

STUDIUM
LA NUOVA BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA

Il Tolomeo

Articoli, recensioni e inediti delle Nuove Letterature

INDICE

Il Tolomeo

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dedicato a Giulio Marra



Nel 1995 vedeva la luce, all'Università di Venezia Ca' Foscari, il primo numero del Tolomeo. Oggi, dopo quasi vent'anni, sedici numeri, ventun fascicoli, chiude il suo primo ciclo di esistenza con questo numero doppio del 2013, in attesa di passare al digitale free access con le Edizioni Ca' Foscari.

Nasceva per opera di un gruppo di studiosi postcolonialisti dell'università veneziana: principale artefice e propulsore della rivista era ed è sempre stato Giulio Marra, che l'ha diretta dalla sua creazione fino al 2013, anno del suo congedo ufficiale dalla vita accademica.

La Direzione attuale del Tolomeo ringrazia Giulio Marra per l'opera coraggiosa di innovatore da lui svolta e per le costanti e amorose cure prestate alla nostra, alla sua rivista nel corso di tanti anni. Questo numero speciale è quindi dedicato a Giulio, da parte di tutti i colleghi, studiosi e studenti che ha saputo coinvolgere in questa impresa, che continua con nuovi abiti ma con lo stesso spirito ed entusiasmo.

LA DIREZIONE DEL TOLOMEO

Foto di gruppo di collaboratori del Tolomeo e amici 1999/2000. Da sinistra: Bill Boelhower, Armando Pajalich, Alberta Fabris Grube, Franca Bernabei, Giulio Marra, Shaul Bassi. Non appaiono ma fanno parte del gruppo originario Francesca Romana Paci e Marco Fazzini.



Giulio Marra, come Presidente dell' AISLI (ora AISCLI) dalla sua fondazione nel 2000 al 2006, ha promosso momenti d'incontro importanti per i nostri studi; ha fondato una scuola estiva che ha visto generazioni di giovani in formazione transitare da Spilimbergo, Asiago e Grottammare; ha progettato e sostenuto *Il Tolomeo*, la rivista attorno a cui l'Associazione ha trovato espressione e coesione.

A Giulio il nostro grazie riconoscente, accompagnato da un omaggio poetico per aver contribuito alla divulgazione di voci di autori da ogni angolo del mondo.

The Story

For his first forty days a child
is given dreams of previous lives.
Journeys, winding paths,
a hundred small lessons
and then the past is erased.

Some are born screaming,
some full of introspective wandering
into the past— that bus ride in winter,
the sudden arrival within
a new city in the dark.

And those departures from family bonds
leaving what was lost and needed.
So the child's face is a lake
of fast moving clouds and emotions.
A last chance for the clear history of the self.

All our mothers and grandparents here,
our dismantled childhoods
in the buildings of the past.
Some great forty-day daydream
before we bury the maps.

Michael Ondaatje

SHAUL BASSI

Il Tolomeo: il Periodo Blu

Per i primi nove numeri della sua esistenza *Il Tolomeo* è stato blu, e realizzato con tecnologie oramai *vintage* in cui i numeri viaggiavano su dischetti quadrati di plastica e le illustrazioni si appiccicavano con la colla. È su questo periodo blu, e come modesto omaggio a Giulio Marra, che vorrei condividere alcune riflessioni di segretario di redazione, ricordi personali e in nessun modo esaustivi.

Quello che mi è sempre piaciuto del *Tolomeo* è il suo essere sempre stato, in molti sensi, una rivista poco ortodossa. Mentre ci avviamo, nel bene e soprattutto nel male, verso una cultura del misurabile, del valutabile, del soppesabile, uno sguardo retrospettivo su un periodico appena diventato maggiorenne mi consegna l'immagine di una casa piena di traffico, di persone, di suoni, colori, vastissima, rumorosa, musicale, a volte caotica e sgangherata, piena di straordinaria e disordinata vitalità. Una casa che riflette per ovvi motivi anche i destini, le glorie e le sconfitte di un'area disciplinare in fieri, piena di promesse, portatrice di straordinarie novità molte delle quali oramai assimilate nella cultura «mainstream» ma snobbate se non dilette quando provenivano da questa periferia dell'anglistica. Pensiamo al titolo: mentre il lessico postcoloniale diventava sempre più specialistico e non di rado esoterico, mentre si dibatteva ancora furiosamente su perifrasi, eufemismi, neologismi (Commonwealth, paesi di lingua inglese, postcoloniale e postcoloniale), Giulio Marra stupiva tutti (figurarsi noi studenti in erba, agguerritissimi lettori dell'ultimo grido in fatto di critica in un'epoca ormai remota dove internet era agli albori) proponendo un nome ariostesco, quanto di più eurocentrico, anzi italo-centrico ci potesse essere. E dove noi volevamo essere rivoluzionari si andava a pescare proprio il nome che evocava il sistema geocentrico. Oggi posso dire di avere per fortuna dimenticato i nomi alternativi (alcuni di noi studenti avevano realizzato una rivista durata ben poco chiamata proprio *AlterNatives*), che mi sarei comunque ossequiosamente tenuto per me. Per dirla in altro modo, mi pare che nel ventennio in cui il postcoloniale si è definitivamente canonizzato e ha paradossalmente colonizzato anche il mercato letterario globale, *Il Tolomeo* è sempre stato eccentrico e asistemato, facendo tesoro dei gusti eclettici delle sue decine di collaboratori. In questo senso sarebbe poco adatto a fare da illustrazione metodica dello sviluppo delle singole storie letterarie e critiche di lingua inglese. Quante importanti opere «non» sono state recensite nonostante i lunghissimi indici? Piaccia o non piaccia *Il Tolomeo* non ha mai preteso di coprire a tutti i costi la novità e se uno cercasse puntuali riscontri delle opere di Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak o Stuart Hall, tanto per fare esempi ovvi, non li troverebbe. Ma d'altra parte moltissime delle voci che abitano il nostro immaginario letterario si ascoltano anche attraverso appassionate interviste (Wilson Harris, Nayantara Saghil, Douglas Dunn, Vikram Chandra, Derek Walcott, Alisdair Gray, Anita Desai giusto per citarne alcune). E credo sia altrettanto significativo che molto probabilmente *Il Tolomeo* è stata la prima sede italiana in cui sono state recensite opere di Chimananda Ngozie Adichie, Jamaica Kincaid, Anne Michaels, prima che venissero «scoperti» dal mercato editoriale nostrano. Il caso più clamoroso è probabilmente quello di *Barney's Version* (1997)

di Mordecai Richler, recensito sul n. 4 1998/99 da Branko Gorjup, dove viene definito il romanzo più convincente del celebre scrittore canadese. Ma certo nessuno poteva sospettare che *La versione di Barney* sarebbe diventato un caso editoriale e culturale di enormi proporzioni in Italia, con manifesti dell'autore allegati a un quotidiano e l'assunzione di Barney a icona nazionale, con stupore anche di Richler che sarebbe morto pochi mesi dopo nel luglio 2001. Parlando delle altre peculiarità del *Tolomeo*, quale altra rivista avrebbe offerto tre recensioni di *Fugitive Pieces* di Anne Michaels (due in un numero e una in quello successivo), e addirittura quattro di *The God of Small Things* di Arundhati Roy. Nel 2004 si supera, certo in ritardo sull'accademia anglosassone ma in anticipo su quella italiana, il modello strettamente nazionale e compare una sezione sull'Inghilterra postcoloniale (si sarebbe detto multiculturale, oggi etichetta a sua volta un po' superata), con recensioni del «veterano» Hanif Kureishi, Monica Ali e Zadie Smith. Qualche anno dopo arriva anche l'Italia, e se certo non siamo tra i primi a riconoscere l'avvento di una nuova società multiculturale che si esprime anche letterariamente, credo ci vada riconosciuto di aver messo in relazione e risonanza le scritture migranti italiane con quelle postcoloniali.

Il Tolomeo fornisce anche una cronaca indiretta delle vicissitudini degli studi postcoloniali in Italia. Il collezionista alla ricerca del numero sei mancante dovrà essere avvertito che quell'annata fu sostituita dagli atti del primo e fondativo convegno dell' AISLI (oggi AISCLI), l'associazione che senza mai formalmente riconoscere nel *Tolomeo* la sua voce ufficiale ha di fatto visto una vasta sovrapposizione (quasi simbiosi) tra soci e recensori. Altri potranno fornire in questo senso una fotografia più obbiettiva delle tendenze, degli ampliamenti e riduzioni di certe aree, del lavoro indefesso e certosino di alcuni responsabili d'area e del contributo poco incisivo di altri (compreso il sottoscritto da un certo punto in poi).

Uno sguardo personale e non sistematico rivela la costante presenza di alcuni dei fondatori e consolidatori degli studi postcoloniali (con una immediata comprensione di Scozia, Irlanda e Galles che in altri circoli postcoloniali o anglistici non era davvero comune o ben accetta), di occasionali collaboratori di eccezione come Stephen Gray e Alberto Manguel, di tanti «giovani» ricercatori poi riusciti a entrare nell'ostico mondo universitario, ma anche di tantissimi promettenti studiosi andati a sbattere contro il decennio più critico e ingrato dell'anglistica e dell'università in generale, più ingeneroso e impietoso che si ricordi.

Osservare tutte le annate del *Tolomeo* su una scrivania, il passaggio dal blu notte a un blu più tenue sullo sfondo di un evocativo paesaggio desertico, e poi al beige, dalla carta patinata a quella ruvida, ricordare come le strette colonne che condensavano una enorme ricchezza di significati in angusti limiti che mettevano a dura prova le diottrie dei lettori, prepararsi a un futuro meno tattile che sicuramente procurerà più lettori e più visibilità, provoca varie emozioni a chi ha avuto la ventura di crescergli accanto. *Il Tolomeo* è stato un fenomeno di passaggio in vari sensi. Il corredo iconografico dei primi numeri veniva incollato e i contributi spesso ribattuti a macchina, quando la «compatibilità» tra sistemi operativi era un arcano. *Il Tolomeo* è stato sempre considerato troppo settoriale magari da chi non si accorgeva che questa presunta settorialità stava fornendo nuovi codici per

comprendere alcuni degli effetti più dirompenti della globalizzazione. *Il Tolomeo* ha dovuto combattere le sue battaglie, contro scettici e conservatori, contro chi si ostina(va) a considerare le letterature postcoloniali come un fenomeno marginale, modaiolo, non letterario [!] Non ho dubbi che *Il Tolomeo* avrebbe meritato maggiore visibilità e circolazione, avrebbe meritato di essere conosciuto e soprattutto letto di più. Dal numero dieci in poi *Il Tolomeo* è diventato meno casalingo, e questo lo possono raccontare meglio altri. La storia, e questa è la cosa più importante di tutte, continua.

FRANCA BERNABEI

Per Giulio

È difficile per me separare il profilo accademico di Giulio Marra dal contatto personale che, in quanto parte del gruppo veneziano di postcoloniale, avevo, avevamo, con lui.

Ricordo ancora il giorno in cui ci ha riunito per comunicare l'intenzione di dare avvio a una rivista di recensioni incentrata sulle nuove letterature. Aveva già pensato al nome, *Il Tolomeo*. Ricordo le discussioni, la voglia di lanciarsi in un'impresa di cui non si potevano ancora prevedere gli sviluppi. E la ricerca delle immagini per il primo numero, che aveva anche coinvolto incursioni nella biblioteca di casa... Ricordo anche le occasioni, non propriamente accademiche ma conviviali, in cui la nostra coesione veniva cementata con l'aiuto di una gita fuori Venezia e di un buon bicchiere.

Accantonando la nostalgia per amici e colleghi che o non ci sono più o, come me, hanno lasciato Ca' Foscari prima dei tempi canonici, voglio esprimere, assieme a Bill Boelhower, la nostra gratitudine per la determinazione con cui Giulio ha portato avanti i suoi progetti (scuola estiva inclusa) aprendo uno spazio operativo in cui confrontarci e approfondire i nostri ambiti di ricerca, e per i suoi sforzi di creare un clima in cui si intrecciassero amicizia e collaborazione intellettuale.

Per questo, dedico a Giulio la mia ultima recensione sul vecchio, sul suo, *Tolomeo*.

PAOLA BOTTALLA

A Giulio, studioso del Settecento inglese, di Shakespeare e di letteratura postcoloniale, ma anche curioso di esperienze nuove, di avventure reali e sognate, di circhi e di cerbottane, di pirati e di perle.

Pelli (Traduzione di *Skins* di Judith Wright)

Questo paio di guanti di pelle ha sessantasei anni, rammendato qua e là, logorato sulle nocche.

I serpenti sgusciano dalla loro pelle tutta intera. Anche quelle pellicole vuote turbano chi passa.

Contando a cicli di sette ho perso nove pelli,
benché il loro graduale squamarsi sia poco spettacolare.

Tenendo un libro o una penna, non posso fare a meno di vedere
come l'età screpoli la superficie. E l'interno poi?

Mi chiedete di leggere le poesie che ho scritto a trent'anni?
Si sono staccate via tante incarnazioni fa.

ROBERTA CIMAROSTI

Corvi in volo (Traduzione di *Crows in Flight* di Uche Peter Umez)

I corvi in volo
a volte realizzano una magia
oltre il cuore
col Mediterraneo che ti spumeggia
in volto

Il cielo si profila
di un azzurro diverso
i pensieri oscillano
tra i manghi e le olive
poi s'intrecciano
in un senso di conforto

Casa è ovunque
trovi una cosa d'amare
casa è null'altro
che terra e cemento.

Ora hai messo su casa in questo luogo
e non puoi definirlo lontananza
diverso da due palmi
uniti in preghiera
simile alla canzone
che tuo malgrado ricordi
ogni volta che mangi un'oliva
mentre invece sbucceresti
la scorza di un mango
dal gusto familiare

È il peso che porti
quando alzi lo sguardo
verso la tua famiglia

che passeggia sulla battigia
in cerca di conchiglie e cose simili

o verso il passante solitario
il perdigiorno
l'innamorato

poiché ora il fardello
come il Mediterraneo scompare
oltre l'orizzonte
indifferente alla politica
e a piccolezze del genere.

MARCO FAZZINI

Terra di palude (Traduzione di *Bogland* di Seamus Heaney)
(per Seamus Heaney)

Non possediamo praterie
Per affettare un gran sole a sera –
Dappertutto qui l'occhio s'arrende
All'invadente orizzonte,

È corteggiato dall'occhio ciclopico
D'un laghetto. Il nostro paese non recintato
È palude che continua a incrostarsi
Tra gli sguardi del sole.

Hanno estratto lo scheletro
Del Grande Cervo irlandese
Fuor dalla torba, eretto
Una stupefacente gabbia piena d'aria.

Burro laggiù sprofondato
Da oltre cent'anni
È stato trovato ancora salso, bianco.
Il terreno stesso è dolce burro nero

Che si scioglie e s'apre sotto i piedi,
Fallendo la sua ultima definizione
Da milioni di anni.
Non estrarranno mai carbone qui,

Solo fradici tronchi
Di grandi abeti, soffici come polpa.

I nostri pionieri non smettono di sondare
Giù, sempre più giù, all'interno, e

Ogni strato divelto
Sembra sia stato in precedenza abitato.
Le gore sono forse gocciolatoi atlantici,
Senza alcun fondo l'umido centro.

FRANCESCA ROMANA PACI

Lumaca nel bosco (traduzione di *Slug in Woods* di Earle Birney)

Per Giulio, ricordando con molto affetto le passeggiate con i nostri studenti nei boschi di Asiago.

Per occhi ondeggia le punte verdi
di rigide corna di bava. Che si tuffavano
ore or sono da uno scoglio,
una foglia di lampone corallino.
Poi tese brancolanti oltre le pinne
dell'abete. Ora occhi retratti
mentre attraverso i ceppi di conifere
della sua cengia diurna ecco scatta
una femmina di chipmunk. Tacito
lumacone – muco verde congelato,
o un sasso maculato e saponoso,
pingue sul muschio, solitario.
Ore dopo, riprenderà
la sua scrittura argentea, la miniatura
del suo palinsesto, il lavoro a sbalzo
della sua linea di sommozzatore in
quell'ondeggiante verde non
limitabile fondo marino. La giovane
ghiandaia snella suo repentino squalo;
i relitti che costeggia sono oscuri
fungosi ceppi di pino, che
racemi di spirea impiumano,
incorallinano. Rugiada la sua conchiglia,
mentre ascendenti colori della corteccia
predicono isole nell'aria maculata
a leghe di distanza dalla sua portata.
Attenuata vita azigote,
lui stesso sua viscida sposa,
verso il cibo si tuffa freddo nel suo mare.
Così passa un secolo di diaspro in una estate.

ARMANDO PAJALICH

*Caro Giulio,
nel momento in cui ti allontani anche tu dal lavoro universitario per dedicarti — io spero — alla scrittura «creativa», ti dedico le prime pagine di un testo che sto scrivendo io. Si tratta ancora di un lavoro in corso, ma ha cominciato a prendere forma. Il seguito sarà per me molto impegnativo perché riguarderà l'incontro fra il protagonista e un grande fittizio uomo dei nostri tempi che darà la sua opinione sulla crisi sociale ed economica che stiamo vivendo.
Ti ringrazio per la tua sincera amicizia nel corso di quattro decenni. Con altrettanta sincerità ti rinnovo l'amicizia mia, presente e futura.*

Prometeo non abita più qui
(voci dell'agosto 2013)

Parte I

I. — Stazione in periferia

Lui si lascia alle spalle
la «M» rossa del Metrò
procedendo fra serrande
sbattute giù speranze fa
(con gialle «AFFITTASI» o «VENDESI»,
e «FASCISTI!» in nero spray)
e ogni tetto incompletato
punta al cielo i suoi tondini.

Lui cammina curvo e stanco,
ma non lento, in tuta blu:
tanto ha visto e ne ha anche prese
ma: «Io non mi arrenderò.»
Lo sorpassano, strillando,
ragazzini in fuga e risa:
si sgambettano schizzando,
contendendosi trofei.

Lui ne vide messeinscena
litigiose nel metrò
per pescare in distrazioni,
tasche gonfie e maniglionti.
Si spartiscono orologi
e portafogli a pugni duri.
Un coltello. Scorre sangue.
E poi via in vicoli bui.

2. — In attesa di ruspe

E lì, fra l'anonimo cemento,
una casetta a due piani in rovina
con un portone a policrome schegge...

Intravista fra resti angolari di un vetro
sale una scala di legno sgomenta
senza ringhiera e pedate ai gradini.

Sotto al cornicione di pietra a dentelli
un balconcino neoclassico in ferro
slabbrato regge arabeschi di alloro.

Nell'intonaco stinto e imbrattato
affiorano azzurro fogliato di bianco
e chicchi arancioni e amaranto.

Povera arte, quadro del tempo,
resiste lì, predata e «protetta»,
in attesa di ruspe per... comproprietà.

3. — Piazzetta e via principale

Quella che un tempo fu piazza è un deserto
di tronchi recisi per legna d'inverno,
aiòle ansimanti di foglie insecchite,

plastiche unte e vomitanti cassoni
che vecchi ricurvi spalano a terra
con occhi ingordi e dita a rastrello.

Il buio non cala ma cambia la luce:
i lampioni fanno giallo il cemento
e i tombini fumano indaco e viola.

*

Il KINO è chiuso: al capolinea del bus,
vestita in nero, foulard e collant,
una impugna impettita un ombrello
e, ai manici stretta, la sua borsetta.

Valigia a guinzaglio all'altra sua mano,
getta lo sguardo in fondo alla via —
come sagoma in cartone di profilo,
réclame di film postbellici ed emigrazione —

senza voltare l'occhio al passante,
oramai persa. E incurante...

*

Al ciglio opposto, in stringinaso e berretto,
un vecchio borbotta, inseguito
— due passi a ciascuno dei suoi —
da un bimbo che supplica «Vero?»

Col bastone puntuto fendendo il cemento,
ribatte astraendosi: «VE-RO!»
entrambi ammettendo nei toni di voce
malcelate stringenti finzioni.

*

Fra quei due marciapiedi, in cupo nero,
sfila una squadra dai passi ben fermi:
toraci forzuti in magliette atillate
e meandri neri su rosse bandiere:

«Siamo noi, patrioti, i protettori
della borghesia impoverita. — I salvatori.
È colpa del negro — se manca il lavoro.
È lui — che ci insozza i valori.

Siamo noi — l'ordinata anarchia:
evviva l'antico — e la purezza di etnia.
Saran paralumi, parrucche e saponi
quegli invasori sporchi cialtroni.

Se necessario — siamo pronti alla guerra
per ripulire la *nostra* terra.»

*

E riplana il silenzio, né morto né vivo,
finché la strada inciampa su pietre
dietro cui serpeggia un sentiero

che s'inerpica su divagando
fra quello che un tempo fu un parco.

4. — Cielo viola e cicali

Nel cielo alto, lugubre, viola
decolla un pipistrello in verticale
da un grumo arcaico di pietre
di un arco che sale e non scende.

Lucertole insonni vi indugiano ancora
e tendono lingue scattanti affilate.
L'impietrita civetta fissa perplessa
come se torto fosse l'asse al suo globo.

La temperatura non vuole calare.
Il mondo è gracchianti cicale.

«Caspita! Sfiacca, l'afa, stanotte!
Strangola. Spacca le ossa
questo fuoco d'agosto.
Da nord non un filo di vento.
Né stelle trapuntano il viola
di luce che sega la sera.»

Parla da solo. O apostrofa il cielo.

Uno stormo di passerì assalta
il frenire nella chioma del gelso:

«Passino anche tre lustri o di più,
la larva poi le ali spunterà.»

5. — Coro di donne tradite

«Come quando, di colpo, ti grandina in testa
e sosti al primo riparo che trovi...

come quando la molla del vento avvita e mulina
e ti aggrappi a ogni piccola fede che tiene...

come se, stesa a terra, non sai
da chi... perché... finita... sei lì...,

così lui, a quattro gambe, si aggranchia
sotto quello che un giorno fu un pino

e poi, capretto imberbe, si leva,
fallendogli il piede, un ginocchio, la testa.

Inforca il sentiero e veloce si lancia
a un rubinetto che tosse incessante

acqua calcarea ma tanto preziosa
memoria che tutto contiene.

Le tende la faccia e, dopo, il collo,
la nuca e... via... anche il cuore

a rinfrescare senno e coscienza.
Guarda al cielo di sbieco e gli urla:

“Non sono finito. Io no.
Mi diano pure spacciato: ricomincerò!”»

*

L'afa deraglia dai gangli
e ride al ridicolo smacco:

gridi irrisòri dal cielo
lo invitano a rientrarsene giù

da dove sale un sibilo rotto:
urla di donne, suoni distorti, elettriche corde

in ripetendo ossessivi. Ovattati
dalla palpabile afa.

*

Quassù: animali fattisi urbani
— conigli sui rami? volpi nei rovi? —

strizzano l'aria dai loro polmoni
in acide ampiezze di suoni.

*

Giù: forni e ciminiere svettanti
sputano fuoco e fumo nel cielo..

6. — Rituale

Smunte adolescenti, informi grembiuli,
si danno convegno a un sasso gigante
a cui erigono barra e montanti.

Chi ha con sé, orgogliosa, una fune...
chi sfoggia una lama a trapezio affilata...
chi fa ciondolare una fiera puleggia...

Altre, assortite, in lento corteo,
recano in grembo nudi bambocci
e l'ultima un vaso: vernice e pennello.

Cantando nenie di loro invenzione,
procedono al sasso a cui la prima depone
a pancia in giù il bambolotto.

E aspettano tutte in silenzio finché
piomba la lama in gran fretta
recidendo al collo il feticcio.

La prescelta getta del rosso
insanguinando il catino
dov'è rotolata la testa.

Un'altra l'afferra ai capelli
e la espone al ludibrio gaudente
e poi tocca al bamboccio seguente.

Così si ripete la storia
reinscenando un'antica memoria
in un gioco fin troppo convinto.

Poi, goffi trapezi macchiati di rosso
e risa bambine, senza più canti,
tornano a casa a sognare tormenti.

Parte II

1. — «Mi diano pure spacciato: ricomincerò!»

Scappa lungo il sentiero.
Cade. Si alza. Imbocca
una traccia protetta tra olivi
a cui foglie, sbiancate, fan velo.
Si arrampica. Gli manca il fiato.

Come una serpe, il sentiero si torce.
Lui deve scorciare tra terra mai colta
cosparsa di pietre e rami già spenti,
non fertile ora, non qui.
Ha fretta e va in linea retta.

Un rovo lo afferra al ginocchio.
Forse c'è sangue. Che importa?

Il vento cambia di corpo.

Alte aquile in girotondo
hanno visioni senza alcun chiaroscuro.

«Pietà sia di loro!
Che divorano il fegato a chi vuole osare...!»

2. — Un bimbo e un bastone

Dai rami secchi spunta un bambino
vestito di stracci sporchi e di noia:

«Che cosa è quello strano bastone?»

«È un regalo per un vecchio mio amico.»

«A me pare lucertola in volo
o astronave di alieni
o rondine in fuga
che qui non vuol starci più...»

«L'ho fatto io stamattina...»

«Bello. Insegna anche a me?»

«Certo. Potrei. Ma sono di fretta.»

«Sì. Dicon tutti così.»

«Ne faccio un altro. Dov'è che ti trovo?»

«Mi sposto sempre di... casa.»

«Dimmi un negozio, un'edicola, un bar...
A che nome te lo posso lasciare?»

«Dite sempre così.»

«Dove vuoi tu. Lo lascio lì.
O, se vuoi, lì ci incontriamo
e ti insegno a fartelo tu;
basta un ramo diritto e secco,
un temperino, un po' di pazienza,
matita e vernice... trasparente...»

«Il nome mio non lo dico a nessuno.
Ho quello solo. E io non lo dò.»

«Fa come credi.»

«Certo che sì.
Tu, piuttosto, attento agli incontri.»

«Posso fare qualcosa per te? Tiè...»

Fa per dargli dei soldi ma quello scappa
e, senza voltarsi, ammonisce:

«Attento a basilischi e scarabei.
Si vestono da bravi stranieri,
ma non sono amici: vampiri,
ti succhiano casa, pane e anche il sangue
dandoti un numero al posto del nome.»

«Aspetta...»

Ma è tardi:
come figlio dei boschi, scalzo e veloce,
balza su sassi e su sterpi

sparendo e lasciando un odore
che sa di mela... o vaniglia... o paura.

Ne rimane una piuma. Che coglie.

3. — Luci in lontananza

Fatica. Si accende una cicca.
(«Maledette!») Scivola. Sale.
(«Fumo il pane a chi ha fame...»)

Perde minuti ché la cicca sia spenta
sotto pietre che scongiurino incendi.
E scorge, fioche, geometriche luci
alla facciata che domina il colle:
forano l'afa e il cielo violetto.

Non manca tanto. Caccia ogni dubbio.
Deve arrivarci. Si siede. Riprende.
Avesse preso la serpe di sassi sarebbe già lì.
Ma questi son tempi che non è da fidarsi.
Al cimitero ormai c'è giunto già.

4. — Coro dei custodi

«Come alle isole nostre che il mare
carezza con dita sempre diverse
passando dal lento al fugace
dal tiepido al fresco al quasi gelato,

così e non così il vento fa qui
con raffiche lente che schizzano audaci
scodellando dal caldo il cocente,
infiammando improvvisamente a mulino.

Che clima è questo? È nostro il luogo?

Pur se... conosciamo, oh se conosciamo,
le avversità di fuochi fra stagni
e le fruste dei venti su rocce pur dove
impettiscono olivi, capre o lavanda.

Madre Terra schizzò fuori tempo?

Non ci sa più figli suoi?

Dèi dell'Olimpo! Li abbiamo traditi,
rimodellandoli in icone affrescate
su pietra e, poi, tela nuova
per chiese in penombre e frescura?

Ripari da venti, soli, maligni...?

Quanto possibile fu serbare da offese
al passato che andò, sempre qui,
all'oggi pregno di antiche memorie,
serbammo noi. O ci provammo.

È colpa forse non sapere ripudiare...
se il futuro si erge sempre avverso
e quando incombe lo fa da straniero?

E, poi, rinnova perenne agonia
o fughe in mondi sperati inostili.
Quale pena scontiamo? L'altrui amnesia?

O colpe di figli e di padri che noi
abbiamo inciso al mondo per sempre
patendole ma... danzandone a canti?

Non sarà feretro l'altare.

Di stele cadute e sepolte e del trono tenuto segreto
saremo sempre custodi, disdegnati e puniti,
ma noi — vivi e morti — prima o poi danzeremo.»

GIUSEPPE SERPILLO

Il remo (Traduzione di *Oar* di Moya Cannon)

Inoltrati e ancora inoltrati all'interno
il tuo remo con te,
finché qualcuno ti domandi
che cos'è.

Allora costruiscti la casa.

Perché soltanto allora potrai dire, sapere
che il mare è immenso e non si può sondare,

che il remo che si spinge
contro l'onda
e con l'onda
è tutto.

ITALIA VIVAN

Per chi scrivo (Traduzione di *For Whom I Write* di Stephen Gray)

Quando mi chiedono d'un tratto non che cosa scrivo
ma per chi scrivo, per quale pubblico,
io balbetto imbarazzato, poiché non credo che coloro
per cui scrivo siano così tanti,
e dico, con crescente interesse e convinzione:

per il barbiere sotto la cui mano i miei capelli si offrono al taglio,
per la signora giù in paese, brava cuoca, che neppure capisce
la mia lingua, ma comunque mi nutre con buon gelato alla crema,
per il barcaiolo che struscia a terra le suole delle scarpe nere
prima di agganciare la passerella all'aliscafo
incitando «Avanti, signori!»,
per la negoziante che — mi dice — troppo ha studiato, tanto da vedere il suo bel
bambino
che nuota, doppio come due pesci, nelle sue lenti spesse un dito,
per alcuni scrittori e studiosi lassù alla Villa avvinti in concorrenza mortale
se hanno un momento libero da fax e scadenze,
e anche, sì, per i poeti che frequento in occasioni annuali
ma che evito per il resto dell'anno
(i nostri lettori sono troppo pochi, e i nostri appelli
all'ascolto si rivolgono a troppi di loro);

ma non per i ladri che derubano e picchiano alla stazione
passeggeri innocenti che per la prima volta
si avventurano all'estero,
né per la polizia balorda troppo corrotta per acchiapparne uno solo,
né per chi fa brutti film, o fabbrica grosse siringhe, o
alleva bovini che scoreggiano buchi nella stratosfera,
né per quei poeti del mio paese che, privi di gusto, continuano a usare
espressioni come «increspato di rosa», «onda ritmica» e «cuore gonfio»
senza la minima ironia,
per i quali l'ironia è un fenomeno essenzialmente borghese
e l'auto ironia soltanto un sintomo di sensi di colpa,
per i quali il piacere si rimanda al tempo del paradiso,
non per loro io scrivo, poiché non apprezzerrebbero nulla

delle mie fatiche e dei miei sforzi, e non ne capirebbero il valore;

ritorniamo quindi al barbiere con la barba lunga d'un giorno, il dito medio in cima alla mia testa per girarla allo specchio e studiando quella, studiare me stesso: questo sì che è un artista all'opera, e io sono pronto a rispondergli, proprio così, e la gentile signora che vende il gelato, spatola in aria, e mi dà consigli, conosce il valore, eccetera, e così via. Per costoro, e con loro la poesia prende vita. Quanto agli altri, zero assoluto.

BENO FIGNON

Par cui scrivezu? (Traduzione di *For Whom I Write* di Stephen Gray in lingua friulana nella parlata di Andreis, Pordenone)

Quan' ch'i me domanda de colp no ce che scrif
ma par cui, par quala zent,
jò me impapine imbaraciât, parcêche e no crot che chiéi
par cui scrif i sèe cussì mitànç
e dis, cun sempre pì passion e convinzion:

pal barbèir ch'al à sot man i gno ciaviéi,
pa' la fèmena de paéis, ch'a sa cuzinâ, ch'a no capis
la mé lenga, ma a me fa passâ la fam cu'n gelato a la crema
pal barciaròul ch'al strassina par tièra li' suole de li' scarpes negres
prima da ganciâ al punt col scafo
fazènt segn da montâ,
par che' davòur 'n banc ch'al à studiat massa, in maniera da jòde al siò bel nin
ch'al noda, dople coma do' trotes, ta li' sos lins grosses un déit,
par qualche scritòur e professòur de ucà leàz in competission da murf
si àn un flà libar cencia fax e apuntamenz,
e anç, si veh, par i poetas ch'iu jòt 'na volta l'an
ma che iù scanse pal rest dal timp
(chéi ch'i ne liéc i son mitànç puòcs, e ce che gozàn
a riva a massa de lòur);

ma no par i làres ch'i roba e i dan jù a la stassion
ai viagjàdòurs cència colpes che par la prima volta
i priva a zî in Lusimpon,
e gnanç par la polizia balorda massa dionesta par brincâni anç un sòul,
e fnaç par chiéi ch'i fan bruz cines, o ch'i fai grosses siringhes,
o ch'i tira su vâcies ch'i scoriacèa bus ta la stratosfèra,

e gnanç par i poetas del gno paéis ch'i, coma socs, i seguitèa a dize
"increspata di rosa", "onda ritmica", e "cuore gonfio"
cencia un fil de rîde,
par lòur cajonâ al éis 'na espression soradùt "borghese"
a 'l rîde de se stess nome la spia de sintisse in colpa,
par lòur al gòde a se lu spuòsta co s'éis in paradis,
no scrif par lòur, dal moment ch'i no valutarés ben
li' mè fadies e i gno sfuàrz, e i no capirés
ce valòur ch'i àn;

tornàn dunca al balbi cun la barba lungja de un dì,
al déit de miéz poàt in somp al ciàf par zirâlu al spècje
e studiant chiél, studiâ me stess; chist chi sì ch'al éis un artist
al lavòur e jò e soi pront a rispundije, prope ucussì,
e che femenùta ch'a vent al gelato, spatula par aria e a me dà consilius
a canòs al valòur
eccetera, e via ucussì. Par lòur e cun lòur
la poesia a ciapa vota.
E chî altres, zero in plen.

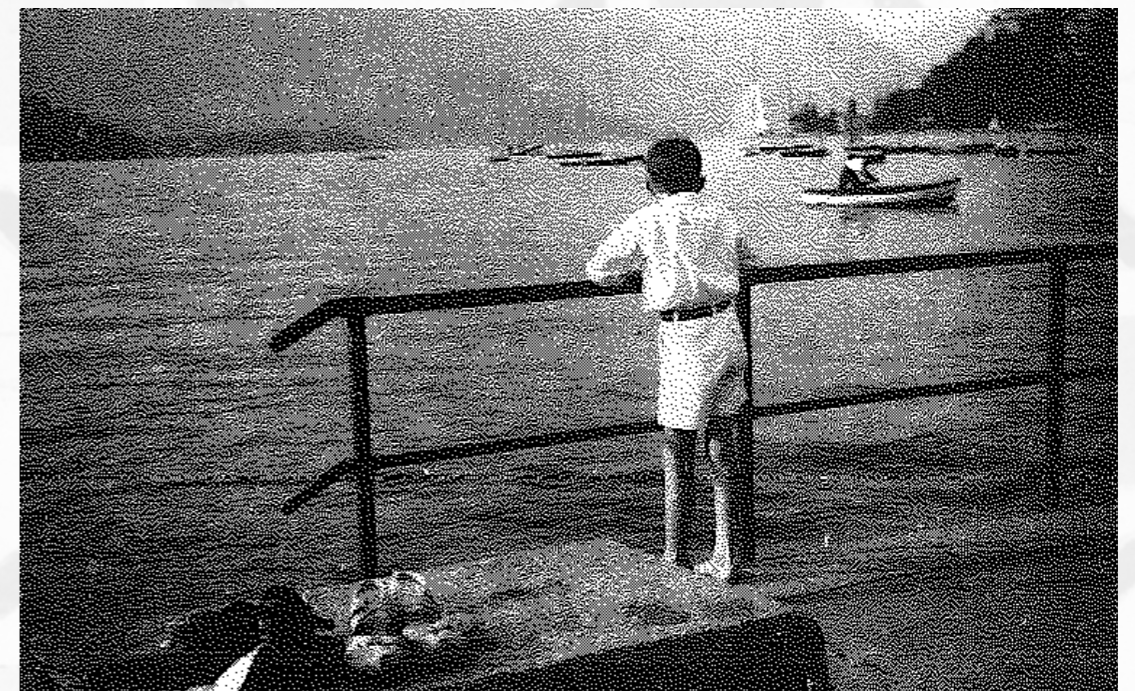


Foto da Stephen Gray, *For Whom I Write*. Mayibuye Books 1998

ITALIA VIVAN

Il bambino al Lago di Como¹*(Traduzione di Child at the Lake Como, di Stephen Gray)*

Il modo come sta ritto questo bambino che pare disegnato, gomiti sulla ringhiera,
una scarpa addosso e l'altra no,
i pantaloncini larghi, la camicia bianca a sbuffo,
le spalle contratte contro la nuca
in una foto di famiglia che guarda il lungo lago grigio

rivela particolari della sua storia: una vacanza italiana
tra ghiacciai grigi di neve,
i pendii cisalpini che si stagliano, spartiti
da Cesare in persona, le foschie
romantiche sui profili a terrazze blu scuro,

le ville, attive come alveari, erette da Plinio il giovane
per governare la popolazione locale,
eleganti, raffinate; tranquille, ora, come un'oasi di acqua cristallina
oltre le pianure bellicose dove Cristo si fermò;
per gli esuli e gli evasori fiscali, il loro porto di pace.

Il suo sabato appena postfascista del millenovecentocinquanta;
non che lui possa veramente rendersene conto,
allora non si commentava più l'esecuzione,
e neppure i fasci arrugginiti, con la lama dell'ascia littoria
a segnare come maledetti i siti bombardati.

Doveva ancora provare l'impatto del plotone d'esecuzione
contro ogni muro — la sua ultima amante
gettata contro il petto, ad attutire il piombo —
questa vendetta su un demone di cartone
le cui tremende truppe seppero fendere e spaccare

intere moltitudini... una politica di malvagità,
senza rispetto per la legge, senza amore,
e il suo stesso orrendo regime che proprio allora iniziava:
fascisti, naziskin, boeri,
macchine di orrori, con la loro cupa messinscena culturale.

¹ Questa lirica prende spunto da una fotografia che ritrae l'autore, bambino, durante una vacanza sul Lago di Como nel 1950. Le allusioni a un nascente regime oppressivo di stampo nazifascista nel suo Sudafrica si riferiscono alla vittoria del Partito Nazionalista alle elezioni per soli bianchi del 1948, che diede il via all'apartheid. [Nota del traduttore]

Dinanzi a lui, innocente, si stende il lago biforcuto
come una lunga verga di raddomante,
da un paese desertico le sue estremità hanno vibrato
e vibrato, abbassandosi: qui c'è l'abbondanza,
e l'attrazione di acque divine lo tiene incantato.

Oppure lo affascina i mezzi di locomozione
festivi, come le vecchie macchine a vapore,
mezzi di fuga infantile: un vaporetto a pale,
ampio e sconquassato, che si affanna
e soffia sbuffi di vaporoso cattivo umore.

Non si è imbarcato per nessun porto in particolare;
tirato di tensione, come una larga foglia di ninfea
lucida, scossa dal ritmo del motore; la lingua appena
sciolta dal ronzio meccanico
mentre si insinua nelle fauci delle Alpi immense...

Ora che posso annuire, dire: questo sono io, mi chiamo così,
un Bravo Ragazzo Coloniale come da copione,
nessun'altra direzione se non quella scelta per lui
— pigramente incamminato verso un'educazione —
ricco del privilegio di viaggiare verso il nulla, in prima classe.
Ma c'è una domanda che non si può porre: avesse saputo
i tradimenti a venire, le morti improvvise,
i cedimenti e gli inganni e altro ancora, avrebbe forse
come ogni altro continuato a guardare dinanzi a sé
afferrando e prendendo ciò che si sarebbe dovuto evitare?

Forse che i diritti di un bambino comprendono ciò che è sempre
meglio per lui: un tratto di ponte su cui reggersi,
la forza di un affetto autentico, e che gli si dica dove andare?
Quando una banda domenicale suonava
le sue marce, e le azalee erano in fiore, lui scese dal battello.

Io so che se ora non provo compassione per quel bimbo,
così magro che la testa sembra gonfia,
le ginocchia ossute, lentiggini in bianco e nero;
se non riconosco e non comprendo quel suo piccolo sé,
rimango perduto, sono finito, resto incompleto.

La sua mano regge questa penna: guarda dove ti conduce
il pennino, dove porta con una lunga linea tersa
la poesia e la continuità, lo scrivere dentro ciò

che la storia gli avrebbe fatto, ciò che accadde,
ne ha vissute troppe... la mano contratta, bloccata.

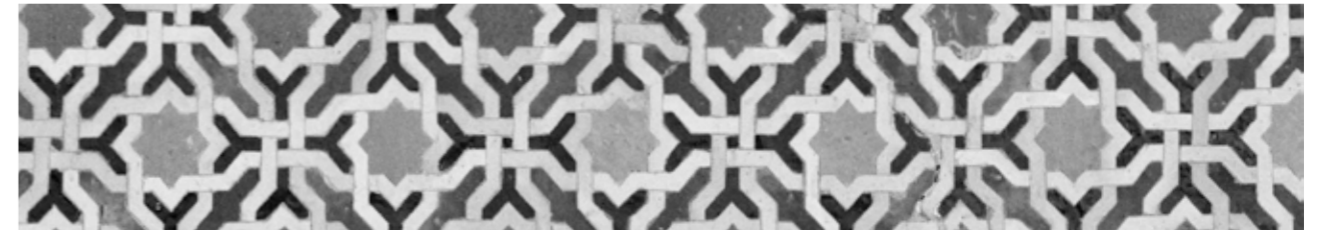
Attenzione. Sulla figura da cartolina illustrata di una Kodak
a soffietto, come usava prima della guerra,
una madre affettuosa prese un'istantanea per figlio e marito.

*Guarda che esperienza si fa qui il ragazzo
che laggiù non potrebbe mai fare,* sul nuovo bordo del mondo.

Così pelle-e-ossa, orecchie a sventola, quest'ultima osservazione:
d'ora in avanti possiamo farcela con molto meno
fantasticherie, nessun indugio, senza più rimasticare;
c'è tutto un monte di lavoro che ci attende,
lavoro che dobbiamo imparare e fare!

C'è anche un patto corretto che dobbiamo elaborare,
e ai poeti tocca disfare e correggere:
le bande vendicatrici, la classe dei corrotti
vanno sfasciate e smobilitate,
occhio al timone, prima che arrivi brutale l'alluvione.

inediti e interviste



ESTERINO ADAMI

**An e-interview with Gibraltar author
M.G. Sanchez, followed by a review
of M.G. Sanchez, *The Escape Artist. A
Gibraltar Novel* (2013)**

M.G. Sanchez is a prolific Gibraltar author, now based in the UK. He has published fiction and essays, in particular: *The Escape Artist. A Gibraltar Novel* (2013), *Diary of a Victorian Colonial* (2008), *Rock Babel. Ten Gibraltar Stories* (2008), *The Prostitutes of Serruya's Lanes and Other Hidden Gibraltar Histories* (2007). He has also edited *Georgian and Victorian Gibraltar. Incredible Eyewitness Accounts* (2012) and *Writing the Rock of Gibraltar. An Anthology of Literary Texts, 1720-1890* (2006). He was awarded a PhD from the University of Leeds in 2004. His social media contacts include: <https://www.facebook.com/mgsanchezgibraltar> and <http://www.mgsanchez.net/>

I would like to thank M.G. Sanchez for agreeing to participate in the interview which follows, conducted by mail in December 2013.

E.A.: Very often, as readers of literatures from Anglophone contexts, we tend to forget or even

ignore lesser-known areas such as Gibraltar. Could you tell us something about the literary scene and the literary tradition of Gibraltar?

M.G. S.: With the exception of one or two individuals, there hasn't really been that much of a literary tradition in Gibraltar. In the 1920s, for example, we had the novelist Hector Licudi, who wrote in Spanish, and in the 1960s and 1970s we had the dramatist Elio Cruz, who wrote a series of plays in the local patois «llanito» (Spanish interspersed with occasional English words and phrases, as well as «Spanglish» expressions of our own making). In the last few decades, however, we have produced a number of writers and they have chosen to express themselves primarily in English. I think that, in some ways, this is a reflection of our growing confidence as a people. In the 1930s and 1940s, you see, we were still very much caught up in a colonial «mindset.» We had British administrators holding all the top jobs in Gibraltar, with the local civilians doing all the menial jobs under them. To keep things this way, British colonial administrators adopted a policy where they not only deliberately undereducated their subjects, but actively sought to inculcate within them an inferiority complex that would

keep them politically pliable. In fact, it is no coincidence that when schooling in Gibraltar finally underwent its long overdue overhaul in the mid-1940s, the man responsible for this same programme of reform, an Englishman by the name of J. W. Cumming, noted that «by far the most important task in this respect is the elimination of the inferiority complex with which, unfortunately, the average Gibraltarian is afflicted, and which has its roots largely in the disability to express himself adequately in the English language.» Since then, however, things have dramatically changed. Starting in the late 1940s, the British administration very magnanimously began handing the reins of power over to the Gibraltarians. With growing power came growing confidence, which translated into more and more Gibraltarians studying in the UK and obtaining British university degrees. Before long the political scene in Gibraltar had evolved to such a degree that Gibraltarians were completely in control of their own governmental affairs. The recent upsurge in Gibraltarian writing, I believe, has to be seen primarily against this context.

E.A.: One of the keyword in your work is «identity», namely the meaning of being Gibraltarian, a notion which encompasses a wealth of cultural and historical stratifications. For example, the protagonist of *The Escape Artist* often wonders about his own sense of identity, split between well-defined categories. In your opinion, would it be possible to affirm that Gibraltarian identity is the hybrid product of various historical, social and cultural processes? Could you illustrate this?

M.G. S.: Yes, you are absolutely right. Gibraltarian identity is a hybrid of different influences. On the one hand, for example, we have been influenced by our proximity to Spain. We can see this Hispanic influence in our cuisine, in our sense of fashion, even in the Andalusian sound of our spoken Spanish.

On the other hand we have been profoundly influenced by Britain too – in our schooling, our law courts, our way of conducting business. Generally speaking, you could say that we have been influenced by Spain on an emotional level and Britain on an intellectual level. The resulting fusion is a complex and challenging hybrid that is difficult to categorise. To the English eye, for example, we are probably too passionate and emotional to be properly considered English, whereas, conversely, to the Spanish eye we are too rigorous and methodical to be typically Spanish. But there are other influences apart from the usual Spanish/ British ones. Many of our forefathers, for example, came from Malta and Genoa and other parts of the Mediterranean. This has influenced the way we think about religion and the family and other interrelated areas. Last but not least, of course, there is the matter of our own unique idiosyncratic geography. We are hemmed in in a small peninsula, barely six square kilometres in size. Because of this, Gibraltar is a place where practically everybody knows each other. I think that this is something that makes us unique too. I have been to many different parts of the world, but I have never come across a place with such a close-knit community feel!

E.A.: Returning to the idea of identity, in your texts it is interesting to see how Gibraltarian identity is imagined, and how characters react towards it, either by accepting or rejecting it. In your works, Gibraltarians are often mistaken for Spanish, or anyway considered ‘odd’ foreigners when in England, and those who temporarily settle in Britain like Brian Manrique, the main character of *The Escape Artist*, frequently have to cope with forms of xenophobia and racism, incidentally a recurrent theme in much post-colonial and diasporic literature. In particular, Brian highlights the fact that while he was studying in Cambridge he was considered «as Spanish as paella or flamenco dancing» (p. 13),

although from his own perspective people in Gibraltar «love Cornish pasties and Yorkshire pudding and Lucozade, that we all support English football teams like Arsenal or Liverpool or Manchester United» (p. 13). Thus Gibraltar seems to have a kind of double relation with the UK, on the one hand showing cultural symbols and on the other still being perceived as a remote, «other» overseas territory. Would you further elaborate on this topic? What does having a Gibraltarian identity mean?

M.G.S.: One of the fundamental problems about being Gibraltarian, I feel, is that few people outside Gibraltar really understand us. If we find ourselves in the UK, people assume that we are half-Spanish Britons, dark-haired, sun-tanned Brits who speak with a slightly odd accent. In Spain, because of all the negative propaganda that the Spanish establishment is continually disseminating about us, they view us as either Andalusian apostates or blond-haired British settlers belligerently ensconced in their own little corner of the Iberian peninsula. But all these views are wrong. We are neither British nor Spanish. We are simply Gibraltarian, with our own way of thinking and doing things that has evolved over the last few centuries. I think, incidentally, that this is why I started to write about Gibraltar and what it means to be Gibraltarian. Again and again, you see, I kept picking up books about Gibraltar in which the Gibraltarians were either represented unfairly or were strangely absent from their pages. This is wrong, I thought. We are the people who live there. We need to have our own representative voice – and not just let ourselves be represented by outsiders. That is why, in a nutshell, I started writing. I wanted to create a Gibraltarian perspective that would counterbalance what others had been saying about us. I’m conscious, of course, that mine is just one Gibraltarian voice among many and that some Gibraltarians might not

necessarily like what I write about, but at least I am a born and bred Gibraltarian and that gives me a degree of credibility and authenticity, I feel, which non-Gibraltarians writing about Gibraltar don’t always have.

E.A.: In your fiction, there are various references to Italy and Italian culture: the novella *Roman Ruins* (collected in *Diary of a Victorian Colonial and Other Tales*) is set in Rome, whilst the protagonist of your latest novel reads Italian language and literature at Cambridge University (you mention authors such as Dante, Cesare Pavese and Curzio Malaparte, amongst others), in the 1970s, supervised by Dr Franceschetti «a balding, grey-goateed Italian tutor from Turin.» (p. 133) Moreover, the young man spends his year abroad in Venice, carrying on with his studies at Ca’ Foscari University. What is your relationship with Italy, and how does Italian culture appear in your writing?

M.G. S.: I have always been fascinated by Italy and I always try to go there whenever I get the chance. I like the magnificence of Rome, the decaying splendour of Venice, the sun-kissed fertility of the Tuscan countryside. I think, in some ways, you know what, I see Italy as the kind of place *that I would have liked Spain to be*. Let me explain what I mean by this. Spain, no doubt, is a wonderful country, with a vibrant Latin culture of its own. It has great artists like Dali and El Greco and Picasso as well as masterly writers like Cervantes and Unamuno. But because successive Spanish governments have always been so doggedly anti-Gibraltarian in their outlook, I find it difficult to let go and immerse myself fully in Spanish culture. Maybe this is why I love Italy so much. It is the nearest approximation to what Spain would have been like had the thorny issue of Gibraltar’s sovereignty never clouded relations between us and the Spanish. I hope that this makes some kind of sense!

E.A.: The Italian connection may be also reminiscent of the broad ethnic composition of the population of Gibraltar, whose intertwined «mixed bloodlines» (p. 13) suggest memories of migration from Malta, from the Mediterranean, from Britain, from Morocco, from Spain. How do you deal with this particular aspect of Gibraltarian culture, both in your literary works and essays?

M.G. S.: I think that's part of the beauty of being Gibraltarian – the fact that our bloodlines are so mixed. In the nineteenth century some British travel writers even came up with the term «rock mongrels» to describe us as a collective. They meant this pejoratively, of course, and as something of an insult, but I've always believed in multiculturalism and pluralism and I think that our diverse ethnic composition is one of our greatest assets. In my case, for example, I have British, Spanish, Maltese and Portuguese ancestry –and this is only going back a few generations. This composite element in our hereditary make-up has made us very tolerant of other faiths and races. In Gibraltar, for example, we have Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Protestant and Catholics all living side by side, without any real problems. This is no accident. We have had years and years of practise living together like this!

E.A.: With regard to your non-fiction writing (you have edited *Victorian and Edwardian Gibraltar* and authored *The Prostitutes of Serruya's Lane and Other Hidden Gibraltarian Histories*), you have a strong interest in history, often in its apparently «marginal» aspects and protagonists. Historical references also characterise some of your literary production: for instance the long story «Diary of a Victorian Colonial» takes place in 1888 Gibraltar and detailed historical elements are also evoked in the plot of *The Escape Artist*. What is your vision of history and its multiple ramifications, especially in your texts?

M.G. S.: Our history is important because it makes us who we are. Broadly speaking, I would say that there are two important historical discourses that have shaped us into the kind of community that we are nowadays. The first is the discourse of our gradual but steady accumulation of civil and political rights under British colonial rule. In many ways this is a discourse that parallels, and simultaneously reflects, the emancipation of the working classes in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Britain. In Britain there were landmark moments like the Reform act of 1832 or the regulation of child labour seen under the aegis of Lord Shaftesbury. In Gibraltar, too, we have our very own «discourse of emancipation.» It is dotted with important historical moments like the establishment of the Exchange and Commercial Library in 1817 (which became a forum for Gibraltarian merchants to express themselves in) or the creation of the Gibraltar Legislative Council in 1950 (which, for the first time, gave us some control over our own affairs). We have had to go through all this to reach the position where we find ourselves today, where we are responsible for all of our affairs except for matters of defence, which are still under British control. The second major historical discourse that has impacted upon us has been our engagement with Spain. Before the Second World War, relations between Gibraltar and Spain were generally good. Gibraltarians and the citizens of La Linea (the Spanish town across the border) were closely bound together by strong ties of family and friendship. However, after the Second World War all this began to change. Sensing that Britain had been seriously weakened by the war effort, Franco went on an all-out campaign to coerce Gibraltar into becoming Spanish. First, he disrupted our telecommunications, then he cut the supply of oxygen to our hospitals, then he made it an offence for Spaniards to export any goods to Gibraltar and finally he tried to economically

«garotte» us by closing the frontier. This was a very hard time for Gibraltarians. Families were divided and many Spanish workers who earned their living in Gibraltar had to give up their jobs and return home to Spain. I remember as a child going down to the border area and seeing families on either side of the fence trying to communicate across the 100 metre stretch dividing them. You could see people sobbing and crying and holding up new born babies to show to their relatives on the other side. It was all very emotional and traumatic. When Franco died and democracy returned to Spain, things slowly improved. In 1982 the border was partially opened and then, three years later in 1985, it was finally laid open to pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Things were going well at this point, and it genuinely seemed as if Gibraltar and La Linea could return to the levels of friendship and cooperation that had existed between the two towns before the Second World War. However, it was only a mirage. In the early 1990s Spain began to impose very strict controls on anyone trying to cross the frontier. I remember these days very clearly because I was in my early twenties. There were days when the line of traffic going into Spain encircled practically all of the Rock, and the Spanish border guards were also proving very awkward and uncooperative. You could be issued a hefty fine for the most trivial of reasons. If you wore glasses and didn't have a spare pair with you in your car, for example. If an «essential item» like a pair of scissors was missing from your first-aid kit. If you didn't have a spare light bulb for your car's headlights in your glove compartment. That kind of thing. I tried to capture the difficulties of this time in my book *Rock Black: Ten Gibraltarian Stories*. When the situation finally improved in the late 90s, I thought that things could never ever again get as bad as all that. But sadly in 2013 we are once again back in the same position. Once more there are very long queues at the border, with daily waiting times of up

to five hours for vehicles and two hours for pedestrians. We are also getting pilloried every day in the Spanish press and media, with all sorts of accusations being levelled against us. I was in Gibraltar for a few days in August of 2013 and I was quite frankly appalled by the sort of anti-Gibraltarian invective that I was seeing on Spanish television channels like *Téle Cinco* or *Antena Tres*. People say that all this is happening because the ruling party in Spain, the centre-right *Partido Popular*, is trying to divert the Spanish electorate's attention from the economic crisis and the allegations of large-scale governmental corruption hounding the Spanish Prime Minister. In other words, they want ordinary Spaniards to think about Gibraltar instead of the other more important problems affecting the country. This may be so, but it seems to me that the whole border issue has now become a recurring, cyclical problem – which is a real, real shame.

E. A.: Let's focus on language now: in an introductory note in your collection *Rock Black. Ten Gibraltarian Stories* you remind the reader that the Spanish spoken in Gibraltar is a non-standard variety, and the same point is echoed in other works – in *The Escape Artist*, for instance, the protagonist underlines the fact that people around the Rock speak «a form of free-flowing "Spanglish" that neither Spaniards nor Englishmen would ever be able to understand» (p. 13). From a stylistic point of view, you also employ the strategy of code-mixing with Spanish (and some other languages). What is the linguistic scenario of Gibraltar today? What is the relationship between, and perception of, English and Spanish?

M.G. S.: Language is a very important issue for me as a Gibraltarian writer. In an ideal world I would be writing in «llanito», our own unique mixture of English and Spanish. But in practice, of course, this is difficult, if not downright impossible. First, «llanito»

has not been standardised in the way that minority languages like Maltese or Faroese have been standardised. Second, if I were to write exclusively in «llanito» my readership would be reduced to a few hundred readers or even less than that. This would be disastrous for a writer. As a result, there has to be a certain amount of compromise in creating a «Gibraltarian» text. In my case what I do is I try to write my books in standard English, with a few touches of «llanito» thrown in here and there. Just enough, in other words, for the Gibraltarian reader to recognise the book as a Gibraltarian book, but not so many as to alienate a British reader. I suppose you could describe it almost as a balancing act. But it is a balancing act that is not so unusual either; this kind of thing happens all over the postcolonial world. Say, for example, that you are an aspiring Nigerian writer. Do you write your book in Yoruba or Igbo, thereby limiting your readership to people in specific parts of Nigeria, or do you write it in English, which would potentially open your book up to a readership of millions? Obviously, if you are really serious about expanding your readership, you will choose the latter. I suppose it is all about compromise, isn't it? In fact, sometimes you even have to compromise with the plot itself. Let me give you an example of what I mean. In 2008 I published a book called *Diary of a Victorian Colonial and other Tales*. The main tale in this collection was set in nineteenth-century Gibraltar. I wanted its protagonist to be a Gibraltarian living in one of Gibraltar's working-class districts. The problem that I faced, of course, was that most working-class Gibraltarians in 1888 wouldn't have spoken English with the degree of proficiency that I wanted my character to possess. To get around this problem, I had to create a character who had received a very good upbringing and also spent many years living in England. That way I could «justify» the standard of his written English, so to speak.

E. A.: Class consciousness and belonging is a significant element in the textual architecture of your new novel, with the antagonism of Brian Manrique and Henry Portas, but it seems to me that different kinds of social forms of oppositions surface in your previous works too, for example Giulietta and Zoran in «Roman Ruins», as well as some of the characters of your short stories. How do you represent and construct the contradictions and tensions of modern society?

M.G. S.: Yes, I must admit that I do like to explore the contradictions and tensions inherent in modern society. I think this probably stems from the fact that I come from a place which means so many different things to so many different people. I think that it is the job of the modern Gibraltarian writer to cut through these contradictions and show the reader what it is really like to live and work as a modern-day Gibraltarian.

E. A.: You have travelled to or lived in various parts of the world (New Zealand, India), and you are now based in the UK, but you constantly concentrate on Gibraltar, a «tiny» territory from a mere geographical perspective. Are your experiences of life as an expat mirrored in your writing, or in a broader frame do they affect your feelings towards Gibraltar as your homeland?

M.G. S.: Yes, almost certainly so. You only have to take a brief look at my books to realise that most of my protagonists are rootless, directionless individuals, struggling to make sense of their position in an often alien and hostile world. This interest in the «diasporic» partly comes from my own situation as a voluntary exile, but it also stems from the fact that, away from Gibraltar itself, the Gibraltarian is something of an unknown entity, subject to all kinds of misunderstandings. My hope is that by writing about the Rock I am helping

non-Gibraltarians readers learn more about us and simultaneously gain an insight into the workings of the Gibraltarian mind.

E. A.: By way of conclusion: we have heard that you are currently working on a new novel, whose protagonist is Maltese (and again we have a Gibraltarian link given the relations between the Rock and Malta); could you anticipate something about this new book?

M.G. S.: I'll do something better than that. I'll let you have a sneaky peak at the new book's blurb!

«Meet Dr John Seracino, predatory ladies man and born misanthrope. His ambition is simple: he wants to find himself a property of his own where he won't be surrounded by any pesky neighbours. But Seracino has a problem: he lives in Gibraltar, where almost everybody lives in flats and where detached properties come at a premium. For the last few years he has been attending property auctions in the hope of bagging himself one of the old colonial bungalows that intermittently come up for sale. But so far he keeps on getting outbid by lawyers and financiers, men for whom the annual £140,000 pounds that Seracino earns as a GP are no more than small change. Then one day Seracino's luck changes and he manages to land himself an old colonial property in the Upper Rock area, the aptly named Solitude House. For a while the misanthropic doctor revels in his new-found isolation, content to be able to sit every evening on his splendidly balustraded veranda, with his feet propped up and a glass of Laphroaig whisky in hand, watching through his binoculars the oil tankers and the fishing boats endlessly drifting through the Straits of Gibraltar. But just when he is at his happiest, something happens that will not only change the way the Maltese-born doctor views his prized Edwardian bungalow, but will also threaten his very mental and

physical stability.... In this wickedly irreverent novel, Gibraltarian writer M.G. Sanchez explores the idea of self-imposed solitude in a narrative tinged with both supernatural elements and the Gibraltarian themes that have traditionally underpinned his writing.»

ESTERINO ADAMI
M.G. Sanchez, *The Escape Artist. A Gibraltarian Novel*, Huntingdon (UK), Rock Scorpion Books, 2013.

The new novel by M.G. Sanchez is constructed as a *Bildungsroman* that intertwines the lives of two Gibraltarian friends from different social classes, Brian Manrique (the timid, insecure narrator from a low social background) and Henry Portas, scion of a prestigious family that has always held important positions in the Gibraltarian community. When the protagonist goes to Cambridge in 1971 to study foreign languages, he meets Henry and they start a long and complicated (almost intermittent) friendship, facing different adventures and situations, although their relation is often blurred by Henry's puzzling reluctance and withdrawnness.

The plot articulates various narrative lines and shifts across different locations (for example Brian lives for some time in Venice on an exchange programme to improve his Italian), but it fundamentally employs the knotty friendship of the two youths (at the beginning of the text seen as «two Gibraltarian Cantabrigians», p. 53) as a device to speculate on the sense of Gibraltarian identity in both its cultural and social connotations, thus evoking a multiplicity of discourses rooted in memory, history, and postcoloniality that subtly link and oppose Britain and its former octopus-like empire. As a matter of fact, identity is the keyword to reflect on and understand the meaning of cultural stratifications, in a territory like Gibraltar

whose complex essence has historically benefited from Maltese, Genoese, Arabic, British, Spanish influences. Brian's sense of belonging and displacement emerges from this context and illustrates the accumulation and uniqueness of different values, alongside the question of the postcolonial self split in-between past and present, tradition and modernity. The character's behaviour also reveals an apprehensive attachment toward his homeland, mentally re-imagined and evoked: «Growing up in a small hemmed-in territory like Gibraltar, I'm afraid, does that kind of thing to you: you develop an almost hyperaesthetic awareness of your surroundings, you become almost umbilically linked to everything around you – the sights, the sounds, the smells, the quality of the light, the various cloud formations, the different blues of the sea.» (p. 19)

The title highlights the metaphor of «escape», of «movement», of «wandering», realised in various linguistic forms (mainly in the protagonist's speech: «I began to abandon all my hopes of escape», p. 171; «Escape, run away, get the hell out of here», p. 146), which refers to the inner sense of uneasiness of the main character in his vicissitudes, especially the relations with his girlfriend, his family and his friends in various periods and situations. As a matter of fact, Brian continuously wants to move to other places, to set off in a kind of quest for something unexplored, and this feeling is matched by Henry Portas' stegophilist passion (the practice of climbing over ancient buildings with no special equipment), somehow a challenge to the expectations that everyone has for the son of a prestigious Gibraltar family, whose education, marriage and behaviour must conform to conventions and traditions.

In spite of its tiny geographical dimensions, Gibraltar turns out to be a rich cultural terrain, and with *The Escape Artist* Mark

Sanchez contributes to the field of English-language world literatures through a style that is intriguing and innovative.

MARCO FAZZINI

A conversation with Robert Crawford

M.F. When did you start to write?

R.C. I can remember my mother writing down a story that I was making up as a child, before I could write; but I think I wrote my first poems when I was about eight. From my early teens I was committed to writing poetry, and I started publishing in magazines in my late teens, though only one of those poems made it into my first collection.

M.F. And how did your parents react against your leanings towards the arts?

R.C. They advised me to get a day job that would earn money. They encouraged my love of reading – in our house there were poetry books that my maternal grandparents had exchanged as love tokens – but I think they were scared that if I wanted to live as a writer I'd not make enough to live off. They'd both left school in their mid-teens and neither had gone to university. They were never 'pushy', but they did all they could to support my education, to give me what they hadn't had. Even while still at school, I thought being a university lecturer might be a good job, since it would pay me to read and write! I didn't quite know what university lecturers did, but I thought I'd like to be one, and that it would provide me with financial security (both my parents had been bank tellers, so that was the bank-tellerly way I thought) while letting me go on writing poetry.

M.F. What do you remember of your stays in Glasgow and Oxford? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing? Did you

choose a particular writer to inspire your work?

R.C. The poet who has meant most to me over the years has been T. S. Eliot, whose *Complete Poems and Plays* I bought when I was fifteen and used to carry to school with me as a sort of talisman to ward off mathematics. It was the music of Eliot's verse that I found totally engrossing. Couldn't understand much of it, but loved it from the start. At school we read *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*: I was hooked from the opening lines, and then read the rest of Eliot's poetry for myself in a state of intoxicated bemusement. When I found out that Eliot had worked in a bank, and maintained a day job, I liked that too.

At Glasgow University I read a lot of poetry, on and off the Eng Lit course. I was lucky enough to have Edwin Morgan as my tutor in my second year (I remember his enthusiasm for Milton's *Areopagitica*); we'd read some of Morgan's work at school, but I hadn't liked it: thought the concrete poems and sound poems weren't real poetry. However, he was the only living poet in the vicinity and I showed him some of my too many sonnets soon after I started at Glasgow. Not sure he liked them much either, though he gave me some encouragement when he read one about W. H. Auden. At the end of my second year he asked me if I'd read MacDiarmid. Though I'd published poems in Duncan Glen's Scottish poetry magazine *Akros*, and subscribed to it, I hadn't really read MacDiarmid. So Morgan gave me one of several copies of MacDiarmid's New York *Collected Poems* (then the only *Collected* there was, and unavailable in Britain). Reading MacDiarmid made me realize just what was possible for Scottish poets to do.

When I went to Oxford as a postgraduate I felt ill at ease. The milieu was alien to me. Yet I made friends with other Scots there, including fellow poets David Kinloch and W. N. Herbert – both postgrads there too – and with a lot of students from overseas. I fell in love with a

refugee and, among other things, this made me think very much about what it meant to me to be Scottish, and what it meant to lose your country. In Oxford I wrote about Scotland, and knew I wanted to return – though that took me six years! I read voraciously and among my favourite poets were two very different ones – John Ashbery and Les Murray – both of whom I met through the magazine, *Verse*, that David Kinloch, the American poet Henry Hart (a fellow postgrad), and I founded in 1984. We wanted to publish Scottish work in the best international company, and it was great to meet people like Seamus Heaney and Douglas Dunn through *Verse*.

M.F. In most of your poems you show a strong and complex commitment to Scotland: this is clear from the very first book you published, *A Scottish Assembly*, which followed your experiences in England, and Oxford in particular. Would you talk about the issue of belonging to a place or going back to a place considered your own *omphalos*?

R.C. Before I went to Oxford I'd not thought very deeply about what it meant to me to be Scottish. The longer I lived outside Scotland, the more Scottish I came to feel. Scotland excited my imagination – both poetically and politically – and seemed, willy-nilly, to be a good deal of my subject matter; but I wanted to try and give a fresh sense of Scotland, one that was open to the outside world, to science and technology, to pluralism. So the sort of verbal intermingledoms in some of my poems in *A Scottish Assembly* and elsewhere are trying to articulate that.

M.F. What's the «chip of a nation» for you, Robert?

R.C. In the poem called *Scotland* that uses the phrase «chip of a nation» I wanted to give a sense of Scotland's heterogeneity, and to use



Robert Crawford. Photo credit: Aisha Farr.

the semiconductor as an image for that. I was going out with a semiconductor physicist, and stole vocabulary from her. Words like «heterojunctive» were exciting, and I wanted to use new technologies as metaphors. When I used the phrase «chip of a nation», I was conscious, probably, of the phrase «chip on the shoulder», but principally I was thinking, in the era of «Silicon Glen», about microchips. So the principal sense of «chip» in that phrase isn't either potato chip or chip on the shoulder (though both can be linked to Scotland!), but a microchip: a small thing so full of expanding connections. I wanted the ironic readings to be possible, but not predominant.

M.F. Speaking about translation Valéry affirms: «The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into language of the gods and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms». Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

R.C. Oh yes: poems often come from phrases and rhythms, then the ideas are generated alongside those. That's what I sensed in Eliot's work, and, insofar as I can analyse it, the way my own poems arrive usually involves verbal juxtapositions that excite my imagination: putting the word «semiconductor» beside the word «country», for instance. The great thing about verse is verse: by which I mean that it's a sense of lineation that adds an extra punctuation to the flow of everyday language and lets it dance. An apprehension of that dance is what you're after in a poem.

M.F. Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens: «After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption».

R.C. Etymologically and actually, poetry is about creating, making, shaping: ideally making a shape that is satisfying in its attunement. That's why poems have to sound right, to have a music of their own that may also engender or be in touch with a wider sense of attunement, or, on occasion, of productive dissonance. It seems an arrogance of the twentieth century to assume that this had to involve abandoning belief in God, but for a good number of people this is so. I have conflicted feelings about religion, but I venerate its shaping intelligence and that intelligence seems to me very close to what goes on in poetry. Having said that, it's easy to be grandiose: I like funny poems as well as love poems and religious poems. Poets like Dunbar and Burns, and Eliot who can range from erotic poetry to comic poetry to religious poetry appeal to me strongly.

M.F. I am struck by the way in which your poems often contain the simultaneous presence of voices and languages, not only and not necessarily from Scotland. We live,

as you say in *Simultaneous Translation* (from the collection, *Talkies*, 1992) between the lines, or close to the binding of a parallel text. Would you spend a few words on the issue of hybridization and crossing-over?

R.C. Probably my imagination is excited by meetings of the familiar and the other, by clashes and kisses between sameness and difference. Rhyme involves that, and I've been enjoying using rhyme quite a lot recently. Very few of my earlier poems – the ones in collections – rhymed; but they were often built out of fusing together different textures, kinds of language or culture. Ideas of cultural crossover, mixing, 'hybridity' were and are important to me. Poetry, like identity, is porous. Because Scotland is important to me, and because I support Scottish independence, I'm all the more aware of the need to avoid ideas of purity and isolationism. Often through making versions of other poets, or crossing into the unfamiliar, you're going in quest of what may be missing in your own culture.

M.F. You have worked, especially in the last ten years, on Latin language and on some of the most beautiful and interesting texts by George Buchanan and Arthur Johnson. Would you talk about this experience with and into Latin?

R.C. I studied Latin and Greek at school, but my knowledge of them has rotted away, so now I need cribs, though I can make some sense of the original. In *Apollos of the North* – the Latin versions – or in *Simonides* (versions of Greek in Scots), I'm in touch with poetry that's both familiar and quite strange to me. The Latin culture of Scotland, which for so many centuries was Scotland's window on and link to the international literary community, has been shamefully neglected; and, as someone who believes in poetry as our greatest abiding art

form, I wanted to remind people of some bits of that lost continent. I suppose the making of those Latin poems fed into my sense of the many-strandedness of Scottish literary history that I've written about in *Scotland's Books*.

M.F. In *Full Volume* (2008), you have included versions of poems by Octavio Paz, Ossian, George Buchanan, Fernando Pessoa, Florentius Wilson, etc. Would you please talk about this process of grafting foreign texts onto your own writing? And: what's the threshold between translation and version for you?

R.C. I like playing with kinds of cultural crossover, what academics like to call hybridity, and play is an important part of making art. But there's also a conscious wish to write from a Scottish perspective that reaches out to other perspectives and that welcomes difference. The little Paz poem I loved for its eroticism; the Buchanan for rhetorical *brio*; the Pessoa for a kind of complex wistfulness and attunement. In making versions, you're trying to stretch yourself and supplement what you have to offer. I have a very bloody-minded view of translation in poetry: all that matters is that the poem works as a poem in the target language. But the truth is that at root I'm so embarrassingly monolingual that, with the possible exception of a translation of the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* (in *The Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*), which I started when I did know Anglo-Saxon, I have to rely on triangulating cribs when I translate – so what I make are versions; to call them translations would be to claim an expertise I don't possess.

M.F. In your volume *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science* (2006) you write an article on the relationship between the human and the machine, and computer in particular. What's the impact computer has had on your creative writing, and on the procedures you absorbed not only from technology in general

but, partly, from the computational techniques experimented in Scotland by poets such as Edwin Morgan?

R.C. I've been fascinated by that line of engagement with science and technology in Scottish poetry that runs through the work of John Davidson, MacDiarmid, and Morgan, and which fits with some of the thinking of the philosopher George Davie. Science and the history of science excited me for their metaphorical possibilities, not least in *A Scottish Assembly*, a book whose title is partly political, but also signals a wish to gather together different kinds of Scotland including the artistic and the scientific. In particular, ideas of the virtual fascinated me when I was writing about death in my collection *Spirit Machines*; but as computers have taken over more and more of my day job, I've found I've come to resent them as hostile to contemplation, and often as a distraction from what I like doing most.

M.F. Presenting an anthology of Scottish poetry in Italian translation, in 1992, I said that in Scotland it is the passion for sensuality, for an agnostic link between man and nature to enable the reader to enjoy a new sacrality, a sacrality relieved from institutional and ceremonial conventions. Do you agree with this statement?

R.C. If I could, I'd like to articulate, more fully than I've managed so far, a sense of the sacred. For me the language of Christianity is not bankrupt but profound. I am in awe of it, even as I find it hard to believe.

M.F. Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

R.C. A Scottish poet: that's just a factual description; but I also enjoy writing about Scotland. At different times, I've found reading Irish, American, and Australian poets, as well as poets from England and Wales, a fortifying experience. Australian poets, for instance, have faced some of the same questions as Scottish poets, and have worked through them. The English language is everywhere, so one can get too hung up on ideas of the peripheral. Some of the issues about the «place» of Scottish literature and about the relations between poets and the Eng Lit of the universities I've tried to work through in my prose books *Devolving English Literature* and *The Modern Poet*. Though these have an academic tone, they do connect at a certain level with issues I've had to face in poetry.

M.F. What is your impression about the New Scotland? Are you happy about its new cultural and literary milieu, or you think it's still a peripheral satellite of the English-speaking world?

R.C. I think this is a great time to be living and working in Scotland. Scottish political independence has excited me for decades, and seems closer now than it has been for centuries. Whatever the outcome of the referendum on Scottish independence, the direction of travel over the last thirty years is pretty clear. Poetry can be written anywhere and under any circumstances, but I count myself very lucky to be a poet at this particular moment in Scottish cultural and intellectual life, and to be working in St Andrews, a small, sometimes sunny, often windswept seaside town full of seagulls, poets, and students of poetry from round the world. «Cosmopolibackofbeyondism» is good.

MARCO FAZZINI

Beyond the Color Bar: in Conversation with Adriaan van Dis. Venice, April 2013

M.F. The protagonist of your latest novel called *Tikkop* has the same name of the one in the previous novel set in Paris. Mulder seems to attract all the characteristics of a kind of alter ego or someone you use to exorcise your relationship with your father. Am I wrong?

A.V.D. The name Mulder started as a joke. It is my father's name, not mine. I am his illegitimate son and bear my mother's name. Mulder is now my alter ego indeed. My father is born on the island of Java, part of the colony of the Dutch East Indies. His family was of mixed Indonesian blood – though those roots have officially been denied. (The family said that the color of their skin came from an Italian ancestor.) My father's first wife divorced from him just after the Second World War, when the Indonesians declared themselves unilateral independent. The new Indonesians family laws were partly based on the Muslim sharia. A sharia divorce was not recognized in Calvinist post war Holland. My father's background made him a stranger in his new «motherland»: he had never been there before and spoke Dutch with a colonial accent. He came from a lost war, a lost colony and experienced Japanese war camps and torture, but the Dutch weren't interested in the stories from colonial refugees. He was too weak and traumatized to work properly, so he lost his status. And then he had a bastard son! My father was the perfect outsider: he had a sharp and critical view at all things Dutch. He was from the outside looking in. As a writer I need that look too. So as homage to him I call my alter ego Mulder. And I gave him a few of my father's characteristics too: well dressed, good mannered and obsessed with cleanliness. I let my Mulder discover the dark sides of the Parisian banlieue or the poverty

of South African townships. He is sensitive for discrimination and migration. I want my alter ego to be touched by the filth of a painful reality we often don't want to see.

I smell my father when I type his name. I share his fear for stains. In the process of writing, we become very sensitive for other smells, especially for the smell of misery and poverty.

M.F. In your lecture released at Berkeley in 2011 you extensively speak about your mother: «she went native», and married a native, if I can use this kind of scandalous phrase which in many colonial and postcolonial novels has become a stereotype. This cross cultural encounter is often at the basis of most of your novel, and has revealed itself to be formative for all the other issues you deal with in your works...

A.V.D. My mother is a Dutch born farmer's daughter. At the age of nineteen (in 1929) she fell in love with a handsome young man, originally from the Banda Islands (Moluccas) who had joined the military and was sent to Holland to be trained as an officer in the Royal Colonial Army. The couple left for Java and got three daughters. During the Japanese occupation of the colony (1942-1945), all the Europeans were interned in Japanese concentration camps. Thanks to his dark complexion my mother's first husband could disappear among the locals and joined a resistance group. After a year he was caught by the Japanese and decapitated. Her marriage with this Indonesian man was a difficult one. The Europeans in the colony frowned upon here: she had crossed the color line. But the indigenous population mistrusted the couple too. The young colonial officer had to appease national sentiments and was sent to the far outpost of the colony. My mother was very alone and isolated in those years. She learned the local *lingua franca* and was very much influenced by Asian mystique. She was never part of the colonial clique and here souvenirs

were quite different from those of most Dutch settlers under the equator. Not sentimental at all! After the war, she met my father in an evacuation camp on Sumatra – a meeting with consequences. I was conceived there. Once back in Holland, she always defended the half blood Indonesians who were more or less forced to leave the independent Republic of Indonesia. Though educated by the colonial Dutch they were often regarded as strangers in Holland. The Dutch post war bureaucracy was very cruel and had no understanding whatsoever for people coming in from the tropics. She hated the condescending manner of Dutch officials regarding people of color. It became part of the National myth that the colored migrants from the Dutch East Indies smoothly integrated into Dutch society. Indeed the first generation never complained and accepted a humble life in a cold country, but their silence was one of rage. Now their children tell the real stories. My mother told me about another reality. The double life most of these migrants were living: Indonesians at home, Dutch outdoors. My father had great difficulties to adapt to Dutch way of live: the bad and blunt manners (Dutch call that: *honesty*), the bad food, and bad way of dressing up. (My father was more a man of *bella figura*, perhaps he was an Italian after all.) He died when I was 10 years old. He was more sentimental about colonial life than my mother was. But they shared the view that one lives with more countries and cultures in your head (a word like identity luckily did not exist in those days). One could be a bare foot child and a shoe child at the same time. Enjoy a rice table with ones fingers and with fork and knife. This idea was very important at home. It shaped my view too.

M.F. Let's talk about one of the strong issues in your works: travel. You often tell your interviewers that as a child you already dreamed about traveling, and dreamed about Africa? Why?

A.V.D. The people in the house I grew up with often talked about their travels in the tropics. Long boat trips to Papua or Aceh. They had lived among other religions, they knew what a Muslim was, a Buddhist or an animist. And all of them had crossed the world by boat to end up in the swamp called Holland. They longed for wider horizons. Quite a few migrants from the colonies left Holland after a few years and immigrated to Australia, the United States or Canada. I had aunts and uncles living there. So traveling in my fantasy was not only a boy's adventure (I devoured books like *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Swiss Family Robinson*), to travel was also a reality. But not back to my family roots. The colony only existed in the heads of the migrants and independent Indonesia was a forbidden place. So I dreamt of other places. I made my grand tour in 1969 – direction India, like more hippies, though I had short hair. I never reached India after I traveled through Egypt and Sudan. This 9-month trip was a watershed in my life. The white European world was smaller than I realized. I studied Dutch literature in those days but when I came back I longed for wider spaces. Than – just by coincidence – I read a poem by Breyten Breytenbach. He was a critical poet living in a self-imposed exile in Paris. He wrote in Afrikaans, a creole derivate of the 17th century Dutch and he wrote about color, discrimination and the sensitivity of white settlers regarding matters of race. Bastards looking for purity, Breytenbach called them. I read more Afrikaans. With a small afford I entered another continent. I read black African writers. I recognized a lot when they wrote about the colonial experience. Africa was a continent I discovered by myself. No one would say: you don't understand it, you have never been there (like family used to say, when they talked about their life in the tropics). With my love for African literature I created «a colony of my heart». I dreamed to visit all the countries, from Cape to Cairo. Africa brought

me to journalism. In 1976 I traveled from Kenya to Senegal to interview African writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, and Sembene Ousmane.

Travelling for me is not only meeting other people, living in other cultures; it is also discovering unexplored sides of your own character. I become another person when I travel: more open, less assured. I leave my opinions at home and I walk very softly. I am a visitor, with big ears and eyes.

M.F. Your interest in South African culture and literature grew with the years, so that you even decided to study Afrikaans officially. Would you please tell me the importance of this language and in particular the influence it had on your life and work?

A.V.D. In the days of full-blown apartheid Breytenbach was a dissident, but also an esteemed poet. Friends and foes acknowledged his talent. In his own country he was regarded as an innovator of language, and he won major literary awards. But there was a problem. He insisted on attending the prize-giving ceremonies accompanied by his wife... but his marriage fell under the IMMORALITY ACT – a law prohibiting sexual relations between white and non-white. That was why he had gone to live in self-imposed exile in Paris. For me his Afrikaans was an adulterous form of Dutch, supple and strong, a coloured language rising above the clay soil of Calvin. So much levity, too, with such a grave subject. What struck me most were his poetical analyses of the classification of people according to skin-colour and origin. The East Indian milieu I grew up in was no different. Breytenbach's language, Afrikaans, reminded me of the old petjoh back home – the Indo-mix of Malay with garbled Dutch. A language with a shade of brown around the edges, so to speak. I could hear my father's voice in it.

I holed up in the library to read more

Afrikaans. I wanted to begin at the beginning. The language did not appear in print until the mid-nineteenth century. (As it happens, the oldest printed document was intended for the ear, and consists of instructions, written in phonetic Arabic, for the imam to explain the Muslim traditions to the Cape-Malay faithful. (1869) The deeply religious, Calvinist Boers considered their vernacular to be too lowly, and therefore unsuitable as the Language of Canaan. They stuck to their old Dutch bible – regardless of whether they could still understand it.) Afrikaans first started to appear in print mainly for comic effect – just like petjoh, in fact! – notably as a way of representing the Malay newcomer. In the early printed stories and farces the white Afrikaner Boers all speak a stiff kind of Dutch.

Remarkably, there was no hint of colour in the prevailing ideas about the emergence of the Afrikaans language. At the time, in the 1950s, its existence was celebrated primarily as the latest shoot on the Germanic family tree.

Admittedly, the Cape Colony had imported a fair number of Malay names, and also the Portuguese had left their mark, but aside from that Afrikaans was supposedly full of seventeenth-century Dutch words. In some cases it was possible to trace a particular word to a southern or northern dialect in the Netherlands. The South-African scholars of half a century ago kept Afrikaans as white as possible. Research into the influence of Khoi-Khoi and San was still in its infancy. In those days we still referred to Bushmen and Hottentots – the latter term having been introduced by Jan van Riebeeck, who was charged with establishing a refreshment post at the Cape of Good Hope. He reported back to his VOC bosses in Holland that the indigenous population were nothing but a bunch of Hottentots – an old Dutch word meaning someone who stammers. He also reported that they were unfit for any kind of work: Hottentots were stuck somewhere between ape and

human. Using them as slaves was therefore forbidden. As a result, slaves were imported in numbers – from West Africa, Madagascar and Malaysia. We now know that those new arrivals made a significant contribution to the development of Afrikaans. Boss simplifies his speech when talking to slave. Slave passes on simplified speech to boss's offspring. Thus the Afrikaans language came into being, and in a remarkably short space of time, too. But the researchers of the Apartheid era clung on to their idea of a Teutonic language shift.

How about that? Denying colour! Where did I witness that before?

I decided to study Afrikaans.

It was colour that I was after. That was a language where North and South came together. The foreign and the familiar. And also the concise levity of the Anglo-Saxons. A blend of tongues that was far more permissive than the staid Dutch of the Netherlands.

The Afrikaans language and the South Africa I knew on paper seemed to me more hospitable than the colony of my parents and half-sisters. I became a very diligent student.

And so that is how it started – with aesthetical considerations – but the ethical inevitably came into it too. The good and bad of politics. I wanted to have nothing to do with the policies that were implemented in the name of Afrikaans, because in those days it was still the case that this supposed Germanic offshoot in darkest Africa was fundamental to the identity and apart status of the Afrikaner Boer.

Afrikaans literature proved to be far less white than its readership, and even the writers themselves, realised. Their world did not lie in Europe. The Boers did not live in a vacuum, their outlook was peopled by black and brown, whether they liked it or not. And however hard they worked tarring the roads, digging mines, building dams and fences and churches – and imposing laws – their entire civilization came down to overcoming a fear of the great, often

hostile, wilderness surrounding them: Africa. I decided to study the Afrikaners from an anthropological angle – how else would I be able to bear their company for any length of time? So there I was, trying to get to know a white tribe who believed that they were a chosen people. A white tribe dreaming. A tribe that oppressed weaker tribes, enslaved them, excluded them. I studied the wondrous rites of Apartheid. The many taboos, the sexual predilections of the Afrikaners (early marriage and the highest divorce rate in the world), the gossip among the elite. But also the obligations and prohibitions of culture and I had found my life's field of study.

Of course I was aware that my quest for colour was subjectively motivated: I, who had been so eager to be part of my family's war, who had joined the kiddies resistance at a tender age, who wished he was brown instead of white, and who sang the prison-camp songs at the top of his voice... I was terrified of being drawn into another camp: the Afrikaner camp. The camp of the baddies.

So I took sides with the dissidents. Stood up for the oppressed in word and deed. How noble. To be honest I found more inspiration with writers who did not go out and man the barricades, but who explored their own small world or their own private past. Not so much out of escapism, but out of self-discovery. Where did they stand in «a country that was loud of voices, and where a sky full of vultures had long since carried the answer. A doomed truth no one was asking for», as the poet N.P. van Wijk Louw said.

What was their place in Africa? They were the descendants of colonists. But also pariahs. They too wrote with a knife at their throat. They too voiced the pain of their country.

The language of these poets belonged to a country where their skin was foreign. It was thanks to them that I dared to explore my own backyard: the coloured world of a hostel for

repatriates on the Dutch coast. It was not the Dutch language, but Afrikaans that roused the writer in me.

M.F. All your novels are set in great historical contexts; yet, you are a great observer of small details, of small worlds so as to discover something relevant about yourself and about most of the minority groups and individuals. Can you talk about this double trend in your writing?

A.V.D. All personal things are politics – it was an old slogan from the Sixties, but it works somehow in literature. When I write about migrants coming from a lost colony, I also portray post-war life in the Netherlands. One can't escape from that. The same for South Africa: listen to the life story of a black cleaning lady and you hear also the effect of Apartheid in daily life and the relations between white and black. I believe in the small scale. Under the microscope I understand the big world better.

M.F. You visited South Africa in two different periods of its painful history: in the early 1970s and in the early 1990s. Your protagonist himself, Mulder, is expecting a new South Africa in his trip back to the Cape, a change everyone had been dreaming about. Are you representing a kind of personal disillusionment in the historical evolution of this country?

A.V.D. Personally, I am not disappointed by the new South Africa. For the simple reason that it is too early to be disappointed. It takes at least three, four generations to heal the wounds of discrimination and poverty. But too many people expected quick miracles: jobs and better housing, less crime. An infrastructure of a happy white few has to be shared with millions more. This brings tensions and fear... and disappointment. Especially among those

groups who have the idea they are forgotten: those who are living in backward areas, the colored people from the Cape who don't recognize themselves in black pride and black power, and the white people who have problems to adapt to a more modest status their new country. I wanted to portray these forgotten groups and political non-correct sentiments.

M.F. In many of your novels you use detailed personal and autobiographical details. Have you consciously decided about a boundary between what you can and what you cannot confess of your life?

A.V.D. When you use the word «I» you start to lie. You become another «I». I play with that, I believe in metamorphoses. Even when I would confess a personal thing, it would not be my life. It is a life that I live in a novel. It is another I.

M.F. Which kind of geographical and historical research you did before writing a novel like *Tikkop*?

A.V.D. I lived in a small fishing community on the Cape shores for three month. I never mention the name of it because I got a lot of sensitive information from inhabitants who don't want to be exposed. I very often do research by living in another town or country. (For *Il vagabondo* I walked hundreds of kilometers in Paris, especially in the banlieue. I got to know some illegal workers in Paris, and I visited their homes and workplaces.) In South Africa I visited several fishing communities and joined local meetings. I also met some social workers in the Cape who work with drug addicts. Historical research was not really necessary. I always make a lot of notes and have meters of old dairies at home. I used the notes I took during my lessons at the Université de la lute clandestine in Paris (in 1973). It was forbidden to do that, but during the training for my illegal mission to Apartheid South Africa, I knew that

one day I would write about that. For me life is one big research for a novel.

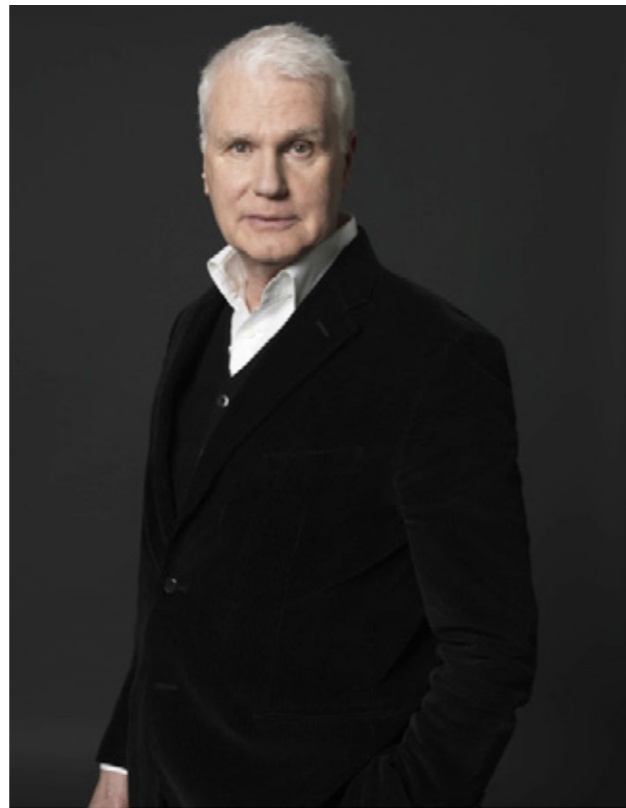
M.F. What's for you the threshold between autobiography and fiction?

A.V.D. My very personal thoughts and hang-ups stay sealed behind my lips. Shame is a very important feeling in my life. I was brought up with shame. So I know how to hide or change the too personal in a good story. If I really want to write about my deepest feelings I can always put them in the mouth of another character. In *Il vagabondo*, for example, I created a priest out of my religious doubt as an atheist. The same in *Tradimento*: I can be the revolutionary and the conservative – the two contrasting feelings live both in my brain.

M.F. You have just moved from Paris, a town where you lived for many years, a town where you wrote 4 relevant novels. What are doing next? Where will you be based? Or, where will you travel to next?

A.V.D. After eight years I moved from Paris because Paris wants things I don't want any more. I wrote enough about refugees, and pour buggers. The commitment is still there but artistically I need another subject. My next novel will be about my mother who died at the age of almost hundred years (two years

ago). It will not be about my relationship with her, but about her life as a young girl over the color line in the tropics. I do a lot of research for that. I find a lot about it in old newspapers. Our colonial past is still an open wound in the Netherlands and I want to write about that. So, again, a small life will tell a greater story.



Robert Crawford. Photo credit: Annaleen Louwes.

ROBERTA TRAPÉ

Practices of Meeting. Paul Carter¹ talks to Roberta Trapè. Interview conducted by email. January 2014

R.T.: Paul Carter, most readers would know your book *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), subtitled *An essay in spatial history* – although I notice that in the US edition the subtitle was changed to *An exploration of landscape and history*. A key argument of *The Road to Botany Bay* was that what you called «imperial history» – by which you referred to a genre of historical narrative that identified the narrative ordering of data with a western telos, broadly identifying forward movement in space and time with the notion of human progress – was theatrical. Your new book, *Meeting Place*,² talks a good deal about the architectonics of communication – the relationship between setting and speech – and you repeatedly invoke a non – or post-theatrical model of appearing to one another. Would this be an important line of descent linking the two works?

P.C.: Yes, indeed. An important «through line» – to borrow a concept from Stanislavsky – is theatre or the theatrical trope as a failed explanatory metaphor for human behaviour. In *The Road to Botany Bay* an opposition was proposed between a history conceived theatrically and a dynamics of placemaking embedded in material practices. In the former,

¹ Paul Carter is Professor of Design (Urbanism), RMIT University, Melbourne. Beside *Meeting Place*, in 2013 he also published *Ecstasies and Elegies, Poems* (University of Western Australia Publishing). As an artist working in public space, he is well-known for *Nearamnew* (Federation Square, Melbourne, 2002). *Alterations*, his ground pattern and program for Civic Square, Dandenong (Victoria), was completed in early 2014. He is currently Visiting Fellow, International Research Center 'Interweaving Performance Cultures,' Freie Universität, Berlin.

² *Meeting Place: The Human Encounter and the Challenge of Coexistence*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis & London, 2013.

space is treated as a Cartesian container, as if it exercised no influence over human activity, as a neutral background or «stage». Evidently, in the context of the phenomenon of colonisation - where the translation of space into various modes of human production provides the content of what distinctively belongs to colonial history – this is a seriously inadequate conception. The latter description of the conceptual and practical armature of colonisation, which I tried to capture in the phrase «spatial history», reclassified space: instead of treating it as a given or ground of existence, it identified the epistemological challenge it represented: how was geographical space to be conceptualised and brought into discursive circulation? To what extent was colonial space mimetic (of other spaces) or performative (improvised in relation to the circumstances of concrete situations)?

This approach to the understanding of colonial cultures and their geographical constitution had as its corollary a different emphasis in reading the records of crosscultural encounter. Instead of seeing the early ethnographic records of crosscultural encounter as proto-anthropological, I focused on their performative character, classifying them as sites of mimetically-mediated social innovation. Of course, the potential of these encounters was rarely fulfilled – and this accounts for the colonist fiction that the colonial landscape was (prior to colonisation) silent and voiceless – and, post-colonisation, univocally settled with white words. In a way it was unfortunate that the US edition altered the subtitle: by comparing my hermeneutical approach to the colonial act of exploration, it suggested that the book recapitulated the very techniques of historical framing and classification that, in fact, it sought to expose and dethrone.

R.T.: How would you describe *Meeting Place*?

P.C.: Well, to stay, with the line of descent

theme ... One difference of *The Road to Botany Bay* from other work associated with what has been called the «spatial turn» in the human sciences was its focus on the poetics of discourse in social praxis – on the role tropes of all kinds (figurative languages as well as everyday choreographies) play in creating and stabilising social relations. Metaphor is a way of throwing ourselves over into another place or position; a primary tool of *relating*. Discourse not only relies on metaphorical turns of expression. As a relation between two people it is essentially metaphorical: a dialogue between (a minimum of) two people represents a unit of sociability that is dyadic (it can never be reduced to the idealised monologue of the sovereign ego – in terms of imperial history, there cannot be a commanding viewpoint). As a social practice, as a way of managing encounter, the discursive constitution of sociability demands that the speaker is actively engaged in the communication act. A primary technique of symbolic exchange is mimicry (always with a creative supplement of irony, parody or intensification of gesture). These ideas were sketched in *The Road to Botany Bay* and subsequently foregrounded in a number of books, as well as performance scripts, that explored the potential of echoic and mimetic techniques to establish crosscultural common ground (both intellectually and physically).

Meeting Place seeks to elevate and generalise some of these investigations. Instead of treating Australia as an historical case study, it argues that the Southern experience of encounter, embodied in Indigenous practices of meeting, represents a genuine alternative to the dominant models of sociability originating in European and North American thought. In general, social theory has assumed the intrinsic good of meeting: it has tacitly identified improved protocols for peaceful coexistence with the western telos of progress. *Meeting Place* juxtaposes this rather anthropocentric view of planetary space and its absorption into human

interests with a counter-argument, derivable from Indigenous Australian cultures – where meeting might have the contrary function of regulating a culture of non-meeting. Non-meeting in this context does not mean a retreat into solipsism. It is the cultivation of a centrifugal impulse that organises the distribution of human communities in a way that is sustainable. Our network cultures already simulate this but they are not copied in the way we organise our cities or, indeed, in our entire relationship with the biosphere.

R.T.: I know that in *Meeting Place* you warn against exoticising the social philosophies of non-Western cultures. But isn't there a danger that promoting a culture of non-meeting reifies Indigenous Aboriginal culture in a comparable way? Similarly, what is meant by creating a North/South socio-cultural divide? Is the division geographical or are we talking about a kind of mental geography?

P.C.: Yes, that danger exists, and I would hasten to say that in formulating a performative account of meeting I am immensely indebted to a generation or more of post-ethnographic writing, where phenomenologically-informed accounts of Indigenous ontologies of place and placemaking have yielded timely and relevant models of sustainable social and environmental change. That said, though, *Meeting Place* seeks to resist implicitly regulatory or closed loop descriptions of social behaviour and its symbolic mediation. It focuses on incidents, situations or even concepts that illustrate the power of social performances to ride the turbulence of encounter and initiate new protocols of coexistence. Let me give a couple of concrete examples, both from my own encounters in Central Australia. The first concerns the role of the white art teacher Geoffrey Bardon in catalysing what came to be known as the Papunya Tula Painting Movement (1971-). The second is *Red Ways*, a meeting place design

project in Alice Springs, in which I was involved between 2007 and 2011.³ Bardon possessed an exceptional mimetic talent: copying, parodying, gesturally and performatively aligning himself with the multimedia practices of Indigenous men living away from their ancestral country, he staged an encounter that took the art production back to its roots. But there was nothing essentialist or exoticist about this: Bardon brought into play his own pedagogical skills (materials, interpretations and senses of audience). The outcome of a radical encounter, which was performative or improvisational all the way down, was the new meeting place of a transformed art practice whose ramifications have been social, economic and, above all, political.

The dynamics of encounter at Papunya played out in the symbolic domain of painting, but it was possible to show that structurally what happened there was no different from innumerable encounters between indigenous and non-Indigenous parties across historical time and space. The key similarity in all the situations singled out in *Meeting Place* was a propensity for sympathetic identification made manifest in mimetic behaviour: what was being sought was not some shallowly-grounded and pragmatic resolution of differences but a gesturally-mediated identification, a temporary meeting place that did not merely preserve the trace of the encounter but was in its form and program the trace of that mimetically-evolved new situation. Accordingly, in Alice Springs my investigations focused on historical and

³ These engagements are documented respectively in Paul Carter, *Dark Writing*, chapter 4, 103-139 and «Regional Patterns: narratives of «mere coincidence» and the production of Sociability» in Robert Mason & Janet McDonald (eds), *Creative Communities: Regional Social Inclusion and the Arts*, scheduled Routledge or Ashgate, 2014. Local Indigenous precedents for treating the Red Ways design project as an investigation of encounter protocols in an exceptional situation are discussed in *Meeting Place*, pp. 103-107.

cultural forms in Arrernte and white settler regional experience that converged on each other conceptually: design work in this context would be the performative realisation of these convergences. These investigations were not the application of a theoretical model to a local problem. On the contrary, a concrete situation generated the grammar that was needed to reinvigorate the social phenomenon of meeting, to give it once again a generative value. One spinoff from this placebased investigation was the recuperation of a term (*hedra*) that in my judgement fell out of philosophical usage for lack of a clear corresponding idea: when, as happens in *Meeting Place*, it is brought into dialogue with the Arrernte term *utyerre*, meaning roughly «tie», its power to name a place where things are properly placed proves to be conceptually valuable. Performance in this context is the proper, even if temporary fit, of human actors and their surroundings; the multiplication of these performances might produce a region of such encounters, tied together but apart.

