

Prospero

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Prospero

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And Prospero the prime duke, being so reputed
In dignity, and for the liberal Arts
Without a parallel; those being all my study,
The government I cast upon my brother,
And to my state grew stranger, being transported
And rapt in secret studies.

W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.ii. 72-77



Une littérature à crédit.

Le tournant épimoderne du contemporain

Emmanuel Bouju

Université de Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle

La littérature française contemporaine, depuis le début du millénaire, a largement vécu à crédit, ou au crédit du siècle passé : un crédit immense, inépuisable peut-être, acquis et transmis par Proust, Colette, Céline, Camus, Bataille, Antelme, Duras, Sarraute, Perec, Simon, Césaire, Cixous – et j'en tais beaucoup d'autres sur cette liste d'éminents créanciers et légataires. Et aujourd'hui, pour le dire comme Walter Benjamin dans « Expérience et pauvreté », en un temps qui rappelle assez le nôtre : « Non, une chose est claire : le cours de l'expérience a chuté » (Benjamin 359).

De fait, placée au cœur d'une crise de confiance dans la parole publique, dans la démocratie représentative et dans l'économie sociale, et encore lestée de sa dette coloniale, sidérée par le terrorisme et ne pouvant plus espérer vivre du seul crédit des Lumières, de Proust ou de la *French Theory*, la littérature française métropolitaine a connu une chute du cours de sa valeur fiduciaire au sein du grand ensemble (*French Global*) des littératures en français. Elle s'est appauvrie, et sa dette n'a cessé de se creuser à l'égard de l'espace francophone, malgré le souci récent (mais marginal) de la « relation » glissantienne et de la dimension-monde.

Quant aux grands arbres des prix Nobel (auxquels j'ajouterais volontiers Annie Ernaux¹), ils cachent « la forêt des œuvres mineures » – comme disait Roberto Bolaño, pour qui (je le cite en français) : « la littérature est une grande forêt, et les œuvres maîtresses sont des lacs, les arbres immenses ou très étranges, les éloquentes fleurs précieuses ou les

grottes cachées, mais une forêt est aussi constituée d'arbres normaux, de fourrés, de flaques, de plantes parasites, de champignons et de petites fleurs sylvestres. » (Bolaño 2003, 890).

Je voudrais soutenir ici que cette forêt de plantes parasites et de petites fleurs sylvestres est aussi nécessaire pour faire une grande littérature : pour la nourrir, la vivifier, et contribuer non seulement à sa survie, mais même à sa puissance nouvelle. Je plaiderai ainsi pour cette puissance-là, en avançant l'idée que l'extraordinaire foisonnement contemporain serait lié à un tournant épimodern, et en donnant l'exemple d'un livre très récent, *Personne ne sort les fusils* de Sandra Lucbert.

J'ai proposé, dans un essai récemment publié dont je reprends ici à grands traits les lignes de force, d'identifier un devenir épimodern de la littérature (2020), fondé notamment sur le glissement progressif du « paradigme indiciaire » – comme disait Carlo Ginzburg (vocabulaire de la trace, de l'empreinte, de l'enquête) – au « paradigme fiduciaire » (vocabulaire du crédit et de la dette, de la confiance et de la méfiance, de la croyance et de l'incrédulité). C'est l'occasion d'une ambition renouvelée de la littérature dans sa capacité de résistance – contre le dévoiement du langage par le *storytelling* politicien, contre la contagion de la corruption ou de la maladie, orchestrée par le régime néolibéral des priorités inégalitaires et des sociétés de surveillance ; mais c'est aussi le lieu d'exercice d'une ironie critique et autocritique qui est l'héritage le plus fort du postmodernisme.

D'aucuns parleraient plutôt d'un contexte *post-postmoderne* (Neaton), dans l'idée que depuis le tournant du millénaire, le modèle postmoderne n'est plus adapté à cette re-politisation ouverte de la littérature dans un contexte de crise de crédibilité des démocraties formelles et des discours hérités. J'ai fait pour ma part le choix du préfixe *épi*, en raison de la richesse de ses six valeurs, utiles depuis le grec ancien : *contact de surface, origine, extension, durée, autorité, finalité*. Et pour rendre compte tout à la fois de la mélancolie de la croyance moderniste en la puissance de la littérature, et de la conscience ironique, dans son exploration renouvelée, des limites de cette puissance, j'ai aussi fait le choix de m'inspirer des *Leçons américaines* d'Italo Calvino, qui distinguaient déjà six valeurs cardinales de la littérature « pour le nouveau millénaire » : légèreté, exactitude, visibilité, rapidité, multiplicité, et « *consistency* » (restée lettre morte en raison de sa disparition prématurée). J'ai ainsi réaménagé le programme de Calvino et défini à mon tour six valeurs pour la littérature actuelle, que j'ai appelées : *Superficialité, Secret, Énergie, Accélération, Crédit et Esprit de suite*.

La première valeur, celle de la *superficialité*, qui correspond à *epi* selon l'idée de contact de surface, reprend l'idée chère à Calvino selon laquelle le superficiel fait apparaître ce qui est caché en profondeur. Ce n'est pas un défaut, bien au contraire : liée à la « légèreté pensive » (*thoughtful lightness*) – à la fois légèreté de la sensation et lumières de la raison –, elle traduit l'idée d'une écriture de surface, d'une épigraphie, capable de contredire les faux-semblants du réel. Une épigraphie où le jeu des citations, des allusions et des réécritures fait apparaître le discours de la littérature à la surface du texte, tout en convoquant (en provoquant), en profondeur, le commentaire du monde. C'est la *contaminatio* (version latine de l'intertextualité) contre la contagion. C'est l'exercice d'une fiction politique capable de briser le glacis du Capital qui recouvre toute chose aujourd'hui. Et c'est aussi, par la pratique ironique de l'épigonat, une réponse « illittéraire » (Gervais) au défi des cultures de l'écran, et de la globalisation numérique.

La deuxième valeur est le *secret*, qui correspond à *epi* selon l'idée d'origine. Les généalogies familiale et historique entremêlées, le roman contemporain s'établit à nouveau dans l'élément du secret : fantasme de l'origine, secret de famille et réinterprétation du motif généalogique par l'écriture de la disparition ou de la trahison. Ainsi en va-t-il de la découverte des secrets du passé comme d'une pratique épigénétique : agissant comme une lecture imaginaire du code génétique secret (du texte introuvable) de l'expérience, les moyens de l'écriture sont analogues à ce que les épigénéticiens appellent des épidroques – lesquelles servent à « faire parler les gènes silencieux » (selon la formule de la biologiste généticienne, Edith Hurt). L'héritage de l'absence et son incorporation sensible sont, en particulier, matérialisés par le motif du *membre fantôme*, qui réinterprète la tradition « hantologique » (dirait-on après Derrida) qui a dominé la fin du vingtième siècle dans l'écriture des disparitions, et lui donne force et renouveau : à l'image de cette sensation fantomatique qui donne l'impression qu'un membre disparu continue d'exister, il s'agit de désigner par-là la puissance d'une trace mnésique fonctionnant comme présence sensible de l'absence, et incorporée dans la réalité mentale de l'écrivain (ou de son narrateur). Par cette pratique épigénétique du code de l'expérience, le secret du passé influence sur le présent, qui traite cette douleur fantôme par les expériences de pensée du roman, dans la « boîte miroir² » du récit.

La troisième valeur est l'*énergie*, qui correspond à *epi* selon l'idée d'extension. Cette idée d'« énergie » hérite de deux origines antiques :

l'étymon véritable (*energeia*) et le faux étymon, phonétiquement proche (*enargeia*) – deux notions grecques qui, passées par la rhétorique latine (*vis / evidentia*), pourraient être traduites en français par la *force* (ou l'actualité) et la *vivacité* (ou la visibilité). Il s'agit, en somme, de rendre visible (par *enargeia* ou *evidentia*) ce qui se tient, en puissance (par *dynamis* ou *potentia*), dans la réalité ; de projeter à l'épicentre du texte le noyau dur de l'expérience ; et ce par l'énergie, la *force en acte* du récit, c'est-à-dire par la puissance active, l'*actualité* de l'écriture. Coups de force de l'écriture, reprises d'autorité : l'énergie romanesque réplique au défi de la récusation des assignations (de genre, de race, de classe, voire d'espèce). Ainsi se multiplient les phénomènes de « composition documentaire » : fictions biographiques ou enquêtes d'imitation journalistique, anthropologique ou sociologique.

La quatrième valeur est l'*accélération*, qui correspond à *epi* selon l'idée de durée, et désigne la résistance du roman à la « compression du présent » (Lübbe 159) et à l'accélération sociale et historique, par des phénomènes originaux d'usage des temporalités : la « détemporalisation » – conçue comme résistance à l'accélération du temps historique et comme exercice heuristique de l'anachronie ou de l'uchronie, qu'elle soit rémanente ou anticipatrice ; et l'« *istoricisation* » – conçue comme fiction du témoin oculaire, et usurpation d'identité à des fins de réinterprétation du passé et de provocation au présent.

La cinquième valeur est le *crédit*, qui correspond à *epi* selon l'idée d'autorité. Le lieu propre du littéraire – un lieu d'autorité et d'inconditionnalité, placé à la fois dans et « à l'écart de l'institution » (Derrida, *Points* 357) – est un lieu où le *crédit* qui lui est accordé contrebalance (ou du moins tente de contrebalancer) le discrédit des institutions sclérosées, des discours vides, des économies inégalitaires ; un lieu où se liquide (ou du moins tente de se liquider) la dette que l'organisation politique, économique et sociale du contemporain a contractée à l'égard du citoyen du monde et du monde lui-même ; un lieu où la croyance provisoire dans la puissance du discours littéraire permet (ou du moins tente de permettre) d'envisager autrement la répartition des crédits et des dettes – symboliques, matériels –, et de penser l'avenir hors de la succession des héritages et du ressassement du passé. C'est le crédit comme partage d'autorité, pour une plus grande crédibilité des récits et des représentations au cœur des économies de la dette et de l'intérêt. C'est aussi le crédit d'un travail mené sur la ventriloquie ironique des discours d'autorité et sur la potentialité

insurrectionnelle et l'irréductibilité des voix dissidentes, subalternes ou, précisément, *discréditées* (Judith Butler).

La sixième et dernière valeur est l'*esprit de suite* (pour *consistency*), qui correspond à *epi* selon l'idée de finalité (ou de consécution) : loi de consistance de la littérature, qui dépasse l'épuisement postmoderne et cherche à réinstaurer une continuité et une solidarité avec le monde réel, jusque dans les expérimentations textuelles (et hypertextuelles au sens numérique) les plus audacieuses. On aperçoit ici l'une des fins dernières de l'épimodernisme : par-delà sa mise en suspens postmoderne, reconquérir une *cohérence* du discours littéraire sans trahir sa profonde et nécessaire discontinuité, formelle et auctoriale ; ou pour le dire autrement, faire du partage de l'autorité et de la circulation des modèles, les occasions nouvelles d'une *cohésion* interpersonnelle de l'écriture. Car c'est l'un des enjeux les plus vifs des temps contemporains : celui d'appriivoiser l'espace virtuel de la circulation en ligne (ou en réseau) des données, définir des modalités d'échange littéraire et de lecture adaptées à l'hypertextualité (au sens numérique) la plus puissante – sans se trouver asservi à ce que j'appellerais « l'algorithmétique » du contemporain.

Permanence ou renouvellement de la puissance littéraire dans l'exercice de la superficialité, du secret, de l'énergie, de l'accélération et du crédit : par le préfixe *épi*, on observe les diverses façons qu'a le roman contemporain de se tenir au-dessus de son temps, légèrement surélevé par rapport à lui, affecté par son flux mais aussi capable de conserver une ligne de force distincte et singulière : répétition et prolongement, complétude rétroactive et invention créatrice, productivité des possibles et narrativité fragmentaire, nouvelle hygiène du vocabulaire littéraire et révolution patiente du style.

Ce n'est pas un tournant spécifiquement français, bien au contraire. Parmi ses meilleurs représentants, je citerais David Albahari, Walter Siti, Péter Esterházy, Mircea Cărtărescu, Olga Tokarczuk, Lúcia Jorge et bien d'autres : autant de noms susceptibles de définir le nouveau canon de l'épimodernisme. Et d'ailleurs, je lui accorderais volontiers des bornes initiales non francophones, en considérant la façon dont trois grands romans ont pu incarner, à l'orée du millénaire, ce tournant : *Guerre et Guerre* de László Krasznahorkai, comme l'archive idéal de l'histoire, présentée sous la forme d'une prophétie secrète conduisant l'humanité de guerre en guerre ; *Cosmopolis* de Don DeLillo, le roman du « spectre du capital » (Vogl 77), en forme de *crash-test* du futur ; et *2666* de Roberto Bolaño — un roman

qui, bien que posthume, est, selon moi, la meilleure critique contemporaine de toute théodicée, technodicée ou *oikodicée* (comme dit Vogl) : un roman de la quête d'un idéal littéraire, mais aussi un roman de la violence, du mal et de la maladie auxquels la littérature « s'oppose » dans une « bataille perdue d'avance » (Bolaño, *Le Gaucho* 165) ; un roman de la transmission narrative comme mystère et chiffre ; un roman, enfin, de la reconnaissance de l'autorité littéraire à partir des traces laissées par sa disparition.

Mais l'épimodernisation de la littérature française recouvre aussi toute une constellation d'autrices et d'auteurs qui renouvellent en profondeur sa valeur, comme Jakuta Alikavazović, Arno Bertina, Olivier Cadiot, Nicole Caligaris, Marie Cosnay, Julia Deck, Virginie Despentes, Hélène Frédérick, Leslie Kaplan, Cloé Korman, Lola Lafon, Noémi Lefebvre, Alban Lefranc, Nathalie Léger, Vincent Message, Xabi Molia, Nathalie Quintane, Emmanuel Ruben, Tiphaine Samoyault, Shumona Sinha, Pierre Senges ou Nina Yargekov³.

Au centre de cette constellation, se tient une autrice dont le dernier livre, tout juste paru, me paraît exemplaire de ce processus de revivification de la littérature française et de liquidation des dettes qu'elle a pu contracter, même malgré elle, à l'égard de son glorieux (mais patrimonial) passé. Il s'agit, donc, de Sandra Lucbert et de *Personne ne sort les fusils*.

Ce livre relève d'une écriture politique qui parie sur la capacité de résistance de la littérature, et de la langue de la littérature, à la « mécanique sociale » (Lucbert 19) dans laquelle nous sommes enfermés, et qui voudrait nous priver de notre capacité à nous autoriser nous-mêmes à parler, et à agir, contre elle.

Personne ne sort les fusils est une composition documentaire sur le « procès France Telecom » qui s'est tenu en 2019 et qui a vu sept dirigeants accusés de harcèlement moral (et condamnés depuis⁴), après une série de suicides survenue parmi les employés et cadres de l'entreprise, et orchestrée par un programme managérial radical : « En 2006, les sept prévenus ont initié les plans NEXt (Nouvelle Expérience des Télécommunications) et ACT (Anticipation et Compétences pour la Transformation), visant à faire partir 20% des effectifs de France Télécom en trois ans. La violence de ces plans s'est comptée en morts – immolation, pendaisons, noyades, défenestration, suicide en réunion à l'arme blanche, suicide sur rails. » (Lucbert 15-6)

Le procès France Télécom, c'est donc d'abord le procès d'un management destructeur fondé sur la bible, en la matière : « un manuel

statistique, soucieux de chiffres : le DSM, abréviation de *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* » ; un manuel rédigé dans ce que Sandra Lucbert appelle « la LCN (Lingua Capitalismi Neoliberalis) » – une forme d'« anglais liquide » (Lucbert 53). C'est l'équivalent contemporain, faussement bénin, de la LTI (*Lingua Tertii Imperii*) identifiée autrefois par Victor Klemperer comme l'arme fondamentale du Troisième Reich.

Est-ce aller trop loin que de le penser ? Sans doute pas, si l'on en croit les travaux très scrupuleux de l'historien Johan Chapoutot (*Libres d'obéir. Le Management, du nazisme à aujourd'hui*) sur l'invention des modèles managériaux, au cœur de l'idéologie nazie, par Reinhard Höhn, créateur de l'*Akademie für Führungskräfte* sous Hitler (et plus tard inspirateur des modèles d'évaluation de la *Harvard Business Review*).

C'est la langue du contemporain, comme une nouvelle sophistique du capital. Et cette *sophistication* du travail tue, quand elle est mise en application à la façon de la herse meurtrière de la *Colonie pénitentiaire* de Kafka, que l'autrice convoque comme l'un des modèles littéraires capables de nous faire entendre ce qui se joue dans ce procès : une herse, gravant, de façon illisible, la loi de sa condamnation (NeXT, ACT) sur le corps du condamné⁵. Comme disait Michel de Certeau, dans *L'Invention du quotidien* : « On pourrait supposer que les parchemins et les papiers sont mis à la place de notre peau et que, substitués à elle pendant les périodes heureuses, ils forment autour d'elle un glacis protecteur. Les livres ne sont que les métaphores du corps. Mais dans les temps de crise, le papier ne suffit plus à la loi et c'est sur le corps qu'elle se trace de nouveau. [...] L'appareillage de l'*utilité* continue à exercer son rôle d'écrire sur le corps le nouveau texte du savoir social au lieu de l'ancien, tout comme la herse de la *Colonie pénitentiaire* reste identique même si l'on peut changer le papier normatif qu'elle grave sur le corps du supplicié. » (Certeau 207-11)

Aussi le petit livre de Sandra Lucbert entreprend-il de mettre en pièces l'outil d'ajustement du corps à la financiarisation du réel, et sa façon de récuser à mort, par l'inscription illisible de ses injonctions vaines, l'utilité sociale de ses victimes.

Pour ce faire, il faut travailler à désarticuler le vocabulaire et la grammaire du pouvoir néolibéral : cette méta-« grammaire d'arraisonnement⁶ », comme disait Derrida, qui « efface ce qui n'a pas place dans sa cohérence. » (Lucbert 40)

Ainsi *Personne ne sort les fusils* résonne-t-il lui-même, dans l'espace de la circulation littéraire (dont cet article participe), comme une tribune à

verser aux instances du jugement public : il fait le procès littéraire d'une langue destructrice dans laquelle le procès réel s'est inscrit lui-même, comme tout le réel auquel nous appartenons.

C'est une charge décisive contre ce faux langage, ce « dire du non-dire », comme disait Leonardo Sciascia à la suite de Pasolini (Sciascia, *L'Affaire* 18). Un langage qui est ironisé et retourné, avec dérision, contre lui-même : « “Enfin-il-fallait-voilà.” Mais “il” qui ? Quoi, il faut ? Qui veut qu'il faille ? » (Lucbert 33). Ou encore :

Et les tirets se multiplient ; le flow est conquérant. Au moment où se tient le procès, non seulement Enfin-il-fallait-voilà n'a pas démerité, mais il s'est surpassé. Il a inventé Uber, où le cash flows très très librement. Il faut avoir Uber en tête pour comprendre à quoi NEXt faisait place.

NEXt prélude l'Uber qui l'ACT.

La place NEXt est le stade Uber du capitalisme.

NEXt-Uber-ACT-flow : c'est le son rendu par la souveraineté des flux et le travail débarrassé du travailleur. Une bande-son de bataille horrible, figée dans les tirets. (Lucbert 36)

En se réclamant de l'épisode des « paroles gelées » du *Quart Livre* de Rabelais (« Comment entre les paroles gelées Pantagruel trouva des mots de gueule »), Sandra Lucbert veut faire entendre ce que « la bande-son du combat » (Lucbert 34) dissimule sous le gel du langage de l'intérêt. Il faut pouvoir dégeler les paroles en les « tympanisant » contre elles-mêmes (Lucbert 38), à la façon dont Derrida considérerait « tympaniser – la philosophie⁷ » (Derrida, *Marges* I).

Car « C'est un langage barbare, celui du flow – du gribouillis financier à tirets. “Enfin-il-fallait-voilà” englaçonne la bataille du flow. » (Lucbert 35)

Est-ce que, dans cette bataille, personne ne sort les fusils ?

Si.

On sort les armes de la littérature : des armes légères mais brandies de façon radicale, contre l'« encuculerie époustouflante » (Lucbert 132) des euphémisations de cette sophistique mortelle – la sophistique institutionnelle, politique et sociale du néo-capitalisme et de ses dérivés.

On sort les armes de l'ironie et du dévoilement, ces instruments d'acoustique et d'optique grâce auxquels la littérature cherche à sonder le réel.

Car il y a une vérité possible et on peut essayer de la dire – même s'il faut pour cela faire appel à Kafka, Rabelais ou encore, comme le fait

l'autrice après nombre d'autres, à Melville (*Bartleby. Une histoire de Wall Street*).

Comment puis-je la dire, cette vérité à l'écart, puisque « je parle aussi cette langue » – confie l'autrice ? Peut-être seulement par l'usage d'une « multiplicité des états de langage » que « je trimalle avec moi » : « c'est ce que fait la littérature aux gens qui la pratiquent. Elle impose un écart permanent d'avec tout ce qu'on dit. Je parle la langue collective, mais contestée par une cacophonie intérieure. » (Lucbert 19)

Ce faisant, Sandra Lucbert s'inscrit en droite ligne dans un haut héritage dont je distinguerais trois modèles exemplaires, utiles selon moi à la compréhension de son entreprise.

Le premier de ces modèles est celui d'Elias Canetti, qui plaçait la langue de la « répétition » au cœur du *Flambeau dans l'oreille* (le deuxième volet, consacré aux années 1921 à 1931, de son autobiographie), lors d'un épisode de l'été 1926 consacré au « cri des hirondelles » et aux « masques acoustiques » qu'ils conduisent à révéler. « Tout n'était que répétition » : c'est depuis cette expérience que Canetti, contemplant Vienne en « tohu-bohu d'éléments séparés » et Berlin en « bousculade des noms », parvient à inventer Kien, « l'homme des livres » de *Die Blendung (Autodafé)*, désigné dans le *Flambeau dans l'oreille* comme « un autre don Quichotte ». Car la découverte de la répétition définit la réalité comme conjonction de masques acoustiques, dont il importe qu'ils puissent être reconnus, déchiffrés et séparés les uns des autres par les « témoins auriculaires ». Symbolisant une logique profonde du langage social, le masque de la répétition définit des formes de langage bien délimitées, audibles et reconnaissables : susceptibles, si l'on sait y faire, d'ordonner une compréhension du monde, d'en permettre un apprentissage.

Pour Canetti comme pour Sandra Lucbert, s'autoriser la littérature contre les masques du langage imposé, c'est porter haut « le flambeau dans l'oreille » – en retournant le psittacisme de la vie sociale en une formidable puissance de récusation des discours hérités.

Le second modèle exemplaire, c'est celui de Leonardo Sciascia, pour qui l'élucidation littéraire combattait la « confusion des langues » politique. La référence en la matière – je l'ai déjà citée plus haut – est *L'Affaire Moro (Il Caso Moro)*, qui fut lui-même un extraordinaire procès à charge intellectuel, un subtil *J'accuse*, dévoilant le fait que la mise à mort de Moro fut scandaleusement consensuelle. Ce que montre bien l'exemple de Sciascia, et qui se retrouve dans *Personne ne sort les fusils*, c'est que

l'écriture est un acte de rapport sans détour, un travail d'élucidation qui repose simplement sur la faculté rationnelle du jugement, et que Sciascia liait étroitement à une triple pratique, essentielle encore pour les temps contemporains : le *diagnostic* sur le mésusage politique de la langue et du langage (y compris dans la façon de remplacer par des périphrases le nom même de Moro) ; l'exercice de *l'interprétation* (de la juste interprétation – ici des lettres envoyées par Aldo Moro pendant sa captivité), que rend possible la qualité ou la compétence proprement littéraire de l'auteur ; et le « détachement de *l'ironie* », un partage de la parole et du non-dit capable de contredire le secret nécessaire à l'usage de la violence politique – et dont la possibilité appartient également, au plus haut degré, à la littérature (héritière de Cervantes et de Diderot, précise Sciascia, comme elle l'est de Rabelais, de Kafka et de Melville pour Sandra Lucbert).

Pourquoi cela ? Pourquoi revendiquer si fortement la littérature, au moment même où l'on s'attaque au noyau le plus dur du réel ? Parce qu'il n'y a pas de différence de nature entre comprendre la réalité et comprendre la littérature ; déchiffrer le texte enfoui, c'est élucider la violence du réel. C'est tout le sens de *L'Affaire Moro* ; et ce dès son début, avec la parabole des lucioles que Sciascia reprend à Pasolini : le temps de leur disparition correspond au temps de la perversion occulte de la démocratie, au temps des « automates » et des « masques » qui parlent le langage du non-dire, aussi incompréhensible que dangereux ; et c'est à la lueur d'une dernière luciole, nichée dans la lézarde d'un mur, que Sciascia se propose d'élucider le mystère Moro.

Pour Sandra Lucbert comme pour Leonardo Sciascia, la vérité du réel ne s'atteint qu'à travers un langage de l'élucidation, capable de faire resplendir, à la lumière de la vérité, les fragments de la littérature⁸.

Et le troisième modèle exemplaire est celui d'Elfriede Jelinek luttant, par la décomposition de la grammaire du récit et de la phrase, contre la « pâte » de la domination⁹.

Car la pâte de la domination asphyxie et contraint au silence, comme la langue, toujours là, dans la bouche, démesurée, « devenue immense¹⁰ » – dit Jelinek : c'est la langue d'un pouvoir qui cherche à étouffer la voix de l'auteur ; c'est celle qu'il faut apprendre à « dégueuler » – pour la faire entendre autrement, à l'écart.

Aussi écrire, pour Elfriede Jelinek, est-ce dénaturer en soi-même la langue telle qu'elle s'était « naturalisée » (en dissimulant son caractère construit, sa technique).

Chez Sandra Lucbert, la pâte de la domination est devenue le *flow* du capital.

Le procès de France Télécom, c'est celui d'une préhistoire de l'économie de plateforme, dont « l'algorithme herse les corps en continu et assure la permanence du flow » (Lucbert 37). La loi de la liquidité y règne en maître sur la hiérarchie des conditions et la valeur de la vie.

Il faut donc pouvoir desserrer la herse.

Il faut pouvoir contredire la loi inscrite sur les corps, et effacer la *kategoria* au front du condamné.

Il faut pouvoir « coller » (tel Bartleby, brebis galeuse de l'*Histoire de Wall Street*¹) aux jointures de la mécanique sociale pour démachiner l'algorithmétique de la liquidité et des prévisions comportementales.

Ainsi *Personne ne sort les fusils* accomplit-il exemplairement le programme implicite de l'épimodernisme : se tenir au contact immédiat du réel pour observer sous sa surface et décrypter son langage secret, par les instruments d'optique et les moyens acoustiques appropriés à cette épigraphie politique ; faire de l'écriture une puissance en acte capable de résister à sa disqualification par la société liquide et ses puissances d'autorité ; prolonger, par esprit de suite et par des voies nouvelles, l'ambition ancienne d'une littérature capable de jouer, dans la discontinuité de son temps, un rôle solidaire et plein.

Conclusion

Que penser des temps que nous vivons, et de la littérature qui les accompagne ?

Le port du masque généralisé ne nous rend guère optimistes. Mais la littérature (entre autres) est parfois capable de faire voir « le visage sur le masque », comme disait Leonardo Sciascia.

Toute la littérature actuelle ?

Non. Dans un même temps coexistent toujours plusieurs « époques », il y a un tuilage des périodisations, des genres et des niveaux possibles de la littérature.

Il y a des « ambiancers » et des « acousticiens », comme le dit Christian Salmon¹².

Il y a de simples « tourneurs de manivelle », comme le disait David Foster Wallace (Smith 366) : « dans le sillage des pionniers viennent toujours les tourneurs de manivelle, ces petits élèves gris qui s'emparent

des machines que d'autres ont construites, qui tournent la manivelle et font sortir du tuyau de petites galettes de métafiction. »

Et puis il y a les épimodernes : des autrices et des auteurs qui font bien autre chose que tourner la manivelle, afin de donner à la littérature française un crédit nouveau.



- 1 Mais certainement pas Michel Houellebecq dont la valeur est incompréhensiblement haute sur le marché international, qui semble confondre son cynisme avec de l'ironie.
- 2 L'étude scientifique et le traitement médical du phénomène des douleurs fantômes ont donné lieu à l'invention du *mirror treatment* : cette « boîte-miroir » (qu'a conçue, dans le cadre de ses recherches en neurosciences, V.S. Ramachandran) permet de visualiser le membre manquant grâce à l'inversion spéculaire, et ainsi d'atténuer, par l'exercice musculaire imaginaire du « membre fantôme », les douleurs qu'il suscite (Ramachandran, V.S. & Blakeslee, Sandra).
- 3 Voir, *infra*, une courte sélection de titres dans la bibliographie de l'article.
- 4 « Les trois prévenus ont été condamnés à un an de prison, dont huit mois avec sursis, et 15 000 euros d'amende, pour avoir mis en place une politique de réduction des effectifs « *jusqu'au-boutistes* » sur la période 2007-2008. Ils ont, en revanche, été relaxés pour la période 2008-2010. France Télécom, devenu Orange en 2013, a été condamné à 75 000 euros d'amende, soit la peine maximale prévue. Les autres prévenus ont été reconnus coupables de complicité de harcèlement moral. [...] Le tribunal fait ainsi entrer dans la jurisprudence la notion de harcèlement moral « *institutionnel* », « *systémique* », c'est-à-dire étant le fruit d'une stratégie d'entreprise « *visant à déstabiliser les salariés, à créer un climat anxiogène et ayant eu pour objet et pour effet une dégradation des conditions de travail* ». » (https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2019/12/20/le-tribunal-rend-son-jugement-dans-le-proces-inedit-de-france-telecom_6023561_3224.html).
- 5 J'avance également, pour ma part, dans l'essai sus-cité, l'idée que l'épimodernisme hérite, depuis *Amerika* et la Kolonie de Kafka, d'une histoire secrète de la fiction politique par la lettre K : K du Kapital, K de la Katastrophe, K du *Kalumniator* (celui qui porte à son front la lettre de son accusation – sa *kategoria* – et de sa condamnation) – pour dénoncer, en somme, la « marque imprimée » sur les choses et les corps par la Loi majuscule (the *Capital Law*).
- 6 « Ni la physique, ni la phonétique, ni la linguistique, ni la psychanalyse, ni la philosophie ne nous apprennent quoi que ce soit de cette essence de

la voix. Ils ne se contentent pas de la sous-entendre, ils en construisent la « grammaire » (non seulement celle qui distingue des voix, l'active, la passive ou la moyenne) pour assurer des identités locales, des corps ou des âmes, des sujets, des « moi » – ou des sexes allant par deux. Ces grammaires d'arrondissement, vous les décèleriez partout, dans le registre social, politique, économique, juridique, sexuel, logique ou linguistique. », Derrida "Voice II" (1985).

