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Mario Materassi

Go Southwest, Old Man

Note di
un viaggiatore
letterario,
e non



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Go Southwest, Old Man
Note di un viaggio letterario, e non

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Zuni land for sale in the vicinity of El Morro, western New Mexico

*for Millicent and Luisa
my beloved travel companions*

*and to the memory of my dear friend
Tony Hillerman*

It is not possible to acknowledge all the numberless people–friends, acquaintances, chance encounters—to whom I am beholden. Though they must remain unnamed, my warm thankfulness goes to all of them. Some grateful exceptions, however, are in order. I am deeply indebted to a former friend, the late Henry Roth, for first calling me to the Land of Enchantment. For opening up the Southwest for me and my family and making us feel a part of their world, my fondest thanks go to Rudy and Patricia Anaya, Blue Spruce Standing Deer, John Cacciatori and Nancy Kozikowski, Stanley and Rose Mary Crawford, Tony and Marie Hillerman, Mary and Dick Kirschner, Frank and Pat McCulloch, Tony and Teresa Márquez, John Nichols, Carl and Geraldine Osborn, and Joseph Traugott.

Now, back in my original home, I raise my eyes from the computer, glance at Brunelleschi's dome soaring above the red roofs and the linden tree tops, and I can hear the soft voices of my faraway friends as we sat under their portales looking at the evening lights come out one by one along the silver strip of the Rio Grande. I look at the Torre di Arnolfo lit by its wavering oil lamps, and am lifted back to the moonless summer nights we spent watching the sky behind the black crest of the Sandias explode with the jagged pink lightnings of a storm too far east to be heard. All of this—the soft voices, the shared tales, the warm friendship—helped make this book. This book is theirs.

As it is Beatrice Töttössi's, who believed in it and made it happen. And it is Arianna Antonielli's, who expertly edited it.



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The Rio Grande from West Mesa, Albuquerque

RELATIVELY SPEAKING. AN INTRODUCTION

This book is about a journey that was both literary and personal. It is not a travelogue, as I never kept a diary while on the road. Rather, it is the imaginary, asystematic reconstruction of my long journey westward far away from home; a journey begun almost half a century ago and which came to conclusion twenty-five years later, when, without ever being aware that I was looking for one, I found—relatively speaking—my new home. Since then I have been traveling in a circle, the outer circle being the whole of the Southwest, and the inner circle being New Mexico; at its center, Albuquerque. And I never tire of exploring my new land.

When as a young man I headed out west, I did not know I was following John Babsone Lane Soule's imperative, "Go West, young man!" I did not know who John Babsone Lane Soule was. I had never heard of him. I just happened to head west because Literature was America, and America happened to lie west of me. Steinberg's cartoon illustrating the relativity of the whole continent as seen from Central Park West, where I lived for several years, made a lot of sense to me. At that time, the West for me was the West Side, and it definitely stopped at Riverside Drive. I did not know that a quarter of a century later I would feel rather uneasy about that cartoon, and chastened about the priorities it implicitly showed me as abetting.

But this was years to come. In those happy days, before political correctness was invented and you did not have to watch everything you said, I could in all honesty maintain that, historiographic evidence notwithstanding, I had discovered America, and that it was then, in 1961, that the world changed, never to be the same again. So history had to be rewritten. Because when I first caught sight of the New World, I was greeted not by palm trees, as history books erroneously claimed, but by the Statue of Liberty. When I landed at Pier 82, the natives did not wear loincloths, as alleged by those books, but shirts and pants. Most important, no royal banner was planted in the virgin soil: again contrary to those misleading historians, the banner was placed in front of me. Mere minutes from my landing, I was presented with the sacred banner of the land I had set out to discover—not the land of spices that, rather prosaically, Columbus had been looking for, but the Land of Great Literature. The banner was an enormous red and white sign (history books got at least the colors right)



painted on the side of a gigantic ten-wheeler in the traffic under the Elevated. It said, HEMINGWAY. I would have preferred that it said FAULKNER, but it didn't matter. From that day on, I delved into the riches of the land I had discovered—the land whose streets are paved not with gold (who cares about gold?) but with great books. It took me a quarter of a century to start exploring the New World beyond the immediate shore of the ocean I had crossed, and to head west. It was a long journey. I waded through the nothingness of New Jersey. I crawled, as fast as possible, through the spiritually barren woods of Tennessee. I crossed the Mississippi, where I felt the first twinges of regret for not having come this way earlier in life. I went on, mile after mile of miles after miles, through the endless plains, under skies that were higher and higher, the earth becoming redder and redder. The horizon sprawled wider, the sky turned an even deeper blue. On and on, through the green waves of grass of the Texas Panhandle immensity, on toward an enchanted land of spaced red mesas which I was already claiming as mine not because I discovered it (again: never mind Cabeza de Vaca, never mind the pioneers and the prairie schooners plowing the green waves, never mind the Comanches spying my arrival from Tucumcari, their lookout hill): mine because at last, nearing my old age, I had come home. And here I stopped. For good.

