

## Centre and Periphery in Lawrence Norfolk's *The Pope's Rhinoceros* and Christoph Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt*

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In this paper, I explore the relationship between centre and periphery in two recent novels: *The Pope's Rhinoceros* by Lawrence Norfolk (1996) and Christoph Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt* (1988). Both novels are set in Rome (the first in the High Renaissance, the second during the reign of the emperor Augustus); in both, the authority and 'centrality' of Rome is subtly challenged and subverted. In *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, monks from the Baltic island of Usedom, who travel to Rome to seek help in rebuilding their collapsing monastery, discover that the putative centre of Christendom is bereft of any spiritual authority, though extremely active in the political sphere (notably as arbiter between rising colonial powers, Spain and Portugal). *Die letzte Welt*, whose protagonist, Cotta, journeys to Tomi on the Black Sea coast to investigate rumours of the death of the exiled poet Ovid, portrays imperial Rome as a sclerotic regime whose ideological underpinnings are threatened by the destabilising energies of the periphery, where (as in the *Metamorphoses*) 'nothing retains its form'. Finally, in both novels, the centre's claims to temporal power and dominion are relativised by the broader, 'geological' timescale of the natural phenomena so vividly evoked in the marginal lands.

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### I.

In his *Atlas of the European Novel*, Franco Moretti makes this observation about the geography of the nineteenth-century historical novel: 'we have long ago agreed to call historical novels "historical" to emphasize their peculiar relationship to time. But [...] their spatial component is just as striking as their temporal one. In a negative way, first of all: because this form seems to flourish only away from the center' (Moretti 1998, 33). This

preoccupation with centre and periphery is one of the ways in which the historical novel engages with a major political challenge of the period: the mapping and consolidation of the emergent nation state. It does this by charting the internal boundaries that separate different cultures within the state and then fictionally overcoming or eliminating them, as we see in Scott's *Waverley*, in which the protagonist crosses and recrosses the Highland Line that demarcates the old clan system of the Scottish Highlands from the 'modern' North British state of Lowland Scotland. Moretti concludes: 'Historical novels are not just stories "of" the border, but of its erasure, and of the incorporation of the internal periphery into the larger unit of the state' (p. 40).

Contexts and meanings may be different but centres and peripheries are still very much in evidence in many recent works of historical fiction. In this article I propose to examine their relationship and interplay in two novels from the last decades of the twentieth century: *The Pope's Rhinoceros* by Lawrence Norfolk and *Die letzte Welt* by Christoph Ransmayr. In both texts, the political and cultural centre is Rome; in both, Rome's centrality and authority is challenged and subverted. If the persistence of the centre-periphery polarity underlines the element of continuity between these recent texts and the nineteenth-century prototypes Moretti discusses, the ways in which that polarity is explored indicate the very different modes of spatiality that are to be found in *The Pope's Rhinoceros* and especially in *Die letzte Welt*, which (as we shall see) displays the self-referentiality and generic hybridity characteristic of the 'historiographic metafiction' which Linda Hutcheon has identified as the dominant mode of postmodern fictionality (Hutcheon 1988, 105–123).<sup>1</sup>

## II.

*The Pope's Rhinoceros*, first published in 1996, was written by a young (at the time) English writer, Lawrence Norfolk. A lengthy and complex historical novel set in the early years of the sixteenth century, it focuses – if such a sprawling work can be said to have a single focus – on the rival expeditions mounted by Spain and Portugal to capture a rhinoceros for the menagerie of Pope Leo X. (He already has an elephant and is eager to stage a battle between the two pachyderms.) Interwoven with this is the

story of a group of monks from the Baltic island of Usedom whose church is falling into the sea and who therefore decide – under considerable pressure from their prior – to travel to Rome to seek the pope’s help in rebuilding it. The major link between these two narrative strands is Salvestro, the novel’s picaresque protagonist; originally from the Baltic, he has returned to Usedom with his sidekick Bernardo (a slow-witted giant, Obélix to Salvestro’s Astérix) to seek out the treasure of the sunken city of Vineta. The prior, Jörg, prevails upon the two adventurers to act as the monks’ guide on their journey to Rome, where – after a series of scrapes – both Salvestro and Bernardo are recruited for the Spanish rhino hunt and find themselves sailing in a leaky vessel down the west coast of Africa towards the Bight of Benin. The fabled rhinoceros is eventually found and transported back to Europe, but dies in a shipwreck off the coast of Italy. Salvestro, one of the few survivors, accompanies the (now stuffed) rhinoceros to Rome, where – in the course of the combat staged for the pope – the creature explodes in a (frankly) bathetic, cartoonish dénouement.<sup>2</sup> We learn in the short final section (a mere four and a half pages) that Salvestro has accompanied the two remaining monks (the now blind prior and the faithful Hans Jürgen) on their journey back to Usedom; he is last seen walking out over the Baltic ice off Vineta point.

Rome functions as the symbolic centre of Norfolk’s novel for both ‘external’ reasons – its political, cultural and religious importance in the period in question – and because of its ‘internal’ role in the novel’s narrative and thematic structure. The *caput mundi* is certainly the hub of temporal power in the novel, a hotbed of political and diplomatic intrigue: we see, for example, how the pope, in his quest for the rhinoceros, fans the expansionist rivalries between Spain and Portugal (represented by their respective ambassadors, Vich and Faria) in the wake of the Treaty of Tordesillas, which had divided up the known world between these two maritime superpowers in 1494. Moreover, Rome, and especially the papal court, is still experiencing the repercussions of the French–Italian wars of the previous decades, and in particular the siege of Prato and the subsequent massacre of its inhabitants, in which the pope was heavily implicated. This episode – taking place before the events of the book get underway and narrated only retrospectively and in fragments – nevertheless serves as a focal point of the plot, with indirect but far-reaching consequences for many of the characters (especially those, like Salvestro,

Bernardo and Captain Diego, who are essentially pawns in the historical process).