Posing these convergences in terms of a new North/South dialogue invokes the historical geography of European and North American imperialism, which, over the last five centuries, has seen the incorporation of most of the southern hemisphere into the North's sphere of geo-political dominance. Obviously, different peoples have experienced colonisation differently, that is, the «South» does not exist except as a projection of the imperial imagination (where it continues to carry the stigma of backwardness or underdevelopment). So, while there is no intention to propose a southern confederacy of interests, it is reasonable to associate with the south the idea of crosscultural encounter. It is in the south where the expanding wave front of imperial expansion has provoked the densest human experience of enforced socialisation – and where, logically, the richest performative ecologies might be expected to emerge.

Of course the South is also within – when Kant associates crossing the line with going mad, he refers to a mental geography. In European Studies the South finds expression in the mediterraneanism of writers such as Cacciari and Franco Cassano. In their North/South divide, the north stands for statist, centralist and continentalist philosophical system building; the south, by contrast, is a philosophical confederacy of peninsulas and islands. Less exotically, these geographical reconfigurations of models of socialisation find powerful precedents in Michael Serres or Bruno Latour. And certainly, when *Meeting Place* spatialises its argument as the traverse of a city whose labyrinth curiously suggests Venice, the aesthetic bias of the author is clear: if the north invests in the plan (the meeting place as prescribed *place*, *platz* or square), the south suggests an archipelagic sensibility. The (non poetic) point is that insights into the character of meeting are not supplementary or dispensable: they re-ground social relations entirely, placing the institution of meeting literally and figuratively on a new footing.

R.T.: Almost a quarter of century separates *The Road to Botany Bay* and *Meeting Place*. As you say, in that period a spatial turn has characterised much research in such allied fields as cultural geography, social anthropology, performance studies and even such placemaking discourses as planning. What have been the important influences on the development of your thought in this period?

P.C.: From the beginning the kind of cultural writing represented by *The Road* and *Meeting Place* existed in dialogue with an art practice. I don't mean to give the impression that these and publications in between have evolved in isolation from the resurgence across a

whole series of fields of material thinking,⁴ however, to speak from inside the process, it was in the laboratory of creative practice that many of the data were found or produced that informed the refinement and evolution of my ideas. The exchange was, of course, two ways. Early radiophonic scripts, museum sound installations and environmental soundscapes teased out the mimetic structuring of early colonial cross-cultural encounter – indeed, they relied heavily on early to mid-19th century language notebooks assembled by missionaries and other colonial functionaries.⁵ To perform my amplified arrangements and variations on these sources, conventional (Stanislavskian) vocal characterisation had to be given up and an echoically –cued mode of performance developed, where the overall effect or (as Canetti might say) the «acoustic mask» of the whole created the work's distinctive identity. Such an identity might correspond to the distinctive sound signature of a meeting place. These practical findings provided new tools of analysis useful in reading the colonial archive in a different way.

The demonstration that colonial spaces were produced, that the meaning accruing to spaces was embedded in the poetic mechanisms of their formation, appealed to architects and landscape architects. From working in a primarily acoustic (interior space) domain, I migrated in the late 1990s to design work in the public domain. There followed a series of public space designs that attempted to integrate

⁴ Carter refers here to a characterization of recent social and cultural theory by Nigel Thrift (see *Meeting Place*, p. 29). Carter's own book *Material Thinking: the theory and practice of creative research* (2004) was a notable contribution to this trend.

⁵ See Paul Carter, *The Calling to Come*, 1996. A return to this electroacoustic installation created or the Museum of Sydney occurs in *Meeting Place*. pp. 127-133.

intuitive patterns of meeting and practices of inscription. In a classical sense these artworks aimed to integrate topos and topic, place and theme.⁶ Their novelty was to insist that the public domain was not theatrically conceived or occupied but was, instead, an act of collective social production. The artwork acted as a catalyst to this recognition and the concrete choreographies found in the ground patterns were conceived as inducements to congregate in particular ways. In general, these works explored the proposition that the socially and politically-regulated act of meeting had embedded within it a primary desire of association that theatrically-conceived public spaces repressed. I associated this primary desire with the longing for encounter.

In encounter the future is not prescribed: it evolves in the performance. Encounter merges into meeting when the forms and gestures improvised in encounter stabilise – when their traces can be inscribed of encounter. In this case, the kinds of trace laid down in these encounter are critical to the kind of meeting *qua* sociability that will subsequently evolve. The function of the inscriptions composed and engraved into my public space designs is to announce at the beginning the grounding of social praxis in a non-conformist discourse formed echoically. Their cryptic appearance invites a creative response; but nothing beyond the human impulse to relate what was found to one's own path and interests is inscribed into the future.

R.T.: *MP* moves between different voices, bringing together very different cultural materials, enacting a meeting or passing through of strikingly different voices and perspectives; as you say, where the desire of encounter

⁶ *Mythform: the making of Nearing at Federation Square, Melbourne* (2005) and *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design* (2008), both by Carter, document work in this genre.

remains alive, there can never be a single, authoritative narrative. Nevertheless, I get the impression that a dominant or predominant narrative voice *does* characterise *Meeting Place*: that of the migrant. In the chapter called «G/hosts» you argue that Australian-Iranian sculptor Hossein Valamanesh materialises a distinctively new ground of sociability, where the contract between self and other is inscribed into the mobility of the actors. You liken the historical consciousness this generates to «the instant between two strides» taken by the traveller, a phrase from Franz Kafka that also permeates your book *Dark Writing*. Doesn't the migrant risk becoming another kind of essentialist trope?

P.C.: It does if the migrant is understood as a sociological category. The migrant invoked in *Meeting Place* embodies a distinctive historical consciousness and, what goes with this, a distinctive experience of placemaking. Historically, the migrant succeeds the colonist; however, in another sense, the migrant precedes the «host» community as the psychological, economic and social impact of emigration resembles in many ways the experience of Indigenous people under colonial rule. Picking up on a distinction of Edward Said, I argue that the necessity of the migrant to affiliate to their new society – they are excluded from the myth of filiation, which white settler nations use to erase the guilt of an original incursion and theft – places them in a privileged position. It also implies enormous responsibility, for the migrant has (ethically speaking) no choice but to engage with the grounds for living in a new country. An engagement with Aboriginal experience is unavoidable.

The argument made in *Living In A New Country*, and taken forward into *Meeting Place* is that a striking resemblance exists between the Pidginised discourses of cross-cultural communication in the early colonial contact period and the hybrid discourses of

recent and contemporary migrant English in Australia. In both, standard English is stripped of its conventional grammar and syntax; pronunciation is wildly idiosyncratic and meaning is largely contextual, carried by gesture. Instead of preserving authoritative concepts, English becomes a score on which baroquely associative variations are played. In this performative dismembering of the dominant tongue, meeting (the successful exchange of meanings) rediscovers its origins in the mimetic structuring of encounter. A migrant poetics, so to say, reinscribes desire into language by re-gesturalising it.

Valamanesh's work is paired with Giacometti's: at the end of *Meeting Place*, Giacometti's famous human groups (often known by such generic names as *La Place*) are characterised as dramatisations of encounter, capturing the moment – perhaps the instant between two strides – when all is about to happen but when all has, in another sense, already been determined. They are chiasmic works that hold the meeting place open to the possibility of encounter. In this softer, existential sense, the migrant represents the one who comes from outside. They are associated with an inrush of desire, an essential component of Eros according to Socrates. However, in contrast with this rather European conception – one that tends to perpetuate a theatrical model of the way socialisation occurs – appearance to the other being identified with walking (from nowhere) onto the stage of public life – the object in *Meeting Place* is to insist on the socially generative value of what I call the «movement form», a repertoire of poses, gestures and echoically mimetic tools that are internal to passage itself and which define the economy of peaceful coexistence as a process of continuous (self-) production. This is the meaning of the quibble ghosts/hosts. Colonial writers claim that Australian Indigenous peoples explained the inexplicable arrival of the British as the return of (naturally)

white forebears or ghosts. Migrants stand in this relation to the imagined community of the nation state. They bring into question the identity of the host; they suggest that the host is the ghost of another, unfulfilled social relation. In ghosting the Other, the migrant inverts the hierarchy of appearances. At the end of *Meeting Place* I conclude with a vignette from Marseilles: a street mimic is described whose mimicry of the crowd illustrates the migration of identity from the self to the other; his performance – the serpentine line of his movement form – materialises a new choreography, one where the ghost of encounter continues to haunt the place of meeting.

R.T.: There are a number of Italian allusions in *Meeting Place*. Besides the canonic status you grant to the Italian piazza as a site of social encounter, there is a specific reference to *La Vera Storia*, a music theatre work by Luciano Berio and Italo Calvino – I believe you also worked with Berio in the early 90s. Reading between the lines – and with the knowledge of your 1994 anti-fiction *Baroque Memories* in mind – the affection you have for the baroque mode is also inspired by Italy – by your personal encounter with Italian art and culture. Is there a sense in which the North/South dialogue you stage in *Meeting Place* is really another variation on your Italian discovery of Australia – a discovery notably staged in *The Lie of the Land*, where you bring a discussion of Giorgione and Venetian aesthetics into dialogue with Central Australian Aboriginal art in order to describe a poetics consonant with a genuinely postcolonial politics?

P.C.: As you say, Italian themes find their way throughout my work. However, in this context, it is the symbolic function of Italy in the structuration of the narrative that is perhaps most relevant. Just as the space of the meeting place is a labyrinth of passages, so the time of meeting (instantaneous, chiasmic) is non-linear.

Hence it seemed to me that the challenge of cultural writing about encounter and meeting was to incorporate these nonlinear or nonsequential aspects of the phenomenon into the structure of the narrative. *Meeting Place* is a sequence of crossings that, it emerges, involve the retracing and deepening of thematic grooves already encountered earlier. It is structured as a system of returns that (like the labyrinth) paradoxically brings you to another place: movement is helical rather than circular. The returns are of various kinds. For example, *Meeting Place* revisits passages from earlier books. These it rewrites and relocates. One should come upon them as one comes upon a familiar street rendered unfamiliar by approaching it from a different direction or in a different light.

Or, again, the North/South dialogue is instantiated in the pairing – I presume for the first time – of acknowledged authorities in the western canon and respected knowledge holders from Australian Indigenous societies. The idea is that encounter is always *rencontre*: to come across something always has written into it the memory (or the expectation) of another encounter. In the same way the classic sites of first contact and the mimetic performances they inspire never occur on neutral ground or in a cultural vacuum. In them is staged a return to certain spontaneous or pre-reflective behaviours that in the encounter become objects of reflection. Therefore it would be a mistake if *Meeting Place* were to arrive somewhere decisively new: the task is almost the reverse, to find a way to linger, to live alongside, to coexist.

The way in which, for example, the reader encounters Giacometti – admittedly only Italian by adoption – illustrates this structuring principle. *Meeting Place* features a discussion of Giacometti's unrealised public art project for Pine Street Plaza (Lower Manhattan). The discussion is in two halves, the latter staging a return to the theme from an entirely

new direction. Just as there is no dominant viewpoint in Giacometti's groups – the scale is internal to their interactional dynamic – so there is no finalisation of the discussion. Instead, in this way, Giacometti's work steps off the pedestal and out into the world – or at least into the world of the book, where, at the end, a visit to the Fondation Maeght folds seamlessly (I hope) into the scene of the Marseilles mimic. This is not some kind of literary flourish: it translates into narrative form the difficulty that Giacometti confronted in New York where, challenged to scale up his figures to a real world environment, the great sculptor equivocated. In *Meeting Place* at least his figures again walk through the world. So with Italy: the vignettes of past experiences in Italy are, when glimpsed again from the winding stair of the argument relocated as earlier traces of movements whose completion is yet to occur.

R.T.: This is a very elegant formulation, and I can see that it conforms to your advocacy of a discourse of concrete situations, one where new insights are generated mythopoetically (from the retelling of the received cultural fables). However, it also raises the question of genre. Some of *Il Tolomeo's* readers may find your concern with form rather abstract, and certainly a distraction from the substance of the book. After all, despite its fictional elements, *Meeting Place* is, as you say, cultural writing intended as a contribution to the broad arena of contemporary cultural and social theorising around the conditions of peaceable human coexistence. From this more pragmatic perspective, can you, for example, say what a zone of encounter would look like? Does it have an existence outside the moment and the occasion of its performance? And, if it does, how might its trace be inscribed into, for example, the design and program of meeting places?

P.C.: Your point is well taken. On the question of genre, though, it is worth pointing out that

Meeting Place stages a meeting not only between genres but between disciplines. It argues that the social sciences take communication for granted and for this reason overlook the obstacles to understanding between strangers and the importance of improvised performative tactics in overcoming these. While such disciplines as sociology, legal studies, psychology, political theory and even urban planning treat meeting as a good in its own right (identifying it with the democratic procurement of wellbeing), they fail to offer a model of what makes meeting possible and worth pursuing: a prior and always unfulfilled desire of encounter. There is a sense in which, I suggest, the very phenomenon that these fields seek to promote eludes them: the performative dynamics that characterise the eros of meeting fall between their disciplinary interests. In this sense *Meeting Place* both falls outside these disciplines and between them.

In broad terms a zone of encounter occurs where the actors participate in the production of the meaning of the event. Where a performance grammar is improvised desire is also inscribed. Mimetically-mediated communication produces a unique complex of signs that, being shared, can also be returned (recognised and exchanged). Communication of this kind occurs at this place and time: its conceptual freight is less important than the confrontation with the Other that it records. A comparison can be made with the way in which graffiti or tags communicate: addressing the person who comes across them at that place and time, they make the reader/viewer self-conscious. They solicit a relationship that is essentially public. The great original of the contemporary urban tag is the Delphic injunction *Know Thyself*. To come across such an inscription is to feel oneself addressed. The self is made aware that it comes from somewhere else. It is asked to understand itself through a process

of presencing to another. In that encounter public space is no longer benignly neutral: it presses on the individual to say where they stand. With this genealogy in mind, many of the chapter titles in *Meeting Place* are taken from tags I have collected in various cities. Encounter in this model is the potentiality of public space to incubate new relations. It is the scaffolding of distance that makes the possibility of approach possible. It holds apart in order to draw together. If this is so, the design of the meeting place needs to preserve these qualities of timing and spacing. *Meeting Place* canvasses a number of options that meet this criterion: the new meeting place may be virtual; or it might be composed entirely of walls – places where the traces of passage are retained while the human presences that produced them remain immanent. These, of course, are thought experiments rather than practical suggestions. They try to visualise the enigma of Public Eros, whose work is, paradoxically, to bring people together by paths that can never be fully formulated. Intrigued by the same question you pose, I have recently completed a manuscript, provisionally called *Ambience, the design of public space*. Just as *Meeting Place* bears the impression of recent public space design projects in which I have been involved – most notably in Central Australia – so the theoretical implications of *Meeting Place* have informed my design practice. *Ambience* takes back to this practice the insights of *Meeting Place*, arguing that the zone of encounter is characterised by certain movements that approximate to algorithms of sociability. One of the innovations of *Ambience* is to make the case for the existence of a complex, and constantly self-changing feedback loop between behaviour in public spaces and the design of public space. The discourse of this new performative placemaking, where the human actors become the designers, is «choreotopography.»

R.T.: And I understand you to say that «discourse» in this context retains its etymological range of reference.

P.C.: Exactly. It is both a running hither and thither and the endless flow of human communication. The proposition of *Meeting Place* is that an awareness of this enables us to curate these flows in ways that bring out their poetic potential, that is, their mimetic impulse through which the desire of identification expresses itself. The reintroduction of Eros – understood here as the distance from which people approach one another as well as the desire of encounter – does not lead to an ultimate congregation (Canetti's abhorred murderous mob) but to a «Brownian Motion» of endless readjustment in relation to the other. The role of the social performances that stage an encounter is to catalyse the emergence of meeting places. Such places are the trace of the discourses that shaped them. In English we differentiate between storytelling and stories that are telling, that is, reveal something significant. Meeting places are where story telling is telling (i.e. makes a difference). Another way to put this is to say meeting places retain their power to generate social Eros when they let something take place, that is, initiate a material transformation. To go back to the challenge of public space design: it is obvious that a new kind of relationship is implied between placemaker and public. The new dramaturgy, in which the placemaker is a mimic intensifying existing flows, may not be attached to places at all: going with the flow, he/she aims to map the surface of turbulence, a pattern of comings and goings consistent with our experience of the world.

ALESSANDRO VESCOVI AND ARIANNA AUTIERI

«God-written wild things actually happening».

An encounter with Namita Devidayal

We met Namita Devidayal⁷ in her hometown, Mumbai, in August 2013 at the National Centre for Performing Arts near Colaba. She was on her way home from the premises of the *Times of India*, where she works as a reporter covering stories from this amazing metropolis. Journalism, however, is not Namita's only occupation, she is also a musician and a novelist. Her debut in the literary work was a kind of autobiography entitled *The Music Room*, where the author describes her relationship with traditional Indian music and her gurus. Her second (and latest) novel, *Aftertaste*, recounts the story of a business family based in Mumbai and their mithai shop. Mithais are very tasty traditional Indian sweets lined with a silver foil, and we are very disappointed that in the modern, stylish coffee house attached to the arts centre they do not have any. However, Namita's easy smiling kindness soon dispelled our disappointment as she started talking about modern India, her relationship with the tradition and the new role women like herself play in this society.

A.V.: Does your work as a journalist contribute to the work as a creative writer? How does one affect the other?

N.D.: I think that they really contribute. Well, my work as a journalist really contributes to my work as a writer, because as a journalist you're constantly out with curiosity, looking for stories, constantly. So you find stories in places that are very unlikely; your mind learns to hear something and then finds the story in it, which another person may not always

⁷ Devidayal's books are published by Thomas Dunne Books and Random House.

find. And after you find the story, you have to write it in a way that is not just a piece of journalistic news, but has a kind of narrative to it. The storytelling just becomes like a part of your routine work. I'm not a reporter, so I don't do too much of daily news reporting at all. In fact I used to much earlier, when I was much younger, now it's really about writing features, longer stories, which are not like «today this person died on the train», not that kind of thing. So that's storytelling and you are looking for details, you're looking for things that really make a picture. That obviously helps in book writing because your mind has already these little pictures going on in your head, and at length you just learn to extrapolate from those for your book. Even though my book was based on another full story, I found that I was using a lot of little, little things that I had written as a journalist in that. I'm not sure that writing contributes to my journalism, but they are very linked.

A.A.: Do you still find time to sing?

N.D.: I do but not very frequently. I still visit my teacher, she is still alive and teaching other students, but she lives very far away from me, so I don't get there as much as I'd like to. But singing is a part of my life, and I'm very much in that world. My son, who is eleven, has taken to music as well, he plays the violin and my husband is a jazz musician, blues musician, so there is a lot of music in our life.

A.V.: When did you first think of writing about your experiences as a musician?

N.D.: I'll tell you how it happened. I was taking a course at Columbia University in New York and it was a creative writing class, so we did a lot of different writing, and then the last assignment was to write a first chapter of a book, any book. And so I just sat down in front of my computer, and the chapter that emerged was the story of a little girl going to learn music

and it was me, but I was writing it in third person. And I wrote it, and then... life went on and all that... And then, when I was living in America, I didn't have a job and I had a little baby, I was a just kind of doing nothing and so I said «I must write». So that's when I went back to that and I actually started writing: from that. So that's how it all started, and then it was just a kind of flow, because there was so much in my head about all that from my childhood. My teacher told me so many stories that were so interesting...

A.V.: So you chose those that actually became part of your book...

N.D.: Yes, I started writing a lot of that down, then I did a lot of research, then I came back and spent time with my teacher as well, and got more, filled in a lot of details.

A.V.: Did you have a particular reader in mind when you were writing *The Music Room*? Whom were you writing for?

N.D.: I'll tell you. I was writing for somebody who knew very little about Indian Classical Music. So it was clearly not for a person who was already from that world, because I was telling a lot of things, I was explaining a lot of things, and I wanted to make it interesting for a person who knew nothing about Indian Classical Music, through storytelling and through the story of my teacher. So it was a way of basically bringing that world alive to a lot of people who have no idea about it. Because in India lots of people are really very westernized now, they have no idea about these old traditions, it's a very small, closed world.

A.A.: It struck us that your autobiography merges with the biographies of your teachers. Did you plan it from the beginning?

N.D.: No. I've never planned anything, it just

kind of happened and this book was really as if God-written wild things were actually happening. I had no idea how it was going to end. Like, you know, there's that whole bit about going to the temple in Kolhapur, where I sing with my teacher, where she used to sing as a child. I had not planned that, but it all just happened. She said something like «Hey, we're going to Kolhapur, we're going to do this» and so I went with her, and the whole thing became a part of the book. There was a very unusual kind of organic feeling about it. It was not the typical way of planning, when you sit down and write a book. It was really like these things that I wrote with no idea about what was being written, other than the fact that I wanted it to be a story about music.

A.A.: Do you think that the biography of your teacher contributes to your own autobiography in some way?

N.D.: No. It is not about me. In fact, I kept a kind of very thin narrative voice, I didn't want too much about my own life, because I'm just like a narrator. But, to make it interesting and alive, obviously, I also wanted to bring in my relationship with her, and what was happening in my life. But I didn't want to dwell too much on myself, because it's not very interesting for a reader. But a lot of people thought it would have been more interesting if I got it more personal.

A.V.: Was it difficult to write about your teacher?

N.D.: Yes. Actually it was very difficult because I had to reveal a lot of details that were very personal, and I knew that she was not pleased about that, but I did it anyway, because I knew that the larger picture was worth it. So it was difficult because it was so intimate, you know, writing about things that happened in her life, or between us, or me saying how I used to lie to her, you know, things like that. There was so much that is so personal. But I also wrote it with humour, so that it became like very real... like

any kid going to a teacher does all these kinds of tricks. She actually was very upset about a few details that she didn't want in there.

A.V.: Did she read it before it came out?

N.D.: No, she can't read English. That was my great advantage. But she basically trusts me. It all worked out in the end, because she got so much applause after the book came out – she is a very reclusive person – and after this book, the number of people that read it and wanted to go and meet her, or learn from her, or give her an award, or invite her to perform was just huge. So I think she realized that the book was something good for her.

A.V.: Was it translated into Marathi?

N.D.: It wasn't, because she did not approve of the details. So she said «I don't want it». Her world is Marathi, so she was very clear that you can have it translated in Italian, English and Hindi and whatever other language, but not in Marathi, because that was her community.

A.V.: So it was not translated...

N.D.: There was a lot of interest, but she said «no», and I fully respected her. I could have done it and have it done, but she... It wasn't her own version of herself and she didn't want it out there.

A.A.: Dhondutai e Kesarbai are, socially speaking, very different... Do you think that they are in some way complementary? Do you feel more akin to one or the other?

N.D.: They are very different. But they are very, very connected by music. That was like the whole point of this book, its aim was also to talk about how music was this kind of universal language that connected people from absolutely [different worlds]... You know India

has very strong divides in communities, in castes, in religion, so these are communities that don't usually interact with each other. Now of course things are different, but in the past, someone from her background would never go and sit in a Muslim person's house. So the very beautiful thing that happened through this is that music became this kind of incredible binding force. You know, I talk about this man, who is the grandson of the big Khansahib, the big musician, Muslim musician, who's her age. He was more like a brother to her, because of the musical connection, even closer to her than her own brother because of the music. Even though he came from a completely different background, and they were not allowed to really interact, in those days.

A.V.: When you say «in those days...»

N.D.: Well, things are now much more open in India. There still are divides, but it's not as strict as it was in those days. In those days, you have to understand that was a period where music, Indian Classical Music, had come to be considered a very cheap thing. So the people who were singing in those days were basically like entertainers. Music had lost its kind of glory, because – there's a whole history for that – the patronages had changed, and after the kings and all that went away, the patrons were these wealthy men in India who – I mean, in cities like Bombay – who would often treat these women singers, as, you know, women who were like... who were not respectable. So that was the period when Dhondutai was learning... So, for her to go and learn with someone like Kesarbai, or even with someone like a Muslim, was just not done. Today anyone can go and learn music, the respectability has come back. So – I mean not in the last twenty, thirty years – but at that time the arts were associated with something slightly cheap and degraded – for a good fifty years.

A.A.: The story opens with Dhondutai's vision, which in a way sets the tone for the whole narrative. Do the other women in the book share the same attitude?

N.D.: It's a very personal thing so I can't speak for anyone else. I don't have visions or anything, but I'm very connected. I considered music to be very closely linked to a kind of a spiritual experience. So, I think the vision for her was more a kind of like... you know, I think when you live alone, and when you have these very strong beliefs in gods and everything, these things manifest. But it's not like it was literal. Actually, I don't know if it really happened or not, that's not even the point, but she believed it did. It's a very personal experience you have, when you have a moment that is so special and powerful, that you experience something, see something that other people might not see.

A.V.: Do you think this is something she shares also with Kesarbai, her own teacher?

N.D.: For Kesarbai the music was very different. It was a clear professional and entertainment based thing, because she was an earning person. For her the music was a way to earn a living for herself and her family, because she came from that profession. So her approach to music was different. It was about entertaining and creating an audience. Having said that, I think this music is so powerful that it takes you into other levels. Dhondutai's whole approach to music was very different, it was not about entertainment or about trying to please an audience. It was a personal journey, which was her own journey. So it was a very different approach.

A.V.: A very personal question, if you can forgive that. Did you find a way to bring this spiritual dimension of music to your son?

N.D.: I try very hard to do things that will let the music just come into his very deep subconscious level, so I do very sneaky things. E.g. before he wakes up in the morning I play a certain kind of music so he wakes up to that. Because, I really feel that there has to be something that is really ambience. You can send him to classes, which I do, but I want to imbibe him at a much deeper level. So I try, but it's nowhere near to what I would like to do. Because I am not doing it myself, so it doesn't happen as naturally and beautifully as it should. My mother used to play a lot of music when we were growing up, so now I can recognize it and it is all still there. With him is very less so, but I try and I hope something comes in. He is musical, so maybe it won't be Indian Classical music, but he's got an open mind to music.

A.V.: Does he play Hindustani or Western violin?

N.D.: No, he plays western classical violin. You know how it happened? That's a nice story. I was invited to Cremona for a music and literature festival⁸ about two years ago, I took him with me and he became obsessed with the Stradivari violins... It was really weird, because he came back and said «I want to learn it.» And he was really serious, I did not think it at the beginning. So he got a violin and he goes here at the NCPA, where they follow the Suzuki method, and he's doing very well.

A.V.: And what do you play for him in the morning? Western Music or Indian?

N.D.: Both.

A.A.: Going back to your writing. I was

⁸ Le Corde dell'anima Cremona in Festival. Devidayal was a guest with Beatrice Colin in May 2011.

impressed by these biographies within the autobiography: how do they contribute to the main story?

N.D.: You should know that a lot of this stuff in this book was my interpretation, so I'm not sure if it's even a biography. I mean, there are no lies or anything in it, but I did not check everything to find out whether that person actually wore those clothes at that particular moment, in that concert. So biography is not the right definition, but it is a biography, in a way it is. It is «life writing».

To me the most interesting thing about this book was that if you look at the three women, Kesarbai, Dhondutai and me, we are just completely from different worlds. Dhondutai and I have absolutely nothing that would bring us together in our normal daily life. She comes from a very different background. Her world is very different from mine. Similarly, she and Kesarbai came from very different worlds, because Kesarbai was one of those professional singers, devadasi. But the music has been such a glue and such an amazing thing that it became a sort metaphor for the story of India, because India is filled with all these different kinds of communities and people, but something always brings them together, sometimes it's food, sometimes in this case is music and it's very special actually. I am really grateful for it because it took me into a very different world from the one I live in, and that will stay with me for the rest of my life. It has really changed the way I think and see things. So, even though I stopped learning music many years ago, I still go back to Dhondutai, because she brings something into me which I don't get from the rest of my world – a simplicity, a quietness. It's an interesting space. I think it's so much more than music, the whole relationship between the teacher and the student is not so much about the actual skill that you are learning, it's really about bringing in a world view that is different from yours, because otherwise you

come with your parents' world view. And this one just adds a dimension to your life, which is much more than just music.

A.V.: Do you think that your musical education, and your musical attitude influence the composition of your books? Are there any aesthetical resemblances between Indian Classical Music and the way you write?

N.D.: No. I'd love to believe that there is a connection, but I don't know if there is. I mean, I don't have consciously thought about it. Subconsciously, if something has come in, that may be, but frankly, no... I tell you one thing though, actually yes, now that you mention it. It may have been a very unconscious thing that happened in *The Music Room*, which is, that you have noticed that it goes back and forth in time a lot, so you're in a moment and then it goes back into another past moment, and then it comes back into the present. That to me is very much a way Indian Music is all about, because everything about Indian Classical Music is like an oral tradition. It's come down over years and years, right? So you are always finding this kind of thing that connects the past and the present. So it could be that that happened, but I really didn't think about it before I wrote it. But it's something that is very much there in that book.

A.V.: Talking about *Aftertaste*, when we got to the end of the novel, we just reread the prologue. It sounded like the exposition of a theme and the rest like variations...

N.D.: You can say that... but I didn't think of it.

A.V.: Do you think that there are any particular literary influences for that book?

N.D.: Nothing specific, I just wrote that. It's based on my extended family stories. My family is a business family; so a lot of the characters

and the stories come from real stories that I've heard. I was just trying to recreate that world where everything is about money, and it's a very real world. It's hard to believe; a lot of people who read the book were like «are you serious?», like «would a mother take a daughter back from her husband if he hadn't got money?». But in fact that does happen in a lot of these business families. I was just trying to bring alive a one whole segment of Indian society, which has not otherwise got anything to do with literary world. I'm able to bring alive worlds which are not usually written by authors.

A.A.: Why did you mention Dhondutai also in this book?

N.D.: It was a personal joke. It was funny...

A.V.: Both books in a way revolve around the Eighties, you were living in Mumbai at that time. So why the Eighties?

N.D.: I think that's because I've realized that a lot of my memories belong to that period, from the time I was ten to about twenty, is very vivid in my head and I was able to really pick on that. I think it is the most interesting time, so I was actually able to remember a lot of things from that time strangely, from my own childhood rather than anything that's happened of late. I don't think it is a conscious thing. Both books happen to be largely based on memory and so that was the time I think is the most vivid as far as my memory goes.

A.A.: Talking about *Aftertaste*, we noticed that the novel portrays a big extended matriarchal family, where Mummyji is the meeting point of what is happening, do you think that things have changed now in society?

N.D.: Yes, they have. Now there are more nuclear families, now families are much smaller; you

don't have the same kind of joint families that you used to have. But I think that the mother's figure is still a very very important person in a lot of Indian families, even today. A lot has changed, but a lot is very much that. So, even though women have all kinds of problems, the mother somehow gets a very powerful place in society.

A.V.: What about business families, are they also changing?

N.D.: Yes, they are much more different. There's much more professionalism, much less of this cash economy... but business families are still there. And I think there are the same issues, the human level – issues between brothers, between two people thinking differently about things that will never go away or get beyond the point, because human beings are human beings, no matter what. So jealousy, difference of opinion and aggression, all that will always be there.

A.V.: Do you think that your education in the U.S. has somehow shaped your vision of India?

N.D.: I definitely think so. That distance gave me a very different perspective, gave me a sense of wonder, you know? Things that you took for granted when you are around, when they are around you, when you are away you suddenly look and they suddenly look different, and more beautiful, more interesting. So, yes, for sure.

A.V.: How long did you live in the U.S.?

N.D.: I went to a College there for four years, when I was eighteen, then I worked there for three years, and then I moved back, and then I moved back later for about two years. So all together nine years.

A.V.: When you write – I'm thinking especially of *Aftertaste* – you put dramatic moments together with petty details on things and

general observations on human nature... very often all these things are just crammed into the same paragraph. So, I was thinking about the metaphor of aftertaste, does it refer to this way of writing, this having a dramatic something and the aftertaste of it?

N.D.: No, I think that what you are describing is more my own laziness to write longer. I think that book, if I could go back, I would have really extended a lot more; it kind of happened too quickly, I think.

A.V.: I liked the fact that it is concise. Have you ever written short stories?

N.D.: I have written one, which is published in a collection called *Mumbai Noir*. It is about a very wealthy housewife – not the usual noir cliché of dark alleys and prostitutes and all that⁹, a very different kind of story. I don't think it was ever translated into Italian.

A.V.: Did you do any research for *Aftertaste*?

N.D.: Yes, I went to a mithai shop in Delhi and got a lot of details... because they are mostly like these ones in Mumbai, but I know someone over there. In mithai business you have to really know someone, because otherwise they don't really talk about the details of this business. So I went in that and got a lot of information about the whole way in which the business is run and how they make that silver thing on the big mithai. And then I did a lot of research through my dad's family, like one or two uncles, to understand the business practices of those days, because they are very interesting, the whole money method, the account book.

A.V.: Why did you choose the mithai rather than any other business?

⁹ The story is called *The Egg*, in Altaf Tyrewala (ed.), *Mumbai Noir*, Akashic books, Mumbai.

N.D.: I was really chatting with my dad... I was like I want to write this book about the business family and he said «yes they should run a mithai shop.» My dad helped me a lot in this, with a lot of funny details about the families.

A.V.: Did anyone in your family who read the book complain about it?

N.D.: They don't read and no one is identifiable. That grandmother, though, is a lot like my two grandmothers. But they are both dead.

A.V.: Are you working at a new book at the moment?

N.D.: Yes, it is a more humanist book. It is very vague right now, but it is also about music, and told through four different stories, but it is so vague that I can't even talk about it.

A.V.: Any hunch for the title?

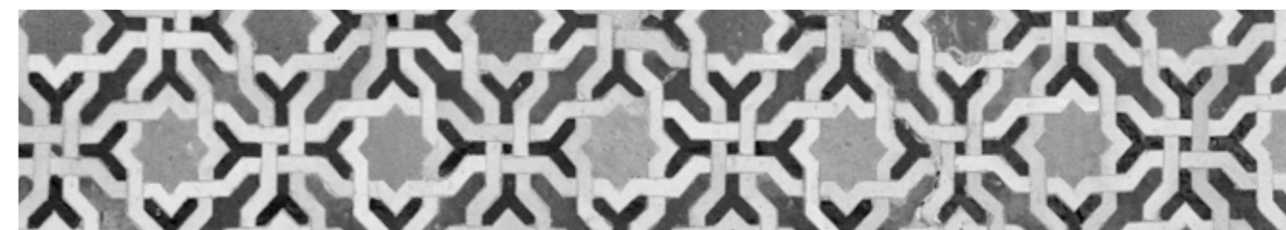
N.D.: Not at all.

A.A.: Will it be autobiographical?

N.D.: No, it's not about me this time, I am sure I will be there in some form, but the whole story will revolve around music. I am working at it, but there are so many things going on now. And, as I was saying, a lot of the stories that I do contribute to my writing.

As we took leave from her, after a ritual photograph, we could not refrain from asking Namita where to find good mithais. She looked puzzled for a spell, then she directed us to a chain of shops in the heart of the city. We left the tranquil world of fine arts and stepped into the other trafficked world of food shops heedless of the monsoon rain.

prospettive critiche



CRISTINA MINELLE
La littérature québécoise dans «Il Tolomeo»

Le parcours de la littérature québécoise dans la revue «Il Tolomeo» s'inscrit dans un itinéraire plus large, celui de la francophonie mondiale, domaine encore peu exploré au plan critique dans les années 1990, même si les pays francophones au lendemain des indépendances étaient déjà très présents dans l'horizon littéraire et culturel du monde. En Italie il manquait toutefois une vision critique de ces «jeunes littératures», nommées par commodité «postcoloniales» avec un anglicisme. Aussi l'équipe universitaire de Venise, anglophone et francophone, s'est-elle engagée sur cette voie en invitant ses collaborateurs à écrire des comptes-rendus de livres, romans, essais et revues.

Cette publication annuelle ne pouvait se suffire à elle-même, les professeurs de Venise faisant partie de projets de recherche auprès d'autres universités italiennes: aussi ont-ils commencé à travailler en étroite collaboration avec d'autres collègues, et avec leurs doctorants, ce, dans un but d'impliquer les jeunes chercheurs. Le réseau s'est vite élargi au doctorat en littératures francophones de l'université de Bologne, au CISQ (Centro Interuniversitario di

Studi Quebecchesi, réunissant les universités de Bologne, Venise, L'Aquila, Turin, Rome, Milan), au doctorat en Letterature omeoglotte de l'université de Bologne et à l'AISC (Associazione Italiana Studi Canadesi).

Au fur et à mesure que les numéros de la revue sortaient, le nombre de ceux qui contribuaient activement à la rédaction de recensions augmentait et la section francophone prenait de l'ampleur.

La fin des années 1990 et le début des années 2000 marquent sans aucun doute la période la plus féconde de la présence de la littérature québécoise au sein de la revue. Tous les genres – roman, poésie, théâtre, essai – et les œuvres d'écrivains parmi les plus connus du Québec sont recensés, des plus «classiques» tels qu'Anne Hébert et Marie-Claire Blais à ceux dont la renommée date justement des années 1990, comme Monique Proulx et Gaétan Soucy.

A côté des comptes-rendus d'œuvres, figurent en bonne place les perspectives critiques, car cette jeune littérature commence à s'affirmer: les recensions d'essais sont très nombreuses et permettent au lecteur de se rendre compte de l'intérêt porté à cette littérature par les critiques québécois (Jacques Allard, Daniel Chartier, Gilles Dupuis, pour ne citer que quelques noms) aussi bien que par les critiques

européens (Yannick Gasquy-Resch, Marie-Lyne Piccione, ...) et italiens en particulier (Anne de Vaucher, Giovanni Dotoli, Carla Fratta, Anna Paola Mossetto, ...), qui témoignent de cette attention privilégiée.

Parfois, ces perspectives critiques rencontrent des thématiques transversales qui associent la littérature québécoise à d'autres jeunes littératures: ceci donne lieu à des essais portant sur la littérature francophone en général, ou bien des ouvrages qui choisissent la perspective postcoloniale – qui se propose alors comme modalité particulière de lecture des œuvres. Ou, encore, pensons aux essais anglophones qui traitent de la littérature québécoise dans ses rapports avec le monde anglophone – québécois ou canadien – dans un dialogue interculturel et multilinguistique, ce qui ajoute une perspective de diversification tout à fait enrichissante (par exemple, Lewis Dufault (ed), *Women by women – The treatment of female characters by women writers of fiction in Québec since 1980*; Irène Oore, Orielle Mac Lennan (eds), *Marie-Claire Blais. An annotated bibliography*), dialogue qui a été immédiatement perçu même en Italie, en particulier avec la publication de quelques recueils de poèmes en français et en anglais (Liana Nissim, Caterina Ricciardi (a cura di), *Parole sull'acqua. Poesie dal Canada anglofono e francofono*; C. Gasparini e M. Zito (a cura di), *Evoluzioni. Poeti Anglofoni e francofoni del Canada*). Enfin n'oublions pas l'apport très important de Giovanni Dotoli, qui publie chez Schena tous les colloques de l'AISC depuis 1978, ce qui constitue les archives des études canadiennes en Italie, où l'on peut retrouver le foisonnement d'idées et la pluralité de voix qui animaient ces rencontres internationales.

Progressivement, et suivant l'évolution du marché éditorial québécois, «Il Tolomeo» fait place aux écrivains migrants: non seulement des essais qui réfléchissent sur le sens et l'intérêt de cette littérature (par exemple Louise Gauthier, *La mémoire sans frontières: Emile*

Ollivier, Naim Kattan et les écrivains migrants au Québec; les actes du colloque de Venise *D'autres rêves. Les écritures migrantes au Québec*; Daniel Chartier, *Dictionnaire des écrivains émigrés au Québec*), mais aussi des livres écrits par des écrivains migrants eux-mêmes (per exemple Naïm Kattan, Mauricio Segura, Régine Robin) ou leur traduction en italien (rappelons Abla Farhoud, dont la traduction du roman *Le bonheur a la queue glissante* a été faite par Elettra Bordino, jeune collaboratrice de la revue, avec un appareil critique d'Anne de Vaucher). Signalons aussi, dans le numéro XIII, consacré à Haïti, une recension du volume édité par Samuel Pierre, *Ces Québécois venus d'Haïti. Contribution de la communauté haïtienne à l'édification du Québec moderne*, qui décrit avec plusieurs témoignages, biographies et explications l'apport essentiel des Haïtiens dans la société québécoise contemporaine.

Au fil des ans, s'affirme une attention grandissante pour l'expression des amérindiens, notamment grâce aux recensions de deux ouvrages de Maurizio Gatti (*Essere oggi un autore nativo in Québec; Littérature amérindienne du Québec. Ecrits de langue française*) et à celle d'Anna Paola Mossetto (*Paroles et images amérindiennes du Québec*).

Deux autres éléments distinctifs de la revue sont les inédits et les entretiens. En ce qui concerne les inédits d'écrivains québécois, «Il Tolomeo» a eu la chance de pouvoir publier des textes de Marie-Claire Blais, Anthony Phelps, Monique Proulx, Noël Audet, Lise Gauvin, Régine Robin et Ernest Pépin. Quant aux entretiens, signalons l'interview de Anne de Vaucher à Antonine Maillet, romancière et dramaturge du Nouveau-Brunswick, le premier écrivain hors de France à remporter, en 1979, le prix Goncourt avec *Pélagie-la-Charrette*.

Dans les pages du «Tolomeo», on n'a jamais manqué de commémorer la disparition de quelques écrivains majeurs, comme Gaston Miron et Anne Hébert, véritables piliers de la littérature québécoise, en citant des passages

de leurs textes fondateurs et en exprimant un souvenir ému et reconnaissant de la part des universitaires italiens, célébrant encore une fois la grandeur et la valeur de leur œuvre non seulement pour le Québec mais pour la littérature mondiale, et, comme le dirait Pascale Casanova, pour la république mondiale des lettres.

On a parlé, plus haut, d'un véritable réseau de recherche italien qui converge autour de la littérature québécoise. «Il Tolomeo» témoigne alors aussi de l'effort de divulgation de cette littérature qui a été fait grâce à la traduction de quelques œuvres – surtout de la part de collaborateurs de la revue – en s'appuyant sur la maison d'édition Sinnos de Rome; ces traductions y ont alors été recensées (André Carpentier, *Rue Saint-Denis*; Marie-Claire Blais, *L'esiliato*). A propos de traductions, et de ce réseau, on ne peut pas oublier que, depuis 2003, le CISQ publie un répertoire on line des traductions italiennes d'œuvres québécoises, mis à jour tous les ans par Anne de Vaucher et Cristina Minelle, ce qui permet ainsi d'avoir une idée de l'intérêt que le monde de l'édition porte à cette littérature. Dans ce répertoire – cas plutôt rare – sont énumérées aussi les représentations théâtrales de pièces québécoises mises en scène en Italie; cela a été possible grâce à l'aide de la Délégation du Québec à Rome, notamment de Mme Daniela Renosto qui avait collaboré avec «Il Tolomeo» déjà en 1996 pour signaler ce genre d'initiatives; malheureusement la revue n'a plus continué à les recenser, mais le répertoire on line a su lui prendre la relève.

En guise de conclusion, et de relance: en regardant de près le nombre de contributions pour chaque numéro de la revue, on s'aperçoit que la présence des études québécoises s'est faite de plus en plus faible au cours des dernières années. Cela est dû sans doute même au fait que, si d'abord la francophonie du «Tolomeo» coïncidait surtout avec la littérature québécoise, elle s'est au fil des ans diversifiée

et élargie à d'autres domaines, en créant de ce fait un équilibre nouveau. Cela dit, on ne peut que souhaiter une présence constante de la littérature du Québec dans le panorama offert par notre revue, pour continuer à rendre compte de l'infatigable bouillonnement littéraire et culturel de cette province du Canada.

CRISTINA SCHIAVONE

Le Cameroun est-il encore francophone? Ça dépend...¹

Dans ces dernières vingt années, plusieurs spécialistes de linguistique africaine d'origine camerounaise se sont penchés sur la question linguistique au Cameroun, Pays caractérisé plus que d'autres par le plurilectalisme, à savoir par la présence d'une mosaïque de langues, parlers et variétés d'utilisation. Dans cette «Afrique en miniature», cohabitent deux langues officielles, le français et l'anglais, et au moins trois cents langues locales. À ce répertoire s'ajoutent le camfranglais, un parler qui est le résultat du croisement du français (variété parlée au niveau local), l'anglais, le pidgin-english et les nombreuses langues camerounaises, au choix selon la région ou la ville. Parmi les chercheurs, rappelons entre autres les travaux d'E. Biloa (2003; 2006), G. Mendo Zé (1990), P. Zang Zang (1991; 1998; 1999), J.-M. Essono (1997; 2001), J. Tabi Manga (1994; 2000), V. Feussi (2004-2012), J. B. Tsofack (2012), É. Ngo Ngok Graux et V. Éloundou Éloundou. De ces deux derniers chercheurs, la revue italienne «Ponts» publie en 2011 un article qui illustre le camfranglais du point de vue diachronique et descriptif: *Les parlers urbains et la transmission des situations linguistiques: le cas du camfranglais au Cameroun* («Ponts / Ponti», 2011, p. 109-122). Cette étude

¹ Dans le titre, je fais expressément allusion à l'ouvrage de Valentin FEUSSI *Parles-tu français? Ça dépend...*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008.

mérite d'être illustrée dans les détails, car elle prend en compte toutes les recherches menées à partir de Manessy (1994) «jusqu'à des études plus récentes comme celles de Simo Nguem-Kam-Souop (2009) sur une variété spécifique de français parlé qui entre en contact avec le camfranglais. Le but ultime de cet essai et de répondre à une question intéressante: «Qu'est-ce qui motive le genre en camfranglais lorsque les déterminants sont français et que les substantifs sont des emprunts à d'autres langues?» (p. 113), c'est-à-dire de chercher à comprendre, à travers le genre, «la manière dont les situations linguistiques peuvent se transmettre» (p. 113).

Les deux auteurs abordent premièrement le sujet des contacts de langues au Cameroun avec une approche d'écologie linguistique inspirée des travaux de sociolinguistique de L.-J. Calvet (1999). Ils donnent un aperçu des étapes historiques qui ont caractérisé ces contacts, à partir de l'époque précoloniale, qu'on fait remonter à 1472, date de l'arrivée des explorateurs portugais, mais dont «il existe très peu de traces» (p. 110) et ensuite coloniale, avec l'arrivée en 1884 de l'explorateur allemand Gustav Nachtigal et vers 1919 des Français et des Anglais.

À propos du contact entre l'allemand et les langues locales, les auteurs affirment qu' «il subsiste sans doute des emprunts des langues locales à l'allemand; toutefois, l'on ne notera pas la formation ou l'émergence d'un parler spécifique [...]» (p. 110) Par contre, la présence de l'anglais, dont le contact avec les langues locales remonte déjà au XVIII^e siècle, donne naissance au pidgin-english, considéré la première langue de contact au Cameroun. Les auteurs citent à ce propos C. de Féral et P. Renaud, qui affirment que le pidgin est la langue de communication entre francophones et anglophones et qu'il entre en concurrence avec l'anglais lui-même.

En revanche, la politique linguistique française, assimilationniste comme il est notoire, se base

sur l'imposition du français à l'école en tant que l'unique langue. Parallèlement, le français in vivo subit déjà des transformations dans le contact avec les langues locales (Cfr. Biloa, 2003, p. 40).

La période postcoloniale est caractérisée par un processus de véritable appropriation vernaculaire du français de la part de la population urbaine, entamée pendant l'époque coloniale.

Les auteurs poursuivent leur illustration en plaçant le camfranglais dans le contexte de la variation du français, notamment «de la variation en contexte plurilingue» (p. 112) car «le camfranglais se pose comme le produit d'une dynamique urbaine de coexistence intensive des langues» (p. 112), et dans le contexte de l'écologie linguistique (Calvet et aussi S.-S. Mufwene, 2005).

La deuxième partie de l'essai présente l'analyse du genre basée sur un corpus tiré d'une base de données recueillies entre 2003 et 2006, pendant une enquête menée dans les villes de Douala et Yaoundé. Les données ont été réunies à travers les techniques des questionnaires, des interviews et des conversations libres au sujet de la vie quotidienne et de l'usage du camfranglais. Les auteurs ont choisi de rapporter une conversation libre. À travers l'examen des substantifs empruntés à d'autres langues, divisés en deux catégories: substantifs sexués et asexués, ils ont remarqué qu'en général, pour ce qui concerne la classe des emprunts sexués, ils ont la tendance à conserver le genre qu'ils auraient en français. Tandis que, pour les emprunts asexués, où la concentration de mots venus d'autres langues que le français est bien plus élevée, les déterminants sont français mais pour le même locuteur peuvent être tantôt masculins tantôt féminins, et ce choix est fait au delà du genre du mot dans la langue d'origine. En tout cas, les termes analysés issus des réalités asexués sont en majorité de genre masculin: et cela parce que dans les langues locales, les mots de cette catégorie sont tous au

masculin. Les auteurs avancent l'hypothèse que l'utilisation du masculin serait une solution de neutralisation interlinguistique qui «semble convenir au contexte multilingue» (p. 121). Parmi les conclusions les plus intéressantes, les auteurs affirment que «le camfranglais finalement n'amplifie pas les oppositions ou les différences entre les langues en jeu, mais tend à développer les convergences autour d'une matrice principale française.» (p. 121) Aussi, le camfranglais semble répondre à un besoin d'affirmation identitaire dans un contexte plurilingue dans lequel le français joue toujours le rôle de langue du colonisateur. Par conséquent, «le camfranglais apparaît comme un parler dans lequel les locuteurs essaient de faire exister les langues (à travers la forme) et leur langue (à travers le fond discursif)» et donc, de par sa nature et sa forme hybride, il permet finalement de protéger et donc de «pérenniser» (p. 121) l'identité pluriculturelle des locuteurs camerounais urbains.

SARA DEL ROSSI

**Centres-villes, villes et bidonvilles,
«Ponti/Ponts. Langues, littératures et
civilisations des Pays Francophones»,
11, 2011**

.....

Dans son onzième numéro, la revue «Ponts» nous offre un tour des périphéries du monde à travers ses banlieues les plus célèbres, vues par des écrivains qui ont décidé de les racheter de leur bitume et de les élire au rang de nouveau paysage urbain. À partir de Paris, avec ses célèbres banlieues, jusqu'aux faubourgs d'Outre-mer (Martinique et Haïti) et d'Afrique (Cameroun), les spécialistes nous mènent à la découverte de ces nouvelles «plumes de bitume» et de leurs muses de boue et de ciment.

Comme pour l'Histoire, tout débute en et par la mère-patrie, qui dicte toujours la mode, même si pour l'urbanisme «moche» des banlieues.

Ilaria Vitali, dans *Pari(s) extra muros. Banlieues et imaginaire urbains dans quelques romans de l'extrême contemporain*, nous introduit au gris univers de la banlieue parisienne. L'auteur, à la manière d'un guide touristique, programme son étude en étapes, chacune consacrée à un lieu-clé de la vie d'un banlieusard: tours, dalles, centre commercial, prison, r.e.r., caves. À chaque étape nous faisons connaissance avec un habitant de ces lieux apparemment sans identité, qui nous permet de découvrir ce qui se passe, réellement, autour de Paris. Il y a Hassan, protagoniste de la nouvelle *Détours* de Mabrouck Rachedi, hanté par les tours au point qu'il perdra son travail; ou Mounir, protagoniste de *Mon nerf* de Rachid Djaidani, qui passe chaque jour de son été dans le r.e.r., direction Paris, pour aller y voir son «psy». Lieux de malaise mais, en même temps, de sociabilité, les résidents défilent sur les «dalles» et à chaque pas assurent et enrachent leurs existences. Ils ne seront jamais des Parisiens, ils ne veulent pas, tout comme leurs écrivains qui, comme l'affirme Ilaria Vitali: «armés de leurs «plumes de bitume», semblent vouloir lancer un nouveau Pari(s): une autre image de la ville, ainsi qu'un défi littéraire, social et culturel.» (p. 39).

Cet enracinement au quartier on le retrouve aussi pour les habitants de *Texaco* de Patrick Chamoiseau, analysés par Dominique Chancé dans *Patrick Chamoiseau. De la «mangrove urbaine» de Texaco à la mangrove immonde de Biblique des derniers gestes*. Le quartier de Texaco est considéré le symbole de la civilisation créole, transposition du morne historique et lieu de liberté pour ses habitants. Même si on le considère un espace insalubre et malsain, il est surtout un organisme vivant et hybride. C'est une «mangrove urbaine» en opposition à la Ville, considérée comme le viol de la nature avec son ciment et son béton blanc, qui «pétrifie de silences les campagnes comme autrefois les Empires étouffaient l'alentour» (p. 51). Pourtant, après dix années, la mangrove perd

toutes ses acceptions positives et se transforme en l'espace infernal de *Biblique des derniers gestes*. Le malaise et la sensation de vide couvent dans ses habitants, des êtres désocialisés et anesthésiés par la drogue. La «part maudite» est remontée à la surface, la mangrove a dévoilé son côté obscur et le lecteur prend conscience de sa propre dualité: «Devons-nous fouiller dans la mangrove pour trouver cela que nous sommes capables d'oublier, comme ceci qui remonte malgré nous à souvenir et qui se plante en nous?» (p. 57).

Si Chamoiseau se consacre à la description de l'espace rhizomatique martiniquais, Raphaël Confiant se consacre à une vraie «Comédie Créole», comme le montre Francesca Paraboschi dans *Magie et misère; violence et volupté. Regards sur Fort-de-France dans quelques romans de Raphaël Confiant*. Les mœurs et les caractéristiques des gens des quartiers populaires de Fort-de-France s'approprient les pages des romans de Confiant. Contrairement au modèle balzacien, ici il n'y a pas de place pour le pathétique, ces quartiers ont une identité trop forte pour se laisser encadrer dans la morale. C'est pour cela que les points de vue se croisent, comme dans le commérage, activité principale des protagonistes. L'auteur décrit l'histoire de son pays à travers les voix et les yeux de son peuple, un réalisme magique imprégné de l'imaginaire populaire, où la magie et la superstition s'entremêlent aux descriptions des lieux, qui deviennent des endroits mystérieux et quelquefois maléfiques. Par contraste se dresse la Ville, le monstre qui tout immobilise, qui engloutit avec ses toiles tous ceux qui cherchent à y pénétrer pour fuir les ruelles étouffantes des banlieues. C'est l'instinct de survivance qui pousse Confiant à recourir à la magie et au rire grotesque pour continuer à résister.

Le thème de la ville monstrueuse se retrouve aussi dans la littérature urbaine haïtienne, présentée par Joëlle Vitiello dans *Port-au-Prince: images littéraires des quartiers-bidonvilles*

et de leurs habitants. Contrairement aux autres banlieues visitées, le cas haïtien propose une opposition haut/bas: la partie haute est blanche, mulâtre et riche, alors que la basse est noire et pauvre. Si cette disparité exaspère les habitants, elle fascine, à l'instar du *sublime* anglais, ceux qui ne l'habitent pas. Par exemple, Brice, protagoniste de la nouvelle *La ville* de Yanick Lahens, se laisse engloutir par la foule en mouvement, par laquelle il est fasciné et terrorisé en même temps; ou comme Dominique, dans le roman *Les fous de Saint-Antoine* de Lyonel Trouillot, une jeune fille rangée qui ne peut pas se retenir de visiter l'«exotique» faubourg de Saint-Antoine. Pourtant, il y a aussi ceux qui habitent ces micro-univers, comme Coralie qui, dans le roman *Le Passage* de Paulette Poujol-Oriol, parcourt son histoire en parlant de tous les quartiers qu'elle a habités. Si les portraits des bidonvilles haïtiennes sont, d'habitude, caractérisés par la violence et la misère, le dernier mot est confié à Pierre Clitandre, qui, comme un Griot, donne une allure de poésie, parfois surréaliste, à ces lieux de malaise, qui soudainement se recouvrent d'une «inouïable et fantastique pluie de roses» (p.106).

Moins poétique, mais plutôt mythique est la ville africaine de Mongo Beti, qui oscille entre une nouvelle réalité occidentale importée et son passé de village africain. Gian Luigi Di Bernardini, dans son étude *Les villes du Cameroun dans l'œuvre de Mongo Beti, entre fiction et réalité*, analyse l'évolution de la ville dans les trois phases principales de l'écriture de l'auteur camerounais. La ville «cruelle» de Mongo Beti possède deux âmes, l'une blanche et léthargique, l'autre indigène et mythique. Cette scission est reproduite aussi par la narration, qui est caractérisée par un dédoublement des points de vue entremêlés: le héros et le narrateur. Dans la deuxième phase, représentée par le roman *Perpétue*, le faubourg de Zombotown, à mi-chemin entre une périphérie occidentale et un village africain,

symbolise encore l'ambiguïté de la narration. La dernière étape est Niagara, le quartier noir, lieu de révolte et fécondité où se situe le polar *La revanche de Guillaume Ismaël Dzawatama*. Le choix du genre populaire et d'un français «tropicalisé» souligne la volonté d'adresser ce roman de liberté et révolte surtout au public africain, le réel habitant de ce «monde à l'envers».

La banlieue est, donc, l'horizon de la nouvelle littérature francophone, les villes multicolores ont apparemment été substituées par le béton et le ciment, des scènes où la Comédie Créole prend forme. Les écrivains, de leur part, ont déjà pris leurs plumes chargées de bitume, pour affirmer leur appartenance à ces nouveaux univers littéraires, qu'ils ne laisseront jamais se confondre avec la ville, qu'ils ne laisseront jamais être définis des non-lieux.

ANNA MICHIELETTA

Pouvoirs de la Parole, «Ponti/Ponts. Langues, littératures et civilisations des Pays Francophones», 12, 2012

Le sujet du numéro 12 de la revue «Ponts» est *Pouvoirs de la Parole*. La pensée se dirige immédiatement au verbe sacré de la tradition africaine, au langage des ancêtres et de la nature, mais les articles traitent surtout de la difficulté d'une narration capable de relater l'histoire récente du génocide rwandais, des dictatures et des guerres civiles. Les auteurs nous accompagnent dans un parcours qui voit une confrontation de plusieurs décennies entre Senghor et Soyinka à partir du débat sur la Négritude. Le fil rouge qui nous conduit d'une réélaboration positive du passé à l'avenir des personnages et du continent tout entier traverse ensuite l'océan: la redécouverte des racines noires est une étape obligée du chemin vers la «diversalité» qui caractérise la Martinique de Raphaël Confiant.

Virginie Brinker, dans son article «*Un destin dont*

l'absurde cloue d'aphasie?» Le génocide des Tutsi au Rwanda, entre parole et silence, s'interroge d'abord sur les acceptions du mot «indicible» (p. 12) et les figures du «témoin rescapé» et du «tiers, entendu comme extérieur», le «témoin du dehors» (p. 14).

La parole est source de salut si on la transmet, ce qui donne légitimité au tiers. Brinker souligne l'appartenance des différents acteurs de ce drame à la «même humanité [...]». L'art serait donc promesse de redonner ces mots au monde» (p. 15), respectant ainsi le devoir de mémoire dû aux victimes. En outre, le rôle de «*superstes*» (survivant) et celui de «*testis*» (témoin) étant différents, l'altérité et l'extériorité sont des conditions nécessaires pour la construction de la mémoire. Le manque de médiation entre les hommes, les rapports basés uniquement sur le pouvoir, comme la «torture» du camp de concentration selon Rousset, ou la «terreur totale» selon Arendt (p. 16), dictent le besoin du «témoignaire» (Waintrater, p. 17) pour revenir aux rapports humains, pour transformer l'histoire personnelle en Histoire, afin que «en embrassant la mort par et pour l'amour de la parole [...] le tiers porte-parole sauve l'humanité du mort et la sienne propre, légitimant pleinement et par là-même son entreprise» (p. 18). Brinker en conclut que le terme «indicible» ne coïncide donc pas avec l'expression «interdit de la parole» (p. 18).

Elle cite le film *Lignes de Front* (2010), réalisé par Jean-Christophe Klotz, qui prône le recours à la fiction, «le terme *parole* étant étymologiquement issu de *parabola*, la «comparaison»» (p. 19). Tandis que la pellicule sur l'holocauste *Nuit et brouillard* de Resnais est «anhistorique» (p. 21) et caractérisée par l'«indétermination des victimes» (p. 21) qui ne sont jamais désignées comme «juives», dans son film *Shoah* Lanzmann traite des camps d'extermination et se confronte avec l'absence de traces et le témoignage des nazis, filmés à leur insu. La question de la fascination du macabre est un inconvénient à accepter face à

l'oubli, parce que le silence, «acte impie» (p. 24), serait le pire des crimes. Le but ultime de la fiction, dans ce cas, n'est pas la jouissance esthétique de l'œuvre d'art. Il s'agit plutôt d'une réponse au besoin très profond «de pacification et de mise à distance du conflit» (p. 24).

Brinker analyse ensuite le rôle positif du fantôme et la poétisation de la voix des spectres des morts comme symbole capable de suggérer et d'introduire «l'altérité dans le même» (p. 26), par rapport au monstre qui diffère radicalement. La parole, à travers la fiction racontée par un tiers témoin et médiateur ou par l'«ego alter» (p. 27) du fantôme, rend possible la narration de l'indicible et la renaissance dans un espace très proche du silence, grâce au langage de la suggestion poétique.

Dans le deuxième article, Maria Benedetta Colini présente *Le cri, le silence, la parole: la trilogie africaine de Léonora Miano*, camerounaise. Elle souligne le rôle central de la parole dans ces ouvrages: l'«emploi de l'italique pour le discours direct [...] attire l'attention des lecteurs sur les dialogues; de même, les intonations des locuteurs, le ton de la voix, l'effet que le son des mots a sur les auditeurs font l'objet de descriptions détaillées» (p. 30). Le pivot de chaque volume est une donnée auditive: le cri de la victime sacrificielle dans *L'intérieur de la nuit*, le mutisme de la protagoniste dans *Contours du jour qui vient*, les paroles des ancêtres privés de sépulture dans *Les aubes écarlates*.

Cette attention aux éléments sonores se retrouve dans la relation entre le destin des personnages et leur prénom, lié à leur appartenance à la communauté. À ce propos, Miano «s'efforce de démanteler le cliché d'une opposition entre un individualisme d'origine occidentale et un sentiment communautaire plus typiquement africain» (p. 36), pour aboutir à un nouvel équilibre entre le besoin du groupe et la liberté individuelle. L'importance de la parole est reconnue même par ses détracteurs, des politiciens qui manipulent la vérité historique et

tordent les traditions pour atteindre leurs buts égoïstes, quelquefois à l'aide de la dialectique exacerbée des théories de Cheikh Anta Diop, mélangée à l'ésotérisme. Cela conduit Miano à une réflexion sur les possibles conséquences d'une basse scolarisation des villageois et sur la transmission orale des coutumes religieuses traditionnelles, auxquelles font face les églises du réveil.

Le parcours tracé met donc en évidence une situation caractérisée par différentes entorses: à la parole divine, à l'histoire et à la parole des ancêtres et de la nature, imbriquée avec celle de la tradition. Les protagonistes des romans analysés répondent avec une contre-perversion positive à travers une réélaboration de la tradition, «retrouvée et revisitée» (p. 44). Il faut revenir sur son propre passé pour nommer enfin la douleur, briser le mur du silence qui mène à la folie, pour pouvoir renouer des relations véritablement humaines. Le silence, revalorisé, permet de «plonger au fond de soi-même et d'y puiser la volonté de vivre» (p. 47) pour énoncer une parole de vérité et raconter sa propre histoire. Miano, à travers les figurines de pierre construites par le personnage de Musango, nous présente aussi une sorte d'«expression non verbale, des substituts de la parole» (p. 49), capables de montrer la souffrance du passé qui continue à hanter le présent.

Dans les trois romans, la parole, préparée d'abord par le silence et le recueillement, affirme la prise de conscience de soi, qui à son tour enchaîne l'acceptation du passé, première étape vers un avenir libre tant pour l'individu que pour la communauté dont il fait partie.

L'article de Martin Megevand, *Soyinka, Senghor: retour sur un différend*, s'ouvre sur la notion de «lecture postcoloniale», entendue comme «une lecture attentive aux manières dont se négocient, dans un texte littéraire [...] décentralisé par rapport aux écritures européennes, les tensions entre diverses forces qui en organisent le sens» (p. 51). Ces tensions peuvent être endogènes et concerner l'écriture

et la langue, ou exogènes, à savoir politiques ou culturelles.

L'auteur reprend la célèbre formule prononcée par Soyinka en 1962 à l'égard de Senghor et du mouvement de la Négritude: «*Le tigre ne proclame pas sa tigritude, il bondit sur sa proie et la dévore*» (p. 53). Par cette formule qui a contribué à séparer le monde postcolonial francophone et anglophone, l'écrivain nigérian conteste l'efficacité de la Négritude, mais aussi de la littérature tout-court. Ce rapport conflictuel entre les deux auteurs se poursuit jusqu'à la publication, en 1999, de l'essai-bilan de Soyinka *The Burden of memory, the Muse of forgiveness*, passé presque inaperçu en France comme auprès de la critique littéraire anglophone. Ce texte relève de la critique d'écrivain, puisqu'il reprend le processus autocritique qui a conduit l'auteur à changer son jugement suite à un «mûrissement intérieur» (p. 55) et aux modifications de la situation historique. Il est question d'une éthique de l'engagement politique où entrent en jeu les pouvoirs de la parole et du geste de l'écrivain: Senghor est élu président du Sénégal indépendant en 1960, Soyinka reçoit le Prix Nobel pour la littérature en 1986.

Les trois étapes de la critique de Soyinka concernent le contenu, l'énonciation et la performativité de la parole de l'écrivain sénégalais. Au niveau du contenu, en 1962 Soyinka reproche à Senghor d'être un écrivain assimilé. Sur le plan énonciatif, il l'accuse en 1982 d'une instabilité causée par la déchirure entre son rôle politique et son rôle de poète: Soyinka le voit comme un prêtre manqué, un prédicateur, même s'il le reconnaît comme le griot de la nature africaine. Seulement en 1997, il renverse ses reproches précédents et s'aperçoit que le «rôle de prêtre qu'il investit [...] lui permet d'occuper invariablement une posture de domination» (p. 64): Senghor octroie son pardon au colonisateur, s'avérant paradoxalement fort dans son humilité du haut d'une dimension inhumaine.

L'«hybridité particulière» (p. 66) du texte de

Soyinka, instable sur le plan énonciatif car il exprime sa résistance dans le tissage incessant entre le général et le particulier, tout comme le fait Derrida, et évitant les oppositions «dans lesquelles les périodes coloniale et anticoloniale pensaient le monde et le sujet» (p. 68), le rend profondément postcolonial et «souverainement libre» (p. 68). La force de l'engagement du littéraire dans le champ politique réside en effet, selon Soyinka, dans la «puissance d'appel» (p. 67), qu'il repère dans la «capacité infinie de réconciliation» (p. 67) et «la valeur subversive du discours mystique» (p. 67) de Senghor. Soyinka accepte donc finalement l'héritage senghorien «contre lequel (mais aussi grâce auquel) sa génération s'est construite» (p. 68). Dans le dernier article, *Couleurs des mots, pouvoirs de la parole, emprises des langues chez Raphaël Confiant*, Francesca Paraboschi décrit la situation de diglossie en Martinique et les étapes fondamentales de la constitution du créole «sur les ruines des langues parlées par les premières générations d'arrivants» (p. 71). Ce nouvel idiome est méprisé non seulement de la communauté blanche et/ou européenne, mais même de la part de ses locuteurs, au point que les parents interdisent à leurs enfants de l'utiliser, ce qui crée un profond sentiment de rejet. L'auteur se propose de dénoncer «l'emprise du français sur les Noirs et [l]es répercussions culturelles, identitaires et sociales que l'héritage colonial a déterminées en Martinique» (p.73) et de montrer les enjeux positifs de la redécouverte du créole par Confiant.

Langage artificiel opposé au réel, d'une expressivité puissante, enraciné dans le terroir martiniquais et dans son histoire, le langage de Confiant s'avère avant tout littéraire: «une représentation personnelle de la langue» (p.79). Cela témoigne donc de sa «surscience linguistique»: la langue est «un vaste laboratoire de possibles, [...] une Babel apprivoisée» (p. 79). Confiant «joue» avec les idiomes et les plie à ses exigences. Contre «la langue du maître» (p.74), il écrit en créole et rend littéraire cette

langue essentiellement orale. Il utilise pourtant aussi le français, malgré le différent imaginaire culturel qu'il véhicule, lorsqu'il ne souhaite pas construire de toutes pièces son outil d'écriture. Il introduit dans ses ouvrages des néologismes créés à partir du français populaire du XVI^e et du XVII^e siècles, parlé par les premiers colons, un français oralisé, plié aux tournures créoles, manipulé pour «bouter l'oralité créole et la littéralité française» (p.77). Dans le roman qu'il traduit lui-même du créole, *Mamzelle Libellule*, il insère la définition des mots créoles dans le corps du texte.

Les personnages romanesques de *Confiant* ressentent pour le français une admiration qui atteint presque l'adoration. Cependant, particulièrement chez les jeunes, «l'auto-ironie et l'hilarité émergent avec vigueur» (p. 86) contre l'humiliation culturelle et linguistique qui mesure la valeur d'une personne proportionnellement à son niveau d'assimilation. Dans les romans de *Confiant*, le créole est la langue effervescente et luxuriante des émotions et des sonorités ancestrales, qui permet au Noir d'entrer en contact avec sa propre identité et redécouvrir son histoire. C'est le créole qui lui permet de dépasser son vécu, «en conquérant un statut humain plus complet et plus complexe» (p. 91). Transgresser la grammaire et la rationalité du français correspond à une attitude de contestation et de révolte populaire.

Le destin tragique du personnage de *Dictionneur* décrit pourtant l'impasse du Martiniquais face au choix linguistique et l'impossibilité de préférer une langue ou l'autre. La crise de la parole nocturne et sacrée du conteur traditionnel, issu du griot africain, qui n'a jamais renouvelé son répertoire, a perdu son sens profond et montre la crise du monde campagnard face à la ville à partir de 1940. Le pouvoir de la parole traditionnelle est désormais aliéné du contexte africain d'où il est issu et appartient au passé, tandis que

la parole française est porteuse de l'aliénation cachée dans le processus d'acculturation par l'idéologie colonialiste.

L'héroïne des romans de *Confiant*, Adeline, symbole de la Martinique, n'arrive pas à engendrer l'enfant pourtant souhaité. De l'idolâtrie du français, en passant par la revalorisation des racines africaines à travers la Négritude, *Confiant* souhaite que l'on trouve «un équilibre entre les différentes cultures qui peuplent la Martinique, plutôt que de s'épuiser en vaines tentatives» (p. 107) «de singer le Noir après avoir singé le Blanc» (p. 106). Dans ce contexte naît la Créolité, mouvement fondé par *Confiant*, Chamoiseau et Bernabé, qui promeut la «Diversalité» (p. 108): le créole acquiert sa dignité d'existence en tant que langue capable de convoier un imaginaire autre que celui propre au français ou aux langues africaines et restitue ce «patchwork identitaire» (p. 109). La puissance du langage de *Confiant* fait de lui le conteur de la modernité créole «diverselle»: écriture oralisée, néologismes, expérimentation, français classique et créole vernaculaire, récupération du passé pour se projeter dans un avenir tout à construire.

Après un long voyage dans le temps, dans l'espace et surtout dans les profondeurs de l'âme à la recherche de leur propre identité à travers celle de leurs personnages, les auteurs aboutissent tous à un éloge des pouvoirs de la parole d'une ampleur et d'une épaisseur accrues. Soyinka accorde sa reconnaissance à la poétesse sénégalaise, Brinker voit la nécessité d'une transmission à travers la mémoire d'une parole à mesure de traduire le silence des victimes d'un génocide et Miano le cri de celles qui ont subi une violence. La Martinique de *Confiant* nous apparaît comme le creuset de cette parole multiple, appelée à réinventer les traditions et les individus dans «un mélange linguistique et identitaire qui dit le croisement, l'enchevêtrement, le composite» (p. 8).

DAVID NEWBOLD

Whose English? Attitudes towards the world's *lingua franca* in recent non-native writing in English

Fifty years have passed since Chinua Achebe justified his choice to write in English in the much quoted conclusion to his reflection on «The African Writer and the English Language»: «I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.» In those fifty years «new English», or rather the codification of «new Englishes», has developed into a major branch of English linguistics, with the plural form «Englishes» making its appearance in the early 1980s (Platt et al 1984). Initially the focus was on postcolonial varieties, their distinguishing lexical and grammatical features, emergent commonalities across the varieties, and the gradual move from «exonormative» to «endonormative» stabilization, often reflecting the newly found political independence of former colonies. This process is well documented in Schneider (2006). More recently, and particularly over the last decade, the English (or Englishes) of the rest of the world, used by non native speakers from those countries which do not have a special relationship with the language, has become the focus of applied linguists investigating the phenomenon of English as a *lingua franca*. Much of their attention has moved away from formal features to communicative strategies, and to attitudes towards the language (such as concepts of «correctness»), and consequent implications for language teaching and language planning.

At the same time, the last half century has witnessed an unprecedented growth in non native writing in English. Achebe emancipated a whole generation of writers, especially in Africa and Asia, by underlining both the new func-

tion of the language as a vehicle of non English experience and the value of the hybridity which he refers to as the «communion» between the language and (non English) cultures. From the 1980s, non native or bilingual writers with a postcolonial profile have regularly won the Man Booker Prize (Salman Rushdie 1981, Ben Okri 1991, Arundhati Roy 1997, Kiran Desai 2006, Aravind Adiga 2008) while the Nobel Prize for literature was achieved by Achebe's fellow Nigerian Wole Soyinka in 1986. In the last decade or so, on the crest of the wave of global English, they have been joined by writers from the «expanding circle» – those countries, which in Braj Kachru's vision of world Englishes, have no historical association with the language, such as China, Turkey, and Egypt.

Yet in spite of this output, which has consolidated the role of English not as a reduced spoken code in international settings, but as an unprecedented vehicle for global literary expression, there have been comparatively few studies (whether by linguists or literary critics) which deal primarily with linguistic aspects of non-native creative writing in English. In this paper I shall look briefly at some of the features which have been noticed, both in terms of formal features, and in strategies writers adopt to represent non English cultures through the medium of English. The three critical works I shall refer to chart a shift of interest, over the past three decades, from the identification of formal features, to approaches to intercultural communication, to the celebration of linguistic creativity in non-native writing – a progression which, I shall suggest, indicates a growing confidence in the opportunities offered by English as a language of global communication; a confidence which is fuelled by an evident change in attitudes towards English, not just in the explicit justification of choices made by writers (as in the Achebe quotation above), but also in the words used and comments made by the characters in their novels, as they get to grips with the difficulties, frustrations, and sat-

isfactions, of using the global language. In the second part of the paper, I shall cite examples from novels which have appeared over the last decade, and which I believe indicate that non-native writers are offering an important contribution to our understanding of how attitudes of non-native users of English are changing in a (post?) postcolonial world.

Of particular interest in user attitudes is the notion of *ownership* of the language, and the extent to which users of a language feel that it belongs to them (and can thus be shaped by them) or whether, in contrast, that it belongs to a community of native speakers (and as a consequence they have to defer to native speaker norms). The debate on ownership in applied linguistic circles was launched in the 1990s, most notably by Widdowson (1994). English as a world language belongs to everyone who uses it, Widdowson argues, and native speakers are no longer the natural repository for its future development. Nonetheless, the «concentric circles» representation of English in the world proposed by Kachru (1985), and still today the default model, puts the native speaking countries firmly at the centre. Beyond the «inner» circle lies the «outer» circle, made up of those countries with a «special relationship» with the language (i.e. a colonial past); and beyond that, an «expanding» circle of countries newly acquiring English speakers, often through national educational programmes; in essence, the rest of the world. This model does not necessarily imply a gravitational pull towards the centre – a metaphor which parallels the notion of an empire writing «back»; an equally appropriate metaphor (which allows us to keep the homage to *Star Trek*) could be that of an expanding universe, in which writers working on the edge are helped by centrifugal force to boldly go where the English language has not gone before.

One of the early studies of linguistic aspects of the new literatures (Sridhar, 1982), starts from the premise that «a language belongs to

whoever uses it, and is not the sole property of its native speakers» (p. 293) anticipating Widdowson by a decade. Sridhar shows how writers from Africa and especially India (Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan) fashion the language both at «lower» syntactical levels of nativisation, such as dislocation, lack of inversions, and verb omission, as they are represented in direct speech, and on a text level by a conscious recreation of vernacular rhythms in the narrative flow, such as the «endless co-ordination» used by Rao to achieve the «breathless» quality of Kannada in *Kanthapuru* (1943). All this, Sridhar claims, is fertile ground for the linguist who is interested in nativisation processes. This linguist, he goes on, with tongue-in-cheek deference to native speaker norms, «might even arrive at a grammar for breaking the rules of grammar» (p. 302).

Sridhar is also interested in lexis, especially nomenclature, calques, and idiomatic language. He acknowledges that there is good and bad calquing, that transparency in conveying idiomaticity is to be preferred to literal equivalence, but that sometimes, too, a close rendering of an idiom is more successful than the use of an available idiom with a similar meaning in English, such as when Rao prefers «Is it greater for you to ask, or for me to say yea?» to the ready-made «Your wish is my command» in *Kanthapura*. In his reflection on idiomaticity, and especially on the notion of transparency, Sridhar anticipates another theme which will be taken up by the advocates of ELF (English as a lingua franca): Seidlhofer (2001) warns of the dangers of «unilateral idiomaticity» in which the user (typically, the native speaker) makes no concessions to the opaqueness of the idiom he or she has decided to use. Creative non-native speaker idiomaticity, in contrast, usually drawing on the resources of another language, is a recurring phenomenon in ELF.

By the turn of the millenium a whole new generation of outer circle writers was well established internationally. It included writers such

as Salman Rushdie and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, both of whom Tymoczko refers to in her 1999 study *Post-colonial writing and literary translation*. Tymoczko investigates the similarities between translators and writers in postcolonial contexts: «The transmission of elements from one culture to another across a cultural and/or linguistic gap is a central concern of both these types of intercultural writing and similar constraints on the process of relocation affect both types of text.» (p. 23)

These constraints include the degree and manner of foregrounding of cultural information, for example, whether it is glossed, imported untranslated, provided with an equivalent, and so on. Tymoczko's reference to the degree of «aggression» with which cultural elements are presented is a reminder of the tension between source culture and receiving audience, in which imbalance (between a minority or marginalized culture and a dominant one) may be a characterizing feature. The case of Ngugi wa Thiong'o who stopped writing in English, to resort to his native Gikuyu, is emblematic of this tension. In one fell swoop he was able to satisfy his own doubts about who he was writing for, to connect more directly with the oral forms of his culture, and to posit Gikuyu on equal terms with English. This stance has led to Ngugi becoming the translator of his own work, which is unusual, although not rare, among non native writers.²

The theme of Evelyn Nien-ming Chi'en's full-length study *Weird English* (2004) is linguistic creativity generated by collision between cultures in an increasingly globalized society. Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy are part of the process, but so too are immigrant writers to the US, (including second generation immigrants), such as Junot Diaz and Maxine Hong Kingston, whose work has foregrounded the

varieties from the expanding circles known as «Spanglish» and «Chinglish». These examples are proffered as positive affirmations of cultural differences. But Chi'en is also interested in older varieties of English. Closer to the centre of Empire, across the border from England, she finds self loathing in the Edinburgh vernacular codified by Irvine Welsh in *Trainspotting* in the words of his protagonist Rent: «It's nae good blamin it oan the English for colonizing us. Ah don't hate the English. They're just wankers. [...] They just git oan wi the shite thuv goat. Ah hate the Scots.» Arguably this is one of the oldest Englishes, sitting on a defiant outpost somewhere along the Scots English dialect continuum. But for Chi'en the vitality of the dialect «restores energy to English», and browbeats the reader into agreement (p. 13). Rent's ranting reflects a similar stance from another part of the British mainland; the conviction of the poet R. S. Thomas that it is the Welsh, not the English, who have dug the grave of their own language. The irony here is that Thomas, a Welsh speaker who affected not to know English when addressed by strangers in the language, chooses to write his poetry only in English:

I have walked the shore
For an hour and seen the English
Scavenging among the remains
Of our culture, covering the sand
Like the tide and, with the roughness
Of the tide, elbowing our language
Into the grave that we have dug for it.
Reservoirs (1968)

The immigrant and postcolonial writers discussed by Chi'en all position themselves towards English as «outlaws», but times have changed, and non standard English now has «aesthetic capital». Their work is thus a celebration of diversity and «linguistic polyculturality», and their invention of language, their take on English, is a guarantee of the non native writer's

² See for example Welsh novelists Fflur Dafydd and Jon Gower, both of whom have translated their own work into English

«artistic redemption» (p. 59). Each new text is thus a claim to ownership of the language, and a tool for finding a new community within the English speaking universe.

Weird English testifies to a desire for emancipation (from native speaker norms) through experimentation. The appearance over the last decade of dozens of new writers in English, especially women writers, from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ghana, and the Indian subcontinent, but also from China, Turkey, Egypt, and elsewhere in the expanding circle, suggests that the phenomenon is still gathering momentum. Attitudes towards English are a recurring feature of this body of literature, if not, indeed, a central theme. Implicitly through narrative choices, explicitly in the language and sentiments of characters, and extra-textually (in interviews with authors, or in their own critical reflections), the role of English is being overhauled on the stage of global English literature. In the second part of this paper I will attempt to indicate the range of these attitudes, and the light they shed on our growing awareness of English as a lingua franca, and, in particular, the changing nature of the relationship between non native and native speakers.

Attitudes towards a language, like anything else, can be positive, negative, or neutral. They may range from a sense of shame at producing «errors» (in other words, deviations from a default native speaker standard variety of the language) to one of polycultural superiority (since ELF speakers can draw on linguistic resources not available to the monoglot mother tongue user). They may also be more pragmatic in their self awareness – feeling «comfortable» in a language, believing that some things can be better expressed in the global language than in a vernacular, realizing that communicative efficiency is the objective in any given interaction, and so on. Using a lingua franca involves thinking about language. In the new literatures, reflections such as these are frequently foregrounded in the daily interactions of protagonists. They serve as a constant reminder of *which language* an event is happening in. As a

result, intercultural tensions are more explicit, and communication is seen as problematic and demanding of effort, but nonetheless possible. In the beginning was deference to a native speaker model and a colonizing culture. In novels set in the 21st century, this means that it is often the older generation which equates English with «civilization». So when the narrator's father in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) shifts from English to Igbo, this is a sure sign that things have «started to fall apart»:

Papa was staring pointedly at Jaja. «Jaja, have you not shared a drink with us, *gbo?* Have you no words in your mouth?» he asked, entirely in Igbo. A bad sign. He hardly spoke Igbo, and although Jaja and I spoke it with mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us: we had to speak English.

In a convincing reversal of religions of Achebe's masterpiece, *Purple Hibiscus* relates the consequences of the narrator's brother not to take communion, flouting the wishes of his repressively religious Roman Catholic father. In another continent, but in a similar context, the orphan Sai in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) has been brought up in a convent where she has learnt that: «Cake was better than *laddoos*, fork spoon knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body was more civilized than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds. English was better than Hindi.» Attendant on this belief in the supremacy of English (and English culture) is fear of failure in the company of native speakers. At the beginning of *I do not come to you by chance* (Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, 2009), a get-rich-quick story about international email scams originating from Nigeria (and therefore, a text necessarily focused on English), the narrator's grandfather feels a panic attack coming on about having to converse with a native speaker: «It was not as if their father did not understand English, but when he received

word that the headmistress was coming, he had panicked fearing that his feeble grasp of the foreign language would not withstand the turbulence of the white woman's nasal accent and fast talking.»

Fear of making formal errors in front of a native speaker – or rather, awareness that one has done so – can cause something akin to physical pain. In *The Namesake* (Jhumpa Lahiri, 2003), Bengal-born Ashima is giving birth to her first child in a hospital in Cambridge Massachusetts, where her husband is a PhD student: «Hoping for a boy or a girl?» Patty asks. «As long as there are ten finger and ten toe.» Ashima replies. For these anatomical details, these particular signs of life, are the ones she has most difficulty picturing when she imagines the baby in her arms. Patty smiles, a little too widely, and suddenly Ashima realizes her error, knows she should have said «fingers» and «toes». This error pains her almost as much as her last contraction.

The lack of the plural marker (transferred from Bengali) – and, conversely, the addition of a plural marker to a mass noun in standard English (*advices, informations*) – is the kind of observable non-standardism frequently noted in ELF research. However, far from compromising comprehension for listeners, the shift in focus (between «mass» and «count» noun) can often add a new layer of meaning³. Yet it is precisely this type of «error» – and similar morpho-syntactic errors (such as omitting the redundant *s* for the 3rd person singular verb,) which continue to be viewed by teachers of English as serious⁴.

Ashima's embarrassing experience with count nouns in English, the author tells us, takes place in 1968, and, crucially, in a context of native-non native speaker interaction. Nearly

³ Seidlhofer 2011 recounts the use by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon of the non standard plural form *evidences* as an example of a useful «count» noun.

⁴ See Mollin 2006 for the opinion of university teachers, and Groom 2012 for a survey of secondary school teachers.

half a century later, it is generally believed that a quarter of the world's population has some competence in English⁵, and that, given the global function of English as a lingua franca, most interactions in the language may now actually be between non-native speakers. This means a whole new relationship with the language, in which functional efficiency has taken over from formal accuracy as the main focus for the ELF user, and, as in the opening of Aravand Adiga's *The White Tiger*, (which won the Man Booker in 2008), a positively laid-back approach to one's status as a speaker, or non-speaker of the language. The protagonist, an Indian, is writing to the prime minister of China:

Mr Premier,
Sir.

Neither you nor I can speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English.

My ex-employer the late Mr Ashok's ex-wife, Pinky Madam, taught me one of these things; and at 11.32 today, which was about ten minutes ago, when the lady on All India Radio announced, «Premier Jiabao is coming to Bangalore next week», I said that thing at once.

That «thing», we learn a few pages later, is *What a fucking joke*. In their positioning towards the language, non-native characters recognize English as functional, but it can be an object of derision too. Thus an unknown expression confronting the protagonist in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) appears in front of her like a pair of «turds»:

«She wants a Year Off.» She spoke the words as if they were two turds dangling from the end of a stick.

«What is it?» asked Nazneen. «Year Off?»

⁵ Crystal 2003 p. 6.

«Before going to university. She wants to spend one year doing nothing.»
But Year Off had an official ring to it and Nazneen knew that she had not yet understood.

Although functional competence in English is invariably seen as a good thing, near native-speakerism, such as a perfect British accent, is not, as in this extract from *The Inheritance of Loss*: «“Good evening... this is Piyali Bannerji with the BBC news.” All over India, people hearing the Indian name announced in pucca British accent laughed and laughed so hard their stomachs hurt.»

For an ELF speaker it is the comfort factor, not nearness to a native speaker standard, which is important; self confidence, in spite of her non-standardisms, marks Zeliha's way of speaking in Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007):

«I am very sorry, I don't know how I slept that long», Armanoush stammered in slow-motion English.

«Of course, your body needed that sleep. It's a long flight,» Auntie Zeliha said. Though she had a mellow yet blatant accent and tended to stress the wrong syllables, she also sounded pretty comfortable expressing herself in English. «Aren't you hungry? I hope you will enjoy Turkish food.» (p. 155)

«Stressing the wrong syllables» is not seen by ELF researchers as a problem in international communication. For Jenkins (2000) stressing the wrong syllable in a word is not part of the «core phonology» of ELF, and as such is not essential to comprehension (unlike word stress and most consonant phonemes).

In *I Do Not Come to you by chance* English, or rather, a version of English, is the central theme. It is the bait with which naïve and unsuspecting westerners are hooked by the so-called «419 scam» emails, which offer huge sums of money from an unexpected source (such as a

trust fund or an inheritance), so long as a fee is paid up-front to release the payment. In the novel, the main character Kingsley becomes an expert writer of scam emails. He knows how to get the tone right; he knows that the English must be convincing and strike a personal chord with the recipient, out there in the great big world of «mugus», whether in Auckland, Cardiff or Wisconsin; he knows, too, even though he is something of a purist, that the «dented English» of an African can make a plea more authentic in the arena of global scams:

The grammatical errors stood up from the page and punched me right in the middle of my face.

«Please move» I said.

Ogbonna shifted away, allowing me space to take over his keyboard. Unlike Azuka and Buchi, he had never made it to university. The level of language in our emails did not matter, though. It was probably just the purist in me. Apparently, mugus were never really surprised to see an African emitting dented English.

The narrator gives us plenty of reflections on this gramatically and phonologically «dented» version of English:

«Bro Kingsley, are you go far away or should we kept your breakfast for you by the time you came back?» Odinkemmelu asked.

It was not the boy's fault that his tenses were firing bullets all over the place. Before he came to live with us about two years ago, Odinkemmelu had never set foot outside the village and the only English he knew was «I want eat». Over time, his vocabulary had improved. But when it came to tenses, he was never quite sure whether he was standing in the present or dwelling in the past. (p. 20)

The other girl hijacked the conversation.

«What essatly do you not understand? She

has told you her mind and it's your business whether you assept it or not.»

This tattling termagant, like many of her compatriots from Edo in the Mid-West region of Nigeria, had a mother tongue induced speech deficiency that prevented her from putting the required velar emphasis on her X sounds. (p. 77)

Bro Kingsley, by contrast, is an effortless communicator. In his ability to adapt to the tone and language of his email interlocutors he exemplifies a key theme in ELF research – that of *accommodation*. A successful ELF user accommodates to other language users – grammatically, stylistically, lexically, phonologically – to facilitate communication. But he also knows where to draw the line, when he comes across an unorthodox email style: «Most people tended to write in sentence case, but once in a comet-across-the-sky while. I encountered some of the world's weirder people who wrote regularly in all caps. In that event, I switched back to sentence case.» (p. 151). ELF researchers tend to theorize non-native speakers as *users* of the language rather than as learners who have been catapulted from the classroom into the real world. Nonetheless, non-native writers often portray their characters as language learners, offering glimpses into the learning process and the affective relationships which people have with words: «Hospital, hospital, hospital. She had another English word. She caressed it all the way down the corridor» (Ali:143) In the same novel, Nazneen's pedantic husband savours the teaching opportunity when Nazneen flounders between double consonants:

«What is this called?» said Nazneen.

Chanu looked at the screen. «Ice skating,» he said, in English.

«Ice e-skating,» said Nazneen.

«Ice skating» said Chanu.

«Ice e-skating.»

«No, no. No e. Ice skating. Try it again.»

Nazneen hesitated.

«Go on!»

«Ice es-kating,» she said, with deliberation.

Chanu smiled. «Don't worry about it. It's a common problem for Bengalis. Two consonants together causes difficulty. I have conquered this issue after a long time. But you are unlikely to need these words in any case.» (p. 36)

The 2007 novel by Xiaolu Guo, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* charts the progress in English of a Chinese girl who has been sent to a language school in London to learn the language by her parents, former peasants who now own a shoe factory. The «dictionary» is a sentimental journey towards intercultural competence, through linguistic immersion and sexual initiation, and a series of reflections on English and Chinese. The opening pages read like a catalogue of errors, an English teacher's nightmare:

Sorry of my English

Is unbelievable, I arriving London, «Heathlow Airport». Every single name very difficult remembering, because just not «London Airport» simple way like we simple way call «Beijing Airport.» Everything very confuse way here, passengers is separating in two queues.

Sign in front of queue say: ALIEN and NON ALIEN. (Guo 2007: 9)

Lack of copular verbs, a default *ing* form, prepositional chaos, lack of articles, regularization of irregular forms, and the list could go on. But month by month, almost imperceptibly at first, and in spite of the efforts of her language teacher «Mrs Margaret», Zhuang (or just Z as she wants to be called) acquires language from her lover and the novel comes to a lyrical end with Z back in Beijing and her nameless lover somewhere in the Welsh hills. Z reads the letter he sends her, and concludes:

Your words are soaked in your great peace and happiness, and these words are being stored in my memory, I kiss this letter, I bury my face in the paper, a sheet torn from some exercise book. I try to smell that faraway valley. I picture you standing on your fields, the mountain behind you, and the sound of the sea coming and going. It is such a great picture you describe. It is the best gift you ever gave me.

The address on the envelope is familiar. It must be in west Wales. Yes, we went there together, I remember how it rained. The rain was ceaseless, covering the whole forest, the whole mountain, and the whole land. (Guo 2007: 354)

This degree of fluent lyricism has been achieved at the expense of considerable cross-linguistic reflection, on nomenclature, for example, and the meanings behind the names of things, in English and Chinese; or word order, and the immodest nature of the SVO syntax of the (standard) English sentence: «Maybe Chinese too shaming putting their name first, because that not modest way to be.» (Guo 2007: 27) Z's partner is a 40-year old bisexual Englishman, and a native speaker of English. She is overawed by him, and feels shamed by the way he speaks: «I think you are a *noble* man with *noble* words. I am not noble. I am humble. And I speak humble English. I from poor town in south China, We never see noble.» (Guo 2007: 79)

On an escapade to continental Europe, however, sent there by her partner who wants time out from the relationship, she finds herself on an equal linguistic footing with Europeans, picking up men on trains and waterfronts in Germany, Portugal and Venice, and being complemented on her English as she does so. In Europe she is an ELF user, not a student of English.

The «easy» relationship between non-native speakers and the problems which arise in na-

tive non-native interaction are in part borne out by ELF research⁶, and the responsibility for a breakdown in communication is more likely to lie with the native speakers - for their inability to accommodate, for their use of unilateral idiomaticity, for their failure to draw on extra-linguistic resources which might be available to them, and so on; in short, because of their own lack of experience as lingua franca users. The ELF user adapts to changing communication needs; the monoglot mother tongue English speaker has not moved with the times. An indication of a default native speaker position towards «foreigner English» is given in Amit Chaudhuri's 1992 short story *The Happiest Man in the World*. The Indian narrator confides to the nurses who have come to see his uncle in a London council house that he is a student at Oxford:

«And what are you studying at Oxford?» she asked, almost winking at me.

«English,» I said.

«English!» said the lady to a slim girl. «He has come a long way, hasn't he? [...] Will you teach English when you go back to India?»

«Don't know,» I said vaguely.

«Bye bye,» she said, closing the door and smiling her broadest smile. «Hope you enjoy picking up our terrible English expressions!» I smiled and waved at her. I realized she thought I had come to Oxford to learn how to speak and read and write in English. (Chaudhuri 2007: 155)

In *Honour* (Shafak 2012), faced with an equally uncomprehending but rather less welcoming London shop assistant, Turkish born Pembe has an angry reaction:

«I don't think she even speaks English,» added the assistant.

⁶ For difficulties in NS – NNS communication in an international setting see Basso 2012.

«I speak,» Pembe snapped.

«Then surely you must have understood what you were told,» said the owner speaking slowly, and unnecessarily loudly.» (p. 112)

These two emblematic exchanges suggest that the attitudes to English most in need of revision in international interaction are native speaker attitudes, since both of them reflect a deeply rooted sense of ownership, even if (as in the case of Chaudhuri's highly articulate Indian protagonist) this flies in the face of the evidence. «Honour» is dedicated to «those who hear, those who see.» The low tolerance levels of the unnamed London shop assistant and shop owner are due to an ingrained refusal to «see» and «hear» and thereby accommodate to the ELF user.

In Noviolet Bulawayo's 2013 novel *We need new names*, the young African (presumably Zimbabwean) protagonist, observing the problems her aunt has as she tries to buy a push-up bra in English over the phone, states this more explicitly: «the problem with those who speak only English is this: they don't know how to listen; they are busy looking at your falling instead of paying attention to what you are saying.» (Bulawayo 2013: 193)

In reflections of this kind, more or less explicit, native speakers are being challenged by non native novelists whose characters understand that an outdated sense of ownership gets in the way of the flexibility needed for cross-cultural international communication. This is the «native speaker problem» theorized by David Graddol, in his 2006 survey of possible futures for English, *English Next*: «Increasingly, the problem may be that few native speakers belong to the community of practice which is developing amongst lingua franca users. Their presence hinders communication.» (Graddol 2006: 115)

One issue which Graddol does not raise, but which seems to be of greater practical significance than the native speaker question, since it

directly sheds light on the expressive potential of English as a lingua franca, is how this global community of practice is being consolidated and extended, and the creative possibilities of English rolled out and enhanced, by the extraordinary and seemingly unstoppable flow of high-level prose writing in non native English. In the opinion of this writer at least, the time has come for the phenomenon, in its many facets – linguistic, socio-linguistic, artistic and cultural – to receive the comprehensive attention it merits.

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E. ADAMI

Sabrina Billings, *Language, Globalization and the Making of a Tanzanian Beauty Queen*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2013

Throughout the postcolonial world, the position of English, its relation with local *linguae francae*, its discursive ramifications and its steep social repercussions constitute a complex area, for which we need new, interdisciplinary critical tools that benefit from disciplines as diverse as applied linguistics, anthropology and postcolonial studies. As matter of fact, it is no longer possible to apply old-fashioned, schematic approaches to a reality which intersects and condenses a variety of discourses, whose cultural productions are habitually affected by processes of globalization. Sabrina Billings' well-documented and innovative book *Language, Globalization and the Making of a Tanzanian Beauty Queen* (2013) focuses on the context of Tanzania and analyses a very specific domain, the world of beauty queen pageants, to explore the multiple realisations of language(s) – with the pregnant tension opposing English and Swahili, the two official languages of the country – along with its implications, imaginings and transformations. Theoretically sound and convincingly articulated, the book adopts, adapts and revises a range of possible approaches from many disciplines such as sociolinguistics, anthropology, gender studies, social studies, pragmatics, which are applied to various kinds of data, spanning from fieldwork in different research periods in the area to published sources and online materials. The author also provides some insightful considerations about the values, meanings and contradictions that seem to characterise the complicated milieu of Tanzanian beauty queen contests, which in reality are useful for understanding other dimensions too, such as the educational environment and the effectiveness of its didactic policies,

the present-day role of the woman and the question of gender, or the function of English as a linguistic capital, typically working at the expense of vernacular languages.

The author elaborates a rich theoretical framework following important scholars in various fields (e.g. Hymes, Appadurai, Pennycook, Silverstein amongst others), and in particular she draws from Blommaert's *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization* (2010) significant notions such as scales, indexicality, truncated multilingualism and mobility that can be useful in the investigation of a context in which many forces are at work. Although contestants are given the possibility of choosing either English or Swahili during their self-presentations and speeches onstage, unsurprisingly covert prestige, indexical projection and symbolic value turn the former into a sort of linguistic capital, which is also seen as a device to obtain well-paid jobs, to move up the social ladder or even to leave Tanzania and access global markets and opportunities. Therefore, Billings interprets the sphere of language as a resource whose pragmatic power does generate effects and contribute to the shaping of lives of those young women who struggle to master proper linguistic skills in a multicultural setting against the backdrop of globalization. In Billings' words, «contestants manipulate linguistic (and other) tools to perform specific personae and achieve particular goals on stage as part of the evaluative process» (p. 20) and in so doing they handle a variety of strategies which the author studies along ethnomethodological lines, for example by considering body and fashion discourses and the typical features that index beauty, elegance, health and other values. The colour of the skin for instance is expected to be clear, «without blemishes or signs of chemically lightening» (p. 95) and this tendency can be found in other postcolonial contexts too, for example in India where the adjective «weatish» is used in matrimonial advertisements. The choice for clothes and

attires too must be considered very carefully as they may carry particular meanings, and here Billings considers the question of how ethnic dresses (for example the Masai costume) can lead contestants to be either praised or ridiculed, and in this case they are labelled *washamba* («country pumpkins», p. 114). Therefore, building up personality and appearance – a form of stratified, polyvalent cultural *habitus* – is a complex operation orchestrating many different components linked to both local culture and global cosmopolitanism.

The presence of English of course is tied to a colonial past, but its current role is also determined by its world position of power and predominance, and in fact English is common in everyday life in Tanzania, although often it emerges in non-standard versions, in informal contexts and structures, such as hip-hop lyrics, advertising, magazines and other genres. Billings also employs the notion of multivocality (cited from Higgins' *English as a Local Language Postcolonial Identities and Multilingual Practices*, 2009, and originally coined by Mikhail Bakhtin) to approach the local realisations of a global type of performance (the beauty contest) since «as commodities, ideas, people and language move through space and time, their significance and substance get reworked into new categories of meaning» (p. 11). In this light, what emerges concerns the manifold interplay and frictions of sociocultural phenomena, which often have to face the weight of disparity and unavailability of welfare, as it frequently occurs in postcolonial countries.

