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# Toward a Monistic Idealism: The Thematics of Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*

... It seems to me that even art is utterly dependent on philosophy: or if you prefer it, on a metaphysic. The metaphysic or philosophy may not be anywhere very accurately stated and may be quite unconscious, in the artist, yet it is a metaphysic that governs men at the time, and is by all men more or less comprehended, and lived.

—D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*

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For Alice Walker, artistic creativity is a deliberate act of giving form to a vision of the underlying or hidden links in the great universal chain of being. It is a vision deeply anchored in a traditional African world view, one which neatly configures "the structure of phenomena from the perspective of interdependency" (Schiele 27)[1]; in other words, configures "the traditional mind's perception of reality [which] transcends the sensory and such levels of experience as could be regarded as empirical" (Obiechina 38). It is also a vision akin to that of the sixteenth-century Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno, and the seventeenth-century English metaphysical poets, which is a way of suggesting "an aspect of rational order underlying surface diversity" (McNulty 79).[2] It is a vision that subserves a delicate interplay of continuity and change—*continuity* of the spirit of universal bond and sympathetic relatedness, what Walker once characterized as "communal spirit . . . righteous convergence" (*Meridian* 199),[3] and *change* in terms of a deliberate break with the largely fragmented, fractured, and frustrated image of woman and her male-bedeviled world in the earlier novels. From the predominately Gothic vision in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland,* to the somewhat Camusian vision in *Meridian,* to the vision of the great gender divide-and-conquer in *The Color Purple,* Walker moves into *The Temple of My Familiar* and creates a salutary vision, which points toward a monistic idealism in which humans, animals, and the whole ecological order coexist in a unique dynamic of pancosmic symbiosis.[4]

Evidently, Walker must have been leery of the danger posed to her imagination by fragmentation—hence the urgency in the novel toward an ideal of unity, the unity of culture, moral truth, and imaginative thought and emotion. The best summation of this unity in *The Temple of My Familiar* is Lissie's long, moving story about the spirit of mutual dependence between humans and their animal cousins and Suwelo's reflections on its moral, agathological, and cultural implications, both for himself as well as for those with whom he has come in contact. Lissie says:

"When you knew every branch, every hollow, and every crevice of a tree there was nothing safer; you could quickly hide from whatever might be pursuing you. Besides, we shared the tree with other crea-


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> tures, who, in raucous or stealthy fashion—there was a python, for instance—looked out for us.... They seemed nearly unable to comprehend separateness; they lived and breathed as a family, then as a clan, then as a forest, and so on. If I hurt myself and cried, they cried with me, as if my pain was magically transposed to their bodies." (84-86)

Suwelo, concurring, responds in a deeply philosophical, soul-searching reflection:

> What do human beings contribute, Suwelo was thinking morosely, as he waited one afternoon for Miss Lissie to appear. Her story about the animal cousins had moved him, and each day he found himself more conscious of his own nonhuman "relatives" in the world. (89)

With this vision clearly set before her, Walker proceeds to construct *The Temple of My Familiar* into six major parts, each consisting of diverse vignettes that project iconographic narrative movement (iconographic because Alice Walker not only tells a story in each movement, but also conveys its underlying metaphysical meaning by a carefully selected icon or mythic image, pretty much in the convention of African cosmological art and iconography).[5] Behind the insistent particularity of each individual story is a serious quest, albeit unconscious, for the demonstrable values of oneness, wholeness, and unity as opposed to dialectical tension, exclusivity, and separateness. Insistently and consistently, characters in the novel are in motion, even when it appears they are in conflict, toward an underlying kinship that binds them with one another and with forces beyond themselves. For Walker this act of seeking means a basic freedom, which only a bird can enjoy, to range over all time, to employ any subtheme, to consecrate a limitless range of subject matter, to begin where she pleases, and to stop where she wishes.

The basic intent is to trace human life in its pancosmic and mythical dimensions through all its protean turns and twists, all its recesses, all its races and peoples. The watchword throughout the novel is communion, a communion forged through three distinct metaphysical contexts: Time, Nature, and Self.

