

«A Levante per Ponente»:

Home Seeking through Irony and Paradox
in Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*.

*Michele
Bottalico*

Christopher Columbus condensed the novelty of his enterprise in a telling paradox which implied his acceptance of the thesis of the sphericity of the earth. «Going East sailing Westward» he would say, meaning that he would reach Eastern countries faster by proceeding in the opposite direction.

The same kind of paradox and situational irony, if by the latter we mean a discrepancy between what might reasonably be expected and what actually occurs, are masterfully combined in Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*, a sort of «transgressive and digressive» picaresque novel which is divided into two volumes.¹ Its protagonist-narrator Updike Underhill seeks a full understanding of his own country by removing the beloved object of his analysis from himself. Through a long journey that takes him *elsewhere*, he grasps the rich complexity of reality and finally comes to accept the totality of his country in its positive and negative aspects. Thus Royall Tyler, who wrote his novel in the post-revolutionary period when most early American novelists were striving to focus attention on local material, indicates expatriation and the comparison with the elsewhere as appropriate means to know the United States better. This is not a transgression to the rules of National Literature, though, since *The Algerine Captive*, even if it does contain fiery attacks against slavery and other substantial shortcomings of American culture, ends up with a patriotic effusion of Updike who, on his repatriation, salutes his newly found home as “the freest country in the universe” (AC 224).

This nationalist feeling, which becomes stronger in Volume II, is

actually the underlying key-note of the whole book and one of its main themes. Like the expatriate writers of the 1920's and 1930's, explicitly or implicitly Tyler speaks of America even if he is describing British or Algerian realities. When he makes Updike tell the reader his adventures, he knows that the United States will, in the end, be the best place in the world to live in, and in fact his narration sometimes wavers between praising and criticizing his native land. However, Tyler lets the objective value of his country emerge through evidence, through mere experience, and through the encounter with the otherness. To reach this aim, what he makes use of throughout the novel is not sarcasm but, rather, a balanced comprehension of the discordant elements that Updike, a character that is reminiscent of Voltaire's *Candide*, has been able to discover in several parts of the world. The narrator uses Socratic irony as he feigns more ignorance about his own country than he really possesses. He presents himself as ignorant, and consequently needs expatriation to acquire knowledge, when he is in fact cautious and tentative.

At a formal level, Royall Tyler adopts several narrative devices taken from the canonical tradition to produce a book that, from what we understand from the author's Preface to his text, is "designed to amuse rather than to instruct" (AC 27). A book that is disguised as a travel account and a biographical captivity tale to overcome the current resistance of American Calvinist culture against fiction writing. The result is a novel that Blanchot would consider quite modern, for it does not adhere completely to any pre-existent narrative genres and yet includes shades of most of them.

A number of critics use the adjectives satiric and humorous quite interchangeably to define *The Algerine Captive*.² I can see no bitter satire in this novel and, on the other hand, I would say that the narration presents a gradual passage from comic effects to humour, which occasionally becomes ironic, to finally acquire a serious tone in Volume II. This passage is parallel to the different stages of the protagonist's expatriation, which starts as voluntary and then becomes a forced exile, starts as an escape from home and then becomes a home seeking.

To illustrate the rhetorical devices that Tyler uses in developing his narratological itinerary, I shall adopt the terminology that Luigi Pirandello used in his essay "On Humour" (Pirandello 127-32 *et passim*).

Updike Underhill passes from a «perceiving of the contrary», which

provokes comic effects, to an «understanding of the contrary» which gives rise to humour and sometimes to irony. In other words, he starts by perceiving those features which are just the opposite of what New England should be. But when he leaves home and goes South, then to London and eventually embarks on a slave ship bound for Africa, a keener reflection gradually changes his mental attitude from one that perceives the incongruities of his native land as comic to another that, through the suffering of humour and irony, makes him understand that the United States is such because life is what it is: the world is not perfect. Updike's more reflexive attitude of mind disorients him, makes him more thoughtful and sometimes perplexed. This explains why *The Algerine Captive* is full of digressions which, like in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, are the necessary consequence of the turmoil that active reflection provokes in the protagonist.