However, the conflict engaging English and Swahili has another consequence, namely it further marginalises and downgrades vernacular languages, which govern communication in rural areas. In urban contexts, English is seen as the language of modernity, success and fulfilment whilst Swahili tends to represent identity and roots, but local languages are not encouraged, and on the contrary are confined to specific geographical areas, such

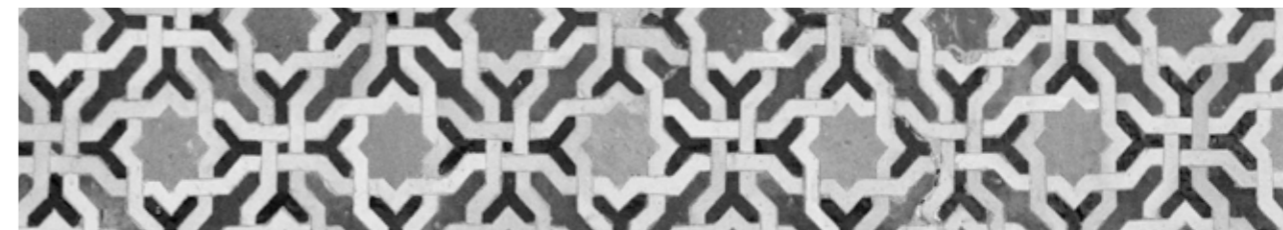
as the countryside. Ethnic languages pertain to certain domains only, such as family relations, and considering the fragmentariness of the sociolinguistic landscape of the country it is true that they may even generate problems of unintelligibility. Billings affirms that «in urban Tanzania, ethnic languages do not hold a visible place, and at pageants – a form of urban entertainment orienting towards cosmopolitan (English-linked) identities and nationalist (Swahili-linked) agendas – it is perhaps expected that markers of ethnicity, and especially ethnic languages, should not play a prominent role» (p. 156). Therefore, they do not participate in the cultural and social processes that take place in and, to a certain extent, reshape contemporary Tanzania.

Billings' empirical research was conducted in Tanzania in various periods between 2001 and 2007, and her fieldwork included attending beauty pageants, interviewing contestants, and gathering other types of materials and data. Observing and exploring the multilayered world of pageants, which embed language competence, identity manifestations, social and gender positions, but also the articulation of dreams, expectations and behaviours, Billings notices two peculiar intertwined elements in the mechanisms of the performance. The first is represented by the idea of confidence, which contestants deem as a fundamental value that they have to show when they are onstage in order to appeal to audiences and judges. The author explains the scope of confidence through a metasemiotic lens since it is a quality that structures linguistic and non-linguistic acts in an expressive ensemble. The vital importance of using a «pure» register, i.e. a formal language (typically English) devoid of code-mixing, borrowing and interference from other languages, constitutes the second element, although actually the sense of *ufasaha* (purity of language) or speaking in a *fasaha* (stylistically pure) manner is not so widespread since code-switching is commonly practiced.

Indeed, very frequently in order to prepare presentations and speeches contestants merely rely on memorisation techniques – normally implemented by education systems in many postcolonial contexts, in which learning by rote and drilling are methodological practices to inculcate formal, unattainable and probably inadequate language models – rather than developing effective fluency skills, which in many cases lead to poor performance and clumsy results. In stressing the perpetuation of certain schemes implemented and upheld by the school system and the general social perceptions, Billings argues that «we see the linguistic and ideological model of *fasaha* English emerging in school and reappearing on the pageant stage» (p. 145). In this, the ideological dimension of English language education and language use appears with its inner contradictions and unsolved questions.

However, the author does not just wish to denounce the concatenation of causes operating in this milieu that determine social conditions of discrimination, unfairness and rigidity, but she also points out the dynamicity of those subjects (in this case, young women) who invent new strategies for identity expression and strive to come to terms with their surrounding dire reality in their *kutafuta maisha* (looking for life p. 180) plans. In this intermingled landscape, located on the edge between the postcolonial periphery and the globalising trends, mobility is the key term as it configures flows, transformations and modalities of different nature, and thus according to Billings «not only must we steer clear of a view of language as static, predetermined clusters of grammar, phonology and words, but we must also avoid ones that take their indexicalities as static and predetermined» (p. 12). Ultimately, the book charts new cultural terrains and expands our understanding of Tanzania as a specific postcolonial scenario rich in layers of meanings, histories and discourses.

africa



RAPHAEL D'ABDON

Tshifhiwa Given Mukweho, *A Traumatic Revenge*, Timbila Publishing, Elim Hospital, 2011

Se c'è un editore che i lettori sudafricani appassionati di produzione underground devono ringraziare, questi è Vonani Bila, focoso spoken word poet che si esibisce sui palchi di mezzo mondo, ma soprattutto fondatore, direttore e *deus ex machina* della casa editrice Timbila Publishing. Pur operando nella remota cittadina di Elim Hospital, in Limpopo (ovvero lontano dalle «capitali culturali» del Paese: Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, Grahamstown), il vulcanico poeta è stato capace di rendere Timbila Publishing un punto di riferimento imprescindibile per chi si occupa di letteratura sudafricana, e grazie alla sua indubbia competenza e alle sue scelte editoriali coraggiose e quasi sempre vincenti, si è rapidamente imposto come uno dei più brillanti *talent scouts* del mercato letterario sudafricano. Dopo aver pubblicato le opere di poetesse di qualità come Myesha Jenkins e Makhosazana Xaba, e aver presentato le opere di numerosi poeti nei vari numeri della rivista *Timbila. A Journal of Onion Skin Poetry*, nel 2011 Bila ha regalato ai suoi affezionati lettori *A Traumatic Revenge*, raccolta di racconti d'esordio del giovane scrittore Tshifhiwa Given Mukweho.

Composta di undici racconti, la raccolta è arricchita da un accurato glossario, indispensabile per decifrare in maniera adeguata il colorito linguaggio «di strada» dell'autore, nel quale si intrecciano armoniosamente inglese, township slang, Venda, sePedi, Tsonga e Shona. *A Traumatic Revenge* è un esempio classico di *autobiographical fiction*, una collezione di storie icastiche raccontate da un ragazzo nero cresciuto nelle strade, nelle periferie, nelle township, nelle baraccopoli e nelle prigioni del «Nuovo» (o forse sarebbe più appropriato definirlo «Seminuovo») Sudafrica.

La raccolta è popolata da una schiera di personaggi rappresentativi delle comunità più povere ed economicamente emarginate del paesaggio urbano sudafricano: gli immancabili *hobos* alcolizzati, riuniti attorno al fuoco per riscaldarsi nelle fredde notti invernali passate all'addiaccio; i poliziotti delinquenti; la domestica pendolare che lavora nei sobborghi dei vecchi ricchi bianchi e dei nuovi ricchi neri; la madre single che si prostituisce; i giovani ladruncoli svelti di testa e di mano. Tutti costoro interagiscono in svariate contesti e situazioni, svelando di racconto in racconto nei gesti, nei dialoghi e nelle riflessioni la profonda sensibilità e l'originalità espressiva dell'autore.

Intellettuale curioso e attento, con lo sguardo costantemente rivolto ai numerosi enigmi del-

la società che lo circonda, Mukwevho affronta alcuni temi spinosi del dibattito culturale e politico sudafricano con leggerezza e arguzia da scrittore consumato. Non a caso, il racconto d'apertura *Jigsaw in the Sky* prende di petto uno dei problemi più scottanti del Sudafrica contemporaneo, ovvero i ripetuti episodi di violenza che si verificano nelle townships ai danni di immigrati africani. I media (e troppo spesso anche l'accademia) definiscono impropriamente questi episodi come manifestazioni di «xenofobia», sebbene sarebbe semanticamente corretto parlare di «afrofobia» dal momento che, come lucidamente osserva Mukwevho, queste aggressioni prendono sistematicamente di mira specifiche comunità di immigrati neri provenienti da paesi africani (Somalia, Congo, Zimbabwe, Mozambico, ecc.) residenti nelle township.

Ma è la durissima esperienza carceraria vissuta in prima persona dall'autore (qui rivissuta nei racconti *A Strange Demise* e *A Traumatic Revenge*, e commentata in un saggio pubblicato nel 2013 intitolato *Writing in and out of prison*) quella che sottende il tono malinconico e disincantato di questo testo, unico all'interno del panorama letterario del post-apartheid. In particolare la narrazione tocca il punto emotivamente più intenso nel racconto che dà il titolo alla raccolta. «I bow forward a little to make my naked ass protrude devilishly at him. «Who-Jack!» I say, voice tormented, eyes shut. «Khezwi, come on. Slip your dick into my anus and pump away madly just like you used to do when we were in the police station holding cell», grida l'autore-narratore all'ex-compagno di cella che lo aveva violentato, incrociandolo casualmente mentre questo passeggia con la famiglia nei pressi di una stazione di rifornimento, in una storia struggente dove trauma e dolore tengono in ostaggio sia la vittima che il suo aguzzino. Racconti come questo fanno di *A Traumatic Revenge* un esempio di narrativa brutalmente realista, una testimonianza cruda sulla *low life* sudafricana che presenta un

paese nascosto, messo sotto silenzio, ignorato da molti, meticolosamente relegato nel cono d'ombra della scintillante «grande narrazione» della Nazione Arcobaleno. Un Sudafrica scomodo, defamiliarizzante, che in altri tempi era stato magistralmente raccontato da due straordinari giovani romanzieri (i compianti Phaswane Mpe e K. Sello Duiker) e viene costantemente messo in versi dai poeti nei circuiti di slam e spoken word poetry dei quali Mukwevho, poeta a sua volta, è rispettoso e rispettato compagno di viaggio.

La peculiarità che rende questa raccolta particolarmente significativa è che questo è il primo testo di prosa di spessore letterario scritto nelle prigioni del post-apartheid.

In *The Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela scriveva (giustamente) che «il carcere non solo ti priva della libertà, cerca anche di spogliarti della tua identità [...] il carcere è l'istituzione totalitaria per eccellenza, che non tollera né autonomia, né individualità. Come combattenti per la libertà e come esseri umani, dobbiamo opporci con tutte le nostre forze ai tentativi di derubarci anche della seconda di queste prerogative». Parole sagge, ma che sono rimaste lettera morta nel «Seminuovo» Sudafrica, un Paese nel quale queste «discariche sociali» si sono moltiplicate, venendo in alcuni casi addirittura privatizzate, diventando in tal modo imprese a scopo di lucro dalle quali ricavare enormi profitti. In un Paese dove la corruzione dilaga a ogni livello, e i «white collar crimes» rimangono quasi sempre impuniti, Mukwevho – oggi trentenne – ha scontato 11 anni di reclusione nel Thohoyandou Correctional Centre di Makhado, carcere (privato) di massima sicurezza nel nord del Limpopo. Arrestato il 26 gennaio 2000 a soli 15 anni, fu condannato in via definitiva l'anno successivo a un totale di 22 [!] anni di reclusione per una serie di piccoli furti in abitazioni private ed esercizi commerciali nell'area di Makhado. Rilasciato sulla parola nel novembre del 2010, è a tutt'oggi in libertà provvisoria.

Ed è proprio durante il suo soggiorno forzato nella casa circondariale che Mukwevho ha scritto queste pagine.

Gli scrittori reculsi nelle prigioni dell'apartheid (Makhore, First, Sachs, Breytenbach, Mashinini, ecc.) hanno raccontato le loro terribili storie di detenzione in testi autobiografici fondamentali per comprendere l'orrore del regime che li opprimeva, e grazie alle loro testimonianze la *prison literature* dell'apartheid è un filone letterario ricco e variegato. Oggi i prigionieri delle carceri del post-apartheid hanno cominciato a fare altrettanto. A differenza delle opere degli autori sopraccitati, *A Traumatic Revenge* non è un resoconto delle vicende vissute in carcere dall'autore; ciononostante, nei suoi racconti Mukwevho esorcizza i traumi legati a quella drammatica esperienza personale per offrire una visione iconoclastica del Sudafrica odierno, osservato attraverso gli occhi di un soggetto segnato da una durissima (ed eccessivamente severa) esperienza punitiva. Per tale motivo ritengo che la raccolta debba essere considerata il testo apripista della *prison literature* del post-apartheid. Racconti che rivelano uno scrittore di raro talento, il quale farà sicuramente parlare di sé negli anni a venire e sarà probabilmente destinato a ricoprire un ruolo di rilievo nel panorama letterario nazionale, continentale e internazionale. I suoi sempre più numerosi estimatori rimangono quindi in attesa di leggere il suo primo romanzo, *The Violent Gestures of Life*, che sarà pubblicato quest'anno dalla University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

SARA PAHOR

Photographing Nigeria through words – Noo Saro-Wiwa's *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria*. Granta Books. 2012)

Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995) is often remembered for his commitment to the protection of Ogoniland, his pacifist activity in the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and his tragic execution at the hands of Sany Abacha's military dictatorship. And Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1986) is a key text for whoever approaches Nigerian literature. Slightly less discussed is Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Basi and Company*, a sitcom set in Lagos which he wrote and produced for the Nigerian television network (NTA) during the period 1985-1990. Interestingly, if we consider the subsequent work by Ken Saro-Wiwa's twin daughters, Zina and Noo (born in 1976), the exploitation of image, as the representation and re-configuration of reality through writing and the visual arts, characterizes the family's artistic production in several ways. In fact, if Zina is an accomplished video artist and filmmaker, whose latest video installation *Eaten by the Heart* explores «intimacy, heartbreak and love performances among Africans and Diasporans»,¹ Noo in her recent book *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (Granta Books, 2012) has definitely relied on image in writing to convey effective descriptions of Nigeria and its people.

In *Looking for Transwonderland*, Noo Saro-Wiwa chronicles a journey of four months throughout Nigeria, her first long-term permanence in her native country since she was a child. In 1978 the Saro-Wiwa family left Nigeria and moved to Surrey. So, Noo's acquaintance with her Nigerian roots has grown through a collection

¹ From Zina Saro-Wiwa's website: <http://www.zinasarowiwa.com/works/eaten-by-the-heart/>.

of hiccupping visits to her motherland, fragments of a Nigerian life mainly lived during her childhood when the family would spend the summer in Port Harcourt. Her father divided himself between what Noo's mother used to call the «house» in England and Nigeria, a «home» where he kept working as a «property developer, writer and businessman» (p.8) and which would progressively absorb him after his marriage to a second wife. Noo was twelve when her father, trying to pass his patriotic love for Nigeria on his children, took her and her brothers to travel the country extensively. In *Looking for Transwonderland*, Noo follows that route, integrating her travel notes with her childhood's memories and critical reflections as an adult «diasporan» (p.56) who looks at contemporary Nigeria.

A professional writer of travel books for Rough Guide and Lonely Planet, Noo Saro-Wiwa has fashioned an original travelogue of 320 pages which sounds like a semi-fictional account, all set in past tenses and enriched by personal dialogues. The book discloses the complexities of Nigeria, blending information about the country's history, culture and art with autobiographical notes, socio-political insights, and bright and vivid picture-in-words of what she sees. It explores several Nigerian cities. It opens and closes in Lagos, after a zigzagging journey through Ibadan, Abuja, Kano, Nguru and Yankari, Jos, Maiduguri, Calabar, Benin and Port Harcourt. The author dresses her descriptions with intelligent adjectives that help us to capture the diverse moods of Nigerian urbanities. Her photographic writing embodies sensations, portrays the moment, and frames the landscape. For example, she creates a human prototype to convey the malicious, rugged, turbulent, relentless atmosphere of Lagos:

[I]f Lagos were a person, she would wear a Gucci jacket and a cheap hair weave, with a mobile phone in one hand, a second set in her back pocket, and the mother of all scowls

on her face. She would usher you impatiently through her front door at an extortionate price before smacking you to the floor for taking too long about it. «This,» she would growl while searching your pockets for more cash, «is Lagos». (p.14)

Noo Saro-Wiwa plays with architectural elements to send the reader evocative sketches of her body experiences on site, and delivers the geo-cultural differences of Nigeria observing how the ethnic and religious symbols and messages shape the public space. The striking difference between the chaotic, «Jeezos»-obsessed south, and the Islamic north, «an older and more languid affair, free of evangelism's teenage fervour» (p.132), lies in the urban architectural textures and in the relationship between the inhabitants, the buildings and the environment. In her account on the ancient and culturally rich city of Kano, Saro-Wiwa identifies «elegance» with the presence of «several minarets extended into the ochre sky» (p.129), a space in which women hide in the folds of building lines: «I saw flashes of women and girls in brilliantly coloured headscarves, materialising between buildings like shy tropical birds [...]. Kano women were a mystery to me, an inconspicuous, penumbral presence in the city, partaking little in public activity». (p.134)

Yet it is through the portrayal of public life inside and outside Kano's foreign quarter, an area in which Shari'a does not apply to non-Muslims, that the author lets Nigerian opposite realities emerge, which despite some harsh but confined exceptions, coexist in mutual acceptance:

While the rest of the city fell dark and silent, the Ibo Road hummed with life [...] men and women socialising freely. Further along the street, the silhouettes of Hausa men in their fez-style kufi hats fronted tiny, light-filled street taverns crammed with bottles. Suya barbecue smoke mingled with the exhaust fumes of passing cars, and the cars' red tail lights

complemented the occasional red light bulb hanging above a front door. [...] Maintaining our ethno-religious Pangaea requires skilful maneuvering and compromise, something that Nigerian politics – for all its evils – has achieved [...] especially when compared to the British angst over its tiny Muslim minority. Our examples sporadic flashes of violence don't reflect complete failure, I realised, but instead the occasional spewings of an active volcano that Nigerian society has done remarkably well to contain. (pp. 136, 137)

The author displays several urban «negatives» to describe Nigeria's diversity. Abuja, the capital, is a tranquil, clean, dull city, «the opposite of my home town of Port Harcourt» (104). History and stories hide in and emerge from places, the relationship between memory and space becomes an equation written in gestures of visual imagination. She discusses Nigeria's status as an ex-slave colony tracing its past institutionally stored in Calabar's Waxwork Slave Museum as well as silently and spatially alive in Lagos Island's elaborate Brazilian houses built in the eighteenth-century by freed slaves back from Brazil, and in the port of Badagry which «became the transit point for shipping slaves» (p.49). The memory of slavery is preserved in objects and names, in spiked chains as well as in the «Point of No Return,» a placid and breezed beach whose role in the Middle Passage leaves little space for imagination.

Nigeria's socio-cultural «active volcano» (p.137) is nevertheless distributed over more than 900,000 square kilometers of land, a surface on which art, nature and culture undergo dramatic changes due to the systematic corruption which corrode public funds. Saro-Wiwa registers the uncertain future of Nigeria's unprotected landscapes through images of a Yankari National Park Game Reserve with a little animal stock and the fauna in the beautiful rainforest of Cross River State gradually eaten up by local people

because of its delicious «bush meat». Her interesting portrayals of Nigeria bring us in a culturally perishing Ibadan, whose prestigious University is sinking under the pressure of economic anguish and groups of violent students. A few kilometers north of it at Sacred Grove, Suzanne Wegner and the New Sacred Art group's world of figurines scattered around the 600-year old shrine Ogun-Osogbo, has not prevented the local government from an illegal sale of land which has caused the cut of several trees, formerly considered as sacred. The reader is offered images of a wonderful but degraded Nigeria, a country whose cultural manifestations master wide-ranging artistic languages which nonetheless end up crumbling. Saro-Wiwa's representation of Nigeria is close to the Ibadan's Transwonderland that entitles the book: an amusement park, a 1989 «ultra-modern» project commissioned by Babaginda's wife, whose machinery is left rusting in stillness, while local children strive with hunger. Her Nigeria keeps on nurturing illusions of sensational achievements, while in fact every outcome begins to slowly die soon after it is born.

Noo Saro-Wiwa's book deals with images not only through the delightful, thoughtful, sometimes ironic descriptions of her motherland, but also through her sporadic accounts on Nollywood, the Nigerian video film. Nollywood and its images constitute a territory of popular visual art, which in 2010 was the object of Zina Saro-Wiwa's re-elaborations in the «alt-Nollywood» movement and her short films *Phyllis* and *The Deliverance of Comfort*. In *Looking for Transwonderland*, throughout the sixteen chapters in which she describes her journey, Noo Saro-Wiwa casually refers to the videofilms she watches on a cinema screen or on television, introducing the uninformed reader to an audiovisual language with a strong appeal for millions of Africans and diasporans. Next to a brief historical introduction on the rise of Nollywood in south Nigeria – the first

videos recorded by Yoruba travelling theatre companies in the late 1980s and Kenneth Nnebue's role in the industry's development – and some references to her favorite actors and storylines, Noo Saro-Wiwa reports an interview held in Surulere, Nollywood's «moviemaking capital [with] an appealing urban aesthetic,» (p.72) with Teco Benson, one of the most prolific and long-standing Nollywood directors and producers. In Noo Saro-Wiwa's words, Teco Benson emerges as a video artist who defends the industry's ability to spread positive messages and who values the videofilm as a powerful means of social change, beyond market-oriented demands for stories of «domestic strife, sex scandals, marital infidelity, financial swindling, Christianity, witchcraft» (p.73). Nollywood dramatizes contemporary Nigeria's socio-political issues and its spiritual dimensions which permeate and filter life's meaning around hugely glamorous Pentecostal churches, sober minarets and the omnipresent «mysterious invisible forces» (p.74) which Noo Saro-Wiwa keeps confronting with through reason. In Nollywood's narratives, ghosts, spells and sacrifices are exploited to give radical turns to the plot, and the characters are often driven by evil and good spirits. The author remarks that though Nollywood is «positively in favor of supernatural conclusions or any finale involving the comeuppance of women» (p.76), this industry is a rare example of non-oil Nigerian enterprise which «represents a certain independence of mind and spirit, while generating jobs» (p.75). For Noo Saro-Wiwa as well as for a great number of spectators, Nollywood is a gripping alternative when at night there are no other forms of entertainment or the streets outside are too dangerous.

ITALIA VIVAN

Una nuova storia letteraria del Sudafrica secondo canoni classici.

David Attwell e Derek Attridge, a cura di, *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012

Un compito arduo

Scrivere un manuale di storia letteraria oggi implica affrontare problemi di base che vanno risolti preliminarmente e chiariti sin dall'inizio agli utenti. Innanzitutto, quali siano i confini geografici e culturali che si intendono disegnare, e se ci si riferisca a una nazione oppure a un territorio che comprenda più nazioni. Poi, se la storia letteraria che si intende costruire si articoli all'interno di una sola lingua o di più lingue: e nel secondo caso, quali siano le lingue egemoni e perché, e come le varie lingue si intreccino e si giustappongano nel contesto interessato. Occorre anche chiedersi se il libro che si vuol fare debba occuparsi soltanto delle letterature scritte o anche di quelle orali; e che spazio si debba dare alle forme e ai generi popolari rispetto a quelli colti. Infine, una storia letteraria è per definizione strutturata secondo una cronologia, e quindi si dovrà decidere come tenere conto delle varianti multiple che si sono affacciate nel corso del tempo all'interno dello spazio letterario in esame. A tali problematiche di fondo si aggiunge una constatazione che ha suggerito le migliori storie letterarie più recenti: in questo campo, un'opera seria non può venir prodotta da un solo autore, ma dovrà risultare dal concerto di più voci provenienti da specialisti di settore.

I vari punti elencati ricorrono tutti in modo macroscopico nel caso di una storia letteraria del Sudafrica ed erano ben presenti a David Attwell e Derrick Attridge, i due studiosi sudafricani cui la Cambridge University Press ha affidato il difficile compito di produrre una nuova storia della letteratura d'una nazione che nel 2014 compirà vent'anni dalla fondazio-

ne del sistema democratico nato con le prime elezioni a suffragio universale, la nascita di un Parlamento interrazziale, la presa di coscienza di costituire una nazione unita nel segno di una rivoluzione pacifica. Il concetto di nazione unifica le diversità nel collante politico, e altrettanto dovrebbe fare una storia letteraria nazionale, collegando e mettendo in comunicazione i mille fili di lingue e tradizioni diverse. La nazione sudafricana dunque c'è, ed è nuova. Egualmente nuova dovrebbe essere la sua storia letteraria, in modo da esprimere un bisogno di conversazione interculturale all'interno di un universo come quello sudafricano, dove coesistono più lingue (undici delle quali riconosciute come ufficiali dalla Costituzione) e più tradizioni espressive e letterarie.

Il Sudafrica, però, è un paese dove il regime coloniale prima, quello bianco dell'apartheid dopo, hanno attivamente e costantemente cospirato allo scopo di dividere le culture e consegnare a metri di giudizio differenziati per valore le produzioni nate nei vari settori linguistici e stilistici, orale e scritto, popolare e colto. Si è quindi trattato, per Attwell e Attridge, di compiere un primo tentativo che occorre valutare alla luce dei precedenti storiografici e delle istanze del presente, anche se i coordinatori si meritano comunque simpatia e apprezzamento per aver osato accingersi a un compito tanto arduo e irto di trappole e difficoltà oggettive.

I precedenti storiografici

Per quanto riguarda il Sudafrica, i tentativi di scrivere una storia letteraria sono recenti e sino ad ora settoriali, cioè legati a uno o all'altro comparto linguistico e quindi culturale. È stata proprio la liberazione politica dall'apartheid, con la contemporanea e successiva transizione democratica, che ha costretto anche i letterati a guardare in faccia la realtà di un paese che si pone come nazione unica pur nella sua realtà plurilinguistica. Gli esempi antecedenti cui si rifanno i coordinatori nell'asciutta introduzione generale sono indicativi di problematiche

accennate oppure evitate, a seconda dei casi. Stephen Gray già nel 1979 pubblicava *South African Literature. An Introduction* evocando sin dal titolo il dato di fatto di una «letteratura sudafricana» e ponendo sul tavolo la necessità di definire la natura specifica di tale realtà, che egli descriveva come un arcipelago legato e al contempo separato da un unico mare di coesistenza e di rapporti intrecciati. La visione unitaria di Gray si distingueva radicalmente da una quantità di altri esempi che andavano dalla storia della letteratura xhosa di A.C. Jordan del 1973 (*Towards an African Literature. The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa*), ai saggi di J.M.Coetzee del 1988 (*White Writing: on the Culture of Letters in South Africa*), al manuale di M. van Wyk Smith del 1990 (*Grounds of Context: Survey of South African English Literature*), alla storia letteraria in lingua afrikaans di J.C. Kannemayer del 2005 (*Die Afrikaanse Literatuur, 1652-2004*).

In epoca postapartheid, oltre al già citato manuale di Kannemayer limitato all'universo afrikaner, sono comparse tre opere degne di menzione a questo proposito. Nel 2003 Michael Chapman pubblicava *Southern African Literatures*, improntato a un bisogno di unificazione ma allargato all'intero territorio australe e quindi sottratto al collante politico e culturale nazionale. Chapman ha svolto un lavoro lodevole e assai utile di dissodamento del campo di studio, aprendo la strada a soluzioni più articolate, ma lasciando ancora lacune e motivi di insoddisfazione in parte dovuti al fatto che egli era l'unico estensore di una vicenda letteraria le cui diversità culturali e linguistiche richiedevano una molteplicità di specializzazioni. Nel 2004 compariva la *History of South African Literature* di Christopher Heywood, lacunosa e vastamente insoddisfacente per difetto di spessore critico. Nel 2010, infine, è stata pubblicata dalla Columbia University Press una prima opera collettiva di più autori, che però si limitava alla produzione recente in inglese, nella *South African Literature in English since 1945* af-

fidata a G. Cornwell, D. Klopper e C. MacKenzie.

Oltre ai precedenti citati, un esempio importante è costituito da due opere fondanti del grande comparatista Albert Gérard, *Four African Literatures, Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic* del 1971 e *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa* del 1986, che hanno per prime delineato il quadro di un discorso critico che sarebbe emerso soltanto in anni più tardi, e a cui si sono esplicitamente ispirati Attwell e Attridge.

La recentissima *Cambridge History of South African Literature* (CHSAL) è quindi il primo caso di una storia letteraria basata su un criterio di unità culturale nazionale che si proponga di coprire l'intero spettro della produzione letteraria del paese, orale e scritta, in varie lingue fra le undici ufficiali. È anche il primo esempio di un'opera del genere a più voci, dato che i due coordinatori hanno affidato la stesura dei contributi a un collettivo collegato in rete di ben quarantadue specialisti tutti rigorosamente sudafricani, articolando i vari settori all'interno di una struttura complessiva portante basata sul concetto della realtà multilinguistica del Sudafrica di cui sono stati sostenitori anche altri critici sudafricani, come Andries Oliphant e Leon De Kock.

Organizzazione dell'opera

La CHSAL si svolge in sei grandi parti, ciascuna delle quali è preceduta da un'introduzione di Attwell e Attridge che ne disegna le caratteristiche generali collegandole in qualche modo alla storia culturale ma soprattutto politica. Si tratta di testi assai succinti che cercano di offrire prospettive anche cronologiche che si radichino nel tempo e tuttavia riportino alla situazione del presente. La suddivisione dipende insieme dal filo cronologico e dal settore culturale e linguistico, combinati insieme. Il corpo di ciascuna parte comprende capitoli affidati a specialisti singoli e forniti di una propria bibliografia specifica.

La Prima Parte, intitolata *Orature, Oral Histories, Origins*, deve aver posto i maggiori problemi, data la dovizia del patrimonio orale dell'attuale Sudafrica e della sua storia passata, contrapposta a una documentazione e ricerca ancora relativamente scarse, soprattutto per certi settori. L'incipit, che dà il la all'intero volume e vi conferisce un'impronta drammatica, è dato dalla vicenda (commentata da Hedley Twidle) dei testi narrati dai boscimani (IKam) prigionieri al Capo e che furono raccolti e trascritti da Bleek e Lloyd a fine Ottocento. In epoca recentissima, tali testi hanno avuto l'attenzione dell'artista Pippa Skotnes e della poetessa Antjie Krog, e in queste pagine riecheggiano ovattati di silenzio, quasi provenissero da un oltretomba: di fatto essi sono pervenuti a noi avulsi del proprio contesto socioculturale, testimonianza estrema di un colonialismo distruttivo. Procedendo, Russell Kaschula traccia un quadro complessivo della letteratura orale sudafricana e un'analisi contestuale del genere epico xhosa (componenti *izibongo*) giungendo sino alle performance dei moderni *imbongi* (poeti orali). Nhlanhla Maake presenta il genere *lifela* del Lesotho, e Mbongiseni Buthelezi riassume l'ampia storia dell'epica zulu dalle origini marziali dell'*izibongo* alle performance attuali che si piegano a esigenze le più disparate, dal teatro e dalla poesia alla pubblicità e alle adunanze religiose. Manie Groenewald e Mokgale Makgopa hanno il compito di perlustrare settori meno praticati dalla ricerca, come quelli in lingua isiNdebele, isiSwati, Sotho settentrionale, Tsivenda e Xitsonga.

La Seconda Parte è dedicata a *Exploration, Early Modernity and Enlightenment at the Cape 1488-1820* e si rifà esplicitamente al mito di Adamastor che il poeta portoghese delle *Lusiadi* aveva collocato in Africa australe (capitolo curato da van Wyk Smith). Carli Coetzee si sofferma sull'archivio degli insediamenti olandesi e il suo innervarsi nella narrativa contemporanea; Ian Glenn riassume per accenni il vasto settore della scrittura ottocentesca naturalistica e di

viaggio, indulgiando sulle problematiche della storiografia letteraria sudafricana. Questa parte ha dovuto comprimere drasticamente l'apporto dei diari e delle cronache di esplorazione e scoperta, considerandone anche l'inevitabile ripetitività e la frequente irrilevanza letteraria. Con la Terza Parte, *Empire, Resistance and National Beginnings, 1820-1910*, l'analisi si fa più estesa e dettagliata. Se la Seconda Parte era praticamente monopolizzata dalla storia e cultura di matrice olandese e boera, pur con gli apporti coloniali portoghesi e la compresenza delle culture indigene, dal 1820 in poi emergono l'egemonia politica britannica e l'influenza anglofona nel quadro di un lungo braccio di ferro con i coloni boeri sino al confronto finale della guerra del 1899-1902 e alla successiva formazione dell'Unione Sudafricana nel 1910. Si noti che il termine 'resistenza' qui si applica a più contesti, sia quello africano indigeno (resistenza anticoloniale) sia a quello boero, poi denominato afrikaans (resistenza antibritannica). Questa è la stagione della cosiddetta letteratura imperiale sorta nelle varie aree colonizzate dall'Inghilterra, rispecchiata nei capitoli di Matthew Shum e di Laura Chrisman, mentre nascono la stampa missionaria e il giornalismo fatto dai neri (Catherine Woeber). Ad Elleke Boehmer il compito di riferire sulle narrazioni della guerra angloboera (detta anche «sudafricana») e a H.P. van Coller quello di analizzare le origini della letteratura afrikaans. È caratteristico che nella storia letteraria sudafricana si parli di 'letteratura inglese' oppure «letteratura afrikaans» anziché «in inglese» oppure «in afrikaans», a testimoniare la radicata separazione che ha marcato sin dall'inizio questo universo coloniale e postcoloniale. Inoltre, a chi conosca il mondo sudafricano salta subito agli occhi la macroscopica assenza di Olive Schreiner che pure visse e operò in questo lasso di tempo storico: la sua straordinaria intuizione creativa e la sua poliedrica presenza artistica, intellettuale e politica qui compaiono solo per cenni fuggitivi, e una trattazione della sua rile-

vanza complessiva viene deferita alla Parte Sesta, dove Meg Samuelson si occupa di *Writing Women*. Schreiner fu molto più che una *writing woman*, e la sua figura proiettò un'ombra lunga sull'epoca in cui visse, dando vita a concetti culturali prima di lei sconosciuti e che ebbero un ruolo chiave nello sviluppo successivo del romanzo, del giornalismo e della saggistica filosofico-politica.

Nella Parte Quarta si tratta di *Modernism and Transnational Culture, 1910-1848*. Il capitolo iniziale, di Bhekizizwe Peterson, rintraccia le origini del romanzo storico nero lungo la vicenda delle prime generazioni di scrittori: anche qui, la statura di Sol Plaatje e la sua invenzione postcoloniale avrebbero meritato uno spazio diverso e una lettura critica approfondita. Gerrie Olivier disegna la prospettiva dei poeti afrikaner degli anni Trenta e quella del *plaasroman*, il romanzo di ambientazione rurale, sino alle sue ramificazioni contemporanee. Ntongela Masiela guarda all'importante New African Movement come fase di confronto con la modernità della colonizzazione e come risposta ad essa attraverso la generazione di grandi intellettuali neri impegnati nel discorso culturale. Tony Voss percorre la vicenda del modernismo in Campbell, H. Dhlomo, Van Wyk Louw, mentre Craig MacKenzie guarda al mondo urbano e al localismo in Blackburn, Pauline Smith, Plomer e Bosman, mettendo a fuoco tipicità ed eccentricità.

La Parte Quinta del volume è la più nutrita e cospicua, e avrebbe certamente guadagnato maggior senso da una suddivisione ulteriore dato che copre un periodo vasto e agitato, oltre che ancora vicinissimo, *Apartheid and Its Aftermath, 1948 to the Present*. Il capitolo dedicato al racconto breve nei «favolosi anni Cinquanta» è svolto da Dorothy Driver, e quello della scrittura dell'esilio (categoria nuovissima, tipicamente postapartheid) da Tlhalo Radithlalo. Hein Willemsse copre la letteratura in afrikaans dal '48 al '76, mentre quella dal '48 a oggi è affidata a Louise Viljoen. Un'altra nuova catego-

ria, legata all'ispirazione politico-ideologica, è quella della cosiddetta «narrativa progressista» analizzata da Peter Blair e in cui fa una breve comparsa anche Olive Schreiner. Nel periodo storico delle grandi battaglie antiapartheid si parlava di «letteratura di protesta» oppure «di resistenza»; nel volume di Attwell e Attridge invece questi gruppi vengono scomposti e riorganizzati in poesia della Black Consciousness (Thengani Ngwenya), forme popolari e l'United Democratic Front (Peter Horn), scrittura dal carcere (Daniel Roux), cui si aggiungono un capitolo di collegamento sulla poesia lirica durante e dopo l'apartheid (Dirk Klopper) e un altro capitolo su teatro, resistenza e ripresa (Christiaan Swanpoel). La cesura marcata dalla fine del regime dell'apartheid e dalla svolta democratica rientra nell'analisi di Stephen Clingman, che guarda specificamente al periodo di transizione e alla liquidazione dell'apartheid; di Rita Barnard, sul riscrivere la nazione, e di Michael Titlestad, sullo scrivere la città nel postapartheid. Gli ultimi tre contributi sono molto vicini al presente, anzi, si innervano in esso e lo toccano da vicino, sollevando ogni sorta di interrogativi e perplessità circa gli sviluppi della postcolonialità sudafricana e le sue risposte all'urgenza della modernità alla luce di un tormentato passato sociopolitico. Un ulteriore capitolo copre la produzione in lingue africane dal 1948 a oggi: e vien fatto di notare come tale discorso rimanga scollato dal contesto.

La Parte Sesta, *South African Literature: Continuities and Contrasts*, funge da coda e da chiusura, senza che vi sia una conclusione generale. Parrebbe quasi che qui si fossero radunate delle riflessioni che non si sapeva dove altrove collocare, come il capitolo sulle scrittrici (Meg Samuelson), che rimane evidentemente avulso da contesti storico sociali, e quello a cura di Margaret Daymond e Andries Visagie su confessione e autobiografia, genere particolarmente praticato in questo periodo storico ma non rintracciabile soltanto in esso. Si colloca invece assi bene a questo punto del volume l'a-

nalisi di Michael Green sulla narrativa sperimentale, quella di Leon De Kock sulla questione della traduzione e quella di Peter McDonald sul libro in Sudafrica. In calce a tutto il resto, il saggio di David Johnson sulla critica letteraria e culturale in Sudafrica strutturato cronologicamente sul lungo periodo.

Uno sguardo complessivo sulla Cambridge History of South African Literature

Nell'introduzione generale, Attwell e Attridge dichiarano la propria (inevitabile, e necessaria) distanza dalle grandi storie letterarie nazionali monocordi, ancora ispirate al concetto culturale derivante dal romanticismo herderiano. Tale presa di posizione, che lascia alle spalle l'idealismo tedesco e la lunga scia di manuali di storia della letteratura che hanno riempito gli scaffali delle biblioteche sino alla nostra giovinezza, non significa però automaticamente l'aver trovato una nuova formula storiografica. Nel caso specifico, appare evidente che, mentre si abbandonava una linea ormai antica e inevitabilmente superata, non si è guardato a quanto di autenticamente nuovo e diverso si è detto e suggerito in questo campo soprattutto sul versante della critica di ispirazione marxista e in particolare gramsciana.

La grande assente dal volume della CHSAL è la storia culturale, con tutte le implicazioni di attenzione storica, politica e sociale che essa necessariamente comporta. Il risultato è un caleidoscopio di frammenti che spesso non rimandano l'uno all'altro; e lasciano da parte la ricchissima tradizione della cultura popolare che si è sviluppata in Sudafrica, articolando a modo proprio generi e lingue e elaborandone di nuovi, mescolandoli alla musica e all'espressione visiva, facendone teatro all'aperto, dando vita a una poesia rapida e aggressiva che innervò tanta resistenza durante l'apartheid e ancora oggi appare viva e dialogante con le istituzioni e il potere. In questa assenza si iscrive l'esclusione dal volume della saggistica politica e del grande giornalismo sudafricano, ivi compreso

quello nato nella rivista *Drum* che ebbe un ruolo culturale e politico di così grande importanza; il silenzio sulla straordinaria letteratura nata da e intorno alla Truth and Reconciliation Commission; la scarsa attenzione data alla letteratura popolare e per ragazzi, particolarmente rilevanti in un panorama di derivazione coloniale.

I coordinatori avvertono, in apertura di volume, che molte saranno le osservazioni che si rivolgeranno loro riscontrando assenze, dimenticanze e negligenze. In effetti, non è possibile neppure sfogliare il volume senza stupirsi dello scarso rilievo dato a Schreiner, Fugard, Plaatje e, fra i contemporanei, a Gordimer e Coetzee: come se per essere democratici fosse necessario decapitare le cime più alte di un bosco, quelle che svettano sopra le altre per qualità letteraria, successo di pubblico, profondo significato politico culturale e capacità di invenzione. Ma tale evidente difetto passa in seconda linea rispetto alla stortura del coordinamento generale, all'assenza di quell'autentica cornice vitale che sola potrebbe oggi interpretare le espressioni letterarie e artistiche raccontandone al contempo le vicende storico sociali. Da questo libro, che pure contiene molti eccellenti contributi individuali, non nasce un volto del Sudafrica che li colleghi tutti insieme e li esalti, come pur aveva tentato di fare Stephen Gray nei lontani anni Settanta evocando l'immagine dell'arcipelago. Forse si dirà che questo è un compito impossibile: ma Attwell e Attridge non ci hanno nemmeno provato, limitandosi a svolgere un lavoro di coordinamento contabile. Infine ci si chiede per quale motivo si sia deciso di affidare i contributi esclusivamente ad autori sudafricani, quando è noto che in questo settore letterario esistono note eccellenze anche fuori del Sudafrica. Forse un malinteso intento di «autenticità» può aver suggerito tale discutibile scelta; o forse il desiderio di dare un carattere nazionale anche alle voci critiche. È però indubbio che, così facendo, Attwell e Attridge hanno dimostrato di preferire l'anti-

ca via della chiusura al cosmopolitismo, ripetendo percorsi della canonicità sudafricana di impronta nettamente coloniale. Oggi il campo delle letterature postcoloniali è frequentato da eccellenti specialisti internazionali e appare aperto ai benefici venti della ricerca, del dibattito intellettuale e dell'innovazione metodologica.

La loro opera sarà comunque utile, sia perché costellata di pezzi di bravura critica del firmamento letterario sudafricano, sia perché, come si è detto in apertura, costituisce un esempio di storia letteraria trasversale del paese condotta a più mani. Ma non costituisce una pietra miliare, né pare possibile definirla intrinsecamente nuova. Si tratta pur sempre di una classica storia letteraria, con la differenza che i contributi vengono da una pluralità di voci e quindi vanno valutati uno a uno, e non nel quadro dell'opera complessiva.

ITALA VIVAN

Teju Cole, *Città aperta*, Einaudi, Torino, 2013, traduzione di Gioia Guerzoni. Titolo originale *Open City*, Random House, New York, 2011

Il romanzo del nigeriano Teju Cole si presenta in un alone di plauso (più di venti importanti testate lo hanno elogiato come uno dei migliori libri dell'anno nel mondo di lingua inglese), e incoronato da vari premi letterari anche di rilievo, come il Pen/Hemingway Award e il New York City Book Award. Inoltre, il suo autore esce, per i tipi della Random House, dalla scuderia guidata dal formidabile agente letterario Andrew Wylie: con simili origini, il libro non poteva non essere almeno un buon prodotto di mercato, dato che il sistema editoriale che lo ha messo in circolazione non si muove mai a casaccio né per azzardo. Confesso che perciò io l'ho preso in mano con qualche diffidenza, proprio a causa della mostruosa macchina da guerra che lo ha lanciato e lo sorregge.

Per fortuna, tuttavia, *Città aperta* è molto di più che un buon prodotto: è un libro ottimo, assai ben scritto e strutturato, ed è anche sorprendente per l'inventività narrativa e la capacità di attirare e mantenere desta l'attenzione del lettore. L'originalità della scrittura ritmica è di certo più palpabile in lingua inglese, ove dispiega una sua interessante eccentricità di base orale e di effetto squisitamente musicale nelle riprese, nelle ripetizioni variate, nel fraseggio e nei collegamenti fra i segmenti narrativi. Il corpo del romanzo, benché sia suddiviso in due parti e ventuno capitoli, dà la netta impressione di articolarsi come un continuum unico le cui cesure sono pause di respiro indipendenti da fine o inizio capitolo (o anche paragrafo): è, insomma, una sorta di protratta performance che conserva tutte le caratteristiche tipiche dell'oralità.

Allo stesso tempo, comunque, *Città aperta* è anche un romanzo colto e addirittura meta-letterario, il cui percorso lancia arditi viadotti appoggiandoli su pilastri di discorso critico e disegnandoli lungo indicazioni stilistiche ben riconoscibili, e del resto concordemente e rapidamente individuate dai critici e recensori che lo hanno analizzato sinora.

Tale duplicità originaria coesiste senza contraddizioni nella faglia di modernità in cui si colloca Teju Cole, nato in Nigeria nel 1975 ma a diciassette anni trapiantato a New York, dove vive e lavora e che ha eletto a teatro di questo romanzo. Immagino che tosto o tardi si potrà leggere, in inglese o magari anche in italiano, il suo primo romanzo, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, pubblicato in Nigeria da Cassava Republic, nel quale narra il ritorno in patria dopo dieci anni di assenza. Intanto la New York percorsa a piedi e in metro dal giovane medico psichiatra Julius, voce narrante e motore esperienziale di *Città aperta*, è di fatto la vera protagonista del romanzo e ne segna i ritmi e il senso, sino dal titolo, mutuato al celebre film di Rossellini e allusivo a uno stato di guerra regolata da patteggiamenti, ma non per questo meno crudele

e pericolosa.

La guerra si annuncia subito, nelle pagine del libro, con accenni alla voragine lasciata dal crollo delle torri gemelle – il 9/11, come viene ormai chiamato il luogo della strage, creando una «metonimia del disastro» – e prosegue legando con un filo sottile il racconto, attraverso le vicende di *oma*, l'ava tedesca le cui peregrinazioni nella Germania del dopoguerra egli a tratti rammemora, e che oscuramente ricerca con un viaggio a Bruxelles; come pure attraverso la lunga scia di sangue lasciata dalla storia della schiavitù a New York, con l'ombra sinistra dei linciaggi, sino al momento finale che lo vede sostare pensoso sul sito del Negro Burial Ground. Continua, la guerra, negli episodi feroci di aggressione di cui Julius è via via testimone e infine anche vittima, durante un ritorno a casa nell'Upper West Side; si disegna nella violenza di cui lui stesso è stato responsabile nei confronti di una donna che scopre di avere stuprato molti anni prima, nell'ubriacatura di una festa di adolescenti, rimuovendo poi il ricordo dell'evento; riemerge come memoria lontana di una crudelissima punizione sofferta da ragazzo all'accademia militare, per mano di un sadico sergente istruttore che lo accusa (ingiustamente) di furto. Guerra è anche l'inaudita crudeltà del centro di detenzione per immigrati clandestini che visita nel quartiere di Queens, scoprendovi un'umanità oppressa. La guerra è una sorta di ragnatela sottile che sottende il presente, cioè l'arco di un'annata in cui si collocano i fatti di riferimento della narrazione. E i fatti di violenza sono la trama della storia collettiva – colonialismo, schiavitù, sfruttamento, esclusione – come pure di quella individuale, di cui marcano i passi.

Passi che, nel romanzo, costruiscono materialmente la narrazione come se fossero essi stessi parole. Appena libero dal lavoro, Julius si abbandona a interminabili camminate, «un contrappunto alla frenesia delle giornate in ospedale», e che «pian piano si erano allungate, portandomi sempre più lontano, tanto

che a volte, di notte, dovevo tornare a casa in metropolitana. È così che – conclude Julius – all'inizio dell'ultimo anno di specializzazione in psichiatria, New York si era fatta strada nella mia vita passo passo».

Questi vagabondaggi sono una sorta di erranza in cui Julius va più o meno consapevolmente alla ricerca di segni e di senso – come indicato in un famoso testo di Sebald, suo scrittore preferito e spesso citato – grazie ai quali il labirinto della città, la arruffata matassa dell'esistenza, possano assumere un ordine, edificare un sistema.

Il romanzo si spegne senza che ciò avvenga. La città brulicante di personaggi e di situazioni esistenziali rimane magmatica e dispersa, e il suo visitatore appare fasciato da un silenzio sempre più fitto, immerso in una solitudine via via più densa e impenetrabile. La New York di Julius, sebbene colma di diversità e di differenze d'ogni tipo, si chiude in forme gelide, strozzando il viandante in itinerari che egli è costretto a ripercorrere, in una ineliminabile coazione a ripetere senza sosta, nonostante le pause nei musei, a contemplare i quadri, o negli slarghi delle rimembranze musicali: un conforto psichico che si insinua costantemente nella meditazione, insieme ai ricordi del passato e ai miti e alle credenze dell'infanzia africana.

Questo errare per le vie di New York è la forma che assume l'esistenza stessa di Julius, e perciò contiene in sé il proprio scopo: è una cartografia segreta che si disegna e si anima mentre si vive, e che si abbandonerà quando si abbandonerà anche la vita. Ma all'interno di tale ampia metafora esistenziale, il romanzo è colmo di una serie di elementi culturali di grande interesse. Vi si traccia infatti il profilo di una città multiforme e multirazziale in cui le storie si intrecciano senza sosta e i destini si intersecano, narrandosi l'uno all'altro, come è il caso di Julius e del suo vecchio professore di letteratura, il giapponese Saito, i cui incontri propongono l'amicizia attraverso le tappe

di una conversazione interminabile. Questa storia costituisce quasi l'epitome del romanzo, nella bellezza della sua gratuità e nella valenza dei suoi riferimenti alla ricerca gnoseologica cui si sta dedicando il giovane medico: il senso della memoria e la forza della dignità, il bisogno del metodo e le descrizioni «del territorio solitario» che la sua mente sta esplorando. E se la trama dei passi, la sfida degli sguardi incrociati, l'intrico dei rimandi creati dalle sintonie e dalle simpatie hanno un senso, questo va cercato nella scioltezza del gioco che si viene formando, esempio del vivere ed esso stesso vivere.

Ci si chiederà, forse, che razza di romanzo sia questo, firmato da un nigeriano ma radicato nella realtà di New York, fregiato del titolo d'un indimenticabile film del neorealismo italiano e disseminato di una complessa segnaletica culturale che rimanda a un intero firmamento di pensatori e scrittori di estrazione la più varia, complessivamente internazionale. Si potrebbe dire che *Città aperta* sia un tentativo – più o meno riuscito, questo saranno i lettori a deciderlo – di articolare con libera creatività una rappresentazione della condizione umana del XXI secolo, così come si è incarnata nei panni del giovane Julius, nelle sue tracce e nelle sue memorie, nei suoi impulsi e nei suoi istinti, ma soprattutto nel suo sguardo e nel suo orecchio di artista.

La mia sensibilità personale ha trovato in questo libro un universo di riferimenti a figure e movenze del mondo letterario, talvolta giocose, come il custode dell'American Folk Art Museum, un tizio le cui «gambe smilze ricordavano Pnin di Nabokov». Altre volte, il peso greve della storia incide sul presente, come quando l'errabondo Julius si spinge sino a Trinity Church fondata dai balenieri a fine Seicento: e qui rammemora l'inquietante «messaggio degli abissi» attribuito alla balena bianca. «Il fatto di trovarmi tutto solo nel cuore della città mi sembrava stranamente rassicurante», osserva Julius pensando a Melville – e forse non solo

al Melville di Moby Dick, ma più ancora a quel suo sconcertante personaggio, Bartleby, che finisce imprigionato fra le mura di una città di pietra. E con gli occhi fissi sul mare che circonda Manhattan, osserva:

«Che strana isola [...], un'isola che si era rivolta su se stessa a da cui l'acqua era stata bandita. La spiaggia era un carapace, permeabile solo in alcuni punti. Dove si poteva avere davvero la sensazione di stare su un fiume, in quella città fluviale? Era tutto costruito, cemento e pietra, e i milioni di persone che la abitavano avevano una percezione vaga dell'acqua che li circondava. Era una sorta di segreto imbarazzante, una figlia poco amata, trascurata».

La curiosità del viandante Julius abbraccia memorie letterarie e osservazioni naturalistiche, individuando in alberi e uccelli altrettanti abitanti della metropoli, parte di essa e del suo habitat contemporaneo, non meno degli umani di vario colore e linguaggio.

Numerosi sono i rimandi ad opere di Coetzee, che alcuni recensori hanno visto come il maestro di stile di Teju Cole. Personalmente, ritengo che la scrittura traumatizzata e quasi crocefissa di Coetzee sia lontana dall'ispirazione sciolta e diffusamente narrativa di Cole. Vero è che quest'ultimo deve aver guardato alla lezione di nitore e precisione espressiva che caratterizza la prosa di Coetzee, ed è indubbio che nella figura della dottoressa Maillotte – che Julius incontra durante un viaggio in aereo, e con cui cena a Bruxelles – si ritrovano i lineamenti di Elizabeth Costello, le sue solitarie riflessioni meditative, le sue eccentricità di anziana accademica; ma si tratta di strizzatine d'occhi, di allusioni, anche qui, giocose e di segnali di simpatia. La dottoressa Maillotte (alias Elizabeth Costello) finisce per sostituire

quell'ava lontana che Julius aveva vagamente voluto ricercare a Bruxelles, ma di cui non si era poi curato di individuare le tracce. Così Julius riparte per New York senza più cercare la sua *oma*, ma avendo trovato la dottoressa Maillotte. Una conversazione a cavallo dello spazio e del tempo, come nel caso di Melville.

E infine, questo romanzo contiene un personaggio narrativo davvero intrigante, il musulmano Farouq con cui, durante il viaggio a Bruxelles, nasce una intensa conversazione su temi intellettuali e politici. Farouq è un ammiratore di Mohamed Choukri, con cui invece Ben Jelloun era in disaccordo, e di quest'ultimo dice che «la gente come Ben Jelloun fa la vita dello scrittore in esilio, e questo gli dà una certa [...] *poeticità* [...] agli occhi dell'Occidente. Essere uno scrittore in esilio è una gran cosa. Ma che cos'è l'esilio al giorno d'oggi, ora che tutti vanno e vengono liberamente?» Al che Julius, dopo una riflessione, osserva: «E' sempre difficile, vero? Intendo, resistere all'impulso di orientalizzarsi. Se non lo fai, chi ti pubblica? Quale editore occidentale vuole uno scrittore marocchino o indiano che non offra spunti di immaginario orientale, o che non soddisfi il desiderio di esotismo? E' per quello che esistono il Marocco e l'India, per essere orientali».

In un sol colpo, Teju Cole ha ripreso il discorso di Edward Said sull'orientalismo e l'esotismo, ed ha anche assestato una frecciata a Ben Jelloun e al suo esilio dorato, concludendo con una riflessione sulla mutata natura dell'esilio nel mondo cosmopolita cui lui stesso, e Ben Jelloun, appartengono. Il romanzo di Teju Cole, insomma, è un testo di ottima qualità, da assaporare lentamente, con gusto, con attenzione. E il libro di uno scrittore africano di nuovo tipo, oltre che di nuova generazione.

MICHELA BORZAGA

I remember: An Interview with Denis Hirson²

The interview was conducted by Michela Borzaga on 9 May 2012 at the University of Vienna (Austria)

M.B.: Let's start at the beginning. You grew up in an English speaking family with Jewish roots. In *White Scars* you write that Afrikaans at high school became a «form of slow torture to you». You write how during Afrikaans classes you stopped functioning. Afrikaans was for you always a 'bully-tongue' for the instruction of orders, unbeautiful. In 1983, when you were already living in Paris you translated Breyten Breytenbach's *In Africa Even the Flies are Happy: Selected Poems 1964-77*. My question concerns your relationship with Afrikaans. What kind of role does Afrikaans play in your life today? In what sense was this early project important for the following projects?

D.H.: My first real confrontation with another foreign language in terms of having to survive, in my daily life as opposed to being involved in an intellectual process, was with French. English in Johannesburg was *the only* language, in other words the other languages which were being spoken were negated. The languages of African people sounded like noise to me. There was no question of trying to isolate a word and understand what it might mean apart from «hello» and «good-bye» and things like that. Afrikaans was just an obstacle. It was an obstacle and, of course, for me it gained a political colour, an increasingly sharp political colour, especially when my father went to jail.³ But later, after leaving South Africa, though

² I thank Annelene Barle for the transcription and Karina Brink for her assistance with the final text of the interview.

³ Baruch Hirson was part of the African Resistance Movement and was jailed for nine years because of his political activism from 1964 to 1973.

I thought of myself as relatively sedentary and conservative in many ways, I was shaken and shook myself quite radically by going to France. I can't imagine that I would have started translating Breytenbach had I not gone to France because there I discovered another language beyond English: it was beyond and, as a result, I was beyond myself in a way. In the first few years in France I was disoriented, I felt like an idiot a lot of the time. I was constantly putting myself in a situation of ignorance, and I needed this. Hungrily, I needed it. I would refuse to speak English to English-speaking people if they were in the same room as French-speaking people, and chose to speak French instead. I was, in other words, also questioning the place of English inside myself through French. All of this is retrospective reconstructing, of course, but I think that in shifting the certainties of language in my mind, the potential old uncertainties might have reappeared, the possibility that English was not after all the only language in which I might live and think. African languages really hadn't fully impinged on my reality in South Africa. I didn't have to deal with them, but Afrikaans I did have to deal with. I dealt with it as a student at school, I had to deal with it as a soldier in the army. Now, in France, lo and behold, I was given the possibility of dealing with Breytenbach, who was in prison at the time, somebody who had used that language in writing and who was using it in what I sensed to be a freeing way, whereas it had in some ways imprisoned me. I came across Breytenbach almost by chance (I put «chance» in inverted commas). Somebody asked me to read Breytenbach in Afrikaans, in public, to a Paris audience – I write about that in *White Scars*. And then a few months after doing that I fell ill. In fact, I was translating Breytenbach when I was ill, and that illness was also part of a sort of an identity crisis. I caught hepatitis after going to Israel because of something I drank at the old Jerusalem market. My aunt

also got hepatitis but in a much milder form, and we'd travelled together. When I came back to Paris, I didn't know what I was doing with my life. I had applied to become a child psychotherapist; I had been accepted at the Tavistock Institute in London, but I was also doing theatre in Paris. Something inside me said: Continue with the theatre! Which meant giving up a sort of path, if you like, into the future. It meant just staying in the present. At that moment, at that crossroads, when I was out of daily action for six months, I started translating Breytenbach's poetry. I ended up being completely and utterly obsessive about it. I bought a bilingual dictionary and I just started translating. Looking back at it now, it was such an utterly naïve act. I just didn't have the linguistic faculty to take on such a challenge and Breytenbach is not an easy poet at all, if there is such a thing as an easy poet. So, somehow, retroactively this allowed me to go back into a closed linguistic space and open it up, and of course it was not indifferent to me that Breytenbach happened to be in jail at the time – in the same jail where my father had been. Plus, he had lived in Paris and I was living in Paris. Also, I found his poetry intensely sensual and full of these bombs of metaphor which explode softly and colourfully in the mind. It was a period of my existence when I was constantly thinking about writing, but there was no way that I could imagine being engaged in a fullscale writing project of my own. I was in such an uncertain space. I think of that translation work now as a transitional activity. I wouldn't set out on such a project now. But still translation happens to me. Things are given to me. I am no longer in working contact with Breytenbach, but I am with Antjie Krog, so very occasionally I've something of hers to look at. Right now I've got some court records to look at from South Africa because they interest me and once again I've got this package which I barely dare to open, again in Afrikaans. I can't explain

that to you. It's like some sort of animal that follows you, you look back over your shoulder and there it is again. Does that answer your question?

M.B.: Yes.

D.H.: Another thing that comes to mind in this context is Yiddish. (Again, I speak about Yiddish in *White Scars*). When I think about foreign languages in my life, the focus is on French, but then in Johannesburg I witnessed my mother receiving letters from her parents, above all her mother, in Yiddish; she read out these letters aloud to my father when I was present. I don't know how often this happened but there was this other foreign language in our lives. I was witness to my mother's intense childlike pleasure at these events. It was again a language escaping from me. And there are these resonances between Yiddish and Afrikaans and I don't know if that has anything to do with the reason why I felt in such an utterly naïve way that I could take on the Breytenbach translation.

M.B.: Translation is also a key theme in your books. From *The House Next Door to Africa*, to *White Scars* one sees an attempt to map, re-map, locate, re-locate, exile and estrangement, contact with what is not familiar, a constant need to *translate* linguistically and culturally. «We belong to no single place, ours is the history of those who cross over». How much is your writing linked to a need to overcome a sense of estrangement or to make what is strange familiar?

D.H.: Or what is familiar strange, I would add. One answer is that when I was an adolescent in South Africa, I think a sort of mist of depression and anxiety and loneliness and silence covered over quite large territories of my experience, and below that mist, there was a previous experience which might have

been more luminous and more innocent and which was previous to my father's arrest. I think that *The House Next Door to Africa* was perhaps, again in retrospect, partly a way of recovering that other world. If one could think about that as a translation, I don't know if I'd use that word, but perhaps one can. Certainly I had to find words for an experience which at least to some extent I had to seek out in Paris, with the lightness I rediscovered there, and that had to some extent been buried for me in Johannesburg when my father was in jail and I went into a mute-like state. [Pause] If I'm pausing in my answer, it's because I don't have an intellectual reason why I sit down to write. It's only retrospectively that I can even speak about this. When I wrote *The House Next Door to Africa*, I think I must have gone through five times more material than I actually ended up publishing, if not more. I have this image of my wastepaper basket piling up over and over and over again, with crumpled balls of paper that I threw at it and sometimes missed. I have this image of myself writing in winter, with the window closed, because it was bloody cold, and the heater on, and leaning against the window pane and actually cracking it. I was just going to lock myself in the room and write till something came of it. And then at some point I made myself laugh. That for me, as I remember it, was the breakthrough. I was writing this piece about a flower at the beginning of the book, the stapelia flower, it's a sort of leathery starred flower of a succulent type, and it stinks. I managed to write down the smell of this flower and then I laughed. That is when I felt that I was getting somewhere. I realised I had to just get into the field of perception and not into all the things that I thought about perception. That was one strand. The other one which was so significant to me was that I'd been to Israel and I'd met my grandmother, my mother's mother. She told me stories about growing up in Russia which made me feel that I could actually

talk about experiences which preceded my own experience in South Africa, her Russian childhood actually somehow balanced out with the fact that I was in France and not in South Africa. So thanks to my grandmother I developed a sense of an ancestral past, and at the same time I had just an inkling of a sense of a future for myself in France, and this gave me some distance from my experience of South Africa. The whole essentially uncreative aspect of living in South Africa for me, particularly as an adult, as a young adult and as a student, was how little distance we had from what was going on around us. There was a cloying kind of complicity, a pressure to say and do the things that had to be said and done politically. The idea of actually being able to see and write in a fresh way was difficult. My grandmother's stories were so wonderful. They were just so visual. She was a great storyteller, and through her this whole new world came alive for me. I had very little idea of our past when I was growing up in South Africa. The various changes in perception while living in Paris, which included going off several times with a big tape-recorder to listen to my grand-mother, allowed me slowly to find something that sounded like my own voice. I remember, eventually I printed out five or six pages of writing and kept them. When I started showing them to people I realised from their reactions there was something in there that was *me*. I think of this process as a kind of *archaeology* rather than translation. Archaeology in terms of my own experience, of going below the depressive muteness, and archaeology in terms of our history and in terms of my grandmother's stories.

M.B.: Before I turn to your memory books (*The House Next Door to Africa*, *I Remember King Kong* and *We Walk Straight*), I would like to remind our readers of your important activities as an editor in the mid-1990s. In 1994 you edited the *Heinemann Anthology of South African*

Short Stories and in 1997 *The Lava of this Land*. How did these projects develop?

D.H.: The earth-shattering moment for me was Mandela's release in 1990. It was as if I was directly experiencing a major turning point in South Africa's history, and at the same time, in an entirely unexpected way, reliving my father's release from jail eighteen years earlier but in a very different way. It had not been so easy the first time. The superpositioning of these two events had a deep effect on me. In 1990, the whole question was raised as to how to situate myself in relation to South Africa. Up until that point I think I might have thought of myself as a South African writer in Paris, but then the boundaries shifted and I honestly didn't know how to respond. I thought, I cannot be a South African writer now; there are things going on in South Africa that I'm just not a part of. What can I do? I was in a state of both elation and loss. «Lostness» rather than loss. Also, an old sadness about my father surfaced. I thought the only response I could find within myself to this situation was to read as much South African writing as I could. I didn't know South African writing as well as I might have at that point, really. When I'd lived in South Africa I had read anything *but* South African writing. I needed oxygen from elsewhere. So, in Paris, sometime in the early 1990's, I started reading or rereading South African short stories. Partly because I was thinking of teaching South African writing, bringing it into my English classes, whereas beforehand I would never have thought of doing such a thing. So I started looking for stories that would work for a French readership. Then I went to conferences, notably one in Oxford where I met Martin Trump and decided I'd work on a book of short stories with him because he'd published another book of short stories, which included two pieces I wanted to use, so I thought it would be interesting to collaborate with him. In fact, we didn't collaborate at all,

because, sadly, he fell ill and died before the work was finished. Our collaboration was minimal, and I put that book together on my own. Then the poetry followed sort of logically from there. Poetry was much more my territory than the short stories at that point. Initially I wanted to collaborate with Rob Berold, but he said no, and suggested that it would be better if I did it on my own. Working on the anthologies – finding the stories and poems I wanted, looking at them again and again, reconsidering and putting them all together – felt like writing. In fact, at one point, I read one of the strongest short stories that ultimately went into the Heinemann anthology, *I Take Back My Country* by Barto Smit, in the original Afrikaans, and found that the already published English translation was inadequate. I had it redone, and got involved with the translation myself. But since there were already two translators, we decided to leave my name out. So, I really was completely and utterly involved in all that work, and afterwards became involved by extension in teaching it, and also reading the poetry in public, eventually with an actress, Sonia Emmanuel, and then with a saxophone player, Steve Potts. We still do this, we've been doing performances off and on for more than ten years now. This is also possible in France because of the existence of the French version of *The Lava of this Land*, *Poèmes d'Afrique du sud*, with translations by Katia Wallisky and Georges Lory. They both worked on the translation of another small selection of poems in the 2011 book *Afrique du Sud, une traversée littéraire*. We now incorporate some of those poems into our performances too.

M.B.: How different was the project of *The Lava of this Land* from Leon de Kock's *The Heart in Exile* or Michael Chapman's *A Century of South African Poetry*?

D.H.: I can only say that I felt there were no anthologies like *The Lava of this Land*. There

are short stories anthologies which are for me of the same calibre as the Heinemann book, although I do think it's an excellent anthology, even if I say so myself. But I don't think there's any other book of poetry like *The Lava of this Land* because in it I was interested in the question of lineage, establishing a South African lineage, involving a wide range of poets, crossing many old barriers including those of language and colour. Black or white was not the issue. The issue was a certain kind of voice rooted in place and time. That was what I was pursuing as a theme, if you like, no doubt corresponding to my own need at that point in terms of South Africa, but I hope going way beyond that. I don't think there's another anthology like it. And there hasn't been, at least as far as I know, not since 1997.

M.B.: The title *The Lava of this Land* is taken from a poem by Tatamkhulu Afrika *The Mugging*. In your introduction you write that this anthology contains poems in which «memory of the past cools the molten violence of the present». In another passage you say that Afrika's poem evokes a new malleability and shift in the structures and atmosphere of the 1990s. How did you come to choose this title?

D.H.: Firstly, I am very struck by that poem, and there is a very strong image at the end of it, when the narrator, who has been stripped naked and robbed, doesn't know what to do, while the people who've robbed him are running away; he doesn't know whether inside himself he is lying there naked in the grass or whether part of him isn't running away with the robbers across the «lava of the land.» In other words, the whole question of sides, political and social sides, the side of the aggressor and the side of the victim, is up in the air there, as it was in South Africa at the time. I also think one should underline this issue of the victim. When putting together the poetry as well as

the short story anthology, I was aware of how much of a trap writing out of the position of the victim is for the writer. The poem seemed to me to be dealing with this issue in an interesting way. Then, of course, there is the word *land*, and this idea that it was volcanic. That image of the volcano comes up in quite a lot of the other writing in the 1980's and 90's, for example in Njabulo Ndebele's short story *My Uncle* (which is not in the anthology). That image of the fire and the malleable and the transformation which is in Tatamkhulu Afrika's poem itself, I can't remember more than that. But I should add that I became aware of Tatamkhulu's poetry, as also a lot of the poetry of that time, through Rob Berold's work on *New Coin*. He would send me issues of *New Coin* as they came out and I felt like I was part of that whole movement of newness and emergence of voice that Rob speaks about himself. *The Mugging* was one of the poems that was part of that whole current.

M.B.: Let's turn to your memory books. It is well known that *I Remember King Kong* and *We Walk Straight* are based on Georges Perec's book *Je me souviens*. These first books are memory books and are not only clearly characterized by a fragmented form, but also by a blurring of genres between prose and poetry. In particular I am thinking here of *The House Next Door to Africa* and *I Remember King Kong (the Boxer)*. Why this choice? What is the potential and the limit of this form? And how is this related to the theme of memory?

D.H.: I don't know how to explain the process when poetry shifts towards a prose form and when prose shifts towards a more lyrical form. But that's when I become intensely interested in a text among all the other reading that I do. I don't only read that kind of writing but writers as far apart as Dylan Thomas and Aimé Césaire, Henri Michaux or Bruno Schultz immediately fascinate me because of the way

in which they cross these boundaries. This resonates with something inside me and it's the form in which things come out for me most naturally, or did at any rate when I was writing those pieces. *The House Next Door to Africa* for me was like a series of poems. It was like a book of poetry to me, except that the storytelling of my grandmother and perhaps something of the storyteller inside me came out at the same time, so that it made sense to do it that way. I don't know if I thought about it so much as fragments. Just as I'm not sure if I would necessarily think about a collection of poetry as fragments. It is possible that the process of memory, of transmitting memory in writing, might lead naturally to a dense and fragmented form, dense because of the sedimentation of time, fragmented because the mind shifts from one memory to the next in ways that are sometimes unpredictable, like a dream sequence. I'm not sure that at the time I thought about this. And I can only see now how the forms of *The House Next Door* and *King Kong* might be related, and might have influenced the books that came afterwards.

M.B.: Like *White Scars*...

D.H.: Sure, definitely. *I Remember King Kong* was the first book that I published after *The House Next Door to Africa*. There was a novel which I wrote in between but which I decided never to publish. But *I Remember King Kong* came out of Perce's and Brainard's work, as you know. It wasn't Perce's invention, the structure, but as I wrote in *White Scars*, it was Perce's book that I picked up by chance and it immediately struck me. Before I finished reading it I was already writing my own based on the same structure. But again, utterly obsessively, at all moments; I remember even while I was teaching I was actually writing down bits and pieces. I've never done that before. In fact, I was still going through the process of mourning. My father died in 1999

but I think writing *King Kong* was an extension of that mourning process. It just came out like that. I wasn't thinking; it came at me like dots in a Pissarro painting. And again I had about three or four times more raw material than what I put in the book. Then I saw that I needed to shape it in a way, and in the end there was this need to tell a sort of a story: at the end of *I Remember King Kong*, I'm leaving South Africa with my family, so it's got this natural ending. You say it's a book of memory. It's absolutely a book of memory, but in a way it is also a book of mourning. I think my father's story, even though it's minimally encoded in the book, is nonetheless quite central to it. What makes me smile about the book now is how normal some of the memories are. I love the fact that I was able to write down «I remember "Ag, pleez daddy, won't you take us to the drive-in"», those songs or the films or the games. Everybody was involved in those things. So for me the book is also an act of retroactive integration, because I really felt when I was growing up in South Africa that in some ways I was on the outside of what was going on around me. When people went to see the *Sound of Music*, or *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, or James Bond, I didn't go. I didn't see those films or get the latest records, or in some cases I did but somehow it was only after everyone else had, or that was my impression anyway. In this respect (but not all respects) I think of Perce's book and Joe Brainard's book in the same way that I think about mine. Perce had been out of Paris between the ages of 6 and 10 because of the war when he lost his parents and had to go into the free French zone as a Jew. And Brainard has this homosexual thing going on: his absolute need to talk about homosexuality on every page or every second page and then to weave that thread back into what everybody else was doing around him in suburban Oklahoma. Perce doesn't talk about himself, though he does in another book he was writing at exactly the same time. In one

way or another, in words or in silence, I would say that in all three books there is a weaving of personal experience, lived through as marginal, back into «ordinary» experience. Concerning myself, I found I could remember and also enjoy so many elements of past experience retroactively. I was just like another person growing up in my generation in South Africa, after all. And I was. But I didn't see myself like that at the time at all. So, I think that in saying what I've just said, there's this issue, both in life and in writing, of fragmentation, this issue of marginalisation, and separate experience, the experiencing of one's own world as not actually totally overlapping with everybody else's world.

This may have been for many reasons, including the fact that I grew up as an only child for the first eight years of my life, with parents who were very different from most other parents around me. There's the whole Jewish dimension of our lives which we almost never spoke about in my home and hardly practiced in South Africa. Also, the whole question about my father's imprisonment, and what that meant in terms of marginalisation. And then I came to Paris and again, especially at the beginning, felt very different and off on a tangent. Maybe the pattern of my life corresponds to a particular frame of mind, which precedes so many of the things that have happened to me. I don't know. I wouldn't know. It's funny, because part of me just wants to sink into where I am and not be different from anybody else and not have these fragments of words to write down, why not just tell a story from one end to the other. Why not just write a straight, unfragmented novel...

M.B.: In the introduction to *The Lava of this Land*, you write that the «theme of memory is as natural to poetry as blood is to the heart» and that it takes on a particular significance in a country like South Africa where history has become the property of the state. How do you

see your creative writing in relation to History, with a capital H? Or to put it differently, can we say that you were also trying to write your own version, against the apartheid state's appropriation of history?

D.H.: There's definitely a sense in which I wanted to exorcise the history lessons which we received in South Africa. Definitely a sense in which when I wrote that piece on the Great Trek in *The House next Door to Africa* I wanted to get my own back at all the boredom of classroom history stuffed with state ideology. No doubt about it. And in fact this theme comes back again in *White Scars* when I go back to that bloody history book we had in high school and look at it again. How is it possible that history can coagulate like that into a heavy lump that you throw at the temple of the school child? I mean, it's just inhuman. And how is it possible that our teachers collaborated in this process? Our teachers were English-speaking; they were not Afrikaners, and yet they were collaborating in this making of history which was nothing but a reinforcement of the establishment of the apartheid state. How is it possible? And they themselves were bored stiff. At high school there was one exception, one history teacher who did not actually teach me, and who ended up becoming a journalist and then a political activist against the regime – Patrick Laurence. No doubt the fact that my father became a historian in jail also in some way influenced me. But history, along with English, was my favourite subject at school. These were also subjects that I got terrible marks for in my final high school exams, I did far better in Science and Maths. Anyway I did need to go back and write about South African history, appropriate it for myself, set it next to our family history and my own.

There's also a way in which memory, for me personally, has this added importance since I was transmitted very little memory of the past when I was actually living in South Africa.

The people around me didn't speak about the past, not at home, but, later, not at university either. We were so busy being South African and politically or socially involved in one way or another. I myself was not much of an activist I should add, but the people around me were. South Africa is such a young country, at least in terms of what has happened to it since whites first landed there, and people were putting so much energy into thinking about how it might change. There wasn't any space for the past in our lives. And as for my own family history, my South African grandparents and my great aunt had come to South Africa from Latvia too young to be able to say anything to me about their experience. But I didn't even know that when I was growing up. I hadn't asked myself at what age my grandmother came to South Africa, or any kind of question like that. When I read Dan Jacobson's *Heshel's Kingdom*, which is about Jews in Lithuania and how some of them were lucky to survive the Holocaust and come to South Africa, it was a revelation to me. It expanded on what I'd gleaned since leaving South Africa, but I didn't grow up with a well-developed sense of what had happened to Jews in Eastern Europe.

M.B.: The entries in *We Walk Straight* also start with the sentence *I remember* but the book has a different quality. The entries are longer, they often read like mini-short stories. They are less concentrated and less poetic if we want. Can we see this book as a bridge to your fiction and story writing?

D.H.: It's interesting that you say that. As I have told you before, I have an incredibly poor sense of the future and I have never known exactly where I was going. When I started writing *We Walk Straight* the first impulse was that I had all these leftover *I remembers* and I didn't know what to do with them. Secondly, I was completely taken by surprise by the success of *I Remember King Kong*, and I thought, well,

there was *Godfather I*, then *Godfather II*, and I was inspired. I'd written a book out of a sense of mourning, and lo and behold, it hit a nerve in the South African context just at that moment when Mandela's charm was at its peak with its effects about to fall off, and people were looking back, just before they looked forward to what was going to happen next in South Africa. So, somehow there was a correspondence which I had not expected at all. I wasn't thinking specifically about what the book would mean in South Africa when I wrote it. Then, later, as I began thinking about the book that would become *We Walk Straight So You Better Get Out the Way*, I found a new form of storytelling for myself. We were on a farm outside Paris and I was confronted with a man whom I'd known for quite a long time and who said to me that he could not remember anything about his father, a man who had died when he was nine years old. He had no memory of his father. I sat there thinking: it is not possible that you can't remember anything. We had a long conversation about this. Somehow his situation reminded me of a film which I'd seen as a boy in South Africa, in which people are trying to remember the exact place where a shipwreck had occurred, and one of them goes into hypnosis to get his memory back. It happened that I had seen that film during a birthday party of a boy whose father later died, while I was still at primary school. He was the first person I'd ever known whose parent had died. I learned about this in a dramatic way, because we had an intercom system in the classroom which was only used in emergencies, and one day a message came through telling this boy that he had to leave the classroom and go to the secretary's office. This really struck me. And then of course I lost my own father in a different way some time later and so there was another resonance. I wrote the piece putting these two stories together, of the shipwreck and the boy. That was the first text that I wrote for *We Walk Straight*. Then I

thought, Ah ha, so now I can put storytelling and *I remember* together. So that's what I did. That's as far as my thoughts went. Then, while writing the book, there were also what I now call «trajectories» that came out: I realized that if I wrote a narrow vertical column of prose with blanks on either side of it, instead of fragments with horizontal blanks between them, then the energy of the text seemed to change, it accelerated. I also realized that these vertical columns all had to do with movement through space, crossing the land, and also ultimately leaving South Africa behind me. The very last 'trajectory' in the book, which ends with the birth of our daughter, has to do with movement through time. That is the general dynamic of the book, I think, there are three sections concerned with space while the last one is concerned with time.

M.B.: There is quite a time lapse between *The House Next Door to Africa* (1986) and *I Remember King Kong* (2004) and *We Walk Straight* (2005). Is this long break maybe due to questions of genre? How did you live the question of genre (poetry, fiction, drama)?

D.H.: Until quite recently I have rarely asked myself questions of genre before beginning to write; the writing I have done has taken form on the page without too much thought about this issue. But I did write a novel at one point. I wrote a South African novel, but it just wasn't publishable. I have two or three people whom I give all my writing to read; the reaction of Adine, my wife and companion, was absolutely unconditional: it was unpublishable. She was right, of course. The book was called *The Stick that Beats the Water Leaves No Scar* (an African saying). That's one reason for the gap between my first and second published books. Then there was the whole earthquake around Mandela's release. There was also my involvement in the anthologies and other projects. I organized the visit of South African

writers to France on two occasions, and was involved in various events with them. I got involved in all kinds of literary events. Plus we had young children, and we moved, and all kinds of things happened.

M.B.: No writing block?

D.H.: I don't know if it was a writing block, but there was certainly this whole question of how to be a South African writer. How can I write out of South Africa now that it's changing so much? Mandela has come out of jail. He represents a completely different reality which has always been present in South Africa, but which I did not participate in – a black, politically active reality, which was a whole reality shut out of the white world I had lived in. Now that this reality had surfaced, what was the validity of the reality that I actually experienced? Can one write out of that? And I suppose that *I Remember King Kong* is an affirmation of the fact that, of course, one can write out of any reality. But it took me a while to come to terms with the fact that I could write out of that reality. Not to come to terms with the reality so much as to come to terms with the fact that it was a resource.

M.B.: In 2006 you published *White Scars* which was runner-up for the Alan Paton Award. The theme of the wound, of the scar, is a leitmotif in your books. One can detect micro-wounds in your memory books, but also trauma, in particular the imprisonment of your father, the re-location to England which meant leaving South Africa within a few days of your father's release, and the daily micro-wounds of growing up in apartheid South Africa where you constantly had to decode what you saw and heard. Yet, for you the wound is not negatively connoted. In *White Scars* you write «I do not take the image of the wound to be negative, but central as a well to my being». Or you write that mourning is a form of pregnancy.

Another central theme is the rite of passage and transformation. Could you comment on this?

D.H.: I don't think that I would have written at all the way I did if my father hadn't been in jail. For a long time I felt like I was pinned under that event. It was as if I couldn't get my legs out from under the rock, not really. I was stuck with the sadness and shared knowledge of it, stuck with the particular family situation, stuck with the silence, the inability to speak about it. The whole energy of *The House Next Door to Africa* came from dealing with that stuckness. It was such a part of my identity. But the fact that my father went to jail also rooted me differently in South Africa. It gave me a different kind of involvement, by proxy, but not only by proxy, because I also went to visit him, and my mother went to visit him, and we witnessed his position in that prison with the other prisoners, and came into contact with their ideas and the ideas of members of their family whom we met. All of this came about organically and wasn't an intellectual effort so much as just part of the world that we were inevitably a part of. In that world there was a kind of underground energy, the energy of the darkness, of struggling underground, which for my father and others like him was a political energy. But for me it was a different kind of energy that I plugged into, that had to do with a different kind of resistance to what was going on in my own life. God knows what would have happened if he hadn't gone to jail. I don't know how I would have developed. Only later was I able to perceive all this clearly.

I was considerably helped by the distance I gained after arriving in France, by the theatre work I did there for ten years at the Atelier du Chaudron, including not only parades and performances but also workshops, some of them with physically handicapped people. It was while doing a performance there that I met Henri Michaux a few years before he

died, and became involved in reading his work, and understood how he changed the experience of personal difficulty through the use of humour, irony and imagination, as well as deep involvement in language itself. Then I read Edmond Jabés, who speaks of the wound as a source. Still later, I had to get a doctorate in order to apply for a better teaching job at the Ecole Polytechnique, and enrolled at the University of East Anglia. I was extremely lucky to have Jon Cook as my advisor while working on *White Scars* as part of the requirement for the doctorate in creative writing. The form and content of the book were my own ideas, but he is an exceptionally astute listener and advisor, who must have taken me further, in some ways, than I would have gone on my own. In order to write part of *White Scars* I looked very carefully at writing by Ambrose Reeves on the Sharpeville massacre, as well as the work of Breyten Breytenbach, Raymond Carver and Georges Perec. All of these writers had a lot to say about wounds and scars in one way or another, given the stories of their own lives. All of them open up creative ways of dealing with difficulty, sometimes extreme difficulty. I found Perec's various experiments highly illuminating, not least of all given the darkness of his own story, which was strongly a part of the Jewish experience in France during the Second World War.

M.B.: In 2007 you published *Gardening in the Dark*. You are at home within different genres, prose, prose poetry, the essay form more recently, but also poetry. We usually don't do gardening at night. Again in this book gardening is a metaphor for working through, mapping and re-mapping. Your father was also a gardener: the garden is associated with his arrest and also his homecoming, light and darkness.

D.H.: I was teaching a tremendous amount at that time, and also, I can't remember exactly

what I was doing in my daily life, but I found myself doing gardening at night. We have a garden and I was out in the garden at night. It was relatively dark. I remember one particular incident for example, when it was autumn and I was putting leaves in big plastic bags. My father had just died, and my daughter was out there putting the leaves in the bags with me, and she said, «You're the best daddy in the world.» I just burst out crying. There was the experience of mourning, as well as the gardening, the leaves. My father did some gardening at home, he also had a cactus collection, and then he was the prison gardener. So he made things grow in prison.

Actually, *Gardening in the Dark* came out in French first before it came out in English. This was because I was invited along with Antije Krog to a literary festival in France in 2007, *Lettres sur cour*, in Vienne near Lyon. The organisers of the festival and in particular Isabelle Giroud wanted to publish a book of mine with a fine independent publisher, Georges Monti of *Le temps qu'il fait*. When I learnt about this I thought: What have I got? And I started looking through the poetry and was quite surprised to see that I didn't have what it took to make a book yet. Then at the end of 2006 we went to Flanders, to Antwerp, for Christmas. It was very cold. My wife and I and our children, Anna and Jeremy spent the days going off into the city, and then in the evening, between ten, eleven o'clock, and about two, three in the morning I just thought OK, I'm having a book published, I better do something about this. I started writing what I thought to be some of the missing pieces. I hadn't written the other poems in order to put them together in a book, I'd written them individually. I do think the book works as a relatively structured whole, though.

I don't think I'm a very good gardener, by the way. I'm not constant enough as a gardener, to use John le Carré's title. But, yes my best way of making things grow is with words, not with plants.

M.B.: From the translation of Breytenbach to *The Dancing and the Death on Lemon Street* it has been a long journey. It seems to me to open up a new phase in your writing. After all, this is also about a time in the 1960s in Johannesburg but it's fiction. I could recognize some entries from *I Remember King Kong* suddenly true for the characters in your novel. If before the concern was with the past, precise language, re-membering, now it seems you allow yourself to get written by the story, by your characters. You write them as much as they write you.

D.H.: I'm still learning what it is. It's a young book. I'm not sure. It's been quite well received but I haven't got a sense yet of what it really means out there in the world. It's new to me to write a novel. It was a long time coming. I first had the idea for this story in 1970, after reading a report in *The Star* newspaper about a man who was found dead in his Johannesburg home surrounded by newspapers, having built a second set of walls directly around the walls of his house. I don't know how many times I've written drafts of a novel around that image. On my computer I have one from 2006. But I started trying to write it long before, in fact one brief version of the story was part of the original manuscript of *The House Next Door to Africa*. But at that time I was not really thinking about the story or Johannesburg from anyone else's perspective than my own. And you are right: it was freeing to write about Lemon Street from the perspectives of four people who live there, learning to perceive life on the street as I imagined they perceived it, how their lives crossed, how wider events, the mine disaster, the Sharpeville massacre affected them.

M.B.: This is a very important novel that explores apartheid following what Ndebele has called the «rediscovery of the ordinary» versus the spectacle. By ordinary I don't only mean the daily, ordinary events permeating the lives of your characters in *Lemon Street* but

in particular the master-servant relationships. You delicately and in a very balanced way shift perspectives from Felicity to Rosy, her maid, showing of course the injustice and the division but also the intimate moments they share. But above all you show how these are all lives filled with meaningful events, ordinary acts, emotions, feelings, dreams and wishes. But of course, you also wanted to show what you call in *White Scars* the «deceptive tranquillity» reigning during early apartheid.

D.H.: I think your question is great just as it is, in and of itself. I'm delighted to hear you talking about the novel like that. I want to say, firstly, that of course the novel involves retroactive perception. I made a point in the lecture yesterday⁴ of distinguishing between retroactive perception and the perception of the experience at the time, which was not like that. This could only have been written from the outside and all these years later. Perhaps it could have been written from inside South Africa, but outside of the apartheid system, and later, so that one could put the characters on the same human plain, because in real everyday existence they were not on the same plain. Of course white and black people all had their own lives even under apartheid, but the whites so often behaved as if the blacks belonged to them, were an extension of their property. When I say «whites», I mean even whites who had strong humanitarian ideals. Blacks had their own lives despite the situation, and there's no reason why one shouldn't be able to recognise that, explore what that meant, at last. The key moment for me in writing this novel was when I was able, from one line to the next, to go from the character of the white boy Jonathan Miller in bed listening to the dogs outside, to the black maid Rosy across the road

listening to the same dogs at the same time, but in a very different way. For him they are associated with fear; for her, with hope. In this passage I feel I crossed a psychic barrier that I would not have been able to cross while in South Africa: I set about imagining how a black woman might have experienced that suburban world at that time, not for any ideological reason at all but because it was necessary for the development of the story. Not only would thinking about a maid in this way not been my preoccupation in Johannesburg when I lived there, but it would have involved thinking about *her* preoccupations, which might have made me more than uncomfortable. The life of a suburban maid was not only materially narrow and depleted, but also isolated, she could not live with her own family, her husband or lover, her children. But there is also another aspect to this question. There is the issue of a white person writing about a black person, a white man writing about a black woman, potentially appropriating her experience, colonizing her on paper as she had been colonized in life. So my subject matter was heavily surrounded by taboos. Yet when I wrote the novel it was no longer possible to skirt this issue, to be constrained by these taboos. In fact, before Rosy took on a full presence in the novel it simply did not work for me, I knew there was something missing but I turned in circles before finding it. This process took me a long long time.

There are two other things I want to say about writing this book. One has to do with theatre. During our theatre work at the Atelier du Chaudron we used improvisation a lot to create performances. We would continuously have to think: Now, OK, so we've got this far, what do we do next? How do we shift from this point to that point? I think I learnt a lot as a writer from that activity, though it took me a long time before being able to apply what I learnt in writing a novel, finding the moment when I could shift organically from one perspective to another.

The other thing I'd like to mention is Perec's *La vie mode d'emploi*, (*Life: A User's Manual*) in which he takes an apartment building in Paris and moves narratively from one apartment to the next. In doing this, he mapped out the different apartments and went from one to another according to the movement of the knight on a chess board. Eventually he goes into everybody's apartment, not only in the present but also in the past, visiting the whole building. I don't think I consciously thought about this while writing *Lemon Street*, but the pattern and range of Perec's book might have been somewhere at the back of my mind. If you're writing about a suburban street at the time of apartheid then there's no reason why you shouldn't take the knight as Perec did and move from one space to the next space. One of the spaces is going to be the maid's room, which is on the same plane of the chess board, metaphorically speaking, but that just isn't how it was. In real experience it was a space of a different order filled with taboo and distance. This is not a question of coming to terms with something, it's a question of using the gap between what one can realise now and didn't then to wake up a new kind of energy, new because at the time, as I experience it, that energy was severely blocked. So *Lemon Street* involves a re-invention, but it's not a pure re-invention of the past. It's a new perception, which frees the past up in its own small way.

M.B.: Thank you Denis for this interview.

NICOLETTA BRAZZELLI

Interview with Abdulrazak Gurnah. University of Milan, 19 December 2013

The British-Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah published his latest novel, *The Last Gift*, in 2011. He was born in 1948 on the island of Zanzibar, when it was still a British colony, and migrated to Britain in 1968 with his brother.

He attended the University of London, taught at the University of Kano in Nigeria from 1980 to 1982, and achieved a Phd at the University of Kent, where he was appointed professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures in 2004. His main academic interests are in postcolonial writing and in discourses associated to the experience of colonialism, especially concerning Africa, the Caribbean and India. As an academic, Gurnah has edited two volumes of essays on African writing, published in 1993 and 1995, has published articles on a number of contemporary postcolonial writers such as Wole Soyinka and V.S. Naipaul and has edited *The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie* in 2007.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels have recently received a great critical attention. A special issue of *English Studies in Africa* (1, 2013) has been completely devoted to his works, which focus on the issues of identity and displacement, on the painful search for home of migrant characters moving from Zanzibar to the UK. His first three novels, *Memory of Departure* (1987), *Pilgrim's Way* (1988) and *Dottie* (1990) document the African immigrant experience in contemporary Britain. *Paradise* (1994), set in colonial East Africa during the first World War, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Also *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001) and *Desertion* (2005) are critically acclaimed works. *Paradise*, *By the Sea* and *Desertion* have been translated into Italian by Garzanti.

On 18 December 2013 Abdulrazak Gurnah was invited to the University of Milan, where he read a few passages from his novels *By the Sea* and *Desertion* and discussed of postcolonial literatures and their narrative and linguistic strategies with graduate and phd students, lecturers and professors of the Department of Foreign Literatures and Languages. The event was extremely successful and attracted the attention of a large audience, especially interested in Gurnah's narrative development of the theme of migration, the role of storytelling,

⁴ The lecture *Debts of Guilt, Debts of Love*, given at the English Department of the University of Vienna on 8th May 2012.

the crucial function of silence in Gurnah's novels, the issue of memory and the reshaping of identities in the contemporary world.

On 19 December 2013, during an interview, I asked Abdulrazak Gurnah a few questions on his latest novel, *The Last Gift*, where the main character, Abbas, an elderly migrant Zanzibari resident in England, is suddenly taken ill. The novel unravels his past life and the unexpected family cohesion that his illness and subsequent death bring about. As Abbas becomes enfeebled and weak, he comes to terms with his own past, the degeneration of his physical body urges him to finally tell the truth he has been hiding for years. At last, he reveals his shameful secret of the wife and unborn child he had abandoned many decades earlier. His wife Maryam's attainment of personal agency comes about at the demise of her husband's, while his confession opens up his children's possibility to reclaim their lost heritage, Zanzibar.

N.B.: *The Last Gift* is another story of migration. Migration is a crucial issue in your whole work, not only because of its autobiographical connections with your personal experience, but also in a more general sense. Your latest novel tells a story of people living among different places, languages and cultures. What was your main purpose in writing this story?

A.G.: The writing of this story is connected with a specific episode. One of the bombers in the London bombings in 2005 had released a video in which he explained how he felt he had been deprived of his cultural self because he was a Muslim. As for children, in many cases, parents act out of kindness and the result is to the opposite. Children think they have been denied of something. I started to think of it, I wanted to write not of the bombers, but of what happens when the children of migrants are deprived of certain things, or they are not required to know certain things. How do they

feel when they are so deprived? That was the beginning of it. The migrants themselves are in a kind of struggle to understand their own experience of life and their children's. The role of parents in the experience of migration is crucial. How can they understand the experience of their children, do they have to tell them their stories?

N.B.: Thus, in your novel, the focus is also on second-generation migrants. More generally, the dynamic of the family is very important in *The Last Gift* and also in your previous works. What do you think of the connection between family and nation?

A.G.: A lot of texts from postcolonial literatures do use this parallel between family and nation, particularly Indian literature. Family is seen as a microcosm of the nation, and I think it works very well, an analogy or parallel of it. In a sense, it is considered an allegory. But I am not interested in this idea of family as allegory of the nation, because I don't think family is somehow a symbol of nation. I think that family is a part of it, a fragment of the nation, a community. A community doesn't always fully work and doesn't function in many ways. For example, many communities are patriarchal in inclination, even when prosperity or education actually allows women to have a bigger role, in many societies the inclination seems to be to patriarchy. When we are speaking of community, we also speak of differences and injustices. Communities don't function in many ways. So families. I am interested in this: if you are part of the family, how do you find your own way in it, without being an anti-social force? A kind of negotiation is necessary.

N.B.: I wonder whether we might consider 'postcolonial shame' one of the themes of *The Last Gift*. Obviously this definition means different things. Do the children of migrants

(Hanna and Jamal) feel ashamed by the story of their father?

A.G.: There is a difference between them. Hanna or Anna, as she calls herself, wants to be like anybody else. She wants to leave the story of migration of her parents behind. She seems to say to herself: 'I don't bother about that' and 'My parents, it is their own business. It is their lives', 'My life is here. I like the language, the food of my parents, but my life is here. I am different'. The idea behind is that there are certain things I do not want to know because they are probably not nice. It is what I mean by shame: the ways children engage with the experiences of their parents. This is to feel ashamed. Anna is ashamed by what she suspects shameful in the stories of her parents. Children assume that what they have not been told is shameful, what is suppressed is something bad. They think that secrets include shameful things.

N.B.: I would like to raise a crucial point: the truth of stories, the lies and silences are at the core of your narration. The truth of the past (and the lies of the past) are connected with truth and gaps in history. Are silences and gaps connected to each other?

A.G.: They are not the same. There are different ways in silences. There is defence or resistance; there is also a more difficult kind of silence. I mean, suppression. This happens more than we acknowledge. Not telling things becomes corrosive. It generates mistrust. This is particularly true between parents and children. The things I wanted to know and I could not ask. The sense of parents not telling something about themselves or relatives. Secrets are corrosive. The extreme point is that of a father who doesn't tell his story. Silence can be a way of preserving dignity but can also create guilt and desire to save the secret. The outcome is the sense of something bad going on.

N.B.: Does the idea of Abbas recording a tape also implies that his story will never end?

A.G.: In the final part of the novel, Abbas' son Jamal becomes another storyteller, who narrates the story of his father, a mixture of experience and imagination. The whole novel may be the result of this narration.

N.B.: You spoke of the sense of guilt, of feeling guilty, in different ways. This feeling is connected with the idea of abandonment, of desertion. Men abandon women, men abandon their home country. This implies a sense of loss. Is it also a way of creating a new life?

A.G.: Not in a direct way. My condition is not exceptional. It is connected with the question: 'Have I done the right thing, have I been selfish, have I left when I would have been of more use elsewhere?'. This clearly implicates the sense of not being fully in a place. This is not to say: 'I have a reasonably successful life'. It does not imply to be miserable, but my being as useful as I could be here or there. This feeling is connected to people that you know. It is not a money experience. It is the sense of guilt, of having left people behind. It is constructing your life. You have to do it. At the back of it, there is the sense of having neglected, abandoned something, of having deserted.

N.B.: Migrants are marginal people not because they belong to the lower classes but because they come from different countries. The margins, in your narrative, are the centre. This is a common feature of postcolonial literature, which puts the experience of migrants at the centre of the contemporary world.

A.G.: It is not a new experience. Europe did this too. A different kind of experience. Remember the expansion and the prosperity, the progress of Europe. From the 1950s people coming to Europe are received with a different sense. Mi-

grants came to work, to do dirty work. Europe received them with suspicion, in some cases did not receive them at all. I am interested in understanding how this is working out. How people are making their life in Europe. How this is the story of our time. The stories of European expansion are stories of adventure and hardships, the other stories are different, they are stories of resourcefulness, of how to survive, make connections and build a new life.

N.B.: I finally asked Abdulrazak Gurnah which authors he enjoys reading. Among them, he mentioned the Tanzanian-Canadian writer E.M. Vassanji. However, Gurnah argues that Vassanji's work is very different from his own, because Vassanji writes of a different East African community. Vassanji is mostly interested in the relevance of a certain community, so his perspective is different from Gurnah's, focusing instead on individuals and families. As for the debated Nobel prize-winner V.S. Naipaul, Gurnah certainly appreciates him and thinks Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (on which he wrote a remarkable essay) a great book. He also confirmed that he had in mind Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* when writing *Paradise*, a novel which incorporates disparate elements, myth, folktale, Biblical and Koranic traditions. According to Gurnah, the writing process includes both intertextual references to the literary tradition and personal experiences, and the strategies an author employs are multiple, very complicated as well as 'simple' and easily imagined.

ALEXANDRE CALVANESE

Le charme subtil de la chéchia rouge: une lecture «mimétique» de *Monnè, outrages et défis* d'Ahmadou Kourouma

Si nous parcourons quelques études consacrées au deuxième roman d'Ahmadou Kourouma, *Monnè, outrages et défis* (1990), nous re-

marquons que les commentateurs qui ont analysé la figure de l'interprète Soumaré insistent tous, avec quelques nuances, sur la même caractéristique:

The most important figure at this turning point in African history – the inception of colonialism – is neither the new ruler nor the old conquered king, but their mediator, the interpreter. [...] The interpreter becomes the key figure for the new age (Harrow 1991: 228-29).

Kourouma's novel dramatizes the incomunicability that emerges in the numerous misperceptions and misunderstandings that characterize relationships between the colonial administration and the «natives». [...] Under these circumstances, the interpreter can allow each party to understand whatever seems suitable to him (Midiohouan 1991: 234).

The interpreter is charged with imposing a discourse, and this discourse is one of the principal weapons of a conquering power (Poller 1991: 238).

Il existe en fait un troisième pouvoir, un pouvoir sans lieu, incarné par un personnage. Chez Kourouma, le personnage en question est Soumaré, l'interprète. [...] Soumaré est un étranger qui n'a pas de maître parce qu'il maîtrise la parole, toutes les formes de parole, selon le code de chacun (Ndiaye 1992: 37).

Le seul médiateur, le seul intermédiaire, le seul aussi à posséder les deux codes, c'est l'interprète. Il n'a aucun pouvoir matériel, mais s'arroge tout le pouvoir symbolique (Borgomano 1998: 151).

Le rôle de l'interprète devient nécessaire, précisément parce qu'il ne peut traduire littéralement et doit maintenir une certaine opacité du texte (Gauvin 2004: 110).

L'interprète joue le rôle de modérateur pour

rendre la communication possible (Semujan-ga 2006: 23).

The importance of the interpreter comes from the fact that he is in some way the master of the game, of the situation. He parodies reality and is capable of changing destiny (Koné 2007: 119).

Personne n'oublie de préciser ou de redéfinir un aspect du pouvoir de Soumaré, car tous lui reconnaissent invariablement une autorité indiscutable, souvent symbolique mais pas moins réelle pour autant: c'est la figure-clef de la nouvelle époque coloniale, il «maîtrise la parole», il est «nécessaire», c'est «the master of the game». À force de répéter ces propos le portrait de l'interprète se cristallise, se fige en masque⁵, et ce qu'il y a de problématique en lui reste souvent en arrière-plan.

À notre avis, l'intérêt de ce personnage réside moins dans le prétendu pouvoir qu'il tire de sa ruse et de son rôle de modérateur linguistique – atout qui se révèle, en fin de compte, tout à fait illusoire – que dans le fait qu'il est pris dans le piège du désir mimétique, à savoir du désir calqué sur un désir modèle suggéré par un médiateur, c'est-à-dire, en dernier ressort, du désir d'être comme ce médiateur. Donner la primauté à l'image de force et d'indépendance que la critique a souvent mise en évidence signifie passer à côté de la «vérité romanesque» véhiculée par ce personnage. Pour reprendre un couple de termes centraux dans la théorie mimétique de René Girard, ce n'est pas en tant que «maître» qu'il faut considérer Soumaré, mais en tant que «disciple»⁶.