### Metaphysical Context #1—Communion with Time

This is what I call the "eucharistics of recollective or historical consciousness." This consciousness is at the very core of Alice Walker's creative imagination. She herself has said: "I think my whole program as a writer is to deal with history just so I know where I am. I can't move through time in any other way, since I have strong feelings about history and the need to bring it along. One of the scary things is how much of the past, especially our past, gets forgotten" (Tate 185). In *The Temple of My Familiar*, time for Walker is a process of growth inseparable from the notion of the self and the self's ineradicable link to the world outside. Especially crucial to each character's quest for identity is the personal effort to recapture the past as a significant element in present experience.

Characters like Arveyda, the dandy rock star; his wife Carlotta, a Women's Studies scholar; Zedé, Carlotta's mother and a latter-day shaman; Fanny, a literature teacher turned masseuse/massage guru; Olivia, Fanny's feisty mom, endowed with the power of cultural oratory; Suwelo, Fanny's erstwhile hubby and a rationalist, hard-nosed professor of history; Uncle Rafe, Suwelo's affable uncle and beneficiary; Lissie, the genetrix of race memory and the reincarnational shero with a thousand faces; Hal, Lissie's lifelong and ebullient companion; Nzingha, Fanny's half-sister and look-alike, and a hardbitten feminist been-to; Ola, Fanny's and Nzingha's dad, a rebel/



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playwright and a political/Civil Rights activist; and Mary Jane Briden, a white American liberal émigré married to Ola—all betray a peculiar passion to reconnect with their past, both personally and collectively. For them, without a principle of continuum, of the past merging with the present in a constantly shifting melange, it becomes meaningless to speak of the self. A perfect example is Lissie's lecturing Suwelo on what amounts to the quintessence of memory:

> "Hal and I feel you have closed a door, a very important door, against memory, against the pain. That just to say their names, 'Marcia' and 'Louis,' is too heavy a key for your hand. And we urge you to open that door, to say their names. To speak of them, anything you can remember . . . . To trace what you can recognize in yourself back to them; to find the connection of spirit and heart you share with them, who are, after all, your United Front. For really, Suwelo, if our parents are not present in us, consciously present, there is much, very much about ourselves we can never know. It is as if our very flesh is blind and dumb and cannot truly feel itself. . . . And, more important, the doors into the ancient past, the ancient self, the preancient current of life itself, remain closed. When this happens, crucial natural abilities are likely to be inaccessible to one: the ability to smile easily, to joke, to have fun, to be serious, to be thoughtful, to be limber of limb." (352-53)

The pith of Lissie's message is twofold: Memory is eucharistic; it is also therapeutic/psychotherapeutic. It is eucharistic in that it forces us to acknowledge our sacred bond with our past and with those that might be regarded as the prime limbs of that past. It points up "the place of memory as ontological foundation of the experience of identity, continuity and relationship" (Perlman 34). The iconography of memory as a doorway to the eternity of the past and of those loved ones that have passed away subtly subserves not only a *participation mystique*, but also a certain normative value of fundamental human relatedness. Lissie maintains further:

> "It is against blockage between ourselves and others—those who are alive and those who are dead—that we must work. In blocking off what hurts us, we think we are walling ourselves off from pain. But in the long run the wall, which prevents growth, hurts us more than the pain, which, if we will only bear it, soon passes over us." (353)

Memory is psychotherapeutic because it soothes a violently sundered heart and creates in its void what Reinhold Niebuhr describes as "the inner life where the rational soul may cultivate equanimity in defiance of all outward circumstances" (*Webster's* 767).

Thus, for Alice Walker, as for the post-Romantic French novelist Marcel Proust, recollective art is a rhetorical strategy of relocating the lost self, of seeking and uncovering an inner tapestry of identity, not mere psychological identity, but the exterior contexts—social, political, and personal—that make up the human self in all its complexity. Recollective art uses what John McCormick says is "the impact, tragic in implication, of a virtually palpable past upon an impalpable present" (17). Recollective art builds historical consciousness into a mystique, very much as Faulkner did; in the words of Baron Friedrich von Novalis, "We bear the burdens of our fathers, just as we have inherited their goods, and we actually live in the past and the future, and are nowhere less at home than in the present" (qtd. in McCormick 17).

In a way, each of the main characters in *The Temple of My Familiar* is like Huxley's archetypal historicist in *Those Barren Leaves*: Lilian Aldwinkle, a woman who has literally purchased "history," searches for a durable source of value, and looks to the past to provide a means of interpreting the present.