This is the subject of my book.

It is a book about writers whose work I admire, and who with their books and their friendship have given further meaning to my finally stopping here. It is about John Ford, of whose indirect role in my westward journey I became aware only after I completed it. It is about places that only appear to be empty—mesas, buttes, canyons, arroyos, endless plains of sagebrush or sand—as well as places where people live, or used to live: my beloved Albuquerque, though its soul is being fast destroyed by the same breed of politicians and developers who try their damn best to destroy my equally beloved Florence; little towns made of plasterboard and aluminum, the most imposing construction a fiercely lighted service station; sleepy adobe villages, placid horses grazing in their paddocks; an abandoned Navajo hogan (somebody must have died here), its grey timber succumbing to time; the leaning posts of an empty, solitary corral; what is left of an Anasazi dwelling in the cave of a slickrock canyon. Places, all of them, that have taken on the sentimental function, both positive and less positive, once held by the huddled hill towns, the procession of cypresses stenciled along a ridge, the stone church perched where it can control the farmers who for centuries have worked their little green valley. It is a book about a world whose rhythms speak millennia rather than centuries; a world of immense spaces and resounding silence. “When I first saw the desert,” a woman who grew up in the lushness of the Northwest says in Douglas Preston’s *Cities of Gold*, “I felt... like I’d been released from a green hell. I could never live anywhere else but in the desert.”

This, for me, would be only relatively true. Much as I love the desert, I also love Broadway. I need the silence, but I also hanker for the din of

markets. Moreover, I cannot live without the second-hand bookstores. If I were condemned to the green hell of New England, buried under its deadening trees and allowed some sky only when the woods open up to one of those bland ponds (what could Thoreau have done, had he been parceled out the Painted Desert instead of his pond)—probably I would survive only thanks to the book shack at the edge of the city dump.

The concept of discovery, as incorrect as recently it has been declared to be, still best expresses the sense that the salient points in one's life hold for the individual. After I discovered America, I found that I was half Florentine and half New Yorker. Then, a quarter of a century later, I discovered (or, as the politically correct love to say, came in contact with) the Southwest, and I became someone who is fifty per cent Florentine, fifty per cent New Yorker, and fifty per cent Albuquerquean. The narrow minded maintain that this is impossible. They insist that I reduce each quota to an insignificant 33.33 percent, ignoring the increase in heady existential value that my calculation, for all its yet to be proven arithmetic incongruity, rightly takes into account.

Because my new land, my final land, with the overwhelming impact of its people and its scenery, teaches one to embrace, to combine, to include, and therefore to expand. To grow. You don't have to renounce what you always thought was your precious, discriminating you: you just learn to welcome the differences, and the *mestizaje* of this marvelous land becomes your *mestizaje*. As a "border person" (this trendy, politically correct but misleading expression that emphasizes division rather than integration), you change, yes; but you don't have to lose all that you have always been. Or to put it differently, you are always the same, yet you change. Either way, the resulting mix is the new you.

It is up to you to gain rather than to lose. I would have never imagined that one day I, a Florentine, four minutes from the David and the Prigioni, would not only stand but even appreciate (relatively speaking) some of the stuff sold in the art galleries of Santa Fe, the world capital of kitsch; that I, seven minutes from the Bargello, would not miss my impregnable stone buildings and come to love these soft, wavering adobe constructions, ristras of red chili hanging by their kiddie-room blue entrance. Or that I would wear a bolo, which in my original world was, and still is, the epitome of tackiness. And yet, now I do wear my bolo; while at the same time, from across the ocean plus almost an entire continent, on Sunday night during the soccer season I run to www.acfflorentina.it to find out what we did against our detested black-and-white striped enemy, the name of which, like the one hundred percent Florentine that I used to be, I still never pronounce. For you can wear many hats, provided you are the one who chose them.

Thus, this sprawling, relaxed book, an overflow of decades of happy contradictory experiences both on the personal and the professional levels, mirrors the existential *mestizaje* from which it issues. Long free, thanks

to age (*chaque age à ses plaisirs*) of the constrictive austerity of thought as well as of diction required by scholarship, I indulge in a meandering discourse the focus of which constantly shifts, and which reflects now my never abjured critical tenets, now a blissful indifference to methodological rigor. Occasional writings violate the tone set by scholarly analyses. Some writers are discussed at length, though never exhaustively as good academic manners would require; others are introduced only by means of interviews. The persistent attention to the literary genre most visible in New Mexico, that of the detective novel (“*Me interested in formula writing? Are you kidding?*” And yet, here I am) might suggest that finally the book has found its critical focus; then, unexpectedly, a couple of forays into the western usher in a fleeting interdisciplinary approach. There are pieces on an early photographer of the West, on a Native American artist, on the stereotype of the “redskin” in the Italian media. Short sketches interrupt the flow of literary or general considerations, seemingly in order to add a bit of local color. The reader would have every right to wonder where the critical focus is—if, indeed, there is one. The answer, quite simply, is that this book is guided not by a critical focus but by a unifying life experience—a fact to which, actually, the recurring personal sketches and travel notes intend to call attention, throwing light as they do upon the very experience of which this book is a reflection.

