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Angelo Grossi

# "War Is Ninety Percent Myth": Post-postmodern Revisions of Vietnam in Denis Johnson's *Fiskadoro* and *Tree of Smoke*

*We're on the cutting edge of reality itself.*
*Right where it turns into a dream.*
(Denis Johnson, *Tree of Smoke*)

The critical debate concerning a change of paradigm in fiction after the exhaustion of post-modernism in the late 1980s is rich and multifaceted. Some scholars recognized that fiction underwent a conservative return to conventionally realist aesthetics.[1] In his *Post-Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* Jeffrey T. Nealon regards the change of paradigm as an expression of "an intensification and mutation within postmodernism" (ix), brought about by the emergence of the new economies where capital rests "in the orbit of symbolic exchange and information technologies" (20). Robert McLaughlin reads post-postmodernism neither as a break, nor as an intensification, but rather as a refocusing on some aspects that were neglected in postmodernism. McLaughlin acknowledges post-postmodern authors' aim at reconnecting with "something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real" ("Post-postmodernism" 213). He also points out that post-postmodern authors tend to spend less time exposing their own fiction's artificiality and restore – with varying degrees of transparency – the respect towards the suspension of disbelief of classical realism. Nonetheless, while post-postmodernism puts less effort in drawing attention to its own style as style, "it never represents an unproblematically knowable world or treats representation unproblematically" (219).

Post-postmodern authors do not reject their immediate predecessors' diagnosis concerning the contingency of truth and the self-referentiality of representation. On the contrary, their plots often revolve around characters discovering that their sense of reality is a fictitious construct, the result of a complex network of representations. Post-postmodernism also shares the same deconstructive attitude towards totalizing systems of knowledge and master narratives, exposing their nature as arbitrary constructions and stressing the impossibility to gain a stable knowledge. As far as issues regarding representation, master narratives and epistemology are concerned, McLaughlin argues that "[p]ost-postmodernism offers not a move away from this attitude but rather [...] a change of focus" (221). Where postmodernism denounced the uncertainty of epistemological systems, post-postmodernism takes it for granted, and considers it a starting point to ask constructive questions: What to do with it? How to live with the limits of knowledge? How to represent the real while acknowledging that representation is self-referential?

An emblematic example of this change of focus is represented by Denis Johnson's body of work. An attempt at labeling Johnson as a "post-postmodernist" author is partly unfair, given the uniqueness of his literary project, which pre-dates what are generally considered the manifestos of post-postmodernism, like David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram" (1993). Nevertheless, as I will argue, Johnson's work is certainly characterized by the post-postmodern attitude of both acknowledging the unknowability of truth beyond representation and seeking for a way to live constructively with the limits of knowledge. As we will see, in his work there is a sense that these same limits may even possess a redemptive quality, not devoid of spiritual connotations.

Johnson's work engages also with another salient feature of postmodernism: its apocalyptic penchant for ultimacy and finality. As John Barth maintains in his pivotal essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," postmodernism "reflects and deals with ultimacy, both technically and thematically" (67). Leaving aside the engagement with ultimacy on a technical level, from a thematic standpoint a "fascination with the new beginnings to be found in endings" (Burn 14) is certainly central in Denis Johnson's fiction, but it has, again, a different focus than postmodernism:

the stress is not on the collapse of a world (which often entails the collapse of a system of knowledge), but on how to live purposefully once the end of that world (and the collapse of that system) has already occurred.

In this article I am going to focus on two novels that are dominated by an unsettling sense of aftermath. Both novels deal with the preoccupation of how to live after apocalyptic events that are both collective and individual. I will discuss Johnson's sprawling Vietnam novel *Tree of Smoke* (2007) and connect it with one of his early works, the post-apocalyptic phantasmagoria *Fiskadoro* (1985). Denis Johnson's body of work is engineered so that each new novel expands on previously written novels. His novels are all linked together by the Balzacian technique of recurring characters, present also in other contemporary authors (Roberto Bolaño being a prominent example). This intertextual system of references prompts us to see his novels as various pieces of a unitary universe. From this standpoint, his body of work becomes a homogenous collective narrative of a decaying American empire whose destiny is the one imagined in *Fiskadoro*.