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### Metaphysical Frame #2—Communion with Nature

Alice Walker's treatment of nature reminds us of two well-known writers—the novelist Thomas Hardy and the philosopher F. W. J. von Schelling. Walker uses Lissie's passionate interest in nature to reiterate the age-long truth visible in Hardy's nature novels, especially *Far from the Madding Crowd,* that "man is part of the landscape" (Alcorn 2). In Carlotta's cave-walk, we sense Walker's reassertion of the Romantics' "interest in the unknown modes of being associated with the world of physical nature" (Alcorn 3). Lissie's and Hal's nature art and painting are signifiicant ways of experiencing spiritual and imaginative growth, of feeling the immanentistic and vitalistic pulse of God evolving throughout the universe.

Lissie once told Hal, " ' "Being a genius means you are connected to God" ' " (335). Of course, being connected to God means that all of us are connected to nature, for behind nature is supernature. This is a theosophical and animistic conceptualization of the peculiar chiasma between man and cosmic intelligence. There is an almost lyric rapture surrounding their nature painting, nature appearing like a pure crystal mirror behind which is a deep metaphysical truth about the grandeur and majesty of the ecological order.

**_The Temple of My Familiar_ can be read as the romance of the development of the human psyche in which the human ego strives consciously and unconsciously for wholeness.**

Lissie's and Hal's nature paintings make one feel close to the Spirit of the Universe, contemplating the deeper mysteries and the mighty invisible forms of the universe.[6] One of the best examples in the novel is the twin artwork ("Self-portrait, Lissie Lyles" / "Self-portrait, Harold D. Jenkins") which Lissie presents to Suwelo as a gift, in appreciation of the latter's visit with the couple in Baltimore. The paintings celebrate androgyny; they visualize a double birth—the bodily birth (God as Mother of the entire fabric of creation—Lissie) and the mental birth (God as Father of the creative mind—Hal) which must be spoken for ideas to be born. Moon and sun (lunar and solar consciousness); earth and sky; earth, wind and fire; the eternal tree of life—all feature significantly here; all partake in the colossal mystery of wholeness and anagogic (i.e., mystical) valence, what C. G. Jung calls the coniunctio oppositorum (integration of duality). The metaphysical principle being played out in Lissie's and Hal's painting is the principle called *objective idealism,* which in the philosophy of Schelling means that nature is visible intelligence and intelligence invisible nature. For Alice Walker, creative intelligence is an instrument for promoting the acceptance of nature as ultimately ideal or spiritual, and existing independently of any subjects.

Another example of the mystical perception of nature is the story Zedé tells of a waterfall in her South American village, a magical abode of the goddess Ixtaphtaphahex, identifiable with the destiny of the community. In and around the waterfall, Zedé and her friends connect with one another and with their cultural heritage, the heritage of ancient deities whose pervasive presence is tied up inextricably with the destiny of the people.



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## Metaphysical Frame #3—Communion with Self

By self, I mean the innermost essence of each individual, within which he or she is attuned with the supreme, universal order. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker creates a unique self—which I will describe as the protean/metempsychean self. I am referring to Walker's preoccupation with the reincarnational theme—the belief that the human self is part of the infinite. Like Joyce's Anna Livia Plurabelle, Lissie goes through life knitting up relations which she believes to have originated in former existences. Her life seems like a tale that has no beginning and no end. Suwelo confirms what she already knows: " 'You are a spirit that has had many bodies, and you travel through time and space that way' " (243). She responds, " 'Suwelo, in addition to being a man, and white, which I was many times after the time of which I just told you, I was also, at least once, myself a lion' " (364).

Lissie's story reminds us of *Finnegans Wake*, in which Joyce paints the rotations of the wheel of life, rebuilds the city across the ages in Finn's multiple metamorphoses (Cranston and Williams 342). The cumulative effect of Lissie's story is that she achieves something resembling a universal soul, a transcendent harmony with the entire universe as symbolized by the bird icon. Just as Christ represents for the Christian this principle of eternal harmonies, Buddha for the Buddhists, and Krisna for the Hindus, so Lissie represents for Walker this eternal spirit, a kind of womanist élan vital. Her hope is that some of us will some day become Lissies. In this sense, Alice Walker is a theosophist *par excellence*, and so can confidently be regarded as the latter-day Madame Blavatsky of American literature.