The reader will have no difficulty in detecting the writer’s pleasure in the mere mention of certain toponyms. Albuquerque, of course. Santa Fe (with some reservations: as one of Steve Brewer’s characters says, “Santa Fe is all a little too charming for my taste”). Cimarron. Corrales. Kayenta. Moenkopi. Mexican Hat. Globe. Show Low. Hovenweep. Wagon Mound. Española. Silverton. Los Lunas. Or Tucumcari, the eastern door into New Mexico: the barren hill, rich in Apache and Comanche lore, that looms over a mile-long stretch of motels—how I love, how I never tire of the tawdry, ephemeral architecture of old Route 66. Tucumcari: where, whenever I pass it, I promise myself that the next time I will climb to its top—although I know that I never will because Tucumcari must forever remain an alluring mirage, a bewitching sound suggestive of an unapproachable otherness.

Tucumcari. I cannot stop saying it, as I cannot stop repeating to myself all these names—as well as Broadway, as well as Via Guelfa, Via Panicale, Via Taddea. Or West Mesa. For lovers, as we all know, feed on the rush caused by the reiteration of the name of their beloved. No matter by how many names she is known.



View from Sandia Crest

HOME COMING

... finché verso nord – lo aspetto da ore – la piatta, brulla immensità è graffiata da un sottile rilievo che la ferma: eccolo, finalmente, il bruno avanzato delle Rockies – le Sangre de Cristo Mountains; e da qualche parte, nascosta fra le loro pieghe scure, Santa Fe. È il segno, ancora appena avvertibile, che fra poco sarò a Albuquerque.

Fra poco, sotto di noi passeranno – vicinissime: la discesa è già cominciata – le gialle pendici delle Sandias punteggiate dai primi radi ginepri; poi sarà il fitto verde scuro delle gobbe che guardano indietro verso est; poi la cresta, e subito i dirupi scheggiati a picco sulla valle – stiamo scendendo. Finalmente, dopo sette ore, siamo a casa.

L'ala si abbassa. Ecco il nastro azzurro del Rio Grande, la striscia nera dello scarpata di basalto della West Mesa, i tre vulcani in miniatura, brufoli grigi sull'immensità gialla che riprende a andare verso ovest. Albuquerque – eccola – si dispiega, gialla e grigia, ancora piatta da quassù, con il brutto grumo scintillante dei palazzi della ufficialità. Adesso è l'altra ala che si abbassa, e siamo già sotto il bastione delle Sandias, già è l'aeroporto, gli hangar, le piste: stiamo per toccare, tocchiamo – sì, siamo arrivati. Fra pochi minuti, la dolce architettura, il dolce décor stile Southwest dell'aeroporto – l'amato odore pungente dell'incenso di piñon, i nomi spagnoli, le kacina, le ristras rosse dei peperoncini; e mentre la lenta scala mobile ci porta giù ai nostri bagagli, l'enorme arazzo blu bianco e rosso di Nancy Kozikowski che ci accompagna nella discesa (domani la chiameremo, lei e John – forse li troveremo a far colazione alla Pancake House o da García; domani chiameremo tutti gli amici) – e poi al piano terra il grande paesaggio di Wilson Hurley che ci dirà, ci ripeterà: Sì, siete a casa.

'On behalf of the captain and of the whole crew, I would like to thank you for flying Southwest, and to wish you a pleasant stay in Albuquerque'.

Oppure (perché è sempre l'arrivo, mai la partenza, che resta):

... finché dalla brulla, lenta immensità si leva, contro luce, la lunga barriera scura delle Sandias. Meno di cinquanta miglia: dopo cinque giorni, ormai è soltanto meno di due ore.

Glorieta Mesa, sulla destra, si accende nel sole calante. Il cartello ('2 mi. to the Best Snake House of the West' – residuo della Route 66) sembra un



po' più stinto; e così, di lì a poco, la baracca con la sua scritta bianca appena leggibile. Neppure stavolta ci fermeremo: Clines Corners può aspettare.

Ancora venti miglia. Qualcosa di aperto dove cenare, a Old Town, di sicuro lo troveremo. Oppure a Nob Hill.

Adesso le mesitas stanno diventando viola. La lunghissima discesa in curva, e poi riprende la salita verso lo spacco nelle Sandias. Passato Tijeras Canyon, saremo a casa.