The experience of expatriation is fundamental for Updike as it leads him to lose his illusions, to explore the many facets of reality and to be confronted with the problems of several truths or realities, sometimes depending upon the individual point of view. In the first chapters of the novel, the protagonist-narrator creates a suitable context to allow his rejection of America, and his consequent expatriation, appear as necessary and motivated. To begin with, he comically describes the excessive moral zeal of 17th century Puritan society by recalling the misadventure of his ancestor, Captain John Underhill, who was banished from Massachusetts with the charge of “adultery of the heart” (AC 36), for

at a certain lecture in Boston, instead of noting the referred texts in his Bible...this gallant soldier had fixed his eyes steadfastly...upon one Mistress Miriam Wilbore; who it seems was...herself in the breach of the spirit of an existing law which forbade women to appear in public with uncovered arms and necks, by appearing at the same lecture with a pair of wanton open-worked gloves, slit at the thumbs and fingers for the conveniency of taking snuff; though she was not charged with the latter crime of using tobacco (AC 35-36).

It can be added that one of the ministers who was present at Captain Underhill's trial defined those openings as “Satan's port holes of fiery temptation” (AC 38).

Then Updike relates several episodes of his childhood and early youth,

when his parents were to decide about his future profession. As a young man, proud of the newly founded republic, he is disappointed by both the theoretical and practical knowledge of his native New England, by a discrepancy between a supposedly prestigious classical learning, which reveals itself to be outdated and almost useless, and the need for a modern and more pragmatic culture which has to shape the new nation. He learns Greek and Latin but “as to English grammar, my preceptor knowing nothing of it himself, could communicate nothing to me” (AC 46). Pressed by his father, Updike starts to work on the family farm and attempts to transform his knowledge of the classics into a practical tool, but the result is a complete disaster. He thus recalls one of his experiences:

I gave Greek names to all our farming tools, and cheered the cattle with hexameter verse...I killed a fat heifer of my father's, upon which the family depended for their winter's beef, covered it with green boughs, and laid it in the shade to putrify, in order to raise a swarm of bees, after the manner of Virgil. The process, notwithstanding I followed closely the directions in the *Georgics*, some how or other failed (AC 50).

After the protagonist has a chance to verify the ignorance and the roughness of his fellow citizens by working as a schoolmaster, he is finally allowed to study medicine, although his father doubtfully observes that “he did not know what pretensions our family had to practice physic, as he could not learn that we had ever been remarkable for killing any but Indians” (AC 57). Later on, seeking practical experience with other doctors, Updike meets all kinds of quacks and ends up by witnessing a sort of veterinary who cures a drunken jockey who has fallen from his horse by pouring “a dose of urine and molasses down the patient's throat” (AC 88).

Enough is enough, and he decides to go South to look for better openings for his medical profession; namely, in search of the mythical America he had always dreamt of. Even more disappointed by the local way of living, which he describes with subtle humour, Updike accepts a berth as a surgeon on a ship bound for Africa and meaningfully named *Freedom*. The ship stops in London, and later on the protagonist sails for Africa aboard a slave ship ironically named *Sympathy* and is eventually captured by Algerian pirates.

Updike, who had been deeply shocked by the slave trade and by the way the captives were treated, is now sold as a slave himself but does not lose the objective attitude he has acquired. He gives up many prejudices he had been taught, for example about the Algerians being blasphemous infidels or having more than one wife, notions which turn out to be false. Even now that he is forcedly removed from that safe maternal womb that is everyone's country, he proceeds in his process of becoming a citizen of the world and discovers, for instance, that his fellow slaves "spoke that universal language of benevolence which needs no linguist to interpret" (AC 126). This innocent Adam learns that life is no romance and that experience can teach "those virtues, which schools and colleges often fail to teach, and which, as Aristotle well observes, are like a flame of fire. Light them up in whatever climate you will, they burn and shine ever the same" (AC 128). At the same time, in a series of episodes that could be mentioned as examples, he learns to praise real freedom, particularly freedom of mind, and he comments once: "Let those of our fellow citizens who set at nought the rich blessings of our federal union go like me to a land of slavery, and they will then learn how to appreciate the value of our free government" (AC 132).