Johnson's second novel, *Fiskadoro* is a hallucinatory prophecy about the end of American history. The novel imagines that the decline of the US empire started with the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, the conclusive episode of the Vietnam War. Everything that happened afterwards led to a nuclear holocaust that not only precipitated America into a Third World condition, but also erased its collective memory. The description of the fall of Saigon is the novel's only incursion into the past, focalized through the eyes of a British-Vietnamese teenage girl, Marie, who will later survive the nuclear holocaust and become the oldest person in *Fiskadoro*'s fallen world. *Fiskadoro*'s implication that the fall of Saigon marks the beginning of the decay of the US Empire haunts the Vietnam novel *Tree of Smoke*, which revolves around the historical event that, according to Johnson, marked the origin of the collapse. As we will see, both *Tree of Smoke* and *Fiskadoro* convey a conception of cultural memory as lacking the redemptive power attributed to it by most modernist writers, although not by all of them (William Faulkner constituting a notable exception). Memory reveals itself to be a self-referential interweaving of representations, an uncertain system of knowledge unable to provide a privileged access to truth or to a deeper meaning. On the contrary, both novels provocatively suggest that

an occasion of personal and collective renewal can be found in amnesia, and especially the oblivion of US imperialist history. The question Johnson asks his reader is the same pronounced by a marginal character in *Tree of Smoke*: "Why must we have any legacy at all?" (242).

As Timothy Melley rightly points out, in contemporary fiction amnesia has become "a metaphor for historiographical dilemmas – for the sense that it is no longer possible to ground historical narratives securely and that the failure to do so has led to dangerous forms of collective forgetting" (174-75). Amnesia symbolizes the crisis of historical referentiality that has been extensively diagnosed by French cultural critic and philosopher Jean Baudrillard. In his critical work, Baudrillard regarded the Vietnam war as the seminal moment that marks the passage of history into simulation, where meaning implodes through a global network of information. As he points out: "What sense did that war make, if not that its unfolding sealed *the end of history* in the culminating and decisive event of our age?" (66, emphasis added). *Tree of Smoke* can be read as a chronicle of the exact transition described by the French philosopher, when the boundaries between history, fiction and mythmaking imploded sealing the end of the possibility to ground any historical narrative.[2]

A pastiche of different genres (especially war novel and spy-story), *Tree of Smoke* is written in Johnson's habitual minimal style and with a linear chronological structure. It presents an intricate plot stretching from the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1963 to 1970, with an epilogue in 1983. The narration is fragmented, displaying selected slices of the experiences of a wide range of characters. The novel's espionage plots and subplots remain mainly opaque to the reader. As the author Norman Rush pointed out in an early review, the reader "sees these various projects in silhouette only" (n. pag.), and fully understands only that the majority of these missions end up truncated or aborted.

The novel's chief protagonist is William "Skip" Sands, a young CIA recruit from Kansas who is engaged in the Psychological Operations against the Vietcongs under the directions of his uncle, Francis Xavier Sands, nicknamed "The Colonel." A melancholy and inchoate individual who feels "central to nothing" (37) and has a scholarly background, Skip is initially imbued with patriotism and binary oppositions, hoping to follow

in the footsteps of his larger-than-life uncle. His certainties start to waver during an operation in Manila, when he becomes the unwitting accomplice of the assassination of a priest (and suspected gunrunner) named Carignan. He is then assigned the task of sorting and cross-referencing a massive amount of file cards assembled by the colonel during his career, holed up in a villa in the Vietnam jungle belonging to a deceased French doctor (Dr. Bouquet). Not only will the file cards prove to be useless, but Skip will also find out that the unnarrativized pieces of random information they contain, summed up with Dr. Bouquet's fragmented letters and diaries, fail to provide any knowledge or final meaning. In the absence of a structural narrative that conveys truth, these fragments of texts lead only to a state of permanent doubt. At some point Skip finds in Bouquet's letters a quotation from Cioran that aptly represents the condition of radical doubt where he is stuck: "This state of sterility in which we neither advance nor retreat, this peculiar marching-in-place, is precisely where doubt leads us, a state which resembles in many respects the 'dry places' of the mystics" (355).