- 7 OÙ tympaniser devenait, par apposition, et tiret vertueux, synonyme de philosophie. Voir aussi Peter Szendy, *À coups* 79.
- 8 « Ainsi, qu'est-ce donc que la littérature ? Peut-être un système d'"objets éternels" (...) qui – de façon variée, divertissante, alternée, imprévisible – resplendissent et s'effacent, recommencent à resplendir et à s'éclipser, et ainsi de suite, dans la lumière de la vérité. » (Sciascia, *Noir* 888).
- 9 « Combattre le pouvoir en Autriche, c'est comme vouloir retirer un à un les ingrédients d'une pâte déjà préparée. On ne peut plus rien séparer. » (Jelinek, *Le plus* 80).
- 10 « Quand c'était si calme, quand la langue était encore mon enfant. Maintenant, elle est devenue immense d'un seul coup. Ce n'est plus mon enfant. » (« Conférence Nobel : À l'écart ». *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2013. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2004/jelinek-lecture-f.html).
- 11 « Bartleby [...], le cauchemar du capitalisme [qui] s'abandonne à la voracité Uber, puis soudain, [qui] #Occupy » (Lucbert 115).
- 12 Christian Salmon, « Que peut la littérature par temps d'épidémie », dans la revue en ligne *AOC* du 24 mai 2020.



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« Ceci n'est pas un traité de chimie » :
terminologie et traduction littéraire, le cas de
Il sistema periodico / Le système périodique
de Primo Levi

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Introduction

Considérer le terme en tant qu'unité discursive, outre que conceptuelle et linguistique, est sans doute l'un des résultats les plus inspirants des recherches en terminologie des dernières années. L'approche descriptive aux langues de spécialité a contribué en ce sens à prendre en considération leurs comportements dépendamment des différents contextes discursifs à travers lesquels elles circulent. La dimension textuelle des terminologies et les contacts avec la lexicologie ont été soulignés par Mejri, Petiot, Petit dans *Lexique, terminologie et discours* : « Les unités lexicales n'ont pas d'existence effective en dehors des réalisations discursives ». Les travaux de François Gaudin en socioterminologie proposent une étude de la circulation des termes « sous l'angle de la diversité de leurs usages sociaux, ce qui englobe à la fois l'étude des conditions de circulation et d'appropriation des termes, envisagés comme des signes linguistiques, et non comme des étiquettes de concepts » (Gaudin, *La socioterminologie* 81). Dans ce sillage, Rachele Raus a eu le mérite de prendre en considération la dimension traductive, espace traditionnel de contamination du terme, atteint à la fois par les points de vue, les valorisations et les choix colingues des instances énonciatives responsables de sa traduction, tant que l'auteure de *La terminologie multilingue* admet une « complémentarité entre ces deux disciplines » (Raus *La terminologie* 8).

Des nombreuses études ont été consacrées à l'aspect discursif des terminologies (et donc à la variation terminologique, la reformulation etc.), surtout dans le cadre de la vulgarisation (dans plusieurs secteurs : la presse, le discours politique etc.) en tant que pratique de « formulation des concepts spécialisés nécessaire à la présentation des découvertes scientifiques à un public de non-initiés » (Humbley, *La néologie* 40). Plusieurs univers discursifs – pourtant si féconds et enclins à s'appropriier des ressources des langues spéciales – restent inexplorés. C'est pourquoi il nous a paru intéressant d'interroger la traduction française d'un texte littéraire – *Il sistema periodico* di Primo Levi (1975) – qui, selon l'auteur, a une relation ambiguë avec les discours de spécialité (en l'occurrence, la chimie). « Questo non è un trattato di chimica » (Levi, *Il sistema* 212)¹, dit en effet le narrateur au début du dernier de vingt-et-un chapitres qui racontent sa carrière de chimiste, chacun consacré à un élément du tableau périodique. Ceci faisant, une porosité entre univers discursifs (scientifique ; autobiographique ; historique) est évoquée comme l'espace d'une appropriation et d'un usage littéraire des terminologies de la chimie. Les termes de la chimie sont en effet envisagés dans leur pouvoir évocateur, chacun d'eux déclenchant la narration des épisodes significatifs de la vie de Levi : les origines et la formation, la pratique de la profession, son internement dans les camps (à Fossoli di Carpi et à Auschwitz) ainsi que des épisodes de la vie de l'après-guerre.

L'étude de la traduction française, parue en 1987, aura comme objectif d'étudier les usages symboliques des de spécialité et leur circulation dans la pratique traductive, afin de démontrer l'apport fondamental de la traduction à la terminologie et, par conséquent, de mettre en discussion la séparation traditionnelle entre traduction spécialisée et traduction littéraire. A travers ce cas d'étude nous ambitionnons de montrer comment la traduction littéraire peut remettre en cause certaines visions traditionnelles de la création terminologique, notamment la dépendance du terme de la structure technique ou scientifique de référence, sa monosémie ainsi que le rapport entre les instances énonciatives en jeu dans le discours.

1. La pipe de Levi, ou de la « terminologie négative »

Il sistema periodico est à plusieurs égards un texte à vocation autoréflexive, où une méditation constante est portée sur la langue et sur le discours ainsi

que sur les conditions de leur production. À cela s'ajoute le rapport entre les nombreuses langues qui cohabitent dans les pages de Levi : à côté de l'italien, le piémontais, l'hébreux-piémontais, l'allemand, le français etc. ; et le rapport entre langues de spécialité et langue générale. En plus de témoigner d'une sensibilité forte de l'auteur aux faits de la langue – ou une « surconscience linguistique », comme Lise Gauvin nous apprend à l'appeler – cette tendance au métalinguisme se montre comme un élément important dans l'économie du récit. L'usage des terminologies comme moteur narratif, dont nous allons présenter le fonctionnement, aboutit à une véritable théorie linguistique fondée sur la négation de certains traits caractéristiques du terme. Cette théorie – que nous pouvons provisoirement baptiser « terminologie négative » – se fonde sur le renversement d'au moins trois noyaux fondamentaux qui sous-tendent la notion de terme dans l'approche wüsterienne, en l'occurrence : la notion de domaine ; la subalternité du terme au concept ; l'indépendance par rapport au contexte.

1.1. Terme et domaine

La première notion niée par Levi est donc celle de « domaine », soit le champ de relations conceptuelles intérieures à une discipline donnée (Zanola). Selon l'approche traditionnelle en terminologie, le domaine est donc l'horizon ultime de signification du terme, entendu comme l'expression linguistique d'un concept spécialisé. Au début du dernier chapitre, « Cromo », une étrange formulation attire l'attention du lecteur :

Il lettore, a questo punto, si sarà accorto da un pezzo che questo non è un trattato di chimica: la mia presunzione non giunge a tanto, «ma voix est foible [*sic*], et même un peu profane» (Levi, *Il sistema* 212 « Carbonio »).

Le lecteur, parvenu à cet endroit, se sera aperçu depuis un bon moment que ce livre n'est pas un manuel de chimie : ma présomption ne va pas aussi loin, « ma voix est faible, et même un peu profane » (Levi, *Le système* 243 « Carbone »).

Comme c'est le cas pour la fameuse pipe dans la *Trahison des images* de Magritte, Levi se sert du dispositif de la négation linguistique pour rendre visible l'objet de sa négation en même temps qu'il le nie. En particulier, Levi montre une réalité extra-discursive (un système de

connaissances, en l'occurrence la chimie) par le biais de la négation de sa typologie discursive (le genre de discours « traité »). Selon la philosophie du langage, en effet, un énoncé affirmatif (« ceci est un traité de chimie ») et son correspondant négatif (« ceci n'est pas un traité de chimie ») partagent le même sens (la pensée « traité de chimie ») : Paolo Virno affirme à cet égard une « identité du contenu sémantique auquel l'affirmation et la négation sont appliquées » (68, *je traduis*). La négation n'affecte point le contenu propositionnel de l'énoncé : le fait que l'on a affaire à un « traité de chimie » reste intact ; le rôle de la négation se réduit à un acte performatif de prise de distance du locuteur par rapport au contenu affirmé. Les raisons de ce fonctionnement peuvent être expliquées par le recours à la notion de *Verneinung* freudienne : le patient a accès au contenu refoulé uniquement à travers son énonciation négative (« la femme dont je rêve n'est pas ma mère ») (Ferreri). La traduction de Maugé semble exaspérer cette négation du domaine, en réduisant une typologie discursive (*traité* garde la dimension énonciative et cognitive du verbe *traiter* à côté du sens d'« ouvrage didactique ») à une typologie éditoriale (le manuel) dont la dimension réifiée est confirmée par la traduction du déictique « questo » avec « ce livre ».

1.2. Terme et concept

Le second élément qui entre dans le champ d'action de la *Verneinung* est la notion traditionnelle de terme comme « étiquette » d'un concept. À travers l'invalidation du système conceptuel de référence (la chimie) et de son genre discursif (le traité), Levi semble aussi mettre en discussion le lien fondamental entre « terme » et « concept ». Le terme est défini dans la théorie classique de la terminologie comme l'expression linguistique (lexicale, polylexicale ou phraséologique) d'un concept spécialisé. Selon cette approche, dite onomasiologique, la forme de désignation est subordonnée au concept qu'elle désigne ainsi qu'au réseau des relations conceptuelles du domaine en question. La présentation du système conceptuel sous un signe négatif de la part de Levi fait tomber les barrières qui séparent discours spécialisé et discours non spécialisé. Séparé de son domaine, le terme acquiert par contre une capacité évocatrice et se fait ainsi le seul moyen d'accès à un contenu biographique refoulé, comme l'auteur l'explique quelques lignes après :

ogni studente in chimica, davanti ad un qualsiasi trattato, dovrebbe essere consapevole che in una di quelle pagine, forse in una sola riga o formula o parola, sta scritto il suo avvenire, in caratteri indecifrabili, ma che diverranno chiari «poi»: dopo il successo o l'errore o la colpa, la vittoria o la disfatta. Ogni chimico non più giovane, riaprendo alla pagina «verhängnisvoll» quel medesimo trattato, e percosso da amore o disgusto, si rallegra o dispera. Così avviene, dunque, che ogni elemento dica qualcosa a qualcuno (a ciascuno una cosa diversa), come le valli o le spiagge visitate in giovinezza (Levi, *Il sistema* 212-213).

tout étudiant en chimie, devant n'importe quel manuel, devrait être conscient que dans une de ces pages, peut-être une seule ligne, une seule formule, un seul mot, son avenir est écrit en caractères indéchiffrables, mais qui deviennent clairs « ensuite » - après le succès, l'erreur ou la faute, la victoire ou la défaite. Tout chimiste qui a cessé d'être jeune, rouvrant ce même ouvrage à la page *verhängnisvoll*, est frappé d'amour ou de dégoût, se réjouit ou se désespère. C'est donc ainsi que chaque élément dit quelque chose à quelqu'un (une chose différente à chacun), comme les vallées et les plages visitées au temps de la jeunesse (Levi, *Le système* 243-244).

La visée onomasiologique est ainsi renversée : cette idée présupposait un système linguistique où les faits sont plus importants que les mots qui les désignent, comme rappelé par Rondeau : si le signe linguistique part « d'une appellation pour découvrir l'être ou le groupe d'êtres représentés par cette appellation », le signe linguistique terminologique procéderait plutôt à l'inverse, « à partir des entités pour étudier leurs dénominations » (Rondeau 11-12). Une observation peut être faite à partir d'une confrontation des attitudes métalinguistiques et métadiscursives de Primo Levi. D'un point de vue discursif, son métadiscours annule le cadre conceptuel à l'intérieur duquel le terme prend son sens ; d'un point de vue métalinguistique, la réflexion contenue dans ces pages porte à une négation de la vision classique du terme comme entité monosémique.

1.3. Terme et contexte

Un troisième effet de cette « terminologie négative » est la dépendance du contexte et le rapport aux instances énonciatives impliquées dans le cadre de l'interlocution. Déjà le rôle du lecteur était présenté comme la source

du point de vue nié dans l'énoncé « Ceci n'est pas un traité de chimie ». En effet, selon Ducrot, tout énoncé négatif peut être interprété dans une optique polyphonique. Dans l'énoncé « Ceci n'est pas un traité de chimie », deux actes sont accomplis à un même temps : respectivement, l'assertion que le texte qu'on est en train de lire est un traité de chimie et le refus de cette assertion. Le refus, selon Ducrot, « est attribué au locuteur (personne à laquelle renvoie *je*), mais l'assertion refusée est attribuée à quelqu'un d'autre » (Ducrot 153). Dans ce cas, il s'agit du lecteur, explicitement nommé comme la source de ce point de vue. En ce sens, le rôle coopératif de l'interlocuteur devient fondamental pour une terminologie qui non seulement dit « quelque chose à quelqu'un » mais aussi « une chose différente à chacun » (Levi, *Le système* 243-244). La langue spéciale, prétendument universelle et indépendante de toute scène d'énonciation, est donc réinsérée dans un cadre coopératif avec l'interlocuteur. La dimension négative de cet acte oblige dès lors à prendre en considération la présence des terminologies comme une fonction énonciative et donc dans le cadre de l'analyse du discours.

2. Non-termes : déspecialisation et traduction

La séparation du domaine scientifique ou technique – « dédomanialisation », selon Rastier (2009) – la rupture du lien monosémique avec le concept (et donc l'ouverture à un éventail de référentialité plus grand) et la prise en considération de l'interlocuteur (et, dans un sens plus large, de la scène d'énonciation) sont les caractéristiques négatives qui font du terme un non-terme. Les conséquences de cet acte négatif sont visibles dans un processus de déspecialisation terminologique qui est à l'œuvre dans *Le système périodique* et qui obéit à une logique purement diégetique. Par *déspecialisation* ou *déterminologisation* ou, selon d'autres, *banalisation* (Dubois) on entend, chez Condamines et Picton, tout phénomène de « passage d'une partie de la terminologie d'un domaine spécialisé vers la langue générale », et donc toute forme de « transfert de la connaissance spécialisée vers le grand public, mais de manière moins directe que dans la vulgarisation ». Dans le contexte littéraire, en obéissance à une logique narrative, la déspecialisation a lieu comme pratique visant à valoriser la dimension du signifiant. C'est le signifiant qui se fait en effet porteur d'associations et qui se manifeste

comme le déclencheur fondamental de la narration. Lisons l'incipit du *Système périodique* (chapitre « Argon ») :

Ci sono, nell'aria che respiriamo, i cosiddetti gas inerti. Portano curiosi nomi greci di derivazione dotta, che significano «il Nuovo», «il Nascosto», «l'Inoperoso», «lo Straniero» (Levi, *Il sistema* 3 « Argon »).

Il y a, dans l'air que nous respirons, des gaz appelés inertes. Ils portent des curieux noms grecs d'étymologie savante, qui signifient le « Nouveau », le « Caché », l'« Inactif », l'« Étranger » (Levi, *Le système* 9 « Argon »).

Le processus de déterminologisation a lieu d'entrée de jeu et de manière tout à fait drastique : le narrateur tait les noms des gaz inertes, auxquels on se réfère uniquement par les formes de dénomination récupérées de leur « étymologie savante ». Ce processus est d'autant plus saillant si l'on considère le style de spécialité qui, partout dans le texte, évoque les habitudes locutoires de l'écriture scientifique. Ce style de spécialité serait selon Lavric un « cosmétique syntaxique » donnant au texte un « air de spécialité » (Lavric) sans pour autant impliquer l'usages des terminologies. Il est par exemple visible dans l'effacement de la figure du locuteur, déjà remarqué par la critique littéraire : « Dans la syntaxe et la sémantique également, tout concourt à l'effacement du "je" » (Kertesz-Vial). À sa place on trouve en effet une *nous* de modestie ou « d'auteur » (« dans l'air que nous respirons »), garant de l'universalité du discours scientifique².

C'est donc dans le cadre d'un discours spécialisé que le processus de déterminologisation consiste à remplacer le terme par le signifié littéral de la métaphore à la base de son étymologie. Dans l'ordre : *néon* (en grec : « nouveau ») ; *krypton* (« caché ») ; *argon* (« inactif ») ; *xénon* (« étranger »). Ce processus obéit notamment à des nécessités diégétiques : c'est *argon* en l'occurrence qui fait déclencher la narration de l'histoire des ancêtres « inactifs » mais « nobles » de Primo Levi. C'est-à-dire que le pouvoir évocateur du terme, dérivé du processus négatif de la déspecialisation et de la séparation d'une structure conceptuelle scientifique ou technique, aboutit à une capacité d'exprimer des signifiés refoulés de son histoire étymologique. Levi explique de manière précise dans un passage de « Chrome » :

tutti i linguaggi sono pieni di immagini e metafore la cui origine si va perdendo, insieme con l'arte da cui sono state attinte: decaduta l'equitazione al rango di sport costoso, sono ormai inintelligibili, e suonano strambe, le espressioni «ventre a terra» e «mordere il freno»; scomparsi i mulini a pietre sovrapposte, dette anche palmenti, in cui per secoli si era macinato il grano (e le vernici), ha perso ogni riferimento la frase «macinare» o «mangiare a quattro palmenti», che tuttavia viene ancora meccanicamente ripetuta. Allo stesso modo, poiché anche la Natura è conservatrice, portiamo nel coccige quanto resta di una coda scomparsa. (Levi, *Il sistema* 141-142 «Cromo»).

toutes les langues sont pleines d'images et de métaphores dont l'origine se perd en même temps que le métier ou l'activité où elles ont été prises : l'équitation étant tombée au rang de sport coûteux, les expressions « ventre à terre » et « ronger son frein » sont devenues inintelligibles et sonnent étrangement ; de façon analogue, la nature étant elle aussi conservatrice, nous portons dans le coccyx ce qu'il reste d'une queue disparue. (Levi, *Le système* 164 « Chrome »).

Le recours à l'étymologie est donc opératoire à l'établissement d'un lien non arbitraire, indexical avec le référent, et devient en particulier le mode d'accès à une absence, à une perte ou, pour revenir à la notion freudienne de négation, à un contenu refoulé. En ce qui concerne la traduction, il est évident qu'une telle mise en valeur de la dimension du signifiant du terme pose des défis de taille. Il peut y avoir des omissions, comme dans le passage précédent, causées par la difficulté de traduire les expressions figées de l'italien, qui produit un écart aussi dans la compréhension de la phrase suivante. Le recours à la note du traducteur est aussi une option qui est très présente dans la version d'André Maugé, qui se préoccupe non seulement de répertorier les innombrables références intertextuelles mais aussi de sauvegarder les jeux de mots. Cela est visible dans le chapitre « Or », où le nom italien de l'affluent du Pô (*la Dora*) est traduisible (*la Doire*) mais non traduit, quitte à enfreindre le lien paronymique avec le nom du métal dont il est question :

– Sai perché si chiama Dora? – mi rispose: - perché è d'oro. (Levi, *Il sistema* 127 « Oro »).

« Sais-tu pourquoi elle s'appelle Dora ? me répondit-il. Parce qu'elle est en or » (Levi, *Le système* 149 « Or »).

Note : En français : la Doire.

Toutes les étapes du processus de déspecialisation sont visibles dans l'extrait suivant (voir la note du traducteur, André Maugé) :

Ecco il precipitato giallo di solfuro, e l'anidride arseniosa, l'arsenico insomma, il Mascolino, quello di Mitridate e di Madame Bovary (Levi, *Il sistema* 161).

Voici le précipité jaune de sulfure, c'est l'anhydride arsénieux, bref : l'arsenic (1), le Mâle, celui de Mithridate et de Mme Bovary. (Levi, *Le système* 149 « Or »).

Note : Du latin *arsenicum*, emprunté au grec *arsenikon*, de *arsên* : mâle, ainsi appelé à cause de la puissance de ses propriétés (*N. d. T.*).

Les stratégies de dénomination vont dans la direction du maximum de spécialisation (« precipitato giallo di solfuro » et « anidride arseniosa ») ; à la forme de dénomination commune (« arsenico ») ; à l'étymologie (« Mascolino »), capable de susciter un imaginaire. La reprise anaphorique « quello di » garantit le passage d'un discours sollicitant les compétences techniques de la terminologie chimique à un discours qui appelle par contre la compétence intertextuelle du lecteur. En l'occurrence, ce sont les textes classiques (*L'Histoire romaine* d'Appien ou *L'Histoire romaine* de Dion Cassius) ou modernes (*Madame Bovary* de Flaubert). La traduction française opère une distinction nette entre discours spécialisé et discours dé-spécialisé (et re-spécialisé) à travers les signes diacritiques « , », « : », fonctionnant comme des signes mathématiques d'équivalence. Une longue note du traducteur explique finalement la dénomination paraétymologique (ou d'étymologie populaire) à partir de la ressemblance formelle et phonétique du grec *arsenikon* à *arsên* (justement : « mâle »)³.

D'autres aspects intéressants de la traduction ressortent au moment où le rapport entre déterminologisation et re-signification implique de manière plus importante le contexte narratif. Soit le passage tiré du chapitre

« Titane », où le jeu de mot est construit en italien sur l'assonance entre le nom de l'élément et le verbe « ti taglio » (littéralement : « je vais te couper »), ressenti comme une menace de la part de la femme :

Maria si avvicinò all'armadio, ma l'uomo se ne accorse e disse: - Non toccare. Non devi toccare. Maria si arrestò interdetta, e chiese: - Perché? - al che l'uomo rispose, - Perché non bisogna -. Maria ci pensò sopra, poi chiese ancora: - Perché è così bianco? - Anche l'uomo pensò un poco, come se la domanda gli sembrasse difficile, e poi disse con voce profonda: - Perché è titanio. Maria si sentì percorrere da un delizioso brivido di paura, come quando nelle fiabe arriva l'orco; guardò con attenzione, e constatò che l'uomo non aveva coltelli, né in mano né intorno a sé: poteva però averne uno nascosto. Allora domandò: - Mi tagli che cosa? - e a questo punto avrebbe dovuto rispondere «Ti taglio la lingua». Invece disse soltanto: - Non ti taglio: titanio.
(Levi, *Il sistema* 156-157 « Titanio »).

Maria s'approcha de l'armoire, mais l'homme s'en aperçut et dit : « Pas toucher. Tu ne dois pas toucher. » Maria, interdite, s'immobilisa, et elle demanda : « Pourquoi ? », et l'homme répondit : « Parce qu'il ne faut pas. » Maria réfléchit, puis demanda encore : « Pourquoi est-ce si blanc ? » L'homme réfléchit lui aussi un instant, comme si la question lui paraissait difficile, puis il dit d'une voix profonde : « Parce que c'est du titane. » Maria sentit un délicieux frisson de crainte la parcourir : était-ce un magicien ? mais rien n'arrivait, elle regarda attentivement : l'homme n'avait pas de baguette magique. Alors elle demanda : « Titania ? Où est-elle ? » L'homme la regarda un moment, puis il dit seulement : « Pas Titania, titane. »
(Levi, *Le système* 180-181 « Titane »).

Dans ce cas, la traduction exaspère le processus de déterminologisation qui visait un retour à l'interprétation littérale de la forme de dénomination du terme « Titane », inventé à la fin du XVIII^e siècle par Martin Heinrich Klaproth, qui s'inspira du mythe grec des Titans. Dans l'impossibilité de reproduire le jeu de mots en italien, le traducteur propose de le remplacer par une référence intertextuelle : le choix tombe sur la reine des fées du *Songe d'une nuit d'été* de Shakespeare, Titania. Cette proposition traductive est sans doute cohérente avec la dimension vaguement érotique signalé dans le texte italien par le « frisson » ayant lieu « quando nelle fiabe arriva l'orco » (littéralement : « quand, dans les contes de fées, l'ogre arrive »). Mais elle s'avère encore plus cohérente avec la stratégie de signification des termes déspecialisés chez Levi, qui se réapproprient leur dimension littérale : en

parcourant jusqu'au bout la dimension magique évoquée par les « fiabe », le traducteur ne fait que mettre en place un des éléments fondateurs du récit fantastique selon Todorov, c'est-à-dire la lecture littérale du sens allégorique et le retour du « sens premier » de la métaphore (Todorov 69). Le rôle du non-terme en traduction est donc non dissemblable de celui de la métaphore littérale dans le genre fantastique, visant, encore une fois, à faire ressurgir un contenu refoulé.

3. *Le foie et le poumon. Formes de spontanéité terminologique en traduction*

Au processus de désécialisation que l'on vient d'illustrer dans le cadre de la traduction française peuvent correspondre des phénomènes égaux et contraires de terminologisation, c'est-à-dire d'innovation terminologique. Parmi les motivations discursives et communicationnelles sur la base desquelles un traducteur fait recours à l'invention pour combler un vide terminologique, John Humbley indique des raisons relevant du besoin de « résoudre un problème de communication ponctuelle » (175). Cette invitation à prendre en compte la dimension cotextuelle « ponctuelle » et immédiate dans la création terminologique nous suggère encore une fois l'importance de considérer les conditions discursives d'apparition d'un néologisme terminologique. Dans notre contexte d'études, nous nous limitons évidemment à l'étude du stade de l'innovation terminologique – à ses stratégies et à ses comportements textuels et cotextuels – et non pas à celui de la propagation ou de la fortune.

Pour cette dernière partie de notre analyse, nous avons donc procédé en opérant une extraction terminologique du texte source, qui montre la liste des mots excédant l'usage « normal » : le corpus est en effet comparé à un corpus de référence généré automatiquement pour représenter la langue non spécialisée⁴. Voici un tableau résumant les premières cinquante occurrences du corpus :

| Term | Score | Freq |
|--------------|---------|------|
| Hendrik | 159.640 | 15 |
| commendatore | 148.280 | 22 |
| Maggie | 137.510 | 25 |

| Term | Score | Freq |
|----------------|---------|------|
| Rodmund | 132.810 | 11 |
| allossana | 132.470 | 11 |
| Muller | 129.780 | 23 |
| SAC | 123.600 | 13 |
| Kern | 108.920 | 9 |
| Bortolasso | 108.820 | 9 |
| nicel | 101.420 | 22 |
| Tenente | 94.920 | 16 |
| goia | 94.210 | 8 |
| Buna | 90.670 | 8 |
| clorurare | 81.270 | 21 |
| Cerrato | 73.070 | 8 |
| haverta | 72.990 | 6 |
| Gnor | 72.880 | 6 |
| Pistamiglio | 72.770 | 6 |
| Varisco | 70.760 | 7 |
| piruvico | 68.370 | 6 |
| boccaporto | 62.450 | 6 |
| cloridrico | 60.230 | 7 |
| Paglietta | 60.030 | 5 |
| coppale | 59.750 | 5 |
| cilindretti | 59.700 | 6 |
| pietrine | 58.910 | 5 |
| Doktor | 57.260 | 5 |
| Lanza | 56.730 | 15 |
| ammonio | 54.720 | 7 |
| fracasso | 54.530 | 7 |
| Willem | 52.610 | 6 |
| caporeparto | 52.440 | 5 |
| urico | 51.570 | 7 |
| vanadio | 50.280 | 5 |
| cautamente | 50.050 | 6 |
| fosforo | 49.010 | 17 |
| impolmonimento | 49.000 | 4 |

| Term | Score | Freq |
|--------------|--------|------|
| Sbariia | 49.000 | 4 |
| Grassiadio | 49.000 | 4 |
| piombo | 48.940 | 37 |
| Commendatore | 48.510 | 5 |
| Marchin | 48.340 | 4 |
| Barbarico | 48.130 | 4 |
| stannoso | 48.090 | 4 |
| manod | 47.970 | 4 |
| Auschwitz | 47.960 | 19 |
| Snowdon | 47.340 | 4 |
| benzene | 47.270 | 7 |
| impurezza | 47.260 | 4 |

La fréquence (*Freq*) indique le nombre d'occurrences dans le corpus choisi ; le *Score* indique par contre le niveau de *keyness*, c'est-à-dire le taux de spécificité des mots sélectionnés par rapport au corpus de référence. Les données obtenues, confrontées à la liste des fréquences, sont assez parlantes. Sur 50 occurrences, presque la moitié relève de la terminologie de la chimie (et de la chimie appliquée). Le reste des résultats relève de nom propres – absents pour des raisons évidentes dans le corpus de référence – ou d'expressions en dialecte juif-piémontais, qui ne trouvent pas de correspondance dans un corpus de référence construit sur l'italien standard.