Ma no, non è vero: anche il Llano Estacado era già casa, anche Tucumcari. Anche Palo Verde, Texas era casa. O quasi.

Il canyon è cupo. Affilati al vertice dei loro stretti ghiaioni, i bastioni controllano.

Minacciosi, respingono – ma poi ci abbracciano. Fra le pareti a picco, il cielo è ancora azzurro. E finalmente la discesa. Finché lo spacco si apre, e davanti a noi il sole sfiora la West Mesa, dorandola.

L'intera vallata si accende. Siamo a casa.

A volte mi domando perché questa città, nella quale non ho mai vissuto per più di qualche mese, non ho mai avuto un lavoro, non ho radici che reclamino lealtà verso un tempo non soltanto mio, sia per me, appunto, 'casa'. Mi domando se non vi sia qualcosa di falso – di voluto – in questa forse senile dipendenza emotiva. Poi mi passa. Perché in realtà sono queste stesse domande che hanno qualcosa di insincero, come se me le ponesse perché *devo* pormele, quasi dovessi giustificarmi – ma di che cosa? E mi rendo conto, ancora una volta, che esse sono soltanto l'occasione di ripercorrere la strada che mi ha portato fin qui. Di rivivere, ancora una volta, la scoperta.

Ricomincio sempre da lontano – da quando, vi arrivi in aereo oppure in macchina, per la prima volta la scorgo, la rivedo, questa città il cui stesso nome (Albuquerque. O Alburquerque. O Duke City) sembra mimare la sua serena polisemia; questa città che sembra adagiarsi, quasi si stirasse, sbadigliando, fra la parete rosso cocomero (la *sandia*, appunto – questo, al tramonto) che chiude la porta all'oriente, e la balza nera della West Mesa che la apre all'illimitata distesa verso occidentale.

E qui comincia, ogni volta, la rimessa in gioco di tutto. Che in fondo è già una prima risposta a quelle domande alle quali non m'importa più di tanto trovare risposte.

Oriente, occidente: ma qual è l'occidente? Quale l'oriente? È il serpente che si morde la coda: perché qui geografia ed epistemologia si contraddicono, confondono le idee – come fece il serpente con la povera Eva, e lei col povero Adamo: in che direzione guardare, per attingere alla conoscenza? Phileas Fogg, almeno lui, dopo ottanta giorni in giro per il mondo fu salvato da questo dilemma conoscitivo solo all'ultimo istante. Ma io?

In realtà, anche questa è una domanda insincera, perché per quanto mi riguarda non è affatto un dilemma. Questa sottilmente simbolica chiusura retrospettiva – voglio dire, superare le Sandias, lasciarmi alle spalle l'occidente come stato mentale e, nera silhouette stagliata (non a cavallo,

ma al computer) contro un rosso sole calante, avviarmi solitario verso il West – è soltanto una sintesi di tutto ciò (compreso il dubbio buon gusto della retorica visiva) che, in quest'ultimo quarto di secolo, non soltanto mi ha portato fin qui ma qui, felicemente consenziente, mi ha fatto restare. Rimettendomi in gioco, certamente, come snaturato figlio di quell'occidente, e pertanto facendo esplodere ogni sorta di contraddizioni culturali, ma liberandomi anche del dovere di preoccuparmene.

Fiorentino, appunto. Europeo. Newyorkese – e mi fermo qui, perché niente di più ad ovest di Riverside Drive riconosco come mio: non la Middle America, non la California dove pure, portassi alle sue logiche conseguenze geografiche e mentali l'apertura ad oriente (o occidentale?) che West Mesa mi addita, ho alcun interesse ad avventurarmi. E invece niente di tutto ciò: occidentale in tutto e per tutto. Eppure, nonostante questo iato di quasi un intero continente, soltanto qui, in quest'angolo periferico che non è mio perché estranea mi è la cultura nativo americana, distante quella ispanica perché troppo cattolica per i miei gusti, scomoda quella anglo perché qui troppo lontana dalle sue radici illuministiche e dunque mie: soltanto qui – o diciamo: soprattutto qui – mi sento, incongruamente, me stesso.