In spite of its political centrality, however, the *caput mundi* is spiritually bankrupt, its moral authority utterly compromised. This is exemplified first of all in the person of the pope himself, who presides over a Curia marked by venality and cynicism and remains haunted by guilt over Prato. Another telling instance, among the plethora of episodes involving the most varied forms of intrigue, debauchery and violence, is the abject failure of the Usedom monks' mission, which ends with all but two of them going native (as it were) by joining the beggars and petty criminals who congregate along the banks of the Tiber. Admittedly, Prior Jörg is not one of those who succumb; indeed, of all characters in the novel, he arguably comes closest to being a moral and intellectual yardstick, as we see when he gets the better of the powerful Cardinal Serra in a theological disputation in the Church of the Santissimi Apostoli. But the tribulations he subsequently undergoes in Rome – notably when he is chosen to be 'mock pope', presiding over the final battle between elephant and rhinoceros – only serve to underline in more ironic vein the spiritual vacuity that reigns at the centre of Christendom.

Perhaps the most vivid, and sometimes lurid, depiction of Rome's corruption, moral and material, is to be found in the various symbolic episodes and tableaux – it would be tempting to describe them, in Renaissance style, as conceits – that punctuate the 'Ro-ma' section of the novel. A number of major isotopies emerge: the city as battleground, war zone, scene of internecine strife; as group mind spawning monstrous imaginings in its collective consciousness; as vast grotesque body of the sort Bakhtin describes in his account of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984, 18–30, 303–367). The battleground motif appears in the initial description of Rome: dawn breaking over the city is figured as an elemental struggle between darkness and light:

A slow flood is moving up to the barricades. In the east, an invasion is underway. The ground is prepared, shuddering and waiting below. The vault of heaven is tented and empty, its commanders fled. [...] This is a battle without surprises: another dawn is rising over the city. (Norfolk 1998, 151)

The conceit may not in itself be very unusual but it is expressed with considerable rhetorical exuberance and vigorously developed: as the

'Ro-ma' section proceeds, the isotopy of conflict spreads and intensifies, moving from the metaphorical to the diegetic level in the extended description of the wars between rival tribes of rats inhabiting the Palazzo Colonna and the Church of the Santissimi Apostoli:

Sniggering Apostolic rats ambush the corridor scouts, killing all but one, who reports back on the source of the trouble. It is worse than Nest Central first feared: a rival colony, as big as their own, ferocious perhaps, acquisitive, expansionist ... [...]. The culverts and roof-spaces of Fortress Colonna grow thick with rat secretions as the colony twitches itself into action: attack-posture, submit-posture, win-posture, lose-posture ... Mock battles break out and rat-squeals sound in registers reserved for threat, rage, distress. (p. 204)

The allegorical overtones hardly need emphasising: throughout the city, the principle of *homo homini rattus* holds sway, often with a savagery comparable to what we see in this brutal 'rattomachia'. This Hobbesian war of all against all, however, is counterbalanced at times by a kind of collective identity, a sort of group mind that, in one notable passage, generates what the narrator describes as the Rumour-Beast – an unstable, shape-shifting aggregate of the people's speculations about the mysterious creature the pope is seeking to possess:

The city's ticklish collective cortex sweats in its travertine-and-tufa brainpan. The gossip meanwhile mutates, sprouts odd prehensile limbs, gradually becoming something Rome can recognise ... Enter the Rumour-Beast, sporting a pelt of voided velvet with a pomegranate design, seven legs, a single head, and three tails (two more than the average Englishman). [...] The Rumour-Beast gallops about, evolving and disintegrating, shedding a pair of udders in Pescheria, growing gills in Ponte. (p. 307)

Strictly speaking, the Rumour-Beast is a product of the city's collective imaginings rather than an image of the city itself, or of its inhabitants. But it is nevertheless tempting to make that semantic shift, especially as Rome is elsewhere figured in monstrous terms:

*Ro-ma* drips tears, and oozes sweat, secretes and releases drool. Lips pucker or slaver, tongues loll or stiffen. The Caput Mundi grows hydra-headed and thirsty, these mouth-to-mouth exchanges marking junctions, short-lived intersections in the commerce that the city carries on with itself, a new and fluid topography. (p. 238)

This is a passage of considerable semantic density, exemplifying both the complex figuration of Rome in the novel and what William Dalrymple has

memorably described as Norfolk's 'bawdy baroque-punk prose' (Dalrymple 1996, 13). Most of the major tropes – of corporeality, monstrosity, eroticism, topography – appear here, in often unexpected conjunctions and juxtapositions; the overall effect, once again, reminds us of nothing so much as Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque body, in all its disruptive and transgressive vigour.

These tropes – battlefield, grotesque body, gossipy collective consciousness – combine to create a powerful impression of Rome's materialism (in both economic and philosophical senses). The city is presented as a nexus of exchange and interaction, of plotting and trading and all manner of commerce and congress, but hardly as a place of overwhelming piety or spirituality. Any trace of the numinous in *The Pope's Rhinoceros* – and such traces are not very abundant – is best sought in the peripheral regions, where the hold of official Christianity is more precarious, if indeed it exists at all.