Parmi ces résultats, nous choisissons d'analyser le terme « *impolmonimento* ». Le choix est justifié du fait que c'est le seul terme qui relève de la chimie appliquée, en l'occurrence de la science de la fabrication des peintures. Dans le passage où le terme se trouve, tiré du chapitre « *Chrome* », le narrateur relate son expérience dans l'après-guerre dans une usine de peinture en passant au peigne fin toute une série de procédés techniques de fabrication. Ces procédés aussi fonctionnent comme les mots : ils conservent des « rudiments d'habitudes et de procédés abandonnés depuis longtemps » (Levi, *Le système 162* « *Chrome* »). Dans la préparation de l'huile de lin cuite, par exemple, on ajoute encore deux rondelles d'oignons qui, à l'époque où les thermomètres n'étaient pas encore entrés dans l'usage, servaient à mesurer la température. L'auteur raconte donc l'histoire de l'introduction du chlorure d'ammonium dans la formule d'une peinture

antirouille aux chromates, inventée par Levi lui-même pour résoudre un problème de solidification des peintures, puis restée dans l'usage. Dans le passage suivant, on décrit la rencontre avec le directeur de l'usine :

Mi condusse in un angolo del piazzale, vicino al muro di cinta: ammonticchiati alla rinfusa, i più bassi schiacciati dai più alti, c'erano migliaia di blocchi squadrati, di un vivace color arancio. Me li fece toccare: erano gelatinosi e mollicci, avevano una sgradevole consistenza di visceri macellati. Dissi al direttore che, a parte il colore, mi sembravano dei fegati, e lui mi lodò: proprio così stava scritto nei manuali di verniciologia! Mi spiegò che il fenomeno che li aveva prodotti si chiamava in inglese proprio così, «*livering*», e cioè «infegatamento», ed in italiano impolmonimento; in certe condizioni, certe vernici da liquide diventano solide, con la consistenza appunto del fegato o del polmone, e sono da buttar via. Quei corpi parallelepipedici erano state latte di vernice: la vernice si era impolmonita, le latte erano state tagliate, ed il contenuto buttato nel mucchio delle immondizie. Quella vernice, mi disse, era stata prodotta durante la guerra e subito dopo; conteneva un cromato basico ed una resina alchidica. Forse il cromato era troppo basico o la resina troppo acida: sono appunto queste le condizioni in cui può avvenire un impolmonimento (Levi, *Il sistema* 144 «Cromo»).

Il me conduisit dans un coin de la grande cour, près du mur d'enceinte : amoncelés en vrac, ceux du bas écrasés sous le poids de ceux du haut, il y avait des milliers de blocs parallélépipédiques, d'un orange vif. Il me le fit toucher : ils étaient gélatineux et mous, avaient une consistance désagréable de viscères à l'abattoir. Je dis au directeur que, couleur mise à part, ils me faisaient penser à des foies, et il me félicita : c'est exactement ce qui était écrit dans les manuels de fabrication des peintures ! Et il m'expliqua qu'en anglais on appelait exactement ainsi le phénomène qui les avait produits : *livering*, c'est-à-dire «*hépatisation*» ; dans certaines conditions, certaines peintures, de solides deviennent liquides, avec, justement, la consistance du foie ou du poumon, et elles sont bonnes à jeter. Ces parallélépipèdes étaient des bidons de peinture : la peinture s'était hépatisée, les bidons avaient été découpés et le contenu jeté aux ordures. Cette peinture, me dit-il, avait été produite pendant la guerre et aussitôt après ; elle contenait un chromate basique et une résine alkyde. Le chromate était peut-être trop basique ou la résine trop acide – ce sont précisément les conditions dans lesquelles une hépatisation peut se produire (Levi, *Le système* 166-167 «Chrome»).

Le terme *livering* est défini selon la banque de données terminologique de l'Union Européenne (IATE) comme « l'augmentation progressive et irréversible de la consistance d'un véhicule pigmentaire » (IATE, fiche 1489804)⁵. L'origine du terme est une métaphore conceptuelle qui change d'une culture à l'autre : la peinture est « foie » (« liver ») en anglais et « poumon » (« polmone ») en italien. Dans l'extrait, le narrateur se plaît à montrer le processus de terminologisation *in statu nascendi*, en mettant en scène toutes les étapes de l'histoire de ce terme : l'invention métaphorique à partir d'une impression empirique et personnelle (« mi sembravano dei fegati ») ; l'évocation du terme officiel en anglais (« *livering* ») ; la paraphrase du terme anglais allant dans la direction d'une localisation par recours au calque « *infegatamento* » ; finalement, l'équivalence en italien : « *impolmonimento* ».

La langue française est à cet égard très synonymique car il existe plusieurs équivalences officielles de *livering* : le terme *gélification*, proposé par IATE et défini comme « transformation, le plus souvent irréversible, d'un produit de l'état liquide à l'état figé » (IATE, fiche 1489804). On trouve dans le Grand Dictionnaire Terminologique le terme *concrétion* (« Gélification très prononcée » d'une peinture, fiche 8451700, 1981) ; *épaississement* (« peinture qui devient semi-solide ou comme une gelée », fiche 8885252, 1983) ; et « augmentation de la viscosité d'un produit de finition provoquée délibérément ou survenant en cours de stockage », fiche 2083322, 1991) ; pour les encres, *livering* est traduit par *caoutchoutage* (fiche 8889755, 1982). Nonobstant les possibilités offertes par les sources terminologiques, la formulation néologique proposée par le traducteur vise à mettre en valeur la dimension métaphorique (les peintures solidifiées sont des « foies ») et donc à proposer le faux calque « hépatisation » (de *infegatamento*, calque à son tour de *livering*), dont l'usage à la place de « *impolmonimento* » est généralisé dans le texte cible.

Or, il se trouve que *hépatisation* est un faux calque, puisque le terme existe déjà dans le vocabulaire médical pour se référer à une « [a]ltération d'un tissu organique (notamment pulmonaire) dont la compacité et la coloration rappellent alors celles du foie » (TLFI, *ad vocem*). En ce sens, le calque réinvente le terme, à plus forte raison que la terminologie considère l'attribution d'un signifié nouveau à un signifiant existant comme de la néologie ; Humbley précise à cet égard que « tout changement de définition relève de la néologie » (54). Cette innovation obéit à des impératifs de type discursif : le chapitre est en effet construit sur le transfert incessant de

certaines propriétés humaines aux objets de la chimie, et vice-versa. Cette procédure est visible dans les passages suivants, où les termes spécialisés et non spécialisés sont à peu près interchangeables : le terme chimique *réagir* est utilisé métaphoriquement dans le premier extrait, où il se réfère à des relations sentimentales entre les ouvriers d'une mine :

a quanto pareva, tutti i cinquanta
abitatori della miniera avevano reagito
fra loro, a due a due, come nel calcolo
combinatorio
(Levi, *Il sistema* 66 « Nickel »).

À ce qu'il semblait, les cinquante
habitants de la mine au complet
avaient réagi entre eux, deux à deux,
comme dans l'analyse combinatoire
(Levi, *Le système*, 78 « Nickel »).

alors que dans le second cas ce sont les substantifs *partner*, *fornicatori* et *amplesso* qui sont empruntés à la langue générale pour décrire, toujours sous métaphore, un concept spécialisé, en l'occurrence la réaction entre le chromate et la résine :

I due partner, i due fornicatori dal
cui amplesso erano scaturiti i mostri
aranciati, erano il cromato e la resina
(Levi, *Il sistema* 146 « Cromo »).

Les deux partenaires, les deux
fornicateurs de l'accouplement
desquels étaient sortis les monstres
orange, étaient le chromate et la résine
(Levi, *Le système*, 169 « Chrome »).

C'est dans le cadre d'une lexicalisation des langages spéciaux que l'invention terminologique en traduction vise à privilégier les relations sémantiques internes du terme en question, plutôt que son assimilation à un concept spécialisé donné.

Conclusion

Notre analyse des comportements terminologiques en contexte littéraire a montré comment le terme, dissocié de son domaine technico-scientifique, peut s'ouvrir à un élargissement de potentialités de signification. Le terme, en ce sens, s'insère dans un horizon de sens qui excède les limites de la déspecialisation comme pratique finalisée à la vulgarisation de concepts techniques et scientifique. L'étude de la traduction du *Système*

périodique de Primo Levi a permis de montrer un cas d'usage diégétique des terminologies. Au final, la néologie terminologique en traduction a démontré que le terme, séparée de sa relation exclusive avec le domaine et le concept, répond à des logiques de type discursif, symbolique et – vu l'importance du rôle de l'interlocuteur – communicationnel. Le néologisme terminologique demeure, en tout état de cause, irréductible aux pratiques de la nomination. Gloning, dans une étude sur le vocabulaire médical allemand au XXe siècle, met l'accent sur la dimension locale des inventions terminologiques : « la mise en pratique d'usages innovants sert seulement à résoudre des problèmes communicatifs locaux ; ce sont des usages *ad hoc* » (122). Ce sont donc des besoins ponctuels de communication et de narration qui régissent la création d'un nouveau terme : il s'agit là d'une thèse qui serait à confirmer par la prise en considération d'un corpus littéraire plus large.



- 1 Cf. la traduction française : « ce livre n'est pas un manuel de chimie » (Levi, *Le système* 243).
- 2 Il s'agit d'un *nous* fondateur d'un contrat énonciatif selon lequel « l'auteur se pose en délégué d'une collectivité investie de l'autorité d'un Savoir dont la légitimité repose sur une institution et, au-delà, la Science » (Maingueneau 30).
- 3 *Arsenic* dériverait plutôt de l'arabe persan *zarnikh*, signifiant *jaune*.
- 4 Le corpus est Italian Web 2016 (itTenTen16), généré et mis à disposition par Sketchengine.
- 5 Dans la version originale : « the progressive, irreversible increase in consistency of a pigment-vehicle ». Domaine : *Industry > chemistry > chemical compound*. (*Scandinavian Glossary of Coating Terms*, FSPVT, 1985).



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Mirroring the Victorian *Fin de Siècle*: Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation*

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*W*ill Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* has been a controversial narrative ever since it was published in 2002, receiving on the whole adverse critiques from reviewers². Nevertheless, some academic scholars have defended its relevance as an innovative “retro-Victorian” reflection on aestheticism from an intertextual viewpoint (Yebra) or as a postmodernist rendering of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* between imitation and self-reflection (Chalupský). In this same vein, Harrison has considered Self's narrative as a homage to, and adaptation of, Wilde's novel, underlining the deployment of satire, aspects that Gingell has wittily expanded with a major emphasis on parody, also discussing the concept of misrepresentation. Other scholars, like Helen Davies—who includes *Dorian: An Imitation* in a comprehensive catalog of neo-Victorian versions of Wilde's “voice”—and Louisa Yates—in a thought-provoking analysis of the process of “re-vision”—have delved more deeply into the comparison between Wilde's book and its appropriation by Self from a neo-Victorian stance, a perspective that Patricia Pulham has applied to her intriguing account of traces of Wilde in both *Dorian: An Imitation* and Craig Wilmann's 2014 drama *The Picture of John Gray*, taking into consideration the balance between history and fiction in each text and providing the first academic analysis of Wilmann's play.

Referring to its main literary model and point of departure, Will Self narcissistically stated in an interview that his novel is “a homage.

And a complete and professed rewrite of a classic, I think it's unique. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the prophecy and *Dorian* is the fulfilment" (McCrum). Is Will Self's piece of fiction a fulfilment of Wilde's? How does he trace and rewrite the Irish genius's classic? How does the text retrieve and transform the cultural and the sexual politics of the model on which it is based? Throughout this article I shall endeavour to answer these questions, dealing with the way(s) in which *Dorian* mirrors *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from a contemporary perspective which, at the same time, together with many present-day narratives in the English language, tries to recover the late Victorian past, establishing significant relationships between the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* and that of the twentieth century. In this respect, I subscribe the determining words of Heilmann and Llewellyn when they emphasize the fact that the neo-Victorian standpoint focuses on the oscillating nature ("Going forward, looking backward") of this essential and culturally productive trend: "As Victorianists we are fascinated by the ways in which contemporary culture seeks to return us to, develop us from, and connect us with our Victorian precursors" (32). And, unquestionably, Will Self's attempt at rewriting Wilde's narrative masterpiece has proved to be a bold experiment to revise and 'update' it from a contemporary approach. Self's novel has been considered outmoded and far from the sensibility of present-day readers by some reviewers who have not interpreted it within the historical framework in which it is included (beside not taking into account its indubitable literary merits): that of Margaret Thatcher's Britain, in which its most representative political leader was precisely enthralled by the trace of the Victorian period³, and the subsequent 1990s.

As the subtitle of Self's bizarre narrative emphasizes, *Dorian* aims at being 'an imitation' of Oscar Wilde's well-known and myth-making *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. According to Neil Bartlett,

Self's *Dorian* subtitled itself "an imitation", and that it is exactly what it is, in the full Wildean sense. It flatters its original by taking both subject and style entirely seriously. The locations, characters, plot and epigrams are all transposed from the 1890s to the 1990s, chapter by inexorable chapter. Little is materially altered, but everything is reused — sharpened, blackened and intensified by Self's idiosyncratic remix of Wilde's combination of wit and rage, extravagant debauchery with clinical introspection.

Consequently, *Dorian* constitutes a neo-Victorian rewriting of Wilde's influential incursion into the Gothic mode, clearly connected with former paradigms of the fantastic introducing the figure of the double. Both Self and Wilde are haunted by the Narcissus myth, narcissism, the *Doppelgänger* motif and, ultimately, mirror images⁴. The plot of *Dorian: An Imitation* begins in 1981, and the number itself is chiasmic with respect to the year in which *Dorian Gray* was published in one volume by Ward, Lock and Co., after having been issued in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1890. Mirrors trace the multiple reflections of selves, a theme that is recurrent and almost obsessive in both books, which are the product of the inner and outer conflicts of their respective ages. Duality is a persistent element in Victorian literature, and especially in nineteenth-century English Gothic and fantasy, teeming with ominous doubles, Frankenstein's monster, Bertha Mason (the 'madwoman in the attic' of Thornfield in *Jane Eyre*), Edward Hyde and Dracula being the most evident examples. Similarly, both Wilde's narrative and Self's imitation mirror a period of decadence and dissipation, of consumerism, of social and political crisis, of sexual ambiguities and reinventions, of projections of disease, of disenchantment and escapism, of psychological confusion. Will Self's *Dorian* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) are among the books that best fulfil and represent in an explicit way what is ambiguously suggested in Wilde's narrative, which is masterfully subtle and vague as far as unconcealed details about Dorian Gray's crimes are concerned, leaving mostly aside Basil Hallward's murder.

The comparison between Wilde's novel and Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886)—which exerted a clear influence on the former, haunting the Irishman's imagination—constitutes a relevant case in point in this respect due to the fact that both narratives show an obsession with mirrors within an unmistakable Gothic atmosphere, Jekyll's cheval glass being the equivalent symbolic element of Dorian Gray's picture, and Hyde's evil behaviour providing a chiasmic counterpart to that of the dazzling ephebe. If both Wilde and Stevenson had plainly and visibly reflected their protagonists' misdeeds and transgressions, they would probably be perceived now, in an age of extreme fetishism of violence, backed up and brought forward by many films and television series, as outdated and scarcely shocking. In this regard, Victorian subtlety and ambiguity have been substituted in present-day times—in our neo-Victorian context—by grim explicitness, undoubtedly attenuating the uncanny effect

that Victorian Gothic narratives produced in their coetaneous readers. *Fin-de-siècle* literary monsters — vampires, ghosts, psychopathic characters like Edward Hyde and Dorian Gray himself — are now ‘disenchanted images’, utilizing the sagacious term applied by Theodore Ziolkowski to those icons that bring about terrors and anxieties within the very heart of a social and psychological milieu, and which are accordingly de-semanticized, devoid of their power to produce a feeling of disquiet and defamiliarization. In this line of argument, it would not be implausible to envisage Self’s *Dorian* as a neo-Victorian ‘disenchanted’ rewriting of its model.

Be that as it may, in Wilde’s view, as he asserts in the famous “Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (3). It can be affirmed that both *Dorian Gray* and *Dorian: An Imitation* are ambiguously moral; and both are very well written. *Dorian* is the fulfilment of *Dorian Gray* because it makes overt what is behind Wilde’s novel, among other relevant issues: the veiled promise and seed of a revolution in sexual and social manners. Not in vain, the great Irishman endured two years in prison after the two infamous trials of 1895 in which part of the evidence for his alleged guiltiness of “gross indecency” was the citations of passages from his notorious book.

Will Self’s *Dorian* replicates to the very verge of hyperbole the satire of late Victorianism revealed in Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*. Maybe this is because the last two decades of the twentieth century were, debatably, more extreme and frantic than their nineteenth-century correlates. Or, simply, the English writer deliberately wanted to emphasize in sharp terms the perverted nature of the diseased society of Thatcher’s Britain and the increasing sensation of *ennui* generated by capitalistic dissipation and dehumanization in the 1990s. Self rewrites and imitates his model with acerbic irony, corrosive satire and grotesque exaggeration, mirroring and distorting the late Victorian past in a narcissistic narrative (Hutcheon 1984) structured in three parts, adding a disturbing and ambivalent epilogue. In describing the progression of Dorian and the rest of the characters throughout the plot of his novel, the English author reflects the excesses of the turn of the century in a decadent London where there are no deeply-rooted certainties. The vices and the profligacy of the Victorian *fin de siècle*, that other side of the splendours of Imperial Britain, are mirrored by what Self depicts as the utter mayhem of Thatcher’s England, where the Prime Minister herself and the Conservative government

implemented a nostalgic vision of the purported greatness of Victorian times (Samuel; Evans).

Even so, Self goes consciously beyond Wilde's elegantly sinuous descriptions and highly elevated rhetorical style in painting a portrait of weariness, overindulgence, drugs and dissolute homosexual relationships. Andrew Smith has aptly and captivatingly read Self's text as a paradigm of the queer Gothic. The most relevant characters in the book, the same as those in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in a more restricted manner, are gay. This is obviously the case of Dorian himself, the same as that of Baz Hallward and, of course, Henry Wotton, who is the real protagonist of Self's narrative, becoming even its intradiegetic author, a narrative double of the writer himself. Dorian is perceived from the very beginning as an icon of gay beauty, being compared with Adonis and, most of all, with Narcissus, as in Wilde's narrative, in which Henry Wotton responds to Basil Hallward's avowal of having put too much of himself into his portrait of the youngster in the following terms:

I really can't see any resemblance between you, with your rugged strong face and your coal-black hair, and this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and roseleaves. Why, my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus (6).

Like Narcissus, Dorian is loved and worshipped both by men and women, and the recognition of his beauty is provided by the portrait-mirror-pond in which he falls in love with himself, infatuated with his own image:

When he saw it [the picture] he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time [...]. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before (24).

Will Self turns the portrait into a protean video installation called the *Cathode Narcissus*: nine television monitors showing the body of Dorian in different postures and attitudes. On the whole, it is a monument of voyeurism, nine mirrors instead of one, in which the young man can contemplate his multiform image potentially *ad infinitum*. From the very beginning, it arouses Dorian's desire of immortality:

‘How long will these tapes last, Baz?’ he asked.

‘It’s hard to say... Certainly years, if not decades, and by then they can be transferred to new tapes, and so on— for ever, I guess’.

‘So these’ —Dorian gestured— ‘will remain young for ever, while I grow old, then die’? [...] I wish it was the other way round’ (22).

Uncannily enough, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian’s wish becomes true, and, like the portrait of his Wildean counterpart, the video installation —“an alternative me”, the young man says (51)—, will suffer all the transformations caused by Dorian’s wicked behaviour whilst he, obsessed at the beginning with the passing of time, remains young and beautiful, in spite of his criminal and murderous deeds. The *Cathode Narcissus* is the equivalent of Dorian Gray’s portrait, reflecting Self’s Dorian transformations when being involved in an evil action. Shortly after Herman—a character I will comment on later—commits suicide by overdose, there is a change in the monitors that Self describes with palpable irony, stressed by the apparently incongruous simile:

Then Dorian saw it: the faces on the screen had all changed—and for the worse. An exaggerated moue twisted his formerly flawless mouth. A distortion of a perfect symmetry such as his was far worse than a harelip on an ordinary face (70).

Dorian remains a mystery for most of the novel, and his ending increases this sense of not being able to cope with his changeable multiplicity. In a way, unlike Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as has already been pointed out, Self’s narrative focuses mainly on Henry Wotton, following the general impression of many critics and readers—and that of Will Self himself—that he impersonated Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in spite of the Irishman’s well-known refutation in this sense written in a letter to Ralph Payne (February 12, 1894): “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps” (in Hart-Davis 116).

The plot of Self’s novel covers a span of sixteen years and, unlike Wilde’s narrative—together with the evolution of Wotton and of a chameleonic, elusive Dorian—, it breaks down in impressionist glimpses the incidents of history, commencing with the Brixton riots, and going back and forth in time to refer, for example, to the Gulf War and the Balkans conflict. As Jerusha McCormack has wisely detected, “Sequence, or history, is destroyed by myth, which Wilde understood to be more enduring

than history” (112); conversely, from a neo-Victorian standpoint, Self pays more attention to history rather than to myth in *Dorian*. The elongated shadow of Thatcherism inevitably lurks from the backstage of the narrative, and Self is always willing to debunk and expose it through his hyperbolic and corrosive style, even from the very beginning of his novel:

But such was the particular correspondence between the year our story begins, 1981, and the year of the house’s construction, 1881, and such was the peculiarly similar character of the times—a Government at once regressive and progressive, a monarchy mired in its own immemorial succession crisis, an economic recession both sharp and bitter... (3).

Self inserts his narrative within the convoluted twists and turns of history, always an essential issue in neo-Victorian narratives. It is illustrative—and ironic—that Victoria Wotton, Lord Henry’s wife, who bears the same name as the charismatic queen, is a historian. And it is even more sardonic that one of Dorian’s doubles throughout the narrative is Princess Diana, who is described in vitriolic and acerbic terms by Lord Henry, who, unlike Dorian, feels no affection whatsoever for the English monarchy: “Anyway, it is absurd, the deference that’s paid to Fatty Spencer; after all, it’s looking increasingly unlikely that she’ll ever be a queen, whereas there’re oodles of them in here” (80). Providing a relevant example of Linda Hutcheon’s concept of “historiographic metafiction”, Dorian and Diana’s narcissistic link is symbolically underlined at the very occasion of the Royal Wedding of the Princess with Prince Charles on 29 July 1981, when some of the main characters of Self’s novel are watching a videotape of the marriage ceremony (“The royal-fucking wedding!” in Wotton’s disrespectful language) “...grouped around one of the *Cathode Narcissus* monitors” (64), substituting Dorian’s iconic body for that of Diana, that “Queen of Hearts”, a figure of contemporary authenticity “hopelessly caught within the representational order of the artificial” (Lea 1). In Wilde’s narrative there is no analogous double of Gray; the portrait only reflects his own image and the metamorphoses on account of his transgressions and misdeeds.

On the other hand, seen from the specific point of view of homosexual history, Dorian and the other characters with the same sexual inclination stand for the first gay generation to come openly out of the closet, a point of departure still conceived as complex in socio-sexual terms, as Baz, the

counterpart of Basil Hallward in Wilde's book, accentuates: "But I want a different kind of relationship. I want truth and beauty and honesty, but the world wants to destroy that kind of love between men" (13). Of course, these sad words evoke the appalling fate of homosexuals in Wilde's time, and the unjust punishment he was compelled to suffer, which turned him into a martyr of the gay cause, among other attributions, as Alan Sinfield has perceptively analyzed.

Unfortunately, this was also the first gay generation to have become, through the use of drugs and—as shown in the narrative—immoderate sexual intercourse, the propitiatory victims of AIDS, the terrible pandemic that decimated the homosexual population (beside that of other groups also susceptible to be exposed to the virus) in the last decades of the twentieth century, until a retrovirus (the HAART) was discovered and applied to patients in order to reduce the devastating effects of the disease on the carriers of the VIH. As a consequence, homosexuality became a curse and a source of supplementary social and sexual exclusion. In Baz Hallward's words,

They say now that those few short years between the Stone-wall Riots and the arrival of AIDS were characterized by a mountings sense of liberation, that we gay men felt the time had come to be ourselves, to express ourselves, to live as we truly wanted to live, free of guilt, free of convention, free of interference. They say now that the disease is a ghastly, one-off, one act play. A piece of incomprehensible dramatic irony, inflicted on us happy Arcadians by a god who doesn't even exist... They say a lot of things, but for those of us who were there it was simple. Simple to observe that for men who were meant to be free, how readily they draped themselves in chains...' (94-95).

In *Dorian* AIDS replaces syphilis, the sexual epidemic of the *fin de siècle* which symbolically underlies the plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, lying at the core of most Victorian Gothic narratives, *Dracula* being the most obvious paradigm. In *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag brilliantly examines the symbolic power of the pandemic and what it means for those who suffer from it, illness being always "other", turning the body of the patients into alien entities which "belong and don't belong" to them at the same time, creating oftentimes, and because of social and psychological pressure, a feeling of guilt. Although of a different nature, the current COVID-19 pandemic makes us aware of the vulnerabilities, and the mental and physical transformations and

anxieties undergone by ‘diseased’ groups of people from the various layers of society.

The first part of *Dorian* (“Recordings”) ends up with a veritable “conga line of buggery” (68) in which Herman (notice the metaphorical connotations of the name), a drug dealer, transmits the lethal VIH virus to the rest of the participants in a sexual orgy, although Dorian will remain asymptomatic to the inexorable attack of the bacilli in spite of the fact that he contracts the disease. Both Herman (described as a “black Narcissus”⁵; 64) and a girl called Helen play the role of Sibyl Vane in *Dorian Gray*, and Herman’s friend, Ginger, that of James Vane, Sibyl’s brother.

As a matter of fact, Self’s Dorian, who holds relevant intertextual connections with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, as scholars like Schaffer have suggested—admittedly, to a lesser extent than Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* inspired *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—, will become a homicidal and vampiric character: he not only murders Baz Hallward when he becomes witness to the transformation of his creation, the *Cathode Narcissus*, and contributes to the death of other characters in the book, as is the case of Octavia; he also transmits the VIH conscientiously to innocent people through sexual intercourse. This happens to Helen, who, to make things worse, has become the mother of a little baby. It is striking to observe how characters who are more than thirty are considered old people in Self’s mordant narrative. Ageing is a serious problem in a society which has converted youth and physical beauty into its incontestable deities.

Like Edgar Allan Poe’s pioneering protagonist of “The Man of the Crowd” in the early nineteenth century, and Anne Rice’s main male characters in “The Vampire Chronicles”, leading the way for other postmodern, neo-Victorian “creatures of the night”, Dorian and Henry Wotton are also impenitent *fin-de-siècle* dandies, conceiving of themselves in aesthetic terms, in archetypal Wildean fashion. Wotton, in a sentence which could be applied to the Irish writer, “styled himself as some contemporary dandy, *flâneur*, or boulevardier, and [...] he saw himself as a work of art” (40). Of course, these characters shine mostly in big cities like New York, where Dorian and Basil live for a time, whilst the painter rehabilitates from drug addiction. Lord Henry, adopting the many invectives—however funnily and mildly ironical—against the United States that can be found in Oscar Wilde’s works, “doesn’t do America”; he prefers the familiar urban landscape of London.

As in many Victorian and neo-Victorian narratives (Alan Moore's and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* being a significant example of the latter in this respect), the capital of England constitutes a cartography of moral and physical misery, a hostile repository of thinly-disguised violence and obscure ambiguities. Consequently, the dual London of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also reflects itself in *Dorian*, although the vision of the city becomes grimmer and gloomier in Self's novel, exhibiting all the vices and ailments of its inhabitants. Actually, from a symbolic perspective, London is another character in Self's novel, as can be seen in many of its passages. For instance, Henry Wotton tells Dorian that

'You, my dear friend [...], are condemned to a seventy-milimetre, windscreen view of the city. You are a mere corpuscle, travelling along these arteries, whereas I have a surgeon's perspective. I float above it all, and see Hyde Park as but a green, gangrenous fistula in London's grey corpse!' (26).

This repulsive vision provides an unpleasant portrayal of the unhealthy city impregnated by centuries of filth, where luxurious cars (reminding of those which the characters of J. G. Ballard's *Crash* turn into emblems of orgasmic sexuality) and virus-like passersby traverse the labyrinthine topography of the former colonial and anonymous metropolis. This is a mirror image of that other London where Wilde's *Dorian Gray* could hide in opium dens, leaving to the reader's imagination the sinful crimes that he committed. Soho, the tortuous Victorian district where both *Dorian* and Hyde loiter and keep their unspeakable secrets, preserves in *Dorian* its atmosphere of blatant exoticism and decadence:

Later the same day Dorian fetched up in Soho. Soho was, at that time, just gay enough but not yet the flagrant village it was to become. Janus the flagellator's boutique, had recently opened, while the Swiss pub was going strong, and other brittle, night-time hangouts clustered like snails beneath the flat, stony sky of the city (45).

The city has become the quintessence of utter decadence and dirtiness which embodies the moral condition of the book's characters: "Dorian had known that there was squalor like this in London, but never conceived of himself as part of it" (48). Furthermore, the capital, as a living thing, represents the licentiousness of the whole nation: "No, this is not an era for municipal grandeur. The city, feeling itself to be moribund, is simplifying its routines, deaccessioning its most solid and durable

possessions in favour of sentimental trinkets and plastic gewgaws” (62). Like those affected by AIDS, as is the case of Lord Henry Wotton, *fin-de-siècle* London is unavoidably diseased. And so is New York, another urban location in the novel, the cultural center of the new Empire that replaced the British Empire in the western world. The American metropolis is also depicted in extremely negative terms as representing the pinnacle of emptiness and corruption: “New York in the early eighties was at the very peak of a great mountain of depravity. It was *so* extreme, Henry, so totally unconstrained, that it almost had an aura of innocence about it” (83). It is also the site of vacuous lavishness and capitalist consumerism from an artistic and aesthetic perspective: “By the early 1980s the avant-garde was busy being franchised and sold off to a series of designer labels and purposed-designed emporia. Halston, Gucci, Fiorucci⁶. Only somebody as staggeringly ill-informed as Dorian Gray could have imagined that there was still a ‘scene’ to be created in Manhattan” (91).