Da anni, in questa irresolubile incoerenza mi muovo in piena pace, perché mi permette di convivere serenamente (Albuquerque, alla anglo? Albuquerque, alla latina? Duke City, anche se il riferimento nobiliare è un po' ostico per un plebeo?) con l'accettazione, whitmanianamente, della pratica della contraddizione; del disimpegno dalle responsabilità della coerenza. Indiani? Latini? Anglo? In questa *mestizaje* mi riconosco: un fiorentino nato a Bologna (imbarazzante, molto imbarazzante), un fiorentino del centro che prima di passare la cerchia dei viali controlla non gli sia scaduto il passaporto; poi un newyorkese, anzi un West-sider, che in tanti anni non ha mai messo piede a Staten Island e due sole volte a Brooklyn, e comunque sdegna lo East Side) – di tutte queste snobistiche dichiarazioni restrittive intese a ribadire la mia supposta coerente identità, qui, finalmente, faccio felicemente a meno. (Ma, pendulo dal ramo non di un melo ma di un *piñon*, ecco ricomparire il serpente: che a questo Albuquerqueian a mezzo servizio fa guardare Santa Fe con convinto disinteresse; che a questo New Mexican – relativamente parlando – ispira, *impones*, altrettanto convinto disprezzo per il Texas. Perché il campanilismo regge anche dove non ci sono campanili).

Ma come spiegarlo? Non agli altri, ma a me stesso?

Non fu amore a prima vista. Certamente, non l'amore a prima vista conosciuto a New York – ma allora, si sa, ero giovane. Qui, all'inizio – lo ricordo con imbarazzo, come un tradimento verso quella che sarebbe diventata la mia ultima casa – fu come trovarmi sperduto in una realtà periferica che non sapevo cosa fosse: un Terzo Mondo improvviso, dotato di tanti dei congegni e delle marche visive dell'era tecnologica, e tuttavia diluite, queste marche, in un ambiente che non era paesaggio e non era città; dove dominavano altri elementi, inassimilabili alle categorie di cui a quanto pareva avevo ancora bisogno: enormi spazi brulli, e qua e là edi-

fici color terra senza contorni precisi, senza angoli, senza i segni consueti ai quali, da dove venivo, era affidata la lettura della loro funzione; senza il consueto manifestarsi, e disporsi, dei rapporti reciproci. Senza un disegno. Di quel mattone cotto al sole che il variare delle stagioni sfa e indurisce e di nuovo sfa in un continuo stemperarsi delle forme, in un costante, quasi organico trasformarsi, ancora non sapevo nulla. Non sapevo neppure che si chiama *adobe*. Ancora non capivo.

Bastò poco perché tutto cambiasse. E non fu soltanto l'effetto del tramonto, quando l'incanto della Terra dell'Incanto è più potente. Fu il cielo.

Che il cielo possa essere il fattore dominante del quotidiano, c'è voluto mezzo secolo perché mi rendessi conto. Il cielo, a Firenze, non lo si guarda. È qualcosa che si sa che c'è, qualcosa lassù sopra le case – uno spicchio qui, uno spicchio là; che certi giorni è bello e certi altri è grigio, e serve solo a metterti di buonumore oppure di malumore. È uno dei tanti accessori scontati dell'esistenza, come il marciapiede troppo stretto e la macchina parcheggiata all'incrocio oppure la battuta del macellaio in San Lorenzo, l'ultima mascalzonata dell'arbitro venduto oppure i bigné di Robiglio. Senza dubbio, offre minore gratifica estetica dell'irregolare fuga parallela degli aggetti dei tetti e dei segnapianti. Anche al tramonto, quando sul lungarno il cielo lo si guarda davvero (parole di Mark Twain: a Firenze si possono avere i tramonti più belli del mondo – fino a vent'anni fa lo dicevo anch'io, benché certo con minore autorità), lo si guarda, sì, e ce lo godiamo: splendidi colori, splendida luce, ma poi tutto finisce lì. Resta un episodio.

Qui (o, con nostalgia, *là*) il cielo è un'altra cosa. *Sky Determines: An Interpretation of the Southwest*, dice lo splendido libro di Ross Calvin. Il cielo, appunto, che detta il ritmo dell'esistenza. Smisurato. Onnipresente, perché nulla s'interpone allo sguardo; un azzurro che è invito continuo a – e ti strugge – non sai che cosa. E che anche quando si annuvola, dispiega (e sembra di poterle toccare) il più vasto danzare di masse.

Dapprima, a tenermi in sospeso, erano state le distanze – tutto quello spazio vuoto, tutto quella sproporzione fra lo io e il non-io. Le strade erano immensi tracciati (ma verso che cosa?) lungo i cui larghissimi marciapiedi sbrecciati, orti spontanei a erbacce in cui inciampare, era inutile cercare qualcun altro in cui riconoscermi, attendermi delle strisce bianche che mi confermassero nella mia pur minima realtà di pedone: nessuno vi camminava, perché a piedi non arrivavi da nessuna parte – neanche al supermercato. 'Ce ne avete uno vicino', ci dissero la prima sera, appena entrati nella casa lasciataci per l'estate. 'Sono solo due isolati'. Ma avevamo da riempire il frigorifero e prendemmo la macchina. Per fortuna, perché quei due isolati risultarono due smisurate distese vuote divise da una viottola sterrata – qualche cavallo al pascolo dietro il suo lungo steccato, una Ford senza ruote a arrugginire vicino a un fosso, un paio di case solitarie. Eppure eravamo in città. Eravamo (oggi è già diverso) a Albuquerque.