Notre hypothèse est donc que Kourouma a exploité la figure de l'interprète-tirailleur pour

5 KONÉ définit l'interprète «the unavoidable character» (KONÉ 2007, p. 119).

6 «La position du disciple, de toute évidence, est seule essentielle. C'est par elle qu'il faut définir la situation humaine fondamentale» (GIRARD 1972, p. 218).

approfondir son investigation de la dynamique du désir humain commencée, vingt ans plus tôt, avec *Les Soleils des indépendances*⁷. Mais si, dans cette première œuvre, le romancier ivoirien s'était concentré sur les différentes configurations du triangle mimétique qui accompagnent la transition de l'époque coloniale à celle des indépendances, dans *Monnè, outrages et défis* aussi bien que dans *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998), il opère un retour en arrière dans l'histoire pour aborder le sujet de l'identité de l'homme africain après le contact, imposé par la colonisation, avec la civilisation occidentale. Dans un roman comme dans l'autre, c'est précisément la figure du soldat africain intégré dans l'armée française (dans la double version du tirailleur indigène des troupes employées en Afrique pendant la colonisation et du soldat envoyé en Europe lors de la Première Guerre Mondiale) qui marque une étape fondamentale dans l'évolution de ce rapport⁸, tout en annonçant – mais ce ne sera pas le sujet de cet article – la série des doubles monstrueux de l'Occident incarnés par les dictateurs de *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. C'est pourquoi, si dans la première partie de notre étude nous nous concentrerons sur la figure de l'interprète pour montrer les occurrences textuelles qui font de lui un vrai double mimétique du colonisateur, dans la deuxième partie nous évoquerons la figure de l'ancien combattant de retour du front de la guerre de 1914-1918. Dans la représentation que Kourouma offre de ce dernier nous retrouverons, poussées à l'extrême et pour ainsi dire explicitées, les mêmes dynamiques qui caractéri-

7 Voir CALVANESE 2013.

8 OUEDRAOGO a reconnu que «l'interprète et le tirailleur de façon générale présagent l'ambiguïté des personnages du roman moderne africain, tiraillés entre deux mondes, «sollicités» de deux cultures – occidentale et traditionnelle – et frappés de ce fait du vertige de l'aliénation et de l'inadaptation» (OUEDRAOGO 2004, p. 53), mais il reste en-deçà d'une interprétation mimétique de ce rapport dans le roman de Kourouma.

saient le premier, de façon que si l'un (l'interprète) anticipe ou introduit l'autre (l'ancien combattant), celui-ci offre une clef de lecture pour réunir de manière cohérente les fils qui, du début à la fin du roman, tissent le profil mimétique du premier.

Partons du début du roman. Quand Djigui Keita, le roi du royaume de Soba où vient d'arriver une colonne française, exhorte l'interprète à traduire au commandant blanc son discours de défi – un discours d'autant plus péremptoire qu'il abonde en verbes performatifs à la forme impérative: «dis», «annonce», «explique», «présente», «traduis», «affirme», «répète», «rapporte», «adjure», «redis»⁹ –, Soumaré décide de le transformer en un discours de bienvenue aux envahisseurs. Il a, dans ce cas, une justification d'ordre socioculturel: son clan d'appartenance et le clan de Djigui sont liés par l'alliance à plaisanterie¹⁰, un pacte qui permet des joutes oratoires même très vives mais qui interdit toute forme de violence physique entre les membres des deux groupes. C'est pourquoi, si Soumaré traduisait au commandant les «rodomontades» (*Monné*: 191) de Djigui, le roi de Soba serait immédiatement fusillé comme tous les autres chefs africains alliés de Samory, et l'interprète trahirait le pacte. Cependant, plus que ce lien clanique qui l'oblige à sauver son «rival pour jeu» de la mort, l'attitude de Soumaré semble conditionnée par une ferme adhésion à la mission des colons:

Il y a quelques semaines, des troupes de Samory ont trahieusement massacré une colonne française. Plus de compromis possible entre «samoriens» et nous; systématiquement, nous

fusillons tous les chefs alliés de Samory. Sans moi, c'eût été ton sort (*Monné*: 191).

Soumaré ne feint aucune neutralité, il ne dit pas «plus de compromis possible entre samoriens et français» mais, au contraire, il affirme ouvertement et par deux fois, à travers l'emploi d'un simple «nous», son appartenance au côté français, et il ajoute même un jugement négatif sur les samoriens (ils ont agi «traîtreusement») sans que cela soit un acte de basse flatterie. Il convient en effet de rappeler que, sur la base du pacte fictionnel qui gouverne le roman, le dialogue entre Soumaré et Djigui se déroule en malinké, et l'interprète a assuré au roi qu'aucun des officiers blancs ne comprend cette langue. Soumaré ne s'adresse donc pas à Djigui dans le but de montrer aux français sa fidélité à leur égard, l'opportunisme ne suffit pas à expliquer l'agressivité de son langage. C'est par rapport à Djigui lui-même, à la population de Soba et aux africains qui s'opposent à la colonisation qu'il affirme sa position. L'alliance à plaisanterie n'annule ni ne suspend ce choix, elle n'est qu'une courte parenthèse, un plaisir personnel inspiré et réglé par un code traditionnel. Quelques pages plus loin, l'interprète confirme la nature exacte de la relation qu'il veut établir avec le roi de Soba: «Un matin, Soumaré, l'interprète du capitaine Moreau, se fit introduire près de Djigui toujours en retraite. Il ne salua pas ni ne parla en frère de plaisanterie, mais en officiel» (*Monné*: 198). À partir de ce moment, le déroulement du récit ne fait qu'accentuer les traits d'un personnage dont le zèle rappelle celui d'un disciple qui ne se borne pas à accomplir sa tâche mais qui s'exerce, devant son auditoire, à jouer le rôle du maître: «Le Blanc énonçait des instructions et des ordres; l'interprète les répétait et les commentait» (*Monné*: 216). Peu après il revendique l'originalité de son énoncé: «Ces dernières réflexions ne sont pas des dires du Blanc; elles sont mes propres exégèses» (*Monné*: 217). Il n'est plus question de savoir si ses

traductions sont correctes ou non, car Soumaré assume pleinement la responsabilité des mots qu'il prononce. Il est tellement empreint d'esprit mimétique qu'il se sent rabaissé par le moindre manque de considération: «L'interprète s'approcha et admonesta le griot Diabaté. Il le laissait parler seul comme un esclave; il n'accompagnait pas ses dires, ne les reprenait pas, ne les commentait pas comme ceux d'un noble» (*Monné*: 206).

C'est l'interprète qui forge l'expression «devenir toubab» pour rendre en malinké le sens du mot colonisation, tout en expliquant que «civiliser ne signifie pas christianiser. La civilisation, c'est gagner de l'argent des Blancs» (*Monné*: 209). Soumaré change un verbe et renverse complètement la perspective: il présente la colonisation comme une chance de développement offerte au colonisé et non plus comme un acte d'exploitation, de violence et d'humiliation.

La victime principale de cette surenchère verbale est Djigui. La dynamique entre le capitaine français, l'interprète et le roi de Soba est efficacement représentée dans l'extrait qui suit, rapporté par la voix de Djigui:

L'interprète, au garde-à-vous, écouta religieusement le capitaine blanc; puis exécuta un salut, un demi-tour, trois pas cadencés, s'arrêta à deux pas du roi, s'esclaffa de la façon dont l'hyène, dans les nuits de la lointaine brousse, ricane en sortant de la caverne; puis m'apostropha.

- Keita ! Keita ! Le savez-vous? (L'impertinence du ton me stupéfia.) Le savez-vous? Après le combat entre deux lutteurs qui ont tous les deux pour totem le caïman, le saurien du vaincu devient un vil margouillat. Le caïman-totem des Noirs s'est avili, réduit en margouillat; celui de la France émerge en plein crocodile car, avec la capture de Samory, les nazaréens français instaurent leurs paix et force dans toute la Négritie, du sud au nord. Gloire et joie aux vainqueurs ! Malheur aux vaincus !

J'allais répliquer, mais l'interprète me fit signe: je n'avais pas la parole (*Monné*: 205).

D'un côté Soumaré écoute «religieusement» son modèle, de l'autre il adopte un ton et un langage qui mortifient Djigui, jusqu'au point de lui interdire toute réplique.

Autant il est impertinent avec le roi de Soba, autant il est féroce avec le peuple. Soumaré semble plus cruel que les français quand il s'agit d'infliger des punitions aux transgresseurs de règles:

L'interprète resta ferme; il ne voulut rien entendre, il décida de faire un exemple. Les parents des enfants insoumis furent déshabillés et publiquement fouettés. L'interprète aurait voulu, en plus, les envoyer sur les chantiers de coupe de bois, mais le Blanc s'y opposa (*Monné*: 218).

Mais le sommet de l'esprit mimétique est atteint quand Soumaré prononce, tout à fait gratuitement – dans le sens qu'il ne le fait pas pour plaire au capitaine car, répétons-le, il s'adresse exclusivement à la population de Soba en malinké –, des propos racistes qui calquent ceux des colons:

Quand un toubab s'exprime, nous, Nègres, on se tait, se décoiffe, se déchausse et écoute (*Monné*: 206).

Comme le besoin d'évoluer n'a jamais résidé dans la tête du Noir, il faut l'amener à vouloir la civilisation (*Monné*: 210).

Nous, les Noirs, nous avons été mal fabriqués: il faut nous chicotter au rythme des tam-tams pour nous faire bien travailler (*Monné*: 217).

Comme aimait le dire Soumaré à la fin de ses longs commentaires:

«C'est vraiment malheureux qu'Allah nous ait mal fabriqués, nous, Nègres; Il nous a créés

⁹ KOUROUMA 2010, p. 189. Toutes les citations des romans *Monné*, *outrages et défis* et *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (dorénavant *Monné* et *En attendant le vote* dans le texte) sont tirées de cette édition.

¹⁰ Voir MEITE 2004.

menteurs de sorte que le Noir n'accepte de dire la vérité que la plante de pied posée sur la braise» (*Monné*: 230).

Nulle surprise que le peuple de Soba voie Soumaré come un appendice du commandant, celui qui lui prête ses yeux et ses oreilles: «[Soumaré était] le premier chez le commandant le matin avant l'ouverture des bureaux pour rapporter ce qu'il avait vu et répéter ce qu'il avait entendu. Soumaré était le nocturne clabaud du commandant» (*Monné*: 260), ou, autrement dit, son double monstrueux.

Mais ce qui révèle le plus manifestement la conception de la relation entre colon et colonisé dont ce personnage est porteur, c'est sa description du rite d'initiation qu'est l'entrée dans le corps des tirailleurs, les soldats africains intégrés dans l'armée coloniale française: «On entre dans les tirailleurs comme dans un bois sacré; on rompt avec son clan, sa famille, son groupe d'âge; on vend son âme aux Blancs et on cesse d'avoir de la compassion pour le Nègre» (*Monné*: 213). Au-delà du ton mi-enchanté, mi-solennel, il faut retenir surtout la lucidité brutale qui inspire les mots de l'interprète. Devenir tirailleur signifie, avant toute autre chose, renoncer à son identité. Il faut prendre à la lettre cette observation, car elle résume un thème que Kourouma approfondit lorsqu'il nous présente la figure de l'ancien combattant africain qui a combattu en Europe sous le drapeau français. C'est un sujet qui devait intéresser profondément l'écrivain de Boundiali, et pas seulement en raison de son passé de sergent de l'Infanterie coloniale française en Indochine de 1951 à 1954¹¹, mais, plus spécifiquement, parce qu'il devait voir dans l'expérience des premiers soldats revenus d'Europe une espèce de tournant pour l'histoire collective de son pays. En effet il prend le soin de revenir sur le sujet à deux différentes reprises, dans

Monné et dans le roman suivant, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*.

Quand la Première Guerre Mondiale éclate en Europe, les plus forts parmi les hommes de Soba qui avaient été mobilisés pour les travaux forcés sont recrutés par la France et envoyés dans les tranchées pour combattre contre les Allemands. Le récit du retour à la maison des premiers rapatriés sanitaires représente sans aucun doute une des pages les plus mémorables de *Monné*, *outrages et défis*:

Ils portaient tous des brodequins; les culs-de-jatte et les unijambistes les avaient sur les épaules, les autres aux pieds (au-delà des mers, on leur avait appris à marcher avec des chaussures et à manger avec des fourchettes). C'était magnifique et, pour rien au monde, nos compatriotes n'acceptèrent de se dévêtir, se déchausser, se séparer de ce qu'ils avaient et qui les distinguait des autres Noirs. Ils étaient heureux et fiers d'avoir combattu pour la liberté de la France. Ils le proclamaient en chantant: «C'est nous les Africains» dès qu'ils aperçurent les premiers toits de Soba; quand ils mirent les pieds à terre, ils se rassemblèrent et entonnèrent *La Marseillaise*. Ils parlèrent français (c'est plus tard que nous saurions que c'était là un charabia à eux, que les natifs de France n'entendaient pas). Leurs dires étaient hérissés d'éloges, de mensonges et de merveilles. Ils prétendaient avoir en deux ans oublié nos dialectes et nos manières sauvages telles que manger à la main, marcher nu-pieds, se soulager derrière le buisson, se torcher avec les feuilles et se moucher avec les doigts. Ils étaient devenus des étrangers, des non-Nègres (*Monné*: 234).

L'ironie de la voix du narrateur ne doit pas empêcher de prendre au sérieux le problème évoqué par Kourouma, à savoir la réintégration des anciens combattants dans le tissu social de provenance après l'expérience d'une guerre

combattue ailleurs et, plus en général, l'expérience de l'Europe. Si l'entreprise de la colonisation avait été résumée par l'expression «devenir toubab», qui voulait signifier l'identification à un modèle imposé par la force, on peut dire que cet objectif est atteint quand les vétérans refusent de se séparer de quelques objets de menue valeur comme «le casque en fer, la chéchia rouge, la ceinture de flanelle, la capote sur laquelle étaient épinglées les médailles» (*Monné*: 234), parce que grâce à eux ils peuvent se distinguer des autres Noirs. Ils arrivent à clamer «C'est nous les Africains» comme s'ils étaient des Africains plus authentiques que les autres: une authenticité bien singulière si l'on tient compte du fait qu'ils chantent l'hymne national français et qu'ils prétendent avoir oublié les «manières sauvages» de leurs compatriotes. Ils affichent une identité toute neuve en imitant gauchement le modèle occidental. Et pourtant ce comportement correspond parfaitement aux mots de l'interprète Soumaré sur l'enjeu du «devenir tirailleur»: on rompt avec le passé, on vend son âme convaincu d'en trouver une nouvelle dans quelques reliques imbues de l'essence de son idole, sauf que la valeur idéale de certains objets provient uniquement du charme exercé par celui qui les possède ou les indique comme étant désirables. Pour ces anciens combattants la France représente vraiment le Tabernacle dont parlait Fanon (Fanon 1952: 18), mais Kourouma s'empresse de démystifier, chez eux, toute allure de demi-dieux revenus de la métropole.

Le narrateur, le *nous* qui réunit la collectivité méprisée par les rapatriés en uniforme, prend tout de suite sa revanche en anticipant la découverte, qui n'aura lieu qu'à une époque postérieure, que les rapatriés ne parlaient pas français mais seulement «un charabia à eux»; il définit leurs discours «hérissés [...] de mensonges» et répond à leur revendication d'être les vrais Africains par une sorte d'excommunication: «Ils étaient devenus des étrangers, des non-Nègres». Le village n'est jamais tendre

avec ceux qui sont partis et reviennent en se pavanant. Pour les uns la différence est un point d'orgueil, pour les autres une raison de blâme: on est en Afrique, mais on pourrait très bien observer la même démarche dans un salon proustien. La compétition entre frères ennemis arrive à son zénith peu après, quand les rapatriés réclament de ne pas confondre le souvenir de leurs compagnons d'armes morts en bataille avec celui des victimes de la colonisation: «les anciens combattants qui ne toléraient pas qu'on les comparât aux torturés et tués sur les chantiers de travaux forcés et de pose de rail» (*Monné*: 235).

Kourouma reprend le même sujet dans *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. Les observations les plus perçantes sont inspirées par le père du futur dictateur Koyaga, Tchao, le fameux lutteur qui combattit à Verdun en 1917. Dans la boue des tranchées Tchao se fait remarquer grâce à une action audacieuse pour laquelle il obtiendra les quatre distinctions militaires les plus prestigieuses. Mais une fois rentré chez lui, dans les montagnes du Nord de la République du Golfe, parmi les hommes nus, Tchao doit choisir entre l'exhibition de ses médailles épinglées sur l'uniforme et le retour à la nudité originelle, mais sans médailles. Tchao ressent fortement le charme de l'uniforme et les Français observent avec beaucoup d'intérêt sa difficulté à reprendre les anciennes habitudes:

Comme les autres tirailleurs, et même souvent mieux que les ressortissants de certaines ethnies des plaines, Tchao le montagnard avait su porter la chéchia rouge, se bander le ventre avec la flanelle rouge, enrouler autour de la jambe la bande molletière et chausser la godasse. Il était parvenu sans grand effort à manger à la cuiller, à fumer la Gauloise. C'est donc avec plaisir que, de retour dans les montagnes, les autorités françaises constatèrent qu'il refusait de revenir à la nudité originelle. Les administrateurs reprirent les fiches contradictoires des

¹¹ DJIAN 2010, p. 35.

ethnologues qui, tout en demandant le maintien du régime de faveur consenti aux paléonigritiques, montraient que les montagnards nus avaient des besoins comme tous les humains. Le ministère des Colonies conclut souverainement que les hommes nus pouvaient être civilisés, christianisés, envoyés aux travaux forcés. [...] Ils étaient économiquement exploitables. Les civiliser était rentable, jouable. Le coût de la conquête des montagnes serait rapidement amorti (*En attendant le vote*: 426-427).

La transgression de Tchao, sanctionnée par les anciens du village, démontre que tous les hommes, même les insoupçonnables «paléonigritiques», sont également sensibles aux sirènes des désirs suggérés par l'autre, copiés de l'autre. Dans ces pages Kourouma parle incontestablement du rôle fondamental joué par l'imitation dans les relations humaines et de la dynamique éminemment mimétique qui entraîne la multiplication des désirs. La transgression de Tchao consiste à violer un tabou qui interdit à un homme nu de porter des vêtements, car toute forme de différenciation peut déclencher la jalousie ou l'émulation chez les autres. Son impudence est une vraie menace mimétique capable de provoquer le désordre social, et en tant que telle l'auteur la décrit. Autant la peur de l'ennemi aux portes rassemble la communauté, autant celle-ci risque de se désagréger quand la menace vient de l'intérieur:

Dans son histoire millénaire, le monde des nus n'avait jamais eu à faire face jusque-là qu'à des attaques venant de l'extérieur. Pour la première fois, elle se trouvait contestée en son sein par un élément de l'intérieur [...]. Le feu de brousse qui s'allume aux lisières de la savane se circonscrit, celui qui prend au milieu de la brousse ne peut être éteint (*En attendant le vote*: 426).

La réflexion anthropologique de René Girard nous rappelle le rôle des interdits dans les so-

ciétés archaïques¹². Les interdits, qui sont le produit d'une longue élaboration culturelle qui vise la prévention des effets catastrophiques de la violence, imposent une limite aux désirs et aux ambitions de tout un chacun. Ainsi ils évitent que l'ordre social ne soit bouleversé par une compétition généralisée qui pourrait mettre en danger la communauté tout entière. Le discours de Kourouma revient précisément sur cet aspect. La transgression de Tchao déclenche une contagion mimétique représentée par l'image d'un incendie qui rappelle le feu de brousse évoqué dans le proverbe que nous venons de citer:

La transgression se comporte comme une petite braise jetée dans la grande savane au gros de la saison sèche. On voit où la flamme prend mais nul ne sait où elle s'arrêtera. La transgression de Tchao [...] entraîna le recrutement massif des montagnards comme tirailleurs. Elle fit des Montagnes un réservoir de tirailleurs dans lequel les Français puisèrent abondamment pour toutes les guerres (*En attendant le vote*: 436).

Kourouma n'aurait pu trouver de comparaison plus éloquente. Nous nous expliquons un peu mieux, maintenant, son intérêt pour la figure des anciens combattants de la Première Guerre Mondiale: leur exemple opéra comme un virus qui circula dans la population jusqu'à atteindre les générations successives, au point d'assurer à l'armée française un «réservoir» de tirailleurs qui seront employés, presque quarante ans plus tard, dans la guerre d'Indochine:

La rapide adaptation de Tchao aux conditions de la vie des tirailleurs, aux subtilités de la civilisation et, surtout, son mépris pour le danger incitèrent les colonisateurs à poursuivre l'expérience; ils recrutèrent une centaine de montagnards qu'ils envoyèrent aussi au-delà des

¹² GIRARD 1972, pp. 320-325 et GIRARD 1978, pp. 20-33.

mers. À leur retour, ces anciens combattants se comportèrent comme le grand lutteur Tchao; ils se permirent de parader de fortin en fortin accoutrés dans des costumes. Ils se pavanaient dans des costumes, attifés de la flanelle rouge sur le ventre et de la chéchia rouge sur la tête. Qui connaît le goût immodéré de la parure et de la couleur du montagnard imagine que les anciens combattants ou tirailleurs furent tout de suite admirés et aimés dans toutes les montagnes et isolats des hommes nus de l'Afrique continentale. Il comprend aussi que les femmes montagnardes voulurent les posséder, les servir. [...] Les maris trompés et bafoués décidèrent eux aussi d'aller se procurer la godasse, la chéchia et la flanelle rouge du Blanc colonisateur. [...] L'armée française par brassées recrutait des Nègres pour l'Indochine (*En attendant le vote*: 436).

Kourouma souligne une fois de plus le rapport mimétique qui lie le comportement des anciens combattants à celui de Tchao, et par la suite la réaction en chaîne qui entraîne dans la rivalité toutes les populations d'hommes nus. Dans ce cas ce n'est pas, comme cela se passait dans *Monné*, la voix envieuse du peuple qui dévoile la vanité de l'ancien combattant, mais le regard intéressé du colon qui, n'étant pas capable de soumettre par la force les guerriers qui habitent la région, essaie de trouver une autre piste pour s'assurer la rentabilité de l'effort militaire nécessaire pour les vaincre. Le fait de voir en eux des hommes soumis aux dynamiques mimétiques les rend exploitables et convainc ainsi les Français à poursuivre leur entreprise. Voilà un autre changement de perspective qui montre efficacement la vacuité du défi entre les anciens combattants et leur communauté d'origine. Il suffit de voir la compétition entre frères ennemis de l'extérieur pour comprendre qu'il n'y a absolument rien à gagner, ni pour l'un ni pour l'autre. Le Blanc ne fait pas de distinction, il continue à traiter le tirailleur indigène en inférieur. Le dernier mot

sur le sujet est plein d'amertume, la même, peut-être, que le jeune sergent Kourouma avait ressentie en Indochine quand il avait dû essuyer les petites injustices, les humiliations et l'arrogance des chefs¹³:

Le règlement de la coloniale distinguait dans l'armée deux races: les soldats français et les tirailleurs indigènes [...].

Les soldats français étaient les supérieurs et mille règles avaient été instituées pour que les indigènes restent des inférieurs. Le tirailleur indigène devait en toute saison porter la chéchia et la ceinture de flanelle rouges, le flotant en gonfreville, et aller nu-pieds. Il devait le salut à ses supérieurs noirs et à tout Blanc militaire ou civil... Ce fut ce que la colonisation française réserva aux descendants des tirailleurs indigènes hilaires et grands enfants qui avaient combattu en France pendant les deux dernières guerres. Rien de plus qu'un racisme pointilleux et mesquin ! (*En attendant le vote*: 522).

La technique narrative de Kourouma, avec ces fréquents changements de focalisation et de narrateur, fait émerger le caractère relatif, précaire et souvent illusoire de la perception que ses personnages ont de la réalité. L'interprète Soumaré n'échappe pas à ce destin. Quoi qu'il fasse pour émuler le Blanc, celui-ci continue à le considérer pareil aux autres: «Comment distinguer chez les Nègres une chevelure crépue d'une autre, quand tout autour *l'interprète*, le chef de canton, le représentant, les sicares trafiquaient, combinaient, s'enrichissaient avec la sueur de leurs coreligionnaires?» (*Monné*: 233, nous soulignons en italique). Malgré tous ses efforts pour imiter son médiateur et pour se distinguer des autres Africains, à la fin du roman nous découvrons que Soumaré, exactement comme les anciens combattants de la Première Guerre Mondiale, parlait un fran-

¹³ DJIAN 2010, p. 36-38.

çais un peu suspect, ou du moins insuffisant pour les nouvelles élites politiques africaines: «Quand la réaction arriva à Soba, on trouva inaudible et incompréhensible le charabia petit nègre du vieux serviteur de la France, l'interprète Soumaré. Il fut mis à la retraite d'office» (Monné: 414).

Dans l'exemple des rapatriés de Soba ou dans le cas des hommes nus comme Tchao, le renversement de perspective qui dévoile l'illusion du personnage est plus évident parce qu'immédiat; dans le cas de l'interprète il est nécessaire de suivre son lent développement du début à la fin du roman, mais le parcours est identique. À travers les premiers Kourouma révèle ouvertement le même mécanisme mimétique qui est à l'œuvre, de façon plus implicite, chez Soumaré: les uns sont nécessaires à la compréhension de l'autre. Dans ce croisement de regards parsemés tout au long du roman, l'auteur suit une ambitieuse trajectoire humaine qui monte pour ensuite précipiter, repoussée loin par l'astre vers lequel elle tendait. Inscrit dans la tragédie que fut la colonisation pour tout un peuple, son drame tragi-comique se situe entre l'espoir de «devenir toubab» et l'accusation d'être «devenus des non-nègres»: une fracture identitaire qui évoluera de façon bien plus brutale à l'époque des dictatures racontée dans *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*.

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SARA DEL ROSSI

Les Comores: une littérature en archipel, textes réunis et présentés par J.-L. Raharimanana et M.N. Marson, «Interculturel Francophonies», 19, juin-juillet 2011.

Éloignées de l'Occident, à l'ombre du Madagascar, les Comores restent encore aujourd'hui un univers méconnu, dont l'on ne connaît ni l'histoire tourmentée ni la culture et la littérature. C'est pour cela que la revue «Interculturel Francophonies» consacre son dix-neuvième numéro à la diffusion de ces cris, qui viennent de très loin mais qui ne cessent de se propager. On pourrait considérer donc ce volume comme une sorte de mégaphone par lequel les jeunes voix éparpillées aux quatre coins de l'archipel font entendre leurs cris jusqu'à l'Occident. Des cris qui ont été et sont encore provoqués par la situation de contrastes paradoxaux qui caractérise les Comores: une langue parlée qui n'est pas écrite (comorien ou shikomori); deux langues écrites qui ne sont quasiment pas parlées (français et arabe); une séparation politique interne (Union des Comores et Mayotte) qui est la cause du racisme entre les Comoriens et les Mahorais; le voisinage de la culture islamique et de la culture matriarcale africaine, mais surtout un État tout jeune avec une culture ancestrale. Ce n'est pas un hasard si la coordination de ce numéro a été confiée à deux Malgaches (Jean-Luc Raharimanana et Magali Nirina Marson). Le fil rouge qui lie cet archipel d'articles est la jeunesse fragmentée de la littérature comorienne, due à la formation tardive de l'État (indépendance seulement en 1975) et à une condition de mutisme imposée par les *Autres* (Arabes, Malgaches, Occidentaux et surtout Français). Un exemple de ce retard politique et organisationnel est donné par Alain Clockers dans son étude *L'évolution des sources documentaires écrites des Comores et de Mayotte*,

où l'on souligne le manque de documentation scientifique sur les Comores. En effet, après avoir retracé l'histoire des tentatives de nombreux chercheurs (toujours étrangers), l'auteur termine son étude par l'appel à une réelle organisation scientifique des écrits concernant l'archipel.

Ce manque se heurte à la richesse de la tradition comorienne, tradition composite nourrie de sagesse africaine, mais aussi musulmane. La religion islamique, en effet, fait partie intégrante de la vie d'un Comorien, mais aussi de sa formation culturelle, comme le montre Saïd Assoumani Mohamed dans *Le tafsiri. La place de la traduction du Coran dans la vie des Comoriens*. À travers l'exemple du *tafsiri*, c'est-à-dire le rite de traduction du Coran dans une autre langue (dans ce cas le comorien), l'auteur souligne comment le rite d'origine religieuse est devenu une étape de la quotidienneté comorienne (au point que l'émission à la radio du *tafsiri* sert aussi aux gens pour se renseigner sur l'heure), mais ce rite a aussi poussé à la naissance d'une école de la traduction écrite. Si le Coran fait donc partie intégrante de la routine quotidienne d'un Comorien, la tradition de la littérature orale a aussi son importance, non seulement pour son côté de *trésor du passé* et sa fonction pédagogique, mais aussi pour sa capacité d'adaptation à l'Histoire contemporaine. Si Noël-Jacques Guenier dans *Le roi fou et l'oiseau captif. Un conte en dialecte malgache de Mayotte* laisse deviner que le Roi dévorant son peuple du passé mythique peut se référer au préfet d'aujourd'hui, Andrea Cali dans *Furukombe: morphologie d'un conte comorien* nous présente un exemple de morphologie du conte comorien. À travers l'analyse du conte traditionnel *Furukombe*, l'auteur retrouve les caractéristiques principales et les thèmes fondamentaux des contes comoriens et leurs associations avec la société et ses composantes africaines et islamiques. Même si le conte se réfère traditionnellement toujours au passé (le mot *hale* traduit «conte» mais aussi «temps

passé»), sa fonction pédagogique est toute contemporaine.

Malgré ces racines fortes, ancrées dans le sol, la civilisation comorienne reste une plante fragile, hybride et encore verte, exposée aux vents qui l'empêchent de se fortifier. Les Comores sont un état jeune, une *république imberbe* (comme la définit l'écrivain Mohamed Toihiri), qui n'a pas encore atteint l'âge adulte. Ses fruits sont des adolescents mûris avant l'âge, âpres et piquants, des écrivains furieux de rage qui hurlent leurs mots et font ressentir leur condition d'orphelins sans père, avec une enfance déjà lointaine et rêvée.

M.N. Marson nous présente son étude *Introduction à une littérature en archipel. Les «COM'OR!», un champ littéraire spécifique: «natif natal»* et aussi ses entretiens avec les écrivains Nassur Attoumani («*Le rire dans tous ses états d'âme!*»). *Entretien avec Nassur Attoumani*) et Aboubacar Saïd Salim (*Rencontre avec Aboubacar Saïd Salim: l'écrivain moïnantsi, «enfant de [sa] terre» et révolté*). Par ces textes elle nous introduit à cet univers tout nouveau et nous fait connaître ces enfants guerriers déjà adultes. Divisée en trois parties, l'étude se concentre sur trois questions fondamentales: le lien entre les écrivains, la terre et l'Histoire, le mode de représentation et le champ littéraire. Les écrivains comoriens s'auto-définissent *amarrés* à ces îles ravagées, un ancrage inné dont l'origine remonte à la tradition d'enterrer à la naissance de l'enfant son cordon ombilical dans le lieu de sa future sépulture. Un *retour au pays* inscrit à partir du début, un lien indissoluble avec cette terre qui devient un humus fertilisant pour leurs ouvrages. La tâche de l'écrivain comorien c'est interroger ce lien: creuser la terre à la recherche des racines, s'enfoncer en elle pour s'en imprégner, afin de «entrer dans l'Histoire, entrer dans notre Histoire» (comme l'affirme l'écrivain Alain Kamal Martial, p.255). Mais quelle histoire? Les trois histoires possibles: celle toute en majuscule (*HISTOIRE*), c'est-à-dire le

déroulement des événements; celle avec un H majuscule (*Histoire*), le grand récit, le discours sur le passé; enfin l'*histoire* individuelle et collective.

Dans leur refus des *Histoires* écrites et dictées par *les Autres*, les écrivains veulent les réécrire en s'appuyant sur la réalité, sur les *histoires*. C'est pour cela que Nassur Attoumani utilise dans sa féroce satire tellement de descriptions réelles et de sujets de la société (esclavage, colonialisme, violence conjugale, conflits entre générations, émigration) qu'il sera défini par l'écrivain Mohamed Toihiri le «*Violateur de tabous*»; ou comme Aboubacar Saïd Salim qui utilise l'écriture pour structurer le réel, mais surtout pour *annoncer* et *dénoncer* en même temps: «l'écriture ne peut qu'avoir deux rôles: *annoncer* ou *dénoncer*. Comme sur la planète Afrique c'est l'Autre (l'alien) qui a souvent *annoncé*, notre rôle est justement de *dénoncer* ce qui a été *annoncé* sans tenir compte ni de nos existences, ni de nos enracinements dans nos terres et dans nos cieux» (p.252).

Dénoncer les avanies subies afin de réaliser la ré-appropriation du territoire et surtout la revalorisation de l'expression «Être-au-monde», même s'il s'agit d'un émigré comme dans le cas de Salim Hatubou (Isabelle Mohamed, *Salim Hatubou, écrire pour vivre et faire vivre un espace*). Le seul moyen pour mettre en œuvre tout cela est de rendre les cris féroces à travers l'utilisation d'un martèlement de mots-clés gravés en majuscules qui ne cesse de re-proposer l'archipel aux yeux du lecteur en éparpillant ces lettres qui s'impriment dans la rétine et ces mots qui retentissent dans la tête. Une écriture percutante, qui réussit à influencer même M.N. Marson décrivant tout cela en rythme syncopé. Une virulence qui doit choquer le public, parce que le but n'est pas du tout esthétique mais pratique: il faut se faire entendre au-delà de l'Océan, il faut se faire reconnaître afin de s'insérer dans l'Histoire pour ne pas oublier sa propre histoire. La littérature comorienne est une sorte de

manifestation des étudiants mise par écrit, de slogans criés en majuscules, de thèmes qui touchent et choquent, tout cela accompagné de la volonté d'initier les nouveaux jeunes («pour moi un bon lecteur est un futur écrivain» A.S. Salim, p.101). Le mouvement ne peut pas s'arrêter, il a toujours besoin de nouvelles forces pour aller encore plus loin, pour annoncer ses intentions et dénoncer son Histoire (passée et présente). De là l'exploration et l'exploitation de tous les genres: le roman à base historique *La République des imberbes* de M.Toihiri (dans Nassur Djailani, *La République des imberbes: une satire politique d'une férocité hilarante*), le roman autobiographique *Brûlante est ma terre* de Abdou Salam Baco (dans N. Djailani, *Abdou Salam Baco, romancier de la protestation, ou la conscience d'un lectorat à venir* et A.S. Baco, N. Djailani, *Entretien avec Abdou Salam Baco*), le roman de l'enfant solitaire d' A.S. Salim (dans A.S. Salim, M.N. Marson, *Rencontre avec Aboubacar Saïd Salim: l'écrivain moïnantsi, «enfant de [sa] terre»*), le théâtre populaire et satirique de Nassur Attoumani (dans N. Attoumani, M.N. Marson «*Le rire dans tous ses états d'âme!*»). *Entretien avec Nassur Attoumani*), le théâtre-récit de Alain Kamal Martial (dans F.K. Hassan, *Alain Kamal Martial, du théâtre à l'invention de l'espace*) et la poésie de la voix solitaire intolérante et intolérable de Saïndoune Ben Ali (dans J.-L. Raharimanana, *Testaments de transhumance: les rêves d'archipel, du poétique au politique*).

Toutes ces voix et d'autres encore ont enfin trouvé le moyen de divulguer leurs *ressassements* (comme les définit M.N. Marson dans *Les littératures comorienne, malgache, mauricienne et réunionnaise: dire la terre natale par le ressassement*) et leurs obsessions au-delà de l'archipel à travers d'autres voix, afin de ne plus être seulement une *Littérature en archipel* mais une littérature qui permet de «se tourner vers l'avenir et entrer sereinement en relation avec la «Tout-Humanité»» (p.302).

ANNA MICHIELETTA

Gabon: la littérature en question, textes réunis et présentés par L. Obiang, «Interculturel Francophonies», 20, novembre-décembre 2011.

Ce volume retrace le parcours du développement de la littérature gabonaise pendant les 50 ans d'indépendance du Pays. Ludovic Obiang fait référence à deux aspects en particulier: d'un côté à «un long voyage jusqu'au bout du silence» (p.9), de l'autre au positionnement identitaire. La littérature gabonaise a gardé le silence pendant longtemps, mais elle se veut aujourd'hui nationale et mûre dans différents genres, du théâtre au roman en passant par l'importance dernièrement acquise par la nouvelle. Le positionnement identitaire est source de complexité parce qu'il est lié aux questions concernant l'utilisation de la langue française – mais quelle langue française? – ainsi qu'au concept de nation décliné à l'africaine».

Ce numéro de «Interculturel Francophonie» se situe exactement 20 ans après la parution du numéro 105 de «Notre Librairie» (1991), entièrement consacré à la littérature gabonaise et «démarrage de l'activité critique au Gabon» (p.95). Dans l'introduction, Obiang souligne les points communs et les différences entre les deux publications. À l'époque, le corpus de textes qui composait la littérature gabonaise était très réduit, en revanche maintenant la situation s'est beaucoup améliorée. L'auteur met en évidence pourtant le problème de la prépondérance de l'institution littéraire dans le Pays, au détriment du littéraire en soi. Il s'interroge aussi à propos du rôle des acteurs institutionnels nationaux pour la promotion de la lecture, des maisons d'édition, de l'enseignement de la littérature dans les écoles et les universités. Face à la controverse concernant l'expression «littérature gabonaise», Obiang adopte une position pragmatique: il regroupe «toute la production littéraire identifiable «par la nation», par «la nationalité commune de leurs

auteurs» (p.20), conscient du cadre artificiel des frontières ainsi que de la richesse du patrimoine traditionnel oral appartenant aux 52 ethnies du Pays. Il fait ressortir la spécificité du roman africain qui remplit une «fonction représentative» (p.25) par rapport au roman occidental, représentativité manifestée surtout par la dichotomie village/ville. L'anti-cité, dans la peinture du *matiti* (le bidonville), exemple de réalisme africain qui diffère du réalisme occidental et le rapproche du réalisme magique latino-américain, devient le pôle de construction de la nation et des valeurs traditionnelles de solidarité. Obiang n'hésite pourtant pas à tracer les risques d'une production exiguë: «le nombrilisme hagiographique qui ferait valoir automatiquement toute œuvre littéraire dès le moment où elle est produite par un Gabonais» (p.32), la qualité des textes choisis pour la didactique dans un corpus qui n'est pas assez vaste et «une association fondée sur la nationalité littéraire» (p. 32), qui pourrait «établir une logique de cartel, génératrice d'exclusion» (p.32) et être trop liée au pouvoir, limitant ainsi les ferments de révolte ou de rupture.

Les questions sur la *gabonité* des textes, leur perception critique et leur rapport avec l'histoire, débat qui remonte au tout début de la littérature gabonaise, sont reprises par Georice Berthin Madébé, qui souligne le manque de repères souffert par les auteurs: puisque le colonialisme français n'a pas favorisé la formation d'une classe dirigeante et d'intellectuels, on n'a pas assisté, différemment du Congo Brazzaville ou du Cameroun, à une éclosion du genre romanesque (*Histoire d'un enfant trouvé* de Robert Zotoumbat date de 1971). L'auteur reconnaît, de 1971 à 2011, trois tendances dans la littérature gabonaise: de 1971 à 1989 «une plus grande édition des genres oraux et des chroniques» (p.49); à partir de 1990, «la faillite de la gestion publique d'un État considéré jusqu'en 1980 comme un Émirat africain» (p.49); avec l'émergence de nombreux jeunes auteurs, une fracture entre les écrivains locaux

qui gardent des liens étroits avec l'immédiateté sociologique et ceux de la diaspora (dont Sandrine Bessora), qui s'adonnent à une sorte d'*hédonisme* littéraire. Il s'interroge sur la question de la formation des auteurs et du langage littéraire, en souhaitant la création d'un corpus de romans à partir de la culture gabonaise, capable de limiter le discours historiciste au profit de l'invention littéraire et à mesure de plier la langue française à ses propres exigences (comme le fit Ahmadou Kourouma).

Au Gabon où «le pétrole et l'enrichissement facile ont constitué tout à la fois une chance et une malédiction» (p.61), Steve Robert Renombo décrit la situation d'une culture qui «ne bénéficie guère de structures» (p.61): l'enseignement secondaire de la littérature voit donc une prépondérance de l'analyse formelle et l'université, sans boussole didactique, subit une inflation théorique avec la multiplication des modèles méthodologiques. L'auteur suggère par conséquent «une redécouverte du capital cognitif et psychoaffectif des œuvres de fiction et des capitaux symboliques» (p.70), en particulier du roman qui permet «d'habiter *authentiquement* le présent» (p.71), par le biais d'un «passage d'une "épistémologie de l'application"» de différentes méthodologies «à une "épistémologie de l'implication"» (p.71-72) du sujet apprenant, pour qu'il acquière les compétences nécessaires au contexte de son territoire et de son époque. L'enseignement, qui nécessite une étude de la réception, est strictement lié à la sociocritique de la vie littéraire et des acteurs institutionnels. À ce propos, Hémery-Hervais Sima Eyi souligne l'importance d'une interaction entre la base des systèmes de diffusion de la littérature (maisons d'édition, librairies, bibliothèques) et les mécanismes de publicité (prix, concours, enseignement, critique). Au Gabon les maisons d'édition ont été absentes pendant longtemps et les éditeurs actuels, malheureusement, sont encore «des imprimeries détentrices de numéros isbn» (p.85) qui ni sélectionnent ni promeuvent

les publications. Les ouvrages ne bénéficient donc ni de supports pédagogiques adéquats ni d'une présence suffisante dans le réseau de bibliothèques ou de librairies, où en tout cas les prix sont majeurs par rapport à ceux des livres importés. Voilà pourquoi les enseignants préfèrent les littératures étrangères (française et africaines subsahariennes).

Après les «parcours généraux et lectures transversales» (p.17), la deuxième partie du volume présente plus en détail la richesse de la littérature gabonaise actuelle et le foisonnement stimulant de ses jeunes auteurs. L'intérêt de ce livre collectif, outre que par les questions discutées, est accru par les multiples comparaisons entre différents ouvrages et auteurs gabonais, mais aussi entre volumes gabonais et volumes appartenant à d'autres littératures subsahariennes, ce qui donne au lecteur une vision plus ample et riche en échos.

Apparue aux alentours des années 1940, marginalisée entre 1960 et 1998, depuis la fin des années 1990 la nouvelle évolue sur le plan thématique aussi bien qu'esthétique et devient un genre autonome et reconnu au Gabon, comme le souligne dans sa périodisation Didier Taba Odounga. Au niveau thématique, les histoires décrivent généralement la parabole d'un destin individuel et concernent la réalité du Pays. Parmi les différents auteurs, dans les recueils individuels ou collectifs, Auguste Mackey nous présente la fonction symbolique de la topographie et des lexèmes locaux de l'Afrique «banlieusarde», tandis qu'Obiang nous fait plonger dans le monde des masques fang et son alphabet d'interprétation de l'univers. L'importance d'Obiang comme écrivain de nouvelles est remarquée aussi par Clotilde-Chantal Alléla-Kwévi, qui tisse un lien: *De la Francophonie à l'Hispanité. Présence de la Guinée Equatoriale et de l'Amérique latine dans trois nouvelles de Ludovic Emame Obiang*. Les «constitutions étatiques d'emprunt, [...] superposées à d'anciens découpages traditionnels» (p.275) sont désormais cimentées par les différentes langues coloniales:

il faut donc en connaître plusieurs pour passer d'une partie à l'autre d'un territoire culturellement homogène. Obiang fait pourtant circuler ses personnages et crée une osmose linguistique grâce au trilinguisme français/espagnol/fang, soit pour promouvoir le dialogue avec l'hispanité africaine et américaine, soit pour «reconstruire le berceau de l'enfance que la colonisation a détruit» (p.276). Pour aboutir à l'union nationale rêvée et utopique, l'harmonie doit se produire au niveau politique, mais aussi à la base de la société, au niveau clanique et familial, à partir des sources traditionnelles (le monde des masques, mentionné plus haut, qui met en communication avec l'univers des Esprits) et des forces positives de la nature. Dans les nouvelles d'Obiang, la Guinée Équatoriale revêt en effet «l'image de la forêt ou des montagnes pour les esclaves marrons des Antilles» (p.297). En ce qui concerne le mythe positif de la guérilla, l'auteur stigmatise «les dérives actuelles des héritiers du sandinisme ou du castrisme» (p.292) à travers la mise en relief d'une violence systématique de la part des bourreaux animalisés: les enfants-soldats. Cette «complexification de la réalité humaine» (p.295) invite le lecteur à ouvrir sa conception du monde à l'Ailleurs grâce au réalisme magique de matrice hispano-américaine.

Georice Berthin Madébé propose une lecture comparée des structures sémiotiques de *Giambattista Viko ou le viol du discours africain*, un classique de la littérature subsaharienne, et de *Parole de vivant*, roman gabonais. Dans les deux ouvrages, la quête fondamentale du sens de l'existence a lieu à travers la littérature et le langage de la création romanesque. L'identité subjective et culturelle des personnages principaux, expérience intérieure de la signification, est confrontée à la tradition d'un côté et à la modernité occidentale de l'autre. Elle aboutit dans *Giambattista Viko* à «l'altérité morphologique du roman» (p.157): l'acte d'énonciation vise à «produire une parole intemporelle animée par le désir primordial de la rencontre de

l'autre» (p. 163). Dans *Parole de vivant*, avec un procédé différent, les distorsions énonciatives rendent le roman parfois incompréhensible pour un lecteur qui ne connaît pas la langue punu.

L'identité et le choix qui oppose d'une part les traditions et la culture du village et de l'autre l'école des blancs et le christianisme de la ville reviennent dans l'article de Thierry Ekogha: *Identité et dimensions de l'exister dans* La vocation de Dignité de Jean Divassa Nyama. La protagoniste du roman, Dignité, fait son chemin vers la liberté et l'inattendu, accompagnée du dépositaire des coutumes du village et de la lignée: «tradition et modernité sont ici en leur dépassement mutuel» (p.195). Obiang, dans le rôle de critique, examine *Représentation littéraire et positionnement identitaire dans* La vocation de Dignité de Jean Divassa Nyama et Histoire d'Awu de Justine Mintsa à travers l'analyse de deux extraits de ces textes. La question de l'identité résulte encore une fois étroitement liée à la question de la langue et de la culture: la complexité du rapport avec la langue française et l'Autre conduit soit à la cohabitation des lexiques, soit «à une situation de *glottophagie* insidieuse, par laquelle la langue étrangère se laisse subjugué par la logique (intérieure) africaine au point d'être vidée de sa charge culturelle originelle» (p.134).

On remarque donc que ce volume attribue un espace important à la femme en tant que personnage, tout comme à la femme écrivain: Bessora, l'auteure la plus célèbre de la diaspora gabonaise, consacre son roman à l'étude d'une «ontologie du moi» (p.199) par un dédoublement de la narration et des sujets des récits qui la composent. À travers cette écriture qui se veut plurielle (des micro-récits sont contenus dans le récit; l'identité des personnages est double), Bessora est confrontée aux problématiques de la dimension sociale de la maladie, de la configuration du Mal ou des clochards. Les points de vue imbriqués, les parcours parallèles des deux femmes protagonistes, le mé-

lange des micro-récits au fur et à mesure que le roman avance contribuent à tisser «une poétique de l'existence» (p.213).

Sylvie Ntsame est définie par Nicolas Mba-Zué «comme l'écrivaine la plus prolifique de la jeune génération» gabonaise (p.219). Dans ses ouvrages, comme il arrive souvent dans le roman africain, la suggestion et la métaphore dominant et la description de l'espace vise à «communiquer un savoir» (p.227). On retrouve la dichotomie d'un endroit proche et moderne -la ville- juxtaposé à un espace lointain et ancien: le village, dépositaire du savoir traditionnel, «monde authentiquement africain [...] à la fois sauvage et humain» (p.237). L'espace, ordonné par le principe de la diversité comme «modalité discursive des textes africains» (p.240), construit l'univers diégétique d'un monde beau, heureux et harmonieux, enraciné dans les mythes.

On revient à la sémiotique, mais on reste toujours dans le roman gabonais décliné «au féminin», avec l'article de Patricia Sylvie Essonghé: *Pour une sémiotique de l'ivresse amoureuse dans* La Femme-poison de Irène Dembé. Le pivot du récit est la quête de l'argent à tout prix par la protagoniste, une femme prédatrice qui provoque l'ivresse amoureuse dans ses victimes. Suivant une approche sémio-narrative, Essonghé analyse la «scripturalisation» (p.246) de cette ivresse et repère «une organisation complexe et polémique des parcours narratifs des actants-sujets» (p.247) au-delà de l'organisation linéaire superficielle des chapitres. La thématique du corps féminin comme arme pour affirmer l'identité de la femme et le «*pouvoir du vagin*» (p.269) à travers le progressif avilissement du corps masculin renvoie à d'autres femmes écrivains subsahariennes: Bessora, que nous venons de citer, pour rester au Gabon, mais aussi Mariama Bâ et Calixthe Beyala. Le dernier article du volume, *La démence comme miroir de la situation coloniale dans* La Folle du Gouverneur de Laurent Owondo par Clément Moupoumbou, est consacré à un ouvrage de

théâtre gabonais qui traite de la rencontre manquée avec l'Autre dans le drame des amours coloniales. La folie, liée à l'histoire, construit le discours amoureux et politique. Dans la pièce, la puissance hégémonique vise à posséder le fétiche lié autour du ventre de la femme colonisée, qui dans la pièce est symbole du territoire conquis et de l'environnement équatorial exploité et trahi par les différents dominateurs, au détriment de la population. Moupoumbou en rapproche le dénouement, pourtant positif, de celui du roman *L'aventure ambiguë*: le veilleur de nuit, porte-parole du peuple, le libère du gouverneur imposteur, possédé à son tour par la folie.

Pour conclure, ce volume a le mérite d'assembler différentes études générales et spécifiques sur la littérature gabonaise, ses auteurs, son histoire et ses problématiques. Il pose un regard à la fois global et particulier sur cette littérature: ce qu'elle est, ses débuts, comment elle a évolué au cours des décennies, les tendances actuelles et futures selon une perspective historique, sémiotique ou comparative. Les auteurs ne se limitent pourtant pas à la dimension littéraire, mais se préoccupent aussi de la diffusion de cette littérature et de son enseignement, soulignant ainsi l'importance des liens entre le littéraire et le social dans une vision plus ample, qui englobe le Pays tout entier.

ALESSIA VIGNOLI

Raharimanana: la poétique du vertige, textes réunis et présentés par J.-C. Delmeule, «Interculturel Francophonies», 23, juin-juillet 2013.

C'est à l'auteur malgache Jean-Luc Raharimanana et à sa «poétique du vertige» que se consacre le numéro 23 de la revue «Interculturel Francophonies», coordonné par Jean-Cristophe Delmeule. Dans ce numéro de la revue dirigée par Andrea Cali, divisé en 5 sections, les interventions des spécialistes prennent en

examen plusieurs aspects de l'œuvre de Raharimanana, pour aboutir à un portrait d'ensemble qui décrit très bien le caractère varié du parcours littéraire de l'auteur.

Le rapport qu'il entretient avec les formes littéraires traditionnelles de sa terre est au centre de sa poétique, comme le montre Frédéric Mambenga dans *Jean-Luc Raharimanana et la quête spirituelle à travers la métaphore sorabique dans L'arbre anthropophage*, une analyse de la présence des *Sorabes* dans l'œuvre de Raharimanana, en particulier dans le roman *L'arbre anthropophage*, paru en 2004. Les *Sorabes*, textes sacrés malgaches écrits en graphies arabes, sont réutilisés par Raharimanana pour faire revivre ses racines à travers une recherche dans la mémoire ancestrale. L'objectif de cette redécouverte est celui de restituer la spiritualité malgache après l'instauration de nouveaux symboles religieux ou politiques par les pouvoirs coloniaux; à cette instauration correspond une crise, une fracture. La redécouverte des *Sorabes* est donc fondamentale pour Raharimanana, car elle lui permet d'explorer le passé et le présent de sa patrie à travers des formes symboliques qui appartiennent à la tradition de son peuple. Cette volonté de retrouver une tradition perdue s'accompagne d'un refus de la falsification du passé maudit de Madagascar, refus qui pousse le «je» (auteur et personnage) à une quête spirituelle qui a comme point de départ la réinterprétation des formes traditionnelles.

Cette réinterprétation est aussi au centre de l'étude conduite par Magali Nirina Marson dans *Raharimanana, Sorabe et Tantaran'ny andriana: les littératures malgaches, laboratoire et paradigme du «bricolage» générique et de la «re-création» littéraire*, où l'auteur se concentre sur l'aspect composite des ouvrages de Raharimanana, en particulier de *Nour, 1947* et de *L'arbre anthropophage*. M. N. Marson explique la démarche de l'écrivain malgache, qui intègre dans ses récits des mythes, légendes et formes traditionnelles en donnant ainsi origine à un

mélange de genres qui se base sur la «ré-invention» de la tradition, à travers la création d'un lexique qui mêle oralité et écriture. À la présence des susmentionnés *Sorabes* à l'intérieur de l'œuvre de Raharimanana, elle ajoute aussi celle également importante des *Tantaran'ny andriana*, formes narratives en prose appartenant à la tradition malgache qui incluent des parties chantées.

Le caractère polymorphe de l'œuvre de Raharimanana est étudié aussi par Virginie Brinker qui, dans *Rêves sous le linceul*, «*Rwanda et dépendances...*», analyse le recueil de nouvelles *Rêves sous le linceul* et met en évidence l'écriture choquante de Raharimanana et son lien avec l'histoire: dans ce cas il s'agit du génocide des Tutsi en Rwanda de 1994.

La violence et l'histoire en tant qu'éléments fondamentaux des récits de l'auteur font l'objet de l'étude d'Ute Fendler, qui dans *Une écriture relationnelle: violence et histoire coloniale dans l'œuvre de Raharimanana* réfléchit sur les moyens utilisés par Raharimanana pour écrire et décrire la violence subie par le peuple malgache pendant des siècles. U. Fendler s'appuie sur les théories élaborées par Édouard Glissant, dans sa *Poétique de la relation*, pour démontrer dans son analyse que l'écriture de Raharimanana est «relationnelle» et «rhizomatique», ouverte et éclatée.

À l'origine de cette écriture il y a le fragment, mode d'expression choisi par Raharimanana pour véhiculer le traumatisme et la fracture, comme le souligne Cheikh M.S. Diop dans *Écriture fragmentaire et résilience littéraire chez Jean-Luc Raharimanana*, une étude très intéressante qui porte sur l'écriture de Raharimanana et sur l'effet d'unité et d'espoir qui dérive assez étonnamment de son style violemment fragmentaire.

L'importance de la terre natale comme point de départ et origine d'un traumatisme incurable est au centre de l'étude de Louis Bertin Amougou, qui dans *Jean-Luc Raharimanana: entre l'écriture de la faille et la faille d'une écri-*

ture décrit le mélange entre fiction et réalité dans l'œuvre de Raharimanana pour aboutir à la conclusion que son écriture est étroitement liée à la fracture: c'est à partir du déracinement que cette œuvre se nourrit et évolue. L'événement qui déclenche chez l'auteur malgache un besoin d'écrire presque obsessionnel est représenté par l'arrestation de son père, survenue en 2002; à partir de ce moment l'écrivain se met au service d'un engagement littéraire qui amène, à travers la fiction, à réfléchir constamment sur les problèmes de Madagascar. L.B. Amougou, dans son étude, termine par une réflexion concernant un risque auquel l'œuvre de Raharimanana pourrait être obligée de se confronter, c'est-à-dire l'obsolescence due au rapide changement de l'actualité. Si l'on considérerait aussi l'implication personnelle de l'auteur dans ses récits, qui pourrait apparaître proche de l'exhibitionnisme, il ne resterait que la beauté artistique pour juger de la valeur littéraire de cette œuvre, comme le souligne L. B. Amougou quand il termine son intervention par cette interrogation: «Et si l'engagement littéraire était aussi et d'abord une question de forme?» (p.144).

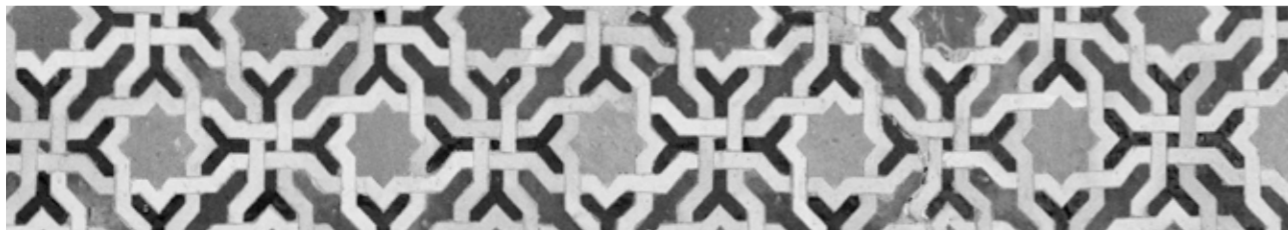
Au mélange entre fiction et réalité se consacre aussi l'étude de Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo, qui dans *Incandescences de 1947 dans quelques textes de Raharimanana: «écrire 47 sur corps et voix»* choisit de prendre en considération la métaphore de l'année 1947 (date symbole de l'oppression coloniale française) pour décrire la réélaboration de cet événement à l'intérieur de l'œuvre de Raharimanana. 1947 est une date qui revient toujours, de *Rêves sous le linceul* jusqu'à la pièce 47, tirée de *Madagascar 47*, et devient la métaphore de tous les conflits coloniaux et postcoloniaux, au-delà des limites du territoire malgache. La découverte du passé de sa terre natale, nécessaire pour Raharimanana afin de rappeler ce passé dans ses récits, est accompagnée d'une étape importante, celle de la découverte des photographies du fond Charles Ravoajanahary et des clichés de Pier-

rot Men. Il s'agit de photographies coloniales et de portraits du passé qui décrivent une époque qu'il faut remémorer, pour analyser le présent à partir de l'oubli qui caractérise la période coloniale et pour mieux comprendre les blessures incurables que cette période a entraînées.

La variété des formes qui caractérise l'œuvre de Raharimanana est mise en évidence aussi dans la dernière partie de la revue, *Paroles d'auteurs*, qui rassemble deux entretiens. Le premier est un dialogue entre Valérie Dewaele et Jean Ravelona, peintre malgache qui a illustré le conte de Raharimanana *Landisoa et les trois cailloux*. Le deuxième entretien, entre Jean-Pierre Han et le metteur en scène et auteur de théâtre Thierry Bedard, qui a monté quatre spectacles tirés des ouvrages de l'auteur malgache, tourne autour du rapport entre Raharimanana et le théâtre.

À l'intérieur de ce numéro apparaissent aussi une intervention de Jean-Christophe Delmeule, *Les Enlacement(s) du drame ou le repli du texte* et une analyse d'un conte de Raharimanana menée par Valérie Dewaele, *Landisoa et les trois cailloux: la couleur du destin*. C'est avec *L'espoir du bout de la misère*, inédit de Raharimanana qui date de 1987, que se termine ce numéro consacré au prolifique auteur malgache. J.-C. Delmeule dans son introduction souligne le fait que, dans ce poème de jeunesse, apparaissent déjà les caractéristiques principales de l'œuvre de Raharimanana dans sa totalité: l'utilisation du fragment, la puissance écrasante des mots et le tragique toujours accompagné d'un sentiment d'espoir.

magreb



ILARIA VITALI

Des histoires au coin de l'œil: Ghita El Khayat et les *Mille et une nuits*

«Je trouve ton histoire extraordinaire. Si on pouvait l'écrire à l'aiguille sur le coin intérieur de l'œil, elle donnerait à réfléchir à qui sait réfléchir.»¹ (*Les Mille et une nuits*, p. 55)

L'écriture d'histoires au coin de l'œil est un motif récurrent dans le recueil des *Mille et une nuits* et Abdelfattah Kilito, dans l'essai *L'œil et l'aiguille*, en a bien expliqué la signification et les enjeux. On retrouve cette pratique pour la première fois dans *l'Histoire du marchand et du démon*. La formule est ensuite reprise par Shéhérazade dans le conte du prince des Îles noires, dans celui des trois *calenders*, dans celui de Qamar et Budur et dans celui du jeune homme d'Oman. Bien qu'elle puisse paraître à première vue effrayante, cette pratique apparemment étrange de fixer une histoire sur un support autre que le papier met en jeu les instances majeures de la mémoire et de la vue et

tisse un lien subtil entre écriture et broderie, entre texte et tissage, en remontant ainsi à la source même du verbe «kataba», qui, comme le latin «texere», recouvre en même temps le sens d'«écrire» et de «coudre».² La pratique des «histoires au coin de l'œil» met aussi en lumière l'un des aspects cruciaux des contes du recueil des *Nuits*, leur côté merveilleux (le *'ajīb* et le *gharīb*, l'étrange et l'étonnant), mais aussi leur aspect éducatif et édifiant. Car, pour mériter d'être écrite au coin de l'œil, une histoire doit répondre à plusieurs qualités essentielles, dont on pourrait citer ce qu'Alain Montandon appelle la «concision formelle, déterminée par des facteurs de condensation, de raccourci, d'économie spécifique» (Montandon 1992: 4), mais aussi la présence d'une «morale». Comme Kilito le souligne, le but des contes est en effet celui de mettre en œuvre la «*ibra*», soit la réflexion sur l'exemple.

² Voir KILITO, *L'œil et l'aiguille*. On pense aussi à la pratique rituelle du tatouage, qui recouvre des significations symboliques très codifiées au Maghreb. Voir, entre autres, B. BELHASSEM, *Le tatouage maghrébin*, «Communication et langage», 31, 1976.

Dans le recueil *Les Sept jardins*, l'écrivaine marocaine Ghita El Khayat³ semble avoir adopté, à sa manière, le principe des «histoires au coin de l'œil». Le livre se présente comme une suite de douze textes, assez courts, qui pourraient être qualifiés tantôt de nouvelles, tantôt de contes, et qui mettent en œuvre, pour ensuite les détourner, certains thèmes et motifs orientaux.⁴ Si l'on considère le recueil des *Nuits* comme une œuvre hybride qui «greffe sur le conte arabe des éléments de langue, de culture et de littérature française» (Sermain 2009: 18) il est particulièrement productif d'analyser son influence sur un texte qui fait partie de la littérature maghrébine de langue française, elle aussi produit d'une hybridité, au carrefour de l'Orient et l'Occident. Le lecteur de textes maghrébains assiste, en effet, à la reprise continue des thèmes et des motifs-clefs du célèbre recueil⁵ et il est ébloui par la renaissance perpétuelle du corps théorique de Shéhérazade, fastueuse théorie de récits imbriqués jusqu'au vertige, dont les auteurs s'approprient souvent pour démystifier les clichés et les stéréotypes

³ Née à Rabat en 1944, Ghita (ou Rita selon les translittérations) El Khayat est une psychiatre et anthropologue, connue surtout pour sa riche réflexion sur la condition de la femme maghrébine, à laquelle elle a consacré plusieurs essais (*Le Monde Arabe au féminin*, 1985; *Le Maghreb des femmes*, 1992; *Le Somptueux Maroc des femmes*, 1994; *La Femme artiste dans le monde arabe*, 2011). Publié en 1995, *Les Sept jardins* est son premier texte fictionnel, ce qui marque un tournant dans le parcours de l'auteur et lui donne une valeur supplémentaire.

⁴ Ghita El Khayat aborde d'ailleurs les *Mille et une nuits* (leurs sources, leurs thèmes et leurs symboles, en faisant référence surtout à la figure de Shéhérazade) dans l'essai *La Femme artiste dans le monde arabe*, Paris, Editions Broca, 2011, et plus particulièrement dans le chapitre 8, «Shéhérazade, la *jarja* la plus célèbre».

⁵ On pense, entre autres, à l'œuvre d'Assia Djébar, d'Abdelkébir Khatibi, de Mourad Djebel, de Tahar Ben Jelloun ou de Fawzia Zouari, pour ne citer que quelques exemples.

d'un Orient au décor exotique – Orient «de patotille» pour reprendre les mots de Khatibi.⁶ Sans vouloir traiter de la résurgence des *Nuits* dans l'ensemble de la littérature maghrébine,⁷ j'aimerais me pencher dans cet article sur le recueil de Ghita El Khayat mentionné plus haut, car il me paraît un cas emblématique de (ré)écriture et de (ré)appropriation. Il est composé en effet de quelques récits où le merveilleux revient sous des formes et avec des significations inédites, s'alliant à une «morale» inattendue qui réadapte et modernise le principe des histoires à écrire «au coin de l'œil». Deux nouvelles ont attiré particulièrement mon attention. Les voici.

La jalousie des femmes et la mémoire défaillante des hommes

La quatrième nouvelle du recueil de Ghita El Khayat, *Le Présent*, prend dès son incipit les allures d'un conte merveilleux. L'époque où se déroule l'intrigue – on fait vaguement référence «aux plus grandes époques de la civilisation islamique» – renvoie au temps indéterminé des formules rituelles telle que «Il était une fois». Il y est question d'un riche caravanier et de son épouse Hawa, «très douce et très calme», qui lui demande de lui rapporter de son prochain voyage de grands peignes ronds en nacre blanche pour retenir ses cheveux. Le marchand étant doué, comme il arrive souvent

⁶ A. KHATIBI, *De la mille et troisième nuit*, in *Ombres japonaises*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1992.

⁷ Voir à ce sujet C. FRANÇOIS, «En présence de l'étranger: les *Mille et une nuits* dans la littérature maghrébine d'expression française», in *Les Mille et une nuits*, catalogue de l'exposition «Mille et une nuits», (Institut du Monde Arabe, 27 novembre 2012-28 avril 2013), Paris, Éditions Hazan, 2012. On peut consulter également plusieurs articles de C. CHAULET-ACHOUR qui recourent ces thématiques et que la spécialiste met à disposition en libre accès sur son site: < <http://christianeachour.net> >.

¹ Toutes les citations du recueil dans cet article sont tirées de cette édition.

dans les contes, d'une très faible mémoire,⁸ sa femme lui suggère un stratagème: il lui suffira de regarder la lune pendant son voyage pour se souvenir de quelque chose de «nacré» et de «rond». (El khayat 1995: 36)

Le caravanier entreprend ainsi son périple, d'abord dans les sables mouvants et trompeurs du désert, puis dans l'océan Indien jusqu'à Zanzibar, encore connu comme la Côte des Esclaves. Ayant perdu son fidèle second ainsi que ses biens, il est forcé de prolonger son voyage et de tracer sa route jusqu'à Ceylan, où il arrive à faire de bons commerces et à récupérer sa fortune.⁹ Comme l'auteur elle-même

8 La mémoire défaillante des marchands, maris ou pères, est un *topos* qui revient dans nombre de contes d'une rive à l'autre de la Méditerranée. Au-delà des *Nuits*, il suffit de penser à la *Gatta Cenerentola* (1634-1636) de Basile, l'une des premières sources écrites de l'histoire de Cendrillon, codifiée par la suite par Perrault à la fin du XVII^e siècle dans la version qui est aujourd'hui la plus connue. Dans le conte de Basile, les six filles demandent au père, marchand, de leur rapporter des cadeaux de son voyage. La jeune Zezolla (Cendrillon) demande seulement «che me raccommanne a la palomma de le fate, decennole che me manneo quarcosa; e, si te lo scuorde, non puozze ire né 'nanze né arreto. Tiene a mente chello che te dico: arma toia, maneca toia». Le père oublie et son bateau ne parvient pas à démarrer; ce n'est qu'après la suggestion du capitaine qu'il retrouvera sa mémoire et apportera à sa fille un dattier qui se révélera magique. Ce détail, crucial dans le conte de Basile, sera effacé par Perrault qui substituera la fée marraine à la plante (la datte reviendra sous forme d'un rameau de noisetier dans une autre version du conte, celle des Frères Grimm). L'oubli touche également le caravanier de la nouvelle d'El Khayat, car c'est à cause de «sa mémoire [qui] le lâchait souvent» – définie par ailleurs comme un «sérieux handicap» – qu'il se trompera de cadeau, jetant son épouse dans le désespoir.

9 Ce qui n'est pas sans rappeler l'une des histoires les plus emblématiques du recueil des *Nuits*, *Les sept voyages de Sindbad*, quoique ce cycle de contes ne faisait pas partie du corpus originel et qu'il y fut introduit au début du XVIII^e siècle par le premier traducteur occidental du recueil, l'orientaliste français antiquaire du roi Antoine Galland (*Les Mille et une nuits*, Paris, Barbin, 1704-1717). Le nom de Sindbad demeure aujourd'hui lié de manière indissoluble au célèbre recueil.



Ghita El Khayat - Photo R. Castro

le confirme: «Les somptueux récits de la sublime Shéhérazade ne sont qu'une partie des aventures oubliées de tous ces marchands, ces caravaniers, ces navigateurs au long cours armés parfois seulement du secours de Dieu et de leur courage fou et fascinant» (El khayat 1995: 43). L'homme voudrait poursuivre sur la Route de la Soie vers la Chine, mais plusieurs mois se sont déjà écoulés depuis son départ, il n'a pas respecté le Ramadan et, surtout, il ne peut plus tenir sans sa femme Hawa, «langoureuse et alanguie par l'absence du caravanier et par l'oisiveté tant fréquentée.» (El khayat 1995: 34). En effet, si à une extrémité de la corde nous avons les caravaniers courageux et intrépides qui arpentent le monde, à l'autre bout nous trouvons les épouses languissantes qui les attendent. Désœuvrées, elles alimentent leur jalousie pour les époux

absents jour après jour. Comme nous le verrons, le mot «jalousie», qui ouvre la nouvelle d'El Khayat, en dicte toute la partition.

À Ceylan, loin de sa femme «langoureuse», le caravanier regarde donc la lune, qui lui rappelle le désir exprimé par Hawa avant son départ: un «objet blanc dont la mode venait de se répandre, rond, d'un usage typiquement féminin» (El khayat 1995: 45). Il en achète alors cinq, de cuivre ouvragé, d'argent ciselé, sertis dans de la nacre, dans du bois et dans l'écaille. Admirable geste... sauf que l'objet rond, blanc et féminin n'est pas celui tant recherché par Hawa. Au retour du marchand, au lieu des peignes demandés, l'épouse se voit offrir un objet mystérieux, réservé à l'époque uniquement aux favorites et aux sultanes, et dont elle ignore l'usage:

Hawa fut ravie de toute la moisson qu'avait rapporté son mari jusqu'au moment où il extirpa d'une besace un étui de soie. Il vit que seul l'objet rond serti sur le cuivre avait résisté au long voyage. Il le remit à Hawa qui tremblait d'avidité et de curiosité.

À la vue du miroir (car c'en était un mais peu de gens à l'époque le connaissaient), à la vue du miroir donc, Hawa entra dans un désespoir terrible.

Une inconnue souverainement belle la regardait au fond de l'eau lisse du miroir et de grands yeux bruns étaient figés au fond du cercle brillant et la regardaient avec une étrange intensité. (El khayat 1995: 47)

N'ayant jamais vu un miroir de sa vie, Hawa ne se reconnaît pas dans l'inconnue au fond de la glace et pense que son mari ait ramené de son voyage une belle inconnue. On retrouve ici l'évocation détournée du «miroir magique», objet appartenant à l'imaginaire collectif et for-

tement exploité dans la tradition du conte.¹⁰ Incapable d'attribuer la vraie valeur à un objet tout à fait innocent qui a pour but de montrer le réel de manière fiable, Hawa lui prête des vertus magiques et y retrouve l'art de la catopromancie (du grec ancien *κάτοπτρον* (*kátoptron*), «miroir», et *μαντεία* (*mantείa*), «divination»), à savoir la divination d'après les figures apparaissant sur la surface réfléchissante.

El Khayat semble revisiter ce *topos* dans une optique psychanalytique (n'oublions pas que l'auteur est psychiatre). «Lorsque le miroir se brouille et que la reconnaissance ne se fait plus, le vraisemblable se transforme en fantasmagorie» (Chikhi 1996: 9). Croyant voir l'altérité au fond du miroir, Hawa ne voit en réalité qu'elle-même, ses craintes et ses peurs, que l'on peut résumer en un maître-mot: la jalousie. Gorgée de ce sentiment qu'elle a nourri dans l'attente de son mari, Hawa pense – comme on a vu – qu'il a rapporté de son périple une autre femme, qui se cache dans l'eau lisse du miroir. L'auteur elle-même nous le dit: «La jalousie est un sentiment ontologique: il nous précède et il nous suit». (El khayat 1995: 33)¹¹

Comme Gilbert Grandguillaume le remarque,

10 On le retrouve en effet dans certains des contes les plus connus et qui font aujourd'hui partie d'un imaginaire partagé, tel que *Schneewittchen* (*Blanche neige*) des Frères Grimm (1812), ou bien *La belle et la bête* repris en France par Gabrielle Suzanne de Villeneuve (1740) et Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1750), qui s'inspire d'ailleurs du conte transcrit deux siècles auparavant par Straparola (*Il re porco*) dans *Le piacevoli notti* (1550), où il n'est pourtant pas question d'un miroir. Dans les *Nuits*, on trouve des références au miroir magique par exemple dans *l'Histoire merveilleuse du miroir des vierges*, dans le tome XI de la version de J.-C. Mardrus (Paris, Éditions de la Revue blanche, 1902), ainsi qu'à des objets similaires, tel que le tube d'ivoire magique dans *l'Histoire du Prince Ahmed et de la fée Pari-Banou*, dans la version déjà citée d'Antoine Galland.

11 L'auteur poursuit: «Il est un aiguillon de malheur et un mauvais œil à crever.» Il est intéressant de repérer les références à l'aiguille et à l'œil, ici détournées, qui semblent renvoyer directement à la pratique des «histoires au coin de l'œil» dans les *Nuits*.

la jalousie est l'un des thèmes les plus emblématiques des *Nuits*, voire leur moteur premier, car c'est la jalousie du Sultan Shâhriyâr qui l'oblige à exécuter, chaque matin, sa nouvelle épouse de peur d'en être trahi. «Sous un certain aspect, on peut considérer l'ensemble des *Mille et Une Nuits* comme l'histoire d'une jalousie, de son émergence et de sa guérison» (Grandguillaume 1996). Dans la nouvelle d'El Khayat, la «guérison» – ou mieux, son détournement – arrivera par le biais d'une voix féminine. Les rapports entre femmes, que l'auteur décrit par ailleurs dans plusieurs de ses essais, sont bien codifiés dans les *Nuits* tout comme dans cette nouvelle: c'est donc à une autre représentante de la *gens* féminine, la mère de l'épouse, voix de sagesse, que revient le mot de la fin: «La mère, ayant extrait l'objet de son vêtement de soie chamarrée, regarda pensivement dans le miroir et dit à sa fille: Mais que t'importe, ma fille, que ton mari ait rapporté une autre femme, elle est si vieille!...» (El khayat 1995: 48).

L'ironie exploitée par El Khayat sert ici à démythifier les «sortilèges» chargés d'exotisme encore souvent rattachés au monde oriental. Le récit se fonde en effet sur ce que Jean de Palacio a défini comme «perversion» du merveilleux,¹² c'est à dire une réécriture qui ne se limite pas à reprendre les thèmes, la structure ou les motifs du texte premier, mais qui se plaît à les subvertir. On retrouve donc le procédé des contes détournés et particulièrement la parodie, qui n'est pas gratuite, mais qui sert à mettre en place un dialogue constant et une remise en question du modèle des *Nuits*, qui fait figure aussi bien de référence que de repoussoir. Technique postmoderne, la «perversion» ne s'avère que plus productive dans un contexte postcolonial, qui vise, entre autres, à détourner clichés et stéréotypes liés au monde maghrébin, souvent encore teinté d'orienta-

lisme. L'écriture maghrébine, nous dit Beïda Chikhi, «est devenue comme par nécessité une activité de démolition.» (Chikhi 1996: 7) Mais l'œuvre d'El Khayat ne fait pas seulement œuvre de destruction. Si le miroir magique disparaît de sa narration, c'est le conte lui-même qui se fait, d'une manière plus subtile, miroir magique car, comme l'explique Bruno Bettelheim, tout conte «est un miroir magique qui reflète certains aspects de notre univers intérieur et des démarches qu'exige notre passage de l'immaturité à la maturité. [...] derrière cette image, nous découvrons bientôt le tumulte intérieur de notre esprit, sa profondeur et la manière de nous mettre en paix avec lui et le monde extérieur, ce qui nous récompense de nos efforts» (Bettelheim 1999: 442). En transformant son conte en miroir magique, El Khayat passe ainsi de la parodie à la réappropriation du modèle et du patrimoine culturel, mode de réécriture supérieur, tout en arrivant à la création d'une œuvre originale et personnelle, dont les enjeux sont bien plus vastes. Derrière le travail de sape de son ironie «postcoloniale», Ghita El Khayat nous fait entrevoir une «morale» à écrire au coin de l'œil plus universelle, mais aussi plus obscure: même dans un miroir, semble nous dire l'écrivaine, on peut se voir soi-même et ne pas se reconnaître. On ne voit que ce que l'on veut voir.

Un mystère sans mystère

La matière des *Nuits* jaillit dans un autre conte du recueil d'El Khayat, intitulé *Le Maharadjah et la Maharaneh*. L'intrigue, qui baigne dans l'Inde immémoriale, est des plus espiègles. Un Maharadjah qui possède des richesses inestimables se languit dans son palais et personne ne peut éteindre son ennui. Jusqu'au jour où il rencontre la fille du prince de Kandy, une jeune fille farouchement belle, mais qui cache un secret. Elle accepte d'épouser le Maharadjah, à condition qu'il lui fasse une promesse: «Fort sérieuse la princesse lui expliqua avec beaucoup de candeur qu'elle portait sur

le sein gauche un soutien-gorge de cuir qui ne la quittait ni de jour ni de nuit. Il fallait que jamais le Maharadjah ne s'avisât de le lui faire ôter.»¹³ (El khayat 1995: 63)

Ébloui par l'étonnante interdiction, le maharadjah promet, car «toute chose inconnue attire, envoûte et retient, si elle a quelque éclat et quelque grandeur» (El khayat 1995: 58). Mais voilà les années qui passent, les deux époux ont quatre enfants et la curiosité, au lieu de s'éteindre, tarabuste de plus en plus le Maharadjah lui faisant oublier sa promesse. Il harcèle alors son épouse pour qu'elle lui montre le sein qu'il n'a jamais vu. La Maharaneh est, tour à tour, agacée, offensée, puis amusée et conquise par l'idée. Ainsi, à la clarté du jour «elle offrit à voir au Maharadjah deux seins identiques» (El khayat 1995: 64-65).

Résultat catastrophique: «À cet instant précis le Maharadjah cessa de l'aimer» (El khayat 1995: 30).

Le dévoilement du mystère (qui n'en était pas un), fait retomber dans l'ennui le Maharadjah et le ramène à son état de vague à l'âme initial. Pire encore: à partir de ce moment, il arrête d'aimer sa femme, à croire que ce n'était que le «secret» qui avait maintenu en vie son amour. D'ailleurs, qu'est-ce qui le déconcerte le plus dans sa découverte? Le fait que sa femme lui avait fait prêter une promesse sans raison aucune, ou le fait qu'il n'y avait pas de mystère là où il pensait en trouver un?

On croit pouvoir exclure la première hypothèse, car, dans ce cas, le Maharadjah aurait dû s'emporter contre sa femme, lui rétorquer de lui avoir menti pendant des années, de s'être jouée de lui. Or, rien de tout cela ne se produit: il tombe dans l'ennui.

Pour mieux comprendre les enjeux de la nouvelle, laissons de côté le Maharadjah, pour

nous pencher sur les raisons de la Maharaneh. Pourquoi avait-elle créé un mystère là où il n'y en avait pas? La réponse est assez simple: pour susciter la curiosité du Maharajah, car, comme chez Shéhérazade, «le désir de fiction inoculé à l'homme reste à jamais inassouvi» (Chikhi 1996: 128).

Mais, alors, pourquoi dévoiler le «secret», sachant qu'il n'en était pas un? La réponse paraît elle aussi tout aussi simple: après tant d'années passées ensemble, elle se sent aimée, objet d'une confiance unique. Et comme Shéhérazade l'avait fait avec le Sultan Shâhriyâr par le truchement de ses contes, la Maharaneh croit, elle aussi, avoir «transformé et guéri, et non pas seulement distrait» (Jullien 2009: 13) son mari, et le secret inventé au début de leur histoire ne doit plus lui paraître si nécessaire. El Khayat nous le rappelle d'ailleurs: «En effet il avait guéri dans le sein de sa femme et il était devenu un homme consulté, aimé et respecté par tous» (El khayat 1995: 64).

Dans cette nouvelle, l'auteur semble se jouer du pouvoir thaumaturgique du conte, ainsi que de ce mécanisme bien huilé dans les *Nuits*: une énigme à laquelle on ne peut avoir accès, un secret caché (souvent par une femme) qui se lie à une interdiction, à la demande étrange de ne pas faire/dire quelque chose, sous peine que l'irréparable n'arrive. Dans les *Nuits*, ce motif topique tresse sa loi, entre autres, dans l'*Histoire des Dames de Bagdad* où une phrase, écrite en peinture d'or, tapisse la porte de la demeure mystérieuse des trois maîtresses: «Ne te mêle point de ce qui ne te regarde pas, sinon tu entendras ce qui ne te plaira pas» (*Les Mille et une nuits*, p. 23). Tentative de détourner la curiosité de l'observateur, qui n'en est que plus intrigué. Ce motif émaille également d'autres contes, dont la célèbre histoire du troisième *calender*: après des multiples aventures, il échoue dans un palais princier habité par quarante jeunes femmes à la beauté extraor-

¹² J. DE PALACIO, *Les Perversions du merveilleux. Ma Mère l'Oye au tournant du Siècle*, Paris, Séguier, 1993.

¹³ G. EL KHAYAT, *Les Sept jardins*, p. 63. Ce qui rappelle le mythe des amazones, même si le sein en question est ici le gauche et non pas le droit, ce qui ne fait que brouiller les pistes en ajoutant un détournement ultérieur.

dinaire (Le château des Amazones),¹⁴ un château dont toutes les portes lui sont ouvertes sauf pour une chambre dont l'accès lui est interdit.¹⁵ Saura-t-il ne pas céder à la tentation, comme les Amazones le lui ont demandé? La réponse est de toute évidence négative et l'entraînera dans une suite d'aventures cauchemardesques qui l'amèneront, entre autres, à la perte de l'œil droit.

Dans la nouvelle d'El Khayat, encore une fois, l'ironie n'est pas gratuite. Dans l'histoire du Maharadjah et de la Maharaneh, l'auteur nous montre, à un niveau plus profond, ce qui arriverait si le mécanisme premier des *Nuits* qui maintient en vie Shéhérazade – la curiosité du Sultan – se bloquait. Si ce dernier, comme le Maharadjah, se lassait de Shéhérazade et de ses «secrets», et la condamnait finalement à mort. «C'est assez; qu'on lui coupe la tête, car ces dernières histoires surtout m'ont causé un ennui mortel».¹⁶ Cette hypothèse de Trébutien, traducteur des *Nuits*, a été recueillie par plusieurs auteurs: il suffit de penser à quelques «suites» des *Nuits*, dont par exemple celle de Edgar Allan Poe, *The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade*, qui voit la mort de la Sultane par étranglement.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ce qui nous reconduit, une fois encore, au «sein» de la Maharaneh.

¹⁵ Ce qui rappelle, par ailleurs, le célèbre conte de Perrault *La Barbe bleue*, dans le recueil *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (1697).

¹⁶ Trébutien, tome III, p. 497, cité in A. KILITO, *L'œil et l'aiguille*, cit., p. 26. Il s'agit en fait de la traduction de Joseph de Hammer, écrite en français et traduite en allemand, puis perdue et retraduite de l'allemand vers le français par Trébutien en 1828. Au sujet des traductions françaises des *Mille et une nuits* je renvoie à l'étude de référence de S. LARZUL, *Les Traductions françaises des Mille et une nuits: étude des versions Galland, Trébutien et Mardrus*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1996.

¹⁷ «Stop! Said the king – I can't stand that, and I won't. You have already given me a dreadful headache with your lies. [...] Upon the whole, you might as well get up and be throttled!», E.A. POE, *The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade* (1845). Voir à ce sujet *Contes de la Mille et deuxième nuit*, textes réunis, commentés et en partie traduits par E. STEAD, Grenoble, Millon, 2012, p. 94.

L'ennui, perspective épouvantable, est présentée dans la nouvelle de Ghita El Khayat ainsi que dans les *Nuits* comme la pire des calamités. Dans le *conte d'Alî le Persan devant Hârûn ar-Rashîd*, le calife est angoissé, il a du vague à l'âme, bref, il s'ennuie. Voilà donc que son fidèle vizir Ja'far lui offre le remède que nous pouvons déjà imaginer: «Commandeur des Croyants, j'ai un ami, Alî le Persan, qui connaît des histoires, des contes plaisants qui font plaisir à l'âme et ôtent tout chagrin du cœur» (*Les Mille et une nuits*, p. 284). Début stéréotypé de plusieurs contes¹⁸ qui se terminent souvent par un rire tellement fou du calife «qu'il en tombe à la renverse». Chez El Khayat, pourtant, personne ne va rire. L'histoire et son dénouement – le dévoilement du sein gauche de la Maharaneh – étanche la curiosité mais fait renaître l'ennui. Le texte prend ainsi une allure circulaire en devenant un cercle vicieux: le Maharadjah s'ennuie, il lui faut une épouse; l'épouse cache un secret – donc une histoire – qui chasse l'ennui; le secret titille le Maharadjah qui s'acharne à dévoiler le mystère; le secret dévoilé, l'histoire n'a plus d'intérêt et l'ennui l'emporte. La boucle est ainsi bouclée. Quelle «morale» dans cette «histoire au coin de l'œil»? Peut être celle-ci, que l'on ne doit pas s'acharner à dévoiler un secret, car on risque d'être «punis», sur un mode différent et bien moins féroce que dans les *Nuits*, mais non moins cruel.

En guise de conclusion

À sa parution en 1995, le recueil d'El Khayat avait été présenté comme un texte qui marquait «une rupture dans l'écriture maghrébine».¹⁹ S'il est vrai que l'auteur rompt avec une certaine tradition littéraire, elle ne rompt pourtant pas avec l'univers du conte, le ton,

¹⁸ Un autre dérivatif est possible: Ja'far propose au Calife ennuyé et insomniaque de se déguiser en marchand et de sortir dans les ruelles de Bagdad.

¹⁹ Voir la quatrième de couverture du recueil.

l'ambiance et la structure de ces deux récits continuant de relever du merveilleux. En psychiatre, Ghita El Khayat connaît bien le pouvoir révélateur du conte, que Bettelheim, Von Franz et tant d'autres ont fait ressortir, et ne veut se priver du plaisir de réélaborer ce réservoir d'histoires par excellence, au carrefour de l'Orient et de l'Occident, que sont les *Nuits*. Comme Cyrille François le rappelle, en s'appropriant des thèmes et des motifs du célèbre recueil, «[à] l'opposé d'une répétition gratuite des contes, [les auteurs maghrébins] les adaptent au profit d'un enjeu commun: repenser le sens des *Nuits* pour la littérature et le monde d'aujourd'hui. Si la curiosité anthropologique ou le fantasme de l'altérité étrange et jouissante ont largement secondé le plaisir narratif dans la diffusion des *Nuits*, l'imaginaire exotique est reconquis par des gestes démythificateurs et des détournements. Plutôt que la rupture illusoire, [l]es écrivains [...] préfèrent la compréhension et la transmission critiques du legs orientaliste» François 2012: 270). C'est précisément cette transmission critique que Ghita El Khayat met en œuvre dans son recueil. Ce qui me paraît magistral dans l'écriture de ces deux nouvelles, c'est qu'elle réussit à convoquer le merveilleux sur la scène du texte sans y avoir vraiment recours: le miroir dans *Le Présent* n'a rien de magique, tout comme le sein de l'épouse dans *Le Maharadjah et la Maharaneh* n'a rien de mystérieux, et pourtant, la simple évocation de ces éléments suffit à mettre en œuvre un effet de résonance chez le lecteur, qui n'est que plus intrigué par le jeu d'échos et, au final, par ses détournements. Aucun besoin d'avoir recours au surnaturel, semble nous dire El Khayat, pour montrer le côté merveilleux de l'Orient, son patrimoine immémorial et ses enjeux nouveaux, son potentiel révélateur dans toute sa complexité protéiforme.

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CLAUDIA MANSUETO

M. M'henni, (sous la direction de), Littérature tunisienne de langue française: une autre voix(e) de la tunisianité, «Interculturel Francophonies», 21, juin-juillet 2012.

Consacré à la littérature tunisienne de langue française, ce numéro spécial de la revue réfléchit sur les énigmes identitaires et idéologiques qui hantent l'intellectuel tunisien francophone contemporain.

L'étude *Littérature tunisienne de langue française: une autre voix(e) de la tunisianité* comprend

quatre sections thématiques: *Voix tenaces sur la voie de la Tunisie* qui inclut les contributions de K. Gaha (pp. 15-22), M. M'henni (pp. 23-44), S. Marzouki (pp. 45-58), A. Baccar (pp. 59-66), M. Chagraoui (pp. 67-88), M. Trabelsi (pp. 89-100), H. Ouardi (pp. 101-110) et de S. Kassab-Charfi (pp. 111-124); *Des voix de femmes* qui comprend les études d'A. Marzouki (pp. 127-138), K. Ben Ouanes (pp. 139-148), S. Zliti Fitouri (pp. 149-160), H. Ben Charrada (pp. 161-170) et de M. Bahi (pp. 171-186); *Entretiens* (pp. 189-206) qui propose quatre interviews à F. Lahouar, H. Béji, A. Attia et à H. Djédidi; *Anthologie* (pp. 209-240) qui comprend des extraits littéraires choisis par M. M'henni. Particulièrement intéressantes, les sections *Voix tenaces sur la voie de la Tunisie* et *Des voix de femmes* présentent un portrait kaléidoscopique de la région maghrébine: exploitée par un Occident opulent et tyran, la Tunisie s'ouvre à de «nouveaux horizons d'action» (p. 15) pendant ces dernières années. Fragile, mais déterminée à protéger ses conquêtes démocratiques, la terre natale d'Albert Memmi ne succombe pas sous le poids d'une politique postcoloniale décevante: la dérive idéologique de Bourguiba et de Ben Ali n'a pas éteint la «ferveur» (p. 19) révolutionnaire du citoyen tunisien. Blessés, torturés, humiliés, les tunisiens se réveillent le 14 janvier 2011 pour «revaloriser la chose publique» (p. 20), pour récupérer cette idée d'«arabité» (p. 105) fière et digne qui oriente la production littéraire de Abdelwahab Meddeb. Profondément liés à la littérature et à la langue arabe, les intellectuels maghrébins qui choisissent la langue française fascinent le chercheur: marginalisés, parfois critiqués pour leur choix anticonformiste, les intellectuels tunisiens qui s'expriment dans l'ancienne langue du colonisateur cherchent leur identité. Clairvoyants comme les jeunes émeutiers du Printemps tunisien, ces écrivains francophones «donne[nt] une leçon au monde» (p. 20) à travers des publications originales qui renient «les artifices et les

bifurcations» (p. 26). «Scrutateurs et inquisiteurs» (p. 37), selon les mots de M'henni, les intellectuels maghrébins de langue française véhiculent «l'émergence d'un nouvel moi» (p. 38), un *je* pluriel qui résume et synthétise la richesse culturelle et linguistique d'une Tunisie frontalière, d'une terre «de tension et de croisement» (p. 42). Alchimistes raffinés, les écrivains francophones utilisent un français hybride, un idiome kaléidoscopique qui réfléchit le humus idéologique qui a nourri leur source créative. Interprètes d'un français aux «nuances arabes» (p. 53), comme souligne Marzouki, les intellectuels tunisiens francophones contribuent à la création d'une littérature «difficilement traduisible» (p. 56), d'un *patchwork* idéologique et linguistique qui conduit le lecteur à la découverte d'un univers «liquide» (p. 60) aux «multiples facettes» (p. 61). Explorateurs de «mosaïques» identitaires (p. 66) *in fieri*, les écrivains tunisiens de la dernière décennie suivent l'exemple réformateur des fondateurs du «groupe Perspective» (p. 67): pionniers «d'une écriture encombrée par le désir de dire les peines du quotidien, les calamités de l'histoire» (p. 67), Mohamed Charfi et Gilbert Naccache aspirent à la création d'un système politique évolué, un microcosme national qui favorise, pour reprendre les mots de Chagraoui, l'«émancipation de l'individu» (p. 73). Hanté par l'errance, l'intellectuel postcolonial est, donc, un pèlerin à la recherche de sa mémoire et de son style, un nomade qui s'élance «vers la découverte et la rencontre de l'Autre» (p. 89). *Déraciné*, l'intellectuel tunisien contemporain rêve et provoque, voyage et s'exile, lutte pour récupérer son passé et plonge dans l'oubli. Porte-parole d'une génération errante, Tahar Bekri est le symbole d'une communauté intellectuelle tunisienne qui cherche sa subjectivité, qui combat pour conquérir son «soleil inquiet» (p. 98). Anticonformistes, les écrivains maghrébins du XXI^e siècle choisissent, souvent, des genres littéraires inexplorés: la nouvelle,

par exemple, favorise l'analyse des sentiments et des pulsions les plus secrètes du tunisien contemporain. Rafik Ben Salah utilise la nouvelle pour pénétrer les drames identitaires de la «Tunisie profonde» (p. 116), d'une région aliénée et plurielle qui, pour reprendre les mots de Kassab-Charfi, «étrangéifie» (p. 119) le français de l'ancien colonisateur avec le parler natif tunisien pour créer «une nouvelle voix littéraire, vivifiante, dépaysante» (p. 120). Théâtre hybride, le microcosme littéraire tunisien ne peut pas oublier le regard scrutateur féminin: intimiste, la voix des intellectuelles tunisiennes traverse les conquêtes et les échecs de la région maghrébine avec l'intensité et l'émotion d'un explorateur errant, d'un vagabond désenchanté qui voyage entre le «le dedans et le dehors» (p. 131). Toujours cryptique, l'intellectuelle tunisienne dépasse les stéréotypes et les lieux communs pour récupérer une écriture courageuse, une parole révolutionnaire qui croit dans le nécessaire dialogue entre «Nous et Vous» (p. 142). Citoyenne d'un «third space in fieri», l'écrivaine maghrébine dépasse le conformisme social qui l'étouffe pour s'envoler vers un ailleurs sans frontières où la folie remplace l'hypocrisie, les «identités en chantier» (p. 165) occultent les certitudes d'esclaves silencieuses. En conclusion, le numéro spécial d'«Interculturel Francophonies» présente un *corpus* de contributions d'indéniable intérêt: exemple d'anticonformisme, la Tunisie qui émerge des pages de *La Littérature tunisienne de langue française: une autre voix(e) de la tunisianité* est un microcosme de recherche politique et littéraire, un mosaïque hybride qui exhorte le monde à suivre sa leçon de liberté et de démocratie parce que, comme dit Mohamed Bahi, «la dignité humaine n'est pas négociable» (p. 186).

CLAUDIA MANSUETO

R. El Khayat, *La femme artiste dans le monde arabe*, Paris, Éditions de Broca, 2011.

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Consacrée à l'*extra-ordinaire* créativité des femmes artistes dans les pays arabes, l'étude de Rita El Khayat réfléchit sur la nécessité de «dépasser les barrières de genre» (p. 9) qui mortifient le talent féminin: les préjugés injustifiés et le manque d'une «critique constructive de l'œuvre» (p. 9) menacent la créativité du génie féminin. Engagée contre toute forme de préjudice, El Khayat, «psychanalyste des divagations, militante de l'intelligence et exploratrice de la folie» (p. 11), se livre à cet essai sur l'art pour récupérer les fragments les plus cachés d'une identité féminine mystérieuse.

La femme artiste dans le monde arabe comprend trois sections thématiques: *Être une femme artiste?* (pp. 19-122) analyse la condition existentielle des premières pionnières méditerranéennes; *Du XX^e siècle à nos jours, la reconnaissance des femmes artistes dans le monde arabe* (pp. 123-152) souligne les étapes les plus représentatives du processus d'affirmation féminine dans le complexe contexte artistique arabe et *Portraits de femmes artistes contemporaines* (pp. 153-167) qui présente les biographies des artistes méditerranéennes les plus subversives contre tous ces tabous idéologiques qui menacent le chemin de libération des sociétés arabes.

«Perçues comme inférieures à l'homme» (p. 30), les femmes arabes de l'Antiquité «incarnent le rôle d'inspiratrices» (p. 34): muses en chair et os, elles renoncent à leur potentiel artistique pour devenir objets, statues muettes qui capturent la contemplation masculine. La Campagne d'Égypte de Napoléon Bonaparte favorise le «contact brutal» (p. 51) entre Eu-

ropéens et populations arabes: fascinés par le fantasma d'un «Orient-harem», les premiers envahisseurs occidentaux reproduisent «le schéma universel de domination du masculin sur le féminin» (p. 58) à travers une création artistique «voluptueuse et magique» (p. 53). Recluse dans l'étroite prison orientaliste, la femme arabe lutte courageusement pour affirmer son talent: chanteuses, poétesses et danseuses, les artistes arabes ont toujours utilisé leur intelligence et leur creatività pour s'affirmer. À partir de Shéhérazade, la grande *jarja* cultivée et raffinée des *Mille et Une Nuits*, les femmes méditerranéennes utilisent leur art pour transmettre et valoriser leur patrimoine culturel et pour faire évaluer le riche répertoire populaire où elles puisent leur inspiration. Parmi les nombreuses figures féminines qui peuplent l'univers artistique arabe, El Khayat concentre son attention sur les danseuses orientales et sur la *chikha*: interprètes mystérieuses des énigmes identitaires féminines, les mouvements sensuels des danseuses et les chants rauques de la *chikha* «semblent interpellare tout ce qu'il y a de lointain en l'être humain» (p. 106).

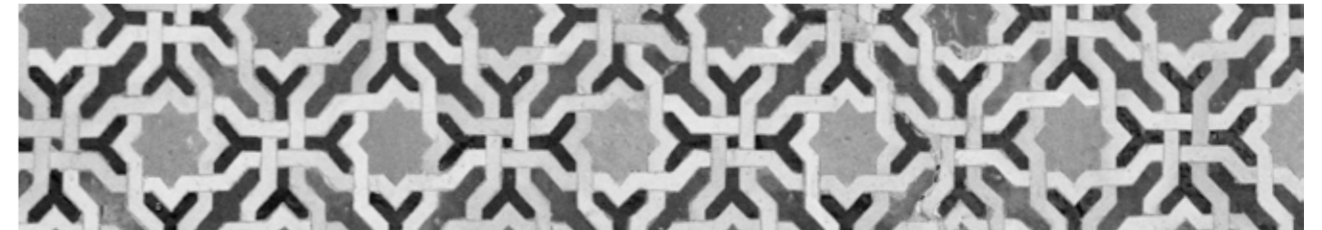
Le XX^e siècle signe «une transformation irréversible du rapport des femmes à l'art en général et à la littérature en particulier» (p. 131): à partir de l'année 1970, la femme artiste perd son statut de «reflet d'un désir masculin» (p. 131) pour devenir un sujet «libéré du silence» (p. 133) qui parle pour se faire entendre. Roman-

cières, cinéastes ou plasticiennes, les femmes artistes contemporaines «revendiquent leur place et abolissent toute différence sexiste» (p. 145): en marche pour «sortir des sentiers battus» (p. 143), elles expérimentent et mélangent leurs arts pour contribuer à la «fusion et à la multiplication» (p. 153) des styles et des itinéraires identitaires.

À bâtons rompus contre les frontières sexiste qui ont toujours opposé le masculin au féminin, les premières femmes artistes des pays arabes sont des épiphanies d'émancipation, des funambules sur le fil de l'intégrisme: Reinette l'Oranaise (1915-1998), Oum Keltoum (1904-1975) ou Fadhma Aït Mansour Amrouche (1882-1967) représentent toute une génération d'artistes qui a choisi de franchir le dogme du silence pour «montrer au monde ce qu'elle pouvait créer» (p. 170).