While Skip's "state of sterility" is provoked by his discovery that the cards can never be cross-referenced in any way that may produce a coherent knowledge, the possibility to achieve such a coherence is further undermined by the Colonel's methods, which deliberately deploy the conflation between facts and mythology as a weapon. The Colonel is a disciple of the cold warrior (and counterinsurgency guru) Edward Lansdale, who "became famous for his ethnographic approach to intelligence" (Melley 130) and is rumored to have provided the model for Graham Greene's *The Quiet American.*[3] According to the legend surrounding the Colonel's past, "Lansdale had shaped his [the Colonel's] methods: trust the locals, learn their songs and stories, fight for their hearts and minds" (Johnson, *Tree* 449). The Colonel's policy is guided by the conviction that the key to a successful military strategy can be found in an understanding of the enemy's myths and folklore. As he pontificates: "War is ninety percent myth anyway, isn't it? In order to prosecute our own wars we raise them to the level of human sacrifice, don't we, and we constantly invoke our God. It's got to be about something bigger than dying, or we'd all turn deserter" (54). Starting from this assumption, the Colonel plots an operation involving an intelligence network which seeks "to create fictions and serve them to our policy-

makers in order to control the direction of government" (254). The name of the final step of this operation, "Tree of Smoke," is both a quotation from the biblical Book of Joel (445) and an evocation of the image of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The name therefore suggests that the final step of the operation deals with the American strategy of deterrence (the simulated threat of the nuclear weapon). According to Baudrillard, it was exactly deterrence that connoted the Vietnam war as the event that sealed the impossibility to distinguish between real and fictional threats (66). In the novel the conflation between fiction and reality also lies at the basis of another operation, "Project Labyrinth" (Johnson, *Tree* 344), which involves the exploitation of Vietnamese mythology to dissuade the Vietcongs from using their own underground tunnels. In the Colonel's own words: "This land is their myth. We penetrate this land, we penetrate their heart, their myth, their soul. That's real infiltration. And that's our mission: penetrating the myth of the land" (212). Skip is enrolled also in this operation, for which he is ordered "to extract an encyclopedia of mythological references from over seven hundred volumes of Vietnamese literature" (145).

As the plot unfolds, the distinction between fictions and facts blurs and collapses, together with other binary oppositions. The boundaries between the two fronts of US and Vietnam become also increasingly permeable, due to the proliferation of double agents, internal fights and a general imposition of American consumerism to the Vietnamese population. The impossibility to access any grounded reality gives way to a triumph of abstraction. As Skip admits to himself: "He'd come to war to see abstractions become realities. Instead he'd seen the reverse. Everything was abstract now" (357).

While the postmodern conflation between facts, simulation, and mythology characterizes the Vietnam war, also the memory of the ante-bellum past does not provide a privileged access to reality. On the contrary, it appears equally overburdened by legends and fictions. As the narration unfolds, Skip gradually comes to terms with the fact that the country he is fighting for – and the ideals it represents – exists only in his (unreliable) reminiscences: "He loved and fought for a memory. The world inheriting this memory had a right, he couldn't help seeing, to make its way

unbeholden to assassinated ideals" (330). Skip's memory of his homeland maintains the idealized aura of a childhood nostalgia, transfiguring his hometown, Clements, Kansas (where his widowed mother still lives), into a Wizard of Oz-esque mythical space. While Skip believes in the reality of the phantasmagoric America of his childhood, the news reaching him about the present reality of his country (namely, the deaths of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy in 1968) appear to him "improbable, fictitious" (329). As the news convey the impression that "the homeland from which he was exiled had sunk in the ocean of its future history" (329), Skip clings to the nostalgic illusion that the hometown of his childhood has remained untouched by historical change. His memory assumes the contours of out-of-time pastoral idyl: "Clements, Kansas, remained as it had been, of that he could be confident; to Clements, Kansas, only one summer could come, with its noisy locusts and blackbirds, and the drifting fragrances of baking and soap suds and mown alfalfa, and the brilliant actuality of childhood" (329-30). Skip's intention to remain as far away from Kansas as possible is nurtured by a desire to keep his hometown identical to that of his memories and his nostalgic idealization. In this respect it is meaningful that, when he goes back to the United States before his first mission in the Philippines, he keeps away from his hometown and from his mother. As he acknowledges: "Sure: war, intrigue, the fates – certainly, he'd face them. Just, please, not Mom. Not her laundry flapping in the sorrows of springtime. Not Clements, Kansas, with its historical license to be tiny, low, and square" (148).