In tracing and rewriting the late Victorian past in his hyperbolic novel, Wilde’s exquisite aestheticism is parodied by Will Self in his use of an almost brutal and hyperbolic range of vocabulary. Language plays the leading role in both Wilde’s and Self’s narratives. The latter imitates the uproarious and/or satirical witticisms of its model, mainly through the discourse of Henry Wotton. The examples multiply:

“I like bodies better than minds, Baz, and I like bodies with no mind at all better than anything else in the world” (12).

“You should remember, *Mister* Gray, a nude body requires no explanation, unlike a naked intellect” (17).

“My mother cultivated plants before she moved on to humanity” (19).

“I adore destructive spectacles: they are the last refuge of the creative” (26).

“...Being poor would be an absolute tragedy. So poor that you had to be straight...” (59).

“Monogamy is to love as ideology is to thought; both are failures in imagination” (82).

All these aphoristic sentences, and many others, together with some noteworthy allusions to biographical data—like the illustrious Irish writer, Wotton lives in Chelsea; the description of Dorian’s parents coincides somehow with that of Wilde’s... (Self 39) — amount to a patent homage to Oscar Wilde the man, to his masks and characters. However, unlike the great Dubliner, Self is fond of the utterly grotesque and of using startling and aggressive similes, especially when depicting episodes of sexual intercourse:

In one fluid movement Herman rolled forward on to his knees, grasped Dorian by the shoulders, and kissed him. Such suction. They were like two flamingos, each attempting to filter the nutriment out of the other with great slurps of their muscular tongues. Adam's apples bobbed in the crap gloaming" (49).

In Self's neo-Victorian recreation, *fins de siècles* go hand in hand together, reflecting each other in a mirror of excess, in a portrait of frenetic amplification.

On the other hand, both Wilde's and Self's narratives are intertextual books, palimpsests where literature speaks about literature, where texts reflect themselves in narcissistic fashion in the same way as the *Cathode Narcissus* projects Dorian's image forever, making him into an aesthetic object of desire, the emblem of an unbalanced society. *Dorian* is a narrative where canonical literature and popular culture coincide: John Donne (with the emphasis of blending and mixing fluids shown in poems like 'The Flea' — a patent 'epidemic' poem — or 'The Sun Rising'; Self 68, 159) coexists with Huysmans (the French author of *A Rebours*, one of the candidates to be the book that corrupted young Dorian in Wilde's narrative, together with Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*), Proust, Queen (Freddie Mercury being another homosexual icon who fatally died of AIDS) and David Bowie, that recurrent idol of ambiguity, among others. The role played by literature in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is also mirrored in Self's 'imitation' with intentional metaliterary flavour:

Lying on a tubby sofa, in a toweling robe with 'Waldorf Astoria' sewn over the breast, was the lean form of Dorian Gray. He was reading *Against Nature* by Huysmans, the Penguin Classics edition with the portrait of the Comte de Montesquiou on the cover (55).

Dorian's ending plays with the Freudian uncanny — *das Unheimliche* —, and corroborates the ultimate conviction that we, like Dorian, in line with Schopenhauer's quotation preceding Self's narrative⁷, are all fictional characters, constantly reinventing ourselves and fighting with our other personalities, with our multiple selves, trying to make an art of life. Lord Henry remains as a voice, whilst in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he disappears before the tragic protagonist seals his death sentence by stabbing the haunted picture. The final mystery of Lord Henry's essence cannot be ultimately found out.⁸

In general terms, it could be said that Self's neo-Victorian imitation of Oscar Wilde is a successful one, manipulating its model so as to turn it into something new for the contemporary world, although the passing of time, I am afraid, has rapidly and inexorably turned *Dorian* into an old-fashioned narrative from a technological viewpoint. The apparently sophisticated *Cathode Narcissus* appears to be naïve when contemplating the vertiginous expansion of increasingly highly-developed computers and mobile phones. This technological obsolescence is also replicated in social networks that construct, and contribute to, the creation of our daily "reality", threatened by new pandemics, like the COVID-19, coexisting with older ones, like syphilis and AIDS. Mirrors have multiplied. Portraits proliferate. In our posthuman, neo-Victorian context, they menace to erase past history, which has to be traced back for us to know how to cope with our present time, full of new elusive, eternally narcissistic Dorians. Every age has its own Dorians, the same as, according to Nina Auerbach, it has its own vampires... and other monsters. Beautiful monsters, like Lucifer himself, are always difficult to categorize and destroy.



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- 2 A comprehensive account of the reviews can be retrieved at <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/selfw/dorian.htm#top>. Oscar Wilde provides some consolation to Self in “The Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where he affirms that “Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital”, and emphasizes that “When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself” (4).
- 3 Margaret Thatcher’s defence of “Victorian values”, even when, as Raphael Samuel affirms, the word “Victorian” was “still being used as a routine term of opprobrium” (1), became a key ideological obsession in the run-up to the 1983 election campaign. The Victorian age became for the Prime Minister a period of decent values, hard work and self-respect. More information about Thatcher’s commitment with Victorian values, beside Samuel’s lecture, can also be retrieved in Evans.
- 4 As I tried to demonstrate elsewhere, the *Doppelgänger* motif is linked to the Narcissus myth from a symbolic and mythological perspective (Ballesteros-González).
- 5 Self may be wittily punning here on the eponymous British film—*Black Narcissus*— released in 1947, starred by Deborah Kerr, Jean Simmons and Sabu, among others, and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. The film, based on a book by Rumer Godden, displays clear imperial and colonial connotations.

- 6 This sequence of brand names might be an echo of the Chic's 1999 famous song "He's the Greatest Dancer", with its catchphrases like "a guy who stuck out in the crowd / He had the kind of body *who would shame Adonis* / ... He wears the finest clothes, the best designers, heaven knows / Ooo, from his head down to his toes / *Halston, Gucci, Fiorucci*, he looks like a still / That man is dressed to kill" (my emphasis). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this article for this perceptive and opportune comment.
- 7 "There is an unconscious appositeness in the use of the word *person* to designate the human individual, as is done in all European languages: for *persona* really means an actor's mask, and it is true that no one reveals himself as he is; we all wear a mask and play a role".
- 8 Jerusha McCormack believes that Lord Henry, "as the devil himself, is merely the agent of destruction", a point of view based on agency that can understandably explain why he disappears from Wilde's narrative, which she interprets on the whole as "a script for his own life" (114). This identification between the writer and the book is another narcissistic mirror image that, in my view, cannot be traced in Self's *Dorian*, where there seems to be a biographical detachment between the English author and his narrative.



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Deconstructing Englishness, Relocating Britishness: Arthur Hugh Clough's *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich*

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I will look straight out, see things, not try to evade them;
Fact shall be fact for me, and Truth the Truth as ever,
Flexible, changeable, vague, and multiform, and doubtful
(Clough, *Amours de Voyage* 129, Canto V, ll. 100-102).

Introduction

In 1848, Arthur Hugh Clough, the Victorian iconoclastic poet who, in spite of being one of the main interpreters of Victorian dilemmas and contradictions, is still suffering from critical neglect in Italy and elsewhere, astounded the Victorian reading public with a work which, at different levels, deconstructs Englishness as well as relocates the concept of Britishness. Though presenting an apparently simple narrative frame, *The Bothie of Tober-Na-Vuolich. A Long Vacation-Pastoral* (from now onwards indicated as *The Bothie*) is a complex long poem characterized by heteroglossia, hybrid poetic forms and genre heterogeneity – all aspects somehow reflecting the poet's ideas of national identity and Britishness.

Through an inventive, idiosyncratic metre and a variety of styles and registers, Clough controversially and provocatively suggests that, behind its facade of cultural stability, Victorian Britain could not be conceived as a nation state with an organic, central political and cultural identity, but as several nations within the nation, an ethnic and linguistic

multitude, that is, marked by decentralization and fragmentation. This image of a dis-united Kingdom is formally conveyed through a specific textual strategy which consists of adopting a heterogeneous amalgam of diversified languages, each expressing a particular geographical or cultural identity or coinciding with individual idiolects. Clough's aim is to challenge the cohesive force represented by the English language in a nation which, to his eyes, as well as to those of the hero of *The Bothie*, is "Only infinite jumble and mess and dislocation" (89, Canto IX, l. 64). However, this image of disharmony and disconnectedness conveys much more than a mere critique of Victorian conservative ethics and ideological structures. It reflects the author's existential philosophy, his sceptical frame of mind, as well as his idea of a poetry that, taking issue with his friend Matthew Arnold's classicist ideals of beauty, grandeur, and decorum, must represent the flow and chaos of life, express epistemic (self)doubt, and, at the same time, sublimate the ugliness and incongruities of experience by representing, rather than escaping, them. Such a poetics and *Weltanschauung* clearly emerge in Clough's long poems *Amours de Voyage* (1858) and *Dipsychus* (posthumous, 1865), as they similarly underpin the stylistic patchiness of *The Bothie*.

The poem was written in two months in 1848, after a five-week sojourn in Paris, during which Clough and Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom he met there, observed with great satisfaction the effects of the February revolution¹. Interestingly enough, 1848 was also the apogee of the Chartist movement in Britain², whose impact on the poem (both in the first and later editions) is evinced by the author's adoption of some typical characteristics of Chartist rhetoric, such as the use of Biblical intertextual references, ballad-like refrains, the Bunyanesque hymn, class antitheses and martial symbolism. With Chartist songs *The Bothie* also shares the celebration of the ideal of freedom, which, in the case of Clough, can be also associated with the particular circumstances in which the poem was conceived. In 1848, he had to resign his Oxford Fellowship at Oriel college as a consequence of his refusing to subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles of the Anglican Church³, a choice which paradoxically produced in him a sense of release and euphoria, rather than defeat and failure. As a matter of fact, while the Oxonian community was expecting him to write a work which would explain, if not apologize, for his unorthodox decision, Clough composed instead a completely different poem, inspired by the reading parties and trips to the Scottish Highlands that he, as an Oxford

tutor, used to organize for his students. Both the geographical setting and the narrative frame of the *Bothie* are based on those moments in Scotland, and, interestingly enough, it is from such a decentred perspective that he presents his vision of British society and culture.

Indeed, *The Bothie* tells the story of an undergraduate reading party or vacation study group that, accompanied by their tutor, leave the domestic, albeit stifling, Oxford environment to travel to a remote site in the Scottish Highlands. The hero is one of these students, Philip Hewson, an upper-middle class bookish young man, would-be poet and advocate of social reform. The pastoral vacation turns for him into an opportunity for romance with three women with a different class and social status: the peasant girl Katie, the aristocratic heiress Lady Maria, and Elspie, the self-educated daughter of an ex-blacksmith, ex-soldier and ex-schoolmaster and now farmer, living in a typical Highland *bothie*, the small cottage named in the title. Eventually, Philip decides to forsake his cloistered Oxford life, marry Elspie, emigrate to New Zealand with her and start there a new, simple life as a farmer.

Philip the exile might be regarded as the alter-ego of Clough's friend, Tom Arnold – brother of the more famous Matthew – who, being disenchanted with Oxford education and, more generally, Victorian Britain, moved for a period of his life first to New Zealand and then Tasmania, before eventually returning to England⁴. In fact, the poem's final idyll only represents one of the many alternatives Philip might have chosen, thus no unique or definitive solution to his inner tensions. In that sense, rather than Tom Arnold's experience, Philip mirrors, just like the eponymous "double-minded" protagonist of Clough's *Dipsychus*, his creator's watchful scepticism and self-contradictoriness, which makes him constantly oscillate between idealism and common experience, metaphysical aspirations and the call of reality, thus turning any choice into no more than a vexing solution.

The Bothie celebrates relativism, arbitrariness and inconsistency as opposed to an unshakable faith in absolutes and unequivocal truths. As the critic W. D. Shaw underlines, "Clough reminds us that to answer questions is always to delimit arbitrarily a whole *terra incognita* of unknowables" (Shaw 141). Inadvertently, Clough seems to be offering his own idiosyncratic version of the Keatsian concept of "Negative Capability", the condition of "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Buxton 77), an

epistemological approach whereby open possibilities and what may be defined as integrity of doubt prevail over conclusive answers or easy solutions. This outlook also involves Clough's contentious conception of Englishness and alternative representation of a multifaceted Britishness, which reflect some of the ideas expounded by Linda Colley in her magisterial 1992 study, recently republished by Yale University Press (2014): the problematic concept of a "British national identity", and the persistence of divisions and tensions in the "forging" of the "British nation" from 1707 onwards, which "was never based on ethnic or cultural uniformity" (Colley xxx).

At the same time, I maintain that Clough's vision of a (dis)United Kingdom even looks forward to theorisations on the Britishness question which show the long-term effects of historical processes, such as the 1707 Union of Parliaments and the building of the British empire, on post-war and contemporary British culture and society. "The British state and the British nation", Andrew Gamble and Tony Wright argue, "was always a sham, a political creation which suited the interests of those groups in all nations which favoured the Union and wished to create a new supranational focus for loyalty and allegiance" (1). By the same token, John K. Walton has called attention to "the lack of a clear overarching sense of British identity". Consequently, "the existence of a general preference [...] for geographical definitions of the self in society that focus on entities nearer to home", and "ideas about what it is to be British have been, and are being, relocated along a variety of axes and in several dimensions" (Walton 2), including issues of region/nation, class, gender/sexuality, ethnicity and culture (4, 6).

In particular, the present article will argue that Clough's deconstruction of Englishness can be tackled by focusing on three interrelated "axes" and "dimensions" of the poem. First, metrical eccentricity and genre heterogeneity, which are features of its essential heteroglossia – an ideological, rather than merely formal, choice. Form and significance are always juxtaposed in Clough's poetry. Secondly, the relationship between Englishness (or Britishness for that matter), gender and, more specifically, masculinity, a theme conveyed by the hero's three liaisons with Scottish women foregrounding national socio-political divisions. Finally, what may be defined as the South-versus-North paradigm, that is, the dialectics between centre and periphery deriving from the Oxonians' incursion into the exotic Scottish Highlands, the latter

becoming an intercultural “contact zone” (Pratt 33-40) which exposes the prejudice and tensions marring national unity. In combining these three aspects to address the issue of Englishness/ Britishness, my work builds on previous scholarly studies which have examined each of them individually or as interconnected components of the poem, starting from Isobel Armstrong’s pioneering chapter on Clough included in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (1993).

There Armstrong defines the “brilliance” of *The Bothie* as deriving from the poet’s creation of a form “to which a politics was intrinsic” (“The Radical in Crisis”, 178) and a “radical language” that becomes “the object of democratic investigation” by exploring “speech as it is determined and organised by and in specific social groups” (181). It is my contention that this politics characterizes both the first 1848 and posthumous 1862 editions of *The Bothie*, although, as far as its idiosyncratic English hexameters, I agree with Joseph Patrick Phelan that the corrections to the metre introduced in revised versions of the poem show Clough’s “retreat from the radical position” achieved in the first edition (166). Christopher Matthews’ study of the poem’s “heterosexual and political narrative” and of “the synergy between the poem’s sexual and metrical allegories” (478) is behind my identification of a similar synergy between the language(s) and the theme of (multi)national identity in the poem, as well as it underpins my analysis of the intermeshing of the protagonist’s erotic life and politics.

In line with Francis O’Gorman’s analysis of the poem’s “difficulties”, that is “problems, blockages in the communication of meaning [...] dramatized in the poem itself” (127), the present reading of *The Bothie* will show how Clough foregrounds the divisions and fractures of British society without making any ultimate effort to recompose them. After all, such “difficulties”, meant as both relational impediments and internalized conflicts, are ingrained in the author’s philosophical outlook. As the article will demonstrate, “difficulties” also concern the relationships between English and Scottish characters, following the Oxford students’ temporary “exile” to the Highlands. In examining this intercultural encounter as well as Philip and Elspie’s final migration to New Zealand, the present article is also partly indebted to Jane Stafford’s reading of *The Bothie* as an example of “immigration narrative” (34) exposing telling connections between places and the experience of cultural dis- and re-location.

1. *Heteroglossia and national identity*

The poem's metrical idiosyncrasies and generic hybridity thwart any attempt at classifying it. *The Bothie*, a "curious mixture of seemingly incompatible ingredients" (Harris 39), can be variously defined as a Theocritan pastoral poem, an epic and a verse *Bildungsroman*, all suffused with a parodic penchant to play with each tradition's norms, transgress the boundaries between them and hybridize them. The Muse is to Clough a "Muse of great Epos, and Idyll the playful and tender" (Clough, *The Bothie* 91, Canto IX, l. 139). In his study on Clough, Walter E. Houghton defines *The Bothie* as a "modern poem" attempting "a synthesis of elements hitherto kept apart for reasons of simplicity or decorum" (112). Indeed, lyrical, narrative and dramatic passages alternate without fusing into that harmonious whole that Matthew Arnold saw as an essential requisite of poetry. Thus it is not surprising that Arnold untowardly described *The Bothie* as a "serio-comic poem" written in a "grotesque" (Thorpe 69) style which contrasts with the classical metre – the hexameter – adopted by the author, as Robert Southey and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had done before him.

In fact, Clough reshaped the hexameter to adapt it to the cadences of conversational speech, in an attempt at combining high and low registers, high-flown and prosaic styles, thus deliberately giving rise to bathetic effects. In order to produce naturalistic speech rhythms, he subverted the traditional fixed form by instilling into its classical aura extravagant elements, deviations from the "norm", and anti-conventional prosodic turns. In other words, he constructed a boisterous metrical form which visually and phonetically could express the sense of freedom, the variety of experience and inquisitive spirit he intended to uphold in the poem. Charles Kingsley wrote that, reading the poem, one understands the warning that Clough gave to readers in an introductory note, that is, "to 'expect every kind of irregularity in these modern hexameters'. [...] a large proportion of his hexameters are, to use the very mildest word, abnormal" (Thorpe 41).

On the one hand, Clough confirmed his iconoclastic and experimental attitude by refraining from adopting the conventional English metres; on the other hand, he did not commit himself to the classical tradition either, but he invented instead his own singular hexameter by letting the "longs" and "shorts" of quantitative metre go by the board and going by accent

instead (six stresses yet any number of syllables). He was so innovative and irreverent in appropriating this metre that Charles Kingsley, in his review of the poem in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1849 wrote that his verses should not be defined as hexameters at all but were “a fire-new discovery of his own genius, to be christened henceforth Bothiaics” (Thorpe 43). Unlike Arnold, Kingsley admiringly commented on the “*bizzarerie*” of the poem in terms of both subject matter and style, and appreciated its genre hybridity observing that Clough “found the sublime and the ridiculous hand-in-hand, as they usually are [...] on this earth” and “how a playful, mock-heroic key” can give scope “for all sorts of variations into the bucolic, sentimental, broad-farce, pathetic, Hebrew-prophetic, whatnot” (Thorpe 40). As the critic J. P. Phelan observes, mental agility is required in order to appreciate Clough’s narrative poems, an “ability to switch rapidly between very different levels and registers” (Phelan 8).

Indeed, in *The Bothie*, Clough can easily oscillate from lyricism to scientific jargon to prosaic terminology, as in these passages referring to one of Philip’s romantic escapades:

[...] by the mail, ere the morrow, came Hope, and brought new tidings;
 Round by Rannoch had come, and Philip was not at Rannoch;
 He had left that noon, an hour ago.

With the lassie?

With her? the Piper exclaimed, Undoubtedly! By great Jingo!
 (64, Canto III, ll. 242-245)

So in the golden weather they waited. But Philip returned not.
 Sunday six days thence a letter arrived in his writing.—
 But, O Muse, that encompassed Earth like the ambient ether,
 Swifter than steamer or railway or magical missive electric
 Belting like Ariel the sphere with the star-like trail of thy travel
 Thou with thy Poet, to mortals mere post-office second-hand knowledge
 Leaving, wilt seek in the moorland of Rannoch the wandering hero.
 (64, Canto IV, ll. 1-7)

Or, speaking about relationships between men and women, he can switch from architectural jargon to Biblical intertextual references. The former is used by Hobbes, one of the Oxford students, to tease Philip’s diverse taste in female beauty, without consideration of their social rank:

Philip who speaks like a book, (retiring and pausing he added),
 Philip, here, who speaks—like a folio say’st thou, Piper?
 Philip shall write us a book, a Treatise upon *The Laws of
 Architectural Beauty in Application to Women*;
 Illustrations, of course, and a Parker’s Glossary pendent,
 Where shall in specimen seen be the sculliony stumpy-columnar
 (Which to a reverent taste is perhaps the most moving of any),
 Rising to grace of true woman in English the Early and Later,
 Charming us still in fulfilling the Richer and Loftier stages,
 Lost, ere we end, in the Lady-Debased and the Lady-Flamboyant
 Whence why in satire and spite too merciless onward pursue her
 Hither to hideous close, Modern-Florid, modern-fine-lady?
 No, I will leave it to you, my Philip, my Pugin of women.
 (53, Canto II, ll. 142-154)

A few lines after this passage, Philip retaliates this mockery, as well as his Tutor’s warning against disregarding one’s “station” in life, even in love, by taking issue with a phrase from the prayer-book: “*Doing our duty in that state of life to which God has called us*” (55, Canto II, ll. 202-203). As a matter of fact, in the long disquisition about women, labour and class in Canto II, Philip and his tutor seem to speak, as it were, two different languages: their speeches, as O’Gorman has poignantly noticed, meet “only obliquely”, “rejoinders are only partially in focus” (O’Gorman 130-131). Adam’s didactic and moralistic speech clashes with Philip’s juvenile impetus and radical spirit. Communication in *The Bothie* may fail even between characters with the same social and educational backgrounds and, therefore, supposedly speaking the same language.

As has been said, the interaction of diversified voices and registers is a central feature of moral sense in Clough’s work, of his intellectual honesty and existential scepticism. Such eccentric style and diction, moreover, accompany Clough’s vision of a dislocated and fragmented British identity. As in his other masterpiece, *Amours de Voyage*, Clough exploits language to convey the many cultural and social divisions corroding the deceptive image of a unified English language as an effective means of communication. The poem is heteroglossic in the sense that it encompasses a conception of language, even a single national language, as a multi-discursive phenomenon determined by a variety of extra-linguistic factors which reflect the differences between individual characters, their world views, as well as between social groups and classes (i.e. gentry, keepers,

gillies, peasants, clansmen, priests and ministers, landlords, marquises, and students)⁵. By presenting English as a polylinguistic system, Clough questions any centralized vision of a monological and monolithic British culture while depicting a complex, multilayered and differentiated national picture. So, the poem's linguistic heterogeneity becomes a political means of unmasking the conflicting forces lurking behind the apparently sturdy facade of Victorian security and self-confidence deriving from economic progress and imperial power. At the same time, the alternative image of Britishness that derives from it looks forward, with striking insight, to the future multi-cultural and multi-ethnic identity of Britain, and to definitions of culture as "an organism, nor a totality, nor a unity" which exists "in the relations" between itself and other cultures, and which is "the site of a dialogue, [...] a dialectic, a dialect" (Craig 205-6). Actually, in the poem culture and language are sites of dialogic contest, of ethnic and social divides which the characters hardly manage to bridge.

Language in *The Bothie* is an individual, social, as well as a national question. Each of its characters is, as it were, defined by how he or she speaks. In Isobel Armstrong's words, Clough "evolved a radical language [...] by enabling language to become the object of democratic investigation", and by exploiting the power of words to be "a subjective correlative, so to speak, of an internal condition" ("The Radical in Crisis", 180) – in fact, an "internal" but also social condition. The peculiarity of the poem's diction results from Clough's remarkably authentic, yet also mocking or self-mocking, reproduction either of specific jargons, corresponding to the various classes or coteries the characters belong to, or of their own idiolects. For instance, Clough half-jokingly refers to the newly created "dialect" (Clough, *The Bothie* 45, Canto I, l. 29) which Lindsay, one of the students visiting the Highlands, has expressly concocted for the occasion: an effervescent undergraduate jargon flaunting the Oxonian party's intellectual or pseudo-intellectual pursuits, yet also meant as a self-caricature. Speaking from behind the narrator's mask, Clough mimics and deliberately inflates the students' use of a mock-heroic rhetoric, filled with Latinate words, sexual jokes, academic puns, bombastic repetitions, French borrowings and facetious epithets to refer to the single characters – Lindsay, for example, because of his linguistic creativity, is "the ready of speech, the Piper, the Dialectician (45, Canto I, l. 27).

In order to differentiate the students' coterie language from the narrator's voice, Clough generally italicizes their most idiosyncratic words

and phrases, as when Hope, one of the students, in his typical singing rhythm, refers to the cottage and bathing place in the Highlands as the “*shop*” and the “*wash-hand-stand-bason*” (55, Canto II, l. 230). Or again when Lindsay, continuously interrupted by Arthur, tells the other students about their trip to the Highlands in a language which mocks the phraseology of their rivals, the undergraduate students from Cambridge:

And there was told moreover, he [Lyndsay] telling, the other [Arthur] correcting,
Often by word, more often by mute significant motion,
Much of the Cambridge *coach* and his pupils at Inverary,
Huge barbarian pupils, Expanded in Infinite Series,
Firing-off signal guns (great scandal) from window to window,
(For they were lodging perforce in distant and numerous houses.)
Signals, when, one retiring, another should go to the Tutor:—
Much too of Kitcat, of course, and the party at Drumnadrochet,
Mainwaring, Foley, and Fraser, their idleness horrid and dog-cart;
Drumnadrochet was *seedy*, Glenmorison *adequate*, but at
Castleton, high in Braemer, were the *clippingest* places for bathing,
One by the bridge in the village, indecent, *the Town-Hall* christened,
Where had Lauder howbeit been bathing, and Harrison also,
Harrison even, the Tutor; another like Hesperus here, and
Up the water of Eye half-a-dozen at least, all *stunners*
(61, Canto III, l. 136-150).

The overall effect is one of broken rhythm and lexical as well as typographical fragmentation, all somehow echoing what Clough, in “A Lecture on Dryden”, defines as the “escaping components” of modern English language, which, after Dryden, hardly nobody has ever managed to “re-unite” and “re-vivify” (Clough, *Poems and Prose Remains* 332-333) – including himself, one may add, who in *The Bothie* dramatizes the “dissolution” which he sees affecting it. While John Dryden was able to promote a “democratic movement in language” (331) by adapting classical “elegance and propriety of writing” (330) to modernity’s need of a new “living instrument”, to the “desires and aspirations of the age” (332), the nineteenth-century English diction, according to Clough, is “popularized” in the sense of “vulgarized” (332-333). Not at all worried about appearing self-contradictory, in the “Lecture” Clough suggests that an “aristocratic reconstruction” would be needed to guide the contemporary “democratic revolution” (333) of language and re-unify the English language, whereas

his own poetry seems to go in a different direction by evoking its disunity and diversity and, in a sense, also reflecting his existential anti-dogmatism. It “was wholly impossible”, his wife wrote, “for such a character to accept any merely external system of authority” (Clough, *Poems and Prose Remains* 12) – an attitude which would seem to include his anarchic treatment of language.

The cohesion and authority of the English language appear as contentious issues already in the opening Canto, which is almost entirely occupied by a particular episode: Highlanders and Oxonian guests have their first “confrontation” when, during a dinner, they are asked to make public speeches. In the already quoted review in *Fraser’s Magazine*, Charles Kingsley depicted this scene as a humorous picture containing all sorts of incongruities generated by the mixing up of English tourists with Scottish Highlanders: “marquises and gillies, shooters and tourists – the luxuries and fopperies of modern London amid the wildest scenery and a primitive people – Aristotle over Scotch whisky – embroidered satin waistcoats dancing with bare-legged hizzies – Chartist poets pledging kilted clansmen” (Thorpe 39). The social differences among the commensals are evidenced both by how they speak and where they are seated at the four tables set in the barn, as explained in these lines:

[...] Four tables were in it;
Two at the top and the bottom, a little upraised from the level,
These for Chairman and Croupier, and gentry fit to be with them,
Two lengthways in the midst for keeper and gillie and peasant.
(45, ll. 47-50)

By the same token, the narrator zooms on the individual participants according to the class hierarchy they represent and their roles at the dinner, from the bottom to the top of the social scale: starting from “keepers”, “gillies” and “pipers”, then moving to the “Catholic Priest” and “Established Minister”, the gentry, “Members of Parliament”, the Marquis of Ayr” and Dalgarnish Earl, and finally to Sir Hector, “the Chief and the Chairman” (45-46, ll. 52-70).

As far as the characters’ dictions are concerned, in this scene the omniscient narrator steps aside in order to allow them to speak with their own voices, none of which prevails but participates with the others in a dissonant chorus: instead of a Wordsworthian common ordinary language,

what we have, to borrow Armstrong's words, is a profusion of languages, each felt as "extraordinary, a special variant or form" ("The Radical in Crisis" 181). The dinner scene is, moreover, exemplary of Clough's attention to the sociolinguistic and culture-specific varieties of English. The narrator himself asks the Muse to be exonerated from reporting all the speeches, because of their "strangeness" and formal whimsies, thus implying a difficulty of understanding experienced by the characters, too:

Spare me, O great Recollection! for words to the task were unequal,
Spare me, O mistress of Song! nor bid me remember minutely
All that was said and done o'er the well-mixed tempting toddy;
[...]
Bid me not, grammar defying, repeat from grammar-defiers
Long constructions strange and plusquam-thucydidean,
Tell how, as sudden torrent in time of speat in the mountain
Hurries six ways at once, and takes at last to the roughest,
Or as the practised rider at Astley's or Franconi's
Skilfully, boldly bestrides many steeds at once in the gallop,
Crossing from this to that, with one leg here, one yonder,
So, less skilful, but equally bold, and wild as the torrent,
All through sentences six at a time, unsuspecting of syntax,
Hurried the lively good-will and garrulous tale of Sir Hector.
(46-47, Canto I, ll. 82-97)

Clough deconstructs the authorial power of the narrative voice through self-referentiality and effective dramatizing procedures. In *The Bothie* he makes use of voices in dialogue and a variety of linguistic registers which comment on and correct one another.