E allora, il rifugio di Old Town. Facile, qui, trovarci a nostro agio: quelle stradine, quei *portales* di quercia scura, quel che di pittoresco anche se in gran parte rifatto. I rapporti spaziali erano familiari. Familiare era fare due passi intorno alla piazza alberata, sostare sulle panchine bianche di ghisa, gironzolare da un negozietto d'antichità all'altro. Certo, non vi trovavi i cassettoni del Seicento o le maioliche del Quattrocento di Via dei Fossi, ma a questo mi aveva abituato Broadway; e comunque, era bello toccare quegli umili oggetti di ieri e ieri l'altro – la lanterna e il piccone da minatore, il pezzo di turchese non lavorato, i *santos* di legno; una giacca blu da ufficiale, con la sciabola e una scatola piatta con le due pistole da duello; uno spento acquerello del Ponte dei Sospiri, esercizio di qualche lontana, diligente sposa in viaggio di nozze. E quante voglie, quante voglie tutto sommato accessibili: lo scudo arrugginito d'un cartello stradale della Route 66, la serie completa delle targhe del New Mexico degli anni '60; le lucenti cornici di stagno traforato; la foto color seppia di un'arcigna famiglia di pionieri; i rozzi vasetti porta semi dei tarahumara, e quelli neri, perfetti (ma carissimi, questi) di María Martínez. Il vassoietto sottovetro di un orafo indiano di Santo Domingo, tre quarti d'ora da qui – prendiamone la carta da visita. Senza che me ne accorgessi, stavo cominciando a riorientare il mio gusto.

Poi, dietro la chiesa, in Romero Street, il Christmas Shop – decorazioni natalizie, presepi peruviani, abbaglianti alberi di Natale. E il Blue Portal, dove vecchie signore generose del loro tempo vendevano per beneficenza oggettini locali. E Channer & Taney, gioiellieri: davanti alle cui bacheche con i vecchi gioielli in argento e in turchese lasciati in pegno dagli indiani, così come a quelle di artisti indiani di oggi, impari a vedere, impari a distinguere, impari a lasciare il cuore dietro a oggetti d'un artigianato che sul Ponte Vecchio ti avevano insegnato a non prendere sul serio. Qui, invece, mi stavo abituando perfino a chiamarli, questi artigiani, 'artisti'. Old Town, dunque, col suo diffuso profumo d'incenso di *piñon*. Con la sua quasi patetica illusione di far parte del mondo dal quale venivo.

Poi, poco a poco, questo piccolo mondo racchiuso, con le donne pueblo acccolate dietro i loro tappetini neri coperti di monili e la Cadillac di quarta mano su cui a sera ricaricano tutto per tornarsene nella riserva; con qualche navajo austero che fa il giro dei negozi per piazzare la sua ultima, fraudolenta *kacina*, lui che hopi non è; con la ragazza chicana che davanti all'entrata della *cochina*, dall'altra parte del Rio Grande Boulevard, gira e gira la manovella della gabbia dove abbrustoliscono i peperoncini, diffondendone l'aroma per mezza Old Town – poco a poco, tutto questo cominciai a riconoscerlo come l'umile, serena risposta alla sfida di quanto c'è appena oltre – ecco che fra l'autolavaggio e la Kachina Kitchen scorgi i tre vulcanini spenti: il segnale, vicinissimo anche se distante quindici miglia, di quella natura immensa che si lascia appena sfiorare. Finché tutto questo – la gente, le stradine, gli odori pungenti, le cose, i vulcanini, anche le grandi strade, che ieri erano ostili ma che adesso sono immen-

se vie verso qualcosa che sfugge, irraggiungibile, ma che ti parla anche se non sai che cosa ti dice – riconobbi come mio.

Ed ecco allora, imperiosa, la dimensione egemonica che fino a ieri mi aveva respinto – no, che non avevo capito: quel cielo da cui non v'è rifugio se non nella sua piena, totale accettazione. E allora l'effimero, l'attuale, riprende l'umile ruolo insignificante che gli compete.

Sullo sfondo della roccia rossa, in un valloncetto in cui qualche rado ginepro si contorce senza riuscire a fare ombra, un branco di cavalli bradi si riposa nel grande sole. Mi guardano avvicinarsi. Il capobranco – uno splendido baio – si solleva lento, mi guarda mettere a fuoco. Poi si avvia. Gli altri si alzano, lo seguono lenti.

Mi resta impressa una generale, sdegnosa voltata di glutei.

Anche questa è una risposta alle domande che una volta mi facevo.