There are a number of these peripheral regions in *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, from Goa to São Thomé, but the two most significant are the Baltic coast, and in particular the island of Usedom, where the monks have their church, and the West African kingdom of Nri – an equatorial periphery, ironically enough – where Salvestro and Bernardo, after an arduous journey through the tropical rainforest, eventually locate the rhinoceros.<sup>3</sup> The action of the novel ranges over a wide geographical expanse, with characters travelling in all directions: from the Baltic to Rome and back again; from Rome to the Bight of Benin and then inland to Nri; from the Malabar coast, round the Cape of Good Hope, to the Niger delta. There is a balance of centripetal and centrifugal movement: on one hand, we have the monks' pilgrimage to Rome from Usedom, and the rhino's journey from Nri; on the other, the voyage of the *Santa Lucia* from Ostia to the Bight of Benin, and the ultimate return of Salvestro and the last two remaining monks to Usedom.

It would be misleading to see the thematic relationship between margins and centre as invariably based on contrast or difference. Conflict and exchange (of various sorts) are ubiquitous features of Norfolk's fictional world: even in Nri and Usedom, there are political struggles to be waged, and the Spanish and Portuguese expeditions in search of the rhinoceros are marked by (often brutal) traces of economic activity (one thinks especially of the scenes in the slave colony of São Thome). Nevertheless,

there are some clear thematic oppositions between Rome and these peripheral zones. First of all, the periphery is where nature most obviously and irresistibly reasserts its dominion. This is evident from the very first pages of the book, with the extraordinarily vivid and panoramic description of the formation of the Baltic – a dazzling set-piece which raises questions at once about the centrality of the events of human history that follow.

Centre and periphery are also contrasted in religious terms: Rome, however chaotic and corrupt, remains the nerve-centre of Christendom – at least politically – while both Nri and (to a lesser degree) Usedom are associated with paganism. This is self-evidently the case for Nri, which has its own rich cultural traditions and mythological system, evoked by Norfolk in some detail, especially in relation to the thematically significant conflict between Enyi and Ezodu – a kind of West African ‘Just So’ story explaining how the rhinoceros got its horn (Norfolk 1998, 640–642). Traces of paganism in the Baltic are fainter but equally important for the narrative structure of the book: Salvestro grows up worshipping the old gods (Svantovit) and sees his mother drowned as a witch for her beliefs. The antagonism between the boy and the islanders who killed his mother, and would willingly have killed him, lasts throughout the book, resurfacing (almost literally) in the final episode, when Salvestro flees the murderous pursuit of the Usedom natives, who are too afraid to follow him across the Baltic ice. Perhaps the most important symbol of this vestigial Baltic paganism is the sunken city of Vineta: an ancient Wendish trading centre, fabled for its wealth, it is swept into the sea one night in the course of a violent storm while under attack from the (Christianising) Saxon army of Henry the Lion.<sup>4</sup> Vineta plays a crucial role in the plot, as Salvestro’s ostensible reason for returning to Usedom is to recover the fabulous treasures of the submerged city; it is also strongly associated with the heathen gods, since (according to the legend related by Salvestro’s mother) Svantovit has descended into the depths of the sea with his people and their city (p. 18). Indeed, Vineta’s sudden disappearance almost feels like an obscure form of resistance to the Saxon army: ‘A promise had been made, but the victory was ill-defined and beyond them, in some inconclusive region of convections and sluggish movement. The last ditch should have been the city and every life within it, never this yellow-grey monotone, this limitless vista of nothing’ (p. 26).

The two figures most clearly representing these contrasting pagan cultures are among the most important and (arguably) sympathetic in the text. The first of them, Salvestro, could reasonably be described as the book's protagonist: a picaresque figure who forms an (often unwitting) link between the diverse narrative strands and character clusters.<sup>5</sup> The other is Eusebia/Usse, whom we first meet as an African servant-girl in Rome but who turns out to be princess of Nri and is instrumental in leading the adventurers to the fabled and elusive rhinoceros. Salvestro and Usse are, unsurprisingly, two of the novel's most important centres of consciousness; large swathes of the action are focalised through Salvestro in particular. Although access to a character's thoughts and feelings does not invariably predispose us, as readers, in his or her favour – after all, Pope Leo is both internally focalised (at times) and thoroughly reprehensible – the balance of sympathy in this novel does seem weighted towards these two figures from the margins, both of whom find themselves in more than merely geographical opposition to the culture of the centre, its dominant practices and ideologies. We could see this as a reflection of Norfolk's own poetics of historical fiction, as articulated in an interview conducted by Jonathan Walker which appeared in the journal *Contemporary Literature*: 'One way of seeing the novel was that it retold the history of the sixteenth century, but instead of having the pope at the center, you had a rhinoceros. They were equivalent in the title, and they were equivalent in the text' (Walker 2006, 323). *Pace* the author, one could perhaps argue that, syntactically at least, the rhinoceros in the title is the dominant element: it is after all the substantive, whereas the pope's grammatical role is merely adjectival. But the crucial point surely is that in placing the rhinoceros centre stage, Norfolk is endeavouring to retell, or reconfigure, the orthodox Eurocentric narrative of early sixteenth-century history: 'one of the shortcomings of the history of the Renaissance is that it put undue emphasis on the pope, and not enough on the rhinoceros. That's possible as a novelist: you can restructure history, and rewrite it in that way' (p. 323).