"The poet and radical" (48, Canto I, l. 134) Philip Hewson's diction extravagantly combines alliterative high-flown rhetoric with a mock-heroic register and a parodic treatment of the battle clichés typical of Chartist songs. The pungent irony of the following lines is hardly caught by those present, possibly not even by the host and Highland "laird" Sir Hector:

I am, I think, perhaps the most perfect stranger present.
I have not, as have some friends, in my veins some tincture,
Some few ounces of Scottish blood; no, nothing like it.
[...]

And, surely seldom have Scotch and English more thoroughly mingled;
 Scarcely with warmer hearts, and clearer feeling of manhood,
 Even in tourney, and foray, and fray, and regular battle,
 Where the life and the strength came out in the tug and tussle,
 Scarcely, where man met man, and soul encountered with soul, as
 Close as do the bodies and twining limbs of the wrestlers,
 Where for a final bout are a day's two champions mated,—
 In the grand old times of bows, and bills, and claymores,
 At the old Flodden-field—or Bannockburn—or Culloden.
 —(And he paused a moment, for breath, and because of some cheering.)
 We are the better friends, I fancy, for that old fighting,
 Better friends, inasmuch as we know each other the better,
 We can now shake hands without pretending or shuffling.
 (48, Canto I, ll. 143-155)

The reference to Scotland's famous battles (only one victorious) against England to contrast them with the present friendly situation sounds rather incongruous. Like most of his Oxford comrades, Philip's coterie language is generally marked by double entendres which the Northern hosts can hardly appreciate: after his "doubtful conclusion" – "I have, however, less claim than others perhaps to this honour./ For, let me say, I am neither game-keeper, nor game-preserve" – the narrator comments that "his satire had not been taken" and the men who stood up during his speech "mostly sat down without laughing" (48, Canto I, ll. 159-164). Communication, or even spontaneous conviviality, consequently, fails.

Thus, from the beginning of the poem, Clough presents us with a variety of "Englishes", a multiplicity of voices and a fluidity of points of view suggesting a disjointed and polyhedral national identity that cannot be defined according to essentialist ideas of "Englishness" or "Britishness" but depends on individual and social dynamics, subjective experiences and relative circumstances. Apart from language, in *The Bothie*, these ideas are also conveyed by gender relations, particularly the relationship between Philip and Elspie.

2. *Gender and class divisiveness*

Not only Philip's masculinity but also his political convictions and cultural identity are challenged by having relationships with three very different

women. Through them he faces the deepest cracks undermining the stability and unity of contemporary Britain: the gender divide; class conflicts; and the clash between rural and urban worlds.

Each of the three stages of Philip's sentimental *Bildung* is associated with a particular political positioning and ideological discourse⁶. First, when he falls in love with "golden-haired" (62, Canto III, l. 195) Katie, the uneducated Highland peasant who personifies his ideal of the natural working-girl, he convincingly declares himself a Chartist. Secondly, after being seduced by the aristocratic Lady Maria, he turns to the opposite side, to the extent of justifying the social stratifications at the basis of the class system: "What of the poor and the weary? Their labour and pain is needed./ Perish the poor and the weary! What can they better than perish./ Perish in labour for her, who is worth the destruction of empires" (72, Canto V, ll. 51-53). However, this passage is imbued with an irony that is reinforced a few lines later: "Dig in thy deep dark prison, O miner! and finding be thankful;/ Though unpolished by thee, unto thee unseen in perfection,/ While thou art eating black bread in the poisonous air of thy cavern,/ Far away glitter the gem on the peerless neck of a Princess" (73, ll. 64-67). Finally, the humble yet self-confident, autodidact Elspie Mackaye, occupying an in-between status between the other two, apparently offers Philip the ideal compromise that not only may solve his inner tensions but also suggests the possibility of bridging the socio-cultural and political divisions which the initial dinner scene drew attention to.

However, contemporary gender-normative behaviours as well as cultural differences act against this achievement: neither Elspie nor Philip seem to be equipped to definitely overcome these obstacles and establish a balanced relationship on equal terms. Interestingly enough, it is rather the external voice of the narrator that, at some moments, intrusively calls attention to such a possibility, in spite of the different circumstances of their birth, upbringing and education:

[...] a revulsion again came over the spirit of Elspie,
When she thought of his wealth, his birth and education:
Wealth indeed but small, though to her a difference truly;

[...]
But the many things that he knew, and the ease of a practised
Intellect's motion, and all those indefinable graces

(Where they not hers too, Philip?) to speech, and manner, and movement,
Lent by the knowledge of self, and wisely-instructed feeling.
(83, Canto VIII, ll. 1-10)

For the time, Elspie displays a proto-New Woman's self-confidence, determination and anti-conventional conception of marriage as a pact of reciprocal respect, but she cannot repress an intermittent sense of inferiority towards Philip at the thought of his intellectual pursuits and knowledge:

With these thoughts, and the terror withal of a thing she could not
Estimate, and of a step (such a step!) in the dark to be taken,
Terror nameless and ill-understood of deserting her station,—
Daily heavier, heavier upon her pressed the sorrow,
Daily distincter, distincter within her arose the conviction,
He was too high, too perfect, and she so unfit, so unworthy
(Ah me! Philip, that ever a word such as that should be written!)
It would do neither for him nor for her; [...]
Should *he—he*, she said, have a wife beneath him? herself be
An inferior there where only equality can be?
It would do neither for him nor for her.
(83, Canto VIII, ll. 13-24).

Confirming the sceptical mindset of Clough's major heroes, Elspie's self-inquisitiveness is a warning to the reader against rushed, simplistic conclusions, and a reminder of the complexity of gender negotiations in a society which is still far from guaranteeing man and woman equal civil and educational rights. By the same token, her father, David Mackaye, though finally giving his consent to their marriage, does not seem to feel totally reassured by Robert Burns's line "*Rank is the guinea stamp, but the man's a man for a' that*" (87, Canto VIII, l. 164), which the narrator quotes in order to assert the Scot's democratic principles. Indeed, the narrator adds: "Still he was doubtful" (l. 165). In fact, it is not only class difference that complicates their union, but also, on the one hand, Elspie's inner struggle between idealism and realism, and, on the other, Philip's fluctuating attitudes and ideas. At one point, he seems to be ready to renounce the prerogatives of gender-normative masculinity by openly showing his sentimentality and almost submissively prostrating himself – "he retained her hand, and, his tears down-dropping on it./ Trembling a long time, kissed it", "he fell at her feet, and buried his face in her apron"

(80, Canto VII, ll. 80-81, 85). At another, he reasserts those prerogatives and expounds theories of womanhood and femininity which contrast with his radical politics while rather concurring with the contemporary societal codes.

Unsurprisingly, considering Philip's unresolved moral inconsistencies, this apparent compliance with a mentality moored in conventional mental schemes emerges both at the beginning and at the end of the poem. "Labour, and labour alone, can add to the beauty of women", he first says in Canto II (50, l. 26). After reading these lines, one cannot but agree with Clough's biographer James Insley Osborne:

the discussion of the beauty of work for women is an echo presumably of Clough's long talks with his sister about what she was to do in the world. [...] His sister [...] became in the decade after his death one of the persons most actively interested in the education of women. [...] she was a moving spirit in the establishment of a hall of residence for women at Cambridge, and in securing their admission to lectures and examinations. When Newnham Hall was founded, she was made its Principal, and she retained the position after the hall became a college. [...] A similar connection of Clough's with the enfranchisement of women may be found in the position he held as the trusted friend and adviser of Miss Florence Nightingale. (103-104)

However, later on, in the same Canto, he especially identifies the beauty of work for women in "Needful household work, which some one, after all, must do./ Needful, graceful therefore, as washing, cooking, and scouring./ Or, if you please, with the fork in the garden uprooting potatoes" (52, ll. 104-106). In Canto VIII this romanticization of feminine work is replaced by a hackneyed association of woman with Nature as opposed to intellectual nurturing. When Elspie asks him to leave her some of his books, Philip replies:

This is the way with you all, I perceive, high and low together.
Women must read,—as if they didn't know all beforehand:
Weary of plying the pump, we turn to the running water,
And the running spring will needs have a pump built upon it.
Weary and sick of our books, we come to repose in your eye-light,
As to the woodland and water, the freshness and beauty of Nature.
(86, ll. 113-118)

Rejecting Philip's equation between feminine and natural beauty and rebelling against his allusion to a woman's unnecessary devotion to study and reading, this time Elspie pushes aside any feeling of inferiority towards him and retorts with pride:

I am to read no books! but you may go your ways then
And I will read [...] with my father at home as I used to.
[...]
What, you suppose we never read anything here in our Highlands.
(ll. 120-125)

[...] I will not be a lady,
We will do work together, you do not wish me a lady,
It is a weakness perhaps and a foolishness; still it is so;
I have been used all my life to help myself and others;
I could not bear to sit and be waited upon by footmen,
No, not even by women—.
(ll. 136-141)

Although eventually her firm principles seem to get the better of Philip, the question of whether they will definitely succeed in challenging contemporary prescribed gender codes and the traditional politics of marriage remains open. Interestingly enough, to suggest the solidity of her relationship with Philip, Elspie compares it to the “high new bridge, they used to build at [...] / Over the burn and glen on the road” (79, Canto VII, ll. 58-59), but this image appears while “dreaming at nights about arches and bridges”, about the two sides of the bridge joining “with a queer happy sense of completeness” (ll. 67, 72). The reader is left doubting whether eventually they will be able to realize this dream.

Throughout the poem, Clough subtly hints at Philip's suspect and shifting views on women. Therefore, one wonders if he can represent for Elspie the “great key stone coming in” and allowing “all the other stones” (ll. 70-71) to form a whole. For example, the peasant Katie seemed to perfectly respond to his Carlylean conception of labour and disdain for “plain women”, “unhappy statuettes [...] / Poor alabaster chimney-piece ornaments under glass cases” (88, Canto IX, ll. 26-28). Yet, he gradually lost interest in her, and when interrogated about the reasons why he deserted her, he admits that “What had ended it all [...] was singular, very”

(68, Canto IV, l. 103). “Singular” like the quick glance cast over him by a girl he had met, like her “simple superior insight”,

Quietly saying to itself—Yes, there he is still in his fancy,
Letting drop from him at random as things not worth his considering
All the benefits gathered and put in his hands for fortune,
Loosing a hold which others, contented and unambitious,
Trying down here to keep-up, know the value of better than he does.
(ll. 113-117)

The reader will later discover that that admonishing glance was cast by Elspie herself. It may be, as Armstrong has pointed out, that Philip’s fluctuating opinions about womanhood and femininity reflect the poet’s own “anxiety about the sexual feelings and demands of women in heterosexual relationships” (“The Radical in Crisis” 178). At the same time, though, they also reflect his relativist *visio mundi*, his unresolved inner battles and that honesty of doubt which makes him perceive the fragmentariness of modern reality, the temporary and limited scope of all human experiences. Once Matthew Arnold said of Clough that he was “too content to *fluctuate*—to be ever learning, never coming to the knowledge of the truth” (Lowry 146).

Hence, Clough closes the poem with an ambiguous analogy between the marriage of the two protagonists and the complexity of life and identity in general. This time Clough’s *dramatis persona* is Hobbes. In a letter to Philip, he refers to the Biblical episode of Job and his two wives, Rachel and Leah, in order to explain why he sees marriage as a conjunction of heterogeneous components: a “bigamy only./ Even in noblest kind a duality, compound and complex./ One part heavenly-ideal, the other vulgar and earthy” (92, Canto IX, ll. 168-170), “Rachel we dream-of at night: in the morning, behold, it is Leah” (l. 179). Hobbes seems to suggest that Philip and Elspie’s final idyll of perfect marriage might turn out to be an illusory dream. Thus, if *The Bothie*, as Christopher Matthews argues, presents a “romantic thesis, antithesis, and synthesis on the level of the story” (Matthews 492), corresponding to the three stages of his erotic/ political *Bildung*, the final step of such dialects is an imperfect synthesis and leaves the reader with open questions. There is no denying that the concluding picture of the married couple with children now in New Zealand living in a new version of the *Bothie* of Tober-na-Vuolich is anticlimactic:

There he hewed, and dug; subdued the earth and his spirit;
There he built him a home; there Elspie bare him his children,
David and Bella; perhaps ere this too and Elspie or Adam;
There hath he farmstead and land, and fields of corn and flax fields;
And the antipodes too have a Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich.
(93, ll. 196-200)

As Claude says in *Amours de Voyage*, “*ACTION* will furnish belief,—but will that belief be the true one?” (127, Canto V, l. 20). Is Philip’s choice a true solution to his erotic and political dilemmas? In this case, too, the text provides no ultimate answer. Charles Kingsley explained such elusiveness by saying that Clough preferred to “let the reader draw his own conclusions [...] than to tack a written moral to the last page of his poem” (Thorpe 46)

3. Exiles

Seen as an escape from Britain – be it the rural Highland retreat or the Oxford academic world – Philip and Elspie’s exile, like the language(s) of the poem and cross-class and gender relationships, provides a further key to reading the discourses of Englishness and Britishness at the heart of the poem. The newly married couple’s supposedly permanent expatriation to the British colony of New Zealand is preceded by the Oxonian students’ temporary exile from the cloistered world of English academia to the exotic landscape of the Scottish Highlands. After all, Adam’s pupils are also tourists, and their gaiety, holiday spirit and desire for freedom are clearly a projection of Clough’s own *wanderlust* after resigning the Oriel Fellowship and leaving what he felt as the oppressive ideology of Anglo-Catholicism and Tractarianism. More importantly, they are the protagonists of a transcultural experience, since, as the initial banqueting scene has shown, the Oxford coterie’s slang and habits are translated and adapted to the new environment. However, the meeting between the two different worlds, even when it involves, as is Philip’s case, closer intercourses with local women, does not give rise to a third space of successful interaction and integration; so the English visitors will remain “the Strangers” (47, Canto I, l. 115), as Sir Hector calls them.

A strong sense of place, on the other hand, is conveyed by the narrator’s landscape pictures, which sometimes he seems to present from an insider’s perspective, so much so that William Thackeray, after

reading the poem, wrote to Clough: “I have never been there but I think it must be like Scotland – Scotland hexametrically laid out” (Thorpe 30). Thus, following in the steps of the “wandering hero”, with a geographical accuracy combined with fine examples of nature poetry, he draws a map of his journey through the Highlands, and, by means of a series of interrogatives, has the reader directly involved in the tour:

There is it, there, or in Lofty Lochaber, where silent upheaving,
Heaving from ocean to sky, and under snow-winds of September,
Visibly whitening at morn to darken by noon in the shining,
Rise on their mighty foundations the brethren huge of Ben-nevis?
There, or westward away, where roads are unknown to Loch Nevish,
And the great peaks look abroad over Skye to the western most islands?
There is it? there? or there, we shall find our wandering hero?
Here, in Badenoch, here, in Lochaber anon, in Lochiel, in
Knoydart, Moydart, Morrer, Ardgower, and Ardnamurchan,
Here I see him and here: I see him; anon I lose him!
(65, Canto IV, ll. 8-17).

Local colour and evocative power also characterize the detailed description of the Bothie’s pastoral location:

Blank hill-sides slope down to a salt sea loch at their bases,
[...]
Cottages here and there outstanding bare on the mountains,
[...]
There on the blank hill-side, looking down through the loch to the ocean,
There with the runnel beside, and pine-trees twain before it,
There with the road underneath, and in sight of coaches and steamers,
Dwelling of David Mackaye and his daughters Elspie and Bella,
Sends up a column of smoke the Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich.
(75, Canto VI, ll. 7-15)

However, behind these and other similar samples of the Scottish picturesque and sublime, there is often an embedded critique of the contemporary tourist industry and how it reduces to stereotype the mythical image of the Highlands made popular by Walter Scott’s novels and poems. Clough denounces “the irresponsibility of the holiday stranger who treats the environment he has entered in an unscrupulous and insensate way” (Armstrong, “The Radical in Crisis” 182). For instance, in Canto III, before the romantic description of a mountain stream, the narrator

satirically says: “There is a stream, I name not its name, lest inquisitive tourist/ Hunt it, and make it a lion, and get it at last into guide-books” (57, ll. 25-26).

Throughout the poem, there are moments such as this one in which the narrator ventriloquizes Clough’s irritation at effortless and superficial ways of responding to or consuming a foreign culture, while the attempt should be made to approach and appreciate its otherness beyond purely folkloric aspects. The students show no deep interest in Highland culture and Gaelic language, respectively reduced to trite symbols like the tartan kilt⁷, and to few enticing words to pick up local girls, as in the following lines, in which Lindsay describes how Philip approached the farmer’s daughter, Katie:

What was the Gaelic for *girl*, and what was the Gaelic for *pretty*;
How in confusion he shouldered his knapsack, yet blushing stammered,
Waving a hand to the lassie, that blushing bent o’er the porridge,
Something outlandish—*Slan*-something, *Slan leat*, he believed, *Caleg Looach*,
That was the Gaelic it seemed for ‘I bid you good-bye, bonnier lassie’
(62, Canto III, ll. 184-188)

In fact, the absence of Scottish Gaelic in the poem, except for a few sparse words and the title, should be read as symbolically referring, first of all, to the strangers’ inability or unwillingness to truly understand Scottish otherness on its own terms. In *The Bothie* Clough portrays a Scotland, in Armstrong’s words, “dominated by the English and an anglicised ruling class” (“The Radical in Crisis” 182), and the Highlands, to borrow Charles Kingsley’s expression, as a “cockneyized” space of dislocated Englishness (Thorpe 40). Secondly, the silence surrounding the *Gàidhealtachd* (Gaelic-speaking culture) may perhaps hint at the risk of gradual decline and disappearance produced by the Highland Clearances in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries⁸, as well as by the imperium of English and the consequent marginalization of linguistic and cultural minorities.

The poem’s polyphony and shifting points of view mean that the reader can see the limits of the “Strangers”’ simplistic, somehow distorted, vision of otherness also from the opposite perspective of the insider. Elspie, as a matter of fact, becomes the main vehicle of the poet’s attack on specious ideas of cultural superiority, on an essentialist conception of English identity obstructing the vision of an inclusive, non-hierarchical and heterogeneous Britishness. Significantly enough, the self-taught Highland

lass Elspie speaks perfect English without ever dropping into Gaelic. The poet deliberately creates an ironic contrast between her humble origins and her indulging in sophisticated, not to say tediously long, descriptions of love or sexually-connoted, elaborate similes to describe her feelings for Philip. One significant example occurs in Canto VII:

You are too strong, you see, Mr. Philip! just like the sea there,
Which *will* come, through the straits and all between the mountains,
Forcing its great strong tide into every nook and inlet,
Getting far in, up the quiet stream of sweet inland water,
Sucking it up, and stopping it, turning it, driving it backward,
Quite preventing its own quiet running: and then, soon after,
Back it goes off, leaving weeds on the shore, and wrack and uncleanness:
And the poor burn in the glen tries again its peaceful running,
But it is brackish and tainted, and all its banks in disorder.
(81, ll. 120-128)

Clough, in other words, is very careful not to idealize his heroine; at the same time, not only does he endow her with witty self-humour – as when she refers to her “ignorant Highlands” (82, Canto VII, l. 174) – but he also elects her as mouthpiece of the most important, albeit utopian, message of the poem concerning British cultural identity: how it may be possible to see it as unity in diversity rather than, as Philip suggests, “only infinite jumble and mess and dislocation” (89, Canto IX, l. 64). For that, Elspie advocates the need to re-assess allegedly marginal cultures as constituent parts of that national identity rather than patronisingly treating them as exotic allure or, for that matter, tourist attractions. In the above-mentioned passage, in which Philip interprets the meaning of Elspie’s gaze – “Doesn’t yet see we have *here* just the things he is used-to *elsewhere*;/ People here too are people, and not as fairy-land creatures” (68, Canto IV, ll. 119-120, my italics) –, the implied message is that, in his oscillating moods, he is misled by deceitful myths of her native Highlands. By alluding to the similarities between the “here” and “elsewhere”, she also expresses the possibility of a conciliation between Englishness and Scottishness based on what connects them, and that is, essentially, the overarching idea of humanity.

This is why, later in the poem, Elspie expands the scope of her cultural argument. Britishness, in this vision, is not exclusively rooted on national prerogatives but relocated and reformulated from a transnational and cosmopolitan perspective. Here, once again she acts as counterpart to

Philip's wavering (between struggle and defeatism, action and dejection), and to his indecisiveness as to whether or not it is sensible for them or rather a folly to leave Britain for New Zealand:

[...] I don't myself feel always,
As I have felt, more sorrow for me, these four days lately,
Like the Peruvian Indians I read about last winter,
Out in America there, in somebody's life of Pizarro;
Who were as good perhaps as the Spaniards; only weaker;
And that the one big tree might spread its root and branches,
All the lesser about it must even be felled and perish.
No, I feel much more as if I, as well as you, were,
Somewhere, a leaf on the one great tree, that, up from old time
Growing, contains in itself the whole of the virtue and life of
Bygone days, drawing now to itself all kindreds and nations,
And must have for itself the whole world for its root and branches.
No, I belong to the tree, I shall not decay in the shadow;
Yes, and I feel the life-juices of all the world and the ages
Coming to me as to you, more slowly, no doubt and poorer;
You are more near, but then you will help to convey them to me.
(85, Canto VIII, ll. 82-97)

The "great tree" is a metaphor of the world, of the nations (branches) composing it and the single individuals (leaves) inhabiting each of them. Elspie's description suggests no identification of the tree with a centre of power, but rather conjures up an image of multiple and variegated (inter)connections. However, she latently alludes to a link between Scotland (namely Gaelic Scotland) and Peru as both oppressed "colonial" others, subjugated to "stronger" nations, thus also implying that they suffered from political as well as cultural marginalization.

Elspie's symbolic tree, with its spreading roots and branches, challenges any cultural, political and social value system ostensibly based on fallacious distinctions between dominant and minority cultures, centre and periphery, supremacy and subordination. In fact, she dismisses all hierarchies and grand systems to focus on the "leaf on the one great tree", the single human being and his or her connections with other human beings, without consideration of geographical and national boundaries. Elspie's speech points to the relational and rhizomatic quality of individual and national identity against essentialist concepts, or, to adapt Stuart Hall's

words, against “an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin’”, since cultural identity “is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture”, “not an essence but a positioning”, a “matter of becoming as well as being” (Hall 225-226). If Philip is at first hesitant about leaving his fixed roots to embark on uncertain new routes, Elspie, on the contrary, already sees herself as part of the big tree, therefore as entitled to taste “the life-juices of all the world” (l. 95). Her cosmopolitan spirit counterbalances Philip’s rooted Englishness and consequent scepticism about their escape – a deliberately ironic contrast which problematizes facile polarizations between centre (England, Oxford, culture) and periphery (Scotland, the Highlands, nature).

In line with Hobbes’ above-mentioned theory of bigamy, analogically signifying the inherent complexity, mutability and relativism of any human experience, Elspie’s image of the branching-out tree suggests diversity, multiplicity and mobility in individual, cultural and national identity, as opposed to unified, centre-oriented notions of Englishness and Britishness. By means of an eccentric metre, genre heterogeneity, shifting registers, language varieties, and the representation of class divides *vis-à-vis* conflicting gender discourses, Clough deconstructs the concept of Englishness as synonymous with national unity, organic culture and political stability.

On the one hand, a negative implication of such “jumble and mess and dislocation” (89, Canto IX, l. 64), to return once more to Philip’s already-quoted key line, is that an individual can hardly find the answer to his or her doubts. Indeed, the poem dramatizes Clough’s own self-conscious scepticism, the tension between his unshaken ideal of a truly democratic society and the sad awareness of the impossibility to fully achieve that ideal in the fragmented modern world. This is why Philip and Elspie’s retreat, from England to New Zealand, is a relatively happy ending, not the climactic moment of resolved conflicts. On the other hand, though, as this article has already argued, in the poet’s vision, open-endedness in life as well as art, the lack of incontrovertible truths and an endless search for meaning are not obstacles to be overcome but the principles at the basis of his scepticism and refusal of absolute moral and ideological values.

The critic Francis O’Gorman has observed that “what *The Bothie* actually amounts to is still not a question easy to answer. A reader’s chief feeling today is of regarding a conundrum” (125). In other words, as is often the case with Clough’s poems, *The Bothie* perplexes us by

ultimately expressing a paradox: while exposing the fractures in Victorian society and debunking myths of Englishness, it celebrates cultural and linguistic diversity as images of possibility, and of Britishness as a fluid, multiple discourse in which frontiers, without being eliminated, must be conceived as thresholds rather than walls. Thus, the poem also perplexes us by adumbrating Homi Bhabha's idea of national identity as "impure" and of nation as a site of cultural differences rather than one in which an overarching culture encompasses subordinate formations (1994). In this way, as remarked by Marc Augè, "respect for differences would start with the equality of all individuals, independent of their origin or gender" (Augé XV). Clough was a child of his time, but his conception of individual and cultural subjectivity as dynamic and relational, open to changes and transformations, points to contemporary definitions of (trans)national identity – rooted while also branching out, like Elspie's "great tree".



- 1 It was written in November 1848 and published by the Oxford bookseller Macpherson in December of the same year. An American edition then appeared in 1849. The “bothie” of the title refers to the hut where Elspie, one of the main female characters, lives with her father. Originally the poem had a slightly different title, *The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich*, a Scottish Gaelic expression possibly meaning “the well of the frightful (or bearded) woman”. In fact, it was the name of a real hut that Clough saw during one of his Highland tours. Since the title was regarded unseemly because of the possibility to read it as a metaphor for a woman’s genitalia, Clough replaced it with an invented one but with exactly the same rhythm: *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich*. The posthumous 1862 edition (used in the present article) bears this title. For a detailed analysis of the differences between the 1848 and 1862 editions see Patrick Scott’s 1976 facsimile edition published by the University of Queensland Press.
- 2 Chartism was a radical movement fighting for the rights of urban working-classes, but it was also associated with the 1848 French Revolution. In 1848 the House of Commons rejected for the third time the Chartist petition asking for parliamentary reform after the 1832 Bill.
- 3 Clough gained the Balliol scholarship and later an Oriel fellowship at Oxford during the Tractarian controversy, when both William George Ward and John Newman, two leaders of the Oxford Movement, were there. All dons at Oxford and Cambridge had to sign allegiance to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church. However, Clough could not, as he wrote: “I can have nothing whatever to do with a subscription to the xxxix articles—and deeply repent of having ever submitted to one” (Mulhauser 219). After resigning the scholarship, he visited Paris, Rome, and Venice during the 1848 Revolutions. From 1849 to 1852 he was in London, in charge of University Hall at University College. Totally unhappy with that job, he emigrated to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to try a writing career, but he failed and returned to England in 1853. He had to accept a minor job as examiner in the Education Office, which allowed him to marry Blanche Smith. At the same time, he started assisting his cousin Florence Nightingale in charitable work.

- To restore his increasingly poor health, in the late 1850s he travelled to Italy. He died in Florence in 1861.
- 4 Tom Arnold took up farming in New Zealand, but all his plans failed, so in 1850 he moved to Tasmania, where he was appointed as Inspector of Schools by Governor William Denison. There he converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, but, since at the time in Tasmania it was not possible for Catholics to be employed in senior civil service positions, in 1857 he moved back to England with his family.
 - 5 For a challenging Bakhtinian reading of *The Bothie* see Tasker, Meg. "Time, Tense, and Genre: A Bakhtinian Analysis of Clough's *Bothie*". *Victorian Poetry* 34. 2 (Summer, 1996): 193-211.
 - 6 William Michael Rossetti explained these three stages in his favourable review of the poem in the *Germ* in 1850. See Thorpe 54-64.
 - 7 After the repression of the Jacobite rising of 1745-6, the kilt had to be banned, but the clan chiefs loyal to the Hanoverians continued wearing it. George IV wore it on his state visit to Edinburgh in 1822, turning it into a kind of fancy dress, as it is described in the poem.
 - 8 The term "clearances" refers to forced removals, for purely economic reasons, of the inhabitants of the Scottish Highlands and western islands between 1750 and 1860; the dispossessed lands were used mainly for sheep raising to comply with the flourishing wool trade, but the evictions resulted in the destruction of the traditional clan society, in depopulation and mass emigration from Scotland to America and Canada. See T. M. Devine's study quoted in the bibliography.



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“A sagacity that can penetrate into the depths
of futurity”: revisionismo storico e scenari
possibili in *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*
di Mary Shelley

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*I*t is a painful thing to me to put forward my own opinion. [...] I would, like a dormouse, roll myself in cotton at the bottom of my cage, & never peep out” (Jones 1: 201-2); così Mary Shelley descriveva il suo stato d’animo a Lord Byron, in una lettera composta qualche mese dopo la scomparsa di Percy.¹ Le difficoltà finanziarie con le quali si era dovuta misurare, unite al senso di responsabilità verso Percy Florence l’avevano, forse, spinta a prediligere intrecci che incontrassero il favore di un pubblico più ampio e, dunque, lontani da “the extravagance of her debut work” (Lynch 136). Tale percezione sembrerebbe confortata da un’altra lettera indirizzata questa volta a John Murray, il 19 febbraio 1828. L’autrice aveva inizialmente pensato al noto editore² per la pubblicazione del romanzo storico al quale stava lavorando, *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, rassicurandolo sull’argomento che, per sua stessa natura, non lo avrebbe esposto a biasimo e censura: “An historical subject of former times must be treated in a way that affords no scope for *opinion*, and I think you will have no reason to object to it on that score” (Jones 1: 371). Trascorsi dieci anni, nel giugno 1838, avrebbe poi affidato alle pagine del suo diario una riflessione in cui si coglie il medesimo desiderio di sottrarsi al coinvolgimento diretto in questioni controverse come la causa cartista, motivo di scontri aspri e violenti tra fazioni; “I am not a person of Opinions” (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert 553), commentava nel *Journal* in riferimento alla sua indole schiva, dissociandosi da chi, come

i suoi genitori e Percy, era invece sostenuto da un'autentica "passion for reforming the world" (553).