Through Skip's contradictory relationship with his hometown, Johnson offers a parodic version of an important aspect characterizing of the crisis of historicity: the rise of a postmodern nostalgia, which has been analyzed extensively by Fredric Jameson. According to Jameson, postmodern nostalgia is the collective desire to appropriate an idealized past through aesthetic representation, emptying the signs of the past of their historical referents and approaching "the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness'" – in particular, the 1950s "remain the privileged lost object of desire" (19). By way of analogy, in order to remain a phantomatic object of desire, Clements, Kansas must remain a lost object. In order to

preserve his nostalgic memory from the changes of history, Skip chooses to remain as distant as possible from his home for the rest of his life: "Here, in Manila, [...] he couldn't get much farther away. But it wasn't far enough" (Johnson, *Tree* 148).

The need to keep the past alive through a mythology is also epitomized by the tale that Skip learns from a Vietnamese old woman at some point in the novel. The story revolves around a child whose father has left the family to fight in a war. Every night his mother holds him close to a lantern and shows him her shadow, pretending that the shadow is the missing father standing by the door. "Immediately the child was comforted by the shadow" (331). However, when the father returns from war, the child does not recognize him, still persuaded that the shadow is his real father: "Alone with his child, the man said, 'Come to me, I am your father.' But the child said, 'Daddy's not here now. Every night I say goodnight to Daddy. You're not Daddy.' As he heard these words, the soldier's love perished in his heart" (331). The tale goes on with a series of bleak events caused by this misrecognition, which eventually lead to the deaths of all the characters. What is at stake with this cautionary tale is the idea that the attempt to keep the past alive is inevitably overburdened by mythology, and that this mythology prevents us from recognizing the real possibilities of the present. At the same time, this wisdom is available in the form of myth. Therefore, while every system of knowledge proves to be blurred with mythology, mythology itself still seems to bear a connection with truth. As knowledge is available only through a plurality of narratives, the problem of *Tree of Smoke*'s characters therefore becomes not which narrative actually tells the truth, but which mythologies help living in the present (and which ones must be discarded).

An example of a character entrapped in a dysfunctional mythology of the past is provided by another main character in the novel, the Canadian lay missionary Kathy Jones. She meets Skip for the first time in the Philippines, where she initially mistakes him for her missing husband, a Seventh-Day Adventist pastor named Timothy. When the news of Timothy's death reaches her, she decides to remain in the South Pacific, eventually moving to Vietnam to volunteer in some lay organizations helping children without medical care. She becomes Skip's lover, although

they see each other on scattered occasions and carry on a mostly epistolary relationship. While Kathy's love affair with Skip can be read as a strategy to maintain a connection with her deceased husband (given the physical resemblance between the two men), her attempt to keep the past alive passes also through her increasing obsession with the book left by Timothy before his disappearance, containing "the dreadful essays of John Calvin and his doctrine of predestination, promising a Hell full of souls made expressly to be damned" (83). Far from being an expression of faith, Kathy's tormented surrendering to the Calvinist doctrine – defined as a "spiritual pornography" to which she returns "like a dog to her vomit" (83) – can be read as an attempt to maintain a connection with the past, which, nonetheless, shatters any belief in the possibility that her actions can change the inevitability of her predestined damnation. Strictly related to Puritanism, one of the core foundational myths of the American experience (although Kathy is Canadian), the Calvinist belief becomes the only master narrative that can explain the arbitrariness of suffering in what Kathy conceives as a "fallen world" (291). As Kathy sees that "survival was a breeze that touched some and not others" (241), she assumes that the same occurs with salvation and damnation. She writes to Skip: "I know that this is Hell, right here, planet Earth, and I know that you, me, and all of us were made by God only to be damned" (156). Again, what the past has to offer is not a key to understand the present, but the legacy of a mythological master narrative (Calvinism) that, in Kathy's case, does not convey meaning but despair. As she acknowledges: "I started reading Calvin, wrestling with Calvin, and I lost the fight and got dragged down into Calvin's despair. Calvin doesn't call it despair but it's despair all right" (156).