Walker also creates a second self, the totemic self. This self is a function of the protective familiar, usually an animal which indigenous people selected, each person for him- or herself, generally through the monition of a dream during a kind of initiation. The character associated with this is again the indomitable Lissie. Here is how she describes her temple and her genie/familiar:

> "Last night I dreamed I was showing you my temple," said Miss Lissie. "I don't know where it was, but it was a simple square one-room structure, very adobe or Southwestern-looking with poles jutting out at the ceiling line and the windows set in deep. . . . It was beautiful, though small, and I remembered going there for the ceremonies dressed in a long white cotton robe. . . . my familiar—what you might these days, unfortunately, call a 'pet'—was a small, incrediby beautiful creature that was part bird, for it was feathered, part fish, for it could swim and had a somewhat fish/bird shape, and part reptile, for it scooted about like geckoes do, and it was all over the place while I talked to you. Its movements were graceful and clever, its expression mischievous and full of humor. It was *alive*!" (118)

Lissie's dream is a journey into self. It is a metaphor of psychic development in which the dreamer—here, Lissie—recognizes the patterns of opposition in her life and attempts to synthesize them into some sort of self-healing totality.

Such a totality or wholeness is expressed in symbolic form; and the symbolic form is the icon. Here that icon is a temple, an archetypal image which represents aspects of the feminine psyche as united on a higher plane. In other words, it is a mandala of psychic totality. In feminist terms, it signifies the pyramidal or radial order of the woman. Like the Indian *yantra*, the temple motif is an instrument of invagination, of self-immersion, in which the female realizes inner peace, inner order, a communion with the angels of the soul which expresses the idea of a safe refuge.



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The temple is a mandala of primal order whose purpose is to transform the chaos of gender into a kind of inner cosmic peace. Through the brilliance of the bird-image of her familiar, Lissie's self-identity resounds with echoes of personal triumph, even if only momentarily. The sensuous and numinous qualities of her temple create a sense of place, in fact not just a sense of place, but a *topophilia*—love of place.

In short, the temple is equivalent to interior space; and the image of interior space is a symbol of reintegration and wholeness, "the wholeness of the female consciousness" (Fleenor 15). Furthermore, the temple is a loop, a functional circle which helps Lissie's inner self transpose its own being, both on the subliminal plane and in the world of action—the phenomenal world. It transforms the woman/perceiver into a shared world of self/gender/racial identity, and thus helps her to illuminate the dark world outside.

Of crucial significance to the theme of monistic idealism, or the idealism of essential communion, in *The Temple of My Familiar* is the nature of language. In the novel every major narrative movement embodies a traditional convention of language, especially the art of conversation raised to a ritual act of phatic communion. Every movement is an exposé of one character's sharing his or her intimate thoughts, feelings, memories, and recollections with other characters, partly as a way of communicating ideas, but more importantly as a means of establishing an atmosphere of sociability and rapport, of strengthening a sense of the unified whole and sympathetic relatedness. The recurrent use of conversational and recollective art, despite its banalities, provides part of the emotional and social matrix that holds the characters and their world together.[7] Recall Arveyda's and Zedé's use of Spanish sententious expressions, which reminds us of the vernacular characters of Leo Tolstoy (one of Alice Walker's favorite Russian novelists). When the characters use these expressions, they situate their individual utterances within a milieu of cultural continuity. Walker's aim is not so much to articulate her characters' uniqueness, as it is to demonstrate their kinship with the community in which they were born and bred; that is, with its linguistic ethos.

## Conclusion

*The Temple of My Familiar* can be read as a romance of the development of the human psyche, in which the human ego strives consciously and unconsciously for wholeness. Man as separate from woman, humans as separate from animals, one race as separate from another, the old as separate from the young—all that foists a gribbled, self-destructive narcissism, a half-personality at best. But as C. G. Jung opines, ". . . since everything living strives for wholeness, the inevitable one-sidedness of our conscious life is continually corrected and compensated by the universal human being in us, whose goal is the ultimate integration of conscious and unconscious, or better, the assimilation of the ego to a wider personality" (Bickman 40). As a romance of the psyche, *The Temple of My Familiar* follows three kinds of wholes that Proclus posits: the first, anterior to the parts—the human world of men and women; the second, composed of the parts—the earth of living organisms, including humans and animals; the third, knitting into one stuff the parts and the whole—the universe, the magic circle of reunion and integration.