Numerosi critici hanno, pertanto, manifestato delle riserve nei confronti dei testi più tardi della scrittrice, singolarmente vicini a quelle posizioni moderate (se non apertamente conservatrici) da lei respinte negli anni giovanili. Mary Poovey, ad esempio, afferma che "by 1830 she had totally rejected both Wollstonecraft's goal of 'rest[ing] on [her] own' and Percy's ideal of artistic originality" (159-60); secondo Julie Carlson, Monina e Katherine – le protagoniste femminili di *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, "depicted as motivated solely by love" (93) – mancherebbero di reale spessore ed efficacia, in modo analogo alle eroine di *Lodore* e *Falkner*, "the so-called sentimental fictions that characterize Shelley's later, allegedly conformist years" (93). Non sorprende, quindi, che, fino alla fine del ventesimo secolo, pochi studiosi abbiano rivolto la loro attenzione al secondo romanzo storico dell'autrice,³ se non per esternare giudizi tutt'altro che lusinghieri. Pur notando l'esiguità della cifra corrisposta per la vendita del manoscritto, Jane Blumberg lo ha infatti classificato come "an historical romance in the popular and lucrative style of Walter Scott" (216), probabilmente composto per ragioni squisitamente economiche; Blumberg ha, inoltre, giustificato l'oblio in cui l'opera è lentamente scivolata nel tempo con la totale mancanza di elementi d'interesse per un lettore moderno.⁴ Per Lidia Garbin, la scelta di seguire le orme di Walter Scott, coltivando un genere dalla popolarità indiscussa, costituisce un chiaro indicatore del nuovo approccio di Mary Shelley alla scrittura dopo la morte del consorte, "more conformist and 'commercial' than 'radical.'" Nella sua dettagliata biografia, Miranda Seymour ha infine riservato commenti rapidi e sprezzanti a *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, i cui personaggi a tratti inverosimili, dall'eloquio ampolloso e vacuo, "amounted to more than a waste of Mary's imaginative gift" (362). Così, nel 2007, Erin L. Webster-Garrett riassumeva lo stato degli studi su *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*: "until recently, *Perkin Warbeck* was routinely passed over in surveys of Shelley's fiction or quickly abbreviated as evidence of what happens when a Romantic author stoops to write for profit" (49).

Tra i contributi più recenti, alcuni hanno tentato di ricostruire il dialogo intrecciato dall'autrice con chi, prima di lei, aveva illustrato lo stesso tema: le vicissitudini di Perkin Warbeck, sotto le cui mentite spoglie si sarebbe, in verità, celato Richard of Shrewsbury, Duca di York, il più giovane dei due principi nella Torre (i figli di Edward IV), sfuggito alla prigionia e

deciso a riconquistare il trono occupato da Henry VII. Oltre ai volumi di storici e letterati esplicitamente citati nella “Preface” al romanzo – Bacon, Hall, Holinshed, Pinkerton, Chastellain e Hume (particolarmente invisato alla scrittrice poiché, contrariamente a lei, riteneva Perkin un impostore) –, Mary Shelley si sarebbe accostata anche ai testi di Bayley, Walpole, Ford e Shakespeare⁵ (Hopkins 261-7; Al-Fuhaid, “Mary Shelley” 102-6), nei lunghi anni in cui attese alla stesura dell’opera.⁶ Walter Scott fu poi direttamente interpellato con una richiesta curiosa, relativa alla sua terra d’origine; in una lettera datata 25 maggio 1829, gli veniva infatti chiesto di indicarle “any writer of its history—any document, anecdote or queer ballad connected with [Perkin Warbeck] generally unknown, which may have come to [his] knowledge” (Jones 2: 15). Per Lidia Garbin *Ivanhoe* venne sicuramente preso a modello dall’autrice, che avrebbe ricalcato le due protagoniste, Rebecca e Rowena, nelle sue Monina e Katherine.⁷

Anche se il legame tra la scrittura di Godwin e *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* è stato esplorato da critici come Pamela Clemit (287-8) e William D. Brewer (187-203), l’influenza esercitata dal saggio del 1797 intitolato “Of History and Romance” sull’immaginazione creativa di Mary non pare essere stata adeguatamente ponderata. Questo studio si propone, pertanto, di indagare come, alla luce del testo di Godwin, la materia storica abbia acquisito un ruolo straordinariamente attivo nel romanzo di Shelley. Come si avrà modo di osservare, infatti, lungi dall’essere espressione di tendenze escapistiche o mero sfondo in cui ambientare le avventure di personaggi fittizi, la vicenda di Perkin Warbeck e la complessa operazione di revisionismo storico intrapresa nel narrarla sono state impiegate come strumenti lungimiranti, atti a suggerire alternative possibili alla condizione di severa oppressione in cui l’Inghilterra, dominata da sovrani iniqui, indubbiamente versava nel quindicesimo secolo così come nell’epoca contemporanea all’autrice. Tali alternative, si vedrà, assegnano alle donne compiti di più alta responsabilità e rilievo, facendole così emergere da quelle tenebre che, per troppo tempo, ne hanno avvolto la memoria.

La perdita di Percy coincise con un riavvicinamento di Godwin a sua figlia, preludio di una rinnovata collaborazione intellettuale tra i due artisti (Hill-Miller 52). Betty Bennett (364) e Pamela Clemit (287) avanzano l’ipotesi secondo cui l’influenza del filosofo su Mary Shelley sarebbe stata decisiva nella scelta dell’argomento per la sua opera.⁸ È comunque certo che Godwin svolse per lei alcune ricerche bibliografiche presso il British Museum, che le prestò dei libri dalla sua biblioteca e che reagì

con entusiasmo alla lettura del primo volume di *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*: come le scrisse nell'agosto del 1828, "I am transported with your manuscript, & long for more" (qtd. in Clemit 288). In questo clima di fruttuosa armonia e intensi scambi è possibile che Mary abbia consultato il saggio "Of History and Romance" (rimasto in forma manoscritta),⁹ il cui contenuto avrebbe potuto fornirle stimoli utili all'elaborazione del suo romanzo storico.

In apertura di trattato, Godwin asseriva che "the study of history may well be ranked among those pursuits which are most worthy to be chosen by a rational being." L'analisi meticolosa e attenta degli eventi passati, la riflessione sulle conseguenze tragiche che le azioni dei singoli possono determinare sul destino di molti non erano, tuttavia, esercizi fini a sé stessi: al contrario, permettevano di maturare quella che il filosofo definiva "a sagacity that can penetrate into the depths of futurity." Se correttamente condotta, l'indagine storica avrebbe quindi assolto a una funzione civile e pedagogica, finalizzata a una gestione più consapevole e felice del presente e del futuro: "the genuine purpose of history [is] to enable us to understand the machine of society, and to direct it to its best purposes." Per raggiungere tale obiettivo, era necessario affrancare lo studio del passato dalla semplice elencazione di nomi e date, da quelle forme di generalizzazione della conoscenza, sterili e astratte, che la rendono "a dry and frigid science": "he that knows only what day the Bastille was taken and on what spot Louis XVI perished, knows nothing. He professes the mere skeleton of history. The muscles, the articulations, every thing in which the life emphatically resides, is absent." Come si intuisce dal titolo scelto dall'autore per il suo testo, per dare corpo e vitalità alla trattazione storica era dunque indispensabile annullare la distanza comunemente percepita tra "history" e "romance," non più visti come generi antitetici ma complementari. Seguendo le argomentazioni di Godwin, la "general history," intesa come "the study of mankind in a mass, of the progress the fluctuations, the interests and the vices of society," doveva essere affiancata alla "individual history," materia di romanzieri e letterati, in grado di selezionare circostanze ed episodi specifici "most calculated to impress the heart and improve the faculties of [...] reader[s]," capaci quindi di suscitare reazioni profonde nei lettori, affinandone le facoltà percettive. Se l'intento era quello di creare opere dall'impatto duraturo, dotate di un valore educativo autentico, era auspicabile che le competenze dello storico e dell'autore di *romance* si fondessero in un'unica figura: "He

that would prove the liberal and spirited benefactor of his species, must connect the two branches of history together, and regard the knowledge of the individual, as that which can alone give energy and utility to the records of our social existence.” Ne consegue che il romanzo storico¹⁰ fosse identificato dal filosofo come “the noblest and most excellent species of history,” che ammetteva persino rielaborazioni e riscritture – la “*licentia historica*” menzionata nel saggio – se congruenti con uno specifico disegno di riforma sociale e politica.¹¹

Quest’ultimo aspetto è particolarmente rilevante per *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, il cui protagonista, contrariamente a quanto tramandato nella maggior parte dei documenti pervenuti, era ritenuto il vero Duca di York da Mary Shelley, forse per rendere la sua parabola discendente ancora più esemplare. Che la scrittrice avesse fatto proprie le posizioni del padre è poi evidente nell’incipit della “Preface” al romanzo, in cui si chiarisce che i dati riportati nelle cronache¹² (per loro natura aridi e scarni) non potevano rendere giustizia a una vicenda dall’inconsueto potenziale narrativo: “The story of Perkin Warbeck was first suggested to me as a subject for historical detail. On studying it, I became aware of the romance which his story contains, while, at the same time, I felt that it would be impossible for any narration, that should be confined to the incorporation of facts related by our old Chronicle to do it justice” (Shelley iii). La volontà di rompere i sigilli al libro della Storia rileggendone le pagine sotto una luce nuova, l’intenzione di ricavare dalla contemplazione del passato ammaestramenti e spunti validi per il presente vengono, inoltre, legittimate da una delle frasi conclusive della “Preface,” in cui si afferma che “human nature in its leading features is the same in all ages” (iv): la persistenza delle passioni e inclinazioni umane cancella ogni scarto temporale permettendo al lettore di *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* di sviluppare quella “sagacity that can penetrate into the depths of futurity” di cui Godwin scriveva nel suo saggio.¹³

Prendendo le mosse dalle vicissitudini di Perkin Warbeck, teso alla riconquista della corona, il romanzo affronta i temi congiunti del potere, della giustizia e del governo, senza tralasciare uno dei motivi portanti della produzione di Mary Shelley: la questione femminile. Lungi dall’essere espressione di un ingegno ormai timido, fiaccato dai lutti e dalle pressioni economiche, il testo si inserisce perfettamente nel solco già tracciato dall’autrice nei suoi scritti precedenti. Pur nella parzialità evidente per il Duca di York rispetto a Henry VII, la descrizione del

giovannissimo Richard presente nei capitoli iniziali tradisce una sottile inquietudine per il futuro della nazione, qualora le sue speranze di riguadagnare la dignità di monarca non venissero frustrate. Nonostante la dolcezza che traspare dai suoi occhi azzurri, “lighted up with intelligence” (Shelley 70), sulle labbra del principe affiora infatti quell’orgoglio, quella consapevolezza piena di sé che spesso spinge un regnante ad anteporre il proprio capriccio e soddisfazione personale al benessere del popolo: “[his lips] were full, a little curled, can we say in pride, or by what more gentle word can we name a feeling of self-elevation and noble purpose, joined to benevolence and sweetness?” (71). La tenera età non gli impedisce di accarezzare sogni di gloria: alla notizia della morte di Richard III, reagisce in modo quasi innaturale per un bambino di poco più di dieci anni: “his eyes flashed as he said proudly,—‘Then I am king of England’” (19). Giunto al limitare della maturità e ben addestrato all’uso delle armi, aspira a lanciarsi nel folto della battaglia, ma più per soddisfare la sua ambizione che per una reale causa da abbracciare, come si deduce dalla cura con cui seleziona avversari di pari valore: “Proud was the young Duke of York, and eager to paint his maiden shield with worthy device [...]. [T]here was a forethought in his eye, and a most careful selection of worthy and valorous opponents” (89).

Come Betty Bennett ha notato (365), l’educazione di stampo cavalleresco, la ferma convinzione nel diritto supremo e incondizionato del re (con la quale, sin dalla prima infanzia, il suo animo era stato nutrito) inducono in errore una creatura tendenzialmente pura, i cui talenti innati meritavano un orientamento più saggio.¹⁴ Agli irlandesi ai quali propone di stringere alleanza Perkin/Richard si mostra nelle vesti di sovrano giusto, padre benevolo per coloro che gli giureranno fedeltà: “Justice, mercy, and paternal love, are the gifts with which I will repay your obedience to my call; your submission to my rule” (Shelley 110). Stimola, inoltre, il loro senso di responsabilità, intessendo un rapporto fondato sull’onore e sulla fiducia reciproca. Rendendoli artefici, al suo fianco, del destino del regno, li eleva (con malcelato paternalismo) dalla condizione ferina nella quale l’intera popolazione d’Irlanda – “warlike chiefs, [...] uncivilized sept, and English settlers, scarce less wild and quite as warlike as its aboriginal inhabitants” (109) – sembrava languire. Presentandosi come “the son of Edward the fourth, the victim of [his] uncle Gloster’s treachery, and low-born Tudor’s usurpation” (113), pronunciando un discorso appassionato di fronte a una platea ammaliata dalla sua fine abilità retorica, Richard, “a

Prince and an outcast” (113), si affida al suo pubblico, affinché lo renda “a fugitive for ever, or a King” (113).

Nella sua legittima (ma non per questo meno pernicioso) corsa verso il potere, il Duca di York pare progressivamente smarrirsi; la devastazione dei conflitti, i ripetuti tradimenti del suo compagno Clifford¹⁵ (cui, comunque, deve la vita, avendolo questi salvato in gioventù), l’influenza del consigliere fraudolento Frion¹⁶ – “Master of the arts of flattery, cunning and wise” (Shelley 123) –, producono effetti deleteri su di lui, facendolo quasi desistere dai suoi propositi. Persino la Storia cessa di essere maestra ai suoi occhi: in un passo in cui riecheggiano distintamente le parole di Godwin, l’autrice sembra sottolineare la cecità del suo protagonista, la sua incapacità di ricevere dal passato intuizioni e impulsi necessari per indirizzare al meglio il suo futuro: “Back, back young Richard threw his eye over the skeleton shapes of the dead years; and again he sought to penetrate the future. Dark as the starless sky, not one gleam of comfort presented itself to the outcast’s hope” (171). Tale limite nel personaggio di Richard è anche riscontrabile negli errori grossolani di giudizio che commette ripetutamente nell’arco della narrazione: nonostante sia stato più volte ingannato da Clifford e Frion, continua a perdonarli con una benevolenza sorprendente, che sembra nascere da una considerazione eccessiva di sé (di fatto, si ritiene invulnerabile), unita a una certa inettitudine a imparare dai propri sbagli e dunque dalla Storia. In un tale contesto, il principe comincia ad accarezzare il proposito di ritirarsi a vita privata, coltivando quegli affetti che, fino a quel momento, erano stati relegati ai margini della sua esistenza. Il matrimonio con Katherine Gordon, cugina del re di Scozia, James IV, gli offre l’opportunità di ritrovarsi: “Richard had found in Lady Katherine a magic mirror, which gave him back himself, arrayed with a thousand alien virtues” (230). L’unione sigella anche un’alleanza preziosa per il pretendente al trono, foriera di uno tra gli incidenti più drammatici del romanzo: l’invasione del nord dell’Inghilterra da parte delle truppe scozzesi, determinate a tentare una conquista lungamente desiderata col pretesto di deporre l’usurpatore a favore del Duca di York.

Mary Shelley si profonde nella descrizione del campo di battaglia, delle grida dei feriti, dei corpi mutilati, delle abitazioni distrutte e dei villaggi saccheggianti; lo scontro si trasforma in una lotta fratricida in cui i seguaci di Richard massacrano i loro connazionali, semplici contadini senza colpa. Nella sua miopia e concentrazione insensata sul proprio diritto di nascita, il principe dapprima non comprende perché nessuno, al

suo passaggio, inneggi al suo nome. Come William D. Brewer ha posto in rilievo, la presunzione di occupare “the moral high ground” (199) rende il protagonista di *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* – “willing to sacrifice the lives of others in order to obtain power for himself” (199) – un oppressore al pari del suo antagonista. In questa scena cruciale del romanzo è presente una delle incursioni più significative dell’autrice (e della contemporaneità) nel testo; quasi riallacciandosi alle animate conversazioni con Percy attorno al tema della tirannide o richiamando alla memoria la trama del suo *Valperga* (incentrata sulla figura dispotica di Castruccio Castracani), così commenta: “Oh, narrow and selfish was the sentiment that could see, in any right appartaining to one man the excuse for the misery of thousands” (Shelley 255). Ancora una volta l’educazione dell’“ill-nurtured Perkin” (257) è esplicito oggetto di biasimo e lui stesso prende infine coscienza di come orgoglio e ambizione, instillati come veleno nella sua mente sin dalla prima età, l’abbiano reso un protettore indegno per i suoi sudditi: “What am I, that I should be the parent of evil merely? Oh, my mother, my too kind friends, why did ye not conceal me from myself? Teaching me lessons of humbleness, rearing me as a peasant, consigning me to a cloister, my injuries would have died with me; and the good, the brave, the innocent, who have perished for me, or through me, had been spared!” (262). È un dato certo che il Perkin Warbeck storico e la sua sposa ebbero dei figli (Wroe 298); diverso è il caso della creazione letteraria di Mary Shelley che, nelle parole di Anne Rouhette, viene “sterilized” non soltanto “to underline the vanity of his enterprise and to bring into sharp relief his rival’s success”¹⁷ (6), come sostiene la studiosa ma, con tutta probabilità, anche per impedirgli di alimentare la sua prole con quelle stesse bramosie che avevano distorto il suo senso di giustizia.

Henry VII non è dipinto dalla scrittrice in termini migliori, sebbene come sovrano sia definito “prudent, resolute, and valiant” (Shelley 20) in apertura di romanzo e, successivamente, “wise and crafty” (41) da Elizabeth Woodville, che pure aggiunge “and to be feared” (41) alle sue parole, lasciando intravedere quegli elementi di oscurità nel carattere del primo Tudor che emergeranno in seguito. Nella sezione conclusiva del testo si legge inoltre che, durante il suo regno, il sistema della cavalleria – criticato dall’autrice per il suo eccesso di militarismo in nome dell’onore (Brewer 198) – aveva oramai lasciato il posto a una vocazione commerciale diffusa, capace di consolidare lo spirito di appartenenza alla nazione: “A commercial spirit had sprung up during [Henry VII’s] reign, partly arising

from the progress of civilization, and partly from so large a portion of the ancient nobility having perished in the civil wars. The spirit of chivalry, which isolates man, had given place to that of trade, which unites them in bodies” (310). Nel rifiutare il proprio sostegno a Richard, il Conte di Surrey si giustificava evidenziando il nuovo clima di pace e di abbondanza¹⁸ che finalmente dominava il paese, coincidente con la scomparsa dei “deadly horrors of unholy civil war” (195) che, personalmente, non desiderava rievocare con un’alleanza tanto giusta a livello teorico quanto dannosa per la collettività.

Ciò che Mary Shelley pare deprecare nel monarca è il suo atteggiamento meschino, sprezzante e persecutorio nei confronti delle donne che lo circondano. Elizabeth Woodville viene da lui rinchiusa in una “convent-prison” (Shelley 50), strappandola ai suoi affetti più cari con studiata malvagità: “The heartless tyrant was callous to every pang that he inflicted, or rejoiced that he had the power to wound so deeply one whom he abhorred” (50). La regina Elizabeth sua consorte¹⁹ è angariata e offesa, ridotta a uno stato di ubbidienza servile e persino privata del contatto col suo primogenito, per timore che possa traviarlo e spingerlo, un giorno, alla ribellione:

Neglect was the lightest term that could be applied to the systematized and cold-hearted tyranny of Henry towards his wife. For not only he treated her like an unfavoured child, whose duty it was to obey without a murmur, and to endeavour to please, though sure of being repulsed. At the same time that he refused to raise her above this state of degradation, he reproached her with the faults of maturity, and stung her womanly feelings with studied barbarity. He taunted her with her attachment to her family and partizans; spoke with triumph of its overthrow; [...] he divided, as much as possible, the infant from the mother, under the avowed, though ridiculous pretence, of preventing her from inculcating principles of rebellion towards his liege and father. (46-7)

Persino l’infatuazione di Henry VII per Katherine non riesce a tradursi in quell’amore la cui essenza, per Mary Shelley, “is the excess of sympathy, and consequently of self-abandonment and generosity” (Shelley 377). Di fronte alla costanza nei sentimenti della giovane sposa, il cui amore per Richard è immune a qualsiasi suo tracollo di fortuna, il tiranno reagisce stizzito, accanendosi con accresciuta perfidia contro il principe prigioniero, allo scopo di punire entrambi i coniugi.

Di contro a un universo maschile fazioso, brutale e arrogante, le protagoniste femminili di *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* sembrano

offrire modelli di comportamento alternativi che, in un'ottica Godwiniana, suggeriscono una visione diversa del futuro e prospettive nuove sul tema del governo. Ann M. Frank Wake ha osservato che, specialmente nella sua produzione di carattere storico, la scrittrice, "links morality directly to gender, repeatedly depicting women in morally superior positions to men" (243). Tale convinzione è ribadita da Jena Al-Fuhaid, secondo la quale il romanzo è "a feminist, reformist text" (*Feminine-Centered History* 7), il cui fulcro "despite the perceived importance of the titular hero, [...] remains the female characters" (10). A tal proposito, è opportuno ricordare che, a seguito della pubblicazione di *Perkin Warbeck; or the Court of James the Fourth of Scotland* di Alexander Campbell, avvenuta proprio a ridosso dell'uscita del suo testo, l'autrice aveva tentato invano di cambiarne il titolo in *The White Rose of England; or Perkin Warbeck* (Crook et al. xv), riferendosi sia allo stemma della casata di York, sia all'appellativo di Katherine dopo il matrimonio. Si potrebbe quindi ipotizzare che non sia stata soltanto la necessità di distinguere più chiaramente i due scritti ad averla spinta a inviare una lettera agli editori, pregandoli di operare la sostituzione; forse Mary Shelley cercava anche di recuperare, sin dall'impatto iniziale del lettore con il suo lavoro, quella simmetria tra i sessi cui aspirava, dando parallelamente risalto all'inconciliabilità delle visioni politiche maschili e femminili attraverso l'uso dell'avversativo "or." Una strategia analoga era del resto già presente in *Valperga*; nelle parole di Betty T. Bennett, infatti, "the title of the novel may be viewed as a statement of the central conflict of the novel. *Valperga; or the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* suggests that the story is about one or the other. The two cannot coexist, confrontation must erupt" (358).

La già notata tendenza al revisionismo o *licentia historica*, ora declinata apertamente in una prospettiva di genere, conduce la scrittrice a riabilitare la controversa figura di Elizabeth Woodville. Nel romanzo, svanisce ogni riferimento alle accuse di stregoneria che gravavano su di lei e sulla sua famiglia; spogliata del titolo di regina dopo l'annullamento delle sue nozze, continua inoltre a essere amata e rispettata dai suoi sudditi: "the public voice went in her favour, and the majority of the English people looked upon the tale which deprived her children of their rights, as a contrivance of their usurping uncle" (Shelley 21). Lontana dalla scaltrezza e dall'arrivismo che, solitamente, le sono attribuiti nelle cronache, Elizabeth Woodville è una matrona modesta e rispettabile, che

sogna una vita agreste e ritirata – “Ah! Were I a cottager, [...] though bereft of my husband, I should collect my young ones around me, and forget sorrow” (40) – e che ammonisce il giovane Richard contro le insidie dell’ambizione: “Never forget that you are a King’s son, yet suffer not unquiet ambition to haunt you” (51). Nelle battute conclusive dell’opera, quest’ultimo riflette su come, nonostante l’impronta virile e militare impressa su di lui sin dall’infanzia, siano sempre state le donne e non i compagni d’armi a sostenerlo veramente, soccorrendolo in ogni sua sventura: “again he reflected with some wonder that, in every adversity, women had been his resource and support; their energies, their undying devotion and enthusiasm, were the armour and weapons with which he had defended himself from and attacked fortune” (359-60). Monina de Faro,²⁰ Jane Shore²¹ (l’amante di Edward IV, ora ritratta come una devota penitente) e soprattutto Katherine Gordon reclamano pertanto una parte centrale e attiva, emancipandosi dal ruolo di semplici comparse tradizionalmente assegnato alla maggioranza delle donne.²² La loro “utopian domesticity,”²³ prendendo in prestito l’espressione da Melissa Sites, diviene il paradigma sul quale modellare scenari possibili, alieni da quell’atmosfera di sospetto, rivalità e oppressione che incombeva sull’Inghilterra all’epoca degli eventi narrati così come durante il regno di George IV. Nella comunità ideale e antagonista da loro costruita negli interstizi della Storia, le donne si sostengono a vicenda, si alleviano reciprocamente il peso delle sofferenze, astenendosi dal formulare qualsiasi giudizio di valore di fronte alle debolezze umane. Così Jane Shore, dapprima riluttante ad aprirsi a Monina poiché “the fallen woman fears women, their self-sufficient virtues and cold reprobation” (190), riconosce nella giovane una capacità di comprensione rara, una dolcezza e un’empatia fino a quel momento sconosciute. Allo stesso modo, la regina Elizabeth, ascesa al trono con l’illusione di poter offrire un contributo alla collettività²⁴ e in seguito angariata dal consorte, trova in Katherine un’amica compassionevole con cui condividere, dopo anni di isolamento e silenzio forzato, tutta la propria rabbia e il dolore: “[Elizabeth] spent her bitterest words; but thus it was as if she emptied a silver chalice of its gall, to be refilled by Katherine with heavenly dew” (352).²⁵

A Katherine Gordon Mary Shelley riserva poi un compito d’eccezione, come appare chiaro nella nota esplicativa inserita all’inizio del capitolo finale:

I do not know how far these concluding pages may be deemed superfluous: the character of Lady Katherine Gordon is a favourite of mine, and yet many will be inclined to censure her abode in Henry the Seventh's court, and other acts of her after-life. I desired therefore that she should speak for herself, and show how her conduct, subsequent to her husband's death, was in accordance with the devotion and fidelity with which she attended his fortunes during his life. (Shelley 405n)

La Catherine Gordon realmente esistita è personaggio ambiguo e discutibile: oltre a essere annoverata tra le amanti di Henry VII, l'assassino di suo marito, si sposò altre tre volte, guadagnando così ricchezze e privilegi.²⁶ Al contrario, nella riscrittura dell'autrice Katherine acquista una fisionomia inedita e una voce propria: finalmente le viene data la possibilità di narrare la sua storia in prima persona, al di là di eventuali filtri o pregiudizi inveterati. Il suo rimanere a corte è quindi interpretabile come una forma di ribellione al patriarcato, motivata dalla premura di Elizabeth nei suoi confronti: in un atto di sorellanza, la regina desidera infatti sottrarla all'eventualità di un secondo matrimonio impostole dal padre una volta tornata in Scozia. Invece di contemplare nuove nozze per la sua protagonista, sembra quasi che Mary si faccia promotrice di un tipo di sodalizio alternativo tra donne, finalizzato alla realizzazione di una società più giusta attraverso la corretta educazione del futuro regnante. Come Katherine riferisce:

My Richard's last act was to bestow me on his sister [...]. We wept together—how long, and how bitterly—the loss of our loved one; and then together we turned to fulfill our duties. She had children; they became as dear to me as to her. [...W]hen I endeavour to foster the many virtues nature has implanted in the noble mind of Prince Arthur, I am fulfilling, methinks, a task grateful in the eyes of Richard, thus doing my part to bestow on the England he loved, a sovereign who will repair the usurper's crimes, and bestow happiness on the realm. (Shelley 410)

Non sfugga che, nella realtà parallela tratteggiata in *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, sarà Arthur, bambino nobile ed equanime, a governare e non il futuro Henry VIII, ritratto nell'opera come una creatura maligna e perversa, il cui godimento massimo risiede nel suscitare discordia e nell'infliggere punizioni agli innocenti: “bluff Harry was setting two dogs to quarrel, and then beating his favourite for not conquering, which seeing, his sister Margaret drew the animal from him to console and caress it” (Shelley 351).²⁷

Quando *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* venne pubblicato, ricevette un'accoglienza tiepida da parte dei critici, incapaci di dare ragione delle imprecisioni e forzature storiche – così erano percepite – in esso contenute. Il recensore dell'*Edinburgh Literary Journal* lo valutava certamente “a talented work, but, at the same time, a little tedious and heavy” (350); sforzandosi comunque di rendere omaggio alla scrittrice, concludeva affermando che il romanzo era prova inconfutabile del fatto che Mary (la cui dignità di artista scivolava in secondo piano) fosse “worthy to have been the wife of the author of the ‘Cenci’” (351). Al contrario, come questo studio ha tentato di dimostrare, *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* è un lavoro complesso, testimonianza della fiducia incrollabile nel valore attivo della Storia e conferma di un impegno civile e sociale che non è mai venuto meno. Che poi sia stata una donna, la giovane Vittoria, a subentrare nell'asse dinastico sette anni più tardi è forse una prova ulteriore di quella “sagacity that can penetrate into the depths of futurity” che l'indagine del passato consentirebbe di acquisire.