This restructuring project is in evidence both in the geographical dominants of Norfolk's fictional world and in the patterns of identification and sympathy arising from the way the characters are presented. One could argue that, for all Norfolk's imaginative energy and stylistic exuberance, *The Pope's Rhinoceros* remains recognisably a 'realist' historical novel, concerned to fill out the textures, and fill in the gaps, in the official historical



narrative. Norfolk himself suggests as much in the *Contemporary Literature* interview: 'I'm always trying to reproduce the lived experience of another period. [...] It's done using texture and the build-up of details, and by the unconscious formation or half-conscious formation of large structures' (Walker 2006, 339–340). The accuracy of much of the historical detail in *The Pope's Rhinoceros* would support this: to cite just two examples, Oçem, the keeper of the Ganda aboard the Portuguese ship *Nossa Senhora da Ajuda*, is a historically attested figure, and the pope's elephant was indeed called Hanno. There are many passages of dreamlike and hallucinatory vividness in the novel, but perhaps only in the forests of Nri, where boundaries blur between indigenous mythology and the experiential world of Salvestro and Bernardo, do we see anything approaching the shifting ontological levels, characteristic of Latin American magic realism, that we find in *Die letzte Welt*.

### III.

*Die letzte Welt*, by the Austrian writer Christoph Ransmayr, was published in 1988 by a small southern German publishing house and rapidly acclaimed as a work of rare distinction.<sup>6</sup> It is a hallucinatory account of the adventures of Cotta, a young Roman who journeys to Tomi on the Black Sea coast to find out whether his friend, the exiled poet Publius Ovidius Naso, has in fact died, as rumours circulating in Rome have it. Cotta is also eager to track down the manuscript of the *Metamorphoses*, on which Naso was working at the time of his exile – if indeed such a manuscript exists. During his time in Tomi and environs, Cotta encounters a series of (sometimes bizarre) figures, strangely reminiscent of characters in the *Metamorphoses*: Lycaon the rope-maker, Arachne the deaf-mute weaver, Tereus the coarse and brutal butcher and his fleshy wife Procne, among many others. Judged by conventional standards, the novel ends rather inconclusively: Cotta fails to find Naso or his manuscript, though fragments of a work that presumably resemble the fabled *Metamorphoses* are to be found carved on menhirs, scrawled on ragged pennants wound around stone cairns, and (most vividly) woven in Arachne's numerous tapestries. The final pages of the book see Cotta heading back up towards Trachila, in the mountains above Tomi, where he hopes to discover the little banner inscribed with the two

syllables of his own name, which will explain the mystery of his own future transformation.

The geographical structure of *Die letzte Welt* is more straightforward than that of *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, with only one peripheral region presented: Tomi, the 'eiserne Stadt' on the Black Sea coast, where Ovid was exiled by the Emperor Augustus in AD 8.<sup>7</sup> Spatial displacements are correspondingly simpler, taking place along a single axis and in one direction: Cotta journeys from Rome to Tomi to look for Ovid and the *Metamorphoses*; there is no return journey, except intermittently in Cotta's memory and imagination. In comparison to the complex movements to and from the centre we find in *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, then, the 'centripetal pull' in *Die letzte Welt* is noticeably weaker. If Rome is the symbolic centre in political and cultural terms, the dominant space on a diegetic level is Tomi; all the action presented directly – not, that is, through flashbacks in Cotta's mind – takes place in Tomi or its hinterland.

We can outline some of the main thematic oppositions between Rome and Tomi without difficulty, simply by following Cotta's reflections on the matter. In the first place, he links Rome with principles of order and reason, and the stability (material and mental) that they seem to offer:

Aber schließlich begriff Cotta, daß er erzählte, um diesem wüsten Gerede aus dem Dunkel die Ordnung und die Vernunft einer vertrauten Welt entgegenzusetzen: Rom gegen die Unmöglichkeit eines Maulbeerbaumes im Schnee vor dem Fenster; Rom gegen die in der Einöde hockenden Steinmale, gegen die Verlassenheit von Trachila. (Ransmayr 1988, 17–18)

The tension between Roman values and those of the periphery is developed in a subsequent passage in which Cotta speculates about the subversive potential of the *Metamorphoses*: 'Allein der Titel dieses Buches war in der Residenzstadt des Imperators Augustus eine Anmaßung gewesen, eine Aufwiegelei in Rom, wo jedes Bauwerk ein Denkmal der Herrschaft war, das auf den Bestand, auf die Dauer und Unwandelbarkeit der Macht verwies' (pp. 43–44). Imperial Rome is, or aspires to be, a place of stasis and permanence – 'monumentum aere perennius' – and as several critics (Kennedy 2002, 331; Broich 2003, 432; Harbers 2004, 287) have noted, it is these qualities, together with the corresponding intellectual values of order and reason, that form the ideological foundations of the authoritarian and repressive imperial regime.

Tomi, on other hand, is the realm of mutability and metamorphosis, where, in the Ovidian phrase which so many critics have taken to encapsulate the novel's fundamental meaning, 'keinem bleibt seine Gestalt' – nothing retains its form.<sup>8</sup> This principle pervades the 'Last World' of Tomi and Trachila on various levels: diegetic, thematic, formal. The physical processes of transformation, for example, are omnipresent: iron rusts, buildings collapse, weeds and mosses sprout, cliffs and stones erode, carcasses rot, slugs explode. The human actors also obey the immutable law of change in the dramatic Ovidian metamorphoses they undergo: Lycaon becomes a wolf, Battus a stone, and the triad of Tereus, Procne and Philomela are turned into birds (hoopoe, nightingale and swallow respectively).<sup>9</sup> This results in a kind of referential instability – what Ulrich Broich has called an 'ontological flicker' (Broich 2003, 427) – arising from the blurring of boundaries between fictional levels; as Broich goes on to remark, we have a strong sense that 'the fictional text [of the *Metamorphoses*] is seeping into the real world' (p. 433).