Alice Walker's concern with life is usually deep and metaphysical, full of fresh revelation of truth and beauty, and shows real depth of emotion and intensity of feeling. Like the prelogical and pristine American Indians whom she adores dearly, Walker in the *The Temple of My Familiar* plunges head-



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long into the wave that wafts her to her native shore—the eternal universe—where objects become symbols of the unique affections and ontological links in the catena of our endless being. Unraveling these eternal links is the metaphysician's way. In the novel, we see the aesthetic function of the imagination in its power of grasping in a single, firm vision the long course of African American history. By enabling us to penetrate the magic circle of a past which is great in itself and vitally related to the confused present, Alice Walker invites us into her own magic temple for the ritual act of transforming the appliqués and raciocultural imperatives of her art into a quest for the metaphysical basis of reality. It is this metaphysical vision which relates *The Temple of My Familiar* to Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine*, "a novel that finds in the human relation the seeds of a truly sacramental sensibility" (McCormick 29). *The Temple of My Familiar* offers Alice Walker one more opportunity to consummate a momentary fusion of her own being with the souls of others, brought into a psychic intimacy by some affinity of creative intellect and cultural palingenesis.

**Notes**

[1]Shirley Jackson offers a more elaborate exegesis of this vision: "Generally, traditional African beliefs focus on a world view that includes human beings, flora, fauna and nonhuman forces." According to traditional beliefs, "Africans consider themselves to be part of a universe which was complete upon creation. Everything in creation such as animals, plants and minerals is imbued, to one degree or another, with the power of God." (39)

[2]This explains Alice Walker's persistent use of analogy or metaphysical conceit not only in her poetry, but also in much of her fiction. The sense one gets reading her works is the sense one gets reading the English metaphysical poets, which is to say that both Walker and the metaphysical poets recognize or "suggest underlying connections unifying things that on the surface appear utterly unrelated . . . . As J. A. Mazzeo puts it, the metaphysical poet is 'one who discovers and expresses the universal analogies binding the universe together.' " For more on this point, see McNulty 79.

[3]In a comment on the writing of her third novel, *The Color Purple*, Walker suggests that this communal spirit is the main springboard of her creative imagination: ". . . I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing of it I felt joy and strength and my own continuity . . . that wonderful feeling writers get sometimes, not very often, of being with a great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them, and eager to let me know, through the joy of their presence, that indeed, I am not alone" ("Writing" 453).

[4]In this essay *idealism* is employed in relation to the theory of metaphysical idealism which regards reality as essentially spiritual and which regards the intrinsic nature and essence of reality as consciousness. *Monistic* comes from the word *monism*; *monism* essentially relates to the metaphysical view that reality is a unitary organic whole. In sociological terms, it refers to the harmonious force which unites the laws of man and nature. Thus *monistic idealism*, as employed in this essay, is the consciousness of the intrinsic spiritual bond between woman and woman (or man and man), on one hand, and between man and the natural/ecological/destinal order, on the other.

[5]Part I (1-141) contains 21 narrative movements; Part II (143-201) contains 11 narrative movements; Part III (203-34) contains 3 narrative movements; Part IV (235-83) contains 4 narrative movements; Part V (285-330) contains 8 narrative movements; and Part VI (331-416) contains 14 narrative movements. The total number of iconic narrative movements is 61.

[6]In an interview with John O'Brien, Walker underscores the eternal, inextricable linkage between nature and the idea of deity: "Certainly I don't believe there is a God beyond nature. The world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake. . . . So when Grange Copeland refuses to pray at the end of [*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*], he is refusing to be a hypocrite . . . . He does, however, appreciate the humanity of man-womankind as a God worth embracing. To him, the greatest value a person can attain is full humanity, which is a state of oneness with all things, and a willingness to die (or to live) so that the best that has been produced can continue to live in someone else" (205).

[7]This view of Walker's use of language in *The Temple of My Familiar* is borrowed from Emmanuel Obiechina's interpretation of similar use of language in the West African, culture-oriented rural novel, and I hereby express my unreserved gratitude. See especially ch. 7.



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