Livre qui révèle, à la fois, «une érudition patiente et une impatience passionnée» (p. 11), *La femme artiste dans le monde arabe* est un hymne au talent féminin, au courage d'oser: plus dignes et fortes, les femmes artistes célébrées par El Khayat défendent leur imagination, leur voix. À la recherche «des choses étranges, insondables, repoussantes et délicieuses» (p. 172), selon les mots d'Arthur Rimbaud, les femmes arabes sont les gardiennes du pluralisme identitaire et expressif, les acrobates qui «feront faire à l'Humanité le saut dont elle a besoin pour aller vers la paix et la tranquillité» (p. 177).

caraiibi



FRANCA BERNABEI

Edwidge Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

Con *Claire of the Sea Light* Edwidge Danticat ritorna al romanzo dopo un intervallo di nove anni (*The Dew Breaker* era stato pubblicato nel 2004). Anche in questo caso, la struttura narrativa consiste in una serie di storie, storie di vita (o «short» stories) focalizzate su specifici personaggi e individualmente concluse nei singoli capitoli, il cui progressivo concatenamento è tuttavia necessario alla comprensione dell'insieme. A differenza di *The Dew Breaker*, però, la contestualizzazione spaziale non travalica i confini di Haiti, e rimane ancorata a una piccola città, la fittizia Ville Rose (ispirata a Léogâne, luogo di origine della madre di Danticat). La storia di Haiti, o meglio, la sua temporalità storicizzata, è come sospesa in questa spazializzazione, in questa concentrazione topologica e sincronica su questa cittadina situata tra il mare e la montagna, la cui conformazione ricorda una rosa, con i suoi petali e le sue spine – letterali e simbolici. Nozias, il pescatore padre della Claire evocata nel titolo, la definisce «a small and unlucky town» (p.14). Se il tessuto sociale, la vita e la psiche degli abitanti di Ville Rose non sono condizionati dalla presenza o dal fantasma della dittatura e dei

suoi carnefici, che avevano contrassegnato il romanzo precedente, la disseminazione narrativa di multipli e differenziati «character spaces» (come li definisce Alex Woloch in un suo studio sui personaggi del romanzo) punta all'esposizione degli stati affettivi, dei «drammi ordinari», della comunità. Comunità contrassegnata da profonde ineguaglianze (il 5% della popolazione è ricca o benestante, il resto, per lo più pescatori, «poor, some dirt-poor» [p.5]), dalla violenza ad opera delle gangs di quartiere, dallo sfruttamento irresponsabile delle risorse locali che provoca danni irreparabili all'ambiente. La pesca non è più quella di un tempo, a causa del limo e dei rifiuti che soffocano le alghe che nutrivano i pesci, la montagna è ormai erosa perché disboscata per procurare la legna necessaria a cuocere e scaldarsi. Se se ne avvantaggeranno i ricchi che potranno costruirsi le loro ville, in altre zone la casa si rischia invece di perderla perché il terreno è alluvionale. E i resti di un castello incompiuto, che Napoleone voleva edificare come dono per la sorella Pauline, sono ancora lì, come memento sbiadito di un non memorabile passato di dominazione coloniale.

La soglia che separa gli «haves» e gli «have nots» determina contrastanti spinte all'emigrazione: mentre Nozias medita di andarsene per sfuggire agli imprevedibili pericoli del mare,

«[p]ou chèche lavi», in cerca di una vita migliore (p.8), Max Ardin Junior è spedito in tutta fretta a Miami dal padre, titolare e direttore di una scuola per ragazzi benestanti, per sfuggire alla responsabilità nei confronti del figlio avuto da una giovane domestica, dopo averla stuprata (o aver esercitato, come si sarebbe detto un tempo, il suo *droit du seigneur*). Ma al di là della referenzialità esplicita al quadro sociale di Ville Rose, Danticat intesse una complessa rete discorsiva che esplora un intrico di dilemmi, a partire dal peso affettivo del lutto, della mancanza e della perdita che avvicina, nonostante le ineguaglianze di classe, le vite dei personaggi. «It's sort of a volley of loss, of separations that one doesn't choose», ha dichiarato la scrittrice in una recente intervista. La morte, in quanto evento e perdita primaria, inaugura la storia di Claire, che, benché testualmente sospesa tra il primo e l'ultimo racconto-capitolo denominati, rispettivamente, «Claire of the Sea Light» e «Claire de Lune», funge da cornice – strutturale e simbolica – all'interno della quale si incastonano i possibili significati delle altre. E se queste contribuiscono, retrospettivamente o sincronicamente, direttamente o indirettamente, a illuminarla, resta pur sempre il centro propulsivo che apre e conclude il movimento multidirezionale della narrazione. La morte è quella di Caleb, amico di Nozias, la cui barca è stata travolta da un'onda anomala, e il cui corpo, nonostante le ricerche, non viene recuperato. La morte, e l'imponderabilità del destino, incombono dunque sulla vita dei pescatori, ma incombono ancora più direttamente sulla vita della piccola Claire, non solo perché di un pescatore è figlia, ma soprattutto perché sua madre è morta dopo averla messa al mondo. La scomparsa di Caleb avviene il giorno del suo settimo compleanno, ma comunque ogni suo compleanno, in quanto anniversario di morte, si celebra con una visita al cimitero. La morte non ha risparmiato neanche Madame Gaëlle, benestante proprietaria dell'unico negozio di stoffe, la cui famiglia ha avuto un

ruolo importante nella fondazione e nella storia di Ville Rose, a cui Nozias vorrebbe affidare Claire. Il marito è stato assassinato da una gang mentre lei stava partorendo la sua Rose, che qualche anno dopo avrebbe perso la vita a causa di un incidente su un «motto taxi». E Max Ardin Junior ha perso il suo inconfessato e inconfessabile amore, Bernard, ucciso dalle Forze Speciali della polizia che Gaëlle aveva ingaggiato, ritenendolo, ingiustamente, colpevole della morte del marito. Bernard stesso, d'altronde, pensando a coloro che, come lui, vivevano negli slums, «couldn't shake the feeling that one day they would all be shot» (p. 80), a causa della volontà di qualcuno «angry and powerful, and maniacal» (p. 81). Come si può vedere, il gioco delle coincidenze, corrispondenze e accidentali convergenze di morte e vita intreccia le traiettorie dei personaggi sia sul piano diegetico che discorsivo. Ma se la morte è evento inseparabile dalla loro vita, essa assume diverse connotazioni in un contesto culturalmente ibrido o eterogeneo quale quello di Ville Rose, fondata da Sò Rose, una «free colored woman» (p. 55) così chiamata per onorare la santa patrona della regione, Sainte Rose de Lima, il cui nome è stato poi dato alla cattedrale cattolica. E, a Ville Rose, chiese cattoliche e protestanti sorgono al fianco di templi Vodou le cui pareti sono ricoperte da immagini di santi cattolici «doubling as lwas» (p. 11). La madre di Claire, che proveniva da una famiglia di «mountain undertakers and professional mourners» (p. 20) e lavava e vestiva i morti nella «funeral home» di cui, guarda caso, è proprietario il sindaco della cittadina, raccontava di parenti che seppellivano i loro familiari in un luogo segreto, per timore che fossero strappati dal cimitero e trasformati in *zombies*. Claire, entrata in questo mondo nel momento in cui la madre lo stava lasciando, è, secondo le credenze locali, una «revenant» che lo spirito della madre potrebbe reclamare e portare con sé in the «other world» (p.16). Madame Gaëlle cerca di convincerla che questa

è superstizione, che «[n]obody returns. That is not real. You're gone. You're gone. Back in God's hands, and no one can pull you back» (p.162). Al tempo stesso, questa donna si sente «a shell, a zombie», e anela a essere «wherever her husband's and daughter's spirits were» (p. 148). Quanto a Claire, la madre, mentre lei stava uscendo dal suo corpo, l'aveva accolta con queste parole: «[v]ini», vieni. «But she was gone before Claire came» (p. 201). Si potrebbe rilevare, come è stato fatto in una recensione, l'indeterminatezza di quell'invito, sospeso sul limite dell'andare e del venire: in quale dei due mondi è accolta Claire? Claire, bambina silenziosa, docile e radiosa, che porta il nome della madre e che, crescendo, a detta della gente, è uguale a lei, Claire che corre il rischio di inseguire un'ombra che non potrà mai raggiungere, Claire che a volte, in quelli che chiama «waking dreams» (p. 236), sente un'altra presenza intorno a sé.

La focalizzazione multipla adottata dall'autrice, e la lirica economia della narrazione, allusiva e reticente al tempo stesso, lasciano aperta la questione della transcorporeità dell'io afro-diasporico, della liminalità tra morte e vita, vita materiale e vita spirituale, presenza e assenza. Sono piuttosto le ripercussioni interiori della perdita, della separazione e dell'assenza, e le altre manifestazioni che esse possono assumere, non necessariamente connesse alla morte, a puntellare la logica mimetica e simbolica di *Claire of the Sea Light*. Danticat ha dichiarato che nel romanzo, scritto dopo la nascita delle due figlie e la morte del padre, ha riversato, consciamente e inconsciamente, sia le proprie ansie di madre che le assenze che hanno segnato la sua infanzia. (Come i suoi lettori hanno appreso in *Brother, I'm Dying*, i genitori erano emigrati lasciando Edwidge e il fratello ad Haiti e, in particolare, la separazione dal padre era durata una decina d'anni). Indubbiamente, l'abbandono (e il rigetto) o lo spettro dell'abbandono (e del rigetto) da parte di un genitore o di un figlio, costituiscono uno dei prin-

cipali nuclei strutturali e tematici del romanzo. La famiglia, sostiene ancora Danticat, «is not always just mother and father». E, in effetti, in *Claire of the Sea Light* la nozione di genitorialità, in quanto collegata alla realtà o potenzialità dell'abbandono, viene radicalmente interrogata e destabilizzata, perlomeno nella sua implicazione di proprietà e di possesso. Un esempio illuminante è quello del figlio, non riconosciuto, di Max Ardin. Mentre la genealogia di Max è esplicitamente iscritta nel suo nome (Maxime Ardin Junior), quella del bambino è paradossalmente riconosciuta e contraddetta. Non solo porta, di necessità, il cognome materno, ma la madre ha voluto chiamarlo Pamaxime. «Pa» è un prefisso creolo che indica contemporaneamente «suo» e «non suo». Di conseguenza, quel nome può significare sia «di Maxime» che «non di Maxime». «Only the mother could know for sure» (p.98). Rivendicando il suo diritto primario, decisivo e decisionale, alla genitorialità, la domestica oggetto di violenza ha sovvertito il *droit du seigneur* esercitato su di lei, e quando, dieci anni dopo lo stupro, Max Junior ritorna per incontrare per la prima volta Pamaxime, la giovane donna decide di andarsene lontano per impedire che quella famiglia si appropri di ciò che è «suo», anche a costo di rinunciare al supporto economico che Max Senior le aveva dato. Max Junior, dopo il fallimento di questo incontro, si sente rigettato da tutti, bandito da casa nel momento in cui il suo amico moriva, padre di un figlio avuto per aver voluto provare al proprio padre la sua mascolinità, e che forse non vedrà più. Pamaxime, in aggiunta, nel disegnare il suo ritratto prima di incontrarlo ha semplicemente tracciato una vuota O su un foglio di carta.

Ma è nella storia di Claire, in particolare, che le dinamiche – non alternative ma liminali – dell'abbandono, del possesso e dello spossamento (oltre che, l'abbiamo visto, della coesistenza della vita e della morte) emergono con particolare urgenza, tanto più perché inserite in un contesto di radicale vulnerabilità e insta-

bilità. Bernard, l'amico di Max, avrebbe voluto fare un programma radiofonico sugli «arti perduti» di Ville Rose. Per parlare non solo di amputazioni reali, ma anche delle perdite di parenti e amici, «the phantom limbs, phantom minds, phantom loves that haunted them because they were used, then abandoned, because they were out of choices, because they were poor» (p. 82). Forse per questo, per esorcizzare quei fantasmi di povertà e alienabilità, nell'annunciare a Nozias che era incinta, la madre di Claire aveva sussurrato: «[s]a se pa nou. Se pa nou. This is ours. Ours. Ours. Ours» (p. 210). E come la madre di Pamaxime, aveva voluto essere lei a coniare il nome della figlia, espandendo il proprio in quel nome luminoso (Claire Limyè Lanmè in creolo, ispirato da una nuotata notturna nel mare, verso il luccichio delle alghe attorno a cui si era radunata una colonia di pesci). Il dilemma, l'«impossibile decisione» che tormenta l'animo di Nozias, dopo la morte della donna, è quello, come abbiamo visto, di a chi affidare quella figlia che lei aveva tanto desiderato e che lui, in quanto padre, si sente inadeguato ad accudire. Il primo capitolo, in cui la voce narrante si avvale della ripetitività formulaica della fiaba, si allontana progressivamente dallo spazio-tempo della scena iniziale (la spiaggia su cui sono confluiti i pescatori che cercano di recuperare il corpo di Caleb) per presentare retrospettivamente al lettore oltre alla figura della madre, e le tragiche circostanze di quella concomitante nascita/morte, i ripetuti (e non ascoltati) appelli da parte di Nozias a Madame Gaëlle, che era stata la prima e l'unica persona ad allattare la neonata, a prenderla con sé. E, secondo la logica narrativa delle coincidenze che abbiamo già visto in azione, quando si ritorna al presente Gaëlle decide di andare a «prendere» Claire proprio quel giorno, il giorno della morte di Caleb, anniversario di quella della madre di Claire e, anche, di quella della sua piccola Rose. Come Nozias stesso riconosce tra sé e sé, «[t]his most impossible of days, this day of both life and death» (p. 31).

Se la perentorietà di quella risoluzione («It's now or never»[p. 32]) sgomenta ora Nozias, che però non può tornare indietro, Claire non è pronta a lasciarsi «prendere» e, invece di rientrare in casa per raccogliere le sue poche cose, si allontana di nascosto. Ricompare, per il lettore, solo quando, in «Claire de Lune», la narrazione ci riporta sullo scenario della spiaggia, per focalizzarsi, e finalmente, si potrebbe dire, su di lei, rivelando i dilemmi in cui si dibatte. Il mare racchiude in sé la mancanza e il desiderio del corpo materno: «[s]ometimes [...] she yearned for the warm salty water to be her mother's body, the waves her mother's heartbeat, the sunlight the tunnel that guided her out the day her mother died» (p. 215). Il mare è anche la fonte di tutte le sue angosce di orfana, delle sue paure di perdere anche il padre. Intorno a una canzone dedicata a Lasirèn, la caritatevole dea marina che, si diceva, appariva ai pescatori prima che morissero, si concentrano i suoi giochi e i suoi pensieri, e anche quel giorno, come regalo per il suo compleanno, aveva obbligato le amiche a cantarla, «until they were hoarse, circling until they were dizzy» (p. 222). Ogni volta che cantava, però, «it was as if someone else were there with her» (p. 219). Se giocavano in cinque, Claire vedeva sette ombre per terra. Claire forse non sa che la madre, la notte in cui aveva coniato il suo nome, era apparsa a Nozias proprio come «his Lasirèn, his long-haired, long-bodied brown goddess of the sea» (p. 34). Quel canto fa anche parte, come spiega Roberto Strongman in suo articolo, di alcune cerimonie Vodou haitiane. Dunque, si ispessisce per il lettore la densità allusiva dell'umbratile presenza assenza materna, mentre, sul piano diegetico, la concreta presenza paterna è resa precaria non solo dalla possibile morte in mare ma anche dal paventato abbandono a causa di una decisione impossibile. Di qui l'attesa sfibrante, da parte della bambina, del momento via via differito in cui sarebbe stata «given away», e gli interrogativi irrisolti: «[w]hy hadn't he just given her to this

woman after she had suckled her breasts? She wondered. She would have known no other life» (p. 217). E ancora, «[c]ould it be as simple as that? One day she was her father's daughter and the next she was Madame Gaëlle's?» (p. 227).

No, non è così semplice. I percorsi del dare (che non coincide necessariamente col dar via) e del prendere, del possesso e del dovere («to own» e to «owe»), del «longing» e del «belonging», dell'amore e dell'amore non corrisposto, della *responsibility* e della *responsivity*, sono tortuosi e imprevedibili, così come instabili sono i loro confini. Gaëlle, «both hungry for life and terrified of it» (p. 159), in risposta al «[w]hy now? Why tonight?» di Nozias spiega: «I need another way to remember this day» (p. 32). E quando Claire scompare, decide di rimanere ad aspettarla, ponendo, a se stessa e Nozias, questo interrogativo: «[w]hat will we do when Claire returns?» (p. 203). Il passaggio dall'«I» di «I need» al «we» di «[w]hat will we do», come quello da «need» a «do», segnala sia la sua assunzione di responsabilità, di superamento di quella condizione di «zombificazione» che imprigionava il suo io, che la necessità di una condivisione di quella responsabilità come molla per l'azione. Nozias, che aveva assistito alla morte di Rose, aveva riflettuto tra sé e sé che quel giorno «the fabric vendor was the sole owner of that tragedy» (p. 15). «No one will ever love you more than you love your pain» (p. 153) aveva osservato Max Senior, amante occasionale di Gaëlle. La responsabilità in quanto *responsivity* e l'amore nei confronti dell'altro, possono non smussare il dolore della perdita, ma convogliarlo altrove, iniettando nuova vita nello scenario sdrucchiole della morte, nelle sue varie accezioni (fisiologica, psicologica, spirituale, sociale). I pescatori raccolti sulla spiaggia si stringono attorno alla moglie di Caleb. La madre di Claire, mentre si prendeva cura dei morti, parlava loro e raccontava cosa era successo in città dopo la loro scomparsa. Nozias si era abituato al fatto che loro erano parte

della sua vita, «he was happy to live with all of that, if it meant living with her» (p. 209). E se a volte arrivava perfino a sentire il loro odore su di lei, e le mani che carezzavano i loro volti carezzavano il suo, «[h]e ate from those hands. He kissed them. He loved them» (p.209). Per la gente, le circostanze della morte della moglie indicano che c'è stata una lotta tra madre e figlia, e che ha vinto «the one with the stronger will» (p. 16). Per Nozias, piuttosto, si è trattato di «a kind of loving surrender» (p. 17). E di amore ne sapeva certamente, quella donna che ammirava Ezili Freda, «goddess of love» (p. 11), spesso ritratta come Mater Dolorosa dal cuore trafitto da una spada, per testimoniare il fallimento dell'umanità nel comprendere il potere trascendente della fecondità, della sensitività e dell'emozione.

La scena conclusiva della storia di Claire e delle «altre» storie ci presenta la piccola fuggitiva che, dopo essersi inerpicata su una montagna su cui aveva deciso di nascondersi (del resto, un tempo quello che ora è chiamato Mòn Inital era stato rifugio dei «marons») cambia idea nel vedere, dall'alto del suo punto di osservazione, il padre e Gaëlle, «whose own sorrows could have drowned them», accovacciati intorno al corpo di un uomo che era stato appena tirato fuori dal mare, alternativamente «breathing into this man, breathing him back to life» (p. 238). Quest'uomo non è altri che Max Ardin Junior, che dopo aver visto Pamaxine e sua madre aveva vagato tutto il giorno, ed era infine arrivato sulla spiaggia, dove aveva assistito alla veglia per Caleb e contribuito alla ricerca di Claire, per poi arrendersi all'ostile docilità del mare. Se si salverà, troverà il padre ad attendere a casa. Quanto a Claire, la cui fuga era stata determinata dal suo sentirsi «kicked out, like her home was no longer hers», «[b]efore becoming Madame Gaëlle's daughter, she had to go home, just one last time» (p. 238). Danticat sostiene, in un'intervista, che i suoi personaggi non sono delle vittime, ma dei «survivors», la cui sopravvivenza è resa possi-

bile da «their healing as a community». Non per niente, la compassionevole, amorevole madre di Claire affermava: «[w]e must look after each other» (p. 54). Dunque, il suo fievole «vini», e quello silenziosamente attuato da Nozias e Gaëlle, immettono nella vita e rimettono in vita, aprendo la vita a un nuovo o reiterato inizio. Venire o ritornare alla vita (nell'unità molteplice del mondo, ma, in particolare, a Ville Rose) è sempre una ferita, l'immissione nella vulnerabilità, nella potenziale ingiuria dell'ingiustizia, che si può subire ma anche commettere, e nella morte. Ma, se vivere, a Ville Rose, significa sopravvivere, la sopravvivenza, ribadisce Derrida nella sua ultima intervista, complica l'opposizione morte-vita. Non è semplicemente quello che rimane, ma una vita oltre la vita.

Indubbiamente, con *Claire of the Sea Light* Dancat rappresenta la scena haitiana da un'angolazione diversa rispetto ai romanzi precedenti. Basti pensare alla presenza del mare e al ruolo che esso assume sul piano strutturale e su quello simbolico, e alla gravidanza poetica con cui è raffigurata Claire. O all'effetto straniante delle coincidenze e della riproposizione di una stessa scena (come quella, ad esempio, di Claire che gioca con le amiche) vista da osservatori diversi. Inoltre, intersecando le vite dei personaggi nel microcosmo di Ville Rose, la scrittrice utilizza e ricompatta la struttura frammentaria del *composite novel* per esplorare non solo la totalità di un sistema sociale ma anche l'asimmetrica relazione, ricca a volte di fenomeni apparentemente inspiegabili, che collega il mondo umano e quello naturale. Si potrebbe forse obiettare che, se c'è stato un investimento autobiografico nell'orchestrazione narrativa, questo si è tradotto in una certa ridondanza tematica. Ad ogni modo, l'elemento vincente di questo peculiare *roman à clef* (il termine ci è suggerito dal *collage à clef*, basato sui racconti delle persone da lei intervistate, che sta scrivendo la protagonista di due delle storie, curatrice di un popolare programma

della radio locale) è la duttile limpidezza della lingua. Lingua che si apre, con malleabile aderenza, ai molteplici punti di vista, lingua capace di sostenere la compresenza di diversi livelli di significato e diversi regimi narrativi, mimetici e al tempo stesso favolistico-folklorici, e di giostrarsi tra la trasparenza del segno e l'opaca luminosità dell'immagine. Lingua che testimonia una presenza assenza costitutiva, quel creolo la cui forza espressiva lampeggia intermittenemente, come la «Sea Light» evocata nel titolo, a ricordarci tutto quello che del mondo di Ville Rose non possiamo captare, e che, al tempo stesso, sollecita il lettore a «creolizzare» il proprio approccio critico per cogliere la verità culturale comunicata dal testo.

GIUSEPPE SOFO

Carnival of arts. Teatro, arti visive e performative, e carnevale caraibico

Nella tradizione europea e occidentale, da Bachtin in poi, gli studi sul carnevale passano quasi inevitabilmente attraverso un filtro letterario, e con loro la definizione del carnevalesco. Tuttavia, se si guarda al carnevale in prospettiva caraibica, e come attesta il carnevale di Trinidad e Tobago, secondo Pat Bishop, «questo non è il modo giusto di affrontare la questione. Il carnevale è molto umano. È connesso alla paura, alla fame, non alla letteratura. Per niente. La sofisticatezza della metafora linguistica non basta a renderla vera. Bisogna tornare indietro.»¹ Infatti, per trovare una definizione del carnevale di Trinidad bisogna abbandonare la metafora letteraria in favore delle arti performative, e scoprire la necessità di movimenti e di azioni fisiche senza le qua-

¹ Intervista a P. BISHOP, Woodbrook, Port of Spain, 10 novembre 2008, in G. SOFO, *Jouvay of a culture: Risveglio e resistenza culturale nel teatro di carnevale a Trinidad*, tesi di laurea specialistica, Università di Bologna, marzo 2009, inedito, p. 225.

li il carnevale non sarebbe nato, non avrebbe condotto questo popolo alla libertà culturale e all'indipendenza politica, e non sarebbe quello che è oggi; anzi, non sarebbe forse niente.

Sarebbe in tal senso sbagliato limitarsi alla parte fisica e testuale della performance, escludendone o limitandone l'aspetto visivo: i colori che diventano l'unica maschera di *jouvay*, l'antica arte dell'intaglio del «poui» per il rituale di «canboulay», le torce che hanno illuminato le notti delle «canboulay riots», e la «mas», intesa come i due giorni di carnevale, e come i mesi di disegno e assemblaggio dei costumi. Arti visive e plastiche, con un chiaro intento estetico, che non servono da semplice abbellimento, ma sono piuttosto parte integrante di rituali che hanno cambiato la storia di queste isole. Una storia che non è stata costruita attraverso la letteratura, ma che la letteratura stessa ha saputo rispecchiare al meglio.

Per cominciare dall'inizio della storia di questo carnevale, bisogna guardare all'albero del «poui», dal quale veniva prodotto il bastone degli «stickfighters», che combattevano nel rituale della «kalinda», a sua volta alla base di «canboulay», una delle tre componenti fondamentali del carnevale di Trinidad, insieme alla «masquerade» africana e al carnevale europeo. La costruzione dell'arma dello «stickfighter» comincia mesi prima dei combattimenti, dando inizio a un lungo processo che lo porterà a esibirsi nella «gayelle», nell'arena, per difendere la sua libertà, e quella del suo popolo. Lo studioso e «calypsonian» Hollis Chalkdust Liverpool ci dà una descrizione del processo di lavorazione del «poui»: «all'incirca tre mesi prima di carnevale, i bastoni venivano intagliati – in particolare dall'albero Poui – leggermente tostati in punti diversi per dare colore, e la corteccia rimossa. Venivano anche ricoperti di fango

per temprarli, e immersi nell'olio per renderli leggeri, solidi ed elastici.»²

E quel bastone, detto anche «baton» o semplicemente «bois» in creolo, non rappresenta solo l'arma del combattente, ma la sua stessa identità. Lo leggiamo nell'opera teatrale di Rawle Gibbons dedicata allo «stickfighting, I, Lawah»:

ZANANA: (kissing stick) This bois bien banday.

IRENE: Bois is woman and bois is man too. (kisses top of stick)

JAL: Ever see bois sweet so?

SHIFFER: This one I name Zayclaire

ZANANA: Just give me a cause, who want a taste.

IRENE: Touch me bois, you touch me man.

Touch me man, you touch me.

JAL: Taste me.

SHIFFER: Lightning. Who name man, face me.

ZANANA: Bois, we everything.

JAL: Bois, the stick of life.

CHORUS: Bois, we all.

SHANTWELLE: All is bois.³

Costruire quest'arma significa dunque costruire un guerriero, e trasformare l'artigianato in un'operazione sacra, che avrà effetti sulla vita di ognuno, perché il «bois» è il bastone della vita. E quando la polizia coloniale inglese cerca di togliere i bastoni dalle mani degli «stickfighter», è come se togliesse loro l'aria, la vita. «Mi chiamano Lawah Bois», risponde Lawah,

² H. LIVERPOOL, *Rituals of power and rebellion. The carnival tradition in Trinidad & Tobago 1763-1962*, Chicago, Research Associates School Times Publications, 2001, p. 164.

³ R. GIBBONS, *I, Lawah*, 1986, inedito.

come se il confine tra le sue mani e la sua arma non esistesse:

INSPECTOR: Hand your sticks over or you will be

Under arrest

TODD: To the border. Out the flambeau.

LAWAH: You mad? They call me Lawah Bois.

CHORUS: En batai-la.

LAWAH: L'om blanc, I'se the king of war.

CHORUS: En batai-la.

LAWAH: If you want me bois

Come take it from me, l'om blanc.⁴

E l'importanza della performance torna prepotentemente quando Lawah, prima di attaccare, chiede allo «chantwell» di intonare il suo canto di accompagnamento. Così come un guerriero non è niente senza il suo bastone, egli non può infatti neanche cominciare a muoversi senza il canto dello «chantwell», che ne accompagna e ne ispira i movimenti.

INSPECTOR: If I blow this whistle, nothing in this yard will be left standing

CHORUS: En batai-la.

TODD: Hand it over.

LAWAH: Me ain't care. «chantwell» Shantwelle, raise me song of war.

CHORUS: En batai-la.

LAWAH: Shantwelle, tell them I'se Lawah bois.

CHORUS: En batai-la.

LAWAH: Just give me the chant, the chant Of no feeling.⁵

Canti e torce presenti anche nelle notti delle «canboulay riots», la prima vera rivolta avvenuta nel carnevale e per il carnevale, che ha mostrato agli inglesi e al mondo che quest'isola non era pronta a rinunciare al

proprio carnevale, e che queste donne e questi uomini sarebbero stati pronti a morire per non lasciarselo rubare. Per questo, quando nel 1880 il capitano delle forze di polizia sull'isola Baker decise di bandire «canboulay», il rituale di carnevale più strettamente locale, Trinidad rispose, l'anno successivo, con un attacco a sorpresa nella notte, da parte di un esercito di «stickfighter» armato non solo di bastoni, ma anche delle torce alla base delle rappresentazioni di «canboulay», dei tamburi e delle voci degli «chantwell». E nonostante il rischio di svelare i propri piani nel buio della notte, il racconto di una testimone oculare delle prime «canboulay riots» del 1881 ci dice che prima di attaccare, le torce si sono accese, i tamburi hanno cominciato a suonare, e gli «chantwell» a cantare: «c'era una vecchia donna creola in testa alla band. E chiamò «Capitan Baker e tutti i suoi uomini all'angolo della strada». E a quel segnale gli uomini accesero le loro torce, cominciarono a suonare i loro tamburi e andarono a prendere Baker. Ed è sempre la stessa testimone a dirci che «spazzarono via la polizia.»⁶

Un'ulteriore dimostrazione dell'importanza quasi sacrale della performance, e del suo valore estetico. «L'estetica è importante per tutto ciò che facciamo», mi ha detto lo stesso Gibbons in un'intervista, «comprese le lotte che hanno reso la nostra cultura quello che è oggi. Anche quando combattiamo, non combattiamo e basta; la qualità del combattimento è molto importante. Non si tratta solo di vincere il combattimento, ma anche con quanto stile, e quanta abilità riesci a dimostrare. Quest'atteggiamento che unisce danza e lotta è un'espressione chiave per la nostra cultura.»⁷

⁶ L. PIERRE, *An interview by Tony Hall* in J. D. ELDER, *Cannes Brûlées* in «*The Drama Review*», vol. 42, n. 3, 1998, p. 41.

⁷ Intervista a R. GIBBONS, St. Augustine, 24 Ottobre 2008 in SOFO, *Jouway of a culture*, p. 68.

Danza e lotta, come quella che Tony Hall, un altro autore teatrale, definisce «dance and fight attitude», e da cui trae l'energia per la costruzione del suo Jouway Theatre Process. Un processo di creazione teatrale che passa attraverso il trasferimento di ogni caratteristica estetica delle arti del carnevale all'interno dello spazio teatrale. E che parte proprio dalla «kalinda», per spingere gli attori a trovare il proprio «guerriero interiore», e da «jouway», il rituale che apre le celebrazioni del carnevale la notte tra la domenica e il lunedì, e nella quale ognuno diventa ciò che la comunità intera vuole che sia. Nella notte di «jouway» le persone si riversano per le strade di Port of Spain, di Paramin, e di tutta l'isola, travestite da «blue devils», o da «jab jab» e «jab molassie», i demoni del carnevale, o semplicemente lasciando che siano gli altri a decidere la loro identità. I colori, così come il fango, vengono lanciati addosso alle persone, che incontrandosi decidono di cambiarsi a vicenda. E tutto il resto sparisce; il colore della pelle, lo status sociale, la concezione di un'identità stabile e autodefinita, per lasciare posto a nuovi colori. Come i colori che Pat Bishop ha donato al *pan*, lo strumento nazionale di Trinidad e Tobago, nelle sue sculture dipinte, in cui musica, arti visive e arti plastiche si fondono per una narrazione completa del carnevale.

Lo «steelpan» nato dalla stessa volontà di resistenza all'oppressione, dai barili usati per il cemento e il petrolio che sostituiscono le percussioni africane bandite, perché simbolo di protesta. È ancora una volta un'opera teatrale a mostrarci l'invenzione dell'unico strumento non elettronico del ventesimo secolo, *Ogun Iyan – As In Pan*, di Rawle Gibbons.

KANGA: PLAYS CHIMES OF CHURCH
CLOCK ON HIS PAN. FLAGMAN
APPROVES. EXITS.

CUTTER: How you get that?

BEMBEH: That tone real sweet.

KANGA: I leave it on the fire till the metal

expand, then I pound it thin. You like the tone?

BEMBEH: Tone, father.

BULL: I never hear nothing sounding so.

CUTTER: Them Oval Boys, I hear, have a pan shape so (concave) and playing with rubber on their sticks.

BEMBEH: It have one with four notes could play melody.

CUTTER: That is joke. Scribo made one with six. If you hear.

BEMBEH: You hear?

BULL: Is how much notes we own have, Kanga?

KANGA: We could get more as the metal stretching. Put that on a bigger drum, you could imagine?

BULL: You mean like them barrels?

CUTTER: Who carrying that? And where we getting them?

BEMBEH: In any case they have to cut.

BULL: What about down by the American base? They must have drum there. (...) They have plenty big barrels down there, not so? SHABBA: And plenty gun. You try to thief barrel from the Americans and they would put a bullet in your behind. They not like Trinidadians.

BULL: I mean ones they throw away. They must have old ones.⁸

Dagli scarti dell'impero arriva nuova musica, nuove percussioni e nuovi colori per il carnevale di Trinidad, proprio come le percussioni e i colori descritti da Walcott nella sua *Drums and Colours*, commissionatogli per la prima seduta del parlamento delle West Indies, il 23 aprile 1958. Parte della *Haitian Trilogy*, questo testo ci mostra con i colori e le maschere del carnevale «la dolorosa nascita della democrazia» a Haiti:

Now you men of every creed and class

⁸ R. GIBBONS, *Ogun Iyan – As In Pan*, 2006, inedito.

⁴ GIBBONS, *I, Lawah*.

⁵ GIBBONS, *I, Lawah*.

We know you is brothers when you playing mass,
 White dance with black, black with Indian,
 But long time, it was rebellion,
 No matter what you colour now is steel and drums
 We jumping together with open arms
 But if you listen now, you going see
 The painful birth of democracy.⁹

As the figure of time and the sea, I giving you these two masks, and speak the best you could, poetry and all. And everybody going act, every blest soul going act the history of this nation. And now friend and actors, as the sun been on this roadmarch all day cooling his crack sole in the basin of the sea, we starting from sunset, through night to the dawn of this nation. Clear the stage. Darkness, music and quiet. Right!
 (All go off. Drum roll and bugle)
 CHORUS: Before our actors praise his triumph, Time
 Shows his twin faces, farce and tragedy;
 Before they march with drums and colours by
 He sends me, his mace-bearer, Memory.¹⁰

Un rituale importato dall'Europa come espressione di libertà temporanea, è stato trasformato attraverso l'influenza di rituali africani e caraibici, come la «masquerade» e «canboulay», nel più grande esempio di arte d'azione e di resistenza culturale. È la ricerca estetica di «canboulay» che si rispecchia nella formazione delle «canboulay bands», che precedono le «carnival bands» odierne, è alla base della creazione del carnevale contemporaneo. La letteratura, in particolare il teatro di Trinidad e Tobago, più adatto per la sua

9 D. WALCOTT, *Drums and Colours* in *The Haitian Trilogy: Plays: Henri Christophe, Drums and Colours, and the Haitian Earth*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 2002, p. 3.

10 WALCOTT, *Drums and Colours*, pp. 4-5.

componente performativa a rappresentare un rituale che di performance ha sempre vissuto, è diventata uno specchio delle arti che hanno dato vita al carnevale. Ed è proprio grazie al carnevale che tutte queste arti sono state in grado di fondersi, come tutte le culture che hanno messo piede in queste isole, cancellando i confini tra arti visive, plastiche, letterarie e performative, dando luogo a un vero e proprio «carnevale» delle arti del carnevale.

MICHELA A. CALDERARO
Jacqueline Bishop's Art: A Synesthetic Experience (December 20th 2013)

Jacqueline Bishop was born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica. After completing her studies at Holy Childhood School, she decided to join her mother in the United States. She studied at Lehman College, City University of New York, where she earned a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology.

In 1996 Jacqueline won the James Michener Creative Writing Fellowship, the Caribbean Writers Summer Institute, University of Miami. In the fall of that year she began a post-graduate course in Creative Writing at NYU, earning her Master's in 1998. Immediately after she pursued, at the same university, a second Master of Fine Arts course in fiction writing. Her thesis, the novel *River's Song*, was published in 2007.

Writer Olive Senior defined the novel as «a song we've all heard before, but never with such force and clarity as this.» The book is about the difficulties encountered by women growing up in the Caribbean, their relationships with their mothers, their struggles with a system that forces them to abandon their native islands if they want to achieve a higher education. The decision Gloria, the heroine, must make – to either stay in Jamaica or leave it – is a decision between satisfying the wishes of her loved ones or pursuing her own person-

al wishes as an individual woman. Gloria becomes a reflected image of the mermaid, the Rivermama: the creature who must make a choice, while knowing only too well that whatever road she would choose she would always ache for the other.

The theme of Jamaican women forced to emigrate is most prominent in *My Mother Who Is Me: Life Stories from Jamaican Women in New York*, published in 2006. The book is divided into two parts: the first section focuses on interviews with Caribbean women of African descent, while the second is dedicated to interviews with Caribbean women of non-African descent.

An undoubtedly talented writer, Jacqueline Bishop is also a photographer, a painter, a filmmaker and a producer: She wrote, directed and produced *When In Doubt, Check It Out: A Promotion Of Men's Health Awareness*; wrote, directed and produced *Voices In Prevention: The Sexual Assault, Prevention, Education & Support Office at New York University*; while in Venice on a Master in Art, a program run by New York University, she conceived and produced *Two Visions from Venice: The Art of Maria Morganti & Federica Marangoni. Two Female Venetian Artists*; she founded the independent film company Dyaspora Films and later conceived and secured funding for *I Came Here by a Dream: The Jamaican Intuitive Artists*, a documentary on untutored Jamaican artists.

Following her interest in the connection between the visual arts and the written word, she founded the literary and visual arts magazine *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*. The journal, whose Advisory Board includes, among others, writers such as George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, Wilson Harris and Paule Marshall, publishes, now on-line, critical essays, original and new works by well-known writers, as well as works by budding artists; it also publishes photographs and contributions by visual artists.

The first issue was published in September

2000, featuring on the cover a painting of the calabash tree, by Tony Monsanto, a Curaçao-born artist.

The image of this tree, which has a particular place in the mind and in the hearts of Caribbean people, returns in Bishop's leaf-shaped poem *Calabash* to lead the readers through a journey of words and images.¹¹

Her first collection of poems, *Fauna*, was published in 2006. Using metaphors drawn from the fauna and flora of Jamaica, she explores the tensions between plenitude and emptiness, presence and absence, nourishing and poisonous deriving from her memories of her Jamaican childhood. The book is divided into four parts: Family, Flowers, Women and the Island of Jamaica. Yet every single poem returns to the myths of creation and to the memories of paradise, Jamaica, myths and memories that inevitably hold the power to shape a life, «leaving in what is essential, taking out what is not.» In the last poem, Jacqueline herself identifies with the Jamaican fauna, becoming a bird that emigrates from its

11 M. A. CALDERARO, *A Siren's Journey. Identity and Duality in two Caribbean Writers* in ANNALISA OBOE & ANNA SCACCHI eds., *A Garland of True Plain Words: saggi in onore di Paola Bottalla*, Padova, Unipress, 2012.

«When taken aboard the slave ships, slaves would put their few belongings in some sort of container, which most often was the big, exsiccated leaf of the calabash tree. The leaves of the calabash tree are very large and, once dried, they can be used as containers for food, or even water, and adorned with inscriptions, drawings, symbols that could not be understood by the slave traders, who thought those symbols were just some primitive expressions of the black, illiterate slaves. Yet, those inscriptions were in fact narratives, stories, representing the past of a free people. In this way, memories and knowledge have been passed on from generation to generation, under the oblivious eyes of the Master and his thugs. The carved calabash brought from Africa, became a means of communication, literally transporting memory from one land to another across the sea; and the Middle Passage was recorded together with stories of magical beings and ancestral beliefs» p. 421.

native country yet maintains a strong link to its paradise, «your wings have not, despite what they tell you, been clipped.»

What strikes the reader is the visual element in Bishop's poetry. She moves with grace from poems dedicated to painters, such as Gauguin and van Gogh, to the description of single paintings, becoming an art critic, describing the way the artist uses his palette on the canvas, becoming herself a painter using words as brush strokes.

Her second collection, *Snapshots from Istanbul*, published in 2009, explores the idea of exile, delving into the lives of poet Ovid and painter Gauguin.

In her poems, the process of writing, so important in her whole production, is fused with the process of creating visual art.

Furthermore, her poems are reflected in her own paintings. The flowers described in *Fauna* are given a new physicality in her series of paintings called *The Transformation Series*.

The same can be said of her photographs, her series *Childhood Memories*, where she merges images of Jamaica with images of New York, in a very special version of the mis-en-abyme, images dissolving from one into another. Then you discover that everything is mirrored in her poems where she builds a mosaic of images of different places. Using words, pictures, paintings, she takes us on her artistic journey, where sometimes, after you finish reading, or viewing, you find it difficult to determine whether the image taking shape in your mind comes from a poem or from a picture.

Her latest work represents the perfect fusion between her words and her brush strokes, between her poems and her drawings. She has created an amazing collection, *The Tempest Poems*, for the 9th Annual Liberal Studies Colloquium, *Shakespeare's Globe*, to be held on Friday, March 28, 2014, to celebrate the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth.

The Colloquium will focus on the ways Shakespeare's plays are received and perceived

in a globalized world. The keynote address will be given by Alexander Huang («Brave New World from Shakespeare's Globe to Global Shakespeare») and the artists contributing to this celebration will explore the ways in which Shakespeare's works have been adapted, modified, rendered, interpreted by different cultures and traditions.¹²

What follows is not a standard interview but a summary, and a transcript, of conversations and discussions Jacqueline Bishop and I had over a long period of time, covering issues dealing with poetry, literature, arts, identity and belonging.

M.C.: Jacqueline, I would like to begin by talking about your latest work, *The Tempest Poems/Drawings*, which in my eyes is a unique achievement where you succeed in offering us a synesthetic experience of your art. We hear as well as see your work at the same time, and the effect on us, readers/viewers, is of sheer amazement. Can you tell us about the creative process that led to such a triumphant feat?

J.B.: This all came about by chance. The Liberal Studies Program at NYU, where I am a full time master teacher, sponsors an annual symposium. This year the theme of the symposium was on Shakespeare and I was asked to contribute an essay. I said no to the essay but yes to a series of poems about Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a play that has always fascinated me because of its allusions to the Caribbean. I relished the idea of populating the play with Jamaican characters. Once I finished the poems I was asked to supply images, any images from anywhere, to illustrate the poems. At this point I chose to create my own images, and when I saw the drawings set next to the poems I was pleased with the end result. For a long time I strove to be accepted separately as a visual

¹² <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/mediamosaic/LS-Shakespeare/index.html> (2014/01/20)

artist and a writer, and now it is interesting to me that somewhere, far inside of myself, I am getting comfortable with bringing the two art forms together.

M.C.: What is the source of your inspiration? Do you think writers/painters are born as such or become ones in later years?

J.B.: This is a question I really like, because what writers dream about at night is that somebody in the audience that they are speaking to is going to be a writer. I think that writers know they are writers from very early. That has been my experience that even before they publish their first thing, they know they are writers. How it was for me is that you even try to get away from it, you are like «leave me alone», but these characters and these poems won't leave you alone, they keep insisting and insisting and insisting their way until finally you just go along with the program. Often times people feel they have a story to tell. You don't know who is ever going to read these stories but that is not the most important thing for a writer. The most important thing for the writer is the telling of the story. So it is almost as though it is something you have to do. I felt that I had to write *The River's Song*. I felt that I had to write this book in particular to go on to write other books. I had to understand this story of a childhood in Jamaica because then it would allow me to explore other things. It is something you feel you have to do. It is not even asking you, it is demanding. It says, «This is what you have to do» and you can run and become a physicist and do whatever you want to do and there is still the story to be told at the end of the day.

M.C.: Can you define your relationship with words? Do you fight with words or do words come easily to you?

J.B.: I don't fight with words as much as a poet

and I still think of myself primarily as a poet. Fiction is tougher. But maybe it is not the words that I am fighting with so much when I do have a struggle as it is the thing I am trying to bring to life. I struggle with what it is that I want the words to do. A poem usually just comes to me, oftentimes in a hurry and I have to grab it, it comes in a flash. Then I have to craft the poem. My process of writing fiction is very different from that of writing poems. In fiction I am more straightforward in what I am doing. Oftentimes in fiction, especially in writing a novel (and I have just finished my second novel) I make an outline from beginning to end of the story, so I can have some sense of where I am going with this work. Although I rarely stick to the outline I made, because characters begin to take over and assert themselves in the work, I still find having an outline a good thing to get me going in a novel. I write to the end of the novel and then, when I get to the end, I go back to the beginning to craft the story. For me the work is driven by characters, you have characters who begin to talk to you, and they begin to insist their story and at a certain point the characters begin to take over and drive the story and then there is less of a struggle with words – instead I feel as if I am being written – instead of me doing the writing. This is especially so with short stories. With short stories the only outline I have is a general outline in my head, but even here too characters take over and they begin to «write» their own story and I become a conduit for their words.

M.C.: What about images? How do they form in your mind? How do you transfer them to the canvas? Is it a daunting process or images just form in your mind asking to be transformed into paintings?

J.B.: Like my poems I might have some general idea where I might be going with a painting, but I end up being surprised with the results as well. I am getting to the stage now with

photography where I can frame images in my mind and have a pretty good idea how it will turn out, although there is always the element of surprise, which I like actually. Paintings and drawings though are still a little out of my control, they never quite turn out how I have them in mind, and by this I don't mean that they turn out badly at all. I actually often like the end result. I draw free hand and in ink or chalk like I did with the Tempest Drawings, because something of knowing that I can't erase forces me to give all my concentration to the work at hand. It is a nerve-wracking though thrilling experience as I am going through it. For some visual artists the process of making their work is the art of it all, while I am exactly the opposite. I can only relax after I have completed the work and see what I have made and that I have not yet again ruined everything. For most of my paintings so far I have been doing «drip» paintings because I like the sense of not having total control over the medium and this does not lend itself to having an image in mind beforehand. I like the sense of a dialogue between myself and the medium – whether that medium be paintings, drawings, photography, or textiles. Art after all, for me is an exploration. I use art to understand what I think and feel about something. Art helps me to clarify and understand something. Most recently I have started doing Polaroid photographs and watercolor paintings, which I like because of their immediacy and the fact that things are always a little out of my control. What would be the point of endlessly repeating something you have already mastered or something you already know?

M.C.: In your poems there are extensive references to childhood traumas. Can one describe childhood traumas in such detail without experiencing them personally?

J.B.: Yes you can. I don't think you have to experience death to write about it. And I make

use of the experiences of people around me. Oftentimes someone will say something to me and I am so personally moved by it that it works its way into my work. What I have tried to do is to listen very closely, and if I still don't understand I try to talk to people who have experienced what I am writing about. In this new novel the main character's mother dies of breast cancer. I have never experienced breast cancer but it doesn't mean I cannot write about it. I talk to people who have experienced it, I do research, and then I try to give life to what I am writing.

M.C.: You often deal with lesbian issues. Can you describe the different approaches to these issues in the countries you have visited or lived in, such as Jamaica, USA and Morocco?

J.B.: The USA is the most liberal on these issues, followed by Morocco, and then Jamaica. In Morocco it is so taboo to actually talk about sex that very few people do. In addition, girls and women are expected to be very close to each other and I think gay relationships in general benefit from this cover. In Jamaica there was and still is a lot of hostility towards homosexual relationships. If I write about lesbian issues it is because I find this an area where I could shed some light on in Jamaican and Caribbean literature. In fact I just finished a story *The Great American War Story* that has a lesbian couple at the center of the story. What I learnt in writing that story is that even in the United States ideas «from yard» can still haunt a lesbian couple and there are ways, even in the United States, where lesbian couples are silenced and erased from history. There is just beginning to emerge in Jamaica and in the Caribbean a literature on homosexuality and there was an anthology that was published that treats homosexual issues. Jamaica is not the best place to live if you are a homosexual. People, especially men, get killed for being homosexuals and lesbians are often thought to

be lesbians because they have not met the right man. The head of a Jamaican gay and lesbian organization got killed some few years back. I think you can disagree with homosexuality but to go as far as to kill someone is saying a lot. If in my writing I can shed some light on that I will, because that is one of the powers of writers, we get to say things and bring our point across and hopefully one single person will listen to what you have to say and rethink some idea or position they might have had before.

M.C.: How did the women interviewed for *My Mother Who Is Me* feel about being American? Did they consider themselves immigrants or well-integrated US citizens?

J.B.: As you know Michela, *My Mother Who Is Me* is divided into two parts. The first part are interviews with Afro Jamaican women and in the second part there are Chinese Jamaican, Lebanese Jamaican, white Jamaican, Indian Jamaican and other groups of women who call Jamaica home, they were born there, this is their home this is their land. The first half of women in the book, the African Jamaican women, really struggle with claiming America as their home, they felt that they had a harder time in America, they were confronted with racism and they never really had to deal with that on the island. They really struggled, so if you look in the first half of the book home for these women is Jamaica. They might never go back there most of them to live, but they guard it as a place where they felt safe, a place where they felt that they were understood and a place where they belonged.

The women in the second half of the book have a different reception in America. The women in the second half were largely more middle class or upper class, a lot of them were very rich women and they were not black. They had a different reaction to America. Even the reasons why the women in the first half

migrate is different from the reasons why the women of the second half of the book migrate. The women in the first part are migrating for economic reasons, the women in the second half are going to college, they are going to be reunited with their husbands and so on. So both groups of women had a totally different reception in America, with the women in the second half feeling for the most part more at home in America. But what was fascinating for me with the women in the second half of the book is that even though they had an easier time integrating into American society they too, like the women in the first part of the book, saw Jamaica as home, as a nurturing place, as a place where they would like to get back to. More than anything else that is the bridge that connects the women in the first half of the book and the women in the second half of the book. Both groups of women gesture towards each other in the book and together both groups share a real love of Jamaica.

M.C.: In literature by writers who emigrated from the Caribbean in the past one finds at times a use of tropes that are more traditional and conservative in comparison with those developed since in their native lands. How do Caribbean writers who live outside of the Caribbean deal with what was left behind? Are the tropes currently used there newer than those used before they left?

J.B.: I have noticed two things about Caribbean writers, those who are outside of the Caribbean and those who are within the Caribbean. Caribbean writers outside of the Caribbean like myself are often writing back to the Caribbean and those in the Caribbean are writing outside of the Caribbean to a larger world. If you look at the work of a writer based in Jamaica like Sharon Leach for example, her characters are very cosmopolitan and her work is largely set in the «now» Jamaica, whereas writers outside of the Caribbean tend to have more historical works.

Claude McKay, who was born in Jamaica and came to the United States in the early 1900s, focused primarily on Black identity in his works, and in the 1920s and 1930s when McKay was writing there was a sense that Black writers should present a collective front to the world, an idea, incidentally with which McKay struggled greatly, but nonetheless he too was caught up in being a bulwark against the quite negative ideas about Black people which were running rampant at the time. But now I would say Caribbean writers are freer to explore issues outside of identity and the tropes are more nuanced. If indeed Caribbean writers outside of the Caribbean engage more conservative tropes this has precisely to do with the fact that we are writing outside of the Caribbean. Maybe we are more anxious about being accepted in the Caribbean so we «Caribbean up» our works much more so than writers based in the Caribbean feel the need to do.

Let me confess something: Before every reading that I do I have a literal melt down. I think I have been able to locate this fear not at the fact that people will show up at the reading, the fear is not about speaking in front of a crowd, but the fear in fact is that no one will show up for the reading! This has been a fear I have lived with from the moment I started publishing my works. That no one will show up! That it will just be me and my books in a corner. Anyway, one time I was going to Jamaica and I posted this on Facebook. The poet Tanya Shirley who lives in Jamaica contacted me and said you must must do a reading in Jamaica. I tried to talk Tanya out of it because, you see, I just did not think that anyone in Jamaica would show up! Still Tanya was not standing for it.

The night of the reading came and sure enough I was panic stricken. I was sure NO ONE would show up! But by the time the reading got underway the room was packed. What is more is that the room was packed even with writers whose work I have loved and admired and even read as a child in Jamaica. I wanted to

cry. I really did. To date that has probably been the most meaningful reading I have ever done in my life, and I can't begin to thank Tanya and all those people who turned out that night for that gift of acceptance, that gift of acceptance in one's own country! All of this is a long way to saying, if Caribbean writers outside of the Caribbean are more anxious, which expresses itself in more conservative tropes, it is because, deep down, we want to be recognized and accepted in our own country.

M.C.: According to narrative psychology, people are driven to write biographical or autobiographical texts by an urge to hear their own personal story told by someone else. Do you think you wrote *My Mother Who Is Me* in order to find your own personal identity, to listen to your own story in the stories told by other emigrated Caribbean women? Do you think it helped you identify an already existing identity in yourself or helped you discover a newly-constructed identity through the stories of these women?

J.B.: I think that in talking to other women I came to a place of understanding regarding my identity. I think the women helped me to understand how I am like them with one foot in each country. For the longest time and even after I finished that book I didn't know how to place myself. On one hand, I feel like my creativity comes from Jamaica but there is always this nagging sense of something else. When I get off the plane in Jamaica there is the identification of the landscape and there is your family and you are home and you are so happy to be back on the island, even the voices on the radio and on the television are music to your ears. Everything – every last flower, bird, bee, is enchanting to you. But after three weeks or so «home» reverts to being New York and you begin to miss the comforts of your «home» in New York. By the time you get back to New York, of course you miss Jamaica. So

it is a very difficult thing for me, it is quite a struggle, to try and locate where exactly home is. I don't know if I have solved the issue of trying to figure out where exactly I place myself and where home is for me, I just know that the women in *My Mother Who Is Me* gave me a language with which to speak about a 'whole' identity that incorporated both places, more than anything else, that is what that book gave to me.

M.C.: You talk about an African American identity. Why is the «American» part of your identity so important to you? Why not just say you are Jamaican?

J.B.: Depending on where you land or were born in America, people are very different. So if you are from Texas it is very different from being from the Bronx for example. And even if you are from a city in Texas it is very different from the countryside. In asking why an American identity is so important to me, it is like asking an Italian person why is your Italian identity so important to you? It is who you are. It is what you know. It is how you do and why you do what you do. It would be like saying why is your Jamaican identity important? It is who you are. It is a part of you, so it is important. I hear in this question the subtle question of «Is the African part not enough for you?» The answer is no. I have lived in Africa, in Morocco, and I came to understand that this was not an identity, which I could claim for myself. At least not now. I think that what I love about the United States is that there are so many different people in the United States who call it home, Asian Americans, Indian Americans, Caribbean Americans, Italian Americans, so many different Americans call it home and what I think is particularly wonderful about American literature is that various groups write out of their various identities. Being an American for me is a fact, in the same way that being a Jamaican is a fact of my life. To deny

that I am an American (or Jamaican) would be for me denying parts of my identity and I don't want to deny any part of my identity.

M.C.: Does the epigraph you chose for your collection of poems *Fauna* refer to your own soul or can it be seen as a description of African American people's feelings in general?

J.B.: I hate speaking for large groups of people so let's say the epigraph of the book «turning and turning in the widening gyre. Things fall apart the centre cannot hold» is all about my own soul.

M.C.: The second part of *Fauna* is brimming with flowers' names. Do all these names have a particular meaning? Are they connected to a particular aspect of your hometown? Do they also represent the island inhabitants? Is there any connection with your blue-on-blue series of paintings?

J.B.: These are all flowers of the Caribbean some of which you have right here in Italy, growing and thriving like the hibiscus. I do not attribute much to the names of the flowers, except when these are names given by the local people. There is a plant in Jamaica that curls unto itself when touched called shame-mi-lady and several women poets on and from the island have incorporated this plant into their writings to make a point about conditions facing some women on the island. Regarding flowers as women and women as flowers, when I was writing the poems I tried to get at something, a fact about the flower that I would incorporate in the poem. Allamanda, for example, is really toxic and the love bush literally grows over everything. I particularly love the love bush which is a parasite that will grow on just about any living plant that you throw it on. But it does not always «catch» onto the plant you throw it on, and so, local lore goes, if it grows, the person you love will love you back. If it

does not «catch», well, you have a problem. All these flower poems then are brimming with some aspect of island life. I did the blue-on-blue series of flower paintings a number of years after I had written the poems. They are not like the *Tempest Drawings* for example, that were thought of in relation to the poems I had written. What I think the blue-and-blue paintings and the flower poems show is my continued interest in telling women's stories.

M.C.: When you went to New York for the first time, did you feel as if you were Eve stepping out of the Garden?

J.B.: Yes I did. I really did. I was entering this whole new world, and stepping outside of a world that I had known for oh, sixteen, seventeen years of my life. If I write about Eve a lot, it is because she too leaves Paradise for another place, another home. Jamaica is not exactly paradise, except it is very beautiful, very, very beautiful but oftentimes when I write about a Garden of Eden that is damaged of course I am writing about Jamaica. And since I am really concerned with telling women's side of the story, Eve is very important to me in the telling of that story and there is a part of myself that identifies with her.

M.C.: In *Fauna* there is a poem called *Full Bloom*. It is dedicated to Lorna Goodison. What does Lorna Goodison mean to you?

J.B.: When I was growing up and when I started to write Lorna Goodison loomed large to me, she was just who I wanted to be. I wanted to be Lorna Goodison. I never thought a day would come when Lorna and I would be friends, because Lorna was so like a vision. I remember I won a scholarship to go and study with Lorna at the University of Miami and I will never forget that first day sitting in class waiting for Lorna to come. The classroom had these long low windows and I saw Lorna

walking to class in a yellow dress with her hair was out. She walked under a blossoming Flame tree and I was just speechless. She is a very tall woman you know, very regal. Very majestic. And she was a writer and a painter. She was who I wanted to grow up to be.

M.C.: Jacqueline, you are a multi-talented artist and it is very difficult for me, though we have known each other for many years, to define you.... I mean you are a teacher and a researcher, true, but you are mainly a painter and a writer. A few years ago, when you gave those wonderful lectures in Trieste and Venice, we showed some of your paintings, not all unfortunately, and later we held an exhibition of your quilts. We also discussed the connection between your paintings and your creative writing. Can you elaborate further on how you see the connection between your flowers and the paintings, and also the quilts, and your poems and fiction? And, also, how you chose the paintings for the cover of your books?

J.B.: To date I have published five books, and as I look back on the covers of my books, all of which I choose instinctively, I'm astonished how much they mark the changing moments of my life so far, this journey that I'm on, whether it's me looking back on my island-home from a distance, and being completely stunned by its amazing flora and fauna, for example; or whether it's my embrace of community or even my embrace of the other as in *Snapshots from Istanbul*, *Writers Who Paint*, *Painters Who Write*, or *My Mother who Is Me*. The cover of *The River's Song*, which has three nubile women has caused a lot of controversy, but for me that cover is primarily about childhood, innocence and intimacy. I see my summer holidays in the district of Nonsuch, a tiny district high in the hills of Portland, every time I look at that cover. The covers of my books speak to certain connections among my work

in that I am often preoccupied with telling women's stories and I am often in search of community. You see this preoccupation in the quilts I have made in response to those made by my grandmother and great grandmother as well as in my poems, my fiction works and my other visual art works as well.

M.C.: Yet you have said that you don't want to be identified as a woman artist, but as far as we can observe in your body of work there is greater focus on studies of intimate relationships, of the female body and of sexuality, or of what usually remains untold, unwritten, unsaid. This is arguably typical of female writing; while if we think about Jamaican male writers, for instance, their writings usually concentrate more on social and political issues. Can you elaborate on that?

J.B.: I decided that my art should not be all about fighting social justice issues. I am a great believer in fighting social justice issues and I do a lot of work in this area. I worked at UNESCO in Paris around social justice issues, in Morocco as well, and I am beginning to do this kind of work in Jamaica. Quiet as it is kept I am completing a public policy and politics program focused around social justice issues. But I started to realize that there were things that I wanted to understand as a woman and as immigrant that were not necessarily going to end up on a poster per se. I guess too that since art started out being for me a way to understand myself and my world, it has continued to occupy that place in my life. Are there differences between the art that women and men create? I would say yes, but that has more to do with what people choose to prioritize in their art. In other words what I am saying is that I am pretty fired up about telling women's stories, but a male artist could do this as well – should he choose to do so. And that is why I reject the label of woman artist. Art is art and I prefer the title of artist.

M.C.: Back to the connection between your creative and your visual work. When an idea is formed in your mind, does it first come in words or in images, and how do you choose the means to express that idea?

J.B.: I am surprised all the time by my artwork and sometimes I have to wait to understand how best to express an idea. The most I can say on the subject is that the «feel» of a poem is very different from the «feel» of a short story, which, of course, is very different from the «feel» of a novel. A novel in fact is something you have to make great space for in your life. Because poetry is my primary art form I begin oftentimes with words, although words then conjure images for me. Lately, because I have spent the last few years working extensively in the visual arts something new is happening and it is that I am now creating images for which I have no words. It is here that the work of people like yourself, Michela, become very important. The critic can help the writer and artist see through what she is doing. Recently, a curator came to look at my quilts and because I did not want to cause confusion I did not take out my photographs and paintings, but eventually she saw those as well and she was able to make connections across my bodies of work that I had not seen. I think that art is a way of thinking for me. A way to try to figure things out and sometimes it is not clear to me why I am doing what I am doing. And it is hard to separate out what came first the words or the images.

M.C.: In *Fauna* you write about Gauguin. What kind of influence does he have on your work?

J.B.: Gauguin shows up more in my writing than in my visual arts. I write about him. I don't think he influences my paintings as much as he influences Derek Walcott's paintings, I mean Derek Walcott even has paintings for Gauguin, or in the style of Gauguin. For me it

is Gauguin's voyages and how he operated in the world as a male artist who placed his art over and above personal relationships that I was so intrigued by and the fact that he was rewarded for doing this in ways that I do not think women artists would ever be.

M.C.: Thanks for mentioning Derek Walcott. He is another Caribbean writer who paints as well. There are other writers who paint: Lorna Goodison, Earl McKenzie, Ralph Thompson; then there's Marcia Douglas who creates dolls, and of course Opal Palmer Adisa, who is a photographer, a poet, and a performer. How would you explain the fact that so many Caribbean artists are multitalented?

J.B.: I am unsure how to fully explain this phenomenon, except to note that almost all of the writers you listed are poets or primarily poets and so I believe that the concentration that poetry requires, that attention to every last word in crafting images that is a poem, is the same thing that goes on in the visual arts. It is something about the intensity of image-making which is contained in poetry and painting. Those two things seem somehow linked. Another idea that comes to mind as well is that literacy levels in some parts of the Caribbean for a long time were not very high because of a legacy of slavery and colonialism and so on. I remember as a girl these big beautiful Bibles in all the homes around me. These big beautiful Bibles had all these grand colorful images that could convey to people who could not read something of what the story is in these Bibles were all about. I think given how prevalent and dominant religion is in the Caribbean, maybe this has something to do with it – using images to tell a story to people who did not have access to words.

M.C.: Is there in your opinion a Caribbean aesthetic? And if there is, how would you define it?

J.B.: The most I can say is that a Caribbean aesthetic is informed by its concern with the Caribbean. I remember when I was editor of *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*, a group of us sought to define a Caribbean aesthetic. Was it art created by someone born in the region and writing about the region? What about someone who was born and grew up in the region and was an artist but decided not to engage anything at all about the region? Would there be room enough for such a person in *Calabash*? And where would you place then someone like Edna Manley who was born and raised in England but married her Jamaican cousin and came «home» to Jamaica which indeed became her home for the rest of her life? She is instrumental in developing Modern Jamaican art and her work centers primarily around Jamaica and Jamaicans. If we are to use the criteria of born in Jamaica, born in the Caribbean, to engage the aesthetics of her work that would certainly count her out. So it is all quite complicated and in regards to a Caribbean aesthetic the most I can say is that at some level the work is self-conscious about representing the Caribbean.

M.C.: Do you also feel the restlessness that characterizes the women interviewed in your book *My Mother Who Is Me*? Do you also feel straddled between two worlds, namely New York and the Caribbean? Do you still consider Jamaica as your true home, your paradise?

J.B.: To a certain degree I do feel the same restlessness as the women in *My Mother Who Is Me*, which is probably why I did the book in the first place. There is that constant straddling between the United States and Jamaica. It is just a way of life for me now. Yes, I still consider Jamaica my true home, except when I go home there, I always long for the United States.

M.C.: Almost all female characters in your

work share «a longing to travel», a desire to leave their homeland even if it means leaving behind friends, loved-ones and children. Where do you think this longing comes from? Which opportunities can contemporary Jamaica offer to women? How did you feel when you left the island?

J.B.: I think this longing comes from the fact that Jamaica is an island. There is just a natural curiosity to know what life is like beyond the shores of the island. Jamaica is a pretty forward-looking country in so far as educating girls is concerned. Jamaica's current Prime Minister is a woman and there are no large distinctions in segregating women and men in the professions. That said, I believe I had to leave Jamaica to become an artist and I still do not understand how I could make a living as an artist on the island. I have met other Jamaican artists who tell me I am wrong, but I am not so sure of this. Truthfully when I left Jamaica I had no idea I would be gone for so long. I fully believed that I would return to the island after getting my college degree. That day on the plane heading to the United States my number one concern was seeing the mother I had not seen in years and meeting my baby sister born in the United States. After the reunion with my mother I did not want to be separated from her again. By the time I finished college almost all my immediate family members were out of Jamaica and I had built a life for myself in the United States. I still dream though of going back to live, even part of the year, in Jamaica. That is still a dream I hold near and dear to my heart.

M.C.: Through the «calabash» Caribbean women have always been the most important figures in passing on tradition to younger generations. Today, where communication is mainly based on television, internet and mobile phones, do you think women still hold this peculiar *matrilineage* function?

J.B.: Yes we still do. I will tell you a story. For the longest time I resisted getting a cell phone. I just did not want to bother with even more intrusions in my every waking moment. I enjoyed the times I was disconnected. Then I went to Jamaica to visit my grandmother who had a cell phone that she was constantly talking into. Instead of technology making her less connected, it did just the opposite and made her more connected. Of course I was a little embarrassed that my grandmother should have a cell phone and I did not so I eventually got one and once I did I wondered why I resisted so long. It does make life that much easier. Now my grandmother and I can talk on our mobile phones and though she remains incredibly suspicious of me and all my questions, none the less, she still uses that cell phone to dispense wisdom and knowledge.

M.C.: When writing, how do you fuse Nation language with Standard English?

J.B.: It depends on the point I am trying to make and the characters that I am writing about. In my short story *Brown Girl in the Ring* that entire story is told in Nation Language because it is all happening in this one little girl's head and this is the language she would use. Whereas in another story of mine, *Letter To My Children* you have a mixture of both Nation Language and Standard English because one of the other characters in that story is an educated white American woman so it would make sense that when she speaks she is not using Jamaican Nation Language. Speaking of Nation Language though, what I have noticed is that Nation Language is oftentimes not given the due it should get in Caribbean literature. By that I do not mean to suggest that Nation Language is not used in our literature, it is used quite often, but it is often used with characters who are the butt of many jokes and so on. I find that it is often not thought through in its use. It is kind of like, here is some local color

to color-up or lighten-up this piece to make the reader laugh.

M.C.: Do you think the Caribbean reading public is increasing? What can be done in that context in your opinion?

J.B.: I should hope it is, especially with increasing literacy rates and such events as the Calabash Literary Festival in Jamaica. But it is not only the Caribbean reading public that should be increased but also the reading public in general I would hope would become more interested in Caribbean literature. One idea that I am playing with is to work with a school in Jamaica to get more books by local authors into the hands of school children and to see how the children would respond to that. I am wondering if that might be a way to generate more life-long interest in the things that come out of the countries in the Caribbean.

M.C.: How would you define the so-called African-American tradition in both writing and visual arts? Is there a difference between African-American tradition, African-Jamaican tradition and European-Jamaican tradition? And if there is one, how would you define it?

J.B.: The most that I can say about the African-American and African-Jamaican tradition is that they were most likely created or maintained by people who are somehow engaged with the continent of Africa. I don't think I can say much more than that. Regarding the European-Jamaican tradition it is indeed hard to separate this out from a distinctly Jamaican tradition. In other words all the people who have populated Jamaica have added something to the Jamaican identity and we, as Jamaicans, partake of it even sometimes unknowingly. I read somewhere once that bar-b-que is actually a Native American way of cooking and I thought, who would have thunk it? We participate and engage in Jamaican Taino aspects of

ourselves without knowing it. I think the same is true of other groups that have set down roots in Jamaica, they have all contributed to the Jamaican identity but it would probably take an anthropologist to tell us how they do this.

M.C.: Did the life stories told to you by Jamaican women in New York inspire some of the characters and situations in your novel *The River's Song*?

J.B.: To the best of my knowledge it did not. I had long finished *The River's Song* when I went back to work on *My Mother Who Is Me*. *The River's Song* came out of a conglomeration of my experiences, the experiences of people I knew, and my own imagination. It would not be a stretch though to see similarities in both *The River's Song* and *My Mother Who Is Me* because many of the women's experiences in *My Mother Who Is Me* are similar to experiences that I have had and know about and that I have written about in the novel.

M.C.: What are in your opinion the main features that characterize Caribbean women artists?

J.B.: Our concern with the lives of women and girls. We are still preoccupied with writing and righting the long historical wrong of the absence of Caribbean women characters that we know and understand into Caribbean literature, as opposed to the caricatures and stereotypes of Caribbean women that for too long populated the arts of the region.

M.C.: Do you think that each Caribbean woman has a unique story that is just waiting to be told?

J.B.: No I don't think so. I think every Caribbean woman has a unique story for sure, but all stories are not stories to be told. Take my grandmother for example, she has had what

I would consider a pretty interesting life but she hates it, simply hates it when anyone, in her words «broadcasts» her story. By that she of course means me. For a long time I wanted to know my great grandparents story, they had such an amazing love story that spanned decades, and there are so many questions I would have liked to ask them. Then one day I heard something similar to my great grandmother's voice saying to me, «Jacqueline that is a story that your great grandfather and I want to keep to ourselves, our story, we don't want to share it with anyone else. Let us be with our story and focus instead on your story of us.» I can't say I am satisfied with that answer because there are so many things about those two people I still want to know, but I came away understanding that not all stories, not even all unique stories, should be told.

M.C.: Thank you, Jacqueline. I'm going to close our conversation with a poem and a drawing taken from your latest collection, *The Tempest Poems/Drawings*. I picked *The Birth of the Islands*, but any other choice would have been as effective.

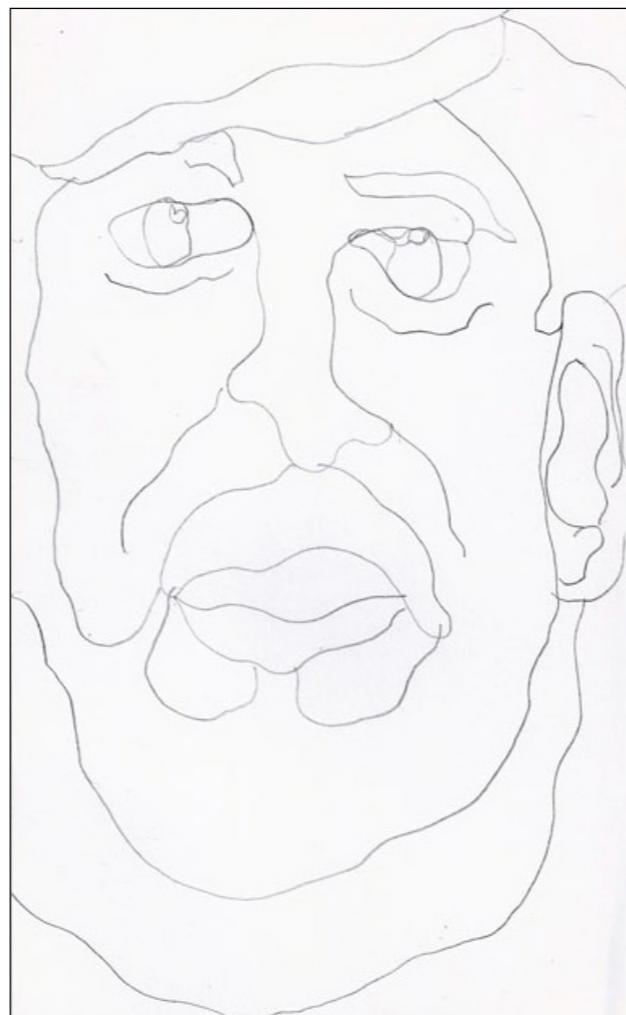
The Birth of the Islands

People can be so ungrateful at times.
It doesn't matter what you try to do for them.
Take that boy Caliban for example.
The same boy that I save from him own mother.
You'd think he'd be thankful to me – all I have done for him, that freckle-faced malignant thing! But instead he goes around telling people
How I just come and take what don't belong to me,
How I done steal this island right out from under him;
This island he says was given to him by the blue-eyed hag

cast out of Algiers for her dark and devious doings,
that was his god-forsaken mother.
I hear him walking around and saying,
No, not even saying but complaining loudly,
that boy Caliban,
That I have this island in my back pocket like I think it is ackee seed
or something; and that I think that the islands that litter these waters,
Is my own personal playground, and that I don't give credence
To even the power of the seeds all about me,
Guinep seed, mango seed, soursop seed,
these cornels,
That if you plant them in soil willing enough to take them,
They have the power within themselves to regenerate
And give birth to more islands floating about on nothing but waters.
I bet him cant tell the difference between any of those seeds!
Is what I hear him going around and telling people.
That I believe that one seed, one island, is just as good as another.
I hear him saying, that boy Caliban, that if it wasn't for him,
I wouldn't know the difference between the sweet brown naseberry
from the dark near purple of an otaheite apple
and that I would bind up not only my hand and my mouth
but the inside of my body with sweet-smelling jackfruit
and the sometimes green sometimes purple cubbitch starapple!
I hear him telling people, to ask me what you boil
tamarind leaves for, as if everbody don't already know
is so you cure measles! Him keep saying,
that boy Caliban,

that is him show me the best rivers and
lakes and streams
where I can go to get fresh water and catch
janga.
And him love to talk that one ban, ban, Ca-
caliban,
Who spend all his time knocking about his
name
And making hideous music on old steel
pan,
How is him tell me bout cerasee tea, show
me
the small green bush with the bright red
and yellow flowers
And tell me that I should give it to my
daughter,
For cerasee tea it good fe u daughter!
Sometimes when I think about the injustice
of it all
That if it wasn't for me that boy wouldn't
even have the words
With which him use to talk bad about me;
And all the things I do for that boy, I even
Have him around my own daughter; yes, it
grieve mi heart so.
But is so life stay; is so people can be bold
sometimes.
Most people cant see themselves and how
they hurting other people.
My own brothers, is them that plot and steal
my kingdom from me.
Anyway I have only one question to ask
him, that boy Caliban,
Which is, if him didn't find people here
already when them
Drop him off, him and him blue-yeye
muma;
If there weren't already somebody clearing
the land

And burning the bush, and picking the
fruit, and drinking the clear
sweet water? Yes, I want him to tell me, that
boy Caliban,
going around and bad-mouthing me to
everybody,
just who him think this island now so
rightfully belong to?



J. Bishop, *Birth of the Islands*.

MARCO FAZZINI

The Muse is not Androgynous but Female: An Interview with Derek Walcott. (April 2004)

M.F.: When did you start to write?

D.W.: Very young, I think virtually as a child. I started when I was, I don't know, eight or nine, and it was mainly poems I wrote.

M.F.: Did your parents encourage your interests in writing or did they react against your literary and creative leanings?

D.W.: I only had one parent, my mother. My father died when he was quite young, thirty-one or thirty-two. I had a twin brother and a sister, so we lived with my mother, who was a widow, obviously. She encouraged me because my father used to write.

M.F.: What do you remember of your period of study in St Lucia. Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?

D.W.: Well, as I got older my mother's circle of friends, and my father's friends too, knew that my father used to write sketches and also poems, and he was also a painter, so I think that his friends, who were my mother's friends as well, encouraged me when I was very young because I think they understood that was the direction we would have gone, my brother and me.

M.F.: Have you ever chosen a particular poetical work to inspire your poetry or would you rather speak about a kind of comprehensiveness in your readings and influences?

D.W.: It depends on what period of time we are talking about. If we talk about the early school days, I was quite a voracious reader. We had a good library: I cannot remember the years but

as the years went on we had a good collection: Walter Scott, Charles Dickens and Raphael Sabatini – I think Sabatini was a Spanish, who wrote lots of adventurous, cape-and-sword stories. The poetry was immediately great poetry: Shakespeare, and the other obvious great names, such as Tennyson, and so on.

M.F.: Many critics mention Dylan Thomas, and obviously Marvell...

D.W.: But that was much later. I am talking about my early readings. At that time I was wide open to all sorts of influences. But the difference between what people call influences and what another generation or another epoch may call apprenticeship is very relevant to my approach to things: I was very much influenced by Thomas when I was young. But who doesn't have influences? In fact, I used to imitate the texture of the style, even the metre of these great poets. I have an exercise-book in which I wrote one poem in the metre of Swinburne, and another one in somebody else's metre, such as Eliot or Pound. So I let myself open to all these influences.

M.F.: What's the origin of a poem? Do you accept the idea that it can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

D.W.: Well, I think it's all a matter of music and metre. Probably, the process of creating a poem, or beginning to explore what is beginning to be a poem would start with a phrase that might come into your mind. I imagine that's the same process for composers: a phrase may come out of the air, or memory or anything, or associations, so that the whole structure is made out of that. The structure is not made in a linear way like when you write prose, where you start from A and you go to B: it may be that the B is first in poetry. It does not have

to follow that narrative thread prose usually has. I think that it was Robert Graves who said that a poem starts with half a line and then the first half of the next line. It is a very interesting thing as a theory: so you don't have the metre of the poem immediately; you have a phrase which may indicate what may be coming to be the metre. So, if you start the poem in the other direction, with the metre heading in a certain direction, then you have the difference between the Apollonian and the Dionysian: the Dionysian comes like an explosion of some kind whereas the Apollonian gives you a certain kind of order. I think that probably the creation of music and the creation of poetry are based on that kind of principle, not on a logical prosaic principle, except with a certain kind of poem, a poem composed on an special occasion, an ode on the death of somebody or things like that... a poem in which you have to use your craft to do it.

M.F.: Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being pre-determined?

D.W.: Yes, I would. It also depends whether or not you know how long the poem is going to be; it may just grow or you may have the sense this is not going to be long and it may be very short. This is not dictated by any kind of rule, but by the interior direction of the poem. I think the hardest thing to do is to follow the direction and not let oneself impose a strict control over what could be more expansive. So, during that period of association in which you are making a poem, anything can come into it. May be a lyric poem or may be, eventually, something much longer. I think that if you have a didactic poem of a sort you have a shape and you fill that shape; but the shape of the poem itself may come from a phrase, the original phrase.

M.F.: What's going on when a new short poem is growing in the poet's mind and when he or

she tries to write it down. I imagine that the poet's activity must be differently planned when he or she is writing a long poem like *Omeros* or *Another Life*. Would you expect, in that case, to write poetry regularly?

D.W.: Yes, if you are doing a long poem, which is good in many respects, you know what you are doing to do tomorrow. So you have a writing job: you know that you'll write a number of lines per day; you don't have to wait for inspiration because you know what the poem is about. When I was working on *Omeros*, I was very happy because in the morning I knew I had a design and I had to fulfil that design. So, I think it's the same process used by novelists when they shape a story.

M.F.: So when do you feel that it's going to be a short poem or a long one?

D.W.: Certain given things that you know tell you that this is going to be fairly lengthy. The story is going to be about X or Y, so if you feel that you are doing this kind of poem telling something, you may be doing a didactic poem or a narrative or epic poem; but lyric poetry doesn't necessarily have a story. In terms of working at a long poem, it's a daily job that you do, especially if you have given yourself a very strict structure. If you say: «all the lines are going to have 11 or 12 syllables, and they are going to be A-B...», you frame a structure. It's very much like an architectural job in a way, you know the frame of the work and you have to fulfil the shape of it.

M.F.: Do you take great care in ordering and choosing the poems in a collection?

D.W.: Yes, I do. I got to learn that a little later better. I printed my first poems myself and I have always encouraged young poets, if they cannot get a publisher, to print their own, despite the fact that there were, and there are

no publishing houses in St. Lucia. In terms of choosing a poem, there is a physical feel of a book of poems too. A blank page opposite a crowded page creates its own kind of echo. I get the feeling that even with short lyrics or short poems they should create a kind of sequence inside the book, so you are conscious of this kind of sequences at a certain stage.

I think that if you design a book that is thematic, and you may say this is all about pianos, it follows a kind of pattern and, thematically, one poem follows the other, so that every page has an echo and the echo can be white, on the page, so that it is a concept of words floating in space, that is the page.

M.F.: Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?

D.W.: Oh, completely, sure!

M.F.: Are there places that have been especially important to your poetry, or may have lent themselves easily to metaphor? And, are they the same ones that have been important in your life?

D.W.: Yes, certain places, very sacred places, such and such thing may have happened here or there, like when you are in love, whatever your beloved occupies, that kind of radiant things, or places where someone may be buried, where you have an illuminating experience.

M.F.: Many of your poems reflect your ideas about human relationships and love. How does it feel to be a contemporary poet who writes about love, when so many other poets today do not, at least in Italy?

D.W.: Is there no love in Italy? What's happening? I think the reason why there may be not much love poetry anywhere it's because love poetry is related to song. The love poem

is a song in admiration of the beloved, it's like a sonnet, a lyric poem. All Provençal poets, and Italian poets write about the beloved with a lyrical instinct, and the lyrical instinct is related to music, to the sound of things, and to the sound of praise and admiration. So, if there is no metre, no music, there is not going to be many poems written with that echo. What you will get is only a succession of prosaic experiences that are, in a way, sublime because that is a kind of sublime expression: to be in love and to feel like that, especially if you are young. Anyway, I think that the quality of the diction doesn't permit a sense of adoration and joy that can happen. There aren't many happy poems in the twentieth century and therefore there aren't many great love poems in the modern age. I think it doesn't have the unity of a joy, of an emotion; love is one emotion; it can be fragmented but it's one emotion that completes itself in terms of what one is saying. It's very rare in English poetry now too.

M.F.: It reminds me something Douglas Dunn told me during one of our conversations. He was observing that probably the best love poems written in the second half of the last century were the Beatles's songs. Probably he was just ironising about the poverty of the production of love poems in the English language.

D.W.: I know what he means; I almost say the same thing, because a pop song has the structure of a lyric poem: it is short, it goes from A to B. The expression will be predominant in pop music. But there is a big difference between *I love you yeah yeah yeah!* and a sonnet by Samuel Daniel. We don't make those distinctions anymore. The popular song has become so much an aesthetic thing that the intellectuals themselves have adopted it because they seem to have nothing else. There are some terrific songs of the Beatles I love myself. The instinct of the «trovatore» of singing to his loved lady is the same thing the Beatles were doing in

their songs and with their language. Look at contemporary Italy: you have a lot of pop singers, the Italian «cantautori».

M.F.: Do you imagine your readers when you write? Do you project your poems on to an ideal reader or not?

D.W.: I think I believe in what Robert Graves believes in: in the muse, and that the muse is not androgynous but female. You can't be just a man to write poetry. There is something very female in Dante, I think, and in a lot of the great poets. It's not a sexual thing, it's a matter of feeling, subtlety and variety of feeling. None of these old guys were wrong. To make the muses women is sensible, and it makes sense. You can't see a hairy guy with big arms saying: 'I'm a muse', unless you like leather and bondage. I don't imagine a muse sitting down with a harp waiting for me to do something. You address somebody, other than yourself; it really, in a way, depends on what you are writing, and your own age. No writer of any self-respect would be writing for himself completely, so you may be addressing your dead father, or your lost love, but you are writing to someone and generally the spirit of approval is the same that happens in painting, in music. I think, certainly, that for men that approval is female. It's not that all art is masculine. In terms of poetry, for instance, the loved object becomes female, feminine, a goddess principle.

M.F.: What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be sceptical about its value?

D.W.: No, why? It's a terrible thing to say! Passages of poetry, of which the supreme example is Dante, are phenomenal in what they do to a human being and to a human intelligence. When you get to a phrase at the end of *Paradiso*, there is nothing like it anywhere that takes off.

The momentum of vision and apprehension is even beyond the Bible, because the Bible is rooted in a kind of orthodoxy like Dante is not. He deals with ordinary things; yet, if you start a canto with «Virgin, Mother, Daughter» that's it, that is phenomenal imagination. It's all over, like to progress from that into a vision of all the world's books spinning as in a storm and coming back into a single volume. I'm not saying: if you have a toothache read Dante; no, go and see a dentist. But this idea of elevating and taking the spirit out of the body into a serenity that is there, that is the point of poetry. That is what is ultimately there for. That is why it is beyond race or time. What I'm saying is that there can be a kind of negative argument that says that these times are so terrible that poetry can do nothing to do X or Y.

M.F.: I was just thinking, for example, about an essay by Geoffrey Hill where he writes against all the atrocities of the last century. He says, roughly, that if you write poetry just to redeem or console your readers against those atrocities you commit atrocities yourself. He calls them the tongue's atrocities, especially if you use cliché phrases, and you don't renovate language in that process.

D.W.: But you can say that about anything, for example tennis, golf, very bad golf. If you presume that poetry is bad, of course, it is atrocious. A philosopher said that there can be no poems after the holocaust. In a way that's true because you wonder what can be said to redeem all that horror. Well, the *Book of Job* can redeem it. The age that one is in is always the worst age that one has lived in. Every age is the worst age, so ours is the same. You can have a bad subject, a terrible subject and out of that you can write terrible poetry, but you can't go looking for an atrocity so that you can write about it. There are passages in literature in which what is discussed is not the atrocity but the consequence of the atrocity. Have a look, for

example, at one of Hemingway's stories called *A Big Two hearted river*, or at the recent movie by Mel Gibson on Jesus Christ.

M.F.: The philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer, in his essay called *On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth*, says that the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling... To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfilment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind. Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic objection to the truthfulness of poetry: 'Poets often lie'?

D.W.: This is the total opposite of the reality, because no word has a reference. I wish Joseph Brodsky were here because he could annihilate this in two seconds. The people who do the most critical damage to poetry are the critics, especially brilliant critics. They can be so wrong because they are so stubborn and they can have very poor choice in terms of making a selection of what is the best in the sound of poetry. I have seen terrific reputation critics showing you examples of a poet they like. One night I called up Joseph Brodsky and I said: «Joseph, listen, do you realise this critic doesn't have an ear for poetry?» He said: «Derek, this is what you woke me up for?» I don't like mystique, I don't like French or Germanic mystique in philological or spiritual terms because it corrupts the actual craft. This is what you do: you practice a craft as silently as if you were a carpenter. If I'm going to be a carpenter and someone comes to me and says: «no, you cannot do this because your saw is sacrosanct», then I can't do the fucking poem! Let me give him a break. He is virtually saying that the poem is autonomous, it is self-ruling, it has no origin.

M.F.: You had many experiences as a writer in residence and you taught students how to write poetry in various university institutions. Do you really think that people can be trained in

this kind of mysterious job?

D.W.: Very amusing! The people who ask you: «Do you think poetry can be taught?» are inevitably English or European. Americans think everything can be taught, including poetry. Poetry can't be taught. Stop. Freeze frame, you go up to Leonardo da Vinci who is working for Verrocchio and you say: «Leonardo, what do you do with Verrocchio?», and he says: «I do the hair and I do the nails.» Can painting be taught? The person has to be gifted. So, people who teach gifted young people well in America are doing a terrific job in helping them refine their craft. That is a medieval concept and it is not a new American concept. But if you are going to teach, you have to be totally laid back in terms of your instruction. You don't violate the individuality of the young poet, you encourage him or her to be as wide as possible, in terms of style or choice, and what you prevent is anything that is excessive or vain or whatever. But, in terms of the craft of writing by a master craftsman, somebody presumed to be a master craftsman. It can absolutely be taught in the same way the Greeks taught rhetoric. There is a very bad side to it that affects American poetry, considerably where everything becomes very academic, and even free verse can become academic. So, the whole standard expectation of a University program is a certain kind of poem, but if you are tough enough and smart enough you tell the students that this is a university poem. But I have seen, not because of my teaching, very good published poets; we had 15 published poets who came out of the program and all of them are very good. I know I can't resist the idea of a sort of industry going on, but everybody at some point in his or her life, every artist has had a mentor.

M.F.: Do you ever think of yourself as a tutor or a guide rather than a teacher?

D.W.: I think the cynicism is based on the

vainglorious European concept of tradition and heritage and America as a vulgar country. This is a very corny view because the great poets of the twentieth century are all American: Whitman, Pound, Eliot, Frost.

M.F.: In becoming accessible is poetry in danger of giving up too much? What are the implication of publicity?

D.W.: Yes, it is, but if you look at the other side of the thing it can become so mechanical, repetitive and boring, basically. So if you open a collection journal of poetry now, in most cases there is no real enjoyment in what you read. That would be true anywhere. You see that an individual genius represents what poetry is. Out of the hundreds and thousands of people who write, two or three are really gifted.

M.F.: Probably there are too many books around...

D.W.: Not books but trash. I have never had access to trash when I was in S. Lucia because it was a poor place. The extremity of poverty and necessity can create a very fine selection of what is necessary.

M.F.: You are a painter as well as a poet. How does your art works fit in with your writing? Do you visualize your writing when you work, and what is the advantage of moving in those two fields at the same time?

D.W.: I'm a realist painter. I paint actual landscapes, some portraits. So I'm not an abstract painter, and I don't have any respect or much respect for the abstract, especially for abstract art. So I believe in the corny but emphatic development that has to happen in terms of trying to be a good painter: drawing proportions, caring about representation, and so on. I think there is a parallel with writing

accurately too. I don't think poetry can help painting because there is nothing it can do physically, but certainly painting can help poetry in terms of visualizing what you are writing about, in terms of colour and shape.

M.F.: I'm going to tell you three names of three amazing water-colourists: William Turner, John Sell Cotman, and Emil Nolde. Would you comment on their work?

D.W.: I don't know Nolde well; I know the kind of work he does, but I'm not a fanatic about that. Turner, of course, is great and Cotman is terrific. But the very master of the water-colourist is Winslow Homer.

M.F.: Where do you go and buy your painting material? What paper and what colours do you use?

D.W.: I just buy it wherever I am. I can buy the material not easily in St Lucia, but in Trinidad there is good quality stuff. Painting in the Caribbean is hard because the shadows are very strong; the shadows in the Caribbean are almost black when they are not green. So, to get the subtleties of that green is the real challenge, of course. Your sky is brilliant blue, and you don't have that model in a temperate climate where the sky can be grey with colour, you can have hard blue for the sea.

M.F.: I wonder if you exhibit your works regularly in art galleries in your country or abroad?

D.W.: No, I haven't held many exhibitions. Sometimes, I don't really have enough, despite the fact that I do a lot of oil paintings, more than watercolours.

M.F.: Can you mention in which way West-Indian art differs, if it does, from European style and tradition. Is it just a question of

the colours the eye can catch in your island or is there a different aesthetic perceptive approach implied in the translation of your reality into art?

D.W.: It's a global position of terms. Globally, you can almost divide painting into two styles: abstract or representational. Unfortunately, for a while, the abstract predominated in West-Indian painting, but there can be different kinds of abstract, as you know. Generally speaking, colours may be shrill or they may be vehement, somehow. So, that kind of painting is an egotistical paradise, because you call yourself a painter and you are permitted to do anything because you are black and you are new. So, you can get very bad art and very egotistical painting, because it is a new country and it is a new freedom, and etc. and etc. with all that fallacy. On the other hand, some of the direct representational painting can be extremely good. My attitude to painting is: you have to draw. Art is based on drawing. Now you have the absurdity of installations.

M.F.: You mentioned several times in your previous interviews that most of the ethnic legends or songs in the West-Indies, differently from Ireland or Scotland, have been erased from the writer's memory and experience. Do you think that this absence has developed in, some way, a stronger sense for imaginative efforts or leanings in the West-Indian poets?

D.W.: Any literature has dealt a lot with folk material, and then has progressed into something allegedly more sophisticated. You would easily get an artist who would go back to the folk material and magnify it. I think that's what happened in Homer. The legends were there, they faded and then they came in at a crisis when the belief in gods wasn't there. Yet, any artist comes at a time when there is a crisis of belief. Out of that doubt, you can

get masterpieces. It is like a reformation, a Renaissance, it is something that contradicts what was there before. I think I was regretting this luck of heritage.

M.F.: In one of your essays dated 1960 you claimed financial support for the artists. How do you judge the function and role of institutional and government initiatives in support of artists and writers in your country?

D.W.: Well, I have always cursed the Caribbean governments for not supporting the arts, and imitating their predecessors. They think it is natural for a government to treat any artist as an amateur. Our models are the standard models of European and American governments.

M.F.: So what's the publishing situation in the West Indies? Suppose you are a young writer, where do you publish?

D.W.: There is not a publishing situation at all... well, you can print you own books. You can try and sell them yourself too. There should be publishers who would take the risk. But they would argue that they don't have a distribution. Yet, most good West-Indian writers eventually do get published in Canada, in England, and even in America.

M.F.: Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?

D.W.: No. I wouldn't like to undertake that. That's huge.

M.F.: Looking back over all your work, what do you think is the most characteristic feature? Can you summarize your work, or your style in a phrase or a sentence?

D.W.: Once upon a time I asked Joseph Brodsky,

Seamus Heaney and myself the following question: if you had to summarize and satirise your work and say what it is about, what would you say? Seamus said: «Bogs, bogs, bogs», and I said: «No, my work is nothing more than: wish you were here. A postcard, palm trees and coconut trees.»

FRANCESCA VALERIO

Tracées de Patrick Chamoiseau, textes réunis et présentés par S. Kassab-Charfi, «Interculturel Francophonies», 22, novembre-décembre 2012.

Le 22^e volume d'«Interculturel Francophonies», édité par l'Alliance Française de Lecce en novembre 2012, présente des articles entièrement consacrés à l'œuvre de Patrick Chamoiseau, essayiste, romancier, scénariste martiniquais, lauréat du Prix Goncourt en 1992 pour son roman *Texaco*.

Cette publication collective, qui a pour titre *Tracées de Patrick Chamoiseau*, a été coordonnée par Samia Kassab-Charfi, professeur de littératures française et francophone à l'Université de Tunis: dans son introduction, elle nous présente, après une brève notice biographique sur l'auteur, la structure de ce numéro, divisé en quatre chapitres selon les différentes problématiques affrontées: «Dire l'amour en littérature chamoisienne», «Chamoiseau et l'autre humanisme créole», «Marronnage du récit et subversions de la parole», «Animalités et sens du monde». Un texte d'ouverture et un texte de clôture s'ajoutent aux onze articles qui composent cet ouvrage critique donnant une vision complète de l'auteur et des différentes manières de lire son œuvre si riche et si complexe.

En ouverture de ce numéro, Rafik Ben Salah, nouvelliste et romancier tunisien, nous montre, dans sa contribution *Relire Texaco, vingt ans après*, tout son attachement pour l'extraordinaire performance littéraire de Patrick

Chamoiseau. L'article rend en effet hommage au roman qui a fait couronner Patrick Chamoiseau du Prix Goncourt en 1992, en mettant en relief l'un des thèmes au cœur de sa production littéraire: le conflit entre la quête de dignité et d'identité des esclaves martiniquais libérés du «Colon» et leur admiration pour les valeurs du «Blanc», pour la langue française et pour ses représentants.

Dans la première section, «Dire l'amour en littérature chamoisienne», c'est Véronique Corinus qui signe le premier article, *La fabrique du récit amoureux créole dans Solibo Magnifique de Patrick Chamoiseau*. Ce roman, à travers lequel Chamoiseau essaie de fabriquer une nouvelle littérature créole qui mette en discussion, d'un point de vue thématique mais aussi linguistique et narratif, les normes et les conventions de l'esthétique classique, combine deux genres marginaux, le roman policier et le roman d'amour. Dans *Solibo Magnifique* deux thèmes s'entrelacent, celui d'un événement criminel et celui du sentiment amoureux aux Antilles. L'attention de l'article se concentre en particulier sur ce dernier sujet, illustré à l'intérieur du roman par la narration de deux micro-récits amoureux: une union vertueuse et une union licencieuse. Les micro-récits bien décrivent la nature des relations homme-femme chez le petit peuple antillais et mettent en évidence comment la violence contre les femmes, due au désir de l'homme de surmonter l'humiliation ancestrale subie, devienne un moyen pour faire valoir sa propre puissance dans la société post-plantationnaire.

À partir d'une démarche critique semblable, l'article de Jacqueline Couti, «*Le chant du koké de Patrick Chamoiseau: rapport des sexes, marquage phallique et politique de négociation culturelle*», examine la portée culturelle et la valeur politique de la sexualité, en mettant en relief l'analogie entre le pouvoir du colonisateur et la suprématie phallique dans la masculinité créole. À travers ses deux romans *Chronique des sept misères* et *Solibo Magnifique*, Chamoiseau

conteste la domination sexuelle de l'homme blanc, libidineux et violent, qui a déterminé l'émasculatation de l'Antillais et dénonce la francisation des mœurs sexuelles de l'homme noir qui entravent la construction d'une identité martiniquaise. En effet, malgré l'intention de l'homme noir d'exprimer toute son opposition au colonialisme, sa tradition libertine continue à s'inspirer de la domination sexuelle héritée des Français en rendant ainsi impossible la mise en place d'une nation profondément et intimement créole.

Guillaume Pigeard de Gurbert inaugure la deuxième section, «Chamoiseau et l'autre humanisme créole», avec sa contribution *Les gri-bouillis de Chamoiseau*. À partir d'une réflexion sur le récit autobiographique *Une enfance créole*, l'article porte, tout d'abord, sur le thème du potentiel imaginaire de l'auteur qui précède l'acte raisonné de la construction narrative; il explore ensuite le thème de la puissance d'insoumission à l'autorité qui réside dans la langue créole. La trilogie s'ouvre, en effet, sur les années qui précèdent l'entrée à l'école, c'est-à-dire quand l'enfant ne sait pas encore écrire les choses mais les dessine en donnant libre cours aux perceptions, aux images, à l'imagination, à la pensée enfantine. Plus tard, dans un système scolaire où le français exerce son autorité en imposant ses règles et son ordre, la langue créole aura un rôle important comme langue de résistance, de combat, d'insoumission politique et sociale. Par conséquent, le message que Chamoiseau nous laisse à travers ses pages est que le créole doit retrouver sa nature libre et infidèle aux logiques imposées par le maître afin de pouvoir s'exprimer dans tout son potentiel. De même, l'écrivain doit réussir à récupérer cette puissance de l'imagination et ces perceptions enfantines qui précèdent toute construction de l'intelligence.

L'article de Maeve McCusker, *L'ennemi intime: la famille békée dans les romans de Patrick Chamoiseau*, vise à examiner le personnage du béké et de la femme du béké, présences fon-

damentales dans l'imaginaire fictionnel de notre auteur. Dans l'essai *Lettres créoles*, Patrick Chamoiseau et Raphaël Confiant décrivent le système antillais des «habitations» caractérisées par la constante interaction entre le béké (le maître) et l'esclave et par leurs rapports ambigus (terreur et volonté de distanciation d'un côté, fascination et désir d'une intimité profonde de l'autre). Si dans *Chronique des sept misères* cette relation est encore très forte, dans d'autres romans (*L'Esclave vieil homme et le Molosse* et *Un dimanche au cachot*) on met en évidence la progressive fragilisation du béké renfermé dans un système qui se révèle de plus en plus statique et arriéré. En effet, l'habitation, qui refuse tout métissage afin de préserver la race, se trouve dans une situation d'apartheid et d'immobilité qui rend de plus en plus vulnérable le béké et sa famille.

Les différentes trames tendues par l'écriture de Chamoiseau dans le but de décrire l'expérience de l'Autre sont le sujet de l'article de Marlène Aumand, *La grille, le damier et la toile. Gravitations autour de l'Autre*. Les barreaux qui composent la grille ne permettent pas la rencontre avec l'Autre: le manque de volonté de compréhension le rend inaccessible au contact et le condamne ainsi à rester une «chose en soi» kantienne (p. 100). Ce n'est qu'au dehors de cet endroit impénétrable qu'on peut faire l'expérience de l'Autre: les stries noires et blanches du damier symbolisent non seulement la possibilité de vivre à proximité de l'Autre mais aussi l'impossibilité de se mêler avec lui et de prendre part à son existence. À l'opposé de ces deux réseaux inertes, la toile, toujours vivante grâce à la présence de l'araignée, est composée d'un système de fils opaquement mais précisément organisé. De la même façon, le conteur est relié à l'auditoire par la toile orale qui attire et fixe ensemble les voix, les désirs, les souffrances de tous.

La troisième section, *Marronnages du récit et subversions de la parole*, comporte quatre autres articles qui traitent de la question des subver-

sions de la structure narrative dans les différentes œuvres de Patrick Chamoiseau.

L'article de Christy Wampole, *Patrick Chamoiseau et l'élan essayistique*, nous montre bien l'importance que *Les Essais* de Montaigne revêtent dans la production de notre auteur, comme lui-même l'a affirmé en réalisant sa «Sentimenthèque», la bibliothèque sentimentale qui recueille les noms des auteurs qui l'ont inspiré. Parmi les auteurs mentionnés à l'intérieur de sa «Sentimenthèque», nous retrouvons plusieurs fois le nom de Montaigne, tout d'abord pour sa conception de l'homme, être inconstant et vain, ensuite pour le rôle de l'anecdote, source à partir de laquelle tirer des leçons morales, sans une signification nette et définitive. Cette tendance hypothétique éloigne Chamoiseau des règles du réalisme bourgeois européen et ouvre ses romans à la possibilité d'imaginer de nouveaux chemins dans un monde qui n'a aucune certitude. Par conséquent, la plasticité du genre de l'essai s'applique parfaitement à cette pratique littéraire flexible et composée de tentatives et permet à l'auteur de mettre en évidence le bouleversement des idées reçues, surtout celles de la culture dominatrice.