In this respect it is meaningful that the novel's epilogue, set in 1983 and separated from the rest of the novel by an ellipsis covering 13 years, closes with a hopeful note that is linked to Kathy Jones's ability to finally leave the past behind. Married again and living in Minneapolis, Kathy meets a friend at a restaurant and confesses about Timothy: "I have no memory of him" (602). When, during the same conversation, the past reaches her in the form of some delayed letters from Skip (who has been executed in Kuala Lumpur for smuggling guns), she realizes that her memory of Skip has also

become vague: "Skip she didn't remember nearly as well. More boy than man. He joked, he evaded, he dissembled, he lied, he gave you nothing to remember" (610). Towards the end of the novel Kathy is in an auditorium, attending an event where the children-refugees of American soldiers are being honored. While waiting for the event to begin, she briefly relives the memory of her survival from the evacuation from Saigon. Nonetheless, her attitude seems open to the future, as she is entrusted with the novel's enigmatic final words: "there are people in this audience with broken bones, others whose bones will break sooner or later, people who've ruined their health, worshipped their own lies, spat on their dreams, turned their backs on their true beliefs, yes, yes, and all will be saved. All will be saved. All will be saved" (614). The words that conclude the novel show that Kathy's moving forward from the past coincides with her getting rid of the Calvinist master narrative that in her case constituted the main device to keep the past alive. Having left the past behind, she is free to choose which narrative to project onto the future: "All will be saved," and not just the chosen ones. This belief comes out of thin air and is not grounded in any epiphanic event occurring in the course of the novel. It is worth noticing that the novel's final words are a nearly literal quotation from St. Paul's first letter to Timothy, which reads: "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved" (1 Timothy, 3-4). The name of Kathy's former husband, Timothy, may be read as a hint at the addressee of St. Paul's letter. It is an ironic reference, given that the belief in the eventual salvation of all stands squarely opposed to the Calvinist doctrine of predetermined damnation.

Given that the events that await humanity in Denis Johnson's narrative universe are the catastrophic ones narrated in *Fiskadoro*, the last words of *Tree of Smoke* are also colored by a dark ambiguity. Nevertheless, a comparison with the ending of *Fiskadoro* will provide a key to interpret the specific kind of salvation addressed by Johnson, as will be discussed later. For now, it is sufficient to point out that the ending of *Tree of Smoke* provides a paradigmatic example of the "change of focus" that McLaughlin attributes to post-postmodernism. While, as we have seen, Denis Johnson instills *Tree of Smoke* with Baudrillard's and Jameson's shared conception of postmodernism as the age of simulacra and simulations, it treats

this condition as a starting point to re-establish a quest for meaning and redemption. While it chronicles the end of history, the novel also explores how personal and collective renewals are possible on the basis of this same end. The idea that the end of history is the basis for a possible palingenesis is the point where *Tree of Smoke* finds its connection with the imaginary future of *Fiskadoro*. A comparison between the two novels is necessary to understand how Johnson's literary project engages with the idea that, as Timothy Parrish puts it, "postmodern history, no less than any understanding of history that precedes it, seeks its own transcendence" (267).

The 1985 novel *Fiskadoro* takes place some sixty years after a nuclear holocaust has destroyed the United States. The setting is the Florida Keys (all that remains of the country), and more specifically what used to be Key West and now has been renamed Twicetown (because two missiles landed there but did not explode). This survived zone of America is called the "Quarantine," insofar as, after the bomb fell, it remained quarantined both geographically and temporally. The Quarantine is both a transitional "time between civilizations" and "a place ignored by authority" (Johnson, *Fiskadoro* 12). The civilization preceding the Quarantine is America as we know it, while the second one refers to the Cuban rescuers that will put an end to the Quarantine (and who are never shown in the novel). One of them is the unnamed, apparently Muslim, narrator of the story. As already mentioned, collective memory of the previous civilization has been erased, and the few relics left, deprived of context, become misleading and emptied of meaning in the absence of a structural narrative that ties them together. The population of the Quarantine is both racially and linguistically creolized (they speak a mixture of English and Spanish). Moreover, the religion that has survived from the previous world is a syncretic system that puts "the god Quetzalcoatl, the god Bob Marley, the god Jesus" (3) on the same level. The Quarantine is also a pre-capitalist society where "whole islands were given over to the cultivation of rice, while sugar cane was a product only of patient neighborhood gardeners" (3). Therefore, what the novel implies is that the population survived from the nuclear holocaust is especially composed by the marginalized elements of the master narrative of American exceptionalism.