A slightly different way of articulating this would be to say that the Last World of Tomi and environs is permeated by the transformative power of the poetic imagination – a power that generates metaphors and narratives profoundly subversive, indeed disruptive, of the fixed categories of reason (with its hierarchy of levels) that underpin the imperial regime. Perhaps the most overt clash of these principles is played out in the Stadium of the Seven Refuges in Rome, when Ovid tells the assembled multitudes – including the emperor himself – the story of the plague of Aegina, the devastation it wrought and the subsequent emergence of the race of Myrmidons.<sup>10</sup> This tale, which serves as a reminder, perhaps even a celebration, of the ineluctability of change, will ultimately lead to Ovid's banishment, even if (in Cotta's account) the exact, and exactly definable, reasons for the emperor's decision – if indeed it was a decision – remain opaque.

The diegetic world of Tomi, then – and by extension or association, the poetic imagination itself – emerges as a site of resistance to the authoritarianism of Rome, an ontological challenge to the universal and unchanging Reason on which Rome's authority rests (Anz 1997, 127). It would, however, be misleading to present the opposition between Rome and Tomi as total, or totally watertight. 'Et in Arcadia ego': as with death in Arcadia, mutability lurks in the very heart of empire. Characters we recognise from the *Metamorphoses* – Memnon the gardener; Cyane, the

wife Ovid leaves behind – form part of the poet's circle in Rome, as Thomas Neukirchen (2002, 201) has remarked. Moreover, the vicissitudes of Ovid's poetic reputation and the ideological tussles over his poetic legacy command considerable attention. Perhaps, rather than positing a fixed and immutable opposition between the worlds of Rome and Tomi, it would be more productive to follow Anz (1997, 127) and see Tomi as Rome's unconscious, where fears, desires, images repressed by Rome resurface – often in distorted form – and where all the transformative energies that threaten to destabilise the Roman state are given free rein.<sup>11</sup> This is most vividly exemplified in the description of carnival celebrations in Tomi, where figures of Roman gods appear in grotesque and travestied forms: 'dieser Narrenzug konnte nur ein stumpfer Abglanz jener Mythen sein, in denen sich die Phantasie Roms ausgetobt und erschöpft hatte, bis sie unter der Herrschaft von Augustus Imperator in Pflichtbewußtsein [...] verwandelt und zur Vernunft gebracht worden war' (Ransmayr 1988, 93).

Like the return of the repressed, this uncouth cavalcade can be read as both a deformation and a revivification of the old gods and myths of Rome. This is made explicit in a passage that sees the appearance of our second rhinoceros – not the pope's this time, but the emperor's: 'Wie das urzeitliche Nashorn in den Gärten des Imperators, schien auch in Tomi noch wild und lebendig, was in der Residenz und in anderen Großstädten des Imperiums schon Vergangenheit war, zu Denkmälern und Museumsstücken erstarrt' (Ransmayr 1988, 94). Symbol of the primitive energies that persist in the petrified heart of empire, the rhinoceros stands four-square as a reminder that the imperial ideology of immutable order is constantly being undermined by the Ovidian principle of metamorphosis.<sup>12</sup>

#### IV.

As we have seen, in both *The Pope's Rhinoceros* and *Die letzte Welt* the authority of Rome – moral, political, cultural – is overtly or implicitly contested. Whether in Norfolk's rewriting of official history, giving weight to the cultures of the periphery, or in Ransmayr's ontological-aesthetic assault on the foundations of authoritarianism, the values of the centre are challenged (and indeed contaminated) by the destabilising energies of the margins. Perhaps the most radical instance of this can be found in the 'ecological turn' perceptible in both novels: a shift of focus

or emphasis away from the anthropocentric narratives of politics and culture towards what we might describe as ‘natural histories’ (Anz 1997, 125).

This shift of emphasis is certainly prefigured in some aspects of the peripheral regions we have examined. In *The Pope’s Rhinoceros*, the pagan cultures of the periphery seem more attuned to, less alienated from, the rhythms and presences of non-human nature than are the inhabitants of the ‘hydra-headed Caput Mundi’: thus Salvestro’s mother worships Svantovit in a holm oak grove and recounts how the god has merged with the natural environment, his claws appearing as islands in the Baltic (Norfolk 1998, 18). Salvestro himself proves particularly adept at reading the signs of nature and withstanding its rigours, as is shown by his escape from Usedom after his mother’s death, his descent in the barrel to seek Vineta and his ability – not unaided by luck, or fate – to find a way through the well-nigh impenetrable African jungle. That jungle – a dominant natural feature of the other pagan zone, the kingdom of Nri – is imbued with traces of the indigenous culture, sheltering the ancestral gods into whose presence Salvestro and his companions are led by some uncanny intuition or mysterious force. It would of course be misleading to argue that Rome is entirely impervious to the influences of non-human nature – after all, the last image Norfolk gives us of the eternal city is of hordes of rats emerging from buildings and sewers and scrambling down towards the Tiber – but the dominant impression we have is of a city alienated from the rhythms and energies of the natural world. We see this, for example, in the way dawn over the city is figured in terms of human activity, as a battlefield, and especially in the (anti-)climactic fight between elephant and stuffed rhinoceros, which can surely be read as a grotesque travesty of natural behaviour staged for a human audience. All in all, it seems clear that human awareness of non-human nature – whether the presence of animals and plants, the impact of weather, or the imperceptibly slow movements of glacier or rock – is keener and more immediate in the peripheral zones.