La tendance à l'inachèvement du texte et à l'impossibilité de l'enfermer dans une structure statique est également le sujet de l'article de Lorna Milne, *Patrick Chamoiseau, mise en abyme et «diffraction»*. Dans un premier moment, cette contribution examine, à partir du roman *Un dimanche au cachot*, la technique de la mise en abyme déterminée par la narration d'une histoire dans l'histoire et la présence des différents personnages représentant tous l'écrivain Chamoiseau qui s'observent, discutent, se critiquent l'un l'autre quant aux décisions littéraires prises. Les diverses identités de ce «Je» narrateur mettent en évidence la liberté que l'écriture apporte à l'écrivain face aux rôles imposés par la société. Le refus de l'enfermement, non seulement dans une identité fixe mais aussi dans un lieu clos, conduit au phénomène de la diffraction: *Un dimanche*

au cachot démontre comment toute construction carcérale conduite au désir de diriger le regard vers l'extérieur, vers un monde imaginé et ouvre ainsi de nouveaux horizons qui, au niveau littéraire, se reflètent dans la structure typiquement centrifuge du texte.

Dans sa contribution *L'éloquence du silence: vers le récit de la genèse*, qui comporte aussi une entrevue à Patrick Chamoiseau, Raouf Medelgi nous donne des éléments pour mieux comprendre le rôle du silence à l'intérieur de *L'Esclave vieil homme et le Molosse*, roman qui constitue un tournant dans l'écriture chamoisienne. L'acte du marronnage accompli par le vieil homme se déroule dans la solitude et dans le silence, entouré par les arbres avec lesquels il entreprend une conversation intime. Grâce à cette solitude et à ce silence si éloquent, le vieil homme arrivera à comprendre sa propre condition et à retrouver son humanité perdue lorsqu'il se trouvait soumis à l'autorité du Maître. L'évolution du personnage se reflète dans l'évolution de l'auteur lui-même: poussé à dépasser les limites de la langue pour laisser libre cours à l'expression des gestes, de «Marqueur de Paroles» il se transforme en «Guerrier de l'Imaginaire», chargé d'extraire du silence sa profondeur locutoire.

Cette troisième section se clôt avec l'article de Samia Kassab-Charfi, *De l'Emprunt à l'Emprunte: naissance de l'artiste selon Chamoiseau*, qui s'interroge sur le rôle que les auteurs précédents ont eu sur l'œuvre de notre auteur. *L'Emprunte à Crusoé*, roman divisé en trois sections qui décrivent l'évolution intérieure du personnage de Crusoé («L'idiote», «La petite personne» et «L'artiste»), raconte l'aventure de cet homme solitaire qui se lance, après la découverte d'une empreinte sur «son» île, à la recherche de l'Autre et vers une prise de conscience de lui-même et du monde qui l'entoure. Les références au personnage inventé par Daniel Defoe et repris plus tard par d'autres auteurs comme Saint-John Perse, Tournier et Coetzee, nous confirment l'importance que la «Senti-

menthèque» revêt dans la production littéraire de Chamoiseau. L'inattendue découverte de l'empreinte d'un invisible intrus nous conduit à la question de l'œuvre comme propriété de l'auteur: dans cette revisitation du mythe, l'île est associée au livre et l'empreinte à l'emprunt, à cette trace remodelée d'autrui qui marque la rupture de la possession auctoriale de l'œuvre. Deux articles, qui mettent l'accent sur l'importante présence des animaux dans l'œuvre de Chamoiseau, complètent la quatrième section, *Animalités et sens du monde*.

Avec le travail de Jean-Louis Cornille, *De «Chamoiseau» aux «oiseaux de Cham»: l'auteur retourne*, nous découvrons le message contenu à l'intérieur d'un roman habité seulement d'animaux: *Les Neuf consciences du Malfini*. Ce rapace, à travers l'observation des colibris, prend graduellement conscience de son identité et découvre ainsi que son existence dérive de la relation avec les autres. La thématique de la relation avec l'Autre revient dans cet article en s'accompagnant à celle de l'intertextualité: comme les êtres vivants n'existent que dans leur rapport avec les autres, de même les livres peuvent dialoguer et interagir entre eux. Voilà pourquoi, dans la «Sentimenthèque» de Chamoiseau, les œuvres ne sont plus rangées l'une près de l'autre mais, au contraire, l'une dans l'autre.

Au centre de la contribution de Annabelle Marie nous retrouvons un autre animal, le chien. Dans son article, qui a pour titre «Donner sa langue au chien». *Traques critiques de la figure du molosse dans L'Esclave vieil homme et le Molosse de P. Chamoiseau*, elle s'intéresse au personnage du molosse, chien monstrueux et dangereux lancé à la poursuite d'un esclave qui a pris la fuite de son maître. La transformation progressive de l'esclave, qui abandonne graduellement son identité servile, va du même pas avec l'affranchissement du chien qui, une fois rattrapé le vieil homme, refuse de le tuer et de le ramener à son maître. Annabelle Marie met en relief l'analogie qu'il y a entre le combat

avec le molosse et la lutte contre l'autorité de la langue française: comme le molosse réussit à rejoindre le vieil homme, de même la langue française arrive à rattraper le parler créole, non pas pour l'engloutir mais pour s'allier avec lui. La riche et vibrante contribution de Louis Hautefort, *Réverbères*, qui clôt ce numéro d'«Interculturel Francophonies», rend hommage aux lignes de force de la poétique de Patrick Chamoiseau, à l'opacité de son écriture qui vise à livrer ce que la complexité de ce monde rend insondable et indicible, à la perte des structures fixes du langage comme signe de refus et de non-assimilation, à la libre circulation des phrases qui donnent expression au parler créole et à tous les savoirs de l'île.

C'est avec ces dernières réflexions que se clôt cette riche monographie sur Patrick Chamoiseau, étude stimulante et utile à tous ceux qui voudront connaître en profondeur et sous différentes optiques l'œuvre d'un des écrivains les plus engagés de notre contemporanéité et l'univers antillais qui sort de ses pages.

ALESSIA VIGNOLI

Tissage et métissage dans l'œuvre de Gérard Étienne, textes réunis et présentés par S. Grossman et D. Schaub, «Interculturel Francophonies», 24, novembre-décembre, 2013.

Tracer le portrait global d'un auteur et de son œuvre n'est pas un travail facile à accomplir, surtout si l'écrivain en question est une figure complexe et controversée comme c'est le cas pour Gérard Étienne, haïtien/québécois aux racines incertaines. Le numéro 24 de la revue «Interculturel Francophonies», coordonné par Simone Grossman et Danielle Schaub, est entièrement consacré à cet auteur dont l'œuvre et la vie sont marquées par des conflits insolubles concernant des questions sociales, religieuses, politiques et surtout identitaires. Animés par la volonté de rendre hommage à cet écrivain,

les spécialistes qui ont participé à ce numéro analysent en détail la totalité du parcours littéraire de G. Étienne, associé à sa vie personnelle. Les dix interventions tournent autour des thèmes principaux abordés par l'auteur, du conflit racial à l'identitaire, en passant par la question fondamentale de la défense des opprimés et par celle, également importante, de la religion juive.

Schallum Pierre, dans *De la négritude de René Piquion à l'humanisme de Jacques Stephen Alexis: considérations sur l'Essai sur la négritude de Gérard Étienne*, analyse la pensée élaborée par G. Étienne dans son *Essai sur la négritude* pour démontrer que sa critique de la conception raciale de la négritude s'adresse au dictateur François Duvalier et à un de ses proches, René Piquion. En s'appuyant aussi sur deux articles de G. Étienne publiés dans «Le Nouvelliste», S. Pierre montre que, loin d'être une condamnation des théories de la négritude, l'opinion défendue par G. Étienne serait plutôt un hommage à Jacques Stephen Alexis et à son «Réalisme Merveilleux». C'est à partir de la perspective socialement ouverte, soutenue par le principal représentant du «Réalisme Merveilleux», que G. Étienne propose une refondation de la Négritude, pour s'écarter de l'extrémisme responsable de si tant de violences en Haïti.

Un aspect analysé dans ce numéro est celui de l'esthétique de la révolte, qui caractérise la totalité de l'œuvre de G. Étienne. Corinne Beauquis, dans *Anne Hébert, Marie-Claire Blais et Gérard Étienne: dialogues avec les ombres*, analyse les similitudes que l'on retrouve dans le roman de G. Étienne *Le Nègre crucifié* et dans deux romans québécois, *Le Torrent* d'Anne Hébert et *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* de Marie-Claire Blais, pour montrer l'ouverture de l'auteur et la particularité de son ouvrage par rapport à la littérature haïtienne. Les influences de ces deux ouvrages québécois sont en effet évidentes si l'on considère les thèmes abordés et le langage poétique utilisé par G. Étienne dans son premier roman. L'auteur lui-même

a confirmé l'importance de la découverte de la littérature québécoise pour l'élaboration de son propre langage romanesque. Mais c'est surtout la même volonté de dénonciation, que l'on retrouve dans les trois romans, à susciter l'intérêt de C. Beauquis, qui souligne comment les trois auteurs invitent à travers leurs ouvrages à la rébellion contre l'oppression et la violence. Leurs protagonistes sont en effet des personnages faibles, victimes d'une situation cauchemardesque d'aliénation; si ces romans ont eu des destins différents (les ouvrages d'A. Hébert et de M.-C. Blais sont aujourd'hui considérés des classiques de la littérature québécoise, tandis que le roman de G. Étienne demeure difficile à placer dans un contexte littéraire), il faut pourtant considérer ce qui reste encore vivant aujourd'hui du premier roman de G. Étienne, c'est-à-dire la puissance libératrice qui caractérise son style d'écriture.

Amy J. Ransom, dans son étude *Gwo nèg, petit blanc: masculinité et solidarité interr raciale et féministe chez Gérard Étienne*, réfléchit sur le thème de la dénonciation des oppressions à travers une approche anthropologique. Elle analyse l'opposition raciale et sexiste que G. Étienne élabore dans son œuvre pour démontrer que l'objectif de l'auteur est celui de critiquer et dénoncer les iniquités sociales, afin d'inviter tous ceux qui subissent des violences à se révolter. Le seul remède contre l'oppression semble être, selon G. Étienne, la solidarité des opprimés qui doivent travailler ensemble pour s'opposer aux tyrans. Dans son œuvre l'on remarque la représentation du contraste typiquement haïtien entre le *gwo nèg*, «homme de pouvoir qui exerce de l'influence politique» (p. 43), et ceux qui doivent supporter ses injustices, le *petit blanc*, le *ti nèg* et les femmes. Cette opposition est étudiée par A. J. Ransom à travers l'analyse de cinq romans de G. Étienne: *Un ambassadeur macoute à Montréal*, *Une femme muette*, *Le Bacoulou*, *Vous n'êtes pas seul* et *Au cœur de l'anorexie*.

La dénonciation des abus des oppresseurs est

aussi au centre de l'étude conduite par Maya Hauptman, qui, dans *Monsieur le président de G. Étienne, un discours polémique*, analyse la pièce de théâtre *Monsieur le président* pour montrer encore une fois que l'objectif principal de la fiction de l'auteur est celui de critiquer la corruption et le totalitarisme. À travers l'étude du caractère polémique de cette pièce et des procédés linguistiques et stylistiques utilisés par l'écrivain, M. Hauptman démontre que la cible principale est le dictateur François Duvalier, mais l'auteur s'adresse en général à tous les hommes de pouvoir qui ont la même conduite.

Cette nécessité de protester contre les iniquités est aussi au centre de l'étude d'Aimé Avolonto, *La Pacotille ou la catharsis poétique de Gérard Étienne*; le roman *La Pacotille* est ici analysé en tant que parcours psychanalytique, accompli par l'auteur pour retrouver les souvenirs de son passé et pour dénoncer le mal à travers son écriture.

Un autre axe fondamental qui parcourt l'œuvre de G. Étienne est celui de la dimension religieuse. Simone Grossman, dans *La souffrance chez Gérard Étienne: une perspective juive*, démontre comment le sujet de la souffrance physique et morale est élaboré par l'auteur à travers la présence de la religion juive, qu'il a embrassée à un certain moment de sa vie. S. Grossman souligne le caractère messianique des personnages de G. Étienne en se concentrant en particulier sur deux romans, *Le Nègre crucifié* et *Vous n'êtes pas seul*, et sur deux recueils de poèmes, *La Charte des crépuscules* et *Natania*. Le but de cette étude, qui s'appuie aussi sur les théories du philosophe Emmanuel Lévinas, est de mettre en évidence un aspect de la conception de la souffrance représentée par G. Étienne dans ses ouvrages, c'est-à-dire la souffrance comme engagement. De plus, S. Grossman insiste sur le rapprochement entre peuple haïtien et peuple juif qui caractérise la poétique de G. Étienne: les souffrances de ces deux peuples se ressemblent et l'auteur établit

un lien entre deux passés d'iniquités et de violence.

Le rapprochement entre Haïtiens et Juifs est aussi au centre de l'intervention de Judith Sina-Ohlmann, *Natania: du mal humain au triomphe de l'amour*. À côté de l'hommage à son épouse Natania, la femme qui lui a permis de se consacrer à l'écriture, G. Étienne introduit la dénonciation des événements tragiques de son passé; pour faire cela, il utilise des éléments autobiographiques qui deviennent fondamentaux à l'intérieur du recueil poétique.

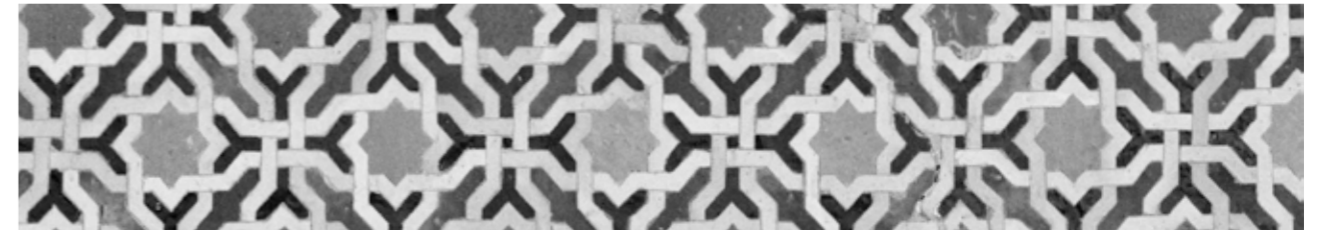
Pour un auteur comme G. Étienne, avec un passé compliqué et toujours à la recherche d'un équilibre, le concept d'identité est bien sûr difficile à définir. Lélia Young, dans *La notion de «distance rapatriée» dans les poèmes de Gérard Étienne*, analyse le voyage identitaire de l'auteur en se basant sur quatre recueils de poèmes: *Lettres à Montréal*, *Dialogue avec mon ombre*, *La Charte des Crépuscules* et *Natania*. L. Young aborde la question fondamentale de l'identité plurielle et incertaine pour démontrer que, en ce qui concerne G. Étienne, l'identité est liée au lieu métaphorique de l'écriture plutôt qu'à un lieu géographique. Les trois pôles autour desquels tourne l'œuvre poétique de l'écrivain, Haïti, Montréal et le judaïsme, sont au centre d'une tentative de conciliation de la part de l'auteur, qui essaie de rapprocher les éléments qui composent son identité, en considérant toujours l'écriture comme sa seule patrie.

Cet aspect de pluralité est analysé aussi par Danielle Schaub dans «*Avec tous les signes inhérents à nos peuples*»: tissage et métissage dans *Natania de Gérard Étienne*. À travers la description du mélange des genres à l'intérieur du recueil de poèmes *Natania*, D. Schaub illustre la volonté de l'auteur d'exprimer l'innommable, la souffrance, la fragilité. C'est grâce à cette pluralité que cet homme, toujours exilé, parvient à revisiter son passé pour comprendre son présent. Dans son intervention, D. Schaub se consacre aussi à l'étude des formes d'ex-

pression de l'horreur utilisées dans *Natania*. La question de l'horreur anime aussi l'étude d'Yves Chemla, *Écriture et mémoire de Gérard Étienne: l'un, l'autre; l'un dans l'autre; l'avant autre*. Y. Chemla propose une analyse de la question de l'interculturalité dans l'œuvre de G. Étienne pour démontrer que dans la fiction de l'auteur, les cultures et les espaces se mélangent pour créer un sujet divisé qui ap-

partient seulement à l'instable, à l'incertain. Ce numéro de la revue «Interculturel Francophonies», à travers dix interventions aux thèmes variés qui décrivent la totalité de la personnalité de G. Étienne, permet au lecteur de comprendre la complexité de cet auteur controversé et d'entrer en contact avec son univers littéraire.

canada



CATERINA RICCIARDI

Il Nord del Group of Seven e le riletture dei letterati

«By 1930 familiarity had robbed the Arctic of much of its terrors», scrive nel 1958 A.Y. Jackson in *A Painter's Country* (Jackson 1958: 128), l'autobiografia di un pittore. Un'affermazione che pare chiudere il difficile rapporto del canadese dell'Ottocento con la terra incognita a nord del colonizzato San Lorenzo, un'entità allora ritrosa e al contempo invitante. Dopo mezzo secolo di post-visioni, Margaret Atwood torna sulla questione confermando quelle matrici: «the North was uncanny, awe-inspiring in an almost religious way, hostile to white man, but alluring», ammiccante come una stereotipa «frigid but sparkling fin the siècle *femme fatale*, who entices and hypnotizes male protagonists and leads them to their doom.» (Atwood 2004: 3, 22)

Il ribaltamento anti-romantico, da Atwood implicato nell'uso del passato, s'inaugura nei primi decenni del Novecento, quando si genera il primo mito nazionalizzante: da «malevolent» il Nord si trasforma in «mystic» o «true North», da funesto si offre quale fonte di salvezza dai mali della modernità. La revisione è avviata dai pittori del Group of Seven – Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Frank Carmichael,

Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, F.H. Varley –, i quali, penetrandolo e dipingendolo, reinventano il Nord quale luogo dello spirito contrapposto alla materialità della cultura.

I traumi della Grande Guerra combattuta oltreoceano come pure il primo albore di un orgoglio nazionale, spinge i pittori verso un tentativo di affrancamento dall'Europa, di scioglimento – scrive Harris nel 1926 – del «dying grasp of a Europe fundamentally alien to us» (cfr. Hjartason 69). In quanto spazio distante/deserto/diverso dall'Europa, la distesa incontaminata che li sovrasta li spinge a nord con tele e pennelli, risalendo la geografia con i passi gradualmente dei pionieri: Georgian Bay, Algonquin Park, Algoma, Lake Superior, infine, ultima frontiera: l'Artico e la Groenlandia, Baffin Island e Ellesmere, dove nel 1930 Harris e Jackson giungono al seguito di una spedizione di studio, guidata da Marius Barbeau.

Negli anni Trenta, il Nord è conquistato all'arte e all'identità canadese con la complicità dei poeti. «Lonely, unbuyable, dear, / The North, as a deed, and forever», scrive A. J. M. Smith in *To Hold in a Poem* (Klinck 1974:273), una lirica del 1954 che è un riconoscimento di ciò che si inizia a riscattare come un (o il) tratto distintivo di un Canada tradizionalmente destituito di qualità autoctone.

Con i monumenti di ghiaccio di *Icebergs*. *Davis Strait* (1930), Harris afferma l'appropriazione delle distese artiche: faraglioni in giallo e azzurro, fondo bruno, oceano azzurro, sfumate bicromie dal vero. La coeva *Iceberg* di F.R. Scott – un'eco di quel dipinto – traduce, con più dubbiosa potenza, natura dipinta:

Dropped from its sloping womb
A huge cliff of blue
it roars its birth into an ocean
of slow death
returning
its giant pride
to deep water
recycling silently
its self-destructive art. (Scott 1981: 60)

Il Group of Seven rende popolari non tanto i ghiacci quanto il paese a nord dell'Ontario. Glenn Gould ricorda sulla pareti di scuola riproduzioni di rocce, pini solitari, cascate, laghi e fiumi lastricati di bianco (Hjartason 1996: 67), trasferiti in un discorso iniziatico e demotico perché siano assunti a simboli del paese. La Georgian Bay e l'Algoma accedono così alla costruzione di un ritratto nazionale, benché manchi ancora la consapevolezza del loro valore culturale. Al Purdy si prova a spiegarlo in *The Country of the Young*, in cui osserva Jackson che dipinge un tratto di terra: *March Storm*. *Georgian Bay* (1920) o *First Snow*. *Algoma* (1921). Il pittore è visto:

standing in a patch of snow
to paint a picture that says
«Look here»
You've never seen this country
it's not the way you thought it was
Look again [...]
The colours I mean
for they're not bright Gauguin
or blazing Vincent
not even Brueghel's «Hunters in the Snow»
where you can get lost

and found in five minutes
(Purdy 1976: 42)

Il poeta esorta a guardare di nuovo: non siamo in Europa ma in Canada, dove si richiede una percezione diversa, perché il paesaggio è un altro: più misterioso di un Van Gogh, più intrigante di un Brueghel. Harris condannava un modo di vedere «foreign-begotten» (Murray 1993: 30), contaminato da tradizioni secolari. Lo spirito da rivendicare è invece quello di un paese giovane (Purdy fa il verso allo Yeats di *Bisanzio*), i cui occhi, come gli occhi del Group of Seven, iniziano ad assumere un senso di non appartenenza coloniale.

Ma è con nostalgia da svilimento che il mito identitario generato dai pittori è ripreso da Margaret Atwood in *Surfacing* – il suo «woman-in-the-woods novel» (Atwood 2004: 139) – pubblicato nel 1972, quando giunge il tempo di una piena coscienza nazionalista: «The future is in the North, that was a political slogan once; when my father heard it he said there was nothing in the North but the past and not much of that either» (Atwood 1972: 9). Così ricorda la protagonista mentre si avvicina al lago dell'infanzia, «blue and cool as redemption» (Atwood 1972: 15), che le restituirà una dignità di donna e di nazione, nonostante le alterazioni subite:

The lake is tricky, the weather shifts, the wind swells up quickly; people drown every year, boats loaded top heavy or drunken fishermen running at high speed into deadheads, old pieces of tree waterlogged and partly decayed, floating under the surface, there are a lot of them left over from the logging and the time they raised the lake level. Because of the convolutions it's easy to lose the way if you haven't memorized the landmarks and I watch for them now, dome-shaped hill, point with dead pine, stubble of cut trunks poking up from a shallows. (Atwood 1972: 31)

Atwood pare leggere *Wagabishik*. *Drowned Land* (1929), un dipinto di Frank Carmichael: stessi ceppi che spuntano dall'acqua, ombre spettrali che ammiccano a un più intatto paesaggio anteriore; la stessa spirituale collina a cupola, le stesse secche, gli azzurri, le nuvole spinte dal vento. Come Atwood nel Quebec, Carmichael è restio allo sfruttamento del Nord Ontario, distinguendosi fra i sette del gruppo nel fermare sulla tela le contaminazioni del progresso. Un'esplicita denuncia è espressa nel cupo umore di *The Nickel Belt* (1928), dove il fumo bianco delle fonderie e delle loro scorie macchia il cielo di Sudbury: l'immagine non è più del grande Nord puro e rigenerante, ma traccia e documento di imperialismo tecnologico.

Ultima stazione urbana, Sudbury è sulla strada di Sault Sainte Marie, terra del *coureur des bois*. Di lì si va oltre. Nella storia del Group of Seven è la fase legata al Lago Superiore a segnare una svolta nell'elaborazione di un'estetica nuova. Con l'americano Rockwell Kent (sostenitore della superiorità spirituale del Nord), è Harris, il teorico del gruppo, ad armarsi di teosofia e Trascendentalismo americano. Il rifiuto del «pittresco» di gusto europeo spinge lo sguardo a guardare la 'solennità' del territorio (l'aveva fatto MacDonald in *The Solemn Land*) e a tradurla in silenziosi, taglienti contrasti.

La luce «as a spiritual quality is introduced» (Murray 1993: 18). È una scoperta, dice Harris: «We found that, at times, there were skies over the great Lake Superior which, in their singing expansiveness and sublimity, existed nowhere else in Canada» (Murray 1993: 29); scompaiono i residui di conquista territoriale dei dipinti plastici della Georgian Bay, come il «pino solitario» dello sfortunato Tom Thomson, che più a nord non arriverà mai, diventato simbolo dell'uomo e dell'artista in lotta con gli elementi; le forme si fanno invece geometriche: triangolo per la montagna e cerchio per l'orizzonte; i colori, prima stagionali, sono incanalati da Harris in una triade teosofica: azzurro, bianco

e giallo-bruno. L'innovazione formale del taglio geometrico permette all'immanenza spirituale di assumere dominio: il lago è perforato da dardi di luce mistica. Harris parla di «informing cosmic powers» di un paesaggio che è «looked at but not possessed» (Frye 1971: 210-11). All'impresa estetica si aggiunge orgoglio nazionalista.

In *Revelation of Art in Canada* (1926), Harris coniuga teosofia e intenti di superiorità locale:

We are in the fringe of the great North and its living whiteness, its loneliness, and replenishment, its resignation and release, its call and answer – its cleansing rhythms. It seems that the top of the continent is a source of spiritual flow that will ever shed clarity into the growing race of America, and we Canadians being closest to its source seem destined to produce an art somewhat different from our Southern fellows – an art more spacious, of a greater living quiet, perhaps of a more certain conviction of eternal values. (Hjartason 1996: 71)

In effetti, egli si impegna in una sorta di tendenziosa «geoestetica», traducendo l'idea di un Nord in opposizione al Sud, e pervenendo a quella convinzione di stampo ottocentesco che riconosce nell'ambiente lo spirito plasmante di nazione, popolo, razza e arte. Ma è un tentativo ideologico determinato per lo più dalla necessità di esprimere per la prima volta un'arte che nasce da una volontà di decolonizzazione.

«The north is the birthplace of spiritualism. [...] The north is where spiritualism lives» (Urquhart 1997: 26). Così Jane Urquhart riprende il mito del Nord e del Group of Seven nel bel romanzo del 1997. Se l'americano Austin Fraser riflette il connazionale Rockwell Kent (introdotto invece fra gli altri protagonisti), è Lawren Harris che Urquhart intende ritrarre, perché il Lago Superiore che fa da sfondo alla vicenda è descritto attraverso i dipinti di Harris. Nel passo seguente si riconosce *Above*

Lake Superior (1922): «The north-shore birch is a discreet tree in most seasons. In winter, Sara told me, it practically disappears, having lost its leaves and exposed its branches, which are almost as pale as the surrounding snow.» (Urquhart 1997: 174)

Gli stessi scheletrici tronchi di betulle invernali, con i rami mozzati da Harris a favore di nevi in primo piano, bagliori di luci e cupola di un monte in lontananza. I colori sono giocati sul bianco, bruno e un azzurro pallido. Il lago eponimo, invece, è assente, relegato in basso come fosse ancora un mistero da sondare. Cosa che Harris farà in seguito con la serie di tele dedicate alla sponda settentrionale. Anche Urquhart espone solo ossee betulle. Sul lago tornerà alla fine della carriera di Austin Fraser:

By late afternoon I had stared out into the bay for such a long time I was beginning to suffer from snow blindness. I had seen clouds like peninsulas float across the sky, blue shadows move under these across the white plain of the frozen lake. I had seen light unfurl like sheets of delicate yellow paper behind the slumbering stone man. But nothing in me wanted to reach for a pencil, a brush, a tube of colour. My hands held only the binoculars, the distances and intimacies they were creating. The long white surface. (Urquhart 1997: 327)

Il bianco accecante, le nuvole pari a orchidee galleggianti, i conici di luce che trafiggono il ghiaccio, riprendono la composizione di *From the North Shore, Lake Superior* (1923) e *Lake Superior* (1924) di Harris. Ma Urquhart, come a suo tempo la Atwood di *Surfacing* con i suoi petroglifi sommersi, inserisce nella composizione qualcosa che il pittore non vede. Nel suo caso si tratta dello «slumbering stone man», la pittura rupestre Ojibway sugli scogli del lago, una mistica reliquia indiana commemorata da Al Purdy in *The Horseman of Agawa* (1973).

Nei dipinti nordici del Gruppo dei Sette non c'è figura umana. Mai un nativo. Mai il segno del transito, solo, dice Harris, «a love of the land» (Murray 1993: 31). Eppure, sembra trasparire un fine preciso nella sua opera: «To us there was also the strange brooding sense of Mother Nature fostering a new race and a new age» (Murray 1993: 31). Qualcuno non è d'accordo. John Moss arriva a parlare di «racial aesthetics» (Moss 2000: 131).

Superata la decolonizzazione, siamo in un'era post-nazionale, in cui, come aveva intuito Ernest Renan (Bhabha 1997: 43-63), il principio etnico può non coincidere più con l'idea di nazione. Le traduzioni intertestuali del mito del Nord da parte dei più recenti Purdy, Atwood, Urquhart, implicano una graduale consapevolezza nella inevitabilità del confronto con le alterità interne a una nazione, alterità di individui che, integrate, costituiscono, secondo Foucault, la «totalità sociale» (Bhabha 1997: 484-85). Vale forse la pena leggere, allora, la bella descrizione che Phoebe Wang fa di *October on the North Shore, Lake Superior* (1927), un dipinto autunnale di Arthur Lismer:

In this season there is a balance:
fire on the edge of water.
One will not give in to the other.
The curving hills are aflame,
maple and oak trees have tongues
of vermilion cinnamon rust saffron.
October on the north shore is a forestfire,
where leaves blaze in vivid colour before
branches become as bare as charcoal.
Ashes of past autumns separate the shore
From Lake Superior, where the turquoise
water
is too eager to swallow
the spices of autumn in its freshwater
mouth.
(Wang 2000: 49)

È la lettura di una figlia dell'immigrazione e del multiculturalismo. Un altro sguardo sul Lago Superiore, altrettanto fedele ma in un'altra «stagione».

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IGOR MAVER

Ted Kramolc in Slovenian Diasporic Literature in Canada¹

The most comprehensive study of Slovenian literary creativity in Canada was carried out by Mirko Jurak (Jurak 1999; 2005). Much has been written about Slovenian migration to Canada, the social, religious and cultural activities of the Slovenian diaspora and their descendants in Canada and their press. Since 1996 especially *The Slovenian: Glasilo Magazine* (edited by Cvetka Kocjančič) «has provided news, literature and commentary for and about Canadians of Slovenian heritage» (www.theslovenian.com).

Sketches (a typical Slovenian short fiction form), short stories and novels are the most frequently used literary forms by Slovenian diasporic authors in Canada. Ted Kramolc, Ivan Dolenc, Cvetka Kocijančič, Irma Ožbalt and Ludve A. Potokar (Jurak 1999: 339) are aesthetically the most prominent ones, although there have been scores of other prose writers who have published their usually shorter pieces in newspapers, journals and books: Janez Kopač, Franc Sodja, Tone Zrnec, Tone Zagorc, Rudolf Čuješ, Miro Rak, Franc Grmek, Lojzka Saje, Marija Koprivšek, Nataša Kolman, Dore Sluga, Franc Skumavc, Anthony Ambrozic, Stanislav Pleško, Danica Dolenc etc. Many of these writings are based on the sad and terrible experiences of the authors/fictional characters during and immediately after the Second World War, when they had to flee their Slovenian homeland as political refugees through Austria to finally settle and find peace and freedom in Canada. Miro Rak and Franc Grmek, on the other hand, in the short stories and sketches described their adventurous experiences in hunting and fishing in Canadian wilderness in several

¹ In memory of Božidar Ted Kramolc (1922-2013).

collections of stories written in Slovenian. John Krizanc, who does not however consider himself part of the Slovenian diaspora in Canada despite his partly Slovenian roots (his father was born in Trst/Trieste), is a successful dramatist writing in English and certainly part of the mainstream (Jurak 1999; 2005). He co-founded the Necessary Angel Theatre Company and received the Governor General's Award for his play *Prague*.

Ted Kramolc (born in 1922) went to Austria in 1945 as a refugee after the end of the Second World War from the changed political system in Slovenia as a constitutive part of the newly formed socialist state of Yugoslavia. Displaced in Austria for three years, he came to Canada in 1948. Schooled as a painter and an architect he has lived a great part of his life in Toronto where he still continues to teach painting, painting in his own right and writing, of course: his numerous works are on display in the National Art Gallery in Ottawa, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Art Gallery of Hamilton etc. Kramolc, a well established painter-writer, which shines through in his style of writing, sees himself and for that matter all people very much defined by the spaces which we inhabit. He describes Canada and Slovenia in these terms: «Slovenia is a nice, enclosed, controlled space: neat houses, charming hills and mountains carefully distributed among lakes, rivers and meadows. But Canada demands a different perspective: wild untamed forests, grand expanses of never ending prairie, savage peaks of solid rock. Nature in Canada is writ large: immense, enormous, and uncaring. Yet «breathtakingly beautiful» (Urbančič 2008). He enthusiastically welcomed the formation of the independent state of Slovenia in 1991 and in 1992 a selection of short stories came out under the title *Podobe iz arhivov* (Images from the Archives, Kramolc 1992).

They are linked together by the main protagonist who is also the narrator and the people appearing in them are displaced persons, D.P.'s

from the refugee camps all over Austria after World War Two that Kramolc himself knew during his own refugee years in Austria. The stories are largely autobiographical as they end with the protagonist's arrival in Canada and establishing himself as an architect specializing in interior decoration. Kramolc wrote many sketches and short stories in English, although his novels are written in Slovenian. The important thing about his work is that it is not just about the emigrant experience but about the meaning of Man's existence as such; also it is largely devoid of political ideology and very independent and original, which is why «the Slovenian "political emigration" more than once reproached him for having estranged from it and for having avoided it (not merely in art but also personally)» (Jurak 1999: 352). He wrote poems and short stories (in English and Slovenian), which were published in Slovenian presses especially after 1991, before that in Slovenian migrant press and anthologies in Argentina and the USA.

He has so far produced three novels, all of which were written in Slovenian and have been published by major Slovenian publishing houses: for one of them he was shortlisted for the prestigious Kresnik Prize for the contemporary Slovenian novel. The novel *Potica za navadni dan* (A Cake for an Ordinary Day; Kramolc 1997) is set in Canada during 1986 and 1996 with four Slovenian married couples in the first part and the focus on one of the women protagonists, Sonja Zavrtnik, and the retired Canadian colonel Tyrone Harrington in the second. The Slovenians in the first part of the book constantly reflect on the Second World War and their role in it, their flight from the newly emerged socialist one-party political system in the former Yugoslavia, the lost years in refugee camps in Austria and finally their emigration to Canada, they are labelled by Kramolc as «professional Slovenians», whose main preoccupation is politics, and consequently there is no place among them

for people who think very independently and critically about this situation (for example Gorazd Prunk).

«Potica», the typical Slovenian walnut cake, which is traditionally made and eaten for holidays and special occasions does not taste the same to them in Canada: it is more sour because the Slovenians brought with them too much hatred. In the second part Sonja and Tyrone, who dies a meaningless death in a bank robbery, are as a loving couple despite their kindred souls shown as «betraying» each other in their minds by thinking about their former partners (Jurak 1999: 356). The constant shifts of narrative and the downright postmodern technique of this novel do not lead to a happy ending and a vision of a happy coexistence of the two cultures, Slovenian and Canadian. Slovenians in Canada often think very highly of themselves, although they are shown here to be really torn by envy and hypocrisy.

Tango v svilenih coklah (Tango in Silk Clogs; Kramolc 2002) is the author's second novel which was shortlisted for the prestigious literary Kresnik Prize. It is a story about a *femme fatale* model and a painter-migrant which definitely transcends the typical emigrant subject-matter. According to Kramolc himself «clogs in the novel are symbolically coated with silk, which is to cover the filth, stench and decadence of contemporary society» (Kramolc 2003). In his most recent novel set in Canada, *Sol v grlu, Salt in Throat*, (Kramolc 2008) Ted Kramolc revisits the past in a graduated dramatic style, the atrocities of the Second World war and especially the Austrian political refugee camp after it that the protagonist Karl experienced. Canada, the promised land which provided him with shelter, too, is very different from what the emigrant Karl had envisaged, he encounters corruption and immorality in human relations (Kocjančič 2009). After three love relationships he still cannot find peace and happiness, deceitful love on either side is at the heart of the book and Karl is at the end almost

driven into madness. Kramolc has shown once again that he is a good writer and very much part of the unified Slovenian cultural space that includes the Slovenian diaspora in the world and the Slovenian minorities in the neighbouring countries: the protagonist's lost youth and the aftereffects of war intermingle with the theme of involuntary migration. He passed away in Toronto on Tuesday, 3 September 2013.

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EDVIGE PUCCIARELLI

Paesaggio morale in *Free Radicals* di Alice Munro

La scelta di dedicare la presente analisi critica alla descrizione spaziale, ambientale e psicologica del racconto *Free Radicals*² è motivata, in primo luogo, dalla mia personale necessità di rintracciare un aspetto stilistico, una confluenza estetica e letteraria nella narrativa della scrittrice canadese, recentemente insignita del premio Nobel per la Letteratura, che mi offrì la possibilità di mettere in rilievo sia una sua peculiare cifra stilistica, la descrizione per l'appunto, sia una cifra tematica ricorrente, ovvero la disincantata analisi psicologica e morale dei personaggi che popolano lo spazio narrativo della Munro. Tali personaggi svelano, rivelano una visione dell'animo umano scarnificato e scandagliato nei suoi aspetti profondi, sempre con uno sguardo tutt'altro che indulgente, in una prospettiva mirata a evidenziare e far emergere molte volte offrendo una scoraggiante rappresentazione, cinica e realistica, della società contemporanea. La descrizione occupa uno spazio preponderante nella narrativa della Munro e, oltre a fornire un impianto metodologico e teorico al mio scritto, serve a situare l'opera munroiana nel solco della tradizione della narrativa dell'intera stagione letteraria del secolo XX. Proprio rinvenendo nella stretta correlazione tra spazio romanzesco e descrizione quella 'immagine del mondo' propria di ogni epoca storico-sociale, come con

2 Il racconto *Free Radicals* è contenuto nella raccolta di Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, London: Vintage, 2010, pp. 116-137. Tutte le citazioni sono tratte da questa edizione. (Prima edizione: *Too Much Happiness*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto 2009). Per la traduzione in italiano rimando i lettori all'edizione critica curata da I Meridiani: *Alice Munro. Racconti*, Milano: Mondadori, 2013. I racconti cerniti sono stati tradotti esclusivamente da Susanna Basso in maniera accurata e pregevole. La Basso rende il titolo in maniera letterale *Free Radicals/Radicali liberi* (pp. 1743-1766).

sorprendente intuito G. Lukacs³ aveva scritto in *Narrare o descrivere?*⁴, Munro presenta una realtà sociale infinitamente complessa e stratificata, focalizzata sulla dimostrazione di una piena partecipazione alla disanima oggettiva della vita del proprio tempo, sottolineando la perdita della dimensione epica del racconto, essendo capace di dimostrare nella propria produzione letteraria che la crescente desemantizzazione del mondo contemporaneo impone una riconsiderazione della rappresentazione in ambito letterario.

In *Free Radicals* è una voce narrante anonima, che si enuncia al neutro, a gestire sia la descrizione spaziale dell'*incipit*, sia la presentazione dei personaggi:

At first people were phoning to make sure that Nita was not too depressed, not too lonely, not eating too little or drinking too much [...]. She held them off, without sounding nobly grief-stricken or unnaturally cheerful or absent-minded or confused [...]. Her better friends probably suspected the truth – [...] She had not even written to people at a distance. Not even to Rich's former wife in Arizona or his semi-estranged brother in Nova Scotia, though they might understand, perhaps better than the people near at hand, why she had proceeded with the non-funeral as she had done.⁵ (Munro, 2010: 116)

3 Sebbene le conclusioni a cui perviene l'indagine lukacsiana siano influenzate da una dichiarata presa di posizione ideologica, non si può fare a meno di notare, alla luce della storia del romanzo del ventesimo secolo, l'attualità e la lungimiranza quasi profetica di un'analisi che riconduce i differenti impieghi dei procedimenti descrittivi a fattori di tipo filosofico e culturale. Se, come ammonisce Lukacs, un nuovo tipo di descrizione è il risultato di una nuova visione del mondo, si può completare il teorema estendendo l'equivalenza allo spazio romanzesco abbracciando le teorie di Lotman sullo spazio come modello di una determinata *Weltanschauung*.

4 G. Lukacs, «Narrare o descrivere?», in *Il marxismo e la critica letteraria*, a cura di Cesare Cases, Torino Einaudi, 1964.

5 *Free radicals*, p.116.

Nella definizione dei processi descrittivi, con il soffermarsi su fatti insignificanti a prima vista, l'autrice traduce, attraverso le percezioni della coscienza della protagonista, la realtà eventuale esperita da Nita⁶: la morte di Rich e la decisione di non effettuare una cerimonia funebre.

Il narratore si sofferma sulla descrizione essenziale, ma pur sempre dettagliata, delle ultime azioni compiute da Rich in vita: «he had started to paint the railing of the deck». (Munro, 2010: 116)

La descrizione non svolge il ruolo assegnatole solitamente dalle grammatiche narratologiche, ove si tende a distanziare la descrizione subordinandola alla narrazione, considerata a lungo *ancilla narrationis*, ma si pone come elemento marginale e sussidiario per la composizione e il completamento del tessuto discorsivo degli avvenimenti. Nell'opera della scrittrice canadese, e in special modo nel racconto oggetto della mia analisi, la descrizione assume la funzione strutturale descritta da Philippe Hamon⁷ e viene a rappresentare, soffermandosi sull'apparato demarcativo-configurativo, un vero e proprio nucleo semantico del racconto che permea il testo e diviene strumentale per la corretta interpretazione della storia.

La descrizione di Rich e della sua morte improvvisa per un malore: «He died bent over the sidewalk sign that stood out in front of the

6 Non è questa la sede per tracciare la storia della critica su romanzo e narrativa. I testi di riferimento teorici consultati sono: Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Il nouveau roman*, traduzioni di Luciano De Maria e Marcello Milotello, Milano, Sugar, 1965, in part. pp. 52-53; Bernard Pinguad, «La technique de la description dans le jeune roman d'aujourd'hui», *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale d'études françaises.*, 14 (1967): 165-177; Jean Ricardou, «Problèmes de la description» in *Problèmes du nouveau roman*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1967, pp. 91-12.

7 Philippe Hamon, «Qu'est-ce qu'une description Poétique», 12 (1972): 465-485, Philippe Hamon, «Che cos'è una descrizione», in *Semiologia, lessico, leggibilità del testo narrative*, traduzione di Antonio Martinelli, Parma, Pratiche Editrice, 1977.

hardware store [...] He had not even had time to get into the store. He was eighty-one years old and in fine health» (Munro 2010: 117). Diviene l'elemento organizzatore del racconto, dal momento che orienta la lettura e favorisce la coesione semantica tra ambienti e personaggi, ci guida alla corretta interpretazione del dato iconografico, svelando tutte le implicazioni culturali e simboliche connesse ai diversi referenti associativi enumerati nel prosieguo della storia:

As soon as she got on with the arrangements, of course, all but the tried and true fell away. The cheapest box, into the ground immediately, no ceremony of any kind. The undertaker suggested that this might be against the law, but she and Rich had their facts straight. They had got their information almost a year ago, when her diagnosis became final. [...] Her cancer was at present in remission – whatever that really meant. It did not mean «in retreat». (Munro, 2010: 117)

La morte di Rich è arrivata inattesa e rimane inspiegabile: la malata Nita, sentenziata a morte dal cancro, sopravvive ingiustamente al marito sano. La descrizione del corpo consunto di Nita, reso ridicolmente simile a uno spaventapasseri, «scrawny» (Munro, 2010: 118), rappresenta un'ulteriore beffa che la vita ha destinato alla protagonista. Il narratore extradiegetico utilizza l'enunciazione descrittiva ripetutamente per sottolineare, con beffarda ironia, l'ennesima ingiustizia perpetrata dal destino: la morte di un uomo in perfetta salute, attivo e competente, a cui sopravvive una moglie resa spettrale, non umana a causa della malattia incurabile. La descrizione, insistita e crudele, dell'inadeguatezza della sopravvissuta rappresenta il luogo del testo in cui il narratore può mostrare la propria competenza ideologica, la conoscenza dei valori della società cui appartiene e che rappresenta, e che condanna esplicitamente Nita per il solo fatto di essere ancora

viva. L'enunciazione descrittiva diviene maggiormente focalizzatrice e la condanna morale di Nita traspare fortemente e irrevocabilmente dall'aspetto linguistico-semiotico della descrizione, il quale possiede forti implicazioni teoriche, filosofiche e culturali in aperto contrasto con le leggi della società borghese e provinciale in cui i personaggi presenti e assenti hanno vissuto, e continuano a vivere, la loro «storia» perché: «She played the younger woman, the happy home wrecker, the lissome, laughing, tripping inguene» (Munro 2010: 119).

La definizione di descrizione, proposta da P. Hamon come sistema semiotico in cui la prospettiva di un orizzonte di attesa, lessicale e stilistico, in cui le nozioni di inclusione, rassomiglianza e contiguità sembrano di maggiore importanza che non quelle di trasformazione o invenzione, ci offre la possibilità di comprendere l'impulso dinamico presente nella seconda parte del racconto: costituita dalla descrizione della cornice ambientale iniziale, il paesaggio fisico e morale della protagonista che si popola con l'arrivo di un intruso che appare improvvisamente all'uscio di casa. La descrizione possiede una forza propulsiva capace di condizionare e mutare il racconto e la sua prevedibilità logica, ove l'intrusione dello scarno essere umano muta il punto di vista che viene a coincidere ora con l'angolazione visiva della protagonista: Nita si pone ora come personaggio e come centro di consapevolezza, viene dotata improvvisamente della capacità di vedere, selezionare e interpretare gli oggetti, e soggetti fenomenici, a livello della propria coscienza, ribaltando anche la visione morale del racconto. Le percezioni non sono più mediate dalla voce del narratore; i dati percettivi della coscienza del narratore vengono sussunti dalla coscienza personaggio-protagonista la quale, nel momento dell'appercezione, mette in crisi le proprie certezze conoscitive come soggetto, insinuando ambiguità e insicurezze nelle sue interpretazioni e aspettative esistenziali. Il breve scambio dialogico si iscrive come l'elemento dinamico della «storia»: «“You

scared?”, “No”, [...] “Husband? Where is he?” “He is dead...”». (Munro 2010: 125-126).

L'enunciato monologico-descrittivo del delitto commesso dall'intruso-assassino rappresenta, in modo esemplare, l'appercezione di Nita, la quale tenta di dare senso agli avvenimenti occorsi nella sua vita e in quella dell'uomo che ha invaso la sua casa-prigione, cercando di interpretare gli stati intenzionali ed emozionali dello stesso. La struttura descrittiva-narrativa si trasforma in un'altra storia, in un'altra descrizione/iscrizione delle esperienze della protagonista, filtrate attraverso le proprie percezioni/appercezioni, Nita risemantizza tutti i dati descrittivi del proprio vissuto: l'incontro con un uomo sposato, la storia clandestina, lo scandalo della loro relazione resa pubblica, il matrimonio in cui svolge un ruolo ancillare, una presenza costante ma invisibile, non fattiva.

La protagonista, elaborando il proprio vissuto ravvede come unica via di salvezza, come unico modo per sottrarsi ad una morte violenta per mano dello sconosciuto rivelare di aver commesso un omicidio: «I know what's like. I know what's like to get rid of somebody who has injured you? [...] I have done the same thing you did?. [...] She was the girl my husband was in love with [...]» (Munro, 2010: 1329)

L'assassino le crede e acquisisce una potente arma di ricatto, la confessione dell'omicidio li pone sullo stesso piano morale e material, non deve ricorrere a un altro omicidio, può andarsene prendendo l'automobile appartenuta al defunto marito. Lo stesso si sente compreso e al sicuro, il delitto li accomuna, li rende simili, interscambiabili e la abbandona in cucina. La protagonista ritorna a essere oggetto di descrizione: «She should write to Bett. Dear Bett, Rich is dead and I have saved my life by becoming you. What does Bett care that her life was saved? Ther's only one person really worth telling. Rich.Rich. Now she knows what is to really miss him.» (Munro 2010: 136-37).

Da soggetto Nita ritorna ad essere un oggetto di descrizione mentre il punto di vista

ritorna ad essere quello del narratore extradiegetico dell'*incipit*, la prospettiva appare distaccata, lo sguardo ridiviene cinico e privo di emozioni. L'arrivo del poliziotto provinciale che annuncia la morte dell'assassino, ricercato per triplice omicidio, non provoca una risonanza emotiva, Nita ritorna a essere parte di un paesaggio morale provinciale in cui non trova un posto, un luogo che le appartiene e a cui può appartenere. Le proprie percezioni non conducono ad una appercezione del proprio ruolo, dell'appartenenza al mondo sociale, al contesto umano. È un oggetto in un paesaggio desolato e la società la ha relegata alla solitudine nell'attesa della morte, indegno soggetto immorale.

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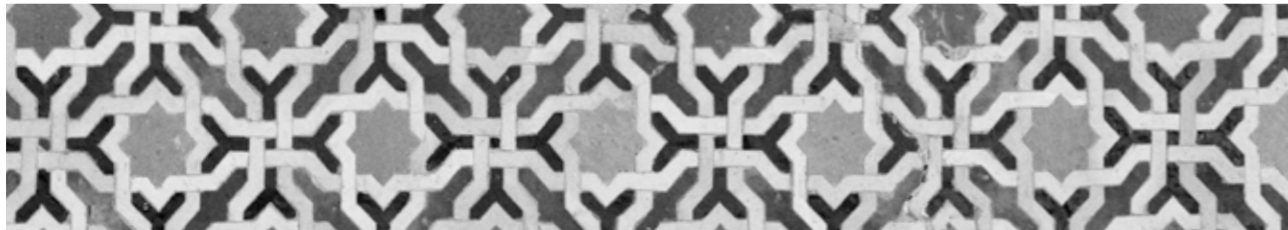
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PAOLA IRENE GALLI MASTRODONATO

Looking South from the North: George Szanto's Mexican Cycle

Immanence and transcendence are well at home in George Szanto's multifaceted and multicultural Mexican narrative world. Prize-winning Canadian novelist and mystery storyteller¹, Szanto takes the Western reader along for a stride in unusual settings and untypical situations while he/she gets acquainted with excruciatingly different characters and points of view. At the end, all his/her *gringo* certainties are gone topsy-turvy, and a new,

¹ Former Professor of Comparative Literature at McGill University, George Szanto now lives on Gabriola Island in front of Vancouver, where he has perfected his art of writing: *Not Working* (1982) was listed among the five best novels in Canada, his short story *How Ali Cran Got His Name* gained the National Magazine Award in 1988, in 1995 he won the Hugh MacLellan Prize for Fiction. Recently he has published an ongoing mystery saga with writer Sandy Frances Duncan centered on the archipelago where he lives: *Never Hug a Mugger (On Quadra Island)*, *Always Kiss a Corpse (On Whilby Island)*, *Never Sleep With a Suspect (On Gabriola Island)*, *The Tartarus House On Crab*. His latest book is entitled *Bog Tender: Coming Home to Nature and Memory*, and a review states that «watching his bogland on Gabriola Island as its life revolves around the circuit of seasons has put George Szanto at the perfect vantage point for reflection and story-telling.»

warmly human and politically crystal clear awareness sets in, remaining as a lesson in the sharing of deep, earthly, aboriginal roots that unite «us» in the North to «them» in the South.

In an interview he gave me at the launch of the Italian translation of his first novel on Mexico, *The Underside of Stones* (Szanto 1990 and 1999), Szanto placed on the table some important matter for thought:

The major intention in writing this novel was to try and see what could happen if somebody with a certain set of categories experienced a whole range of moments in his life which made no sense. What do you do with them? You can either try and make it fit into the categories you know, or try to think the experiences otherwise. When I first went to Mexico with this intention, it soon became clear after a period of time that it wasn't possible to live there and explain to myself everything that I experienced in my «back home» terms. [...] Mexico is a mix of cultures from the beginning, by that I mean from the beginning of participation in Western thinking, mainly the relationship between Spain and the indigenous cultures. So, the multiple cultures of Mexico create categories which are very difficult for a north American to deal with in any kind of easy way. (Mastrodonato 1998-99: 178)

On another occasion, he made it extremely clear what he meant:

A decade ago I discovered Mexico, a different Mexico, and it was great affection at first sight. Over the years my passion grew, maturing to love, respect and fascination. Its people are more generous than any I have known. At one moment their values resemble our own, in the next they elude understanding. Mexico's cultures are indigenous and European, American and pre-Hispanic, occult and telecommunicational. Its values, animating the memory and actions of its citizens, often perplex even those who have lived its history and culture. We nor-teamericanos, [...], when we care to think of Mexico at all beyond its sunny beaches and steep pyramids, are often baffled. Here, so close, is a remote civilization. (Szanto 1996: 10) So, working with «different» categories in a «different» world, is what it is all about. Narration itself becomes cyclical and anti-naturalistic, exploring irregular ways of looking at things. In *Stones*, Canadian criminologist George retires to the small town of Michoácuaro after the painful death of his wife in order to finish writing a book «about victims» (Szanto 1990: 4). Both an alert intellectual and an «innocent abroad», George becomes enmeshed from the start in a complicated web of unusual intercourses with the «foreign» (Szanto 1990: 3) environment that surrounds him, gradually relinquishing his westernized «scales of reason» (Szanto 1990: 10) and becoming *Don Jorge* in the words of his *dead* friend, the street sweeper Moisés de Jesús, who guides him, Virgil like, through the «tiny stories and volcano size stories» (Szanto 1990: 3) that beset his Mexican experience. Breaking barriers and crossing frontiers, both real and unreal, questions deeply Western dualism about space and time, life and death, human and non-human. How else must we consider the shaman Ali Cran, endowed with a lethal and mystic scorpion tail, a symbol of sexual potency and ancient cognition, which his lover, the India Serafina,

trims from time to time in a secret place on the brim of an extinct volcano? Serafina herself embodies «a spirit a thousand years old», in «her eyes lay centers so black they were invisible.» (Szanto 1990: 57). Or Dolores, the woman with two heads: «You see, she had two heads. I don't mean this metaphorically. Empirically, two heads. Two necks – one, two – growing from the shoulders. Each topped by a head, each face smooth light brown skin.» (Szanto 1990: 62)

Soon syntax itself, the rational organization of discourse in the English sentence (Subject-Main Verb-Object) is subverted, and logos has to adapt to a new signifying sequence. When a dead man is found near the pedestal of a monument representing an officer of Benito Juárez, Moisés de Jesús unabashedly tells Jorge that «the statue shot the man», and «besides, they were both drunk.» (Szanto 1990: 13) Summoned by his friend Pepe, anchorman of a local TV station, and by police jefe Rubén, to give a clear, rational explanation of the possible causes of the crime, Jorge admits his failure in doing so after having witnessed in person the «glowing outline» of the statue walking about around the plaza: «After explaining everything that was appropriate from my professional perspective, and it being line-for-line translated, I would tell the reporters and the TV audience, wryly, another explanation was also possible: The dead man had been shot by a statue.» (Szanto 1990: 16-17)

Seeing versus knowing is what opposes the North to the South, just like gringo Freudian consciousness is unable to equal Ali Cran's «ten senses» in the search for the truth hidden «under the stones», exercising a «memory, which is not from the intellect, this is retaining. [...] With it you can remember why you are alive, and human, it's a part of how you're free.» (Szanto 1990: 219) The immanence of the natural world over passing generations is what links our present to ages past, and Jorge discovers, eyes aghast, what lies beneath a

thin layer of clay and straw representing the small statue of a naïf pieta: «Two centuries of clay, straw, decay, held tight. Then the face gave. A shoulder and half the chest came with it. Inside, now exposed, gleaming dull silver, black, deep green, seated like the Virgin, leaning back, grinning, Chac-mool the rain god.» (Szanto 1990: 109-10) Learning to cope with gods and ghosts, we enter a new dimension, a *blakeian* «fearful symmetry» where a placid swimming pool teeming with fish set at the heart of Mexico City can turn into an Aztec sacrificial well in front of the astonished intruder:

In this blue artificial pool, a school of fish. [...] But the fish were only half of it. There in their midst, oblivious to the frothing excitement, a rubber cap covering her hair, a woman slowly backstroked along. Hidden by the foliage, not daring to move, I watched. She crawled the length of the pool, turned, breast-stroked back, then climbed out, pulled off the bathing cap, took a towel, dried herself. All perfectly normal. [...] Then, curiously, she kneeled by the pool edge, leaned over, spread her hands, touched the surface of the water and in a gentle version of her breaststroke made as if to spread the water apart. She did this perhaps a dozen times. Finally she stood up, climbed some broken stone steps to the house and disappeared. (Szanto 1990: 92-93)

Two symbols that constantly recur in the novel remind the reader of the «telluric» (Mastrodonato 1999: 7) essence of Mexico: one is the «rim of the volcano» now extinct and enclosing «a lagoon about half a kilometer wide and so deep oceanographers [...] have not been able to sound its bottom», the other is the Museum of Anthropology which «houses the remains of civilizations alien and magic.» (Szanto 1990: 49 and 89) In one of its exhibition rooms, Dolores stares at her past image in stone – «There in the case, [...] six inches high, clay breasts smoothly prominent, naval at dead center: a woman with two heads» – while Jorge

gets acquainted with Tezcatlipoca, «god of sin, suffering and sorcerers», in front of whom he decides to perform a strange ritual:

On an impulse I knelt again and, as if completing some rite in appreciation of, even homage to, the statue beside me, made with my hands that breaststroke gesture I'd seen from the woman the day before. Then I got to my feet and walked away. And stopped. The splash of solid things. I turned. The pond, alive with fish. (Szanto 1990: 70, 101 and 104) In Szanto's second novel dedicated to Mexico, *The Condesa of M.*, the Eighteenth century María Victoria «returns» in Jorge's times to help him solve a complicated thriller involving a millenarian sect that has kidnapped the daughter of his second wife, a powerful ecclesiastical organization resembling the Opus Dei, and a dissident priest author of a mysterious manuscript. It is undoubtedly She, María Victoria, the Countess of Michoácuaro, that acts like the perennial link that unites all of us to the natural circle of life. Belonging to a clandestine female sisterhood that meets on the shores of the same volcanic lake, María Victoria performs a rite of purification and gnosis against all barriers of space and time, finally freeing herself from the pain and the «illness» caused by the Conquest:

Because time, María Victoria explained, is not a line. It begins with us, and goes forward from here as we go forward; but it goes back also, to many ages, including the age before the illness. We go back, we come forward again, unraveling illness as we return to the present. This, a healing, passes into a woman through the power of the undulations. (Szanto 2001: 130).

In Szanto's last novel on Mexico, a new notion of History sets in, as it is explained by Irini, a woman anthropologist, to Teófilo, «the large unkempt journalist», the way in which the native Purepechas feel the passing of time: «For the Purepechas all the ages exist together. The earlier times live on. Under the ground,

buried. But active. They move us, they limit us. Literally. Right now.» (Szanto 2004: 147)

Further developing his thought on the often ambiguous and conflicting relationship that ties the Western author to the non-Western matter of his writing, Szanto openly attacks the neo-colonial standpoint hidden within the notion of appropriation:

I hate the notion of appropriation, I don't think there's any such thing, if one believes that one owns what one has then one is in serious trouble. One lives on a piece of land, but one is really only the proprietor of that piece of land for a very finite period of time, after that mostly the land is its own; documents of law say you have a right to it, but in the end, what can you do? You can cut down the trees, you can uproot the grass and the flowers, but the land is still going to be there, and it's going to come back, you'll be dead for a very long time and the land will still be there. (Mastrodonato 1998-99: 179) «The land is its own», and «it's going to come back», a recurring motif in Szanto's novels and short stories and something which is strikingly significant for our post-colonial awareness. In his award-winning collection *Friends & Marriages*, Szanto places at the beginning and ending of the narration a «carved woman's skull, seven hundred years old» belonging to a concubine buried with a dead Mixtec king. Around the skull, a powerful «southern» symbol of immanence and transcendence, the stories of the single «northern» characters revolve and acquire their meaning by speaking a new, different language. The ancient Mexican skull with its ambivalent message, carrying both life and death in its sway, becomes the purveyor of a traditional voice revealing the spiritual immanence of all things, whether vegetable, animal or mineral. This has reminded me of Marsilio Ficino who believed that every perceivable event of our human experience transcends physical death and annihilation, thus resulting in a never ending chain of spiritual occurrences and memories

of all that has ever happened. (Mastrodonato 1998: 168-69)

In *The Year the Leaves Were Smaller*, a young boy out on a fishing spree with his aunt on a Vermont lake realizes what lies beneath the liquid surface of the water:

Below the roots, below the soils, below the waters, below the fish, below the mud and stones, there is the world's own warmth. It is a sweet warmth but we know it poorly, as from mines sour with sweat and coal-dust, or from the fetid air of spas. It is an energizing warmth, born of steam deep beneath the crust layers, the barest fraction of which our science claims to understand. It comes from a place before men, before trees, before fish, before water; a place known to the fish because they have learned it from the deepest mud. (Szanto 1994: 121)

Similar to María Victoria's cyclical notion of time down South – «the world's shape, the history of the land, procreation, the meaning of death, the purpose of days, the love of children» (Szanto 2001: 131) – the boy up North stands on the edge of a new perception which carries implicitly the thought of our common origin, our never ending circle of decadence and renewal: «The fish hover. Their tails glide in the current. For balance? The thin water passes, flows away, silent. The roots, the memories, the fires wait.» (Szanto 1994: 124)

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ITALA VIVAN

David F. Dorr, *Un uomo di colore in viaggio intorno al mondo*, Ibis, Como-Pavia 2013. Introduzione di Attilio Brilli. Traduzione di Simonetta Neri. Titolo originale: *A Coloured Man Round the World, USA 1858*.

Compare per la prima volta in Italia, nella scorrevole traduzione di Simonetta Neri e con la brillante introduzione di Attilio Brilli, uno stravagante libro di viaggio ottocentesco che merita attenzione per le sue connotazioni e implicazioni culturali e postcoloniali. Si tratta della fantasiosa e rapsodica cronaca di un Grand Tour d'eccezione, effettuato nel 1851-52 da uno schiavo proveniente dalla Louisiana insieme al suo padrone, il quale gli avrebbe promesso di conce-

dergli la libertà alla fine dell'impresa. Non avendo egli mantenuto l'impegno, l'autore – appunto un nero americano – fuggì dalla piantagione in cui era stato costretto a ritornare, e pubblicò per conto proprio l'opera che oggi viene offerta in italiano dall'attenta editrice Ibis, che ha al suo attivo una ricca gamma di pubblicazioni di provenienza postcoloniale, ma non solo.

Il genere in cui ostentatamente si iscrive *Un uomo di colore in viaggio intorno al mondo* è quello, assai ricco e vario, del resoconto del Grand Tour così largamente praticato fra Sette e Ottocento. Qui, però, ci si trova dinanzi a un caso inedito, dato che l'autore è un americano tuttora schiavo, che pubblica il libro alla vigilia della Guerra Civile e quindi prima della fine della schiavitù negli Stati Uniti. Impercettibilmente, la cronaca di viaggio assume le movenze di una *slave narrative* tutta speciale, ove lo schiavo non narra un proprio itinerario di sofferenza, fuga e salvezza – come era nelle modalità del genere, soprattutto nel mondo statunitense – bensì si cala nella maschera del gentleman anglosassone in viaggio in Europa e Medio Oriente, parla attraverso di essa adottandone le cadenze disinvolute – con palesi effetti ironici – e di rado, solo occasionalmente, si abbandona a osservazioni suggerite dalla sua condizione di schiavo tuttora appartenente a una piantagione del Sud. Sono notazioni, queste ultime, che funzionano quasi da cornice al racconto di viaggio e assumono un tono di gravità e riflessività fortemente in contrasto con la leggerezza che caratterizza il classico *travelogue*.

Nello scarto fra levità ironica e serietà etico-politica si ravvisa la frattura e la fessura, l'interstizio postcoloniale della sottesa narrazione profonda di Dorr, il quale corre a briglia sciolta quando rifà l'itinerario del viaggiatore di maniera, ma si limita a pochi tocchi, ad accenni e quasi a strizzate d'occhio, quando parla nei panni di uno schiavo, e da tale punto di vista commenta il mondo che gli scorre dinanzi.

Tali elementi, tuttavia, inquadrano il corpo narrativo in modo inequivocabile, a partire dalla

dedica anteposta alla Prefazione: «A mia madre schiava. Madre! Ovunque tu sia, in Paradiso o in un mondo inferiore, abbracciata a un monumento alla libertà, o nella più bassa savana della schiavitù americana, tu sei sempre la stessa per me e dedico questo dono del mio sapere a te, madre mia. il tuo David» (p. 17), e fino alla chiusa esemplare, quasi solenne:

«In conclusione voglio citare Dickens, il quale sostiene che quanti hanno tentato di mettere in risalto le differenze fra gli uomini non sono mai stati capaci di porre in discussione il principio dell'unità della natura umana. Egli aggiunge infatti che l'europeo, l'etiope, il mongolo e l'americano non sono altro che varietà di un'unica specie. Poi cita Buffon secondo cui l'uomo, bianco in Europa, nero in Africa, giallo in Asia e rosso in America è sempre il medesimo essere di cui il clima ha colorato in maniera differente la pelle.» (p.176)

Il tema della pelle, e quindi della differenza sociale che essa comporta, si riaffaccia saltuariamente nella narrazione di viaggio, con richiami disparati. Ad esempio, quando Dorr giunge a Verona, loda la bella chiesa di San Zeno, osservando come il santo cui essa è dedicata sia nero (p. 137). In Egitto, non perde l'occasione di concludere «Quando Tebe aveva cento porte non ancora in rovina, poteva mandare in guerra due milioni di uomini. Così potenti erano i re egiziani dei tempi antichi, nonostante fossero neri.» (p. 155)

Giunto ad Atene, si commuove all'idea di trovarsi nel paese dove sarebbe nato il «buon governo», e commenta: «L'intera popolazione della Grecia non raggiunge il milione di abitanti. A paragone, i nostri schiavi formerebbero quattro regni popolosi quanto la Grecia. Oh, quando saremo il "Governo più libero al mondo?"» (p. 132) L'accento alla moltitudine di schiavi presenti in Nordamerica ritorna in una conversazione fra gentiluomini inglesi che parlano di politica: «Uno sosteneva che se i neri degli stati del Sud fossero stati pronti per la libertà, sarebbe stato facile per quattro mi-

lioni di schiavi issare la bandiera della libertà contro duecentocinquanta schiavisti.» (pp. 23-24)

Non v'è dunque dubbio che la schiavitù americana, e la sua condizione personale di schiavo, fossero ben presenti alla mente di David Dorr. Il suo atteggiamento, tuttavia, non è di lamentela, invettiva e compianto, ma di nobile e quasi altera consapevolezza di essere uomo fra gli uomini, capace ed elegante più di molti altri, e certo più signorile e garbato di parecchi cosiddetti gentiluomini americani incontrati durante il viaggio, il cui comportamento gli appare quanto meno discutibile.

La cronaca di viaggio vera e propria appare eccentrica se paragonata con altri esempi di diario odepotico un tempo così in voga. Dorr – che viaggia con il padrone e forse degli amici di lui, che menziona appena – compie il classico Grand Tour che dalle capitali d'Europa lo porta fino al Medio Oriente. Sbarca a Londra, che lo affascina e che definisce «gran bazar del mondo»: anche perché vi giunge in coincidenza con l'Esposizione Mondiale del 1851, e visita il Crystal Palace. A proposito del padiglione americano, nota che

«[vi] era esposto tutto quello che posso giudicare una evidente disgrazia per il nostro paese, tranne gli schiavi. Ho sentito dire che un tizio della Carolina del Sud aveva proposto di portare mezza dozzina di neri nerboruti, ma l'unico motivo che l'ha trattenuto dal proposito è stata la mancanza di coraggio nel rischiare che sei possenti, forti neri in salute avessero l'opportunità di fuggire verso la libertà.» (pp. 27-28)

Da lì va a Parigi, dove rimane ammaliato dalla grazia delle attraenti cameriere in grembiolino inamidato e crestina bianca, e si abbandona alla piacevole follia delle notti parigine. Non nomina i luoghi deputati solitamente visitati dai turisti (salvo Notre Dame, dove lo conduce un vetturino), e menziona solo di sfuggita – durante una visita successiva – il colpo di stato di Napoleone III avvenuto nel dicembre di quello stesso anno 1851. Attraversa Germania e Olanda e, dopo

una nuova tappa nella diletta Parigi, arriva in Italia e visita Roma e Napoli nel 1852. Qui non sembra essere tanto interessato ai monumenti e agli splendori del passato, quanto agli aspetti di vita contemporanea. Visita San Pietro e vede papa Pio IX in sedia gestatoria, ma la cosa che più lo colpisce è una fabbrica di maccheroni, che descrive nei dettagli, mentre sorvola rapidamente sulla visita ai Musei Vaticani e a Tivoli. A Bologna chiede di essere accompagnato a visitare una fabbrica di mortadella. Analogamente, a Napoli rimane affascinato dalla chiesa di S. Gennaro e dal rito della liquefazione del sangue del santo, mentre l'insieme della città, nonostante l'incanto della baia sovrastata dal fumante Vesuvio, gli appare decadente e triste, con i suoi lazzaroni e il suo sciocco re.

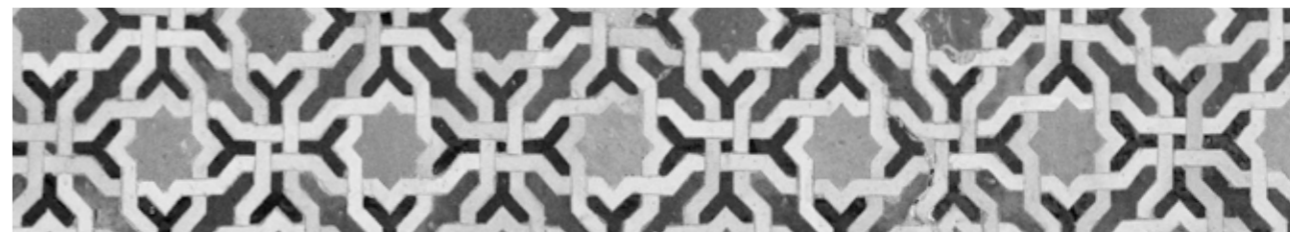
Un viaggio in nave lo porta lungo la Sicilia e fino a Costantinopoli e quindi ad Atene. Da lì ritorna in Italia e vede Trieste e poi Venezia di cui s'innamora e per la quale scioglie un inno di lode: «Qui non transitano cavalli, carri o carrozze, ma miriadi di gondole che intercettano il viaggiatore a ogni svolta dei canali. In una splendida notte al chiaro di luna attraversai la città con la gondola, e mentre il remo spezzava l'onda salata vidi miriadi di luci riflesse dai palazzi sul mare che sembrava un prato di diamanti.» (p. 136) Va detto che la scrittura di Dorr non è esente da risvolti di stile letterario, ed è nutrita da frequenti citazioni e riferimenti a grandi scrittori a lui cari – soprattutto Byron e Dickens, che cita spesso, con palese familiarità di lettore affezionato. Questo aspetto, insieme all'ironia con cui guarda il mondo, fa della cronaca di Dorr un unicum eccezionale fra le narrazioni di schiavi americani, e d'altro canto marca di spiccata originalità anche il diario di viaggio, opera di un uomo ancora in condizione di schiavitù, e tuttavia così interiormente libero nella capacità di autodeterminazione e soprattutto di osservazione. Va anche notato come lo sguardo ironico sia la radice del suo piglio da uomo di mondo che sa valutare le

cose di pregio e goderne, affermando una propria posizione sociale di prestigio personale. I risvolti letterari di stile e la familiarità con la grande letteratura ottocentesca ma anche classica, richiamano alla mente un altro testo dell'Ottocento americano che è stato scoperto di recente e ha suscitato acceso dibattito fra gli specialisti: *The Bondswoman's Narrative* ritrovata in manoscritto da Henry Louis Gates e da lui pubblicata nel 2002, firmata da Hannah Crafts, *house slave* della famiglia di John Hill Wheeler in North Carolina, di dove fuggì travestita da uomo. Anche la *Bondswoman's Narrative* è ricca di riferimenti letterari, e a tratti addirittura direttamente ispirata ai romanzi di Dickens, in particolare a *Bleak House*: testo che era per certo reperibile nella biblioteca di casa Wheeler. Ulteriori studi e approfondite analisi hanno recentemente condotto all'identificazione del vero nome dell'autrice, Hannah Bond, rivelato nel 2013 da Gregg Hecimovich dell'università della Carolina del Sud.

Il racconto di viaggio di David Dorr condivide con l'autobiografia di Hannah Bond l'agilità di scrittura, la disinvolta collocazione nella tradizione letteraria di lingua inglese, la sicurezza dei riferimenti e delle citazioni di grandi autori. Inoltre, anche Dorr, come la Bond, adotta frequentemente uno sguardo ironico sul mondo dei bianchi, loro padroni, che vengono visti alla pari. L'incidente della condizione di schiavitù è catalogato e accantonato come dettaglio anomalo e mostruoso che non lede la loro umanità né la loro intelligenza, mentre depone a sfavore di quanti ancora si abbarbicano all'istituzione e la usano per sfruttare donne e uomini.

Per un lettore attento, *Un uomo di colore in viaggio intorno al mondo* appare uno scrigno prezioso, ricco di riferimenti e dati culturali che rivelano interstizi segreti, linee di comunicazione nascoste e talenti intellettuali che si fanno portatori di leggerezza, disinvoltura, agilità espressiva.

europa francofona



MARIA CHIARA GNOCCHI

Le voyage au bout de l'altérité qui fit les Belges

Pendant la période 1875-1914, que l'historien Eric Hobsbawm a définie l'âge des empires, les principales puissances coloniales européennes se lancent dans la «course à l'Afrique».¹ Ni l'occupation ni l'exploitation du continent africain ne sont, à elles seules, des nouveautés: le caractère inédit du phénomène consiste dans la simultanéité et dans la convergence d'un intérêt qui se concentre sur une région de l'Afrique centrale restée jusqu'à ce moment-là inexploree, «un espace blanc» dans les cartes géographiques, d'après l'image célèbre évoquée par Joseph Conrad dans *Au cœur des ténèbres*. Les Portugais revendiquent quelques droits sur ces terres: leurs aïeux y ont planté, les premiers, des croix chrétiennes, quelque cinq siècles auparavant. L'Angleterre et la France, rivales historiques et grandes puissances coloniales, y cherchent leurs intérêts. À ces nations s'ajoute la Belgique, qui n'est pas, à l'époque, une grande puissance: elle occupe un territoire

minuscule en Europe et n'a pas l'expérience coloniale que ses voisins peuvent vanter. Dans la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle, la Belgique est en effet un pays très jeune, créé depuis quelques décennies seulement. La région où naît en 1830 le royaume de Belgique a été gouvernée, auparavant, par les ducs de Bourgogne, puis par les Espagnols, ensuite par les Autrichiens; ses provinces ont été rattachées tantôt à la France, tantôt aux Pays Bas. Les facteurs d'unité (sociale, politique, culturelle) n'ont jamais été très nombreux, ni très forts. L'élan patriotique qui a enclenché la révolution de 1830 et conduit à l'indépendance semble, quelques décennies plus tard, presque totalement éteint. En 1860, le jeune duc de Brabant – futur Léopold II, roi des Belges – plaide pour la première fois devant son sénat la cause de l'expansion coloniale. Il sait que ses ambitions ne seront pas accueillies avec un grand enthousiasme, mais il devine en même temps que cette démarche à l'extérieur est nécessaire pour que le royaume trouve, à son intérieur, la cohésion qui lui fait défaut.² La Belgique a besoin de renaître *ailleurs*³ et, surtout, de se confronter aux *autres*

1 Voir E. HOBBSAWM, *L'Ère des Empires: 1875-1914*, Paris, Hachette, 1997 (éd. or. *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914*, 1987). Voir aussi H. BRUNSWIG, *Le Partage de l'Afrique noire*, Paris, Flammarion, 1971 (Questions d'histoire).

2 Voir CROEGAERT 1992, p. 244. Dorénavant, pour les références bibliographiques complètes, nous renvoyons à la *Bibliographie* à la fin de cet article.

3 Voir GNOCCHI 2005, pp. 127-141.

afin de devenir quelqu'un. C'est une opération politique mais aussi, avant tout, culturelle. On ne s'étonnera donc pas du fait que, plus ou moins consciemment au service de l'idéologie impériale, la littérature accompagne ce processus de conquête et, on l'a dit, de confrontation. Résumons brièvement les étapes principales de l'occupation de l'Afrique centrale par les Belges: en 1876 Léopold II, souverain depuis 1865, convoque différents chefs d'état, explorateurs et géographes à la Conférence géographique de Bruxelles, où l'on concerte, de fait, l'occupation de l'Afrique. L'expansion belge se concrétise dans le bassin du fleuve Congo, grâce aussi au «défrichement» opéré par le reporter américain Henri Morton Stanley, embauché par le roi. Une dizaine d'années plus tard, les succès des Belges sont reconnus à la Conférence de Berlin (1884-1885), où l'on approuve la création de l'État indépendant du Congo, une confédération sous le contrôle direct et personnel du roi Léopold; il faudra attendre 1908 pour que le Congo devienne officiellement une colonie.

Au fil de ces années, de nombreux écrits voient le jour, inspirés aux aventures et aux conquêtes des Belges au cœur de l'Afrique: des récits de voyage dans un premier moment, puis des textes où la fiction s'infiltré progressivement, se greffant au reportage.⁴ Les auteurs sont parfois des fonctionnaires, des militaires, des hommes politiques, parfois de simples voyageurs; ensemble, ils contribuent à la formation d'une «conscience coloniale» (au sens où l'entend Edward Saïd dans *Culture et impérialisme*) mais aussi d'une conscience nationale tout court: la littérature coloniale garantit un appui important au développement de l'identité nationale qui est encore pratiquement inexistante. Il est donc logique que ces textes soient peuplés de nombreux «autres», termes

⁴ Voir P. HALÉN, *Le Petit Belge avait vu grand. Une littérature coloniale*, Bruxelles, Labor, 1993 (Archives du futur) et GNOCCHI 2008, pp. 125-169.

incontournables de comparaison. Dans le corpus littéraire qui s'étoffe au fur et à mesure, chaque catégorie nationale se distingue par des traits qui reviennent et qui finissent par se figer: mieux les autres sont définis, plus la base d'appui de cette identité sera forte et sûre. C'est aux modalités de représentation de ces autres qu'est vouée la présente étude: notre but est de mettre en lumière les constantes de ces images et d'indiquer dans quelle mesure elles sont fonctionnelles à la création d'une identité belge. D'un point de vue méthodologique, il s'agira donc de mettre l'analyse du discours littéraire au service de l'imagologie. Les textes que nous allons analyser ont paru en Belgique dans la période qui va de la Conférence de Berlin à la création du Congo belge en 1908; signés par des auteurs aux statuts professionnels différents, ils ont tous l'exploration ou la conquête de l'Afrique centrale comme sujet principal.⁵

Éléments d'une théorie: l'imagologie

Les représentations de l'«autre» que les Européens découvrent en Afrique ont fait l'objet de plusieurs études sur la littérature coloniale. Elles ont souvent été abordées par le biais de l'imagologie qui est née comme une branche de la littérature comparée et qui consiste précisément dans l'étude des images de l'étranger convoquées par les œuvres littéraires, mais aussi par des textes aux frontières de la littérature *stricto sensu* comme les récits de voyage ou les

⁵ Les textes analysés sont les suivants, par ordre chronologique (nous utilisons des abréviations pour les textes souvent cités, pour les références bibliographiques complètes nous renvoyons à la *Bibliographie* à la fin de cet article): BECKER, *La Vie en Afrique*, 1887; A. NIREP et G. DE GRAEF, *Les Mystères du Congo*, Bruxelles, P. Maes, 3 t.: A. NIREP, *Les Marchands d'ivoire*, s.d., G. DE GRAEF, *Une expédition mystérieuse*, 1888, G. DE GRAEF, *Triomphe de la civilisation*, s.d.; PICARD, *En Congolie*, 1896; BULS, *Croquis congolais*, 1899; DE GROOTE, *Souvenirs d'escala*, 1903; BRADFER, *Au pays du sommeil et de la mort*, 1908.

correspondances.⁶ Cette ouverture est tout à fait logique: Daniel-Henri Pageaux, qui, à partir des années 1980 s'est affirmé comme le principal théoricien de l'imagologie en France, précise que cette discipline est vouée à réinscrire la littérature dans une réflexion plus générale, culturelle et culturologique, et que l'image littéraire y est envisagée comme «un ensemble d'idées sur l'étranger prises dans un processus de littérisation mais aussi de socialisation» (Pageaux 1989: 135). Dans la mesure où son objet est l'autre, l'image est «un fait de culture» (Pageaux 1989: 138): d'où la relevance du contexte historique, social, culturel au sens large de sa création et de sa diffusion. Daniel-Henri Pageaux a insisté, beaucoup plus que ses collègues allemands ou anglais, sur l'importance que l'image de l'autre a pour la définition du sujet qui la produit, la transmet, la fait sienne: «l'image de l'étranger peut dire aussi sur la culture d'origine (le pays «regardant») ce que parfois il est difficile de concevoir, d'exprimer, d'avouer» (Pageaux 1989: 135). À travers cette image, l'individu ou le groupe ré-

⁶ Sur l'imagologie voir, par ordre chronologique: *Imagologie: problèmes de la représentation littéraire*, numéro spécial de «Colloquium helveticum», 37, 1988; D.-H. PAGEAUX, *De l'imagerie culturelle à l'imaginaire*, in P. BRUNEL, Y. CHEVREL, *Précis de littérature comparée*, Paris, PUF, 1989, pp. 133-161; M. BELLER (éds.), *L'immagine dell'altro e l'identità nazionale: metodi di ricerca letteraria*, Fasano, Schena, 1996 (ce texte contient, entre autres, une *Bibliography of Research Methods in Literary National Characteristics* par M. Beller qui ne compte pas moins de 66 pages); J.-M. MOURA, *L'Europe littéraire et l'ailleurs*, Paris, PUF, 1998 (Littératures européennes), en particulier la première partie; H.-H. HAHN, *Stereotyp, Identität und Geschichte: die Funktion von Stereotypen in gesellschaftlichen Diskursen*, Frankfurt a. M., Peter Lang, 2002; M. BELLER, J. LEERSSEN (éds.), *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2007 (Studia imagologica). Les différents essais sur l'imagologie de Daniel-Henri Pageaux, dont celui que nous avons cité, ont été repris dans le volume *Littératures et cultures en dialogue*, essais réunis, annotés et préfacés par S. Habchi, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007.

vèlent l'espace culturel et idéologique dans lequel *eux-mêmes* se situent:

Je «regarde» l'autre; mais l'image de l'Autre véhicule aussi une certaine image de moi-même. Impossible d'éviter que l'image de l'Autre, à un niveau individuel (un écrivain), collectif (une société, un pays, une nation) [...], n'apparaisse aussi comme la négation de l'Autre, le complément, le prolongement de mon propre corps et de mon propre espace. Je veux dire l'Autre [...] et, en disant l'Autre, je le nie et me dis moi-même. D'une certaine manière, je dis aussi le monde qui m'entoure, je dis le lieu d'où sont partis le «regard», le jugement sur l'Autre: l'image de l'Autre révèle les relations que j'établis entre le monde (espace originel et étranger) et moi-même. L'image de l'Autre apparaît comme une langue seconde, parallèle à la langue que je parle, coexistant avec elle, la doublant en quelque sorte, pour dire autre chose. (Pageaux 1989: 137)

L'ensemble des images, en particulier les images de l'autre, et les liens qu'elles tissent entre elles forment un langage symbolique «qui a pour fonction de dire les relations interethniques, interculturelles, les relations moins effectives que repensées, rêvées, entre la société qui parle (et qui «regarde») et la société «regardée»» (Pageaux 1989: 138). L'imagologie étudie donc les images et leur agencement dans le discours d'un point de vue littéraire, tout en abordant des textes de natures différentes; il est d'ailleurs intéressant de remarquer que, souvent, les mêmes images apparaissent dans des œuvres fictionnelles et dans des textes censés être plus objectifs comme les reportages ou les récits de voyage. En ce qui concerne ces derniers, on se rappellera, encore une fois avec Daniel-Henri Pageaux, que «le voyage n'est pas seulement un déplacement dans un espace géographique ou dans le temps historique; il est aussi un dé-

placement dans une culture, celle qui regarde. On ne «voit» l'étranger qu'avec les outils emportés dans ses bagages (culturels)» (Pageaux 1989: 156). On essaiera donc, dans cette étude, de «regarder les autres» tels que les Belges les ont vus à un moment donné, pour mieux voir les Belges eux-mêmes.

Si la critique a, à maintes reprises, souligné l'importance de la découverte de l'autre, en Afrique, de la part des Européens, il faut dire qu'elle a cherché et trouvé cet autre essentiellement dans l'indigène africain, reflet négatif, le plus souvent, du moi européen. À vrai dire, à l'âge des empires, pour toutes les nations européennes et pour la Belgique en particulier, le moi est confronté en Afrique à d'innombrables autres, non seulement au Noir autochtone. La prise en compte de ces présences et de ces termes de comparaison est indispensable pour avoir une perception complète des mécanismes de construction culturelle et de négociation identitaire à l'œuvre. Dans *Exotisme et altérité*, Francis Affergan affirme que «la conquête de l'altérité est une aventure déréalisante et qui peut s'avérer dangereuse pour la propre identité de celui qui part» (Affergan 1987: 44): c'est sans doute vrai pour les groupes ethniques ou nationaux à l'identité forte et (déjà) définie, mais la situation peut s'inverser dans le cas de groupes dont l'identité est incertaine, faible ou en voie de définition, comme la Belgique à l'époque qui nous concerne. Notre thèse est précisément que les Belges ont besoin de se définir par rapport et par opposition à d'autres (multiples!) groupes nationaux, afin de se concevoir comme groupe, comme communauté, comme nation.

Termes de comparaison

Les textes coloniaux belges «profitent» donc en quelque sorte du récit des conquêtes en Afrique centrale pour mettre en scène la confrontation avec d'autres groupes nationaux. Une confrontation qui trouve son sens le plus immédiat dans le fait que le jeune royaume diffère beaucoup

de ses voisins, mais pas seulement. Deux importantes théories peuvent également fournir des éléments de réponse: la première, que l'on doit d'abord à Max Weber et qui a été ensuite largement reprise par les imagologues, selon laquelle le plus important travail d'identification ethnique et nationale est toujours accompli par les autres (ne serait-ce par contraste), et la seconde, que l'on doit à Benedict Anderson et à son célèbre essai sur l'imaginaire national, selon laquelle la nation est une «communauté imaginée», bâtie et alimentée par les discours qui la rendent imaginable.⁷

De nombreux pays ont précédé la Belgique en Afrique: le jeune royaume ne peut se soustraire à la confrontation avec ceux-ci... mais il peut également tirer parti de cette expérience préalable. En effet, si l'Afrique telle que la décrivent les explorateurs est une chimère mystérieuse et dangereuse, les Belges connaissent déjà les pièges dans lesquels d'autres sont tombés avant eux. C'est ce que suggère par exemple Charles Buls dans *Croquis congolais* (1899):⁸

Lorsqu'on pénètre dans l'estuaire majestueux du Zaïre, on aperçoit, au sommet d'une colline, une roche dressée là, comme un doigt menaçant, pour avertir le voyageur des dangers auxquels il s'expose s'il tente de deviner le secret du Sphinx africain [...].

Si, nouvel Œdipe, il dédaigne cet avertisse-

⁷ Voir B. ANDERSON, *L'Imaginaire national: réflexions sur l'origine et l'essor du nationalisme*, Paris, La Découverte, 1996 (éd. or. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1982). Voir aussi MOLL, *Immagini dell'«altro». Imagologia e studi interculturali*, A. Gnisci (dir.), *Introduzione alla letteratura comparata*, Milano, Mondadori, 1999, p. 221. On remarquera que la «communauté imaginée» de Anderson doit beaucoup au concept de communalisation weberien: M. WEBER, *Économie et Société*, 2 vol., Paris, Press Pocket, 1995, en part. vol. 2, chap. 4 (éd. or. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1922).

⁸ Charles Buls a été d'abord directeur d'école, puis bourgmestre (maire) de Bruxelles (surnommé le bourgmestre esthète), enfin député.

ment, s'il dépasse le monolithe fatidique, nombreuses seront les énigmes que le monstre noir lui posera. Malheur à lui s'il ne les devine pas! S'il se trompe, qu'il soit nation, chef d'état, explorateur, conquérant, il ira s'engouffrer à jamais dans la géhenne ardente.

La nation y verra sombrer sa fortune, comme l'Espagne, ou abâtardir sa race, comme le Portugal; le roi y engloutira ses armées comme Humbert d'Italie; l'explorateur y succombera, comme Livingstone; le conquérant en sera repoussé, comme Napoléon. (Buls 1899: IX-X)

Espagne, Portugal, Italie, Angleterre et France: autant d'ennemis potentiels qui ont frayé, de fait, le chemin aux Belges. Le déficit (l'absence d'expérience) est tourné en avantage: Buls ne cite pas les succès des autres peuples ou chefs d'état, il n'évoque que leurs tentatives échouées. L'insécurité quant aux potentialités du jeune royaume demeure, cependant; les doutes sont nombreux et importants:

L'Afrique sera-t-elle pour nous une source de prospérité ou avons-nous entrepris une tâche au-dessus de nos forces en cherchant à y fonder une colonie?

Notre peuple a-t-il les qualités de race qui ont fait des Romains, des Anglais, des Hollandais, les grands colonisateurs du monde? (Buls 1899: XII)

Quoi qu'il en soit du bilan final de l'auteur, il nous importe de relever que, même en cas de doute, l'analyse se fonde sur une confrontation.

À part la Hollande, au modèle de colonisation de laquelle Léopold II s'inspire, les deux autres grands pays coloniaux de référence sont, dans les écrits belges, l'Angleterre et la France. La littérature coloniale a développé, autour d'eux, une série de stéréotypes. Les Anglais sont pour la plupart représentés comme des *businessmen*,

qui ne cherchent, en Afrique, que leur profit. Dans *En Congolie* (1896), Edmond Picard⁹ décrit ainsi la ville de Matadi, à laquelle les premières installations anglaises ont laissé une marque indélébile:

Tout est jeté là au hasard des nécessités commerciales et du caprice des bâtisseurs. Campement de pionniers, de chercheurs d'or, n'ayant, en leurs cervelles avides, d'autre préoccupation que le profit, d'autre règle d'humaine activité que l'intérêt. Business! business! Ce mot d'ordre égoïste qui a dénaturé et avili la grande âme saxonne, et fait de la bourgeoisie anglaise une caste douteuse de marchands sans chevalerie, est ici crié par tout l'extérieur des choses. (Picard 1896: 71-72)

Faisant quant à lui l'éloge des missionnaires belges, Eugène De Groote, homme politique et littérateur, en profite pour dénoncer dans *Souvenirs d'escale* (1903) les intentions non purement chrétiennes des délégués des autres nations:

Les missionnaires sont les premiers pionniers de la civilisation; ils sont les seuls – pour ainsi dire – qui, mus seulement par l'idée de charité fraternelle, apportent aux sauvages notre civilisation dans toute sa pureté, sans le mélange des tares qui, bien souvent, déparent les autres Européens. [...] Il est bon même qu'ils priment d'une manière définitive les agents anglais ou américains qui, disposant de capitaux considérables, font du prosélytisme pratique et apprennent en même temps aux indigènes le sentier de

⁹ Edmond Picard est un sénateur socialiste, mais aussi un auteur prolifique et le fondateur de la revue «L'Art moderne». Voir P. ARON, C. VANDERPELEN-DIAGRE, *Edmond Picard (1836-1924). Un bourgeois socialiste belge à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle. Essai d'histoire culturelle*, Bruxelles, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, 2013.

la chapelle et le chemin de la factorerie anglaise et inculquent dans leurs esprits étroits que Dieu est grand et que John Bull est son prophète. (De Groote 1903: 183)

Malgré toutes ces tares – suggèrent les textes coloniaux belges –, les Anglais ne cessent de faire preuve d'une mégalomanie sans égale qui les conduit à se croire les seuls maîtres du monde. Nous trouvons, encore sous la plume d'Edmond Picard, la description de quelques cartes géographiques produites en Angleterre, «où une teinte rouge, presque universelle, marque la soi disant [*sic*] domination de l'Angleterre, tandis que quelques petits points noirs désignent les territoires mesquins des autres nations»:

Au dos, un portrait de la vieille reine (dont vous connaissez la figure et la tournure) sous les traits superbes d'une Minerve calme, la lance à la main; tout autour, une série de visages, à l'aspect grognon et muffled, représentant les autres souverains, enguirlandant, comme des feudataires, l'Impératrice du monde. Des «clercs» noirs sont chargés de distribuer cette étrange composition aux naturels, en leur expliquant qu'il n'y a qu'une vraie langue, l'anglais, et que les autres sont des patois; qu'il n'y a qu'un drapeau, le britannique, et que les autres sont des mouchoirs dont la vraie destination est de rester en poche. (Picard 1896: 157-158)

Il va de soi que la Belgique ne peut pas proposer de soi une image analogue: *primo*, c'est un pays tout jeune (le vieil âge de la reine britannique est aussi une allusion à la longue expérience de son pays en tant que puissance coloniale); *secundo*, contrairement à l'Angleterre, qui a conquis des terres partout dans le monde, la Belgique est uniquement présente au Congo, et encore, elle n'y a pas établi une colonie proprement dite; *tertio*, elle ne vante aucune primauté en ce qui concerne la diffusion

du français dans le monde. Au contraire: dans ce pays bilingue, voire trilingue, l'insécurité linguistique a toujours été très grande.¹⁰ Mais, selon une stratégie courante dans des circonstances pareilles, les Belges tournent leur handicap en avantage: comme ils ne peuvent pas se présenter au même titre que les Anglais, ils les couvrent de ridicule. De plus, peignant leurs rivaux comme des vantards et des mégalomanes, ils insinuent le doute sur les résultats que ceux-ci prétendent avoir atteints: du coup, leur domination n'est plus qu'une «soi disant domination»...

Comme ils le font pour l'Angleterre, les écrivains belges essaient de démontrer quelque peu la «grandeur» (coloniale) française. La confrontation ne peut qu'être directe, entre la Belgique et la France, au cœur de l'Afrique: Henry Morton Stanley, embauché par Léopold II, et Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, envoyé au nom de la République française, explorent le bassin du Congo presque en même temps (dès 1879), d'un côté et de l'autre du fleuve. Grâce aux traités qu'ils signent avec les chefs de la population locale, les deux explorateurs procurent aux pays dont ils sont les émissaires des protectorats et des zones d'influence; ils contribuent largement à la création progressive de ce qu'on appelle respectivement le «Congo belge» et le «Congo français». Or, à la primauté indiscutable de la France dans le contexte européen ne correspond pas toujours une suprématie dans le contexte africain. C'est exactement ce sur quoi mettent l'accent les écrivains belges: aux résultats rapides et formidables atteints par leurs compatriotes en Afrique s'opposeraient, du côté français, beaucoup de paroles et peu de substance; les colonies françaises ne seraient, aux dires des Belges, ni bien organisées, ni bien gérées. Charles Buls écrit

¹⁰ M. FRANCARD ET AL. (éds.), *L'insécurité linguistique dans les communautés francophones périphériques*, «Cahiers de l'Institut de linguistique de Louvain», XIX, 1993.

par exemple que l'ensemble des installations belges au Congo est «encore modeste» mais «dénote une prospérité naissante et un effort sérieux qui font contraste avec l'air d'abandon de la capitale du Congo français, Libreville». (Buls 1899: 12)

Autrement dit, des débuts prometteurs *versus* l'ancienne grandeur aujourd'hui en décadence. Ces images traduisent une situation que l'on peut facilement reconnaître. L'âge des empires s'est ouvert, en France, sous de mauvais augures. Au moment où la Belgique fait ses premiers projets d'expansion, la République connaît inversement une phase de repli. Vers la moitié du XIX^e siècle, la politique coloniale y est impopulaire, d'autant plus que ses apports à la vie économique du pays sont faibles.¹¹ La France ralentit alors quelque peu sa propre course aux colonies: elle délaisse le Sénégal, fait évacuer la Côte d'Ivoire, et elle faillit faire de même avec la Cochinchine. L'importance des colonies françaises est à cette époque surtout symbolique: il s'agit de contrer l'expansion anglo-saxonne et de préserver le prestige international. À l'inverse, la Belgique traverse une phase de grand développement matériel, et les premiers succès en Afrique donnent confiance à ceux qui aspirent à une plus grande reconnaissance du pays dans le «concert des nations». Le jeune royaume met sa technologie au profit du projet colonial et réalise au Congo des infrastructures ambitieuses, avant tout une imposante voie ferrée. Quand les fonctionnaires belges regardent de l'autre côté du fleuve, ils n'y voient pas les mêmes résultats brillants. On ne s'étonnera donc pas d'apprendre que les Français sont peu présents dans la littérature coloniale belge: une absence qui en dit beaucoup plus long que mille digressions. Quand, dans leurs écrits, les Belges nomment le Congo, c'est *le Congo*, pas

¹¹ Voir H. BRUNSWIG, *Mythes et réalités de l'impérialisme colonial français 1871-1914*, Armand Colin, 1960, pp. 10-16.

l'un des deux, et il obéit à un seul roi. Pour des raisons analogues, les Portugais sont à peine pris en considération. Aux yeux des nouveaux conquérants belges, ils sont ceux qui n'ont pas su conserver le territoire qu'ils avaient une première fois occupé; le leur n'est que le souvenir d'une domination. De plus, les Belges partagent l'opinion répandue à l'époque dans le Vieux Continent, selon laquelle les Portugais ne seraient pas vraiment des Européens, mais des métis, presque africains, si bien que, avec les Maltais, ils sont souvent assimilés aux Arabes. En plus, le Portugal partage avec la Belgique le profil de «petite patrie» européenne, et souffre du voisinage et de la confrontation avec l'Espagne comme la Belgique avec la France.¹² Bref, ce n'est pas dans le Portugal que la Belgique reconnaît le rival à contrer et à critiquer, l'image en opposition à laquelle elle veut construire la sienne.

L'Arabe, lui, est une figure fondamentale dans les écrits coloniaux belges, presque toujours présente, avec des caractéristiques bien précises. Il est en effet toujours représenté comme le négrier, l'esclavagiste, l'exploiteur mesquin des populations locales.¹³ Dans ce personnage fourbe, cruel et faux,¹⁴ l'Européen reconnaît son ennemi véritable, celui même qui justifie son action, c'est-à-dire l'occupation et l'exploitation du territoire centrafricain. Puisque les Arabes continuent à pratiquer le commerce des hommes, contrairement aux Européens qui y ont renoncé, ces derniers peuvent revendiquer le rôle non pas de brutaux conquérants

¹² Voir V. RUSSO, *Cultura e immaginario coloniale nel Portogallo fineseolare*, in L. ACQUARELLI, M. BARALDI, M.C. GNOCCHI, V. RUSSO, *Tenebre bianche. Immaginari coloniali fin de siècle*, pp. 29-77.

¹³ Voir M.C. GNOCCHI, *Le Blanc, le Noir et... l'Autre. Stratégies discursives coloniales (1875-1914)*, in J.-M. SEILLAN, J.-F. DURAND (éds.), *L'Aventure coloniale*, Paris, Kailash, 2010 (Les Cahiers de la SIELEC), pp. 418-430.

¹⁴ D'importantes réflexions sur le topos de la fausseté et de la perversion de l'Arabe, surtout s'il est musulman, se trouvent dans SAID, *Culture et impérialisme*.

en Afrique, mais de délivreurs, de vengeurs presque, au profit d'un peuple jugé incapable de se défendre. Ainsi, dans *Au pays du sommeil et de la mort* (1908), avant d'expliquer pourquoi et comment les Belges ont décidé d'envahir le Congo, le lieutenant Jean-Hyppolite Bradfer note:

L'Arabe, au sang vicié, aux mœurs dépravées, est la proie de maux multiples qu'il a transmis aux malheureuses peuplades africaines placées jadis sous sa tyrannique et abominable domination. Les vaillantes troupes de Dhanis, de Lothaire, de Venkerkhoven, de Henry, de Michaux l'ont chassé du territoire de l'État du Congo, mais son empreinte maudite reste encore tangible et il faudra de grands efforts pour l'effacer complètement. (Bradfer 1908: 17)

Trois différents sujets sont visés par l'auteur: l'Arabe «au sang vicié», les «malheureuses peuplades africaines» et cet acteur encore indéfini auquel renvoie la phrase finale: «il faudra de grands efforts»... À qui cette tâche valeureuse? On le devine: à l'Européen, qui est puissant comme et souvent même plus que l'Arabe, mais qui, contrairement à lui, agit en faveur du peuple africain et non pas contre. Et, en particulier, aux officiers de l'armée belge qui déjà dans le passé, de Dhanis à Michaux, se sont distingués par leur action de contraste à l'esclavagisme (mais que la postérité reconnaîtra aussi comme les «officiers de l'école "anti-arabe"») (Vellut 1993: 50). La conclusion de l'auteur ne tarde pas à arriver: «La race congolaise est restée la race enfant et il était grand temps que nos compatriotes s'occupassent sérieusement de commencer à l'éduquer» (Bradfer 1908: 25). Quant aux Centrafricains, le texte de Bradfer est parlant: ce ne sont que de grands enfants qui se laissent réduire à l'esclavage avec une sorte

d'indifférence.¹⁵ Le grand nombre d'études critiques vouées au commentaire de ces représentations du Noir – communes à toutes les littératures coloniales – nous dispensent d'insister davantage sur le sujet.¹⁶ De ce point de vue, les auteurs belges qui font l'objet de cette étude ne se distinguent pas spécialement de leurs confrères européens.