Rudolfo Anaya reading from *The Farolitos of Christmas* to a young public at Bookworks, Albuquerque (1997)

“THE CUTTING EDGE OF THE STRUGGLE.”
AN INTERVIEW WITH RUDOLFO ANAYA

This interview took place in Florence on September 26, 1991. At that time, Mr Anaya and his wife Patricia were guests at the Rockefeller Center in Bellagio. They spent a weekend in Florence to see the city, which they had never visited, and to discuss the possibility of Mr Anaya participating in the international conference, West or Far West: Myth and Reality, which was due to open in Treviso the following November. The interview was published two years later in RSA Journal, Rivista di Studi Nord-Americani.

By 1991, Rudolfo Anaya's status as the foremost Chicano writer was beginning to be acknowledged even outside his original Latino readership. The turning point was the publication of his fourth novel, Albuquerque (1992), to which the writer refers in this interview as still in progress, and which was well received nation-wide. In April, 1994, Warner Books put forth a paperback edition of Albuquerque, as well as a paperback and a special, colored-illustrated hardcover edition of Bless Me, Ultima, Anaya's first novel that since its original publication in 1972 by a small press in California had sold over 300,000 copies. Warner went on to publish a Spanish translation of that novel for distribution in the United States, an Anaya Reader, the first three volumes of the Sonny Baca tetralogy (Zia Summer, 1995, Rio Grande Fall, 1996, and Shaman Winter, 1999), and Jalamanta: A Message from the Desert (1996).

“The most widely-read Mexican American” writer, as one critic called him, long celebrated in the West but barely known back east, was finally emerging into the nation-wide circuit of readership. At the time of our interview, Anaya's work, as well as Chicano literature at large, was “on the verge” of receiving national attention. In the light of the unprecedented investment in his books on the part of a major East Coast publisher, the writer's words concerning the reason why mainstream America was beginning to take notice of Chicano writers assume further relevance.

Possibly because your name was first mentioned to me by Henry Roth, when I first read Bless Me, Ultima I noticed profound analogies between your novel and Call It Sleep. I am not talking about literary influences—I am talking about paradigmatic analogies. Had you read Roth's novel at the time? Was it in any way a book that you had in mind?



I had read *Call It Sleep* in college. It was an underground classic. For me at the time, 1958, *Call It Sleep* was not an easy book to understand. Influence in terms of any kind of narrative style or theme or approach or even the idea of the child as the main protagonist in the story was not there, and it wasn't there for a number of reasons. When I began to write *Bless Me, Ultima*, I had already read many American writers. I came from a family that had no education. My parents had not gone to grade school, and my only aspiration was to finish high school. If I did that, I was doing well. So, most of the literature that influenced me I read at the university undergraduate level. When I started writing *Bless Me, Ultima* ...

Which was when?

It was published in 1972. I probably started it in '62 or '63. I worked on it for a good, I'd say, seven years, possibly ten. One of the feelings about these writers was that I could not use the American writers' sense of place in the novel that I wanted to create, which was a novel about a small town in New Mexico inhabited by Spanish speaking old Mexican-Hispanics who had settled in those valleys where I grew up, especially the Pecos River valley in eastern New Mexico. So, the process of writing *Bless Me, Ultima* was a process of finding not only my story but also a way to write, a unique way to portray my community, a unique voice. Probably that is what it has in common with *Call It Sleep* or any other novel that comes out of a particular community, whether it would be ethnic or regional or gender related. What I am sure Henry Roth struggled with as he was writing *Call It Sleep*, was discovering his own voice and how to tell that story. It is the same thing I struggled with when I started my novel—how to find my own voice to tell the story of Antonio Márez, the boy in *Bless Me, Ultima*.

Because in your case, as well as in Roth's, there was no background, no literary tradition to reach back for.

Not within my community.

That's what I meant.

And also, not in the American writers I was reading. Although I was influenced by them and I admired them and probably tried to emulate them or imitate them, it could not be done. Somehow, Roth and Hemingway and Faulkner and Wolfe were not talking about my corner of the world. In fact, maybe the one that comes the closest is Thomas Wolfe because he seems to have this love affair with the small town in the South, with the family and the pressures in the family.

You decided not to write in Spanish?

Spanish is my native language. I only spoke Spanish with my parents.

Which is similar to Antonio's experience. Antonio learns English in school, right?

Right. And so did I. The novel is very autobiographical. It uses the background, the setting of my own home town in New Mexico, the valleys ...

Even the names are the same. You did not change them.

Some of the names are the same. My grandfather farmed and my parents were born in Puerto de Luna. It's still there. I was born in Las Pasturas, a littler village nearby. I used the environment, the geography, the lakes, the river.

Did you ever think of writing in Spanish?

No, because I took my training in the English Department and, therefore, I was reading English and American literature and world literature in translation. A curious phenomenon, I believe, about *Bless Me, Ultima* is that in the process of creating it and thinking back to how I wanted to constitute that world of my childhood which had taken place in Spanish, I thought a lot of it through in Spanish.