The same holds true for Cotta’s experience in the ‘Last World’ of Tomi. From the shape-shifting tempest that batters the ship on the voyage from Rome to the unstable mountain terrain he climbs to reach Trachila, Cotta finds himself in a world dominated by the rhythms of meteorological and geological change, which find vivid and dramatic expression in the

metamorphoses undergone by almost everyone in Tomi. And of course this principle of metamorphosis is what the oppressive regime in Rome cannot acknowledge, what its ideology must repress.

Human experience in the peripheral regions, then, is more attuned to, and sometimes overwhelmed by, the forces and rhythms of the natural world. But in both novels, the way these regions are evoked often foregrounds phenomena that appear remote from human preoccupations and perspectives, and sometimes overshadow them altogether. A good example occurs right at the beginning of *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, where we find an astonishing panoramic description of the formation of the Baltic. The following short extract gives the merest indication of its vividness and scope:

This surface interruption: a pale disc of light germinating in the snow-flecked sky suggests a radical tilt to the axis below, gales cede to gusts and vicious whirlwinds, ice giants shout in the night. An inch of silt marks a thousand years, an aeon means a single degree of arc and by this scale a thaw is underway. (Norfolk 1998, 3–4)

The importance of the natural forces evoked here is indicated not only by the heightened style of the passage but also by its initial position in what will be an extremely complex narrative. However gripping and dramatic that narrative may turn out to be, the significance of its peripeteia is implicitly 'placed' by the sheer magnitude of the geological changes described. This holds good for other *tours de force* of nature-writing in the novel – for instance the description of the Niger at the start of book V, or the astonishing evocation of the West African jungle later in the same section:

The roving roots of these Hydra-footed monsters (Salvestro is about to trip over one) pump tree-food a hundred feet or more into the sky where a glossy canopy of leaves soaks up supplementary sunlight like a fat green sponge and produces brightly coloured flowers most of which are small and exquisitely engineered. [...] Everything else is underneath, groping around in the gloom for whatever gleams and glints of growth-promoting sunshine drip down from the light-hogging canopy high above, the strongest contenders here being fifty-foot balsams, smooth-grained satinwoods, locust-trees with feathery leaves and long pendant seed-pods, densely packed stands of false date palms, fibrous aji-trees, crabwoods, all of which sprout sun-hungry leaves of their own, sopping up the remaining little rays and fugitive shafts until the forest floor is lit only by the vaguest dapplings and glows, the leavings and leakage of those on high. (pp. 616–617)

This is a masterful example of mimetic form, almost palpably dense and entangled: Norfolk employs a battery of rhetorical devices – alliteration (‘groping around in the gloom for whatever gleams and glints of growth-promoting sunshine’), extended lists (‘balsams [...], satinwoods [...], locust-trees [...], aji-trees, crabwoods’), compound adjectives (‘growth-promoting’, ‘light-hogging’, ‘sun-hungry’) – to evoke the luxuriance of *natura naturans*. Indeed, the passage comes across as an autonomous set-piece or *tableau*, its abundance of referential detail and sheer stylistic exuberance far in excess of what would be required to support the machinery of plot or motivation of character.

This is not to deny, however, that natural phenomena and processes do impinge, sometimes very powerfully, on the human drama. We see this most dramatically in the catastrophic coastal erosion that causes the Usedom church, and the cliff on which it is built, to collapse into the sea – an event surely prefigured by the geological shifts and upheavals described in the opening pages of the novel, and indeed by the disappearance of the city of Vineta under the waters of the Baltic. Such epochal natural processes as the formation of the Baltic not only dwarf the timescale of human history; they also represent an underlying causal stratum that influences and inflects the course of that history.

This ‘ecological turn’ or shift of focus away from the anthropocentric manifests itself in another salient feature of the Baltic description: several passages, most notably Salvestro’s descent in a barrel to find the sunken ruins of Vineta, are presented from the perspective of a shoal of herring:

Cannibal herring circle slowly about, nosing, tasting. Its attributes spell food, and yet ... It is too big. Too hard, and strangely shaped – utterly unfishlike. Utterly unmeat-like. Juices curdle disappointingly in their stomachs. They cluster more thickly. It has tendrils – one thick, one thin – which grow up towards the death-light and twitch, *plick*, in the shielding water. (Norfolk 1998, 70)

It should be stressed that we are talking about viewpoint here, not voice; there is no attempt to mimic, or invent, any form of herring-speak. Significant words like ‘tendrils’ and especially ‘death-light’ are presumably to be read as human translations of non-verbal herring perceptions or intuitions. While this is no doubt the most striking use of non-human focalisers in *The Pope’s Rhinoceros*, there are other examples: we see the world, fleetingly, from the viewpoint of mole crabs on the beach in danger

of being crushed by Bernardo's feet, of stateless rats in the great Roman rat war, and even of the demon Tutivullus, observing with unconcealed distaste 'the grey stain of prayer [...] spreading further up the nave' (p. 221) as the Usedom monks advance through the Church of the Santissimi Apostoli.<sup>13</sup> These shifts of focalisation give greater force to Norfolk's claim (quoted earlier) that he wants to give pope and rhinoceros equal billing, as it were, in his rewriting of Renaissance history. What greater challenge, after all, to the belief that 'man is the measure of all things' than these periodic transitions to a non-anthropocentric point of view – even if, ironically, one animal whose perspective on events is not given is the rhinoceros itself?