Une identité par contraste

Si les Belges se définissent par rapport aux autres, c'est précisément parce qu'ils entendent se présenter comme différents. Et donc: ils ne sont pas comme les Anglais, puisque moins vantards, en dépit des grands exploits, et moins mesquins. Ils ne sont pas comme les Français: dans le même territoire, ils ont su faire beaucoup plus et beaucoup mieux. Ils ne sont pas comme les Portugais parce qu'ils assument leur rôle, ils ne se mélangent pas avec les indigènes, et ils sont les protagonistes d'aujourd'hui et non pas d'hier. Ils ne sont pas comme les Arabes non plus: ils s'infiltrèrent, comme ceux-ci, dans le cœur de l'Afrique, mais ils sont mus par des idéaux phi-

¹⁵ Ce sont les échos de la légende dite du fils de Cham: considéré comme l'ancêtre de la «race» noire, ce dernier aurait attiré sur toute sa descendance la malédiction de son père Noé (*Genèse* 9, 25).

¹⁶ L. FANOUDH-SIEFER, *Le Mythe du Nègre et de l'Afrique noire dans la littérature française de 1880 à la Deuxième guerre mondiale*, Paris, Klincksiek, 1968; A. MARTINKUS-ZEMP, *Le Blanc et le Noir. Essai d'une description de la vision du Noir par le Blanc dans la littérature française de l'entre-deux-guerres*, Paris, Nizet, 1975; *Images du Noir dans la littérature occidentale*, «Notre librairie», 35-36, avril-juin 1977, 90, octobre-décembre 1987 (I- *Du Moyen-Âge à la conquête coloniale*) et 91, janvier-février 1988 (II- *De la conquête coloniale à nos jours*); C. BIONDI, *Le Personnage noir dans la littérature française: essai de synthèse minimale d'une aventure humaine et littéraire*, «Mémoire spiritaine», 9, premier semestre 1999, p. 89-101.

lanthropiques et chrétiens, par la noble volonté d'exporter la civilisation, non par des visées de pure exploitation. Et ils ne sont pas comme les Congolais car ceux-ci sont paresseux, peu prévoyants, vivant au jour le jour et gaspillant tous les biens dont ils disposent – encore un cliché très courant en littérature coloniale, et même au-delà –, alors que, une fois arrivés en Centrafrique, les sujets de Léopold II ne perdent pas de temps et construisent des routes, des voies ferrées etc.

Les Belges au Congo sont en effet généralement représentés dans un contexte de travail, d'améliorations techniques, de progrès matériel. Les officiers sont jeunes (encore une fois, ce trait n'est pas seulement en rapport avec l'état civil des personnages), entreprenants, courageux. Ainsi, par exemple, le capitaine Cambier décrit par le lieutenant Jérôme Becker, auteur d'un récit de voyage intitulé *La vie en Afrique ou Trois ans dans l'Afrique centrale* (1887):

Petit, et d'apparence peu robuste, le capitaine commande l'attention par sa physionomie tout en calme profondeur. Le front large et haut semble indiquer une volonté de fer d'une patience opiniâtre. L'œil pénétrant et résolu accuse la vigilance et le sang-froid. (Becker 1924: 309)

La petite taille du capitaine est compensée par une dose massive de patience et de volonté. C'est, encore une fois, la rhétorique des débuts prometteurs, de l'action concrète, menée petit à petit, par opposition aux paroles hyperboliques qui cachent, ailleurs, des résultats modiques. Aux yeux d'Edmond Picard, quelques années ont été suffisantes pour que les succès des Belges sautent aux yeux des «orgueilleux colosses» concurrents:

Dans toute l'histoire des Colonies, il n'y a pas d'exemple d'un résultat aussi avancé [*la création de l'État indépendant du Congo*] obtenu en un temps aussi court, avec un per-

sonnel, souvent de hasard, et constamment déprimé par la maladie. [...] Ni la France, ni l'Allemagne, ni l'Angleterre, malgré leur puissance et leur expérience, n'ont rien fait de semblable dans les morceaux de gâteau africain qu'elles s'attribuèrent lors du partage; le Congo apparaît comme un modèle à suivre pour ces orgueilleux colosses. Je l'ai ouï confesser, sans restriction, par leurs nationaux. (Picard 1896: 152-54)

La mise en scène des différentes nationalités dans le contexte colonial africain est particulièrement évidente – et recherchée – dans une œuvre qu'il faut considérer un peu à part. Il s'agit du roman populaire *Les Mystères du Congo*, publié à Bruxelles en 1888 d'abord en livraisons, puis en trois épais volumes, par deux inconnus, qui se cachent très probablement sous des pseudonymes. Si d'un côté cette saga lorgne vers *Les Mystères de Paris* d'Eugène Sue, de l'autre elle multiplie les allusions à l'entreprise africaine du roi Léopold II, qu'elle contribue à légitimer auprès d'un large public.¹⁷ S'agissant d'un feuilleton populaire très ironique, il va de soi que tout y est exagéré; ce qui est intéressant, c'est que, dans la substance, les images et les clichés sont les mêmes que dans les autres œuvres précédemment citées. Venons-en aux exemples concrets. Les protagonistes de cette longue aventure sont un Belge, un Allemand, un Français, un Anglais, un Russe et quelques autres qui, pour des raisons diverses, sont amenés à explorer le cœur de l'Afrique noire. L'une de ces raisons est liée au commerce des hommes: la sœur du personnage russe a été séquestrée par un marchand d'esclaves portugais qui l'emmène en Afrique, la vend à un

¹⁷ Voir M. QUAGHEBEUR, *Zwanze et science à la conquête de l'Empire. Nirep et les Mystères du Congo*, in HALÉN, RIESZ, *Images de l'Afrique et du Congo/Zaïre dans les lettres françaises de Belgique et alentour*, pp. 205-233, < <http://textyles.revues.org/2217>>, consulté le 19/12/2013.

seigneur arabe le quel la cède, à son tour, à un «roi nègre». Les «civilisés» Européens (une civilisation dont, comme on le disait, les Portugais sont exclus) se doivent de réagir – et l'aventure commence.

Le Français, Gaspard de Sambry, qui vient d'une famille parisienne autrefois riche, puis déchue (la décadence...), cherche, en Afrique, une distraction à ses malheurs. Parti avec l'idée de devenir explorateur, il rencontre un Anglais, William Darly, qui lui propose de suivre de plus nobles desseins, à savoir libérer les Noirs des marchands d'hommes – on découvrira plus tard que seuls des intérêts commerciaux le poussent vers l'Afrique. Tant le Français que l'Anglais donnent beaucoup d'importance au prestige de leurs nations mais, souvent maladroits, ils ne lui rendent pas, dans les faits, un grand service. Le personnage belge, qui s'unit à Darly et à de Sambry dans le troisième tome, ne ressemble pas du tout à ses compagnons d'aventure. C'est un très jeune *ketje* (gamin de rue) bruxellois, inexpert et espiègle, qui atteint toutefois des résultats exceptionnels grâce à sa modestie, à ses idées très claires et à un esprit pratique exceptionnel. C'est lui qui, à la fin des aventures, fonde au Congo une «colonie modèle». Lui, et non le Français, prétentieux mais vain, ou l'Anglais, faux et mesquin; non plus le botaniste allemand qui prend partie à l'expédition, visiblement inapte à des exploits coloniaux. Encore une fois, et de manière particulièrement transparente, on voit bien à quoi ces images renvoient dans la réalité de l'époque.

Les Belges construisent donc leur propre image par rapport, voire par opposition à celle des autres. Arrivent-ils, ce faisant, à créer, ou du moins à imaginer, une identité belge à proposer au monde? De nombreux textes suggèrent une réponse positive. Un an après avoir publié son récit de voyage en Congo, Edmond Picard exprime en 1897, dans un article devenu célèbre, sa théorie de l'«âme belge», heureuse synthèse de composantes latines et germaniques, trait distinctif et unifiant des provinces réunies

dans le Royaume de Belgique.¹⁸ On peut très bien comprendre que la plupart de ceux qui, à l'âge des empires, croient à l'«âme belge» – ou estiment intéressantes les applications possibles d'une telle conviction – trouvent dans la mission laïque de la Belgique au Congo une occasion excellente pour que cette âme s'exprime (l'expérience d'outre-mer est d'ailleurs explicitement citée dans l'article de Picard).¹⁹ L'idée est reprise, assez rapidement, par des auteurs comme Charles Buls et Jean-Hyppolite Bradfer, pour ne citer que deux noms déjà évoqués; ces derniers complètent en quelque sorte l'élaboration conceptuelle amorcée par Picard en renvoyant non seulement à une âme, mais à une «race» belge. «L'œuvre congolaise n'a pas seulement dirigé les efforts des trafiquants belges vers l'Afrique, elle a réveillé les énergies qui somnolaient en notre race, elle a secoué sa torpeur» (Buls 1899: 216-217), déclare le premier; et le second: «Dans l'entreprise africaine, la race belge s'est révélée énergique, tenace, entreprenante, intelligente et forte. On ne saurait assez remercier celui qui a le mieux compris l'âme de son peuple: je veux dire le Roi Léopold II» (Bradfer 1908: 38).

En retard par rapport à la théorie romantique du «génie national» que d'autres pays européens ont développé un siècle plus tôt, de tels concepts – l'âme et la race belges – viennent combler un vide et donner des contours à un peuple et à un pays en mal de définition. Pour que cette âme et cette race se «réveillent» et se «révèlent» (les expressions sont des auteurs cités), l'expérience africaine est fondamentale. Or, qu'est-ce que les Belges ont fait au Congo, et surtout quelle représentation en ont-ils don-

¹⁸ Voir PICARD 1897, pp. 593-599.

¹⁹ Voir aussi PICARD 1897, p. 598: «vit-on jamais, malgré ses dangers et son climat impitoyable, colonie mise au point plus promptement et mieux que ce Congo immense et terrible où, sans apprentissage d'une aussi difficile entreprise, tant des nôtres ont été révéler les qualités les plus rares de l'explorateur, du soldat, de l'organisateur et de l'apôtre?».

née au reste du monde? Ils ont agi, bien sûr, ils ont construit,²⁰ mais ils se sont surtout – telle est notre thèse – confrontés aux autres, et ils ont mis cette confrontation en paroles et en images. C'est de là qu'ils sont partis pour construire une idée de ce qu'ils pouvaient être. Grâce à l'expérience coloniale et à la confrontation avec les autres pays, ils ont bâti un imaginaire national qui était encore assez pauvre. Bien plus que la révolution de 1830, c'est sans doute ce long voyage au bout de l'altérité qui a fait les Belges.

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²⁰ Il s'agit évidemment de l'image créée par les écrivains coloniaux, qu'aucune considération négative sur les méfaits de la colonisation ne souille.

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ILARIA VITALI

Cendrillon en banlieue: métamorphose contemporaine d'un conte de fées

Each century tends to create or re-create fairy tales after its own taste.
Angela Carter, *Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*

Comme le rappelle Nicole Belmont, le conte de Cendrillon dans ses nombreux avatars est de tout temps «le plus connu, le plus répandu, le plus aimé». (BELMONT 2007, p. 9)²¹

²¹ J'utiliserai des abréviations pour les textes cités le plus souvent dans mon article; je renvoie à la *Bibliographie finale* pour les références bibliographiques complètes.

Ce conte-type²² nomade et riche en thèmes et motifs typiquement méditerranéens²³ a voyagé dans le monde entier, avant de faire son entrée dans la culture européenne, où il a été codifié entre l'époque baroque et le classicisme, d'abord par Basile, dans *La gatta Cenerentola* (*Lo cunto de li cunti*, 1634-1636), puis par Perrault, dans *Cendrillon ou la petite pantoufle en verre* (*Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, 1697), dans la version qui est sans doute la plus connue aujourd'hui.²⁴

Ces deux premières versions écrites présentent des différences majeures: si la Cendrillon de Basile cache un côté obscur (elle tue sa première belle-mère, sous le conseil de celle qui deviendra sa seconde marâtre),²⁵ celle de Perrault est l'incarnation même de la grâce et de la bonté.²⁶ Quelles que soient les versions, ce conte montre le passage de l'enfance à l'âge adulte d'une fille «souillon et princesse», assise au coin de l'âtre et confinée à l'entretien du feu («Aggio na figlia, ma guarda sempre lo focolaro», BASILE 1995, p. 136) ce qui symbolise, d'après Adalinda Gasparini, la peur d'en-

trer dans l'âge adulte. Ce sera l'amour qui fera devenir femme Cendrillon, le mariage lui garantissant son ascension sociale.

Au fil des siècles, l'histoire de Cendrillon a fait l'objet d'innombrables reprises, transpositions, détournements²⁷ et chacun des adaptateurs du conte a insisté sur l'un de ses aspects majeurs, en modifiant la figure de l'héroïne selon les enjeux. En effet, de la *Finette-Cendron* de Madame D'Aulnoy (1697) à l'opéra-comique *Cendrillon* de Jules Massenet (1899), en passant par *La Cenerentola* de Rossini (1817), nombreux sont les auteurs qui ont joué sur le destin de cette «chatte cendreuse», la chargeant tour à tour de symboliques nouvelles.

Pour venir à nos jours, nombre de réécritures postmodernes, de Pierrette Fleutiaux (*Métamorphoses de la reine*, 1984) à Angela Carter (*Cinderella or The Little Glass Slipper*, in *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, 1977), s'attachent à la figure archétypale de la jeune fille pour en renverser la symbolique, dans une perspective féminine, voire féministe. A partir de *The Cinderella Complex* de Colette Dowling (1981) jusqu'à *Cendrillon est un couillon* de Catherine Lemaire (2002), la jeune héroïne du conte devient l'emblème de la femme soumise à la protection masculine et fournit ainsi le prétexte pour une réflexion sur la condition de la femme à l'époque contemporaine.

Plus récemment, les réécritures postcoloniales,

27 Sans compter les réécritures contemporaines, plus de 500 versions du conte ont été répertoriées à partir de la fin du XIX^e siècle. Je renvoie à ce sujet aux études de M. ROAFLE COX, *Cinderella; three hundred and forty-five variants of Cinderella, Catskin, and Cap o'Rushes, abstracted and tabulated, with a discussion of mediaeval analogues, and notes*, Londres, The Folk-lore Society, 1893 (disponible en ligne, sur le site <<http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/cinderella/marianroalfecox/>>) et A.B. ROOTH, *The Cinderella Cycle*, Lund, 1951. Pour avoir un avant-goût du cycle de Cendrillon, on lira l'anthologie établie et postfacée par BELMONT et LEMIRRE, *Sous la Cendre*.

déclinées dans toutes leurs formes,²⁸ ont pris la relève des réécritures postmodernes. Des exemples emblématiques nous sont fournis en ce sens par la littérature *beur*,²⁹ qui se prête plus que d'autres à fournir le cadre idéal pour une recontextualisation de ce conte à caractère initiatique. Dans un article récent, Hassina Mechaï traçait, non sans une volonté satirique, les jalons d'un parallèle entre Cendrillon et les «beurettes»:

Il est apparu, depuis peu, dans l'imaginaire médiatique, une nouvelle figure: celle de la beurette méritante, fragile créature à mi-chemin entre Antigone et Cendrillon. Une histoire telle que les médias les aiment, un parcours de la misère vers la lumière avec pour bonne fée la République bienveillante.

Cette dernière transformerait avec sa baguette magique «école-républicaine» cette brune Cendrillon: sa pauvre djellaba devenant un joli tailleur, ses babouches (pour faire couleur locale) devenant de vertigineux talons, ses cheveux hirsutes se domestiquant pour acquérir tout le lustre et la raideur requise, bref toute la panoplie établie de l'*executive woman*.³⁰

28 Je pense non seulement à la littérature, mais plus en général aux arts; je cite par exemple la performance de l'artiste haïtienne Barbara Prézeau-Stephenson, intitulée «Le complexe de Cendrillon» (2008).

29 Sur la littérature *beur*, sa définition et ses problématiques, je renvoie à A.G. HARGREAVES, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, Oxford/New York, Berg Publisher, 1997; *Au-delà de la littérature beur?*, «Expressions maghrébines», vol. 7, n. 1, 2008; M. LARONDE, *Autour du roman beur*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1993; *Postcolonialiser la haute culture*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008; I. VITALI, *Intrangers*, Louvain-la-neuve, Academia/L'Harmattan, 2011; I. VITALI, *La nebulosa beur*, Bologne, I libri di Emil, 2014.

30 H. MECHAÏ, *Icônes de la diversité ou archétypes de l'imaginaire colonial? Le cas Rachida Dati et Fadela Amara*, «Lmsi.com» (dossier Héritage coloniaux), <<http://lmsi.net/Icônes-de-la-diversite-ou>>.

Le conte-type en question est en effet aussi celui de l'enfant qui passe des cendres au trône, Cendrillon étant devenue synonyme de la jeune fille qui parvient à changer son statut à travers des épreuves ardues, pour voir finalement sa valeur et ses qualités reconnues. Sur un ton polémique, Mechaï s'insère ici dans un débat de longue date, qui tourne autour des «beurs de la réussite» – définis par certains «beurs de service», pour reprendre les mots d'Azouz Begag – c'est à dire des enfants de l'immigration maghrébine qui se sont «intégrés» à la culture dominante au point d'effacer entièrement toute trace d'étrangeté.

La comparaison entre la figure de Cendrillon et celle de la «beurette», ainsi que le rappel de certains des éléments signifiants du conte (baguette magique; bonne fée) suggérés par Mechaï méritent d'être approfondis. En effet, les traces d'un parcours féerique «de la misère vers la lumière» ne se trouvent pas seulement dans la médiasphère ou dans la vie politique française, comme le rappelle Mechaï dans son article, mais aussi dans plusieurs textes autobiographiques *beurs* que l'on pourrait ranger dans la catégorie des «récits de succès», comme par exemple *Comment je suis devenue une Beurgeoise* (2005) de Razika Zitouni. Dans l'univers plus proprement fictionnel, une étude particulièrement productive peut être conduite, à mon avis, sur le roman *La Petite Malika*, écrit à quatre mains par les deux frères Mabrouck Rachedi et Habiba Mahany. Ce livre raconte l'ascension d'une jeune fille issue d'une famille algérienne habitant dans une cité de banlieue, qui se lance à la conquête de la capitale. Si le parallèle entre Cendrillon et les «beurettes de la réussite» est seulement amorcé dans l'article de Mechaï, cette intuition critique mérite, à mon avis, une lecture et une application plus élaborées. J'essayerai donc de développer cette comparaison, en

22 510 A dans la classification internationale Arne-Thompson-Uther; classification sans doute un peu sommaire, mais très utile pour une analyse comparée des multiples versions de ce conte, qui a été noté pour la première fois dans sa version complète en Chine au IX^e siècle (cfr. BELMONT, LEMIRRE, 2007).

23 Cfr. à ce sujet M. RAK, *Da Cenerentola a Cappuccetto rosso. Breve storia illustrata della fiaba barocca*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2007.

24 Sur le conte baroque entre France et Italie, on lira l'étude de Michele Rak citée ci-dessus. Le conte de Basile est une source possible de celui de Perrault, mais comme plusieurs critiques l'ont souligné il est peu probable que Perrault ait pu avoir accès au *Cunto*, écrit en napolitain et traduit en français seulement au XIX^e siècle.

25 Michele Rak n'hésite pas à la définir «una ragazza molto cattiva». RAK, *Da Cenerentola a Cappuccetto rosso*, chapitre I, «Cenerentola. Una ragazza molto cattiva», pp. 1-9.

26 Una Cenerentola «tutta buona», pour reprendre les termes d'Adalinda Gasparini (GASPARINI 1999, p. 18).

proposant une lecture de *La petite Malika* à la lumière du conte-type de *Cendrillon*.³¹

Du conte de fées initiatique au Bildungsroman beur

On connaît l'analyse du conte-type de *Cendrillon* proposée par Marie-Louise Tenèze.³² Elle y distingue quatre éléments signifiants: 1) l'héroïne persécutée; 2) l'aide magique; 3) la rencontre avec le prince; 4) preuve et mariage.

Le roman de Rachedi et Mahany suit, comme nous le verrons, ce canevas sans se priver de la liberté d'en détourner plusieurs aspects.

Héroïne persécutée par le destin telle que son illustre prédécesseur, Malika doit faire face dès son enfance à une vie qui semble avoir pour seul horizon la cité H.L.M. de la banlieue parisienne où elle est née. Malgré ces prémisses apparemment peu favorables au développement du «merveilleux», le décor s'avère être moins écrasant que ce que l'on pourrait croire et, surtout, dès la première ligne, Malika montre avoir tout pour être l'héroïne d'un conte de fées. Elle présente d'ailleurs plus d'un point en commun avec la figure archétypale de *Cendrillon*: à moitié orpheline, elle est une jeune fille différente des autres (plus douée, plus sage, plus intelligente, plus gentille, plus travailleuse...) ce qui la détache de la moyenne de ses confrères et, surtout, de ses consœurs;³³ incarnation de l'«innocence persécutée», elle part d'une situation initiale difficile qui la pousse à agir pour obtenir un changement de sa condition, qui se fait par un mouvement symbolique en

31 J'enrichirai mon analyse ayant recours à quelques études sur la réécriture des contes de fées, notamment de PALACIO, 1993.

32 Cfr. P. DELARUE, *Le conte français. Catalogue raisonné des versions de France et des pays de langue française d'outre-mer* (1976-1977), tome II, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 1997, pp. 248-249.

33 Sur la rivalité fraternelle, qui constitue l'une des clefs-de-voûte du conte, je renvoie à B. BETTELHEIM, *Psychanalyse des contes de fées*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1976; voir le chapitre «Cendrillon», pp. 296-340.

trois temps comme dans le conte, son histoire suivant le schéma classique de Propp (malheur initial, série d'épreuves, vie nouvelle). Le roman raconte en effet ses aventures de l'âge de 5 ans jusqu'à 26 ans³⁴ et nous montre les évolutions de la «petite» Malika qui, grâce à une intelligence hors du commun, tracera sa route de la banlieue parisienne jusqu'au palais du Luxembourg, où elle sera conseillère d'un sénateur célèbre lors d'un stage dans le cadre de son cursus à l'ENA.

Le roman reprend plusieurs éléments signifiants du cycle de *Cendrillon*, en montrant une porosité au conte de Perrault aussi bien qu'à celui de Basile. S'il est peu probable que les deux auteurs aient puisé dans le *Cunto*, l'imaginaire du conte-type de *Cendrillon*, avec ses innombrables versions, est tellement partagé qu'il semble les influencer inconsciemment. Jamais déclarée, cette filiation secrète nous montre à quel point les thèmes et les motifs de ce conte de fées sont présents dans l'imaginaire collectif.

Commençons d'abord par l'orphelinat de l'héroïne. Comme la *Cendrillon* de Basile, de Perrault ou des frères Grimm, Malika a perdu l'un de ses deux parents. Cette fois, ce n'est pas la mère «qui était la meilleure personne du monde» (PERRAULT 1697, p. 93) qui manque, mais le père, remplacé par une suite d'aspirants beaux-pères, certains bons, d'autres méchants comme les belles-mères archétypales du conte. Ce qui ressort dans cette suite presque interminable de nouveaux «pères» sont l'inconsistance et la légèreté de la mère de Malika, cette dernière se montrant souvent plus mûre que sa génitrice. Le véritable père de l'héroïne n'est jamais pris en cause dans le texte et la jeune fille ne semble pas le regretter. Il n'en demeure pas moins une absence et un manque de transmission. L'orphelinat de Malika dans un contexte

34 Chaque chapitre reprend dans le titre l'âge de l'héroïne, en mettant ainsi l'accent sur ses évolutions et sur sa formation.

contemporain postcolonial se prête en effet à une lecture plus profonde. Comme Habiba Sebkhî l'a souligné, la figure de l'orphelin n'est pas rare dans la littérature *beur* et reproduit un statut précis:

Le narrateur et/ou le personnage est orphelin parce que le père est absent *in praesentia* ou *in absentia*; par ailleurs, sa bâtardise, qu'il perçoit comme appartenance à deux contextes culturels à la fois le stigmatise dans le même temps dans une société qui ne le reconnaît pas dans sa réalité propre et entière. (SEBKHI 2000, p. 36)

En impliquant une forte rupture d'ordre généalogique, aussi bien qu'un manque de transmission identitaire qui interdit l'acceptation de la condition d'«entre-deux-cultures», la figure des jeunes orphelins introduit le problème de la filiation. Le statut de ces personnages produit en effet l'idée d'illégitimité à un double niveau: celui des personnages *beurs* et celui des écrivains *beurs* eux-mêmes et de la littérature qu'ils produisent, considérée encore aujourd'hui comme «abusive» par rapport au canon français.

C'est peut-être l'absence de l'un des deux parents qui rend nécessaire la présence des marraines (ou des parrains), indispensables pour la réussite sociale de l'héroïne.³⁵ C'était d'ailleurs la seconde moralité du conte perraultien,³⁶ qui insistait sur l'importance des appuis à l'époque de la cour de la fin du XVII^e siècle et qui demeure, comme le montre le roman, en-

35 Plusieurs critiques voient en effet dans la fée-marraine du conte-type une incarnation de la mère défunte de *Cendrillon*.

36 «C'est sans doute un grand avantage, | D'avoir de l'esprit, du courage, | De la naissance, du bon sens, | Et d'autres semblables talents, | Qu'on reçoit du Ciel en partage; | Mais vous aurez beau les avoir, | Pour votre avancement ce seront choses vaines, | Si vous n'avez, pour les faire valoir, | Ou des parrains ou des marraines». (PERRAULT 1697, p. 101.)

core largement actuelle. Cela nous amène au deuxième élément constitutif du conte-type repéré par Tenèze: l'aide magique, incarné dans le conte-type par la fée marraine.

Contrairement à son aînée littéraire, le personnage de Malika ne peut pas compter sur un être secourable pour résoudre ses problèmes. D'ailleurs, comme Mechaï le souligne, dans la transposition contemporaine du conte la bonne fée est devenue la République Française, avec sa baguette magique «école-républicaine». Michel Laronde et d'autres spécialistes de littérature *beur* l'ont bien montré: l'école est un élément-clef dans le roman *beur*, qui met souvent en scène des jeunes personnages issus de l'immigration, aux prises avec l'éducation nationale et ses intentions ethnocentriques.³⁷ Premier lieu d'intégration à la culture française, l'école est présente dans la plupart des textes qui composent le corpus de la littérature en question et il en est de même pour *La petite Malika*. C'est en effet à l'école que notre héroïne manifeste pour la première fois son intelligence exceptionnelle, qui pourra lui ouvrir les portes d'un avenir heureux.

Conforme à la tradition du conte de fées, l'héroïne de Rachedi et Mahany est un être hors du commun. Et pourtant ce ne sont plus sa grâce et sa beauté qui font son charme, mais son esprit. Dans cette version contemporaine, la brune *Cendrillon* est définie «flasque et informe» pour devenir ensuite «à peu près regardable» (p. 101). Ce n'est pas pour son aspect extérieur, mais grâce à une intelligence extraordinaire qu'elle changera son statut. La formation de Malika se fait d'ailleurs par étapes accélérées, car ses talents extraordinaires lui font sauter des classes. Pour activer ce parcours

37 On pense, entre autres, au roman le plus célèbre de la littérature *beur*, devenu aujourd'hui un classique: *Le gone du Chaâba* d'Azouz Begag (1984). À partir de là, de nombreux autres textes ont mis en scène l'entrée à l'école française de jeunes issus de l'immigration maghrébine.

d'ascension, cette Cendrillon contemporaine devra pourtant lutter contre une mère illettrée, qui préférerait que sa fille demeure «sous la cendre» («Ma fille [...] va tout faire comme tout le monde. Pas besoin de lui monter la tête!», p. 14).

Malika, pourtant ne se résigne pas et, grâce à un rat (*sic*), elle parviendra à convaincre sa mère. Dans cette variation contemporaine, il ne s'agit plus d'un rat magique métamorphosé en cocher, comme dans le conte perraultien, mais d'un rat bien réel qui se promène dans la chambre d'un hôtel d'Alger où logent mère et fille de retour au pays natal, déclenchant la panique de la génitrice. Malika vole alors une promesse à cette dernière: si elle parviendra à les débarrasser du rat, sa mère l'autorisera à sauter des classes.

Le détail du rat est un premier indice du détournement opéré par les deux écrivains. Comme il est facile de constater, il ne s'agit plus d'une aide à la métamorphose magique de Cendrillon et de tout son appareil (carrosse, laquais...), mais d'un élément qui renforce la description d'un réel dégradé: nous entrons de plein pied dans un mouvement qui déconstruit le féérique du classicisme pour atteindre le réalisme postcolonial.

Toujours au sujet du magique, un autre élément signifiant du cycle de Cendrillon est repris dans *La petite Malika*: il s'agit du contact avec le sous-sol, balayé dans la version de Perrault mais présent dans celle de Basile et des frères Grimm, où il est représenté respectivement par la datte magique³⁸ et par le noisetier soigneusement cultivés par l'héroïne, qui produiront la bonne fée qui amènera l'héroïne au bal. À l'âge de 9 ans, Malika cultive aussi son petit jardin dans la cité rue Voltaire, malgré les

38 Sur le motif de la datte magique, qui revient d'ailleurs dans plusieurs contes de la tradition européenne (cfr. entre autres *Grattula, beddattula* in I. CALVINO, *Fiabe italiane*, Milan, Mondadori, 1956), cfr. DELARUE, *Le conte français*.

adversités qui l'entourent dans cet habitat hostile:

J'ai imaginé mon jardin d'Éden: un parterre de roses, de coquelicots et du lilas pour les fleurs, un petit potager avec tomates et carottes et des haies taillées au millimètre tout autour. J'ai bouquiné pour mieux comprendre les plantes, comment les arroser, à quelle profondeur planter les graines, à quelle saison. [...] J'ai appliqué toute ma concentration pour égaliser la terre, tondre l'herbe à la main, semer des engrais non chimiques dans le respect de la nature et puis biner, ratisser, couper, tailler... En quelques semaines, j'ai réussi un jardin mieux que Le Nôtre! (p. 50)

L'obstination et la détermination de la jeune fille dans son projet d'horticulture (qui n'est pas sans rappeler celle de Cendrillon-Zezolla dans le conte de Basile) montre bien son attachement à cet endroit de rêve, espace incongru qui pousse comme un «miracle» (p. 51) au milieu du gris de la cité.³⁹ Plusieurs critiques l'ont souligné: dans le cycle de Cendrillon, cultiver la terre met en relation avec le sous-sol, qui représente le contact avec les divinités chtoniennes, rattachées au cycle des saisons, de la vie, ainsi que de la vie après la mort.

À un niveau plus profond, Malika effectue ce contact par une maladie très grave qui l'atteint à l'âge de 13 ans et qui la confine à un lit d'hôpital pendant des mois, suspendue entre la vie et la mort: «J'avais l'impression qu'on me vidait de l'intérieur. Même mâcher était un effort

39 Dans ce jardin, Malika prévoit aussi des citrouilles. Comme pour le rat cité plus haut, ce renvoi qui paraît si transparent ne fait plus référence à la célèbre transformation magique, mais plutôt à la nuit d'Halloween: c'est pour cette fête, étrangère à la culture française, que Malika cultive ses cucurbitacées (p. 51), ce qui nous montre le changement de perspectives et de références par rapport au «canon» français en œuvre dans la littérature *beur*.

considérable et, une fois déchiquetés, les aliments n'avaient aucun goût. [...] J'aurais sauté par la fenêtre si mes jambes avaient pu me porter jusque-là». (p. 90)

C'est la plus dure des épreuves que l'héroïne devra surmonter dans son parcours initiatique. Elle y parviendra grâce aux livres – notamment de philosophie – qui lui garantiront non seulement sa formation, mais une guérison quasi miraculeuse: «Le docteur Martin était étonné de mes progrès [...]. “[...] l'état de Malika s'améliore de jour en jour et je crois pouvoir dire que sa passion pour la philosophie y est pour quelque chose”». (p. 96)

Par le truchement des livres, Malika guérit et parfait son éducation. L'hypotexte du conte de *Cendrillon* offre ainsi aux deux auteurs un canevas pour construire un *Bildungsroman*,⁴⁰ un genre plutôt courant dans le roman *beur*, que l'on retrouve dans de nombreux textes dès les années 1980 jusqu'à nos jours. Cette formation n'est que plus intéressante du moment qu'elle est accomplie par une fille qui se métamorphose en femme au cours du roman (l'évolution temporelle est scandée, on l'a vu, par les titres des chapitres qui suivent l'âge de Malika). Contrairement aux versions les plus classiques du conte-type de Cendrillon, cette métamorphose ne s'accomplira cependant pas grâce au mariage avec «le prince», car Malika tracera toute seule sa route; grâce à ses talents et à son travail, elle quittera la cité et trouvera sa place dans la société franco-française, en réussissant le concours d'entrée à l'ENA. D'ailleurs, comme pour d'autres romans *beurs*, dans le cas de *La petite Malika* il faudrait parler non seulement de roman de *formation*, mais de roman de *transformation*, car ce n'est pas seulement la formation du personnage qui est mise en scène, mais la transformation de la société française aux prises avec les deuxièmes généra-

40 Sur le *Bildungsroman beur* je renvoie, entre autres, à REECK, *De l'échec à la réussite dans le bildungsroman beur*, 2004.

tions de l'immigration qui cherchent, comme Malika, leur place au soleil.⁴¹

Perversions du merveilleux

Si le roman de Rachedi et Mahany semble tirer parti de plusieurs éléments signifiants du conte-type de *Cendrillon*, il ne se prive pourtant pas du plaisir de les détourner. Les deux écrivains puisent en effet dans un imaginaire contique partagé tout en l'irrigant de courants inédits. En substituant le réalisme postcolonial au surnaturel des contes de fées, Rachedi et Mahany opèrent une «perversion» du merveilleux, pour reprendre les mots de Jean de Palacio. Le gommage du féérique est réalisé à plusieurs niveaux et cela est d'autant plus évident si on pose en hypotexte le conte de Perrault, sans doute le plus opératif dans l'imaginaire de deux écrivains.

La reprise par détournement montre bien la volonté de transgresser la tradition, le canon littéraire et son langage, pratiques courantes dans la littérature *beur*. En effet, le conte de Perrault met en avant le luxe des décors et des «habits de drap d'or et d'argent tout chamarrés de pierreries», qui évoquent directement les splendeurs de la cour de Versailles.⁴² Par le biais du parcours initiatique de sa jeune héroïne, Perrault ne raconte pas uniquement le passage d'une fille de l'enfance à l'âge adulte, mais montre les fastes (ainsi que les normes) de la cour de Louis XIV. À cette exaltation du luxe correspond un style très recherché: Perrault n'hésite pas à employer des termes rares et déjà inusités de son temps, en bouclant ses contes par des moralités en vers. Or, dans la version «détournée» de Rachedi et Mahany, le

41 Au sujet du «roman de transformation», je renvoie au chapitre 4 de mon livre *La nebulosa beur*, («Tras formazioni: il Bildungsroman beur», pp. 119-151).

42 On se souviendra, entre autres, du détail précieux des oranges et des citrons – largement inconnus à l'époque de Perrault et destinés uniquement à l'aristocratie – que le Prince offre à Cendrillon.

dépouillement du luxe du décor correspond au refus d'une langue soutenue au profit d'un nouveau langage. Comme la narratrice le fait remarquer dès son plus jeune âge, dans sa cité de la banlieue parisienne, «[l]es discussions relevaient du sabir mêlant arabe, argot, anglais, verlan et un peu de français. Le langage de la cour de récréation était très loin du français de cour». (p. 69)

Il y aurait beaucoup à dire sur le langage employé dans ce roman, qui non seulement puise constamment dans ce que l'argotologue Jean-Pierre Goudaillier a appelé «français contemporain des cités»,⁴³ mais qui dé-crypte et dé-joue ce même langage dans un discours métatextuel très réfléchi. Par ces pratiques langagières hybrides et novatrices, les deux auteurs parviennent à raconter un monde «des marges», du «dehors» (la banlieue défavorisée; le monde des immigrés et de leurs enfants), avec le regard du «dedans», celui de la petite Malika, d'origine algérienne mais née en France. Dès la première ligne du roman, la narratrice acquiert en effet le statut d'une *outsider*, position qu'elle occupe dans la cité, qui la voit comme un «extraterrestre» pour ses succès scolaires et son intérêt pour les livres, aussi bien que dans la société parisienne huppée qu'elle commence à fréquenter depuis l'hypokhâgne, où elle figure comme «néo-bourgeoise parvenue» (p. 195), à la peau toujours un peu plus matte que ses copines. Quoique apparemment malaisée, cette position liminale finit cependant pour devenir privilégiée, les *outsiders* étant souvent les moteurs des transformations, comme Malika le démontre au cours des années.

Dans le roman de Rachedi et Mahany, le palais du pouvoir n'est plus celui du prince charmant, il devient ici celui d'un homme politique, un sénateur, avec lequel la jeune fille n'a pourtant aucune relation amoureuse. Elle lui préfère un jeune homme, Manuel, rejeton d'une famille

43 Cfr. J.-P. GOUDAILLIER, *Comment tu tchatches!*, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001.

de l'aristocratie espagnole, qui joue ici le rôle du prince du conte (troisième élément constitutif défini par Tenèze). L'accès au monde somptueux de la future belle-famille de Malika est décrit comme une entrée de plein pied dans le féérique: «Le week-end a paru aussi irréel qu'une journée avec le petit Lord Fauntleroy. Les toilettes avaient la surface de notre vieux studio alors imaginez le reste de l'hacienda. [...] L'immensité se prolongeait dans les jardins à la française donnant eux-mêmes sur un haras». (p. 190)

Malgré sa beauté et ses richesses, Manuel est en réalité un personnage plutôt fade et sans grande consistance, et Malika choisira de le quitter dans la chute du roman, au moment où Cendrillon couronnait sa réussite par le mariage. Cette transformation ultérieure n'est pas anodine. L'amour (ainsi que le mariage), moteur de l'ascension dans les multiples versions du conte-type 510 A, n'est plus ici au gros plan: il apparaît plutôt à l'arrière-fond, quitte à revenir au centre de la scène dans l'*explicit* du roman – *happy ending* oblige – quoique détourné. Après être devenue femme uniquement grâce à son esprit et à son intelligence, sans l'intermédiaire d'un homme, Malika renonce au pouvoir récemment acquis et à son avenir d'*executive woman*⁴⁴ pour retrouver les valeurs simples de la vie: son honnêteté intellectuelle la pousse à abandonner le palais parisien et à revenir «aux cendres», en banlieue, où elle deviendra professeur de français dans le même collège qu'elle a fréquenté comme élève.

Plutôt que les moralités perraultiennes, le roman de Rachedi et Mahany suivrait donc celle de Basile («pazzo è chi contrasta co le stelle»,

44 Un parcours qui n'est pas sans rappeler celui de Mabrouck Rachedi, qui a quitté le monde de la finance où il travaillait pour retourner en banlieue et se consacrer uniquement à l'écriture.

Basile, 1995, p. 136)⁴⁵ Ce n'est pas ainsi, car vivre en banlieue défavorisée est un destin que Malika a bien choisi après son voyage initiatique: «Quand j'ai réfléchi à mon avenir, le passé m'est revenu en pleine figure. Ce que je voulais vraiment c'était transmettre. Je me suis inscrite à une licence de lettres modernes et à l'iufm pour devenir professeur de français. [...] Personne ne voulait échouer dans cette zone d'éducation prioritaire réputée la pire de la région et moi, je l'avais choisie pour mon stage d'un an». (p. 211 et p. 219)

La décision à contre-courant de cette Cendrillon contemporaine n'est pas bien reçue par Manuel: si la jeune femme semble bien consciente que l'époque n'est plus aux contes de fées et qu'en banlieue «tout était à construire» (p. 219), le jeune homme paraît, lui, encore attaché à son rôle de prince charmant et n'accepte pas la déroute de la féerie:

Manuel m'a dit que ma fébrilité physique était la preuve que cette vie n'était pas pour moi. La banlieue, c'était bien gentil quand on avait 15 ans mais maintenant, il faudrait que je pense à vivre pleinement auprès de lui. [...] Comme par hasard, Manuel m'a demandé en mariage à ce moment-là. On partirait en voyage de noces un an pour visiter le monde, réaliser nos rêves. Il ne comprenait pas que mon rêve, j'étais en train de le vivre chez moi, en redessinant le monde des élèves que j'avais en charge. (pp. 220-221)

C'est le détournement le plus puissant de la symbolique de Cendrillon opéré par les deux auteurs, qui abandonnent définitivement le registre du féérique: par le retour aux sources pauvres après avoir goûté au pouvoir, le cours de la destinée de Cendrillon est inversé et

45 «Est fou qui veut lutter contre les étoiles». Tr. de Ch. DEULIN, *La chatte cendreuse*, in *Les contes de ma mère l'Oye avant Perrault* (1878), Genève, Slatkine, 1969, p. 308.

notre héroïne regagne son visage humain.⁴⁶ C'est d'ailleurs en banlieue que la «petite Malika» rencontrera son «petit Malik», en trouvant ainsi «chaussure à son pied» (quatrième élément constitutif du conte repéré par Tenèze). Ce n'est pas une façon de parler: la petite Malika rencontre effectivement le petit Malik, héros du roman éponyme de Mabrouck Rachedi, publié par Lattès deux ans auparavant *La petite Malika*, en 2008.

Si le conte de Perrault est «celui d'une quête de l'instant qui verra enfin la réunion des deux pantoufles, comme celle des deux moitiés séparées d'un même être» (DE PALACIO, 1993, p. 180),⁴⁷ la réunion est ici assurée par la rencontre des deux personnages au même prénom (auquel s'ajoute, pour les deux, l'épithète de «petit»), qui se présentent comme les deux

46 C'est d'ailleurs une inversion du conte-type qui devient opérative dès la fin du XIX^e siècle, comme de Palacio le montre bien: «Faute de marraine-fée, si ce n'est "La fée Misère", le conte fin-de-siècle inverse le cours de ses métamorphoses et de ses destinées. [...] après avoir été une Idole adulée, Cendrillon réintègre la condition humaine [...]». (DE PALACIO, 1993, p. 173)

47 Sur la symbolique des chaussures de Cendrillon, on lira entre autres: BETTELHEIM, *Psychanalyse des contes de fées*, pp. 393-444 et M. SORIANO, *Les contes de Perrault*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968, pp. 144-145. La sandale de Rhodopis, qui devient une «pianella» chez Basile, puis la célèbre pantoufle en verre (ou «en vair», selon Balzac) chez Perrault, est l'un des motifs du conte les plus suggestifs et les plus commentés. S'il est sûrement chargé d'une connotation sexuelle au XVII^e et au XVIII^e siècles (on se souvient, entre autres, de la première lettre qui ouvre les *Liaisons dangereuses* de Laclos, de Cécile Volanges à Sophie Carnay), ce motif entre par la suite dans l'imaginaire commun, ainsi que dans le français courant. Très récemment, pour fêter la redistribution en DVD du long-métrage animé *Cinderella* (1950), la Walt Disney Company a chargé Christian Louboutin de redessiner la célèbre chaussure en l'adaptant au XXI^e siècle. On peut voir sur le site de la marque <<http://www.christianlouboutin.com>>, l'escarpin chamarré d'une dentelle et brodé de cristaux, avec la semelle écarlate marque de fabrique du créateur. Cela montre à quel point la puissance symbolique de ce motif contique est encore vivante aujourd'hui.

moitiés complémentaires d'un couple parfait. Par leur réunification, la petite Malika et le petit Malik reconstituent la paire, sans que les deux auteurs aient besoin d'ajouter autre chose.

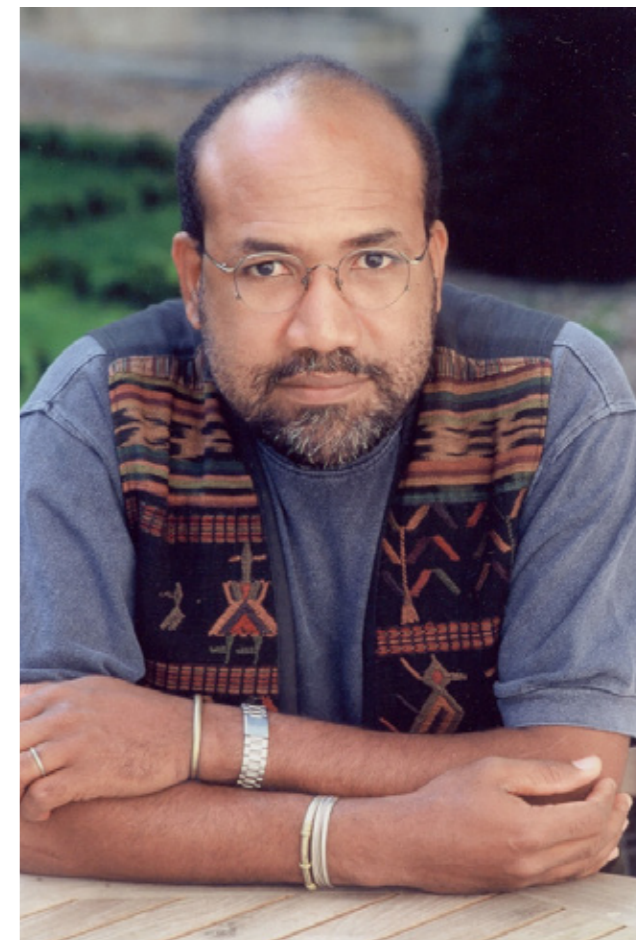
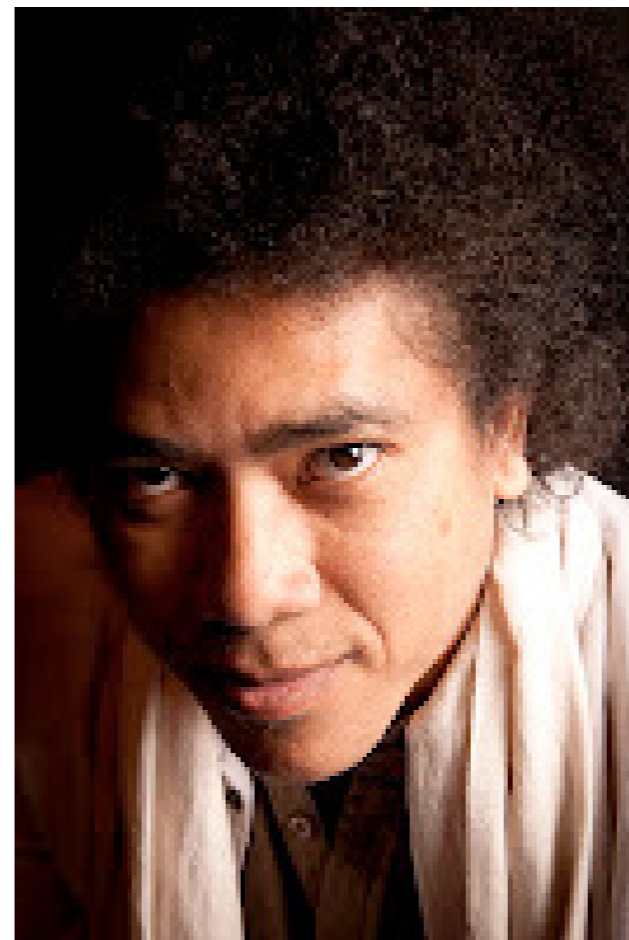
Ainsi, comme dans d'autres reprises du conte-type à partir de la fin du XIX^e siècle, «Cendrillon finit par épouser, non un prince charmant, mais un "simple garçon", [...] qui habite, non un vaste palais, mais une "petite maison"» (DE PALACIO, 1993, p. 173). *La petite Malika* rejoint, en ce sens, d'autres réécritures assez récentes, dont je me limiterai à citer *Revolting Rhymes* (1982) de Roald Dahl: «No more Princes, no more money. | I have had my taste of honey. | I'm wishing for a decent man. | They're hard to find. D'you think you can?»⁴⁸

Au début du XXI^e siècle, l'époque de la cour, soit-elle celle de Naples ou celle de Versailles, est définitivement révolue, tout comme celle du conte de fées. Malika en est bien consciente. Comme si minuit sonnait, l'enchantement s'achève, notre héroïne pend ses tailleurs de marque et abandonne les talons vertigineux évoqués par Mechaï comme signe d'une fausse intégration à la société dominante; tout semble revenir à l'état initial. Mais l'explicit de *La petite Malika* cache en réalité une «moralité» bien plus profonde. Car la Cendrillon de Rachedi et Mahany réussit la plus ardue de toutes les épreuves: saisir le merveilleux dans le quotidien, cultiver le rêve même «sous la cendre». Comme Laura Reeck le précise, «il n'est pas rare que les fins des *Bildungromane* beurs préfigurent des commencements, ou plus précisément des recommencements» (REECK 2004, p. 85).

48 R. DAHL, *Cinderella* in *Revolting Rhymes*, Londres, Jonathan Cape, 1982, p. 12. «Je ne veux plus de princes, je ne veux plus d'argent, | De ces douceurs-là j'ai eu mon comptant. | Je voudrais épouser un homme sans histoire, | Quelqu'un de bien qui ne soit pas trop poire». Tr. de A. KRIEF, *Cendrillon*, in *Un conte peut en cacher un autre*, Paris, Gallimard Jeunesse, 2003, p. 15.

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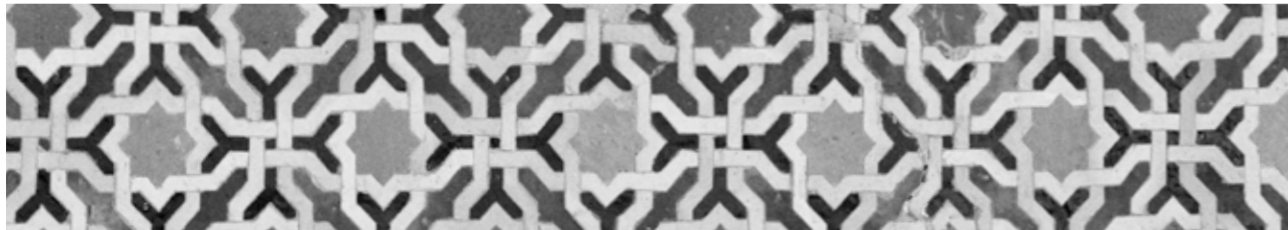


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irlanda



GIOVANNA TALLONE

Houses of Difference in the Fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Clare Boylan

A house is a «privileged entity» in its unity and complexity, writes Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (Bachelard 1994: 3). It is ambivalent and polymorphic, a setting but also a metonymic space of the interior, a psychological diagram (p. 38) for the private world of self. A house is a space to be read (p. 38), it is a textual construction and a cornerstone of psychic topography.

In the fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Clare Boylan the variety of geographical settings is set alongside the unity and fragmentation of the houses at the heart of their stories and novels. The different houses are often houses of difference, their space turns out to be alien and unknown, and hides or discloses characters who are in various ways marginalized or different. This essay will take into account the way in which Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Clare Boylan exploit the space of the house as a container for difference, both in terms of variety of disabilities and of mental disturbance. Attention will then be cast on the close reading of two early and fairly neglected stories by each writer, *A Fairer House* from Ní Dhuibhne's first collection *Blood and Water* (1988), and *Mama*, first

published in Boylan's first collection of stories *A Nail on the Head* (1983).

Houses recur regularly as settings and protagonists in Ní Dhuibhne's fiction, from *Blood and Water* to her latest collection *The Shelter of Neighbours* (2012). In her early novel and futuristic fantasy *The Bray House* (1990), a group of Swedish archaeologists led by ambitious Robin Lagerlof excavate a house in Bray after nuclear disaster in Ireland. Here the discovery of the «debris of the Irish way of life» (Ní Dhuibhne 1990: 70) in the building is also an excavation into Robin's hidden memories. Appropriation of space is thus appropriation of self. And yet, appropriation is also dispossession, since by gaining ground in space, the protagonist loses control on reality. The Bray House also reminds Robin of her own childhood home, «clinical in atmosphere», «never a comfortable place to be in», «all empty spaces, palest grey floors, snow white walls» (p. 42), «bare» (p. 43).

Houses thus break borders (St Peter 2006) between past and present, here and there, illusion and reality, the real world and the other world. In Ní Dhuibhne's story *Midwife to the Fairies*, for example, the realistic setting acquires a dreamlike quality in the intertextual juxtaposition of «a modern story with a traditional story» (Moloney, Thompson 2003: 107). Geographical references to places in Co. Wicklow

interlace with the non-place inhabited by the fairies (Bourke 2003: 31). The midwife leaves her own house at night to reach a house «buried [...] at the side of a road, in a kind of hollow» (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 29). In her journey, different worlds coexisting side by side interact. The midwife herself partakes of two worlds, of this and the other world, the darkness of the unborn and the light of birth (Purkiss 2000: 86). Also in Ní Dhuibhne's latest collection, *The Shelter of Neighbours*, the setting of the imaginary Dublin neighbourhood of Dunroon leaves space to the houses it is made of. In *Trespasses* the possession of a house becomes obsessive when the protagonist trespasses on private property. The house becomes the setting of rage, loss of control and murder in a disquieting turning point. And in *The Sugar Loaf* Audrey's loneliness is emphasised by the disorder in her kitchen, «piled with newspapers, letters, schoolbooks, essays or exams by pupils» (Ní Dhuibhne 2012: 140).

In a similar way, in Clare Boylan's novel *Beloved Stranger*, the house where Dick and Lily Butler have lived for fifty years is a «tall, narrow house with the black railings gripped so close to its front that it seemed to exist behind a cage» (Boylan 1999: 4), its solidity borders with confinement. Their daughter, Ruth, has become an architect because she has always been fascinated and obsessed by houses, «their design, their spirit [...] how they could harbour darkness and capture light» (p. 42). The polarity light–darkness is a catalyst for Dick's mental illness, whose first symptoms involve turning against the house, opening doors and windows and burning books and furniture.

In Clare Boylan's stories like *L'Amour*, *Flat Shadows* and *Concerning Virgins*, the space of houses is often oppressive. In *L'Amour* the chateau where the young protagonist's prospective stepmother lives is «a smashing place, full of towers like wizards' hats» (Boylan 1989: 111). In *Flat Shadows* the house where the family decides to spend Christmas is «fairly hor-

rible» (Boylan 1997: 106), its «silence» and «the way the house belonged to itself» (p. 105) anticipate the mysterious presences that haunt it. In *Concerning Virgins* the house where Narcissus Fitzgall lives with his aging daughters «had been built on a hill above the river but appeared, from the inside, to be suspended in water» (Boylan 1989: 187) and the atmosphere of magic contrasts with the violence and brutality of its prison-like environment. And in Boylan's last novel *Emma Brown* (2003) a variety of houses provides a background for different, often disquieting environments, from the big house where Mrs Chalfont is a governess in youth to the house of Reverend Hibble where Emma finds employment. His house's «mournful interior depths» (Boylan 2003: 256) and comfortlessness (p. 257) are a coreferent for his unbalanced mind.

The claustrophobia of enclosed or secluded spaces is often related to characters who in some way do not conform, who are different for status, or thwarted by some form of physical or mental disability. Either at the centre of narration or in peripheral roles, characters off the norm are recurring presences in the fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Clare Boylan, and seem to belong to places that are, likewise, off the norm. For example, Aunt Annie, in Ní Dhuibhne's story *Blood and Water*, a source of development for the novel *The Dancers Dancing* (1999), is an older version of the young dyslexic student, Mary Doyle, in the story *The Catechism Examination* (Moloney, Thompson 2003: 114). Mary is «stupid», «She can't learn, it seems, and she looks terrible. [...] There is something wrong with Mary Doyle» (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 94). Likewise, Aunt Annie «looked wrong», «like a freak» (p. 118). The story opens with the obsessive focus on the Aunt's difference, she is «not the full shilling», «the mad aunt», «mentally retarded» (p. 108). The continuous emphasis on her disability and the repeated attempt to give it a form in words mirrors the first-person narrator's difficulty in

coming to terms with it. Location itself eludes definition, the house is «in a large yard called “the street”» (p. 111), and so it is a place whose name does not match with reality. The position of the house «on the road down to the lough» (p. 119) is a liminal place, neither here nor there, in the same way as its inhabitant does not fit in or conform with what is considered normal. Like Aunt Annie in *Blood and Water*, Aunt Annie in *The Dancers Dancing* is for Orla the epitome of abnormality: «she is out of the kilter, not plumb with the world» (Ni Dhuibhne 1999: 138), and her physical appearance, her face, body, walk and voice are a visible counterpart of an inner distortion that makes her similar to an animal when «she hobbles up the aisle, haunched as a hedgehog» (132): «Her face is crooked, her mouth is crooked, and she walks with a clumsy and awkward gait, her feet cannot be relied upon to meet the ground at every step. What we would say now is that she lacked coordination [...] Her voice emerges [...] in a jerking staccato, screeching one minute, inaudible the next» (pp. 138-39)

Aunt Annie is physically and metaphorically «positioned at an oblique angle» to the village of Tubber where she lives, and to Orla Annie's house is the house of difference: «There was a crooked woman and she had a crooked house» (p. 139).

Obsessive monomania is a sign of disquietude in *The Garden of Eden*. Here Carmelita reacts to the abandonment of her husband developing a fixation with the neighbours' garden. Likewise, Robin Lagerlof in *The Bray House* is obsessed with the house in Bray and she is often referred to as «mad» by the other members of the expedition; her «lust for power» and her «ruthlessness» (Ni Dhuibhne 1990: 185) are perceived as pathological.

In *The Flowering*, Sally Rua's fall into depression and insanity is reflected in the prison-like house she inhabits, «a square stone block on a slow slope» (Ni Dhuibhne 1991: 19). In a similar way, in *The Pale Gold of Alaska*, Sophie loses

her mind when deprivation and claustrophobia overlap, «immured in her cold cabin in a land of ice» (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 33).

The interaction between space and difference or disability characterizes Clare Boylan's fiction too. In *Affairs in Order* Jocelyn's wasting illness contrasts with his «bright room» where he lies «in a feathery bed by the window» (Boylan 2000: 120). *The Miracle of Life* opens shedding light on the space of the street where «All the houses boasted a radiant darkness» (Boylan 1989: 141). The oxymoronic expression anticipates Renee's «crippling disease» (p. 145) and highlights her confinement in bed. The unbalanced first-person narrative voice in *The Prisoner* focuses obsessively on inner and outer space («Why do you suppose she locks me up»; «Now I just sit in my room [...] looking out the window») (Boylan 1997: 167). This spatial negotiation sheds light on the ongoing wavering of the mind in Alzheimer's disease, the simultaneous presence and absence of consciousness.

In the partially autobiographical novel *Beloved Stranger*, Tim Walcott, the psychiatrist diagnosing Dick Butler's bi-polar disorder, struggles with language when trying to define his patient's condition: «Mad, senseless, deranged, mental, insane, confused, demented, crazy [...] Have you a dictionary? [...] Deranged [...] Here we are! [...] Thrown into disorder. That's about right. We won't say he's mad any more now [...] We'll say deranged [...] I still like mad though [...] It's close to “magic”» (Boylan 1999: 58). He needs the authority of written words to give form to what is elusive and uncontrollable. The irrational of magic lies in the background, and his search for a *mot propre* is indicative of the difficulty of speaking of disability, and the fact that a deranged person inhabits two worlds at the same time, reality and delusion, here and there, now and then, and by doing so he belongs in neither. «Most madmen are remarkable» Tim Walcott continues. «They're explorers, travellers beyond the rim of con-

sciousness» (p. 59). He acknowledges the negotiation between the borders of the conscious and the unconscious, blurred like the boundary between madness and magic.

Two stories in particular concern the interaction of madness and magic, where the space of the house is a catalyst for both. *A Fairer House* was published in Ní Dhuibhne's debut collection, *Blood and Water* in 1988, a volume in which concern with the issues of contemporary Ireland intertwines with experimentation in form and intertextuality. (Hand 2000: 103). *Mama* was published in Clare Boylan's first collection of stories *A Nail on the Head* in 1983, highlighting the complexity of love relationships in its many manifestations.

The two stories are not very often mentioned or anthologised and yet they deserve attention *per se* in the development of each writer's production. In fact, *A Fairer House* elaborates on Ní Dhuibhne's background in folklore and interest in narrative and storytelling, a *fil rouge* in her fiction. Boylan's *Mama* focuses on the nature of maternal love and its macabre overtone sheds light on the traumas of childhood and the difficulties in interpersonal relationships, a *leit-motif* in her novels, too, from *Holy Pictures* (1983) to *Emma Brown*.

In spite of divergences in plot, point of view and narrative strategies, the stories also show parallelisms and cross references in the shared use of setting, a maze-like and mysterious house, and in the theme of mental unbalance or breakdown following the encounter with an alien creature. If folkloric elements are more overtly evident in Ní Dhuibhne's story, in both they are not disjointed from strong Gothic features, especially in the powerful presence of the house as an overcharacter, which is an allomorph for traditional settings in Gothic tales, «an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space – be it a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt [...] a large old house» (Hogle 2002: 2). Both the house built around a forge in *A Fairer House* and the

«square and yellow» house, the «architectural castaway» (Boylan 2000: 360, 361) in *Mama* belong to the uncanny, *Das Unheimliche*, and in different ways can also be read as textual representations. Attention drawn to the house is attention drawn to the text, so that the obsessive references to spaces, rooms, corridors, stairs, doors, are a catalyst for the textual construction of both stories.

In Ní Dhuibhne's *A Fairer House* an unnamed first-person narrator recounts the sudden arrival of a mysterious girl, Emily, in the strange house where he lives. She makes her presence heard by singing, and does not provide any information apart from her name. After the sexual encounter that follows, Emily is nowhere to be found, her disappearance is as mysterious as her appearance. Exhausted by the pointless search for Emily in his huge maze-like house, and persecuted by penetrating sounds coming from nowhere in the house, the protagonist's balance collapses.

In Clare Boylan's *Mama* William and Joanne stop at an abandoned house that attracts their attention. As a matter of fact, a mentally retarded man lives there. He is surrounded by toys, and only utters one word, «Mama». He has some mysterious power to close and open doors, so that William and Joanne find themselves locked inside. Here, William's childhood memories of abandonment make him regress to childhood, and losing his mind he turns into the invalid, assuming his behaviour and language. In the story Boylan reproduces the standard situation of claustrophobia and grotesque «exaggeration of character and location» (Punter 2000: viii) that recurs in Gothic fiction and that is to be found in *Flat Shadows* and *The Prisoner*. The disquieting undertone of *Mama*, however, also shows features of folkloric and fairy-tale elements that frequently characterize, instead, Ní Dhuibhne's fiction. The title of Ní Dhuibhne's story, *A Fairer House*, covers different areas, implying the realistic expression of desire of a fairer house, but also

intertextually casting a glimpse to Emily Dickinson's poem *I Dwell in Possibility*. «I dwell in Possibility – | A fairer House than Prose – | More numerous of Windows – | Superior – for Doors –». Incidentally, the mysterious girl is called Emily, which draws attention to the subtext and highlights the house as a textual construction. However, the expression «fairer house» sheds light on the magic element of another world, as the comparative form «fairer» implies the noun «fairy», thus recalling Ní Dhuibhne's interest and background in folklore. The protagonist and first-person narrator lives in «a blacksmith's forge», «built of granite stones» according to the «folly style» (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 69). The forge is an allomorph for a cellar, the irrational space, «the dark entity side of the house», which «partakes of subterranean forces» (Bachelard 1994: 18). The cellar is thus the unconscious, and in this sense the forge, which is also the centre of the house (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 71), is both the unconscious and the textual centre of the story. Also the reference to the folly style is a multiple catalyst. Used in an architectural sense, it is a mock gothic ruin, thus making the gothic features of the story visible and shedding light on the conscious fiction of the story. Disorder is reflected in the layout of the house, which is «built without pattern or purpose», made of «twenty odd misplaced rooms» (pp. 69-70), which anticipates the protagonist's mental disorder.

«Signs form other worlds» (McGuinness 1989: 24) are made visible and the boundaries between worlds are broken. In fact, as we read in Sean Ó Suilleabhain's *Irish Folk Custom and Belief*, a house should not «be built on the site of a former forge» (Ó Suilleabhain: 16), so this house invades the world of the fairies. Moreover, the forge «is placed right in the centre of the roundabout. It used to be a crossroads» (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 70). Crossroads are liminal places that «played a prominent part in folk custom and belief, as well

as in folktales» (Ó Suilleabhain: 30), they are places that are also non-places. The setting of a house at a crossroads thus highlights the «betwixt-and-between» (Bourke 2003: 31) the fairies belong to, but also the betwixt-and-between of the other world of mental unbalance. The location in-between is a coreference in space to the liminal time of encounters with the other world – twilight, midnight (Briggs 2002: 123) – a pattern Ní Dhuibhne reproduces in the story, as the protagonist and first-person narrator encounters Emily at the end of the day.

A similar sign from a different world appears in Boylan's *Mama* too, where the «mass of cobwebs and thorny growths» Joanne sweeps away (Boylan 2000: 360) is both a realistic detail of the abandoned house and a folkloric detail, as Katharine Briggs suggests that «cobwebs are always supposed to be magical things» (Briggs 2002: 24). The house in *Mama* is limited in its horizontal perception of the garden, the hall and the toy room, thus emphasising the solid pervasiveness of the man's presence. In Ní Dhuibhne's *A Fairer House*, instead, Emily's fleeting presence is enhanced by the verticality of the house, highlighted by the protagonist's double journey through it from bottom to top. The layout itself of the house is erratic:

Around the forge, rooms are strung haphazardly; some are one, some two, some three or four storeys high. One room at the top of a third storey is inaccessible except by ladder or wing. [...] The other rooms are all accessible by the human foot, either from within or without the building. They are of varying shapes and sizes, but mainly small. (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 71)

The obsessive labyrinthine quality of «the maze of corridors and staircases» resembles a Piranesi engraving, winding «this way and that, narrow and gloomy, frightening to traverse. Some lead to every room in the house [...]; some lead nowhere at all» (p. 71). Corridors

provide a metanarrative perspective: «You will learn all you need to as I ramble on» (p. 71); the verb «to ramble» implies both movement in space and the act of writing, which is, like the house, without pattern or purpose. The movement inside the house is at the same time maze-like and claustrophobic: «I ploughed through corridors full of cobwebs, spiders and insects. I slid along the glazed surfaces of highly polished corridors. I choked on the dust of stinking, carpeted corridors. I opened doors I hadn't opened in years and doors I had never opened in my life till then.» (p. 74)

The movement «up the longest corridor winding up four storeys» (p. 73) is thus a textual journey, whose opening is marked by a threshold: «I live in a forge, a blacksmith's forge. I'll describe it for you as precisely as possible» (p. 69). The narrator is inside and outside, on the threshold of the text, and the decision to describe the forge marks the entrance into it, and thus into the text of the story.

The gothic quality of the setting characterises also Clare Boylan's *Mama*. Here too the opening focuses on the negotiation between outside and inside, as the protagonist is in the Norman's land of the garden, a liminal area and a textual threshold. The opening paragraph is characterised by alternated focus between the landscape outside and the house. Its impression of solidity («square and yellow», Boylan 2000: 360), however, seems to be contradicted by the stylistic fragmentation of the opening paragraph, characterised by brief descriptive sentences: «William was in the garden looking at the house, which was square and yellow. Behind it and around, there was scenery; patchwork fields, cosily bumpy like an eider-down, little hunchback shrubs, cowering in the hollows, a horizon with a tooth-edge of firs. A green vegetable, immense, William thought.» (p. 360)

The disorder of the landscape – controlled and contained in a list – anticipates the disorder inside the house and the mental disorder that

is expecting William. The neuter terrain of the garden is enhanced by the «three steps that led to the door» (p. 360): the text opens with a door that is opening. The «mass of cobwebs and thorny growths» hide the door, and together with the «brambles» a few lines below create some sort of curtain that Joanne holds back (p. 369), thus marking the opening of the story, the stepping inside the text.

The mutual identification of the house with the text is enhanced by the gradual exclusion of the visual perception of the world outside as «the placid landscape diminished in the gap of the door and went black» (p. 361). The world inside has a life of its own; William and Joanne unwillingly become the protagonists of the story that is about to begin inside. William is a puppet in the hands of the house as «The door [...] carried him into the hall» (p. 361). Closing the door leaves the rational world outside, and inside the claustrophobia of the house is also the *Geschlossenheit* of the text, since «all the windows are barred» (p. 362) and unexplainably «the door slammed» (p. 363).

In both stories the encounter with an alien presence is announced by aural effects. The human voice that the protagonist hears in *A Fairer House* is first perceived as «high notes» (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 74) recalling the clangs of horseshoes that «resound eerily» in the forge and extend to the house: «Their echoes penetrate to the marrow of my bones and fill me with death shiver» (70). Likewise in *Mama* the mysterious sound, «Mama», intertwines with Joanne's voice calling William's attention to «the other noise» similar to the mechanism box of a doll (Boylan 2000: 363). The doll Joanne finds in the room that «seemed to be the nursery of a spoilt child» (p. 361) is a «disremembered toy» that has «been pulled apart» (p. 362), an objective correlative for the man in the house and an anticipation of breakdown. While Emily in *A Fairer House* appears from nowhere and invades the house, the nameless invalid is rooted in the house. She is intro-

duced in the polarity of reality and magic: «not a ghost or a vision» but «a solid young woman of twenty» (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 74). He is grotesque, possessing starkly contrasting features; he is big and small at the same time: «There was a man in the room. He sat in a little pink wicker chair. He was dressed in a flannel night-shirt and looked like an invalid. His skin had a sticky texture and he was stunted in height, but fat [...] His eyes were like withered figs» (p. 363)

His abnormality has a fairy-tale touch, he is like a dwarf coming out of a story, and, surrounded by toys, he is within a magic circle, violated by William and Joanne as intruders. He is both human and inhuman, with his features of gender-crossing he is the child in the adult (Hogle 2002: 11-12) that recurs in Gothic tales. He is a «little man» (Boylan 2000: 363), which makes him closer to the little people of folklore tradition, thus shedding light on the world he inhabits as a different world. Stark contrasts are reconciled in him, as his small dwarfish body conceals a non-human and animal-like strength. His hand is «monstrous» (p. 364), which contrasts with his «baby skull» (p. 365). His non-human strength marked by the «fat man's fingers» that «manacled Joanne's wrist», his «fingers locked on to her arm» (p. 364) make his hand's grip an objective correlative to the grip of the house. He is part of the house. Like the man, «the house was not civilised» (p. 364). «I read about a case like this once», [Joanne] said. «There was a man with one hugely developed area of his brain that gave him [...] powers [...] and crushed his other mental faculties.» (p. 366)

In both stories the encounter with the alien creature is a means that makes a pre-existing situation of unbalance reach its climax. In Ní Dhuibhne's *A Fairer House* the absence, rather than the presence, of Emily causes the breakdown. The emptiness left by her leave-taking is filled by the eerie and pervasive sounds of the house, «a high clanging note. Ringing up

the house. Penetrating to the marrow of my bones» (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 77). The crescendo of the sound of horseshoes against the anvil is emphasised by the accumulation of sentences with unfinished verbal form, where the pervasiveness of «penetrating» is a catalyst for the hidden power of the house. The nervous breakdown is highlighted by broken sentences reproducing the movement from the inside to the outside: «I cracked up then. In my dressing gown and slippers I ran screaming from the forge and to the main road like a madman. Hailed passing cars. None of them stopped. Not surprisingly. I supposed, but I stayed for hours and hours I stayed for hours and hours.» (p. 77)

The dressing gown and slippers, like the invalid's «flannel nightshirt» (Boylan 2000: 363) are objective correlatives of the condition of difference. The circularity of time («for hours and hours») reproduces the circularity of the main road, the roundabout, the other world, to which the protagonist returns after escaping from the other world his house has become. Space and self identify: «I wanted to become a roundabout person» (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 78), going round in a circle, building up a magic circle that might both protect him and make him part of the other world. A circular movement marks also the breakdown of William in *Mama*. The suppressed feelings of childhood abandonment emerge at the very sight of scattered toys causing «a lump of self-pity that came up in his throat. He had never had toys» (Boylan 2000: 362). A bicycle is a safety valve starting a circular journey of madness: «His suspended foot captured one flying pedal and drove it earthward, [...] The wheels surged. Around, around, around he flew, wobbling just a bit as the bike negotiated strewn objects [...] enjoying the sensation as he squashed some silly toy. The wheels, squeaking from lack of oil, cried "wheel!"» (p. 369)

The double repetition further on – «Round and round, faster, faster» (p. 369) – intensifies the

frenzy of the movement, and while William is making his circle around Joanne closer, he also marks the circle of his psychic breakdown.

This breakdown is also a breakdown of language in both stories involving stylistic organization. In Ní Dhuibhne's *A Fairer House* the protagonist escapes from the house «screaming», thus reaching a subhuman and a subverbal level. The deterioration or annihilation of verbal skills is a subtext in the story with the ambiguous use of the personal pronoun «you». The first paragraph marks it as the presence of an interlocutor, the reader or a listener *in absentia* that recurs every now and then throughout the story, starting with the first paragraph: «I live in a forge, a blacksmith's forge. I'll describe it for you as precisely as possible: you have a taste for the detailed, the accurate, the scientific» (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 69)»

Likewise, in the colloquial use of «you know», «You would have guessed», «I've got to tell you» (p. 69), the narrative voice tries to control the reality of his world and draws attention to the act of narration. «You» is in many ways the protagonist's alter ego, the other side of a split self, I and not-I, a double. The use of the pronoun «you» escapes any logical or rational experience, if we consider that «you» has never seen the house or been there («You would know that I must live on the roundabout, although you [...] have never come here», p. 70), and yet it is the same «you» that rescues the protagonist from his breakdown: «Until you finally came along. [...] You put me on the back seat and gave me a sedative (p. 77)». The apparent contradiction in narrative construction is reconciled by the fragmentation of sentences, which comes back again in the use of punctuation at the end of the story: «Unless ... you come again, to take me away» (p. 78). The use of suspension dots marks the gap between the protagonist's world and the world of the fairies. «You» has thus a multiple referent, which magnifies the fragmentation of the house of the mind.

A similar form of fragmentation of language

occurs in *Mama* in the use of unfinished sentences by both William and Joanne. What is said is unspeakable: «"Your hands [...]" William said» (Boylan 2000: 361), «There's something» (p. 362). Fragmentation of language is conveyed in the sort of stichomythia in their dialogue when first finding signs of difference in the house: «"A doll", she whispered. "It's broken" William said. [...] "It's been pulled apart" (p. 362)»

The invalid's language skills are limited to few words. In the story he repeats the vocative «Mama» four times, «Like» to express his sexual pleasure in fondling Joanne, and «Not» when she attacks him verbally («Dirty, disgusting, untidy», p. 369). William himself regresses to a subhuman and subverbal level. His mental breakdown is marked by the obsessive repetition of the word «Mama», so that William and the man are each other's double, or the two parts of the same self. «In the slow, sedated moments of shock the man in the chair became him, holding on to his mother's wrist, his small, tearing nails catching in clunking chains of her bracelet. (p. 364)»

This is suggested in the use of the pronoun «he» at the end of the story, when Joanne is trying to protect herself from further attacks: «In the dark he might not find her» (p. 370). «He» is both William and the man, whose world of darkness is the epitome of the other world, the world of difference.

The conclusion of both stories focuses on the space of disorder and disruption, *A Fairer House* on the «dark maze of corridors» (Ní Dhuibhne 1988: 78), *Mama* on the corner where Joanne looks for shelter. Corridors and corners are both open and closed, halfway between inside and outside, spaces in-between, where liminal or different characters belong. A corner is, to recall Bachelard, «part walls, part door» (Bachelard 1994: 137), it is a space of difference, which, still remains to be read, and, like the text of the story, remains open to multiple possibilities.

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FRANCESCA ROMANA PACI
Il palcoscenico nella mente: «Ghost Light» di Joseph O'Connor

All'ultimo piano della casa di fronte una finestra è rimasta illuminata tutta la notte. Per molte notti una dopo l'altra qualcuno ha visto quella luce e ha ripetutamente indugiato in contemplazione di quella finestra, mentre simultaneamente lasciava scorrere le linee consce, semiconsce e inconsce del proprio pensiero. Il luogo e il tempo – una camera in affitto, in un edificio malandato, a Londra, il 27 ottobre del 1952, alle 6.43 del mattino – hanno bisogno di tutti gli elementi del paratesto, del titolo e sottotitolo del capitolo, e del titolo del romanzo stesso per operare la loro funzione narrativa integrale, che, per prima cosa, costruisce lo spazio materiale e il tempo dell'azione – una vera e propria scenografia della parola, efficace, sapiente, evidentemente colta, che ricorda, se ce ne fosse bisogno, l'attività di *playwright* di Joseph O'Connor. Stabilito e datato il luogo, le poche righe dei primi e relativamente brevi paragrafi sono dedicate a saturare la scena di molteplici elementi del sensoriale umano, che risponde alle e espande le sollecitazioni delle immagini:

In the top floor room of the dilapidated townhouse across the Terrace, a light has been on all night. From your bed it was visible

whenever you turned towards the window, which you had to do in order to fetch your bottle from the floor. Most nights, the same. The bulb is lighted at dusk. In the morning, a couple of moments after the street lamps flicker out, it dies, and the ragged curtain is closed. (O'Connor 2011: 1)

Questo è l'incipit di *Ghost Light*, il romanzo più recente di Joseph O'Connor, nato nel 1963, autore di altri sei romanzi (*Cowboys and Indians*, *Desperados*, *The Salesman*, *Inishowen*, *Star of the Sea*, *Redemption Falls*, tutti tradotti e pubblicati in Italia dalla casa editrice Guanda), di un romanzo breve, o novella, *The Comedian*, di numerosi racconti, di quattro lavori teatrali, di tre *screenplays*, e di numerosi altri scritti di genere critico, satirico e socio-culturale, dei quali i più famosi, quelli della serie dedicata allo *Irish Male*, in buona parte tradotti in italiano e pubblicati da Guanda.

L'incipit di *Ghost Light* si collega, *prima facie*, direttamente al titolo: la luce che rimane accesa è una luce fantasma, perché assume la stessa qualità misteriosa della persona che la tiene accesa, una persona vagamente immaginata, ma che non si vede mai se non come un'ombra sfuggente, ma che, anche per la sua assenza, è assimilata a un'altra assenza, e produce un lungo processo di pensieri. L'immagine composta di un edificio malandato e scuro, di un paesaggio notturno (qui una città ancora segnata e desolata alla guerra), di una finestra illuminata in alto è troppo simile a uno dei più usati e frequenti cliché del genere gotico per non evocare fantasmi, e, per inciso, per non portare il lettore a notare come O'Connor sappia trarre vantaggio dalle eco apparentemente più sfruttate del gotico, e riesca a farlo senza appoggiarsi al sostegno dell'ironia. Accolto il suggerimento gotico, in poche pagine, anzi in pochi paragrafi, il lettore si rende conto, però, che *Ghost Light* è un titolo che ha ben più di un significato per il personaggio senziente al centro della scena, personaggio che è l'io narrante

del romanzo, anche se non è «io» il pronome formalmente usato nella scrittura di O'Connor. Si capirà presto che nel background del romanzo c'è il mondo del teatro, e in particolare il mondo del glorioso Abbey Theatre di Dublino agli inizi del novecento, ma, anche se il personaggio narrante non se ne rende conto, quel teatro è davvero una specie di idea platonica di teatro. In gradini, che iniziano come successivi e subito paradossalmente si sovrappongono per l'autore, il personaggio e il lettore insieme, la «ghost light» del titolo indica la finestra, e simultaneamente anche la luce che di notte viene lasciata accesa sul palcoscenico dei teatri per evitare incidenti, urti contro materiali di scena o cadute di guardiani o di altro personale nella buca dell'orchestra, una consuetudine viva da quasi due secoli. Ma la «ghost light», inizialmente strumentale, risponde anche a superstizioni e leggende connesse con il teatro vuoto durante la notte: la luce sarebbe lasciata accesa per il fantasma del teatro (ogni teatro ha un suo fantasma), e anche perché i fantasmi degli attori che hanno lavorato in quel teatro possano recitare di notte, quando la sala e il palcoscenico sono vuoti e a loro completa disposizione. Del linguaggio usato da O'Connor, vale la pena ricordare almeno «the ragged curtain», che si chiude al sorgere dell'alba, come un sipario – vaga e non detta, ma evocata, rimane una recita di fantasmi/fantasma sulla quale si chiuda il sipario della tenda della finestra. Corollario di tutto questo sono le percezioni del senziente/narrante, che, capiremo presto, ha molto a che fare con teatri e fantasmi.

Il senziente al centro della narrazione di *Ghost Light* compare quasi surrettiziamente nella seconda riga, «From your bed it [the lighted window] was visible», dove la parola chiave è l'aggettivo «your», che fissa il punto di vista, sia in senso insolitamente letterale sia in senso narrativo, in una altrettanto insolitamente costruita somma di metonimia e sineddoche – un insieme aperto come aperta è a teatro la quarta parete. Il senziente è una donna, non

più giovane, della quale in poche pagine, attraverso una tecnica di accumulo, apparentemente casuale, delle informazioni provenienti dal suo stesso pensiero/linguaggio, sapremo la professione e infine il nome: è un personaggio veramente esistito, una attrice irlandese legata allo Abbey Theatre e in seguito anche attrice cinematografica, Maire O'Neill, da tutti chiamata Molly, nata Molly Allgood nel 1885, sorella minore di Sara Allgood, nata nel 1879, anche lei attrice teatrale e soprattutto cinematografica. Maire O'Neill morirà il 2 novembre del 1952, due anni dopo la sorella Sara, che era morta nel settembre del 1950. L'azione di *Ghost Light*, azione in senso stretto, dunque, iniziando il 27 ottobre del 1952, è la storia degli ultimi giorni di vita di Molly, una storia che nel presente finzionale si svolge parallelamente alla ri-presentificazione di una silloge di episodi di un'altra storia, quella dell'amore realmente vissuto da Maire O'Neill con John Millington Synge dal 1906 alla morte di Synge nel 1909. Molly intreccia il quotidiano dei suoi ultimi giorni di vita, che ovviamente non sa essere gli ultimi, a ricordi e conseguenze di quell'amore: tutto è rappresentato da O'Connor come proveniente da un'unica fonte di emanazione narrativa, un centro che è la mente di Molly.

Nulla in questa scelta di O'Connor sembra esserci di veramente nuovo, non tanti anni dopo l'avvento e lo studio delle tecniche multiple dello *stream of consciousness*, ma non è così: in *Ghost Light* c'è qualcosa di notevolmente nuovo. La narrazione si forma e si racconta, sì, dentro la testa di Molly, l'attività della mente si struttura, sì, come linguaggio in lacaniana o quasi lacaniana osservanza, ma con un significativo scostamento dai mezzi tecnici più conosciuti. Lo scostamento si esprime attraverso l'uso di elementi della lingua, che determinano qualcosa che si potrebbe chiamare un vettore visuale, qualcosa che parte da una origine e non solo connette, ma prima determina e poi invade tutta la narrazione: appunto il teatro. Tutte, o, cautelativamente, diciamo quasi

tutte le modalità teoriche, la cultura materiale e persino le frange spurie del teatro formano e sostengono l'edificio del romanzo.

O'Connor ottiene questo effetto narrativo soprattutto con un uso costante, sostenuto e coerente di «you», «your» nel pensiero/linguaggio di Molly, e con un uso peculiare di «she», per indicare il personaggio di Molly, la cui figura è rappresentata simultaneamente al suo agire, con enfasi visiva immediata: chi racconta, in quello stesso momento, sta guardando direttamente o immagina di guardare direttamente Molly. Potrebbe essere un procedimento simile alla tecnica che usano alcuni poeti romantici, per esempio Byron nella sua famosissima poesia che inizia con le parole «She walks in beauty» (parole che sono diventate anche il titolo della poesia), ma c'è qualcosa in più. Chi guarda in *Ghost Light* è chi scrive, ma è anche, o comunque può essere, in sovrapposizione a chi scrive, il personaggio rappresentato, cioè può essere, e preferibilmente direi 'è', la stessa «she», che nella sua mente guarda se stessa, una se stessa che immagina guardata da un pubblico, che, se anche materialmente non c'è, è un fantasma permanente e tenace, difficile da compiacere e di origine mista – non si tratta solo di spettatori, ma anche di scrittori, principalmente Synge stesso, registi, altri attori, tecnici, agenti, oltre a un individualmente indistinto ma sempre presente gruppo, comunità, folla di persone, che rappresentano la società in senso lato e plurale. Insomma, tanto lo scrittore del romanzo quanto il personaggio sono chi guarda e chi usa «you» e «she». La tecnica è ancora più interessante, e meno semplice, perché Molly immagina anche altri attori che interagiscono con lei: per esempio quando letteralmente si costruisce nella mente la scena in cui Synge (qui è usato il pronome «he» e il suo *cluster*), da solo, agitato, spaventato, pensa a lei – pensa in immagini di lei che agisce e si muove in uno scenario, non immediatamente teatrale, ma certamente teatralizzabile (O'Connor 2011: 41-43). C'è qualcosa della tecnica e del

disegno della *mise en abyme* nel come O'Connor ha costruito l'attività mentale di Molly, che non indugia in riflessioni sui propri meccanismi mentali, che è intelligente, acuta, capace di percepire dati oltre le superficie, ma non è un personaggio creato con la cultura e le capacità intellettuali, e filosofiche con cui, per esempio, Joyce ha creato Stephen Dedalus.

Più in dettaglio, l'uso di «you» e del *cluster* di parole connesso può avere almeno due interpretazioni sovrapposte, a loro volta sottilmente scomponibili in stratificazioni del pensiero strutturato come linguaggio. «You» può provenire dallo *implied author* di *Ghost Light*, *implied author* che si rivolge direttamente al personaggio di Molly, e che alla fine coincide con Joseph O'Connor, ma attraverso il passaggio intermedio della sua *persona*, appunto come autore implicito, ovvero una figura di scriba ufficiale che si interpone tra la figura reale dell'autore e il romanzo – in questo caso si deve notare l'affetto implicito che l'autore offre al suo personaggio. Oppure «you» e «your», per scelta di O'Connor, possono provenire da Molly stessa, che si rivolge a se stessa. Molly, allora attraverso e nella sua attività di pensiero si sdoppia, o, meglio ancora, si pluralizza, e pensa contemporaneamente su vari piani stratificati. Molly, dunque, pensa e in completa simultaneità vede se stessa agire (etimologicamente e letteralmente) in uno spazio assimilabile a un palcoscenico. Molly ha alle spalle tutta una vita di attrice, e anche ora, sola e non in teatro, pensa se stessa come attrice in un teatro, recita situazioni reali come se seguisse le indicazioni di un regista che le impartisce istruzioni di scena: tu dal letto vedi la finestra illuminata dell'edificio di fronte, ora tu mostri di avere freddo, tu prendi la bottiglia di gin, bevi, e poi devi mostrare che ti brucia, non sei contenta di berlo, tu ti alzi dal letto, guardi la stanza intorno a te, vai alla finestra, mostri di pensare a chi può essere la persona che tiene accesa la luce tutta la notte. Il regista non ha un volto e non ha un nome, è qualcosa come un fantasma fuori

campo, una presenza sentita inconsciamente, ma la sua autorità è forte, anche se qualche volta Molly sembra contestare il regista e agire/recitare sicura del proprio talento; anzi, di fatto si sovrappone a quel regista fino a diventare regista lei stessa. Proseguendo nella lettura del romanzo diventa sempre più evidente che le due linee, quella di un autore, che narrando si rivolge a Molly, e quella di Molly che immagina una regia, inclusa una propria regia, operano veramente sovrapposte – in ogni caso, ovviamente, non si deve mai dimenticare che il creatore di tutto è sempre O'Connor, che è molto bravo nel sostenere le sue scelte con coerenza narrativa attraverso tutto il romanzo. Molly continua a essere un'attrice: per tutta la vita ha recitato altre vite, e quando recitava, contemporaneamente era e non era ognuno di suoi personaggi. Ora nell'immaginario semi-volontario che O'Connor ha creato per lei, continua a costruirsi vite parallele, una vaga, che resta in una ombra perenne, che non si espone mai alla luce piena, ma solo a quella di una «ghost light», una vita che è quasi un fantasma del desiderio, ma che continua a essere tenacemente postulata, perché in quella vita lei è la vera e autentica se stessa; l'altra, la vita quotidiana, duramente reale, materiale, sgradevole e dolorosa, che Molly, per inconscia o semiconscia difesa, tenta di vivere come la recitazione di un personaggio – quello di una se stessa invecchiata, sola, indigente e alcolizzata:

You are sixty-five now, perhaps the age of that house, perhaps even a little older – what a thought. You approach your only window: it is shockingly cold to the touch. Winter is coming to England. The weather has been bitter. (O'Connor 2011: 1)

L'affermazione apparentemente neutra «Winter is coming» e l'aggettivo «bitter» hanno palesemente più di un significato, che lega «weather» a «time», la vita al percorso verso la morte. La tecnica narrativa di O'Connor è in-

tensamente teatrale e, in alcuni passi, ancora di più intensamente cinematografica. Mentre è quasi impossibile per un lettore non costruirsi paragrafo dopo paragrafo un palcoscenico per i movimenti, la corporeità, l'abbigliamento di Molly, gli oggetti che la circondano, quello che lei vede sia negli interni sia negli esterni, ancora più facilmente le parole di O'Connor creano scenografie filmiche. In un romanzo il lettore, appunto, legge le parole del pensiero, su un palcoscenico teatrale e in un film sono necessari altri mezzi. O'Connor in *Ghost Light* riesce a suggerire, come in un *film script*, il mezzo, o i mezzi per tradurre la parola scritta in espressione e comunicazione agita e parlata del pensiero di Molly. O'Connor di fatto si sforza di creare materia per la trasposizione dei pensieri di Molly in movimento e monologo, anzi in più forme di possibile monologo – si potrebbe dire che O'Connor cerchi un rapporto interattivo con il lettore, anche oltre i consueti mezzi dell'implicito patto narrativo. Un esempio sono le smozzicate scuse che Molly, ormai una triste alcolizzata, dice e ripete a se stessa e a un tu, che è anche un pubblico invisibile: «You take a small, sour sip. Medicinal. Just a settler, the reek of gin dampens your eyes» (O'Connor 2011: 2). Un altro esempio sono i pensieri di Molly intorno alla persona che abita dietro la finestra illuminata:

You have never noticed anyone enter or exit the forlorn house, but the postman still delivers to it [...]. You have a sense that the occupant of the room is a man. One midnight a fleeting shadow crossed the upper windowpane – so you thought – and there was maleness in how it moved. There was a time when you used to think about him – how can he live alone in a bomb-blasted old house? who sends the letters? [...]
He could be difficult sometimes. What use in denying it? Irritable, unforgiving, for a relatively young man. Because the whisperers [...] always made such a point of the age

difference between you. [...] Triple-chinned hypocrites, too deceitful to utter their true objection. (O'Connor 2011: 1-2)

Il primo pronome personale «him» è lo sconosciuto dietro la finestra illuminata, il secondo pronome «he» è John Millington Synge. Dalla storia d'amore di Synge e Molly, troncata dalla morte di lui, sono passati più di quarant'anni, Molly ha avuto due mariti e due figli, è nonna, ma nel romanzo di O'Connor gli ultimi giorni di Molly sono quasi interamente occupati, o visitati, *haunted*, ma non negativamente, da Synge. Non può sfuggire l'elemento della «maleness» del misterioso occupante della stanza dalla finestra illuminata. Nel pensarlo un uomo, nel percepirne la sua «maleness», Molly richiama non solo la figura di Synge scrittore, resa evidente anche da altri dettagli, ma mostra anche la sua reazione di sessualità sia nei confronti di Synge sia nei confronti dell'uomo dietro la finestra. Tra Synge, nato nel 1871, e Molly c'erano quattordici anni, una differenza di età che era spesso loro rimproverata. O'Connor attribuisce a Molly l'acutezza intellettuale di essersi resa conto senza illusioni del fatto che non era la differenza d'età il problema di chi li disapprovava, ma la differenza di classe – Synge era di famiglia protestante e *upper middle class*, mentre lei era cattolica, proveniente dalla variegata *lower class* di Dublino – belle le pagine sul sarto, per il quale Molly precocemente lavora, e sull'abbigliamento (O'Connor 2011: 129-131). Il tema delle differenze di classe è un aspetto misconosciuto di molta letteratura irlandese moderna e contemporanea. Anche in Joyce agiscono molti elementi strettamente connessi alle classi sociali, in Synge questi elementi sono ancora più complessi, perché sono più estremizzati: da una parte le scelte letterarie di Synge, dall'altra le convinzioni della sua famiglia. In un suo articolo, *Synge e Joyce*, ne discute Giovanni Pillonca (vedi bibliografia), commentando il famoso incontro di Joyce e Synge a Parigi, e analizzando, per esempio, la

figura di Lily in *The Dead* parallelamente ad alcune delle figure femminili di Synge.

Negli *Acknowledgements*, insolitamente ampi per un romanzo, O'Connor dichiara con schiettezza disarmante: «*Ghost Light* is a work of fiction, frequently taking immense liberties with fact» (O'Connor 2011: 244). E in effetti gli scostamenti dalla storia ufficiale sono numerosi. Synge e Molly, ammette O'Connor, non sembra che abbiano mai vissuto insieme, neanche per un mese di vacanza. Anche l'elemento sessuale della loro relazione è una creazione di O'Connor, o perlomeno non è stato trovato nulla che lo confermi, neanche nelle lettere che Synge ha scritto a Molly dal 1906 al 1909, raccolte e curate da Ann Saddlemyer (vedi bibliografia), uno dei libri ai quali O'Connor dichiara calorosamente il suo debito. Il che non vuol dire che il rapporto tra Synge e Molly escludesse la sessualità, che in fondo non è qualcosa su cui si trovi solitamente documentazione ufficiale scritta. Si sa che a un certo punto si fidanzarono e si sa che la madre di Synge, vedova e piuttosto opprimente e autoritaria, era molto contraria; O'Connor ricava da questa situazione pagine di realismo d'epoca (decisamente dublinese!), che testimoniano l'acutezza della comprensione di Molly, che non è colta, non è prona alla filosofia, ma certamente è sempre intelligente. Synge, come è noto era ammalato di una forma grave e incurabile di cancro, e sapeva che la morte non era lontana – anche questa una situazione che O'Connor, attraverso Molly, espande senza indulgenze patetiche, scegliendo di rappresentare l'irritabilità di Synge, le sue violenze e crudeltà di comportamento.

Maire O'Neill e Sara Allgood sono personaggi importanti della Dublino del primo novecento e dell'entourage dello Abbey Theatre. Molly richiama spesso alla memoria Yeats, Lady Gregory, e anche George Bernard Shaw. Negli *Acknowledgements* O'Connor riconosce anche il suo debito nei confronti di un ormai quasi mitico studio di Elizabeth Coxhead, *Daughters*

of Erin – Five Women of the Irish Renaissance, del quale una sezione è dedicata a *Sally and Molly: Sara Allgood and Maire O'Neill* – le altre donne sono Maud Gonne (leader, appunto, della organizzazione nazionalista *Daughters of Erin*), Constance Markiewicz, l'artista Sarah Purser. Sally e Molly erano state tra le prime a entrare ufficialmente nel gruppo delle *Daughters of Erin*.

Come in *Star of the Sea* e in *Redemption Falls*, O'Connor in *Ghost Light*, sia pure in forma leggermente minore, mostra di amare e di saper gestire le virtualmente infinite tecniche del *pastiche* letterario. Tra le libertà di allontanarsi dai fatti che O'Connor si prende, infatti, ci sono invenzioni di documenti di varia natura, lettere, diari, articoli di giornale; ci sono inoltre allusioni letterarie inserite in contesti del tutto immaginati, e persino brani molto noti di opere di altri scrittori in contesti narrativi inventati da O'Connor – contesti che sono talvolta comici, talvolta tragici, e talvolta misti. Gli esempi sono troppi anche solo per una lista limitata. Ci si limita a ricordare, in *Star of the Sea*, l'incontro di Pius Mulvey con Dickens, nel quale O'Connor si diverte a creare l'origine (del tutto fittizia) di un famosissimo personaggio dickensiano: Pius racconta a Dickens di un prete cattolico irlandese, che per Dickens diventa il prototipo di Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (O'Connor, 2003, 189-191). Ma Pius Mulvey è anche un cantastorie, un geniale falsario, che inventa ballate e canzoni che propone poi con successo al pubblico come autentiche e appartenenti al folklore tradizionale irlandese (un mezzo geniale di alludere all'argomento delle trascrizioni romantiche della cultura orale!). In *Redemption Falls* il personaggio di James Cornelius O'Keefe, ribelle irlandese, esule, e affascinante avventuriero, è creato attraverso un insieme di dati storici autentici e di dati inventati, come sono inventati i suoi prodotti di cartografo dilettante e le ballate che raccontano le sue gesta. Non è da meno la figura di sua moglie, Lucia-Cruz Rodriguez y Ortega, alla

quale O'Connor attribuisce fama letteraria, romanzi, e traduzioni di poesie di Rubén Darío (O'Connor 2007: 450-451 e passim).

Al gusto del *pastiche* appartengono i passi in cui O'Connor fa uso delle opere di grandi scrittori del lontano e recente passato. In *Ghost Light* vale la pena di ricordare almeno il caso in cui O'Connor evoca James Joyce. Tra gli episodi che Molly ricorda, infatti, c'è la lontana lettura di un articolo dedicato a un fatto di cronaca, che si riconosce essere la conclusione del racconto joyciano *A Painful Case*, uno dei più amari racconti di *Dubliners*:

Sydney Parade Station. Your black train delayed. Two clerkish men in bowler hats examining the track. Taking measurements with plumb lines. Comparing fat notebooks. An engineer with a theodolite figuring a reading on the far platform. A tragedy the previous evening. A middle-aged mother and she attempting to cross the line. Drink taken, apparently, the unfortunate creature. Sinico, her name. Husband a sea captain. Rumours of a man involved. (O'Connor 2011: 162)

Molly morirà per ustioni che si è procurata bruciando carte e libri connessi con lo Abbey Theatre e Synge. Come in *A Painful Case*, la causa delle ustioni è il suo alcolismo, un tema che O'Connor sa trattare con impietoso realismo. Quanti fantasmi recitano, o meglio, quanti fantasmi, noti e ignoti, O'Connor fa recitare nel teatro della mente di Molly, nella luce programmaticamente indefinita di una surreale, «ghost light», che vira dalla funzione di metafora del ricordo a catene di metonimie e sineddoci intellettuali del passato, un passato che non smette mai di agire nel presente? Con Joyce e con il personaggio di Mrs Sinico, O'Connor, senza incoerenze narrative, si rivolge al pubblico dei lettori, servendosi di Molly a sua insaputa – come Shelley e Joyce affermano, ciascuno a suo modo: lo scrittore non interviene, ma è assimilabile al dio della crea-

zione, e soprattutto comunica come sceglie di comunicare.

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LOREDANA SALIS

«Lost in the folds of time» – Mary Morrissy's *The Rising of Bella Casey*

The Rising of Bella Casey, Mary Morrissy's most recent literary effort, is a novel which definitely offers its reader good food for thought. Published in October 2013 by Brandon Books in Dublin, it follows a collection of short stories (*A Lazy Eye*, 1993) and two novels (*Mother of Pearl*, 1997; *The Pretender*, 2001), all of which have obtained positive reception from the public and the critics, and which excel for the meticulous research of and attention to real-life events, presented in detail and aptly transposed to fiction.

Morrissy defines herself a «writer of historical novels», a literary genre that is usually associated with Walter Scott in the Anglophone world, and with Alessandro Manzoni here in Italy. Its philosophy rests upon the belief that facts are better than fiction, and that «there is no romance like the romance of real life», as William Hazlitt puts it in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825). Indeed, to quote more from the English Romantic writer and critic, «if we can but arrive at what men feel, do, and say in striking and singular situations, the result will be more lively, audible, and full of vent, than the fine-spun cobwebs of the brain». Writers of historical novels «recount [people] in their habits as they lived»; they «ransack old chronicles, and pour the contents upon the page»; they «converse with the living and the dead, and let them tell their story their own way». When the novel is a good novel, «the illusion is complete and nothing is wanting», Hazlitt concludes. In his view Scott achieved that goal, but can this be equally said of Mary Morrissy's *The Rising of Bella Casey*?