The novel's three main characters (and focalizers) are all multiracial. Mr. Cheung is a clarinet player and one of the few musicians left. He is obsessed with the reconstruction of the lost collective memory. Cheung's centenarian grandmother, known as Grandmother Wright, is the only living human being who remembers the previous civilization, although she is mute and only the reader has access to her memories. The novel's eponymous character, a thirteen-year-old black Latino fisherman's son named Fiskadoro (possibly a Christological reference, conflating the Spanish words *pescador*, meaning "fisherman," and *fisgador*, meaning "harpooner"), unsuccessfully studies clarinet with Mr. Cheung. The death at sea of his father ends the lessons; maddened by grief, Fiskadoro goes on a sort of visionary quest. He is abducted by a tribe of primitive swamp dwellers who will initiate him through a crude subincision ritual. The ritual leads to a drug-related loss of long-term memory. While the initiation ritual makes him "different from all other men" (193), it also prepares him for the civilization of the future. As the narrator underscores, he is "the one known to us best of all, the only one who was ready when we came" (12). As the novel makes explicit, Fiskadoro's short-term memory is what makes him fit for the next civilization, which preludes to a renewal of humanity.

Accordingly, *Fiskadoro* configures itself as a mythical-religious narrative belonging to the civilization following the Quarantine. It is, again, a parable conveying a provocative critique of the practice of history. The unidentified narrator takes it as a doctrinal postulate that thinking "about the past contributes nothing to the present endeavor, and in fact to concern ourselves too greatly with the past is a sin, because it distracts our mind from the real and current blessing showered down on us in every heartbeat out of the compassion and mercy and bounty of Allah" (12). Nevertheless, his or her very activity as narrator paradoxically demonstrates that the urge to tell the story of the past is still present in the next civilization.

In the novel the practice of history is represented by Mr. Cheung, who belongs to the Society for Science, a faction of five intellectuals who try to reconstruct the past civilization. They have only access to two salvaged books, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and a children's book called *All About Dinosaurs*. As with Colonel Sands' fragmentary file cards in *Tree of Smoke*, gaining any meaning from these texts becomes an ineffectual

effort given the absence of a context structuring them into a knowledge. As Mr. Cheung admits to himself: "By what light was this fact called 'knowledge?' Wasn't it just one more inexplicable thing to mystify them, didn't it subtract from what they knew, rather than add to it?" (47). When the society trades a fishing boat for another salvaged book, which turns out to be the (really existing) essay *Nagasaki: The Forgotten Bomb* by Frank Chinnock (1969), they realize the futility of their enterprise. The book's horrific descriptions only return the characters to a traumatic moment that they can neither understand, nor transform into a lesson for what Jameson calls the "reorientation of our collective future" (18). What is at stake here is the characters' inability to use the past (or, better, the fragmented simulacrum of the past) as a compass for the future. With the exception of Hemingway's novel, the few texts left to the Society for Science (*All About Dinosaurs* and *Nagasaki*) can only be understood by the characters as mythical narratives that connect them with the possibility of their own extinction. In a class where they read the children's books on dinosaurs Mr. Cheung has an epileptic seizure. In that occasion he "saw the truth of his own extinction and it made him dizzy. They were ghosts in a rotten room" (Johnson, *Fiskadoro* 45). As Timothy Parrish points out, the members of the Society are "doomed to experience their death as a form of memory, instead of experiencing memory as a type of personal or cultural renewal" (237).

As *Fiskadoro*, like *Tree of Smoke*, provocatively denies any redemptive power to history and cultural memory, it nonetheless offers the reader an incursion into the past through Grandmother Wright (a.k.a. Marie)'s memories of the fall of Saigon, when she was 15 years old. Her father, a British importer living in Saigon, committed suicide few days before the conclusive event of the Vietnam war: "And it was on the day when her father took his life [...] that she marked the end of the world as having begun. As a matter of fact, however, only that small war, between the Americans and the Vietnamese Communists, was turning toward its end on the day of her father's death" (72). During her escape from Saigon, her helicopter – piloted by *Tree of Smoke*'s main character Nguyen Minh – crashed and she spent three days floating in the ocean, more dead than alive. She relives this memory at the end of the novel. In an effort to stay afloat, she experienced

a moment of pure present-tense-ness, where she was completely emptied of her ego: "By sunset she was only a baby, thinking nothing, absolutely adrift, [...] indistinguishable from what she saw, which was the gray sky that had no identity, interest, or thought" (220). It is in this condition that she is rescued by a boat. The narrator's meditation on this event contains the wisdom of the novel, which can be also useful to interpret *Tree of Smoke*'s puzzling final words ("all will be saved"). It contends that Marie was