In *Die letzte Welt* we find a comparable foregrounding of natural processes and phenomena, though the effect created is rather different from the overwhelming 'epic' quality of Norfolk's set-pieces. Ransmayr's descriptions of nature, often focusing on meteorology rather than geology, tend to be more persistent and pervasive, forming a kind of backdrop or counterpoint to the human action. Many chapters, especially towards the middle and end of the novel, open with a description of climatic conditions – not unlike a series of shipping forecasts for the Last World, building up to form a continuous narrative of seasonal change.

As in *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, there is a causal dimension to all this, evident in (for example) the landslides and avalanches that bury Trachila and indirectly bring about the death of Lycaon. But other passages of natural description seem more gratuitous, or at least less integrated into any obvious 'plot' of human actions and interactions. At the start of chapter 6, for instance, the townsfolk of Tomi are astonished and alarmed to discover that the sea has turned sulphur-yellow overnight: 'Eines Morgens wurde Tomi von der Hafensirene und dem entsetzten Geschrei der Fischer geweckt: Das Meer hatte seine Farbe verloren. Gelb, schwefelgelb, stumpf und reglos lag das Wasser in der Bucht' (Ransmayr 1988, 120). The initial effect here is one of defamiliarisation, similar to what we might expect in Marquez or Fuentes, although the 'magic realist' element is recuperated, in the manner of Todorov's concept of the uncanny, as Arachne informs the bystanders (and the reader) that the sea has turned yellow because of the wind-blown pollen from stone pines growing on the shore.<sup>14</sup> This kind of recuperation is hardly typical of *Die letzte Welt*, where – as we would expect in an



Ovidian novel – bizarre transformations are frequently described with no attempt at rational explanation, as we see in the metamorphoses of Tereus, Procne and Philomela, or of Battus, as Harbers (2004, 293) remarks.<sup>15</sup> In any case, the sea-change described here seems to have a predominantly thematic function, as yet another instance of the pervasive principle of metamorphosis, with no obvious role in the novel's human drama.

It is hardly surprising, in a work where boundaries between fictional levels are so uncertain, that Ransmayr draws out the self-referential implications of his ecological narrative, as both Harbers (2004, 284) and Schmidt-Dengler (2000, 59) have commented. Cotta, as so often, is speculating about the nature of Ovid's elusive masterpiece:

Hatte Naso jedem seiner Zuhörer ein anderes Fenster in das Reich seiner Vorstellungen geöffnet, jedem nur die Geschichten erzählt, die er hören wollte oder zu hören imstande war? Echo hatte ein Buch der Steine bezeugt, Arachne ein Buch der Vögel. Er fragte sich, schrieb Cotta [...], ob die *Metamorphoses* nicht von allem Anfang an gedacht waren als eine große, von den Steinen bis zu den Wolken aufsteigende Geschichte der Natur. (Ransmayr 1988, 198)

Given the porosity of the boundaries between the *Metamorphoses* and *Die letzte Welt*, it seems an obvious interpretative move to follow Kennedy (2002, 323) in applying Cotta's musings reflexively to Ransmayr's novel. This interpretation gains force from the apocalyptic overtones we find towards the end of the book, as Cotta begins to guess where these narratives of metamorphosis might ultimately lead:

Und Naso hatte schließlich seine Welt von den Menschen und ihren Ordnungen befreit, indem er *jede* Geschichte bis an ihr Ende erzählte. Dann war er wohl auch selbst eingetreten in das menschenleere Bild, kollerte als unverwundbarer Kiesel die Halden hinab, strich als Kormoran über die Schaumkronen der Brandung oder hockte als triumphierendes Purpurmoos auf dem letzten, verschwindenden Mauerrest einer Stadt. (p. 287)

Lynne Cook has argued that the logic of the narrative here leads to 'the end of the individual subject with its symbolic displacement, disappearance, and a conjectured subsumation [*sic*] into nature' (Cook 1998, 227). But this process extends beyond the fate of the individual subject: as Neukirchen (2002, 201) has remarked, Ransmayr evokes in these final pages the prospect of a world where all individuals will sooner or later undergo a non-human metamorphosis: a sea- or stone- or plant- or

beast-change. The entelechy of the novel takes us beyond the human: by telling all stories to their ultimate conclusion, Ovid, and by implication Ransmayr, move out of history altogether, towards the reassimilation of all human existence(s) into a post-human 'Last World'.

V.

As we saw in the introduction to this article, Franco Moretti (1998) has persuasively argued that the spatial and geographical constellations of the 'classic' historical novel offer a symbolic exploration, indeed consolidation, of the still amorphous and in some places precarious nation state. Our two novels obviously use the centre-periphery theme to pose different questions and convey different meanings; they also deviate in various ways from the modes of spatiality that characterise the nineteenth-century prototypes Moretti discusses. *The Pope's Rhinoceros* extends and complicates the centre-periphery model, ranging over three continents to create a spatial constellation that is, if not polycentric (since we have argued that the centre is Rome), then at least multi-peripheral. It does, however, largely abide by the conventions of historical and geographical realism that characterise the diegetic world of the 'classic' nineteenth-century historical novel. *Die letzte Welt*, in contrast, plays fast and loose with conventions of naturalistic representation: its fictional universe is shot through with deliberate anachronisms and, especially in Tomi and environs, is the scene of a series of metamorphoses that obey the ontological laws of a mythic universe. Nevertheless, even if it breaks with realist conventions, Ransmayr's novel is anchored, however loosely, in a recognisable historical context and features historically documented events (Ovid's exile) and figures (Cotta) among the accretions of myth. Thus the diegetic universe of *Die letzte Welt*, though very far from being (and not intended to be) an accurate historical representation, still contains layers of historical and cultural meaning.