The story is a novelistic recreation of the life of Bella Casey, sister to one of Ireland's most celebrated playwrights, and the protagonist of a rather bizarre literary case. Like Morrissy's previous works, this one too inhabits what the author describes as «a grey area between biography and fiction» in which «there are, sometimes, unlikely historical coincidences, often in the shape of real people in the margins of the narrative, who register like ghost images». This ghostly atmosphere surrounding marginal characters – people who may have truly lived but went almost unnoticed, have been totally forgotten or remain unknown to us – the tension between what happened and what the writer imagines or wants to happen, all these elements haunt Morrissy's narrative, making it «compelling and beautiful», to use Joseph O'Connor's words.

The Rising of Bella Casey is surely compelling: easy to read at times, it becomes a com-

plex novel, especially when highly descriptive scenes of extreme domestic violence juxtapose to episodes of sectarian prejudice, against a background of social inequality. This is evident from the start of the novel, and a few pages suffice to create an atmosphere at once disturbing and surreal: «A skirmish, Bella Beaver declared with more certitude than she felt. That's all it is». «They said it was a rising», her daughter, Babsie, shot back [...] «The Post Office no longer belongs to us ... it's the headquarters of the New Ireland». «The New Ireland», Mrs Beaver repeated wonderingly. Then she retreated to her original position. «It's a skirmish, that's all».»

Tales from the private sphere merge into the public Tale of a country (Ireland) and a continent (Europe) caught up in conflict, or in the immediate aftermath of it. But conflict is not the main focus of the story, though violence dominates these people's lives: *The Rising of Bella Casey* is firstly about «risings», and what follows looks into this particular aspect of Morrissy's narrative. The novel is about the rising from oblivion of the eponymous character, and also about the Easter Rising of 1916. The former represents the narrative pretext of this «fictional reinterpretation» of Bella's life; the second is the Dublin insurrection that led to the Proclamation of the first Irish Constitution and, later, to the foundation of the Irish Free State. In the history of the country this is one of the most violent phases – a turning point for many, though not for all Irish people – and undoubtedly one of its most controversial and contested chapters. There is also a third kind of «rising», and that is Morrissy's own: as it is intended here, this rising has to do with the task of the writer; and with this specific writer's endeavour to elevate fiction to the level of real facts, to explore the dynamics of storytelling and to reinstate the author's place in the process of narrative creation. All along, language and representation help her bring up issues of public, moral and aesthetic interest and with a

strong resonance for the present times.

While images of risings lay at the heart of the novel, there is also another theme that is central to it. *The Rising of Bella Casey* is, in fact, a story about love; not a love story, that it could hardly be, but a story that speaks of love – of passion and affections, of the excess of love, and the devastating effects of its abundance and lack. These are all focal aspects in the life stories which Morrissy recounts, both the real and the fictive ones. Love is crucial to the interweaving of actual and invented facts; love is the driving force of Morrissy's own writing – not romantic, nor physical love, but dedication and necessity: love is the pleasure of storytelling.

In the *Afterword* to the novel, the author informs her reader that «[Séan] O'Casey "prematurely" killed Bella off in his autobiographies about ten years before her time». She thus sets out to redress the balance, as it were, and seeks to find out what «really» happened to Isabella between 1908 – the date of her death according to O'Casey's account – and 1918, when the woman actually passed away, due to the terrible flu epidemic. The novel does not follow the chronological order of events: it opens on Easter Monday, 1916, in Dublin, on the day of the Rising, and then goes back, in the second chapter, to Jack's birth. Jack is Séan (O'Casey)'s birth name, which he changed later in his life into its Gaelic equivalent as he took up Ireland's political cause against the English. The novel begins on Easter Monday, as said, with Bella's peculiar and biased definition of the 1916 events – «A skirmish», she calls them, voicing the view of *her* side of the Irish community. Bella is Mrs Beaver at this stage of her life, a mother of five, raised in a proud Protestant milieu she never disavows: «He was one of *them*, a Catholic, a RC», she continues in the same opening paragraph. The twenty-three chapters that follow turn into an emotional rollercoaster proper for the reader, embarked on a journey that is often unsettling as Morrissy's patches up a wealth of information from primary and secondary

sources – academic writings, church records, private correspondence, and, of course, the six volumes of Séan O'Casey's *Autobiographies*.

The rising of Bella Casey

Morrissy's initial impulse to solve the mystery of Bella's premature death in the playwright's *Autobiographies* soon develops into something else as she delves into the private matters of the Casey family, and the more she searches energetically into them, the more she seems to enjoy herself. And so does the reader. Curiously, "obsessions" is the word she uses to depict her writing experience: «I suppose you could say that that's one of the perks of being a writer – you're allowed to indulge your obsessions.» And in this case, her obsession is with a ten-year gap in accounts of Isabella's existence, though there is a strong sense throughout that the novel is more than just an investigation of O'Casey's narrative liberties. It is clear from the start that Morrissy's writing is driven by the need to tell the whole story – a form of moral responsibility on the part of the writer – and to tell it from another perspective, that of the otherwise silent and silenced victim. It is no accident, in fact, that in the novel, Isabella becomes a casualty of her brother's creative vein, and like a host of other women, she makes an excellent case for recovery and just recognition. Irish history is full of such omissions: sisters, wives, mothers, all of them lost in the folds of time, and it is remarkable how in recent years several attempts have been made at tracing these unjustly and inexplicably forgotten women (for example Anne Devlin, Robert Emmet's special «servant» in Pat Murphy's film of that name (1984) is a case in point, but many more may be cited).

Bella rises from the ashes of her supposedly «factual» death in Morrissy's fictional rendition of her life: killed by one writer, that is, she resurrects on the page of another, and becomes the protagonist of a new story in which she manages to survive the brutality of rape

(chapter 6), abuse from her drinking husband (chapters 11 and 15), extreme poverty, reiterated social and religious discrimination. Religion and the vocabulary of faith articulate Bella's vision of the world and of her place in it. Born and raised in a strong Protestant environment, she sees two of her brothers, and then also one of her children, go «to the other side» and turn Catholic, while Ireland fights for its independence from British rule and the Irish kill each other in the name of «their» exclusive God. Sectarian hatred and the civil war resurface now and then, inextricably linked to the lives of the Casey family. As with other narratives by modern and contemporary Irish writers, the dysfunctional family at the centre of this story is a reflection of a larger national malaise. The private life of characters appears to be doomed as is the public life of a state at war with itself. When Isabella Casey makes her fist appearance on the written page, she comes across almost like a character in a well-made story: a successful woman in her youth, she becomes Head of School, and head of the family too, following the death of the paterfamilias and owing to her not-so-motherly mother figure. Bella thus acts as a substitute parent to her younger brothers, living her existence by the Book, driven by an unbending faith and good principles, worthy of every success and joy in life. She meets a beautiful man, falls for him, and he for her – they join in matrimony, have children and live happily.

Corporal Beaver is a good-looking soldier in his uniform; he marries Bella and, like heroes in conventional tales, he saves this woman from her fatal fall. As it turns out, she has been raped by a Rev. Leeper in her youth, and this is a secret which she keeps to herself until the last of her days. Before long, Bugler Beaver's real nature is revealed as he, now married to Bella, turns into the villain, a man who likes drinking, and entertains himself in other women's company. The story unfolds, and Beaver is also (presumably) responsible for one of their chil-

dren's death, and (to the reader's great relief) he finally has his just retribution, gets a syphilis infection and becomes mad. He is taken to a mental asylum, and there he dies alone.

Bella bears the burden of «the Original sin» (tellingly, this is the title of chapter 18), that unwanted act which leaves her pregnant and is never washed: the woman has everyone think that Beaver is the father, but is made to pay for this all with years of want and humiliation. Following her husband's fall and enclosure, she is evicted from her domicile and takes residence into one of Dublin's notorious tenements. This is when Jack, now become Séan O'Cathasaigh, the playwright, decides that «he cannot bear Bella's life, or her living of it»; «a condemned woman», «a glorious failure in life and death»: Bella is sentenced to death by this unscrupulous judge and suppressed «with one stroke of his gavel».

Séan's thoughts have a dedicated place within the pages of Morrissy's narrative. Two of the twenty-four chapters are recounted from the playwright's perspective: chapters 10 and 19 offer a totally different view of the facts, often contradicting Bella's account of them. The sharp contrast is marked on the printed page by the use of a different typeset – an efficacious visual metaphor for Séan's different voice – also made evident by the length of Séan's narrative. The tone and pace of these pages recall the tone and pace in his *Autobiographies*, though in Morrissy's novel the focus is placed on the male gaze, and on Séan's biases – his hatred for Beaver, the sense of betrayal, his attraction for Bella, his sexual frustration: «He liked to watch her and her unknowing; it was the only way these days he could steal a march on the bloody Bugler». Séan inhabits a grey area from which he cannot escape:

He is trying to write the story of his life, a portrait of the artist as a young man. But before the artist, there was the child, the fa-

ther of the man [...] He had been Jack Casey, the boy with two mothers. There was the mother who had borne him [...] and then there was Bella [...] What a beauty she had been! [...] He can see her, in his mind's eye [...] That Bella cannot be resurrected! When he tries to call her up, it is the wretched Mrs Beaver who appears (p. 130).

Sections such as the one above are common in the novel: they provide precious insights into O'Casey's life, close-ups of moments of agony when the young man and the artist are at pain with «the facts of life.» The facts of the past trouble the artist's mind; to recover memories is a hard yet necessary task, «for if he can't find himself as a child, how will he ever find Bella?»

There is a distinctive perversity in Séan's behaviour, and it is more than just «an imaginative perversity» (chapter 19). Having killed his sister on the page, he feels that «he has put Bella out of *his* misery»; and as he «extricates the page from the typewriter and begins to read», it is almost as if his hands and conscience are finally clear, fact and fiction are no longer discernible: «the lurid crimson blood» of guilt fades into a vision of «roses waving stalkily, the garden's velvety roar».

The Easter Rising

From the start, the rising of a New Ireland, from English colonial rule and from the ashes of the Easter 1916 upheaval, occupies a notable place on the written page. Curiously, that moment of shared renovation for Irish nationalists heralds novelty in Bella's world too because this is exactly when she finds a piano in the street. As noted, the novel opens in the immediate aftermath of the Rising, which Bella calls «a skirmish» because in her view the whole matter is but a minor dispute. Seen from the perspective of «a fifty-year old widow» who has «no morsel left in the house [and is] reduced to tea grounds used

twice over» no Rising will stop her from walking the streets of Dublin, determined to buy some bread, caring nothing for «the thunder of field-gun and patter of rifle-fire». This sort of in media res opening promptly delineates the unique traits of its protagonist's character: a woman from the tenements, proud, courageous, «maddened with desire, or greed» at the sight of an abandoned piano she cannot leave behind.

The piano is a recurring image in the novel. There is the «the upright Broadwood [...] offering itself to her» which Bella finds abandoned «in the middle of a battlefield» after the Rising (chapter 1), there is the Chapell, «with the name Elysian carved in gold», which is sold off when the family moves home (chapter 6), and then there is the Cadby, «her proudest possession» (chapter 11), but also a tragic reminder of Beaver's worst outburst of rage and physical abuse on her:

She was at the Cadby in a rare moment of peace [...] She was tinkering with Handel's *Largo* [...] She was playing *pianissimo* [...] She wanted merely to lull herself without rousing Nick who was taking a nap upstairs. But her touch wasn't soft enough for after a while she heard the creak of a floor-board overhead and the tramp of his boot on the stair [...] Suddenly he had her neck in an arm-hold almost chocking the life out of her as he lifted her off and sent her sprawling with a loud discord over the Cadby. Without the slightest ceremony he hoiked up her skirts at the back [...] Her face crushed against the edge of the Cadby raised a weal but that was as nothing to his deprived assault. (p. 225).

Violence enters Bella's life and take control over it: from Leeper's sexual assault to Beaver's «ravaging lust», the death of her child and Jack/Séan's extreme measure in the *Autobiographies*, violence runs across her un-

happy existence. Domestic violence echoes public violence, out in the streets of Dublin people fight and die – there is the Lockout in 1913, and then the Easter Rising, three years later. There is also WWI, fought by the Irish from afar; Bella's eldest son, James, has joined the army and is somewhere in France. In the novel these events are always present, however kept in the background and looked at from the viewpoint of the protagonist, who inhabits a world parallel to those among her compatriots that are actively engaged in a war Bella cares not to understand, the implications of which she fails to grasp. None of this is mentioned in the *Autobiographies* since Ella – this is how O'Casey calls her in his writing – would have been dead by the time the Rising occurred. Morrissy thus imagines what Bella's existence must have been like at that stage, two years before she actually died, and it is interesting to see how in her reconstruction of the 'facts', a piano resurfaces among the page, punctually – a reminder, perhaps, of the woman's past – her education and promising career – a mark of distinction – her taste and sensibility for music – but also a sign of resilience in the middle of mayhem – the collapse of her private life and that of her country too.

Morrissy's rising

There is a wonderful scene in Dickens' *Hard Times* in which a school headmaster articulates that century's obsession with facts: «Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else» (chapter 1). The man's categorical ban on wonder as a basic principle of good education for the young is an eloquent image of how *res factae* tend to dominate the modern mindset. Speaking the truth is a moral necessity for a journalist, so Morrissy must be familiar with the sense of responsibility that writing involves. Yet, the demands of realism *no matter what* must pose

too many limitations to her imaginative mind. Not to mention the fact that, sometimes, what are supposed to be *real facts* turn out to be «worthless as sources for the facts of [...] life». The words are not Morrissy's, though they may well be; they are taken from Nicholas Greene, the Irish scholar, who goes on to describe O'Casey's autobiographical narrative as «freely inventive in style and substance» and «a heavily ornamental fantasia»: «the past was reconceived throughout to correspond to the needs of the then present: the need to set old grudges, to justify opinions, to dramatise the story of the poor boy from the slums struggling towards creative fulfilment» (1999: 113-14). When the *Autobiographies* were first published, readers believed that they were just that, the writer's truthful account of his life. It has long been established that O'Casey's third-person narrative cannot be trusted; the chronology is altered or omitted, names are changed, and so are characters. Their value lies in that they provide an insight into the emotional turmoil of the artist as a man, and help readers read through his Dublin Trilogy, a collection of three dramas also known as «the tenements plays». Curiously enough, O'Casey spent a period not longer than about five months in the tenements; he came to know the place by his own choice, not perforce, and yet he led readers to believe otherwise. This is only one of numerous instances of how, to cite a character in *The Shadow of a Gunman*, a play of his from 1923, «You can't depend upon the word of a single individual». Like O'Casey, Morrissy also dwells upon the unreliability of words. In *The Rising of Bella Casey* she reacts to the playwright's fake construction of his persona and of his peculiar account of real characters and episodes. Bella most especially. This does not amount to a rewriting of the facts *per se*, nor does it pursue the actual exposition of O'Casey's unverifiable notes. To be doing that, to inform the reader of real names and dates, and to say, for instance, that the protagonist is called Ella in the *Autobiographies*,

though in real life she was known as Bella, is beyond the point of Morrissy's historical novel writing. The real point is the realisation that one's truth is not anybody's truth, but also the need to accommodate two distinct worlds – the facts of the rational calculating all-controlling mind and the fiction of the human heart – both prompt this writer to tell the life story of a character who cannot represent herself but, as the author clearly feels, must be represented somehow. Morrissy's writing, in other terms, rises from the battle of these opposites, though that is only one aspect of «her own rising». Morrissy's «rising» in this novel is also about the artifice of writing; it is about this artist's ability to use, play with, subvert and control narrative. It is about finding her own voice amidst the voices of Bella, Ella, Jack, Séan, Catholics, Protestants, Cassides, O'Casey, and those of Irish writers from the past and the present – amidst the real and fictive voices surrounding her, residing with her in that troubled area of creative potential. Morrissy knows very well how the artifice of writing works: she began her career as a journalist; later in her life she took up positions as lecturer in creative writing for students in universities around the world, and then she started writing short stories and historical novels. It is therefore almost inevitable that when it comes to create her own fictional worlds, her imaginative self negotiates with the lecturer and the journalist in her. There are times when the former gives in to the latter, and the calculations of the creative mind are almost perceptible: there is a female victim, a bad guy, and a good one, a magic helper, and a magic object. There is also a distinctively Irish taste to the narrative, with its Dublin setting, the humour, a sense of doom, the sectarian hierarchy, Joyce's unholy trinity, the drink, a corrupted priest, a patriarchal state, a dysfunctional family. The Irishness of the narrative relies, for a large part, on Morrissy's use of toponyms and street names, a feature which characterises this novel and which indicates a sort

of necessary homecoming (as opposed to her former works of fiction where she tends to remove «all traces of the "local"»). «Historical fiction is merciless in its demands about place», says the author, who «litters [these pages] with place names – Dorset Street, Dominick Street, Mary Street, East Wall, Mountjoy Square, Fitzgibbon Street, Rutland Place and many more locations with strong O'Casey associations». Yet, there are times, in most parts of the novel, when the artifice of writing reaches excellence. This is the case, for instance, with the «O'Casey» chapters, 10 and 19, mentioned above, in which Morrissy manages to reconstruct the tormented mind of a solitary man, frustrated in his private life, who struggles with the blank page in the attic of his home, in Battersea, London, years later (chapter 10). The reader can almost hear the playwright's voice, see him in his isolation and torment, bear witness to the complex character of a man who was «deeply compassionate [...] but belligerent as well and at times unjustly venomous» (Maxwell, 1984). The artifice of writing is at its best in another eloquent example, and that is Morrissy's characterization of Reverend Leeper, the priest that rapes Bella, leaves her pregnant and has her sacked from her job. Leeper occupies a central place in Bella's life and in the whole story, but he actually never existed. This may come as a surprise to the reader, and especially to the female reader (in a recent review of the novel the author remarked her big disappointment at the discovery), because the various scenes of sexual harassment, the threats and the abuse Bella suffers are highly effective and moving. But to find out what is true and what is not in a historical novel such as this is to activate disbelief and, literally, to break the spell. Again, one ends up missing the point of Morrissy's work as a writer of historical novels, which is about liberating the imaginative mind, guarding it from the dangers of oblivion, and finding new spaces for exploring, creatively.

Love

Love is pervasive, incontrollable, destructive, annihilating, blind. Motherly love is «fierceness», a woman's love for her man knows no obstacles, a man's love for a woman can be maddening and sickening. Love makes one feel «the rush of the sublime»; it drives Irish men to fight in a war that for some is not their own, while for others there is a war to be won whatever the cost may be. *The Rising of Bella Casey* stages the paradox of love when love is pushed to the extreme, or else it is repressed. Bella's love for Beaver is what causes her fall, yet also Beaver's love for her bears its tragic consequences: as the novel stages the non-negotiable conflicting views of the protagonist and of her brother, there is no telling what the truth ultimately is. As a result, the reader is drawn into the unsolvable dilemma of characters whose fate does not rest in their hands and cannot be helped. The theme of love runs through the pages of Morrissy's novel, punctual, almost infectious, of an extra-ordinary, force. Motherly love, for instance, is seen from Bella's perspective as well as from her mother's. The latter is not the nurturing kind of mother Bella grows up to become: a school teacher at work and a surrogate mother at home, she is severe and loving. She has a protective attitude to her brothers and to her children which is essential to the development of the story: Jack/Séan is raised by her, she is responsible for his education, injects in him the same passion for books she also has. Bella writes the letter that gets Jack his first job, and she is the first to read *The Irish Peasant*, O'Casey's earliest attempt at writing. The bond between the pair is undoubtedly strong, though there is something odd about it – he becomes jealous of Beaver, clashes with the man and holds grudges to the point that, as different scholars have suggested, O'Casey resented his sister's appetites and needs, which he associated with the family's degradation: «She – as the playwright puts it in the *Autobiographies* – had married a man who destroyed ev-

ery struggling gift she had had when her heart was young and her careless mind was blooming» (I, p. 446). In Morrissy's rendition, Jack's resentment reflects a worrying infatuation on his part, often repressed and, unbeknownst to him, silently reciprocated the day when Bella sees him, no longer a child, coming out of the bath tub: «She lingered, gazing at him [...] she could not take her eyes off him. [...] She could not stop from looking» (chapter 14). This mutual fantasy (a doubly repressed incest?) further complicates the relationship between a brother and his sister, later helping to explain Séan's extreme resolution to kill Bella off ten years prior to her actual death. One is left wondering whether his act is the revenge of a troubled mind, or the culmination of extreme love. Bella falls a victim to the hands of three men in her life: Séan, Beaver and Leeper. The love story of Bella and Beaver ends badly, as does Beaver himself, a sick man who dies in isolation – the isolation and alienation caused by his illness, and his physical isolation, to which he is forced whilst in hospital. The reader almost inevitably shares O'Casey's view that he deserves his fate, after all, and Morrissy ironically suggests that he has had his just retribution by having Leeper admitted to the same institute, in the incurables wing (chapter 18). For Bella this is a rare moment of relief; as she looks at the «suppliant creature in front of her» she feels «a surge of power» within. Bella's tormented loves offer Morrissy a good narrative pretext to bring to the fore issues of immediate contemporary relevance such as priests' paedophilia and violence against women. More Irish men hating women, another Irish woman helpless and violated. Morrissy dissents from the view that Bella «has made her bed [and will] have to lie on it» (*Autobiographies*, I, p. 446), she breaks the cycle of tragic reprisal and advocates compassion for her protagonist. She makes up the Leeper incident at the start – a secret which turns Bella's life into an inferno of deceit and a devastating sense of guilt – and slowly re-

trieves the last ten years of the protagonist's existence – deleted in her brother's account – to portray a woman, unlucky and unredeemed in the end. Set between fact and fiction, between that which one knows and that one prefers to ignore, this novel re-inscribes forgotten tales into the book of a shared history that is replete with images and a language echoing Greek tragedy, and a sense of doom so often portrayed in recent Irish literature and drama. I am thinking of Frank McGuinness and Marina Carr more especially, though the notion that the Irish are doomed goes back to the start of the twentieth century and to W.B. Yeats's apocalyptic visions of history. Morrissy knows; she has inherited much of that sense of perspective, so that her debt to tradition and the necessity of memory become crucial elements of *her* vision of the world and of Ireland's place in it. As this reading of her novel has indicated, time plays a central role and is to be counted among the many characters and the haunting presences of her narratives; the interweaving of past and present with the forces of belief passion and hope is indeed where the complexity and beauty of *The Rising of Bella Casey* lie. Here, the illusion is complete, and nothing seems to be wanting. And as the novel draws to its conclusion, Bella pronounces her final word, «love»: «A girl [...] should give up a lot for love», she tells one of her daughters. Years before she had spoken those same words to Jack. People like her are doomed, in real life and on the page; they are too frail and vulnerable, easily lost in the folds of time.

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GIUSEPPE SERPILLO

Ceduto a queste acque: *Kicking the Black Mamba* di Robert Welch. Una memoria.

Robert Anthony Welch, stimato docente e studioso di letteratura inglese e irlandese, preside della Faculty of Arts presso l'Università dell'Ulster, editor del prestigioso *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, oltre che autore di monografie critiche fondamentali per una comprensione e approfondimento della letteratura prodotta in Irlanda, in inglese e in lingua irlandese, fra cui, per citarne solo alcuni, una storia delle traduzioni in versi dall'irlandese dal 1789 al 1897, una storia della poesia irlandese da Moore a Yeats e uno studio fondamentale sull'Abbey Theatre dal 1899 al 1999; ma anche romanziere, drammaturgo e poeta, è deceduto per un male incurabile il 3 febbraio del 2013, ossia esattamente sei anni dopo la morte di suo figlio Egan, annegato nel fiume Bann, che attraversa la cittadina di Coleraine, il 28 gennaio del 2007, proprio nel giorno del suo compleanno. Alcune settimane dopo quel tragico evento, Welch, dietro suggerimento di un'amica di famiglia, decide di raccontare gli ultimi quattro anni del calvario del giovane figlio alcolista e della sua famiglia, la catabasi inarrestabile verso l'autodistruzione da una parte e, dall'altra, i tentativi – fra speranze, disillusioni e disperazione – di impedirne o almeno di rallentarne la caduta; tutto ciò nel convincimento che la scrittura possa servire a trovare un senso nella vita e nella tragica morte di un figlio amato e forse non compreso, o troppo tardi compreso. Il mamba nero del titolo è un serpente africano velenosissimo che, se calpestato o comunque provocato, può con il suo morso uccidere un uomo in pochi minuti. Nel libro, diventa un'icona della morte inevitabile dell'alcolista in

fase di disintossicazione, che «di tanto in tanto» si fa un bicchierino nell'illusione che comunque quel solo bicchierino, proprio quello, non possa fargli male. Ma quel bicchierino è come il morso del micidiale serpente africano: lo ucciderà in breve tempo, e sarà una morte dolorosa.

Welch aveva cominciato a tracciare i primi abbozzi di quella che chiama 'memoir' in un quadernetto di appunti avuto in regalo proprio da Egan qualche tempo prima. E' il primo dei molti gesti simbolici che compaiono nel libro, insieme confessione ed elegia, rimorso e dedizione, smarrimento e tentativi di razionalizzazione di un'esperienza, che fino alla conclusione del libro, nonostante tutti i tentativi di chiudere il cerchio, non risulta completamente assimilata. Conclusa la lettura di questo libro, si ha quasi la sensazione che alla sua stessa morte Welch abbia dato – non saprei dire quanto e se consciamente – un valore simbolico.

Nonostante l'assicurazione che «This is a book written not for "therapeutic" reasons», più si procede nella lettura, più appare evidente che di questo soprattutto si tratta. Il libro è tutto un susseguirsi di domande che l'autore si pone e a cui cerca disperatamente di dare risposte, che non sono, non possono essere definitive; lo stile narrativo inoltre è spesso involuto, gravato di emotività, che se certamente può avere un effetto immediato sul lettore interessato alla vicenda, rivela la sua debolezza a una seconda, più meditata lettura. Viene in mente quanto Orwell ebbe a dichiarare a proposito di *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in una lettera a F.J. Warburg nell'ottobre del 1948, ossia qualche mese prima della pubblicazione del romanzo: «I think it is a good idea but the execution would have been better if I had not written it under the influence of T.B.» Il libro, insomma, avrebbe avuto bisogno di una decantazione del dolore, di una revisione attenta, a cui certamente Welch avrebbe posto mano, se il male che lo colpì solo tre anni dopo quel tragico evento non lo avesse avvertito che anche il tempo a sua di-

sposizione sarebbe stato forse troppo breve per concluderlo. La scelta dell'identificazione del soggetto narrante con l'autore del libro impedisce quel distacco emozionale che dà al messaggio quella pluristratificazione di senso che garantisce il superamento del tempo della scrittura.

Molte delle sensazioni e delle esperienze narrate in questo pellegrinaggio attraverso la sofferenza si ritrovano in una precedente raccolta di versi, *Constanza*, pubblicata nel 2010, in cui confluiscono versi anch'essi nati nello smarrimento della perdita recente del figlio. Messi a confronto, i due tipi di scrittura esemplificano la diversa qualità della comunicazione. In *Constanza* Welch affida a una voce poetante, che per una sezione si identifica con il poeta Ovidio nel suo esilio sul Mar Nero, il compito di lamentare la morte del figlio e di rievocare la figura, i gesti, l'interrelazione armonica con suo padre. La disciplina del verso, la tradizione dell'elegia, che non è solo quella classica, ma anche quella che Welch mutua dalla tradizione dell'*aisling* irlandese o addirittura da quella giapponese, rendono quella stessa memoria esemplare, più asciutta, severa e insieme più memorabile.

Proprio l'adesione troppo intensa al suo tema, la partecipazione non purificata dall'arte, se possono sconvolgere il lettore al primo impatto lo rendono però, come si è detto, meno disponibile a una seconda lettura. In *Constanza*, nella poesia significativamente intitolata *On the Death of His Son*, la voce del padre che piange la morte di un figlio, e non vuole, non può essere consolato, si incanala, e viene disciplinata, in sei intense quartine basate su quelle di un'elegia di un poeta in lingua celtica della fine del XIV secolo. Le quartine dell'antica lirica irlandese, che derivavano la loro forma dagli inni latino-cristiani, richiedevano versi dello stesso numero di sillabe. A questa regola si attiene Welch conferendo alla poesia un'oggettività che universalizza il dolore pur conservando l'intensità del sentimento individuale.

In un'altra poesia intitolata *Voglia di vivere* (in italiano nel testo), l'esperienza di una gita sul sellino posteriore di una motocicletta guidata dal figlio, che si legge nella sua esatta sequenza anche in *Kicking the Black Mamba*, nell'essenzialità dei versi, nell'uso di pronomi personali (You, I, we) che hanno valenza drammatica più che memoriale, si eleva e si purifica in un'esperienza morale ed estetica, che scompare nella narrazione più estesa e dettagliata ma troppo emozionale, del romanzo-memoria.

Paradossalmente, le cose migliori del libro si trovano in certe digressioni sulle tradizioni letterarie irlandesi e su note e osservazioni tratte dalle vaste conoscenze dell'indagatore curioso delle radici della propria cultura antropologico-culturale e delle interrelazioni fra questa e altre culture e tradizioni: da Coleridge al poeta in lingua gaelica Anthony Raftery, dai miti e leggende della tradizione celtica alle Sacre Scritture, e ciò non solamente per la competenza che rivelano, ma per il senso di sollievo che presuppongono nell'autore e che si trasmette con leggerezza al lettore per una qualità della scrittura che acquisisce l'agilità del saggio. Per converso, l'angoscia che cresce sempre di più a mano a mano che i tentativi di suicidio, l'inutilità di cure anche costose e le ricadute sempre più frequenti e disperate nelle crisi alcoliche che fanno presagire l'inevitabile fine, induce nello scrittore un'attenzione spropositata a pratiche superstiziose, gesti e segni che vengono interpretati come segnali di un destino malevolo mosso da presenze invisibili, che non sono molto diverse dalle fate e gli spiritelli del folklore irlandese. Lo spirito razionale dello studioso è consapevole dell'irrazionalità di tali turbamenti. La logica, riflette con amara ironia, ci dice che «this is all nonsense; there are perfectly rational explanations for the bad stuff that happens, and yet». Sono proprio quell'avversativa finale e quei puntini di sospensione che danno il senso della frattura che si sta verificando nella coscienza lacerata da dubbi, sensi di colpa («Has my drinking and

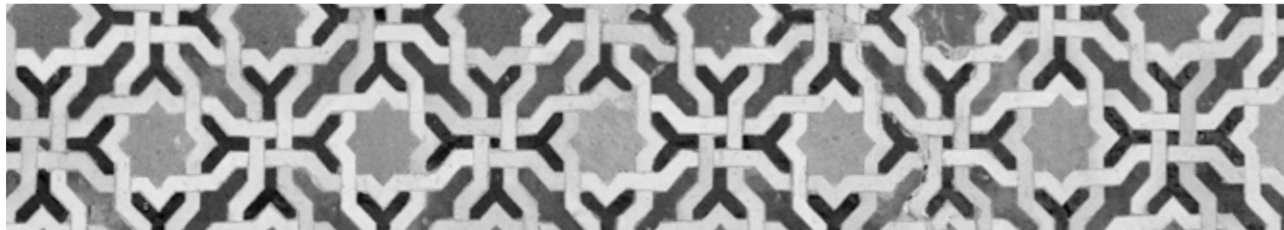
the drinking culture I created in the house as our children grew up, been a factor in Egan's disastrous experience with alcohol?») e dalla sconvolgente e stupefacente constatazione dell'indifferenza che può subentrare al dolore quando questo per il suo stesso perseverare diventa normalità: «There is a sense of futility, and also boredom. You are there because your son is in danger of losing his life and yet you wish to be almost anywhere else.» C'è un limite a ogni sofferenza, alla desolazione della lotta impari contro i mostri. Welch ritrova il senso e la giustificazione del patire dapprima nella natura, nella consapevolezza che la sua capacità di rinnovarsi è contenuta in potenza nelle sue energie distruttive, energie che noi stessi conserviamo nelle profondità nascoste del nostro essere e alle quali le forze della ragione, di quella che Welch chiama «normalità», non ci permettono l'accesso. Questo accesso, argomenta il padre afflitto, non potrebbe invece essere concesso proprio a quelle creature che noi consideriamo più fragili, come gli alcolisti, i drogati? Non è un tema nuovo, naturalmente: la figura dell'idiota ispirato, che paga nel suo corpo e nell'emarginazione dalla società, nel terrore e nell'isolamento il contatto violento con queste forze primigenie, imprevedibili e ingovernabili, ha fornito materia di rappresentazione e riflessione nell'arte e nella religione, ma Welch pare riscoprire questo mistero con una disperazione e un turbamento, che danno alle pagine un impatto emozionale, che la naturale «suspension of disbelief» rende per un momento immune da una più approfondita analisi critica. Nell'amara constatazione che l'alcolismo, lungi dall'aprire varchi o porte le chiude e imprigiona chi vi è caduto nell'oblio e nella disperazione, riemerge negli ultimi capitoli – quando ormai anche l'ultima speranza di un'uscita dal Maelström è perduta – la fede antica, lo spirito religioso che va oltre la preghiera e l'invocazione per manifestarsi come espressione di senso. Le sofferenze del figlio diventano quelle di Cristo, quel «something

else» che giustifica perfino la morte: «a larger pattern exists which contains our distresses and miseries», quel qualcosa che si configura come «a new surge of being, a resurrection». Se per alcuni lettori questa conclusione potrà apparire un'ulteriore forma – più complessa, più sostenuta da una tradizione millenaria – di «consolatio», non si potrà non riconoscere al libro la qualità di documento forte, crudele, sincero fino alla spietatezza, e pieno di un intenso amore per una creatura fragile in cui Welch riconosce la figura del Salvatore e attraverso cui ritrova il senso più vero e profondo della religione, che è fatto di oblio di sé e di compassione, nel senso di identificazione con i pensieri, le attese e le sofferenze dell'altro. Un percorso, anche, di autoconoscenza e di riscoperta di valori che parevano dimenticati dall'infanzia. Il percorso si chiude con un sogno, in cui il poeta Rilke rivolgendosi allo scrittore lo invita a evitare di abbandonarsi troppo al dolore, al ricordo, al pianto per farli rientrare in quel misterioso «larger pattern» che li contiene tutti e tutti li giustifica.

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inghilterra



ESTERINO ADAMI

Hanif Kureishi. *L'ultima parola*. Trad. dall'inglese di Andrea Silvestri. Bompiani / RCS Libri. 2013. Titolo originale *The Last Word*, Faber and Faber, London.

Il nuovo romanzo di Hanif Kureishi, che esce prima in traduzione italiana (ottobre 2013) e poi nell'originale inglese (gennaio 2014), condensa un'ampia serie di temi già presenti nelle precedenti opere di questo prolifico autore. In particolare, vorrei ricordare i rapporti umani e sociali fra individuo e famiglia, o fra individuo e contesto sociale, la sfera dell'eros (declinata in molte variazioni), la scrittura e il senso precipuo della narrativa, la verità e la finzione, o reinvenzione di testi e contenuti, l'interesse per la psicanalisi, parallelamente ad altre dense questioni quali il razzismo, il ruolo culturale dell'Inghilterra, lo smarrimento postmoderno e un po' malinconico della nostra epoca. La trama è apparentemente lineare e ruota attorno al progetto di un giovane e ambizioso autore, Harry Jonhson, di scrivere la biografia di un noto romanziere e saggista di origini indiane, Mamoon Azam, che vive con l'eccentrica moglie italiana, Liana Luccioni, in un paesino sperduto nella campagna inglese (probabilmente nel Somerset, visto che si cita la cittadi-

na di Tauton). Il confronto acceso e profondo fra i due scrittori, nonché altre varie vicende, con il contributo di personaggi spesso inusuali e scomodi genera riflessioni e discussioni animate, e costringere a rileggere il passato, le sue pieghe e i suoi significati. Sfasando i piani della *fiction* e della *non fiction*, il mondo testuale edificato da Kureishi evoca sottilmente la recente vicenda della biografia di V.S. Naipaul, scritta nel 2008 da Patrick French, ricca di allusioni acute e talvolta controverse sulla figura del grande intellettuale di origine indiana. Sicuramente un architrave del testo è identificabile nei labirintici sentieri della scrittura, della manipolazione verbale, nella capacità di narrare, di costruire o di re-inventare attraverso un romanzo, una biografia o altro tipo di testo un evento, ma anche una persona, la sua «identità» e la sua «verità». Mentre Harry libera i fantasmi del passato di Mamoon, i suoi eccessi di rabbia, le sue contraddizioni attraverso ricordi e diari che evocano le precedenti compagne del famoso scrittore, cioè Marion, «colombiana di madre ebrea inglese» (p. 164) e Peggy, la prima moglie morta suicida molti anni prima, sempre più domande e dubbi emergono dall'intreccio fra storia e storie, così che a livello meta-testuale la nascita del libro del giovane biografo simbolicamente coincide con la morte dell'anziano romanziere. Ma può la parola re-

suscitare e imprimere nella memoria il senso di un'esistenza? Sapientemente, Kureishi non fornisce risposte semplici, ma scandaglia i sentieri della mente umana, e le sue possibili trasposizioni letterarie, anche attraverso un processo di *ghostwriting*, di quelle ossessioni che legano scrittore e soggetto umano. In una certa misura, il significato della letteratura è ammantato da un velo di confortante potere salvifico, e secondo Harry:

la grande arte, le parole migliori e le frasi ben fatte, contavano – e contavano sempre di più in un mondo tanto abietto quanto censorio, un mondo in cui la passione per l'ignoranza era cresciuta grazie alla religione. Le parole erano il ponte verso la realtà; senza di esse non c'era che il caos. Le parole scadenti potevano avvelenarti e rovinarti la vita, come aveva detto una volta Mamoon; e le parole giuste potevano rimettere a fuoco la realtà. La follia della scrittura era l'antidoto alla vera follia. (p. 44)

Ma forse Kureishi vuole proprio soffermarsi sull'etica della scrittura attraverso questo lavoro, che funziona come una struttura multi-genero, visto che a livello meta-narrativo ingloba, come una serie di scatole cinesi, elementi del romanzo, dell'intervista, del memoir, del diario, servendosi anche di toni teatrali o di aforismi. Vi è una complessità e una sovrapposizione della memoria con la fantasia nella scrittura biografica, ma in senso ampio in tutto il campo letterario, con il potere dell'autore o del narratore di creare personaggi e plasmare la lingua (come Kureishi stesso ha già dimostrato nella sua narrativa breve, per esempio nel racconto «With your tongue down my throat», raccolto in *Love in a Blue Time* del 1997). Mamoon stesso, a colloquio con il giovane scrittore, afferma «Harry, tu ne sai più di me sulle mie molteplici identità» (p. 210) e suggerisci quindi il confine labile fra ciò che percepiamo come identità singola e quello che invece apprendiamo quando viene mediata e ristrutturata da altro punto di vista.

Fondamentale nel testo è l'apporto dato dai personaggi femminili, non solo in riferimento a Mamoon, ma anche a Harry, e la sua algida moglie Alice, che affascina e seduce l'anziano autore, nonché Julia, la ragazza tuttofare in servizio presso la casa di Mamoon e Liana, con cui il giovane intesse un intenso rapporto fisico. Il tema del sesso, infatti, ricorre in svariate immagini ed echi, da rapporti clandestini in spoglie case di campagna a toni più lievi, che riflettono sentimenti più complessi. Con una visione quasi mefistofelica tipica dell'artista arso dalla voglia di conoscere, sfidare, agire nel mondo, Mamoon attribuisce un forte peso alla sfera della sessualità, poiché «*qualunque persona* deve lavorare con il proprio desiderio, per sconfiggere la noia, per tener viva ogni cosa. Tutto ciò che è buono deve essere leggermente pornografico, se non perverso.» (p. 209, il corsivo è dell'Autore). Ritorna quindi nella scrittura kureishiana la questione dell'eros e dei suoi significati, quale motore, e mistero in una certa misura, degli intrecci dei destini umani, mentre una qualche forma di affinità avvicina Mamoon e Alice, dalla quale Harry alla fine del romanzo si separa per intensificare invece un forte legame con Julia che assomiglia «alla follia nella sua irrazionale fedeltà» (p. 281).

Romanzo complesso e pervaso da un'aria sottile di decadenza nei suoi luoghi e nei suoi personaggi, tutti un po' stravaganti: dal padre di Harry, psicologo ossessionato «dai problemi della psichiatria e dai concetti di normalità» (p. 47), all'agente letterario Rob Deveraux che assiste Harry, ma che in realtà è tormentato da problemi di alcolismo e che preferisce incontrarsi nei bar delle grandi stazioni ferroviarie londinesi poiché ama i «non luoghi» (p. 191), ad un'altra serie di figure minori, ma ricche di significato, come Scott, il fratello skinhead di Julia, un teppistello razzista che vorrebbe spaccare la faccia a tutti gli immigrati. Parallelamente ai luoghi chiusi (lo studio di Mamoon immerso da libri e carte) e ai luoghi aperti (la campagna inglese, pigra e in realtà intaccata da

ferite sociali ancora aperte), vi è accennato uno sfondo urbano, una Londra del nuovo millennio vibrante e viva, «che Harry non conosceva, una città cosmopolita di studenti, profughi e vagabondi» (p. 281). Più complesso di quanto possa apparire a prima lettura, il romanzo testimonia l'impegno narrativo di Kureishi, un autore arguto e provocante, che non smette di richiamare interesse da più parti, come peraltro dimostrato da una recente pubblicazione accademica a lui interamente dedicata (*Hanif Kureishi*, di Adriano Elia, Le Lettere, Firenze, 2012), che fornisce una buona introduzione alla sua opera.

IRENE DE ANGELIS

**E-mail interview with Patience Agbabi.
9 marzo 2013.**

I.D.A.: In her preface to *R.A.W.* Merle Collins speaks about your identity as Nigerian and British, very English and very un-English. Could you tell me something about your family and being «desperate / disparate / diasporate»?

P.A.: Both my parents are Nigerian but from the age of one I was partially raised in a white English foster family. I saw my parents every week when I was young and in school holidays while I was older. They also rang regularly. As for the quote, I was desperate to belong to a community, disparate because I came from a different background to most Black people I knew, and diasporate because I was part of the African diaspora.

I.D.A.: What was it like for a Black British woman to come of age in London during the years of the Thatcher?

P.A.: I was anti-Thatcher and The Left was very vocal. I went on the famous anti-Poll Tax march which ended in a riot; I attended

the Marxism conference in central London. I made friends with anarchists. Some of my Left Wing politics came from hanging out with PPE students at Oxford University (Politics, Philosophy and Economics). They talked politics most of the time and they were all left wing at my college. Also, I was a member of the Oxford University African Society Treasurer for the Oxford University Nigerian Society. Nigerians talk politics non stop. Later I used to hang out at the Africa Centre in Covent Garden. Everyone talked politics in the basement bar. It was all very exciting.

I.D.A.: How did Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Ruth Finnegan and Walter Ong inform your writing?

P.A.: Very little actually. I read Ong's *Orality and Literacy* when I was doing my MA in Creative Writing, the Arts and Education at the University of Sussex. I loved it (and I still love it). But it makes the important distinction between primary orality and secondary. Most people are living in the age of secondary orality. All performance poets I know are highly literate. It's rare to find a poet like Benjamin Zephaniah who claims to compose whole poems in his head. Some African poets I used to hang out with were raised in cultures where part of the population were illiterate but they were all from middle class backgrounds.

I heard Ngugi Wa Thiong'o give a lecture about three different kinds of translation once and it was amazing. I think it was translated by Dr Wangui wa Goro. It was inspiring and I was sympathetic to his cause about writers writing in indigenous language etc but he was coming from a different creative and political perspective from my own.

I'm not familiar with the work of Ruth Finnegan at all. I believe Merle Collins may have referred to these writers in the introduction to *R.A.W.* but she was comparing my poetics to theirs. I was not familiar with any of them in 1995.

I.D.A.: How have the vibrancy of London and later the «tribes» of Colwyn Bay shaped your imagination?

P.A.: A lot of my earlier work was very urban, very London-centric. London was very inspiring to me. I had several groups of very different friends who rarely met: the African friends, poet friends, gay and lesbian friends. I can't remember referring to the «tribes» of Colwyn Bay but in my *General Prologue to the Colwyn Bay Tales* (I only completed two tales in the end), the character portraits were inspired by mods, rockers, new romantics, punks, all the youth cults of the late 70s. It was never published but I knew one day I would like to revisit Chaucer. And I have. In 2014 Canongate Books Ltd are publishing my versions of *The Canterbury Tales*.

I.D.A.: Kamau Brathwaite says that the oral tradition demands not only the griot but a sympathetic audience. How much does feedback from the audience count in your poetry?

P.A.: Before I was published, audience feedback meant everything to me. It was the only feedback I received. But since 1995 I've also had book reviews and occasionally reviews of live performances. I don't see myself as truly being part of the oral tradition because I write my poems before I perform them. But I, and all those other poets out there who are called 'performance poets' (either by themselves or promoters or the press), give the illusion of being part of the oral tradition. They often learn their work rather than read it off the page. They demand audience applause after each poems because they've made the effort to make it entertaining. Poets still talk about the divide between a performance poetry gig where you expect applause between poems and a poetry reading where the poet asks the audience to applaud at the end of the entire reading. Those barriers are gradually being broken down.

You have to be careful about audience feedback because audiences differ so hugely. I've recently been performing from my forthcoming collection, versions of the *Canterbury Tales*, and inviting the audience to mark the poems out of 10 for content and performance style. (This mirrors Chaucer's original pilgrimage where pilgrims were in competition with each other to tell the best story). It's interesting to see that the same poems are getting 9 out of 10. Those poems are also my favourites so it's possible I'm performing them with more conviction than others. Or maybe they really are superior to the other poems in the collection. On the other hand, some poems score quite differently on different nights.

I.D.A.: Your first collection is dedicated to freedom of speech. Have you had to fight much with publishers to keep your work «UN-CAGED / UNCHAINED / UNCENSORED»?

P.A.: No. I haven't had to fight but I've had to learn that if you're going to publish, the work has to have enough tension on the page to warrant being published. I haven't compromised by becoming something I'm not but I've enjoyed writing in traditional literary poetic forms like the sonnet and the sestina and taking them back to their performance roots. Those forms which are now recognized as highly literary were always in that category but they were also performed by troubadours. I'm lucky to be published not by a traditional poetry publisher but by Canongate Books Ltd who specialize in literary fiction. That has possibly given me more freedom. I don't have to conform to a poetry house style because Canongate publishes so few poets. In fact, the publishing director, Jamie Byng, approached me to send him a manuscript after seeing me perform *R.A.W.* at the 1995 Edinburgh Book Festival.

I.D.A.: You feel that the fact of being heard is

a political act. Is the disruption of canonical poetry also an act of cultural re-appropriation?

P.A.: In the late 80s, in venues like Apples & Snakes, it was all about previously silenced groups being heard. Women, Black people, lesbian and gay, disabled. I was «brought up» in that circle. But I was also «brought up» by doing an English degree at Pembroke College, Oxford, where I learnt Anglo-Saxon poetry. I state in my biography for *R.A.W.* that I was educated at Pembroke College, Oxford, and the performance poetry scene in London. Since 1997 I've been trying to marry to the two, the «literary» with the «street», the page with the stage. Poems like *RAPunzel*, *The Wife of Bafa* and several poems in the forthcoming collection, are clearly reappropriating material but hopefully with some humour as well. Poetry (and politics) can take itself too seriously and I think it's important to have fun with language. Yes, you can make a serious point but I'm no longer into the fist-in-the-air preachiness of some 80s poetry, unless it's absolutely brilliantly written.

I.D.A.: You were a Northern Soul fan. How did you come to feel so much at home with the mid-Sixties outlook?

P.A.: It was just an aesthetic thing, it had nothing at all to do with the «mid-Sixties outlook.» I didn't know what that was. I simply heard the music and loved it. I knew it was Black music, African-American soul, but I didn't know much about the politics. Having said that, the first single I ever bought was Black Power by James Coit. You can't get more political than that. I loved the clothes and still occasionally attend events where half the punters are dressed in full 60s regalia.

I got into Northern Soul in 1978 and around the same time, I got into ska, specifically 2-Tone

records, a label that celebrated Black and white coming together to be creative. It was very political but as I say in my poem, *Gangsters*, at the time «We didn't get the 2-Tone metaphor.»

I.D.A.: In synthesis, how did you deconstruct the three «ps» – page, poetry and performance?

P.A.: It's hard to do this justice because I wrote my MA thesis on this subject 14 years ago and haven't looked at it for over ten years. I was simply challenging the terms, especially «performance.» I felt that adjective said very little about the work. Wouldn't it be better to say, punk poetry, dub poetry, rap poetry, stand-up poetry? Performance poetry is such a broad church, how could you lump it all together? Similarly, the word «poetry» doesn't adequately describe what an individual writer is trying to do. If I were writing the thesis now, of course I could further challenge the concept of «page» since there's so much online poetry.

I.D.A.: Have you ever recorded a CD with the other members of Atomic Lip? What kind of music did you play and who inspired you most?

P.A.: We recorded two or three tracks and made two short (terrible) films. We didn't use music, we made music out of our own voices. It was word acapella, «poetry you could dance to.» I'm not sure whether there's any online. I recorded a track with Howie B ages ago called *There's Gonna Be One Hell of a Storm* on the compilation poetry album, *One Hell of a Storm*. That uses Howie's music. He was really big on the music scene. I had no idea at the time. And lovely to work with. But I was always more interested in the raw word and what it could do without music to fall back on. I was, and still am, passionate about the *music* of poetry.

FRANCESCA GIOMMI

The Unfinished Conversation, John Akomfrah. Londra. Tate Britain: ottobre 2013-marzo 2014

Poetico, lirico ed evocativo come l'Akomfrah delle migliori occasioni (dall'indimenticabile esordio con *Handsworth Songs* nel 1987 al più recente e raffinato *The Nine Muses*, 2010), il regista afro-britannico, co-fondatore dello storico Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC 1982), torna alla ribalta della scena artistica londinese con *The Unfinished Conversation* che, dopo l'apprezzato debutto alla Biennale di Liverpool lo scorso anno, viene ora proiettato a ciclo continuo alla Tate Modern sulle sponde del Tamigi, rendendosi così accessibile ad un più vasto ed eterogeneo pubblico.

L'opera si presenta come un'installazione video a tre schermi che nella durata complessiva di 45 minuti rende omaggio Stuart Hall, sociologo e teorico culturale britannico di origine caraibica, ricostruendone in maniera ammirata e talora celebrativa, ma scevra da nostalgici sentimentalismi come è proprio dello stile di Akomfrah, l'identità intellettuale, etnica e personale nell'arco di sessant'anni di storia individuale e collettiva. Nato a Kingston, in Giamaica, nel 1932 da una famiglia medio-borghese con origini ebraico-portoghesi (e lontani retaggi africani e britannici), Hall arrivò a Oxford nel 1951 come studente, sperimentando sulla sua pelle quel senso di alienazione comune agli abitanti delle colonie che in massa varcarono l'oceano a metà del secolo scorso, desiderosi di raggiungere un'amorevole Madrepatria, salvo poi ritrovarsi respinti e misconosciuti da un'alghida, crudele e razzista matrigna. Questo senso di dislocazione e ambiguità portò Hall all'elaborazione complessa e stratificata di un concetto di identità che non coincide mai con l'idea di essenza ma piuttosto con quella di un divenire continuo, prodotto talora conflittuale di storia e memoria (non immune all'ingannevolezza in cui quest'ultima può trarre), identi-

tà quale mai fissa né statica nel tempo e nello spazio, reale o fittizio che sia, e sottoposta a ritrattazione perenne come una sorta di «conversazione infinita».

L'installazione ricostruisce dunque la memoria e l'archivio personale di Hall, intersecandolo a più livelli con quelli collettivi della «Black Britain» dagli anni cinquanta ad oggi, attraverso l'utilizzo libero e creativo, ma sempre sapiente e controllato, di immagini e materiali d'archivio, foto e racconti di famiglia, estratti radiofonici e televisivi, di citazioni da autori costitutivi dell'identità culturale britannica, quali William Blake, Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf e Mervyn Peake, mescolati a brani Jazz e Gospel, da Mahalia Jackson a Stephan Micus. Si esplorano questioni di razza e identità, di cambiamento sociale, storico e politico, passando per eventi cruciali come quelli del 1956 – l'insurrezione di Suez e la rivoluzione in Ungheria – in seguito ai quali germinò l'idea di un anti-imperialismo socialista democratico: nel 1957 Hall fu uno dei membri fondatori della Campagna per il Disarmo Nucleare e nel 1959 fondò la *New Left Review* con E.P. Thompson, Ralph Miliband e Raymond Williams, dirigendola per due anni.

Il 68 fu uno spartiacque importante nel riconoscimento di una comune matrice identitaria in Gran Bretagna, con l'affermarsi definitivo dell'aggettivo «nero» («Black») su altri demarcatori etnici e razziali sino ad allora utilizzati, a designare con esso un preciso contesto storico e teorico, migrante e militante al tempo stesso. Insieme a una ristretta cerchia di artisti e intellettuali caraibici della sua generazione (da Sam Selvon a CLR James e John LaRose, tutti tristemente scomparsi a cavallo della svolta del millennio), Stuart Hall divenne così punto di riferimento e portavoce per intere generazioni di migranti di ogni provenienza ed estrazione sociale (prendendo posizioni pubbliche su eventi di portata internazionale, dal Vietnam, al nefasto discorso *Rivers of Blood* di Enoch Powell, all'apartheid in Sudafrica), tan-

to che per lo stesso John Akomfrah, arrivato a Londra negli anni settanta dal natio Ghana, l'incontro con questo modello fu illuminante e dirompente, avviandolo agli studi culturali e ad una ormai pluridecennale carriera di artista «Black» impegnato, fino al raggiungimento di riconoscimenti importanti nei principali festival cinematografici internazionali, da Toronto a Cannes e Venezia.

Nonostante l'estetica raffinata e il ricercato rigore critico, *The Unfinished Conversation* prorompe nella sala con fragore, opera intellettualmente stimolante che valica e confonde i confini del documentario e dell'installazione visuale, tributo appassionato e vibrante ad un uomo e al contempo ad un'intera generazione di artisti, intellettuali, migranti e militanti. Per contro, a chi accusa Akomfrah e il suo collettivo di rappresentare un'avanguardia troppo impegnata, criptica e d'élite, non rimane che l'abbandono alla potenza artistica della sua opera, trascendendone per un istante i nessi di senso e lasciandosi penetrare dalla bellezza disarmante delle sue immagini, cullare dalla musicalità delle sue voci e lambire dall'infrangersi delle sue onde. Quelle stesse onde che riecheggiano dai versi sussurrati in sottofondo a conclusione dell'opera e tratti da *The Waves* di Virginia Woolf:

The sun rose. Bars of yellow and green fell on the shore [...] Now, too, the rising sun came in at the window, touching the red-edged curtain [...] The wind rose. The waves drummed on the shore, like turbanned warriors, like turbanned men with poisoned assegais who, whirling their arms on high, advance upon the feeding flocks, the white sheep. [...] The waves broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore. One after another they massed themselves and fell [...] withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping.

ANNALISA OBOE

Vivere o scrivere? Filmare forse... Xiaolu Guo fra oriente e occidente

Xiaolu Guo è una scrittrice e regista cinese-inglese che ha lasciato Pechino all'inizio del nuovo millennio per spostarsi a Londra, una delle «contact zones» più creative del mondo globale. In poco più di un decennio Guo è riuscita a trasformare il suo «inglese da immigrata» in uno strumento espressivo potente, con cui ha scritto e pubblicato cinque romanzi, uno dei quali è stato finalista del prestigioso Orange Prize for Fiction nel 2007 (*A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*), e a essere recentemente selezionata dall'influente rivista letteraria *Granta* come una delle giovani voci più promettenti della scrittura britannica contemporanea (*Granta's Best of Young British Novelists 2013*). La sua filmografia conta oltre una decina di titoli fra brevi documentari e film, tra cui *UFO in Her Eyes*, che ha ricevuto il Premio Città di Venezia in concomitanza con la Mostra del Cinema lo scorso settembre, e *She, a Chinese*, premiato con il Golden Leopard all'ultimo Festival di Locarno.

Guo sembra cavalcare più vite con energia e determinazione, oltre che con enorme creatività. Viaggia moltissimo, da un festival all'altro, da una presentazione di libro a un convegno letterario, ciascuno in un paese o continente diverso, per riuscire a vivere del proprio lavoro. Su una rotta che dalla Germania la stava portando a Istanbul, Guo si è fermata all'Università di Padova il 12 dicembre 2013, invitata dal Seminario di Anglistica e Americanistica del Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari, per raccontare la propria esperienza e, in particolare, cosa significhi muoversi come artista fra una pluralità di culture, di lingue e mezzi espressivi, e quali siano le possibilità offerte dagli intricati processi di traduzione culturale che informano i suoi lavori. Armata di libri e di video clip degli ultimi documentari girati per le vie dell'East End di Londra, in un'aula gremita

di studenti e docenti, Guo ha tessuto un racconto schietto, fatto di parole e immagini, di esperienze proprie e altrui, sulla ricerca di senso in un mondo in cui si è tutti stranieri – che si tratti di vivere a Pechino nel rinnovato assetto capitalistico della politica economica cinese, o nel centro metropolitano inglese, diventato «casa provvisoria» per milioni di persone di ogni parte del mondo, che nella sua opera non figura come avamposto inespugnabile della Fortezza Europa ma piuttosto come uno degli snodi di transito di un ordine linguistico ed economico globale delocalizzato.

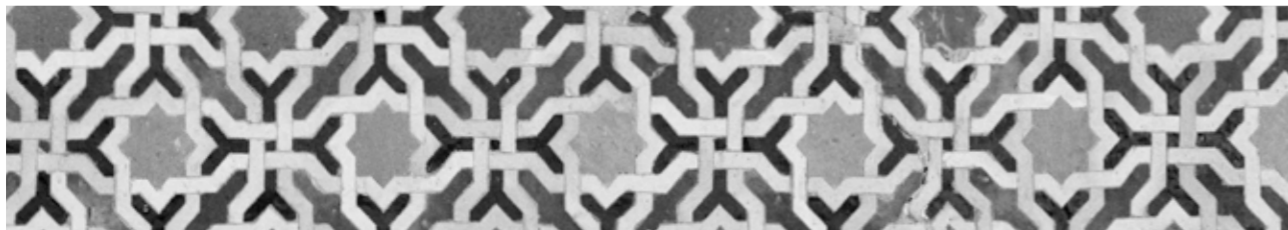
Lo sguardo disincantato dell'artista si concentra sui guadagni e sulle perdite per la vita delle persone causati dai flussi planetari che hanno cambiato la Cina ma anche l'Europa, e produce opere che «traducono» la migrazione e l'alienazione, la continua negoziazione linguistico-epistemologica e i processi di costruzione della memoria che caratterizzano la vita del migrante, le zone di incomprensione e resistenza fra oriente e occidente, nonché gli aggiustamenti necessari alla sopravvivenza – dei corpi e delle identità – quando si vive al centro del ciclone, come oggi accade per molti cinesi intrappolati in cambiamenti socio-economici vorticosi e non controllabili. Se la storia d'amore del suo *Piccolo dizionario cinese-inglese per innamorati* ci fa toccare con mano tali questioni attraverso la sperimentazione linguistica e una forma letteraria profondamente ibrida, l'ultimo documentario *Late at Night. Voices of Ordinary Madness* cuce insieme una serie di interviste ai diseredati che vivono nelle strade di Hackney a Londra, dove lei stessa abita, per produrre un *guerilla film*, una forma di cinema militante che guarda all'allargarsi progressivo della massa dei dannati della terra globale. Guo si identifica con i suoi personaggi, sapendo che potrebbe essere una di loro, o diventare una di loro se il suo progetto artistico fallisse.

Il rapporto con Londra e con l'occidente per Guo è al tempo stesso ammirato, critico e

utilitaristico. Riconosce di dovere moltissimo alla letteratura occidentale, che ha avuto un impatto decisivo sul suo percorso formativo di adolescente negli anni '80, quando il governo centrale aveva permesso la traduzione di opere della Beat Generation americana, di Jack Kerouac e Allen Ginsberg, ma anche J. D. Salinger e Sylvia Plath, aprendo per la sua generazione possibilità di fuga intellettuale e di espressione individuale impensabili rispetto a una tradizione letteraria locale imponente e immobile. E ricorda con gratitudine l'incontro successivo con il cinema europeo alla Beijing Film Academy, i grandi registi e autori che ancora oggi sono i suoi modelli, come Pasolini, Godard, Buñuel, Fassbinder ... La sfida per l'artista è scrivere e fare film contaminando continuamente i linguaggi e le storie dell'Est e dell'Ovest, e così riposizionare la Cina e la sua esperienza di cinese al cuore della contemporaneità.

Ma Guo confessa anche, con schiettezza, di intrattenere una relazione di sfruttamento capitalistico nei confronti dell'Europa, e in particolare di Londra, che le permette di vivere vendendo libri. Ama e odia la metropoli caotica, rumorosa e impietosa che ora è casa sua (per scelta ma anche perché non le è permesso tornare in Cina), come ama e odia l'impegno totalizzante della scrittura. In una nota conclusiva del suo intervento padovano, Guo racconta come negli ultimi quattro anni, per scrivere *I Am China*, in pubblicazione nel 2014, abbia praticamente smesso di respirare, abbia quasi sacrificato l'esistenza intera. «Vivere o scrivere?» è diventato per lei il dilemma attorno a cui organizzare un giorno dopo l'altro, ma il rovello amletico dell'artista sembra trovare risposta ancora una volta nel suo essere per l'arte, nello spostare su un piano contiguo le sue stesse potenzialità creative: la soluzione all'ansia di dover (anche) vivere, per Guo, è lasciare la penna e prendere la cinepresa, scendere in strada e cominciare a girare un film e, dice, «I call that life.»

in memoriam



MARCO FAZZINI

«Madiba» Mandela: l'eterno cantore della libertà

L'11 febbraio del 1990 avevo già in tasca un biglietto aereo per Durban: sarei partito alle nove di sera, da Roma, e sarei atterrato, proprio il giorno successivo alla liberazione di Mandela, nella terra dove si stava da qualche mese smantellando l'atroce regime dell'apartheid. Quel pomeriggio, feci appena in tempo a vedere il servizio in diretta sulla Rai, e gustarmi la liberazione di «Madiba» che, a fianco di De Klerk, camminava lentamente lungo un viale fiorito e giubilante. Atterrare quel mattino nel nuovo Sud Africa, mi riempì di entusiasmo per quello che avrei vissuto di lì a poco. Ma il cambiamento nel paese non fu scontato, né indolore. Tra il 1990 e il 1991, qualche collega, studente nel campus dell'Università del Kwa-Zulu Natal, ancora scompariva sotto i colori foschi di misteriosi eventi, per aver semplicemente lavorato su tesi di laurea «scomode» al governo o alla polizia. La polizia stessa ancora faceva stragi nei ghetti, magari anche solo per il gusto di uccidere, e la città nella quale vivevo contava circa 400 morti a settimana, anche dovuti alle tensioni tra gli zulu di Buthelezi e l'ANC di Mandela. Nell'aprile del 1990 festeggiammo Madiba quando venne a parlare a una popola-

zione studentesca e cittadina di circa quarantamila persone radunate in un campo fuori città, e la sua voce fu calma, decisa, e pacificante, megafono rassicurante e toccante per una svolta epocale. Tutti ci credemmo, e nessuno dubitava, mentre il mondo osservava gli eventi. Come ha detto Muhammad Ali: «Ci ha ispirato il perdono invece dell'odio». Pochi giorni dopo venne in visita al campus un altro grande protagonista delle lotte per la libertà dei sudafricani: si trattava del poeta-performer Mzwakhe Mbuli, a cui lo stesso Mandela, nel 1989, dalla prigione, aveva scritto: «Vorrei renderti noto che sei amato e rispettato ben oltre i confini della tua città. Cari e affettuosi saluti. Nelson Mandela».

Queste parole possono, senza difficoltà, risultare appropriate per Mandela stesso, che pur senza la poesia e la musica di Mbuli, si era conquistato la simpatia di tutta l'opinione pubblica internazionale. Dai confini del suo natio Transkei, Madiba aveva da anni scatenato petizioni, embarghi, proteste e manifestazioni in favore della sua liberazione, in diretta condanna di una delle ultime roccaforti «coloniali» del mondo. Ma ci vollero quattro anni per approdare alle prime elezioni libere in Sud Africa, e accordargli il titolo di Presidente. Sono passati quasi vent'anni da quel giorno, e il paese non è propriamente quello che sognava Madiba, con

le sue corruzioni, i suoi sussulti economici, i suoi contrasti sociali, i rimborsi alle vittime mai arrivati, la riconciliazione ancora sanguinante, come ferita aperta; eppure, è pur sempre un paese libero dove la gente vota democraticamente, dove la ghettizzazione degli spazi e delle abitazioni è scomparsa, dove la musica, la letteratura e le arti sono condivise, godute, create in armonia. Di recente, nel suo ultimo CD, il cantante e compositore Vusi Mahlasela, dopo aver festeggiato i novant'anni di Madiba ad Hyde Park nel 2008, e aver preso parte al Mandela Day nel 2009, e aperto i Mondiali di Calcio del 2010 con la sua musica, ha celebrato Madiba nella canzone «Intate Mandela», dove si leggono i seguenti, toccanti versi: «La libertà non si può chiamare libertà se tutti gli uomini non sono liberi [...] Ci hai insegnato che l'amore per l'umanità è volere la felicità dell'altro». Una lezione che dovremmo osservare, sempre e in ogni contesto.

MARCO FAZZINI

Scomparso Amiri Baraka, il poeta-polemista nero più odiato dal potere. La sua lotta per i diritti civili ha cambiato l'America del dopoguerra.

Poeta, saggista, insegnante, drammaturgo e attivista politico, Amiri Baraka è scomparso lo scorso 9 gennaio 2014, quasi ottantenne. Nato nel 1934 a Newark, nel New Jersey, con il suo vero nome di LeRoi Jones, negli anni Cinquanta, aveva fatto parte dell'avanguardia newyorkese, alleandosi con poeti e scrittori come Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara e Jack Kerouac; negli anni Sessanta era stato lo strenuo sostenitore del nazionalismo nero, trasferendosi a Harlem; nei Settanta aveva svolto attività chiaramente marxista in favore della liberazione del Terzo Mondo e della decolonizzazione; più di recente, era stato accusato di anti-semitismo per la sua poesia *Somebody Blew Up America*, nella quale si chiedeva come mai 4000 impiegati

israeliani erano stati avvertiti, l'11 settembre, di starsene a casa e di non andare al lavoro alle Torri Gemelle, e chi «ha posseduto colonie, chi ha rubato gran parte della terra, chi oggi governa il mondo, chi predica il bene e razzola il male [...] Chi ha invaso Grenada, chi ha fatto danaro con l'apartheid, chi ha mantenuto per secoli l'Irlanda come una colonia, chi ha rovesciato il Cile e poi il Nicaragua [...] CHI?». Nel testo la lista degli attacchi è lunghissima: sovvertendo i valori della dicotomia di bene/male e bianco/nero al modo del famoso discorso di Malcolm X, Amiri voleva identificare esattamente chi fosse il diavolo, perché questo fosse ben visibile nel mondo, e come mai Dio non abbia mai fatto capolino in questa terra.

Polemista ante litteram, mai sceso a compromessi, e combattente disilluso tanto che la prese addirittura con filosofia quando, a un anno dalla sua nomina di Poeta Laureato del New Jersey, quell'onorificenza gli fu subito ritirata dopo il testo poetico sull'11 settembre, Amiri amava recitarlo ancora, e di recente con l'accompagnamento dei jazzisti Jackson al pianoforte, Jones al contrabbasso e AkLaff alla batteria. Non era nuovo, ovviamente a queste collaborazioni con i musicisti dell'avanguardia americana: rimangono negli annali della storia la sua registrazione con il New York Art Quartet, nel 1964, quando appena trentenne fu diretto da Roswell Rudd, o il suo progetto più recente *Blue Ark (Real Song, 1994)*, i concerti con il William Parker Octet con il quale si era esibito più volte, anche in Italia, o le incisioni con Vijay Iyer.

Ricordo con commozione i due giorni che precedettero un concerto a Vicenza del 2007, perché li passammo a Venezia a girovagare sotto un sole cocente, a bere spritz sulla riva accanto a Rialto e a passeggiare le Zattere fino al mio ufficio; poi, dopo la presentazione della ri-edizione del suo storico saggio sulla cultura afro-americana (*Il popolo del blues*, Shake, 2007) presso la Libreria Galla di Vicenza, ci fermammo l'intera serata, e la notte, a bere e

a parlare, e a degustare grappe serviteci da un oste amico che lo aveva riconosciuto, e coccolato fino al mattino, fino al momento del suo imbarco da Venezia per gli Stati Uniti. Eppure, il suo seguito come scrittore non fu quello delle grandi folle in città: ci eravamo ritrovati in non più di dieci persone ad ascoltarlo, lui che aveva scritto le pièce teatrali *Dante*, *Dutchman*, *Il battesimo*, *La morte di Malcolm X*, ecc., si era tirato dietro per decenni i funzionari della CIA e dell'FBI, lui che aveva sconvolto l'America con le sue performance assieme ai migliori jazzisti della piazza, lui che aveva insegnato e tenuto conferenze alla State University di Stony Brook e alla New School University di New York, alla University di Buffalo, alla Columbia, alla San Francisco State University, a Yale, alla George Washington, a Rutgers, e parlato in vari convegni con i suoi amici di sempre, quella generazione Beat che da noi era arrivata con un decennio di ritardo, ma che comunque aveva cambiato il nostro modo di leggere e di vivere il dopoguerra.

Subito dopo il suo ultimo concerto italiano, a Milano, lo scorso 27 ottobre, c'eravamo incontrati per discutere di un mio progetto editoriale che lo includerà tra i 20 poeti che nel secolo scorso hanno maggiormente contribuito alla lotta per i diritti umani e civili nel mondo: il viaggio che Amiri fece a Cuba nel 1959, e l'incontro con scrittori e poeti internazionali dal Terzo Mondo, lo avevano convinto, già nei suoi vent'anni, che lottare contro la povertà, le guerre, le carestie e i governi dispotici sarebbe stata la sua missione di vita. Quasi utopicamente, e con ingenuità, continuava a scrivermi nelle dediche ai suoi libri: «UNITY+STRUGGLE», al modo in cui avrebbero scritto i Wobblies degli anni Venti, o Woody Guthrie, o qualsiasi esponente del proletariato nero d'altri tempi, o forse l'unico eroe bianco americano che si potrebbe paragonare ad Amiri: Pete Seeger. In questo, era un irriducibile idealista, e falliva a leggere l'esacerbarsi del male odierno, quell'individualismo dilagante che ormai la fa da padrone. Ep-

pure, l'animo del combattente non lo aveva mai abbandonato, con quel suo modo tutto particolare di lanciare invettive costruite su metafore semplici, veri e propri moniti caustici, intesi a risvegliare e provocare l'ascoltatore, sia a cappella che con un gruppo jazz. Speriamo solo che la sua voce non vada per sempre perduta, soprattutto dai giovani, e che ci accompagni ancora a lungo, vista la terribile e scottante attualità delle sue «Rivelazioni»: «I peggiori criminali | sono del tutto legali, | hanno leggi che dicono che | loro possono rubare. I peggiori assassini | sono del tutto legali, | hanno leggi che dicono | che per loro è del tutto figo | uccidere. | Come mai? Perché | questo qui è l'Inferno. (Non | l'avete capito?) / La vera domanda non è come | evitare di finire all'Inferno, | la vera domanda è | come uscirne!» I funerali si svolgeranno il 18 gennaio alla Newark Symphony Hall, con una commemorazione ufficiale.

MARCO FAZZINI

L'ultimo passo prima del Parnaso: in ricordo di Seamus Heaney.

Seamus Heaney il poeta, premio Nobel nel 1995; ma anche il traduttore del *Beowulf*, del poeta scozzese tardo-medievale Robert Henryson, della vecchia leggenda irlandese di Sweeney, di Leos Janacek e del gaelico Sorley Maclean; l'insegnante che, dopo i suoi esordi alla Queen's University di Belfast (1966-1972) e al Carysfort College, dal 1982 tenne lezione a Harvard per decenni come Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, dividendosi tra la Repubblica d'Irlanda, dove si era stabilito nel 1972, e gli Stati Uniti, un po' la sua seconda patria. E ancora: lo scrittore che declinò il titolo di Poeta Laureato del Regno Unito perché si sentiva «off-centre» (scentrato), sia come nazionalità che come lingua e religione; colui che nel 1982, rifiutandosi di apparire in una famosa antologia di poesia «britannica», scrisse: «Be advised, my passport's green | No glass of

ours was ever raised | To toast the Queen» (Siete avvertiti, il mio passaporto è verde | Nessun bicchiere è stato da noi mai alzato | Per brindare la Regina). (Heaney 1983: 9)

Io lo conobbi per primo nella veste di critico, ai tempi in cui studiavo e traducevo il poeta inglese Geoffrey Hill. Su Hill s'era scritto poco o nulla nel 1984/1985. Fu così che, lavorando su un grande inglese, scoprii il primo libro di saggistica d'un grande irlandese, quel *Preoccupations* (uscito in Italia per Fazi Editore, e curato da Massimo Bacigalupo col titolo di *Attenzioni*, nel 1996) che già nel 1981 lo aveva decretato quale fine lettore e analista di alcuni tra i maggiori poeti di lingua inglese, con in testa Wordsworth, Yeats, Hopkins, MacDiarmid, Larkin, Hughes, Hill e Kavanagh. Poi venne lo Heaney lettore dei poeti dell'est europeo come Brodskij, Milosz e Herbert, l'Heaney amico dei grandi scozzesi come MacDiarmid, MacCaig, Maclean e Mackay Brown, l'Heaney classicista compagno di Sofocle, Dante e Virgilio, l'Heaney appassionato del gaelico sia d'Irlanda che di Scozia, e le molte altre diramazioni di una cultura smisurata, che mai però incuteva soggezione.

Comprai il suo smilzo *Selected Poems 1965-1975* verso la metà degli anni Ottanta; quel libro raccoglieva le sue migliori poesie fino a *North* (1975): c'era già tutto il suo mondo, quella poetica che Seamus concentrava in una battuta quando poi si divertiva a rispondere alla domanda su cosa, secondo lui, avessero ricordato della sua poesia dopo un secolo. Lui diceva sarebbe solo stato: BOG! BOG! BOG!

In effetti, era quel ciclo dei «Bog Poems» che mi cominciò ad appassionare, tanto da spingermi a produrre la prima traduzione che sia uscita in Italia. La feci nel 1988, e la pubblicai nel 1989, subito dopo la mia esperienza sulla poesia di Geoffrey Hill, su una rivista di poesia e arte (*Origini* 8, 1989), allora diretta da un poeta, Gian Ruggero Manzoni, che ne fu impressionato. Fu così che io e Seamus prendemmo a scriverci, perché la rivista, quando gliela

mandai, lo colpì, come penso anche le traduzioni, anche se sospetto che la sua conoscenza dell'italiano fosse minuscola. Dalla raccolta di lettere che mi rimangono oggi nel cassetto, mi rendo oggi conto che sono passati quasi 25 anni, un tempo nel quale ci siamo scambiati libri, piccoli pamphlet, fax e bigliettini, e soprattutto quelle cartoline che Seamus approntava ogni Natale per gli amici, con qualche poesia, un frammento di traduzione, un pensiero, che faceva stampare in genere dall'amico Peter Fallon della Gallery Press. Una, in particolare, mi colpì, e siamo già alla fine nel 1997: la cartolina con la poesia «Would They Had Stayed» dedicata a tre grandi della Scozia che Seamus sapeva avevo conosciuto bene, tre poeti scomparsi tutti nel 1996: Norman MacCaig, Sorley Maclean e George Mackay Brown. Ma faccio un passo indietro e capirete perché li cito a questo punto, e perché questo contatto stretto con la Scozia mi appare necessario per osservare qualcosa di strategico per la sua poetica.

Ricordo che quando nel 1993, dopo aver già in parte lavorato alle mie traduzioni da Norman MacCaig, parlai a Bologna con Heaney di questa mia impresa, in occasione della presentazione della traduzione del suo primo libro italiano, *Station Island* (Mondadori, 1992), l'irlandese mi disse: «Tiemmi aggiornato su quello che stai facendo: io e Norman siamo amici fraterni.» Fu così che qualche tempo dopo, Seamus decise di scrivere la prefazione al mio libro *L'equilibrista*, contenente una trentina di poesie di Norman MacCaig, una presentazione di Valerie Gillies, e una mia intervista con il poeta. Lo scritto, poi ripubblicato qualche anno dopo da Heaney in *Finders Keepers*, recava già la chiave per poter leggere quali fossero state le sue influenze giovanili. Quando Heaney introdusse MacCaig al Festival di Kilkenny, nel 1975, i due si erano già incontrati, per l'esattezza nel 1973, a St Andrews. Nella sua introduzione al mio libretto italiano, Seamus scriveva così della poetica di Norman MacCaig: «Il mio primo incontro con la poesia di Norman Mac-

Caig sancì una vera e propria conversione. In un libretto della BBC, prodotto per accompagnare *Listening and Writing*, l'eccellente serie di Schools Radio in onda nei primi anni Sessanta, mi imbattei in *Summer Farm*: «Sparse per il prato pagliuzze come lampi mansueti | Pendono a zig-zag sulle siepi». Geniale! Un continuum unico di arguzia e sensualità. Il minimale e l'eccentrico trasposti in chiave metafisica». E poi, poco più oltre: «Norman è un gran pescatore, un maestro del lancio, del filo che fa da richiamo. E l'arte del pescatore, – che è dopotutto l'arte dell'approccio obliquo – è pure contenuta nella sua poesia. Egli riesce sempre a far affiorare qualcosa da un soggetto, e lo fa saltare oltre se stesso». (MacCaig 1995: 9-10) La speciale mistura di surrealismo, atmosfera metafisica e rigore formale – che Heaney descrive con terminologia latina ricorrendo alle nomenclature di *integritas*, *consonantia* e *claritas* – è ciò che più lo attrae di Norman MacCaig, un poeta al quale rimarrà fedele fino all'ultimo: penso che la volontà di scrivere il saggio per il mio libretto sia derivata proprio da questo desiderio di volergli tributare un giusto ossequio, dopo tanti anni di vicinanza poetica e umana, ma anche di indicare qualche chiave di lettura che getti luce sulla sua stessa opera. Il processo di MacCaig di voler svelare, strato dopo strato, l'ultima essenza di quella fattoria d'estate descritta in *Summer Farm*, e la metafora che Heaney usa del filo che fa da richiamo sott'acqua, risuonano in modo del tutto simile alla sua stessa tecnica di escavazione in profondità, facendoci intuire sia che le metafore sono un modo obliquo di rappresentare la realtà sia che questa rappresentazione sonda le corrispondenze nascoste e profonde del nostro sentire e del nostro immaginare, collegamenti arditi che andiamo a pescare spesso nel nostro inconscio, o nell'inconscio collettivo, ossia, tra l'altro, nella Storia. E Storia per Heaney è anche, spesso e volentieri, la storia della lingua, o d'una lingua perduta che lui ha voluto acquisire e praticare nel corso della sua carriera. Anche in questo

caso, MacCaig gli dà uno spunto interessante, e sancisca un'alleanza o una pratica comune, sia agli scozzesi che agli irlandesi. Dice Heaney:

Un giorno, ad una festa ad Edimburgo, in una stanza piena di fumo, musica e amori reggimenti, Norman mi condusse verso un angolo e cominciò a fischiarmi un'aria del tutto affascinante. Quella mi trasportò d'improvviso in un mondo fatto di brughiere, cieli profondi e richiami di chiurlo. Era un frammento di *pibroch*, poche frasi orfane estrapolate dal repertorio classico dei lamenti per cornamusa. Ma si trattava anche di una melodia della solitudine dell'anima, un motivo che sembrava far parte di un sapere segreto [...] il filamento di quel suono che quel giorno si dipanò dalle sue labbra fu come un filo di Arianna che conduce proprio dentro il labirinto del gaelico scozzese: là dentro, nell'entroterra della modernità e della lingua inglese, abita la forma fetale della sconfitta e della dispersione, il trauma e la perdita della lingua. (MacCaig 1995: 12-13)

Quando il libro su MacCaig finalmente uscì, nell'estate del 1995 (*L'equilibrista*), ricordo che Heaney volle volare a proprie spese a Edimburgo, nonostante un brutto raffreddore, e partecipare con tutti noi al lancio del libro, per far festa assieme a un MacCaig che, nonostante l'instabilità dovuta alla malattia, non rinunciò a una riunione conviviale fatta di cibo cinese, whiskey e tante risate.

Mi aveva pregato di tenere il segreto, sia del suo saggio, sia del suo arrivo a Edimburgo, così, quando con Valerie Gillies, a casa sua, ci stavamo preparando per andare alla Biblioteca Nazionale a presentare il libro, arrivò Seamus col suo amico Patrick Crotty. Norman rimase di sasso, abbracciò il suo amico, e ne fu davvero toccato, mentre forse Seamus pensava, come tutti noi, che sarebbe stata forse l'ultima volta che avrebbe visto Norman in vita.

Da quell'anno, i ricordi con Heaney sono troppi: la nostra gioia per il Nobel solo un mese dopo quella serata scozzese; la sua disponibilità a introdurre con una poesia le mie traduzioni (MacDiarmid 2000: 6-9) dell'altro suo grande idolo, quel MacDiarmid che lo aveva incoraggiato fin da giovane; un suo contributo decisivo su Edwin Muir all'interno della mia storia della letteratura scozzese (Fazzini 2005), uno scritto che maturò solo attraverso una serie interminabile di stesure e correzioni manoscritte; e poi, un paio di pomeriggi a Dublino passati assieme a lui e a Muldoon a protestare contro la minaccia al sito archeologico di Tara; e poi, ancora in Scozia, a St Andrews, e in Italia.

Vorrei qui ricordare ancora qualcosa che mi sembra rilevante per il percorso da lui intrapreso non solo all'interno della sequenza dei suoi *Bog Poems* ma dell'intera sua opera. La sua lettura della poesia di MacDiarmid sembra ancora puntare l'obiettivo sulla verticalità, sulla escavazione in profondo, piuttosto che sulla estensione dell'orizzontalità. Certo, sappiamo già molto della sua lettura del libro *The Bog People* (Glob 1969), e di quanto quelle immagini abbiano influito su tutta una serie di testi, oggi ormai largamente studiati e analizzati. Eppure, quello che dice di MacDiarmid, aggiunge un'ulteriore conferma, che sembra provenire dalle letture intense di Heaney, che oggi potremmo anche chiamare influenze, o giochi intertestuali, o linee parallele di poetica. Nella poesia *An Invocation* (Heaney 1996, 28), dedicata a MacDiarmid, Heaney chiama lo scozzese «un catechismo degno d'essere detto e ridetto in eterno» (*A catechism worth repeating always*); ne aveva già scritto nel suo primo libro di saggi critici, *Preoccupations*, ne riprenderà la trattazione nelle sue Oxford Lectures nel 1992, e ne parlerà ampiamente in *Stepping Stones*. Lo incontrò per primo nel 1967, a casa di Kader Asmal, un professore di legge al Trinity e un attivista politico anti-apartheid, prima di una lettura in occasione della Giornata per i Diritti Umani. Poi, ancora nel 1977, a casa dello stes-

so MacDiarmid, a Biggar, dopo averne sentito a lungo parlare dal suo amico Patrick Crotty che aveva discusso una tesi di dottorato proprio sulla poesia di Hugh MacDiarmid. (O'Driscoll 2008: 362-65)

In breve: al di là dei testi in *scots* coi quali MacDiarmid lanciò la Rinascenza Scozzese nel 1922, e del suo capolavoro lungo migliaia di versi, ancora in *scots*, del 1926 (*A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*), è quel passaggio dal *synthetic scots* al *synthetic english* che sembra più appassionare Heaney, più per il programma d'un inglese onnicomprensivo che per i risultati strettamente poetici di MacDiarmid. Heaney insiste: «Le convinzioni di MacDiarmid sono ancora giuste. Ciò che fu grande del suo tentativo in Scozia fu la sua inclusività.» E quando Heaney sancisce le due date strategiche di MacDiarmid, dice che ne rimangono fondamentalmente due: il 1922, anno in cui nasce lo *scots* di MacDiarmid (lo pseudonimo usato da Christopher Murray Grieve per la sua carriera letteraria), e il 1933, anno della sua rinascita in inglese, quello che lui chiamò il suo lavoro nel *synthetic english*. (O'Driscoll 2008: 362-65)

Provato sia fisicamente che psicologicamente, nel 1933 MacDiarmid sbarcò a Whalsay, nelle Shetland, nella speranza di recuperare forze e voglia di scrivere. Qui grazie all'amicizia con il geologo Thomas Robertson, apprese della glaciazione delle isole e della formazione rocciosa di quell'angolo di mondo, ascoltando con attenzione quanto Robertson aveva da dirgli sui terrazzi marini di West Linga. Non si sa se sia vera la leggenda che narra di come abbia passato tre giorni su quella spiaggia, senza cibo, e dormendo in una grotta, o se più semplicemente egli godesse, dal suo cottage di Sodom, la vista del Linga Sound, uno stretto oltre il quale s'intravedeva il terrazzo marino dell'isola. Sta di fatto che il poemetto di MacDiarmid che va sotto il titolo di *On a Raised Beach* è uno dei suoi più alti capolavori, un'opera in cui assume una prospettiva speciale nella quale le pietre, la spiaggia e la conformazione tutta di quella crosta terrestre

vengono a far parte di una più ampia visuale sul cosmo e sugli elementi geologici che danno al poeta il via per altre e più importanti deduzioni filosofiche e poetiche. Anche qui, l'indagine è verticale, si va fino alla *haecceitas* delle pietre, perché sono quelle, e non più Dio, il nuovo logos da apprendere e sperimentare in ogni sua sfaccettatura, sia essa geologica, linguistica o filosofica, per fondarci sopra un nuovo ordine universale. Come per MacCaig, e per gli altri due scozzesi a lui cari, che rispondono al nome di Sorley Maclean e George Mackay Brown, anche per MacDiarmid vale quello che solo di recente Heaney rivela a Dennis O'Driscoll: «Esiste di certo una Scozia nascosta nel retro del mio udito, l'idioma dello scozzese dell'Ulster che sentivo parlare dai contadini della contea di Antrim alle fiere di bestiame in Ballymena» (O'Driscoll 2008: 365). Così questa indagine all'interno del territorio irlandese, l'escavazione in profondo, non è solo storica o archeologica, ma anche linguistica, quando la lingua è forma fetale della sconfitta e della dispersione, trauma e perdita: intendo quello che Heaney aveva visto fare dai suoi amici scozzesi: lo *scots* perduto nei secoli e poi rimesso in gioco da MacDiarmid; il gaelico rivitalizzato da Sorley Maclean nel Novecento, e in parte anche da MacCaig, anche se, per sua stessa ammissione, a lui rimaneva solo l'eco d'un idioma ormai abbandonato fin dalla fanciullezza; l'inglese delle Orkney di Edwin Muir e poi di George Mackay Brown; e, infine, lo scozzese di Henryson quando Heaney lo sente riecheggiare «nella parlata del medio-Ulster plasmata dai Lowlanders arrivati nel diciassettesimo secolo». (O'Driscoll 2008: 426).

Pensiamo, anche solo per un attimo, al testo *Bogland*, a come lì ogni quartina scivola sull'altra, una sorta di cascata, per darci l'idea d'un progressivo slittamento verticale del testo, una stratificazione dove, strato su strato, quartina su quartina si costruisce o si accumula la possibile storia della sua terra. E leggiamo come lo stesso Heaney ricostruisce il momento d'ispirazione che generò quel testo:

ci trovavamo a Londra, nell'appartamento di mia cognata, e stavo infilando la gamba destra nei calzoni quando mi è venuto il primo verso. Ho spesso riflettuto, quasi per scherzo, sulla relazione tra il passaggio non ostruito della gamba attraverso l'estremità aperta dei calzoni e la progressione libera della poesia verso quella conclusione in cui dico «bottomless» (senza fondo) riferendomi al «centro umido» della palude irlandese (O'Driscoll 2008: 91)

C'è anche un altro passaggio strategico in *Feeling into Words* che ci può dare un'ulteriore indicazione per capire meglio il testo: «Iniziai a farmi un'idea della torbiera quale memoria del paesaggio, o come d'un paesaggio che ricordava tutto quello che ci e gli accadeva. Di fatto, se si fa un giro al National Museum di Dublino, ci si rende conto che una gran parte dell'eredità materiale dell'Irlanda è stata ritrovata nella torba». (Heaney 1980b: 54) Un altro dettaglio importante da ricordare è che qui si era già operato quel passaggio dai primi testi di Heaney, scritti in prima persona singolare, ai testi successivi, dove l'uso della prima persona plurale ci dava la prospettiva dei cristiani dell'Irlanda del Nord, e d'un nazionalismo preciso, come succede all'interno della stessa raccolta con la famosa poesia *Requiem for the Croppies*. Qui il «we» sta per tutte le vittime della rivolta irlandese del 1798. Poi, il testo anticipa direttamente quella che, di lì a qualche mese, fu la prima esperienza in America di Heaney, quella con le praterie americane, e il west, che forma la coscienza americana fatta di movimento orizzontale, e di conquista. Qui il sole di sera si taglia contro la linea orizzontale del più estremo orizzonte. Al contrario, l'Irlanda è un «paese non recintato | È palude che continua a incrostarsi | Tra gli sguardi del sole» Quindi, la forza del territorio irlandese non sta tanto nel movimento orizzontale quanto in quello verticale, che abbiamo già visto essere rappresentato sia attraverso l'affondamento del filo del pescatore

nell'acqua (una metafora usata da Heaney non solo per la poesia di MacCaig ma per tutta la strategia della grande poesia) sia l'escavazione/indagine d'un terrazzo marino in MacDiarmid. Le traduzioni italiane di alcune parole chiave contenute nei *Bog Poems* non sono sempre felici: Sanesi e Mussapi appiattiscono i tre termini «Bog», «Bogland» e «Peat» col termine «torba»; anche per Buffoni «Peat» e «Bog» sembrano la stessa cosa, anche se lui tenta un timido scatto nel titolo «Bogland», traducendo: «Terra di palude»; ma l'errore più grande lo vedo quando Heaney dice che in Irlanda non ci sono stati movimenti orizzontali lungo le praterie, perché praterie non ce ne sono; i pionieri irlandesi continuano «a sondare sempre più giù, verso l'interno», ecc. La traduzione di «pioneers» allora non può essere «genieri» come in Buffoni e Mussapi, e neanche «operai» come in Sanesi. Se associazione/dissociazione deve vivere nel testo per ricordare la differenza tra America e Irlanda, il termine rimane «pionieri». Il resto sono scelte musicali e stilistiche personali, qualche volta felici, qualche volta goffe, ma meno discutibili.

Dopo *Bogland*, in *Wintering Out*, del 1972, il volume successivo a *A Door into the Dark*, Heaney pubblicherà *Bog Oak*, *The Tollund Man*, ai quali seguiranno poi, in *North* (1975), *Bog Queen*, *The Grauballe Man*, *Punishment*, *Strange Fruit* e *Kinship*. Un ciclo incredibile che avrebbe collegato i riti sacrificali della Danimarca, della Germania del Nord a quelle dell'Irlanda contemporanea e del mondo nordico in generale.

Nadia Fusini, in *Punishment*, traduce «Bog» con «Stagno», deviandoci dal contesto del paesaggio irlandese, e dallo stesso ciclo dei *Bog Poems*. E aggiunge altre sviste notevoli: «Coppa di cervello»

invece che «cervello rigonfio» (ovviamente, per essere stato immerso nell'acqua); invece di tradurre «le pietre del silenzio» lei sopprime addirittura il termine «pietra», non permettendoci di ricordare il detto: «chi è senza colpa scagli la prima pietra». Invece di «cresta» o

«favo», per «Comb» lei dice «pettini» (del cervello); le sorelle traditrici in Irlanda non sono «incamiciate di pece» ma spalmate; per «railings» Fusini usa «parapetto», mentre Buffoni addirittura: «sieve», tanto da farci chiedere come si faccia a legare una donna a una siepe. Ma tutto ciò non fa altro che dire della difficoltà sempre presente nella traduzione, dei trabocchetti inevitabili per chi si avventura nel tempo dentro il meandro di questi testi. E anche Seamus sapeva di questa difficoltà, lui che aveva tradotto tanto, e tornava spesso a quest'arte frustrante. Se penso alla simpatia che Seamus sempre mi mostrava, e alle sue collaborazioni mantenute per anni, anche a distanza, immagino che siano dovute al fatto di aver sentito di condividere con me una passione disinteressata verso la poesia e i poeti, che per entrambi si dimostrava anche e soprattutto attraverso l'umile volontà di voler tradurre ciò che ammiravamo delle nostre letture straniere; e mi salutava sempre con un: «good man, attending constantly to the clear song of the skilled poets» («brav'uomo, al costante servizio del puro canto dei poeti talentuosi»), citando un famoso verso del *Beowulf* in cui si dice del risuonare della poesia dentro la Sala di Heorot, nel regno del Re Hrothgar.

Nonostante i successi, le lauree honoris causa, i viaggi fittissimi ai quali si sottoponeva da più di vent'anni, e le «alte» frequentazioni alle quali si piegava talvolta con troppa arrendevolezza, Heaney era sempre e comunque una persona dal cuore grande, attento e sensibile, contraddistinto da quell'umiltà che spieghiamo in parte attraverso le sue origini contadine, ma che più in generale attribuiremmo all'animo d'un vero «signore», un «gentleman» che fin da giovane aveva saputo che ogni conquista nel campo della cultura andava fatta attraverso l'ambizione d'uno studio costante. Come il S. Kevin di una delle sue poesie più famose, *St Kevin and the Blackbird* (Heaney 1996: 20-21), lui predicava giornalmente di «lavorare e non cercare ricompensa».

Mi piace, in conclusione, ricordarlo attraverso la sua penultima lettera, che porta la data del primo gennaio 2013, inviatami in risposta a un invito per una lettura presso il Teatro Olimpico di Vicenza. Traspare dalle sue parole un poeta che, pur nella spiacevole situazione d'un rifiuto, sapeva farsi amare esprimendo la lusinga provata per un invito così prezioso: non sarebbe riuscito ad arrivare a Vicenza per una serata al Teatro Olimpico, ma per lui quella avrebbe comunque significato «the last step before Parnassus» (l'ultimo passo prima del Parnaso). Un vero peccato non sia arrivato di nuovo in Italia, né a Vicenza né a Firenze, dove sapeva che ancora si poteva respirare l'alta poesia d'uno di quei poeti che lui ha sempre amato. Eppure noi tutti sappiamo che, in compagnia dei Nobel irlandesi W.B. Yeats e Samuel Beckett, e nonostante non sia mai arrivato al Teatro Olimpico, o nella terra di Dante, Seamus Heaney se l'è guadagnato tutto il suo Parnaso, questo brav'uomo da sempre al costante servizio del puro canto della poesia.

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Seamus Heaney e Marco Fazzini.
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MARCO FAZZINI

È sullo specchio

(per Seamus Heaney)

È sullo specchio speleologico
d'un pozzo che m'affaccio, cercando
un segno del passato
che nel presente porti
luce e strada a futuri eventi.
Dal tuffo dentro il tempo strombato
in questa storia d'acque emerge
dunque il reperto favoloso,
onda, amore e sonda d'oltre i sogni,
un'era ormai a riposo.
Da qui lontano un bosco,
un volto una cornice
amplificano l'oscuro enigma
sepolto dentro la pupilla della sera.

The Well

(For Seamus Heaney.
Translation by Douglas Reid Skinner)

It is in the speleological mirror
of a well that I look into, searching
for a sign from the past
that in the present might bring
light and direction to what's to come.

From that dive into time played
in the history of waters there emerges
then the fabulous find,
wave, love and probe from beyond dreams,
an era at rest by now.

Away, far away from here
a wood, a face, a frame
amplify the dark enigma
buried within the evening's eye.

STEPHEN GRAY

**A writer with «fire in his mouth».
Stephen Gray remembers slain
Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor**

That one of Africa's greatest, most gentle English-language poets should have been killed in the recent terror attack at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, while seeing to the publication of his latest volume, should not pass without at least a memorial note.

He was Kofi Awoonor of the Gold Coast (now Ghana), who had put his country on the world's literary map. In 1957, Ghana became the first African colony to achieve independence. And so a new era rolled out for the continent.

As I reported in this paper (then the *Weekly Mail*) in October 1987, Awoonor and I met up as members of a delegation of African writers in Rome. The scene is an air-conditioned luxury bus, parking outside the Colosseum.

By then we had been honoured by the president under the trophy of an elephant's head, been served numerous aperitivos on Felliniesque rooftops by none other than Mother Teresa, and even dined in the Pope's private villa. I was about to get off the bus when a hand touched my shoulder. Stay.

As this was Awoonor's hand, I could only oblige. We had had enough of playing along, he explained, and were now in boycott mode. Didn't I see the TV cameras of Italy's 32 TV channels just waiting to film poor Africans spilling into that arena once again?

By way of reply I said I thought forced gladiatorial spectacles and thumbs-up, thumbs-down imperial procedures were as outdated as the ruins about us. But Awoonor was of another persuasion.

Nowadays, he smiled, no African muscleman would be stupid enough to be forced to face a lion. Not even with an assegai and a bit of grass mat. So let us rather halt debt reclamation and, for that matter, apartheid with our

pens. Then to while away our peaceful sit-in, he quietly told me the story that still has me wake at night in horror.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that when the late Es'kia Mphahlele published his anthology *African Writing Today* with Penguin in 1967, which was inevitably banned in South Africa, Awoonor had been allocated his due space. As George Awanoor Williams, he appeared with this contributor's note: «Born in 1935 near Keta in the Toga region, father from Sierra Leone and his mother from Togoland». He had by then published his first volume with the Mbari Writers' and Artists' Club in Ibadan, where Mphahlele had become an editor. Mbari had also released the likes of such future troubadours as Dennis Brutus and Arthur Nortje.

Often reprinted has been his *Rediscovery*, which had been the title poem of his debut volume. With these devastating lines he encapsulates the conditions of political autonomy: «There shall still be the eternal gateman | who will close the cemetery doors | and send the late mourners away».

I knew that, based in the United States, he had agitated for an African Literature Association to be formed. Only now will this flourishing network hold its annual conference here in South Africa (at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg next year).

His criticism in *The Beasts of the Earth* (1976) once set the standard.

Also I was aware that, for supposedly assisting a political fugitive, he had served a spell in his homeland's Ussher Fort prison.

Probably because we were about the last of the old style of mission-educated postcolonial poets in Rome – among far better-earning prose writers, playwrights and general polemicists – the friendship developed. He would send me his collected poems of 1963-85, published in the US by his regular outlet, the Greenfield Review Press, as *Until the*

Morning After. He had a co-publisher called Woeli in Accra.

This was a hint that I should reciprocate by return. His dedication was signed Brazilia, 88. By 1993, Dr Awoonor, as he was usually credited, had had his diplomatic duties transferring him to United Nations.

As *New African* reported in December that year, there he was «long known as a man with fire in his mouth» – that is, one unafraid to speak his mind. In this instance, however, he was defending the privacy of his country's first lady, who in her residence had installed a whirlpool bath, costing half the nation's health budget. Evidently Ghana was still wincing over the public scandal of a minister's wife of their first independent government who had flown all the way to the old colonial capital, London, to purchase a golden double bed.

From New York Awoonor retired home to his family, and to fight out in the free press an answer to critics of his *The Ghana Revolution*. Evidently he was accused of endangering the general interest by fanning tribal rivalries.

But still, sustaining his reputation as something of a classic, there was always his novel, *This Earth, My Brother...* Originally released as number 108 in the Heinemann African Writers Series in 1971, it had been reprinted frequently. In his record of publishing African authors, James Currey describes it as a sort of Chinua Achebe work. Plus humour. But this is the story he told me, back on that steamy bus.

The scene is now in Takoradi, or even the shore off Cape Castle from which for centuries specimens of black ivory were shipped abroad at the rate of 100.000 a year. Today bored crewmen on supertankers, making promises of a better life elsewhere, lure the local lasses to stow away on board.

As this was a quarter of a century ago, before the days of condoms and Aids, by the

time they had nearly crossed the Atlantic and acquired every other venereal disease, these human toys were apparently routinely disposed of. In their wake, overboard goes the evidence of earrings and high-heeled shoes. Since this crime is said to occur in Brazil-

ian waters, Awoonor as Ghana's ambassador there was heading a murder investigation. An assistant had fished out the body of a 14-year-old Ewe girl. Case open.

May the circumstances of his own tragic death be interrogated with equal vigour.