disappointment and a small number of questions : why ?

I found my voice, not my nose” (165-168).

51 In this, she echoes Jauss, *op. cit.*: “L’observateur lui-même ne doit pas non plus recevoir la beauté simplement selon l’idéal platonicienne de la vision contemplative (*rühende Anschauung*)” (44); “Darum soll auch des Betrachten das Shöne nicht einfach nach dem platonischen Ideal der rühenden Anschauung hin nehmen,” 28.

52 L. Gilmore, *op. cit.*, 119.

never allows himself to know this” (190), “frustrations which would turn into anger and how that anger would lead to a blankness and how it was that in such a blankness he, Mr. Potter, existed (9).” *Mr. Potter* can then be read as a prosopopoeia of and for the dead, “How sad it is never to hear the sound of your own voice again and sadder still never to have had a voice to begin with” (189). For Jamaica Kincaid, “his appearance was like his absence [...] leaving only an empty space inside” (170) and yet, at the end of her interview with Moira Ferguson, she commented, “if you can keep in mind who suffers, it might prevent you from causing suffering. I think. I hope.”⁵³ In this work she has used punctuation to rhythmically compose a prosopopoeia of her father and thereby make felt a presence of suffering, his own, hers and in turn ours, Benjamin’s listener/reader.

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53 M. Ferguson, *op. cit.*, 170.

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