If our two novels depart from the formal conventions of their nineteenth-century precursors, they are akin to them in their imaginative exploration, though hardly resolution, of some of the pressing political and historical developments in the contemporary world. *The Pope's Rhinoceros* can clearly be read as (among other things) an attempt to reconfigure the traditional Eurocentric narrative of early sixteenth-century history, by giving (to paraphrase the author) the rhinoceros equal billing with the

pope. Indeed, we could describe Norfolk's project, with some justification, as a fictional redrawing of the map of Renaissance history for a postcolonial age. As for Ransmayr, he is clearly engaged in an ideological critique of totalitarianism – as represented in *Die letzte Welt* by Augustan Rome – informed and influenced by the work of Frankfurt School theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer. But what the centre–periphery opposition (or relationship) in these novels most powerfully foregrounds is the relationship between human culture and non-human nature – whether zoological, botanical or geological. Elemental forces course through both of these books, influencing the course of human history and ultimately displacing it from its traditionally unquestioned position centre stage. In *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, we see how relentless natural forces gradually erode the constructions of human culture, architectural or intellectual, while *Die letzte Welt* sketches out the prospect that – when all human (hi)stories are traced to their last end – it will be non-human nature that inherits, or reclaims, the earth.

#### NOTES

1. These features have led some critics to argue that *Die letzte Welt* does not belong in the category of the historical novel. See Harbers: 'Es ist beim Lesen des Romans vom Anfang an klar, daß Ransmayr keinen historischen Roman schreiben wollte' (Harbers 2004, 287).
2. The cartoonish element in Norfolk's writing is alluded to in a review by Alain Bosquet of the French translation of *Lemprière's Dictionary*, published in *Le Figaro* in September 1994.
3. There are other marginal regions that appear in the novel – the Malabar coast of India, the Portuguese slave-trading base and sugar plantation of São Thomé – but they do not seem to have the same thematic weight.
4. This at least is the version of the legend that Norfolk gives. A city resembling Vineta is mentioned by several contemporaneous sources, most notably by Adam of Bremen, but its historical existence is not universally acknowledged: the 'mare balticum' website describes it as 'semi-legendary'. See <http://marebalticum.natmus.dk/vinetaUK.asp?ID=29> (last accessed 13 March 2012).
5. Salvestro furnishes another, subtler link between the two pagan peripheries: when Salvestro, Bernardo and Diego come face to face with the dead king at the climactic moment of their African adventures, Salvestro has a dream vision in which he stares down from the Usedom cliffs at the absent city and sees the mysterious figure of the Water-man (a kind of ghostly alter ego). And to his great astonishment – 'Now how had he failed to notice that before?' – the Water-man is black (Norfolk 1998, 663).

6. For a somewhat sceptical account of the overwhelmingly enthusiastic reception of Ransmayr's novel in the German-speaking press, see Kurt Bartsch 1990, 121–123.
7. The town – the present-day Constantia in Romania – is sometimes known as Tomis in English.
8. Glei (cited in Broich 2003), Harbers 2004 and Schmitz-Emans 2005, to name only a few: the idea, already foregrounded in the novel itself, can hardly be ascribed to any particular critic.
9. As is well known, the identification of Procne and Philomela with swallow and nightingale respectively is not invariable in versions of the myth. For an authoritative account of the variants, see Timothy Gantz 1993, I.239–241. Ransmayr, as we would expect, follows Ovid's version in the *Metamorphoses*.
10. For a discussion of the intercalated Aegina narrative, see Harbers 2004, 286, and Cook 1998, 233, who makes the intriguing suggestion that Ovid 'symbolically names the sickness of Rome to its citizens and narrates its future when the story of the plague on Aegina and the birth of the ant people is told'.
11. Anz argues that '[i]n der mythischen Welt der *Metamorphosen*, die in Tomi lebendige Gestalt annimmt, kehrt das im Prozeß der Zivilisation Vergessene und Verdrängte wieder' (Anz 1997, 127).
12. The role of the emperor's rhinoceros in *Die letzte Welt* is predominantly symbolic. Unlike its papal counterpart, it plays no significant part in the novel's plot: it is not the object of a quest, or a political counter in the struggle between rival powers; nor does it reappear at a (supposedly) climactic moment in the action. But both beasts could be seen as victims of a capricious human will and both seem out of place within the confines of the Roman world – primarily, in the case of the pope's rhinoceros, because it is in fact dead and stuffed by the time it arrives in Rome.
13. Tutivullus is not an invention of Norfolk's; he appears in various 'official' demonologies, usually as a minor devil responsible for introducing errors into the transcription of sacred texts.
14. Holmes comments on the novel's 'strange setting, in which the limits between real and unreal blur, [which] recalls the stylistic features of the magical realism of mid-twentieth century literature of Latin America' (Holmes 2002, 293).
15. Harbers describes the metamorphosis of Battus as 'eine unübersehbare Tatsache und ein unerklärliches Wunder' (Harbers 2004, 293).

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