> [s]aved not because she lasted, not because of anything she did, or determined in herself to do, because there was nothing left of her to determine anything; saved not because she hadn't given up, because she had, and in fact she possessed no memory of the second night, [...] saved because she was saved, saved because they threw down a rope, but she couldn't reach her hand up now to take hold of it; saved because a sailor jumped off the boat, his bare white feet dangling from the legs of khaki pants, and pulled her to the ladder; saved not because her hands reached out; saved because other hands than hers reached down and saved her. (221)

The narrator insists in not attributing to Marie the merit of her own survival because this is a central point in the novel. Marie's state while she tries to remain afloat can be understood as a condition of complete deconstruction. She lives moment by moment, unable to think about the past or the future, and there is "nothing left of her to determine anything" (221). She experiences an oceanic feeling where the boundaries between subject and object are overcome (she is "indistinguishable from what she saw, which was the gray sky that had no identity, interest, or thought"; 220). What Johnson suggests is that such a condition of total deconstruction of the self is not terminal: it leaves room for the present moment as well as for the materiality of existence. Also, in a conception that is in line with the tradition of Christian apophatic mysticism, this emptiness opens a space for a transcendent experience of salvation. She is not saved by knowledge, but by what is still unknown to her. It is according to this logic that, from a grammatical standpoint, in the phrase "she was saved" the agent of the action is missing. As Parrish points out, "[h]aving reached bottom, having been emptied of her ego, Marie is saved because she has become an empty vessel prepared to receive divine grace" (263). This episode of *Fiskadoro*

is helpful to explain the concept of salvation addressed in the final words of *Tree of Smoke*: "all will be saved" (again, grammatically the agent is missing). They will be saved because, in Denis Johnson's narrative, the breakdown of master narratives, the collapse of epistemological systems and the fragmentation of coherent identities ultimately lead to a purifying revelation, which is the prelude of a renewal. The focus is not on the celebration (or the mourning) of a system's collapse, but on an exploration of what to do with it. The exhaustion of a system does not hinder the possibility to create new narratives that can reorient a personal or collective future. On the contrary, it seems to be the starting point of such a process. Kathy's eventual belief in the salvation of all is not rooted in a lesson she learns from her experience, but it is a pragmatic choice. Similarly, Marie's casual rescue does not have a particular meaning to convey or lesson to teach (it is a matter of luck, not of skill) – still, it has a function. Therefore, Johnson's novels apply a change of focus to postmodernism because, while his novels acknowledge (and narrate) the uncertainty and unreliability of several systems of knowledge (especially history and memory), they also explore the functions that such limits may have. The point becomes not only deconstruction, but also reconstruction. The short-term memory represented in *Fiskadoro* is an extreme and provocative example not only of the possibility to live constructively with the uncertainty of knowledge, but even to thrive with it. At the same time, while both *Fiskadoro* and *Tree of Smoke* point out that history is oversaturated with fictions and simulacra, they also show that a rooting is still possible in the contact with the present moment, where the practice of history survives not as a tool to access the truth of the past, but as an expression of the human will to produce narratives that guide us in the world.

## Notes

[1] See Robert Rebein's *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction After Postmodernism* (2001). Rabein's acknowledgment of "neorealism" as the successor to postmodernism is shared and extended by Neil Brooks' and Josh Toth's coedited volume *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* (2007) and Toth's own *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (2010).

[2] The concept of the "end of history" can also be understood as the impossibility to escape a single master narrative when rival narratives have been defeated and humankind reaches the Hegelian endpoint of ideological development. This is what Fukuyama pointed out in his famous 1992 essay *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Fukuyama argued that the end of the Cold War coincided with "the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism" and the "unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism" over its rivals. While Johnson's understanding of history is similarly teleological, it imagines a similar yet opposite process: the exhaustion of Western liberalism, the inception of which is represented by the fall of Saigon.

[3] The title of Graham Greene's novel is mentioned recurrently in *Tree of Smoke*, where it becomes an epithet defining Skip Sands (Johnson, *Tree* 363).

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