Volume II of *The Algerine Captive* contains detailed descriptions of historical, social, economic and religious aspects of what today is Magreb, and Updike discovers that this country has class hierarchies, superstition, quackery and social abuses not unlike those of the United States. So, in the words of the critic Cathy Davidson, Algeria becomes "a distorted mirror version of America. Or, more accurately, it becomes the mirror version that especially shows up American distortions" (Davidson 209). As happens to the protagonist of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, who expatriates from the home country of his human body to come back to it after he has wandered from land to land observing the preposterous and brutal foibles of mankind, at this point Updike Underhill is ready to return to America. His forced exile has redeemed his native country which now becomes the yearned for Ithaca of a Ulysses who has been a prisoner of the Cyclopes, of the Lotus-eaters and of Calypso. Updike, through the very estrangement caused by his journey, has reacquired familiarity with his body or, better, his fatherland. Moreover, his captivity has paradoxically set him free and burdened him with new responsibilities towards his home country: "He is at last freed from his own earlier elitist assumptions about the 'barbaric' Americans; from his own

inability to change either his life or his society (escape, after all, is not social action); and, ultimately, from his picaresque restlessness. The burden of this freedom is that he must now devote himself to *improving* the American society that he earlier saw as meriting only condemnation, derision, and evasion” (Davidson 194).

Going back once again to the central paradox of this novel, Tyler indicates the opportunity of using an «upside down spyglass», as Pirandello would say, to keep away the object of love in order to understand it better. In this it is implicit that the closer one looks at this object, the less he can see of it. Or, even more paradoxically, the blind who cannot see can actually see more, like the “divine blind bard” Homer that Tyler mentions so often in his novel. And Tyler himself foreshadows this truism when, in Chapter 9 of Volume I, comments upon a young man who has been given back sight, and writes that “at first he appeared to have lost more than he had gained by being restored to vision” (AC 61). Tyler insists upon the importance of practical and tangible experience by explaining that even later on this young man “to distinguish objects within reach...would close his eyes, feel of them with his hands, and then look earnestly upon them” (AC 62).

In a similar way to what happens to the Golden Ass, Updike’s expatriation too is a necessary device to provide him with much stronger certainties than his initial ones. They are strongly based truths because they have been acquired through the painful experiences of the wanderer. And only by crumbling the myth of fatherland is this acquisition possible. Thus this relativization of the absolutes is important, in *The Algerine Captive*, as through it Royall Tyler anticipates a level of demythicizing wisdom, which is typical of the old age of both the individual self and the collective consciousness, that the young American people could not have yet. With his journey in the more ancient North African cultures, Updike shortens the route to reach that wiser and disenchanting point of view that only many centuries of history and experience can confer on a people. So he *goes East sailing Westward*, i.e. taking the shortest way.

Moreover, Updike’s home seeking, which is a metaphor of what the post-revolutionary American actually does, is also a search for a quality of life and a new knowledge that *have* to be different from the previous ones. It is not surprising that Tyler dedicates little space to the description of Updike’s actual return, since the novelist’s real focus of interest is the home

seeking itself, with its eschatological connotations and implications. Tyler points out to the new Americans the road to take in order to emerge from the provincial isolation of a former colony and become part of an international context. At the end of the novel, Updike Underhill accepts the United States as part of a larger and more complex world; not as a mythic Eden-like island, a City upon the Hill, a kind of Utopia, but as reality. A reality that needs federalism to survive in a hostile environment: "BY UNITING WE STAND, BY DIVIDING WE FALL" (AC 224) is the last sentence of the novel. To conclude, borrowing a meaningful concept from the historian Federico Chabod³, Tyler underlines the necessity for a voluntaristic rather than naturalistic nationalism for the United States. And this is his main contribution to the developing American thought and fiction writing, as well as the real sense of the patriotism of that headstrong liberal that Royall Tyler was.



Note, Notes, Anmerkungen



1) Published in Walpole, New Hampshire, in 1797, it was one of the first American novels to be reprinted in London (1802 and 1816). The main reason for its success is to be found in the public curiosity about the Barbary pirates and in the novel's non-fiction form, as *The A.C.* was mainly viewed as a biographical account and a travel book. On the publication in England see Tanselle 1965.

2) See, among others, the two most comprehensive studies of Tyler's production: Tanselle 1967, 140-80 and A.L. Carson & H.L. Carson 58-68.

3) Reference is to Chabod's distinction between a nationalism which is based on a free will and a conscious effort towards a mature growth in the adherence to civic values, and a passive, fatalistic nationalism which is the fruit of a racial pride inevitably leading to racism (68 *et passim*).



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