- 1 La lettera da Albaro era datata 9 novembre 1822.
- 2 Il romanzo venne infine pubblicato nel maggio 1830 da Colburn e Bentley, che acquistarono il testo per sole 150 sterline. Le ristrettezze in cui versava e le pressanti richieste di aiuto da parte di Godwin (perennemente assillato dai creditori) avevano indotto Mary Shelley a cedere “Poor Perkin Warbeck” (Jones 2: 27) per una somma irrisoria.
- 3 Il primo fu *Valperga, or the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* (1823).
- 4 Etichettava *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* come “so uninteresting” (Blumberg 117).
- 5 Sia Hopkins sia Al-Fuhaid menzionano anche *Perkin Warbeck; or the Court of James the Fourth of Scotland* di Alexander Campbell, dato alle stampe poco prima del lavoro di Mary Shelley, nel 1830. Pur nelle palesi differenze tra i due scritti (per Cambell Perkin Warbek era soltanto un vile bugiardo), la loro pubblicazione quasi contemporanea avrebbe influito negativamente sulle vendite di *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (Al-Fuhaid, *Feminine-Centered History* 29).
- 6 La raccolta di fonti cui attingere e lo studio preliminare alla creazione del romanzo ebbero inizio nell’estate del 1826 (Sunstein 274). La prima versione del manoscritto, originariamente suddiviso in cinque volumi, venne probabilmente ultimata nell’autunno 1829 (Crook et al. xiv).
- 7 Per Muriel Spark la “unnecessary presence” (207) di Monina de Faro può essere spiegata solo ricordando la fascinazione di Mary per Rebecca, “of whom the Moorish girl [...] is but a dusky shadow” (208).
- 8 Bennet arriva a sostenere che “it may have been Godwin who suggested this historical topic to her” (364), opinione ribadita da Clemit: “Godwin encouraged this project from its inception [...] and may even have proposed its controversial subject” (287).
- 9 Il testo fu pubblicato per la prima volta solo nel 1987 (Carlson 145).
- 10 La definizione di “historical romance” proposta nel trattato è la seguente: “a composition in which, with a scanty substratum of facts and dates, the writer interweaves a number of happy, ingenious and instructive inventions, blending them into one continuous and indiscernible mass.”

- 11 Di fatto, Godwin riteneva che qualsiasi ricostruzione *puramente* storica fosse, in ogni caso, parziale, orientata secondo la percezione di chi la riferiva. Così concludeva, con un commento volutamente provocatorio: “Dismiss me from the falsehood and impossibility of history, and deliver me over to the reality of romance.”
- 12 Anche per Shelley la Storia era spesso depositaria di menzogne che, nei secoli, avevano acquisito una sembianza sempre più consistente di verità. Nel romanzo si legge che Henry VII aveva diffuso voci false sulla morte di entrambi i principi nella Torre, pensando in questo modo di screditare Perkin Warbeck agli occhi dei suoi sudditi. In un inciso l’autrice pare intervenire direttamente, dichiarando che “history has in its caprices given more credence to this composition, than its contemporaries gave; it was ridiculed and despised at the time even by the partisans of Lancaster” (Shelley 153). L’imbarazzo di Mary di fronte ai limiti delle cronache è messo in risalto da Lisa Kasmer: “In this romance [*The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*], Shelley makes clear that the facts of history, which she equates with the historiography of chronicles, although necessary, are not comprehensive” (113).
- 13 Non è escluso, comunque, che Mary Shelley abbia anche accolto la lezione di Manzoni, il cui capolavoro, *I promessi sposi*, le era ben noto, dato che nel 1828 l’aveva proposto a Murray in una traduzione che intendeva realizzare (Sunstein 290). Jena Al-Fuhaid ritiene, infatti, che la scelta del romanzo storico da parte della scrittrice nasconda la necessità di impiegare “her medieval screen” (*Feminine-Centered History* 65) per proiettarvi una critica pungente nei confronti della situazione politica del momento, evitando così censure e ritorsioni. In particolare, nel rapporto asimmetrico e mortificante tra Henry VII e la consorte (ma anche nella sua relazione con Elizabeth Woodville, da lui umiliata e vilipesa), si potrebbe scorgere il riflesso del legame tra George IV e Caroline of Brunswick, tacciata di adulterio e sottoposta a un processo infamante per privarla del titolo di regina. Stando alla ricerca di Al-Fuhaid, i decenni che precedono la pubblicazione di *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (caratterizzati dall’ascesa dell’usurpatore Napoleone, dal *Peterloo Massacre* e da misure coercitive come i cosiddetti *Gagging Acts*) avrebbero condiviso molti tratti con l’epoca fosca in cui l’opera è ambientata (30-71).
- 14 Come si legge, “he had been educated to believe that his honour called on him to maintain his claim. Honour, always a magic word with the good and the brave, was then a part of the religion of every pious heart. He had been nursed in war” (Shelley 196).
- 15 Il talento istrionico di Clifford e le sue continue metamorfosi sono evidenziati da Charlene Bunnell: “A consummate actor himself [... Clifford] assumes various identities for personal gain” (138).

- 16 Con il suo “seductive storytelling,” Frion rappresenta “a villainous variation of Scheherazade” (Nesvet 178).
- 17 Come è noto, Henry VII ebbe una discendenza numerosa.
- 18 “I see plenty and peace reign over this fair isle” (Shelley 194).
- 19 Elizabeth era anche la sorella di Richard; entrambi erano figli di Elizabeth Woodville, la cui unione con Edward IV era stata invalidata dopo la sua morte, per via degli accordi matrimoniali che il re aveva precedentemente preso con Lady Eleanor Butler. Per questa ragione, Richard e i suoi fratelli erano stati dichiarati illegittimi.
- 20 Figlia della coppia che aveva dato al piccolo Richard il nome fittizio di Perkin Warbeck per proteggere la sua reale identità, Monina (uno tra i pochi personaggi fittizi della narrazione) nutre per lui un affetto che supera per intensità quello di una sorellastra. Consapevole di non poter coronare il suo sogno di amore, sublima la passione diventando la sua seguace più energica e fedele.
- 21 In più di un luogo del testo Jane Shore compare nei momenti critici, offrendo a Richard l’aiuto sperato.
- 22 Non si dimentichi che, qualche mese più tardi (l’8 settembre 1830), Mary Shelley avrebbe sottoposto all’attenzione di Murray il progetto (subito scartato dall’editore) delle “Lives of Celebrated Women, or a History of Woman” (Jones 2: 35).
- 23 “Utopian domesticity is antithetical to the absolute sway of the tyrant, and more closely accords with a kind of grassroot republicanism in its emphasis on the fostering of an independent, capable citizenry” (Sites 526).
- 24 “Her imagination fed on the good she would do for others, when raised to the regal dignity” (Shelley 23).
- 25 In un altro luogo del romanzo, Elizabeth arriva a confessarle di provare talvolta addirittura odio verso i propri figli, “because they are [Henry VII’s]” (397).
- 26 Come spesso accade nel caso di Mary Shelley, molti critici hanno voluto vedere in Katherine Gordon il riflesso dell’autrice, ansiosa di difendersi dalle accuse di chi aveva manifestato disagio nei confronti del suo comportamento troppo libero dopo la morte di Percy. Per questa e altre interpretazioni di tipo biografico/autobiografico, si veda Rouhette (7), Al-Fuhaid (*Feminine-Centered History* 102), Peck (196-219), Garbin, Spark (210), Hopkins (270-2).
- 27 Anche in questo caso è una figura femminile a riportare l’equilibrio.



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L'eredità letteraria di Grimmelshausen sul palcoscenico e dietro le quinte del teatro epico brechtiano

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Introduzione

La nascita e lo sviluppo del teatro epico brechtiano devono molto, com'è noto, all'influenza di espressioni letterarie e culturali provenienti dalle più varie tradizioni e che abbracciano le più diverse epoche storiche: da un lato l'imprescindibile poetica aristotelica, con il suo principio della catarsi, diventa il modello su cui il drammaturgo di Augsburg delinea *ex negativo* il fondamento straniante del suo teatro, dall'altro le opportunità tecniche offerte dal cinema e dal teatro dei primi decenni del Novecento, culminate nello sperimentalismo del periodo weimariano, forniscono a Brecht il materiale scenografico con cui dare forma concreta all'idea di innovazione del teatro che anima il progetto del drammaturgo fin dal principio; lo scambio epistolare tra Goethe e Schiller sul tema della forma epica e di quella drammatica, così come i principi del romanzo epico enunciati e applicati da Alfred Döblin nella sua opera, costituiscono altresì tappe di riflessione fondamentali per attuare l'ibridazione produttiva di teatro ed epica; similmente il principio estetico dell'*ostranenie* di Viktor Šklovskij, con cui Brecht entra in contatto attraverso i formalisti russi, contribuisce alla teorizzazione della *Verfremdung* come tecnica da impiegare in ambito teatrale. Tra gli "incontri" fondamentali per l'evoluzione del pensiero estetico-politico brechtiano si possono citare inoltre il materialismo storico di matrice marxiana e la tradizione drammaturgica cinese, la quale attraverso l'impiego di simboli, gesti e maschere porta in scena non tanto

una rappresentazione della realtà, quanto piuttosto la stessa consapevolezza di portare in scena una rappresentazione:¹ nelle implicazioni socio-politiche del pensiero marxista e nella concezione dello spazio scenico propria della tradizione orientale, Brecht riscontrerà un'affinità con la sua idea di teatro come luogo di educazione alla coscienza critica e all'agire sociale. Questo elenco potrebbe arricchirsi andando a includere singoli autori e opere che ispirarono e influenzarono la produzione artistica brechtiana, per cui si potrebbero menzionare John Gay, la cui *Beggars' Opera* offre il materiale narrativo per la composizione della *Dreigroschenoper*, Christopher Marlowe, il cui dramma su re Edoardo II viene scelto da Brecht per un riadattamento in chiave moderna che permette al regista di confrontarsi con la tradizione del teatro elisabettiano e problematizzarne gli stilemi, o Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, la cui "Erzbetrügerin und Landstörtzerin Courasche" è di ispirazione per la figura di Mutter Courage. È proprio su quest'ultimo riferimento che il presente contributo intende soffermarsi, con la consapevolezza che la relazione tra il dramma di Brecht *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* e i motivi caratteristici del romanzo di Grimmelshausen siano stati debitamente messi in luce dalla critica, ma anche consci che la profonda e complessa relazione che Brecht instaura con l'autore barocco – relazione che non si esaurisce nella pièce teatrale citata – offra ancora spazio per una riflessione proficua sull'argomento.

La constatazione, peraltro opportuna e inconfutabile, che con *Trutz Simplex* e *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* ci si trovi di fronte a due opere indipendenti e originali, non quindi legate da un rapporto di rielaborazione che subordini in qualche modo la seconda alla prima, ha funto finora da deterrente per un raffronto critico delle due. Se ciò è senz'altro giustificato dalla rischiosità – o forse dall'impossibilità – di comparare due testi diversi e autonomi, non è tuttavia da escludere che tra essi si stabilisca una connessione più complessa e profonda di quella che superficialmente potrebbe apparire. In questa direzione si sono mossi alcuni – pochi – studi, che hanno indagato il rapporto tra il dramma brechtiano e l'opera di Grimmelshausen mettendo in evidenza ricorrenze tematiche o affinità ideologiche che li accomunano; è il caso ad esempio del saggio di Robert Hiller "The Sutler's Cart and the Lump of Gold", in cui si mettono a confronto aspetti caratteriali e simboli che Courasche e Mutter Courage hanno in comune, o del libro di Cara M. Horwich "Survival in Simplicissimus and Mutter Courage", che identifica nella preoccupazione per la sopravvivenza un motivo centrale e ricorrente nel dramma brechtiano

quanto nel ciclo di romanzi del *Simplicissimus* di Grimmelshausen.² Più di rado i critici hanno invece considerato convergenze di tipo stilistico o poetologico, fornendo tuttavia interessanti contributi che riguardano questi particolari aspetti; a tal proposito si possono citare il saggio di Friedrich Gaede “Grimmelshausen, Brecht, Grass. Zur Tradition des literarischen Realismus in Deutschland”, che facendo riferimento allo scritto brechtiano *Weite und Vielfalt der realistischen Schreibweise* – su cui ci si soffermerà in seguito – interpreta l’autore barocco come un “antenato ideale” di Brecht all’interno della tradizione realista nella letteratura tedesca (ivi 54), o quello di Roland Speirs, “Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder”, in cui si sottolinea un’affinità stilistica tra i due autori presi in esame mettendo in luce la struttura episodica del dramma *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, che ricalcherebbe dunque un tratto tipico del romanzo picaresco, ed evidenziando la rappresentazione di Mutter Courage come “eroina picaresca” (ivi 204). All’interesse di Brecht per il realismo dell’autore del *Simplicissimus* fa cenno anche Eberhardt Mannack nel paragrafo dedicato alla ricezione brechtiana di Grimmelshausen contenuto nel suo studio *Barock in der Moderne. Deutsche Schriftsteller des 20. Jahrhunderts als Rezipienten deutscher Barockliteratur* (45). Un ulteriore contributo per approfondire il rapporto tra Brecht e Grimmelshausen è rappresentato infine dallo studio di Italo Michele Battafarano e Hildegard Eilert *Courage. Die starke Frau der deutschen Literatur*, in cui la ripresa della figura di Courasche da parte di Brecht viene contestualizzata esaminando da un lato il panorama della ricezione dell’opera di Grimmelshausen negli anni ‘10, ‘20 e ‘30 del Novecento, e indicando dall’altro come l’attenzione di Brecht per il romanziere seicentesco coinvolga anche le riflessioni teoriche del primo. Questa ricostruzione, tuttavia, coerente con l’intento dello studio in cui è inserita, funge da inquadramento all’esame della figura di Courage e non si addentra nell’analisi di ciò che le dette riflessioni comportano e chiariscono sulla poetica dello stesso Brecht.

Scopo del presente contributo è appunto quello di ampliare il discorso sulla ricezione brechtiana di Grimmelshausen mostrando come l’interesse di Brecht per l’opera del romanziere trovi riscontro non soltanto nel dramma che più chiaramente ne è ispirato, ma anche in una serie di riflessioni teoriche intimamente connesse al programma estetico del drammaturgo e che, considerate nel contesto delle linee guida tracciate da Brecht per il teatro epico, portano in luce alcuni aspetti fondamentali di quest’ultimo. Per questo motivo, volendo seguire un percorso che parta dalle evidenze

più superficiali ed esplicite per giungere a esaminare connessioni più sotterranee e portanti, si inizierà considerando il posizionamento del dramma *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* rispetto al romanzo *Trutz Simplex*, cercando di problematizzare il rapporto tra i due e di indagarne le tematiche centrali, per rivolgere poi l'attenzione ad alcuni scritti di Brecht in cui Grimmelshausen compare quasi come ospite inatteso, chiamato in causa a supporto di una teoria estetica che si confronta direttamente con problematiche storiche e politiche percepite come estremamente urgenti alla fine degli anni '30 dello scorso secolo.

Suggerimenti letterarie: la ricezione "creativa" di Grimmelshausen da parte di Brecht

Se *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* è l'opera in cui l'interesse di Brecht per Grimmelshausen si mostra in maniera più evidente, questo dramma è anche il luogo più insidioso per esaminare la ricezione brechtiana dei romanzi dell'autore barocco. I pochi punti di contatto e le palesi differenze che emergono da una lettura parallela delle due opere potrebbero far apparire qualsiasi tentativo di avvicinare i due autori una forzatura, così che un'analisi di tipo contrastivo rischierebbe di ridursi a un esercizio sterile. La domanda da porsi, ci sembra, non è infatti tanto che cosa Brecht riprenda da *Trutz Simplex* e rielabori nella sua opera, ma piuttosto in che modo il testo del romanzo picaresco con protagonista Courasche e gli altri del ciclo del *Simplicissimus* abbiano agito sulla fantasia del drammaturgo per condurre alla creazione di un prodotto artistico nuovo.

A tal proposito è indicativo un passaggio che non si trova all'interno del dramma *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, bensì nelle bozze preparatorie di un'altra opera, mai giunta a compimento: il romanzo *Tui*. In uno dei frammenti di questo progetto letterario a cui Brecht lavorò per almeno un decennio tra l'inizio degli anni '30 e l'inizio degli anni '40, è presente un riferimento diretto al capolavoro di Grimmelshausen, che recita così: "Der Herzbruder im 'Simplicissimus' zeigt im Frieden die Tapferkeit und Schläue, die ihn im Krieg zu einem großen Soldaten gemacht haben, und wird als schlechter Kerl hingerichtet" (BB 17, 103). Significativo qui non è tanto il rimando in sé, quanto il suo essere impreciso. Il personaggio menzionato non trova infatti corrispondenza esatta con nessuna delle figure che si incontrano nel *Simplicissimus*: qui è presente, è vero, un personaggio

chiamato “Herzbruder”, amico fraterno del protagonista, il quale tuttavia non può certo essere definito “ein schlechter Kerl” e per di più muore in seguito a una ferita riportata in battaglia; la figura del romanzo la cui personalità meglio corrisponde a quella delineata da Brecht è l’antagonista e alter ego di *Simplicissimus*, Olivier, che però non viene giustiziato. Quello che la critica ha interpretato come un errore dovuto a una lettura del *Simplicissimus* superficiale, parziale o risalente a molto tempo addietro (Müller 2016, 13; Battafarano e Eilert 174-175), ci sembra indicare piuttosto un tipo di ricezione “attiva” e “creativa”, in cui lo spunto colto da un’esperienza di lettura diventa occasione per una creazione letteraria originale. Se la figura tratteggiata nel frammento non trova infatti riscontro nell’opera di Grimmelshausen, diversamente stanno le cose se si volge lo sguardo all’opera di Brecht stesso, nella fattispecie a *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*. Il personaggio di Eilif, primogenito di Courage, calza infatti perfettamente nella descrizione riportata: nel dramma il giovane si copre di gloria nell’esercito in seguito a un abile furto di bestiame compiuto ai danni di un contadino, ma quando durante un periodo di tregua si rende protagonista di un’altra rapina, questa volta sfociata nell’uccisione di una donna, viene condannato alla pena capitale. Il riferimento al *Simplicissimus* nel frammento menzionato ci sembra dimostrare come per Brecht il momento della ricezione e quello della rielaborazione creativa si intreccino, e come la fruizione di un’opera non si traduca in una pedissequa rievocazione della stessa integrata in un contesto diverso, ma inneschi piuttosto una forma di appropriazione che è già di per sé creazione artistica. Nel momento in cui Brecht chiama in causa lo “Herzbruder” nelle bozze preparatorie di un progetto letterario – non quindi in uno saggio o in uno scritto di altro genere, questo è importante sottolinearlo – esso non è più un personaggio rintracciabile all’interno dell’opera di Grimmelshausen, ma qualche cosa d’altro: contiene una reminiscenza del suo luogo testuale di origine, ma si sviluppa verso qualcosa di nuovo.

È interessante inoltre rilevare il fatto che il riferimento di Brecht al *Simplicissimus* di Grimmelshausen sia da collocarsi, stando all’edizione critica dell’opera del drammaturgo, tra il 1933 e il 1935 (BB 17, 461), mentre il progetto del dramma *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* risalirebbe secondo quanto affermato dall’autore stesso al 1938 (BB 6, 377). È necessario pertanto rettificare quanto sostenuto da Klaus-Detlev Müller, che a proposito del passaggio sopra riportato ipotizza che Brecht abbia “die Geschichte des Eilif irrtümlich in den Grimmelshausenschen Roman

zurückprojiziert” (Müller 2016, 13). La constatazione della precedenza cronologica del riferimento al *Simplicissimus* nelle bozze del romanzo *Tui* rispetto all’elaborazione della storia di Eilif all’interno del dramma *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* aggiunge un ulteriore importante tassello per la comprensione della ricezione brechtiana dell’opera del romanziere seicentesco, perché precisa come questa non si limiti a un’unica fase – quella della genesi del dramma –, non sfoci in un unico testo e non interessi uno solo dei romanzi di Grimmelshausen: con almeno due di questi, il *Simplicissimus Teutsch* e *Trutz Simplex*, Brecht si è evidentemente confrontato in diversi momenti, ricavandone spunti di riflessione e suggestioni sfruttati poi in più sedi letterarie.

Appurato come determinate corrispondenze legate alla caratterizzazione e alle vicende personali delle figure dell’opera di Grimmelshausen possano trovarsi rielaborate nei testi di Brecht, è ora il momento di approfondire come questi abbia interpretato, recepito e rielaborato nel dramma *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* alcune delle tematiche fondamentali trattate dal romanziere seicentesco.

Trutz Simplex e Mutter Courage: critica alla guerra e al capitalismo

Che Brecht verso la fine degli anni ’30 del Novecento si sia lasciato ispirare dalla protagonista di un romanzo di Grimmelshausen non stupisce eccessivamente chi ha presente lo stato della ricezione dell’opera dell’autore del *Simplicissimus* in quegli anni. Nella prima metà del ventesimo secolo, infatti, i romanzi dello scrittore barocco stavano attraversando un periodo di fortunato interesse, inquadrato in una fase di riscoperta della letteratura barocca tedesca in generale: nella produzione letteraria del XVII secolo, sconvolto anch’esso da disordini e tragedie storiche, il “Secolo breve” parve ritrovare una sensibilità tematica e stilistica affine,³ e le storie del più celebre dei romanzi tedeschi del Seicento, popolate di furfanti, mercenari, mendicanti e altra povera gente che viveva di espedienti cercando in qualche modo di sopravvivere nel caos della Guerra dei Trent’anni, riuscivano a mettere in risalto la loro attualità in una società uscita disorientata e atomizzata dalla Prima guerra mondiale prima e dalla Rivolta spartachista poi. È necessario puntualizzare che Grimmelshausen non aveva mai sperimentato l’oblio toccato in sorte agli altri autori di lingua tedesca suoi contemporanei, riscoperti davvero soltanto a distanza di secoli

dal loro periodo di attività, e si era anzi ben presto conquistato un posto d'onore nel canone letterario tedesco. Nella prima metà del Novecento, tuttavia, è possibile notare come l'interesse degli studiosi e del pubblico di lettori nei confronti dei suoi scritti fosse incrementato, come dimostra il cospicuo numero di pubblicazioni di varia natura che si collocano in quel periodo e che spaziano dalla riedizione delle opere, alle monografie sull'autore, ai saggi critici.⁴

Ciò che rende peculiare e degno di nota l'interesse di Brecht per l'opera di Grimmelshausen è il fatto che esso si inserisca in una fase di ricezione di quest'ultima in cui la maggior parte degli studi critici ne facevano risaltare il carattere "tipicamente tedesco", inquadrandosi più o meno intenzionalmente ed esplicitamente in una scuola di pensiero di ispirazione nazionalista a cui il drammaturgo era ideologicamente assai lontano. Accanto a contributi come quelli di Friedrich Gundolf, Julius Petersen e Hermann Eris Busse – solo per citare alcuni dei più noti –, che presentavano Grimmelshausen come "Dichter der Deutschen" (Busse), l'autore seicentesco che meglio era riuscito a incarnare lo spirito del popolo germanico e a contribuire alla sua evoluzione (Gundolf), e il suo *Simplicissimus* come un "personaggio tedesco" (Petersen), quelle di studiosi come ad esempio Herbert Roch ed Egon Cohn, i quali invece – rispettivamente in *Bürgertum und Barock im deutschen Roman* (1934) e in *Gesellschaftsideale und Gesellschaftsroman des 17. Jahrhunderts* (1921) – in Grimmelshausen misero precocemente in luce l'attenzione per la dimensione sociale, o di artisti come Karl Amadeus Hartmann, che nell'opera musicale *Des Simplicissimus Jugend* del 1934 illustra la guerra come una vera tragedia che nulla ha di eroico, appaiono voci fuori dal coro (cfr. Lepper 258-260; Meid, Christopher 150).

Che siano proprio questi ultimi aspetti menzionati ad aver attratto anche l'attenzione di Brecht risulta evidente considerando la sua rielaborazione del personaggio dell'"arcitruffatrice e vagabonda Courasche". Non è infatti casuale che tra tutte le trasformazioni subite dalla protagonista nel corso del romanzo – è presentata inizialmente come una fanciulla di famiglia nobile e dopo varie peripezie e cambi di "carriera" la si lascia alla fine dell'opera al seguito di un gruppo di zingari – Brecht si lasci attrarre proprio da quella che vede la donna proprietaria di un carretto e vivandiera a seguito delle truppe (cattoliche o protestanti, a seconda dell'opportunità del momento). Questa attività imprenditoriale, che nel romanzo costituisce soltanto una breve fase transitoria nella rocambolesca vicenda biografica della protagonista, diventa nel dramma brechtiano il fulcro di una nuova

trama e l'occasione per l'autore di esaminare creativamente, oltre che criticamente, la tematica del capitalismo in relazione alla guerra. Se la Courasche di Grimmelshausen, infatti, dava voce alle classi subalterne – e alle donne delle classi subalterne (Meid, Volker 128) – chiamate a confrontarsi con quell'“erschreckliches und grausames Monstrum” (Grimmelshausen 160) che era la guerra, il personaggio di Mutter Courage, madre e imprenditrice, fa risaltare ulteriormente l'istinto di prevaricazione, la sete di guadagno, il bieco utilitarismo e la mancanza di scrupoli che nella concezione dell'autore sono tratti tipici del sistema capitalista. Accanto alla reciproca diffidenza e all'imbroglio che regolano i rapporti tra i personaggi del dramma, ciò che rende maggiormente conto della decadenza morale e dello snaturamento dell'umanità è l'atteggiamento di Mutter Courage con i propri figli: se l'attaccamento che la donna mostra nei loro confronti all'apertura del dramma, quando cerca in ogni modo di dissuadere i due maschi dall'intraprendere la carriera militare, può far sorgere dei dubbi sul fatto che la vera motivazione sia la preoccupazione di una madre o piuttosto quella di una vivandiera che avrebbe perso così le braccia trainanti il suo carro, il fatale tentennamento dinnanzi alla possibilità di salvare la vita al figlio più giovane impegnando il carro stesso, sua fonte di sostentamento, rende palese l'irreversibilità del processo di decadimento morale che ha investito la società: anche il sentimento materno soccombe infatti alla logica del profitto.

Che a suo parere le grandi guerre della modernità fossero intrinsecamente legate al capitalismo, Brecht lo esplicita proprio in un commento scritto all'opera *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*:

[D]er Dreißigjährige Krieg ist einer der ersten Riesenkriege, die der Kapitalismus über Europa gebracht hat. Und im Kapitalismus ist es ungeheuer schwierig für den einzelnen, daß der Krieg nicht nötig ist, denn im Kapitalismus ist er nötig, nämlich für den Kapitalismus. Dieses Wirtschaftssystem beruht auf dem Kampf aller gegen alle, der Großen gegen die Großen, der Großen gegen die Kleinen, der Kleinen gegen die Kleinen. (BB 24, 271)

Il sistema capitalista, suggerisce Brecht, è a tutti gli effetti una forma di conflitto, perché si alimenta ponendo uno contro l'altro i ceti sociali e i singoli individui che li compongono, generando in questo modo non una semplice competizione ma una vera e propria lotta per la sopravvivenza. Non solo, ma per l'autore, che in quegli anni vede concretizzarsi il pericolo

di un nuovo conflitto mondiale, la guerra stessa non è altro che “eine Fortführung der Geschäfte mit andern Mitteln” (BB 25, 177). Queste riflessioni si inseriscono perfettamente in un discorso di ispirazione marxista, tuttavia Brecht aggiunge un elemento di novità, sottolineando che non sono soltanto i ricchi a incentivare tale sistema esercitando una forma di sopruso sulle classi subalterne, ma che anche i “piccoli” che si lasciano sedurre dall’egoistica logica del profitto possono farsi promotori dello stesso meccanismo economico-sociale che li rende subordinati ad altri. Mutter Courage, vittima delle vicissitudini della storia che con la sua piccola attività si pone in una posizione di vantaggio rispetto ad altre vittime, diventa l’emblema di questa triste evidenza (Münkler 30). È proprio lei, in un momento di sincera e lucida riflessione, ad ammettere:

Wenn man die Großkopfigen reden hört, führens die Krieg nur aus Gottesfurcht und für alles, was gut und schön ist. Aber wenn man genauer hinsieht, sinds nicht so blöd, sondern führn die Krieg für Gewinn. Und anders würden die kleinen Leut wie ich auch nicht mitmachen. (BB 6, 31)

Che però il guadagno tratto dalla guerra non sia che effimero e illusorio mentre le perdite subite sono ingenti e perduranti, lo dimostra proprio la vicenda di Courage, che nel corso del dramma perde tutti e tre i suoi figli. In questo modo non soltanto ci rimette in qualità di imprenditrice, privata della sua manodopera, ma viene meno ciò che già nel titolo la qualificava nella sua stessa esistenza letteraria: di “Madre Coraggio e i suoi figli” rimane soltanto “Coraggio”, soprannome conquistato per lo sprezzo del pericolo dimostrato salvando la sua merce dal fuoco nemico, e che di fronte all’incapacità di salvare la sua prole suona ora come una beffa.

Significativo è che proprio il Maresciallo, la figura che tra tutte sembra trarre il maggiore vantaggio dall’attività della guerra, all’inizio del dramma insinui il dubbio che quest’ultima in realtà tolga più di quello che apparentemente offre:

Wie alles Gute ist auch der Krieg am Anfang halt schwer zu machen. Wenn er dann erst floriert, ist er auch zäh; dann schrecken die Leut zurück vorm Frieden, wie die Würfler vorm Aufhören, weil dann müssens zählen, was sie verloren haben. (BB 6, 9-10)

In queste parole risuona la contraddizione di chi considera la guerra tutto sommato un beneficio, ai cui vantaggi necessariamente ci si abitua,

ma è contemporaneamente consapevole delle notevoli perdite che essa porta con sé e che verranno alla luce in tutta la loro tragicità nel momento in cui il conflitto avrà termine.

Il “mondo rovesciato” e la tecnica della Verfremdung

Nell’universo di Mutter Courage è la pace la vera minaccia, perché con essa gli individui vengono inevitabilmente a perdere la posizione di vantaggio che durante il conflitto erano riusciti a raggiungere. Quello che risulta da una vicenda presentata a partire da questo punto di vista è l’affresco di un mondo ormai assestato in un perenne stato di eccezione, in cui ci si assuefa alla continua condizione di emergenza e alla miseria materiale e morale, tanto da non riconoscerle più come “eccezionali” e da non riuscire più ad adattarsi allo stato di cose ordinario. Emblematico è a questo proposito l’epilogo della storia di Eilif a cui si è accennato in precedenza: la sentenza capitale pronunciata in seguito al delitto da lui commesso lo lascia incredulo e incapace di darsi spiegazioni:

DER KOCH *zu den Soldaten*: Wo führt ihr ihn denn hin?

EIN SOLDAT: Nicht zum Guten.

DER FELDPREDIGER: Was hat er angestellt?

DER SOLDAT: Bei einem Bauern ist er eingebrochen. Die Frau ist hin.

DER FELDPREDIGER: Wie hast du das machen können?

EILIF: Ich hab nix anders gemacht als vorher auch.

DER KOCH: Aber im Frieden. (BB 6, 69)

L’idea che la pace porti più svantaggi che benessere, così come la constatazione che la guerra può rappresentare un’ottima occasione di guadagno per i più umili, è chiaramente espressa anche dai personaggi del ciclo del *Simplicissimus*: nel *Simplicissimus Teutsch* Grimmelshausen presenta un campionario di umanità quantomai variegato, in cui si ritrovano sia figure più ascetiche, che rifuggono la guerra così come tutte le altre faccende mondane, sia personaggi che della guerra, in diverse maniere, fanno il loro mestiere; in *Trutz Simplex* Courasche si reinventa continuamente, nonostante i buoni propositi, tuttavia, non resiste lontano dal conflitto e si ritrova inevitabilmente a orbitare intorno alle truppe in movimento, da cui in qualche modo può sempre ricavare dei privilegi;

Springinsfeld, protagonista del terzo romanzo, racconta la guerra dal punto di vista di un ex mercenario che ha accettato di rischiare la propria vita e la propria incolumità pur di trarre vantaggio dalla relativa sicurezza economica che il conflitto gli può garantire.

Da questa rappresentazione del mondo e dell'atteggiamento umano traspare il topos, tipicamente barocco, della *verkehrte Welt*, il mondo rovesciato: l'autore che vi ricorre sceglie di raffigurare la realtà come un luogo in cui l'ordine di cose considerato "normale" è sovvertito, in cui impera il paradosso in tutte le sue manifestazioni e ciò che ci si attenderebbe si rovescia nel suo opposto. Quello che ne risulta è un carnevale dai risvolti inquietanti, in cui la morale è sospesa a oltranza e la degenerazione dell'uomo è ormai giunta al suo culmine, ovvero al punto in cui non la si riconosce più come tale. Il tratto davvero peculiare di questo tipo di rappresentazione⁵ consiste nella neutralità del narratore, che con sardonico distacco si limita a registrare le azioni dei suoi personaggi e gli eventi che capitano nel mondo che li circonda. Questa neutralità è tuttavia soltanto apparente, e nasconde l'intento didattico ed edificante di chi scrive: proprio mettendo il lettore di fronte alle estreme e più nefaste conseguenze della decadenza morale che si vuole condannare, si può sperare di scuoterlo e riportarlo sulla strada della virtù.

Non serve specificare che Grimmelshausen fu uno degli autori del Barocco tedesco che interpretarono il topos del "mondo rovesciato" nella maniera più creativa e raffinata, ed è certo che la combinazione di sarcasmo e critica sociale, lucida analisi della realtà e paradosso su cui le sue rappresentazioni della *verkehrte Welt* stanno in equilibrio non sfuggirono a Brecht, che dovette trovare in quella formula un'affinità con i principi e gli intenti che animavano le sue riflessioni sul teatro epico. Quest'ultimo, nel programma del drammaturgo di Augsburg, doveva collocarsi tra *Vergnügungstheater* e *Lehrtheater* (BB 22.1, 106): senza rinunciare alla sua vocazione di forma di intrattenimento, il teatro brechtiano si propone infatti di rimanere fedele a quello che è il suo principale scopo, ovvero educare il pubblico a una nuova coscienza di classe, determinante non solo per mettere a fuoco i meccanismi che stavano alla base della società contemporanea, ma anche per sondare i limiti e le necessità di quest'ultima e giungere infine a rivoluzionarla. Non è questa la sede per esaminare nel dettaglio quello che è il terreno ideologico in cui questo intento affonda le sue radici, tanto più che il pensiero politico di Brecht è stato esaustivamente trattato dalla critica;⁶ ci si limiterà a ribadire che l'obiettivo che l'autore si prefigge

è sostanzialmente duplice: da un lato si vogliono portare in evidenza le contraddizioni e le lacune della società borghese, dall'altro si intende rivelare l'ordine sociale come transitorio e permeabile ai cambiamenti, enfatizzando la responsabilità e il ruolo dell'uomo nel creare – e mutare – le condizioni che ne sono alla base (Squiers 47-48). Per Brecht non c'è dubbio che questa presa di coscienza debba passare attraverso una riforma del teatro, chiamato ad adeguarsi al nuovo panorama storico-sociale. Se l'opera teatrale fino ad allora faceva leva sulla partecipazione emotiva del singolo spettatore e sulla sua possibilità di immedesimarsi in ciò che veniva rappresentato, il teatro epico dovrà fare esattamente l'opposto: turbare il pubblico, scioccarlo addirittura, in modo da garantire quel distacco critico che affina la capacità di giudizio e lascia spazio all'azione, corale, di protesta. Sul lato pratico, il principio aristotelico della catarsi andrà sostituito con il suo contrario, la *Verfremdung*, che impedirà la fruizione immediata e aproblematica dell'opera e innescherà il processo di analisi di ciò che viene osservato: “Es war die Entfremdung, welche nötig ist, damit verstanden werden kann. Bei allem ‘Selbstverständlichen’ wird auf das Verstehen einfach verzichtet” (BB 22.1, 109).

Risulta evidente che il principio della *Verfremdung* e il topos della *verkehrte Welt* si inquadrano in concezioni estetiche e progetti “educativi” affini e si concretizzano in soluzioni artistiche simili: la Courasche di Grimmelshausen, nel suo raccontare senza il minimo pudore i propri vizi e le proprie scelleratezze, è certamente un personaggio estraniante, così come non c'è dubbio che il mondo della Courage brechtiana sia un mondo capovolto, che disorienta lo spettatore-lettore confrontandolo con situazioni estreme e condotte moralmente inaccettabili. In entrambi i casi la polemica dell'autore e la reazione che quest'ultimo vuole suscitare nel suo pubblico passano attraverso l'accentuazione degli aspetti paradossali delle vicende presentate, aspetti che tuttavia non pregiudicano il carattere essenzialmente realistico di queste ultime: è anzi proprio sullo sfondo di un'ambientazione realistica e a cospetto di personaggi del tutto verosimili che l'effetto straniante risulta potenziato.

Realismo e opposizione

Non è un caso che il concetto di “realismo” occupi una posizione preminente nelle riflessioni programmatiche di Brecht, il quale ne delinea le

caratteristiche ricorrendo anche a esempi tratti dalle diverse tradizioni letterarie. A questo proposito uno testo in particolare merita la nostra attenzione: si tratta di *Weite und Vielfalt der realistischen Schreibweise*, scritto da Brecht nel 1938 in risposta al saggio di György Lukács *Es geht um den Realismus*, pubblicato lo stesso anno nella rivista “Das Wort”. Nel confronto dei due testi affiorano le divergenze tra le concezioni di “stile letterario realistico” proprie dei due autori – più restrittiva la visione di Lukács, più inclusiva quella di Brecht – tuttavia entrambi questi ultimi concordano nel considerare l’opera di Grimmelshausen un esempio di tale stile. Per Lukács il *Simplicissimus* rientra nella – in generale poco rappresentata – letteratura realistica-popolare tedesca in virtù della sua perenne attualità: portando in scena fenomeni immediatamente riconducibili al vissuto umano nel mondo e permettendo così al lettore che “fa propri” tali fenomeni attraverso la fruizione del testo di potenziare la sua comprensione dell’esistenza e dello sviluppo della società più in generale, la letteratura realista, di cui l’opera di Grimmelshausen è esempio indiscusso, riesce ad attraversare le epoche storiche senza che la sua efficacia e il suo valore culturale, sociale e politico vengano meno (Lukács 136). Alla concezione di Lukács di “letteratura realistica”, che si configura come un “Ganze[s]” (ivi), un tutto organico, contrapposto all’unilateralità della letteratura cosiddetta “di avanguardia”, Brecht replica mettendo in luce un altro aspetto, diverso, del realismo letterario, ovvero il suo carattere dialettico. Esso rappresenterebbe il naturale rispecchiamento della realtà stessa, perché “[d]ie Wirklichkeit selber ist weit, vielfältig, widerspruchsvoll; die Geschichte schafft und verwirft Vorbilder” (BB 22.1, 432). L’opera realistica non è, nella visione di Brecht, un intero uniforme, bensì accoglie in sé le contraddizioni che popolano il mondo e le lascia coesistere senza la pretesa di costringerle in un sistema in cui tutti i conti quadrano. Prendendo a modello scrittori come Shelley, Balzac, Cervantes, Swift, Dickens e Tolstoj, riconosciuti anche da Lukács come indubbiamente “realisti”, il drammaturgo mostra come lo scrittore realista sappia sollevarsi sulle ali della fantasia ma rimanere anche saldamente ancorato a terra, e coniugare la concretezza con la capacità di svelare il significato simbolico delle cose (ivi 430). Come anticipato, anche Grimmelshausen rientra nel novero degli scrittori realisti, e diventa per Brecht l’emblema del compromesso produttivo tra l’obiettività dell’osservatore imparziale e la creatività dell’interprete:

Der Ästhet mag zum Beispiel die Moral der Geschichte in die Vorgänge einsperren wollen und dem Dichter das Aussprechen von Urteilen verbieten. Aber Grimmelshausen läßt sich das Moralisieren und Abstrahieren nicht verbieten [...]. (ivi 432-433)

Come già mostrato, la combinazione di raffigurazione lucida e distaccata della storia e impegno sociale-educativo è certamente una componente importante dell'opera di Grimmelshausen e della sua personale interpretazione del topos della *verkehrte Welt*, e a ben guardare è anche uno degli obiettivi primari – se non il principale – del teatro epico brechtiano. Risulta infatti piuttosto chiaro che le riflessioni di Brecht sullo stile realistico non sono un semplice esercizio di critica letteraria, ma che piuttosto portano avanti una ricerca poetologica in atto. Eloquentemente a tal proposito è l'incipit di una breve nota abbozzata a commento dello scritto citato, in cui l'autore puntualizza di aver concepito quelle riflessioni spinto dalla necessità di rendere la definizione dello stile realistico, “die wir im Kampf gegen Hitler brauchen” (ivi 435), meno normativa e limitante, in modo da allargare il fronte delle opere e degli autori il cui rapporto con la realtà si oppone nettamente al rapporto che invece instaura con essa il cosiddetto “Hitlerfront” (ivi 436). Come questo ragionamento si traduca concretamente in termini estetici verrà esaminato in seguito. Ciò che ora preme sottolineare è come l'impegno di individuare un filone letterario capace di assumere un ruolo che, senza temere di esagerare, potremmo definire di opposizione politica e di educazione sociale, si leghi indissolubilmente alla formulazione dei principi cardine del teatro epico e alla loro applicazione in sede di creazione artistica. In modo simile alle opere nominate in *Weite und Vielfalt der realistischen Schreibweise* come esempi di realismo letterario, il teatro epico, così come teorizzato dal suo ideatore, si presenta come il luogo delle contraddizioni, in cui intrattenimento ed educazione all'autocoscienza, emozione e razionalità, critica e arte, verosimiglianza e straniamento, materialità e fantasia non si escludono a vicenda, ma anzi si tengono insieme in una tensione virtuosa.⁷ Se quindi lo scritto citato si può considerare un'“autobiografia culturale” di Brecht (Chiarini 44), Grimmelshausen occupa in questo documento autobiografico la posizione di un ideale predecessore o di un modello a cui richiamarsi.

Ma per comprendere davvero come si collochi il romanziere seicentesco all'interno del programma estetico del drammaturgo di Augusta è

necessario passare a considerare un altro scritto, risalente al 1940 e contenuto nelle *Notizen über realistische Schreibweise*, ossia *Über die verschiedenen gesellschaftlichen Funktionen des Realismus und seiner Abarten*. È qui che Brecht esplicita maggiormente quelle che per lui sono le principali caratteristiche e il valore ascrivibili all'opera di Grimmelshausen, e non è un caso che si parli ancora una volta di realismo, contrapposto questa volta al “naturalismo” della letteratura cosiddetta “fascista”:

Entgegen den Erwartungen vieler, die eine ganz und gar unnaturalistische Darstellung des Krieges von ihnen vermutet hätten, zeigen die faschistischen Dichter den Krieg mit Vorliebe naturalistisch, d. h. mit allen Schrecken. Naturalistisch, nicht realistisch, der Naturalismus hat sich ganz und gar metaphysiert, er ist schon pure Mystik geworden. Der Krieg ist dargestellt als eine ganz mechanische Materialschlacht, er hat keinerlei gesellschaftlichen Gehalt und keine Entwicklung. (BB 22.2, 635)

Nella nota a piè di pagina legata a questo passaggio, Brecht nomina proprio Grimmelshausen come controesempio di tale rappresentazione “naturalistica” e “meccanica” della guerra: “Man vergleiche diese Darstellung mit der des Grimmelshausen in ‘Simplizius Simplizissimus’, wo der Krieg als soziale Erscheinung, als Bürgerkrieg aufgezeigt ist” (ivi).

Ecco che i contorni di quella che è la letteratura dei “poeti fascisti”, che va a sostenere quello “Hitlerfront” contro cui Brecht cerca tra gli autori suoi contemporanei e suoi predecessori degli alleati, si fanno più nitidi: tale letteratura non cerca l'evasione dalla realtà dei fatti, al contrario, tende a registrarli con precisione “naturalistica”. Questo tipo di rappresentazione sembra avere due conseguenze fondamentali: la prima è il rifiuto del ragionamento critico sui meccanismi sociali, politici ed economici a cui tali fenomeni soggiacciono e su quello che è lo sviluppo di questi ultimi; la seconda è la mistificazione della stessa materialità degli eventi, i quali diventano tasselli di un sistema, definito “metafisico”, ordinato arbitrariamente dell'autore. Sacrificando il ragionamento sulla dimensione profonda della storia, fatta di interrelazioni socio-economiche, politiche, culturali, l'estetica tradisce la realtà a vantaggio di una “narrazione della realtà”, che di quest'ultima conserva soltanto l'apparenza esteriore.⁸ È chiaro che una letteratura nata da queste premesse, che nella sua rappresentazione dei fatti asseconda la richiesta di chiarezza, coerenza e semplicità che viene dal pubblico, si presta perfettamente a diventare strumento di propaganda.

Come dimostra la nota a piè di pagina sopra riportata, ancora una volta è in Grimmelshausen che Brecht trova un punto di riferimento contro questa tendenza e una sensibilità artistica affine alla propria. Ci si è già soffermati sulla rappresentazione della guerra come fenomeno sociale ed economico, aspetto che accomuna il romanziere seicentesco e il drammaturgo padre del teatro epico, risulterà tuttavia interessante richiamare qui anche un passaggio tratto dallo scritto *Kurze Beschreibung einer neuen Technik der Schauspielkunst, die einen Verfremdungseffekt hervorbringt*, anch'esso del 1940, che riprendendo testualmente i concetti espressi nello scritto sopra citato, rinsalda la relazione già messa in luce tra l'estetica brechtiana e quella di Grimmelshausen e rimarca la differenza di queste rispetto alla concezione estetica propria dei "poeti fascisti":

Der Hauptvortrag des epischen Theaters mit seinem V-Effekt, der den einzigen Zweck verfolgt, die Welt so zu zeigen, daß sie behandelbar wird, ist gerade seine Natürlichkeit und Irdischkeit, sein Humor und sein Verzicht auf alles Mystische, das dem üblichen Theater noch aus alten Zeiten anhaftet. (BB 22.2, 647)

Il realismo del teatro epico, esattamente come il realismo di Grimmelshausen, mira a rappresentare i fatti così come essi appaiono nella loro naturalezza e "terrestrità", esaltando queste caratteristiche attraverso l'impiego di un umorismo che – come è stato mostrato – tende a mettere in luce gli aspetti paradossali delle vicende presentate. Questo immergersi nei fatti e voler mettere a nudo le logiche profonde che li regolano, testimonia il rifiuto degli autori di cedere alla tentazione di trascendere la realtà per trasfigurarla in un sistema armonioso, sorto dall'arbitrio di un soggetto interpretante. Il realismo di Grimmelshausen e quello di Brecht non vogliono interpretare né trasfigurare il reale, ma piuttosto smascherarne le contraddizioni, i paradossi, le discrepanze e il malfunzionamento. Ciò è possibile soltanto a chi tiene bene a mente lo scopo ultimo di un'opera che si mette a servizio della realtà anziché pretendere di riscriverla: fare in modo che quell'opera diventi il pungolo che risveglia la coscienza critica e incentiva il cambiamento.

Conclusion

In questo excursus che ha coinvolto alcuni dei testi più e meno noti di Brecht si è voluto mostrare come la ricezione brechtiana di Grimmelshausen, finora poco valorizzata dagli studiosi, giochi un ruolo preminente nello sviluppo dell'opera del drammaturgo di Augsburg e costituisca un tassello importante per comprendere appieno alcuni fondamentali aspetti della sua poetica. Non sono semplicemente spunti e suggestioni di lettura ad aver agito sulla fantasia di Brecht, che rielaborando quelle idee ha portato in scena uno dei contributi creativi più notevoli legati alla riscoperta dell'autore del *Simplicissimus* nel Novecento, ma anche riflessioni estetiche e contenutistiche più profonde, che hanno influenzato l'elaborazione di quell'impianto teorico che è il "dietro le quinte" del teatro epico. Il dramma *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* è infatti soltanto la punta di un iceberg che al di là di specifici richiami letterari e riprese tematiche nasconde un confronto profondo e fruttuoso con il più celebre dei romanzieri tedeschi del Seicento, un confronto nato evidentemente dal tentativo di Brecht di collocare la propria opera nel panorama estetico del tempo e di tracciare una genealogia a supporto del proprio progetto artistico. All'interno di questa genealogia Grimmelshausen non soltanto si trova in una posizione di spicco per quanto riguarda la sua concezione estetica e gli espedienti letterari da lui impiegati, recepiti immediatamente da Brecht come congeniali al proprio programma di riforma teatrale, ma viene altresì integrato in una riflessione extraletteraria in cui l'estetica si mette a servizio di un preciso intento storico-politico, ovvero stimolare la coscienza critica del pubblico e contribuire così a scardinare le false sicurezze e a smorzare il facile entusiasmo che la letteratura di propaganda agli albori della Seconda guerra mondiale si prestava a infondere. Ecco che in Grimmelshausen Brecht non scorge solo un modello dal cui genio trarre spunto, ma anche un predecessore e un alleato da cui ricavare supporto nel suo impegno di critico e riformatore.

Alla luce di ciò la rilettura dell'opera di Grimmelshausen da parte di Brecht risulta particolarmente significativa sotto un duplice profilo: non è infatti soltanto la critica brechtiana a trarre dall'esame di questo confronto elementi utili per meglio comprendere la produzione artistica del padre del teatro epico e l'impalcatura teorica che la sorregge; anche gli studi su Grimmelshausen e sulla sua ricezione possono ricavare da esso nuova linfa. Se è vero infatti che la riscoperta di un autore in un'epoca successiva

contribuisce spesso a portare all'attenzione aspetti inediti di quest'ultimo, ma anche a rivelare qualcosa sul pensiero di colui che di questa riscoperta è l'artefice, allora il dialogo instaurato da Brecht con Grimmelshausen è in grado di offrire a chi rilegge oggi l'opera dei due autori una chiave interpretativa capace di aprire nuovi spazi di riflessione critica.



- 1 Si veda a questo proposito lo scritto *Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst* (BB 22.1, 200-210).
- 2 Va qui menzionato anche il saggio “Simplicissimus und Mutter Courage” di Kenneth Knight, in cui vengono presi in esame sia elementi ricorrenti più evidenti e puntuali che alcuni riferimenti espliciti di Brecht a Grimmelshausen in altri scritti.
- 3 Dal punto di vista di affinità strettamente letterarie si segnala come alcuni critici, in primis Walter Benjamin, sentissero riecheggiare nelle opere dell’Espressionismo quell’afflato e quel senso di ineluttabilità che erano riconosciuti come tratti tipici della letteratura barocca (Benjamin 234-236).
- 4 Per un elenco completo delle edizioni delle opere di Grimmelshausen e degli studi critici dedicati all’autore pubblicati fino al 1972, cfr. Battafarano 1975.
- 5 Il topos del “mondo rovesciato” è tipico, nella letteratura del Barocco tedesco, dei romanzi picareschi, ma lo si ritrova anche nella cosiddetta *Narrenliteratur* e in singole scene inserite in generi testuali diversi.
- 6 In particolare per il rapporto di Brecht con il marxismo ci si limita qui a indicare lo studio di Sean Carney *Brecht and Critical Theory. Dialectics and contemporary aesthetics*, in cui il pensiero marxista viene messo in relazione alla retorica (9-12), alla scienza – in particolare alla psicoanalisi lacaniana – (35-38) e all’etica (116-121), e quello di Klaus-Detlev Müller *Die Funktion der Geschichte im Werk Bertolt Brechts: Studien zum Verhältnis von Marxismus und Ästhetik*.
- 7 Sul rapporto tra alcune di queste coppie di contrari si vedano ad esempio gli scritti *Vergnügungstheater oder Lehrtheater?* (BB 22.1, 106-116), *Über rationellen und emotionellen Standpunkt* (BB 22.1, 500-502), e il diciannovesimo punto dell’appendice a *Kurze Beschreibung einer neuen Technik der Schauspielkunst, die einen Verfremdungseffekt hervorbringt* (BB 22.1, 659), in cui Brecht esamina la relazione tra approccio critico e arte.
- 8 In un passaggio di una pagina di diario del 12 settembre 1938 Brecht scrive: “Das ist ‘echter’ Naturalismus, die Natur ist der große Unbekannte, er wird imitiert, indem man seinen falschen Bart imitiert” (BB 26, 325).



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Abstracts

Emmanuel Bouju, Une littérature à crédit. *Le tournant épimoderne du contemporain*

In the past twenty years, French literature lived *on credit*: on the credit of the last century. Now at the heart of a crisis of trust in public speech and in democracy (still undergoing a state of emergency), it has decreased in fiduciary value. This article pleads though for a new strength and a new authority for the French novel: a strength and an authority that are related to what I call *epimodernism*. *Epimodernism* denotes a kind of “post-postmodernism”. It replaces the double *post* by six different values of the Ancient Greek prefix *epi*: surface contact, origin, extension, duration, authority, and finality. *Epimodernism* thus sets up six different relations to the heritage of modernist utopias, re-orienting postmodern critique and rebooting, with all due irony, its forms of anti-late-capitalist engagement and paradoxical empowerment. The six *epimodernist* values would now be: *Superficiality*, *Secret*, *Energy*, *Acceleration*, *Credit*, and (again) *Consistency*. *Epimodernism* thus represents a way to help us foresee what literature can describe, imagine, or invent for our difficult times, as in the most recent book by Sandra Lucbert: *Personne ne sort les fusils*.

Fernando Funari, « Ceci n'est pas un traité de chimie » : terminologie et traduction littéraire, le cas de *Il sistema periodico* / *Le système périodique de Primo Levi*

Socioterminology is an approach to technical and scientific languages which describes their effects and uses in different discursive contexts, especially non-technical, and in the context of translation practices. However, several textual fields remain unexplored: this article aims to analyze the French translation of an Italian literary text, Primo Levi's *Il sistema periodico* (1975), a 'biography' of his professional career as a chemist. The novel (organized through a series of chapters, each devoted to an element of the periodic table) is typologically ambiguous. "Questo non è un trattato di chimica" (« this is not a chemical treatise »), says the author at the beginning of the last chapter, while suggesting the porosity that exists between discursive genres (technical-scientific; fictional). We aim to analyze the French translation (*Le système périodique*, 1987, trad. André Maugé) in order to account for the symbolic and literary uses of terminologies, their contextualization in literary discourse and the interlinguistic and intercultural relationship between Italian and French.

Antonio Ballesteros-González, *Mirroring the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Will Self's Dorian: An Imitation*

Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* has been a controversial narrative since it appeared in 2002. As the subtitle of the book emphasizes, it is 'an imitation' of Oscar Wilde's well-known myth-making *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in 1890 and 1891. Is Will Self's piece of fiction a fulfilment of Wilde's? How does the author trace and rewrite the Irish genius's classic? How does the text retrieve and transform the cultural and the sexual politics of the model on which it is based? This paper aims at briefly answering these questions, dealing with the way(s) in which *Dorian* mirrors *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from a contemporary neo-Victorian perspective which, at the same time, like many present-day narratives in the English language, tries to recover the late Victorian past, establishing significant relationships between the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* and our own epoch.

Both Self and Wilde are haunted by the Narcissus myth, narcissism, the Doppelgänger motif and, ultimately, mirror images. Mirrors trace the multiple reflections of selves, a theme that is recurrent and almost obsessive

in both books, which are the product of the inner and outer conflicts of their respective ages. Both of them mirror a period of decadence and excess, of consumerism, of social and political crisis, of sexual ambiguities and reinventions, of projections of disease, of disenchantment and escapism, of psychological insecurity. Taking this into consideration, I will try to analyze the parallelisms between Self's and Wilde's texts, paying special attention to their complementary portrayal of cultural, aesthetic and sexual mores, and postulating that neo-Victorianism is very much alive in our present time. Regrettably, the triad syphilis-AIDS- COVID-19 epidemics can also provide a suitable coda in this respect.

Gioia Angeletti, *Deconstructing Englishness, Relocating Britishness: Arthur Hugh Clough's The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich*

In 1848, the publication of Arthur Hugh Clough's *The Bothie of Tober-Na-Vuolich. A Long Vacation-Pastoral* astounds the Victorian reading public. This complex narrative poem, characterised by heteroglossia, an idiosyncratic metre and a variety of styles and registers, at different levels deconstructs Englishness, as well as it relocates the concept of Britishness. The article aims to show how the poet, both through form and content, provocatively suggests that, behind its façade of stability, Victorian Britain is not a supranational state marked by political uniformity and cultural organicity but rather consists of several "nations within the nation" that cannot be harmonized, owing to language, gender, class and ethnic questions. First, Clough conveys this image of a dis-United Kingdom through his deployment of a heterogeneous amalgam of diversified languages, reflecting individual, cultural, social or geographical differences. Secondly, he debunks a unified idea of Englishness (or Britishness for that matter) by depicting a confused English hero whose emotional fluctuations mirror the fractures undermining the stability and unity of Victorian society: the gender divide; class conflicts; and the clash between rural and urban worlds. Finally, by representing a group of Oxford students' journey to the exotic Scottish Highlands, Clough invites the reader to reflect on Britain's ethnic and cultural divisions, on the meaning of cultural reception and the hindrances involved in any experience of trans- or interculturality. Ultimately, the analysis of these three interrelated aspects will explain why Clough's contentious conceptions of Englishness and Britishness must be seen in the light of his sceptical frame of mind and epistemic (self)doubt.

Elisabetta Marino, “A sagacity that can penetrate into the depths of futurity”: revisionismo storico e scenari possibili in *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* di Mary Shelley

Influenced by Walter Scott’s historical novels, *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck: A Romance* (eventually released in 1830) has long been overlooked by most critics and scholars. Indeed, up until recently, little attention has been paid to Mary Shelley’s attempt to delve into British history, widely perceived as both an escapist retreat into the past, and an open disavowal of her commitment to social and political reform which, on the other hand, was evident in her previous literary endeavours.

Nonetheless, as this essay sets out to elucidate, *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, a narrative focused on the pretender to the English throne who claimed to be Richard of Shrewsbury (one of the two “Princes in the Tower”), may be perceived as Mary Shelley’s attempt to actively employ history as an effective instrument to reflect and ponder on current-day problems. After all, in his essay entitled *Of History and Romance* (1797), William Godwin had already emphasized that the attentive study of history could offer valuable insights into the future. Hence, it could be argued that, far from signaling Mary Shelley’s lack of engagement, her fourth novel actually aimed at delving into highly debated issues, such as tyranny, power and, as will be shown, even the role of women in society.

Giulia Frare, *L’eredità letteraria di Grimmelshausen sul palcoscenico e dietro le quinte del teatro epico brechtiano*

The novel *Trutz Simplex* of the baroque author Grimmelshausen inspired one of the most popular female main characters of the Brechtian epic theatre, namely the protagonist of the drama *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*. This play is evident proof of Brecht’s interest in the German baroque novelist and at the same time one of the most creative and unconventional contributions to the rediscovery of his work in the 20th century. The figure of Courage and the central theme of war which the drama and the novel have in common render the connection between the two authors explicit enough. However, the relationship Brecht established with Grimmelshausen is deeper and more complex than a series of superficial points of contacts which can be found in their literary production. By retracing the references to the baroque novelist in Brecht’s drafts and programmatic writings, it can be proved that Grimmelshausen’s

oeuvre was not only a thematic source of inspiration for the Augsburg playwright, but also played a role in his poetological and socio-cultural reflection. The aim of this article is to outline the meaning of Brecht's Grimmelshausen-reception in the theoretical program of epic theatre and, more generally, in Brecht's aesthetic research.

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