I was wondering about that. As a matter of fact, quite often your English has a Spanish flavor.

Yes. That novel, of all the ones I've written, has that sense of soul, of *anima*, of contact with the village tradition of New Mexico. I was trying to think of the events, the major events that I wanted to portray in the novel, and so many of them, especially with the old people, took place in Spanish. It was the only language they spoke.

An extremely interesting aspect of this novel is the coming together of at least three different ways of relating to the Unknown. There is the official, institutionalized way of Catholicism. There is a sort of diffuse animism—for example, the episode when Samuel takes Antonio to see the carp. And there is Ultima's way. Her spirituality seems to resolve all conflicts among the various ways. Is this something that you drew from your tradition? Was there this multilayered spirituality in your background?

Yes. One of the things that every writer attempts to do is to reach as deep as possible below the mundane surface of everyday reality. I was looking back at my childhood, reliving those experiences, and recognizing my attempts to

create a meaning for myself—a meaning not only for my life but also, it seems, a meaning, a world view that explained my community. When I looked back I began to see many different levels. I began to see that there was not only the level of the Catholic Church and its teachings but also that world of animism, created partly out of the stories told by the people, the *cuentos*, and partly out of the imagination of the children, that is, by my childhood friends and me as we grew up. We heard stories and we told stories, and the idea of the storyteller or the mythmaker became extremely important to me. Probably, more and more my world points to what is commonly called animism—the idea that the universe is infused with spirit.

Like the presence of the river.

That's what I felt when I was a child. When I went to the river, whether I was with my friends or alone, I always had a feeling that there was something more than just the river, there was something more than the trees and the water where we went swimming or fishing. This was especially true when I found myself alone. When I found myself alone by the river or coming home late in the afternoon or maybe sometimes going down to cut wild grass for a milk cow we kept, and it would be late, there would be this presence, this feeling of being watched. The feeling that the river itself was alive and it had a heartbeat and a rhythm and a message to convey. And the most exhilarating part of it was being swept up in it. If you allowed yourself, you were swept up in that spirit. It was very frightening for a child. The minute you feel it, you run! You run away from it because you don't understand it. There will be very few people to whom you could go to explain what is happening when you feel that. This is why Ultima enters the novel. She comes, in a way, to teach Antonio to trust that feeling, to trust that spirituality, that infusion of life which is all around you in the open hills and in the river.

Interestingly, the father, too, could have taught him that. This is made clear in their final conversation.

Yes. But Antonio never turns to his father. He is too attached to his mother. It occurs to me, since you started the comparison with *Call It Sleep*, that Roth's boy is extremely alienated from *his* father for different reasons.

I don't get the feeling that Antonio is alienated from his father.

Perhaps not alienated, but I would say not close to him. The father has grown sons, older than Antonio, and the war has taken them away. But he dreams. The father's dream is, "When my boys return ..." He never turns to Antonio and says, "You're here, why don't you and I do something?" In that respect, there is a distance. The father, after all, is a Márez.

But it is the father who brings Ultima into the family. The connection based on their mutual respect for the llano is there. So when at the end the father opens up and talks about what it means to be out in the llano, this connects with the beginning. It does not come as a surprise.

Yes. It is the father who has felt the elation of flying. When you really feel the surge of energy of the earth, of the place you love the most, trust the most or are connected to, you feel that elation of flying. The father had felt it on the *llano*, and this is obviously related to the theme of people who can fly. Ultima, being a *curandera* or a shaman, has the ability to fly, so that ties in one theme and, yes, it is the father who brings Ultima into the family. The mother is connected to the river. She turns her attention to the church, while the attention of Ultima and the father, in this round-about way, is to the land.

At the same time, Ultima is also the one who teaches Antonio that there is but one water. That there need not be any contradiction between the sea, the tides, the moon, and the blood, because eventually it all flows together.

Polarities, in the novel, were extremely important to me. In fact, probably the idea of these dualities permeates the novel. It starts quite obviously with the idea of good and evil because Antonio lives in the moral universe of his mother. Then I stretched the mythological roots of the novel into the indigenous Native American world. The Aztecs, for example, who conceived of the universe in dualities, provide a great kinship not only to the European Catholic world Antonio grows up in but also to the indigenous world that he first begins to see through Ultima.

There seems to be a hint that Ultima is in part Indian herself. Or am I over-reading? Her dark complexion, the way she wants to be buried ...

I think that's very true. A great percentage of the Mexican population in New Mexico are *mestizos*. The *españoles* who first came up in the sixteenth century to colonize along the Rio Grande were also *mejicanos*, and they settled all along the Indian pueblos of the Rio Grande. So we think of our cultural roots as being part of that *mestizaje*. By the early sixties, when I began to work on my novel, I became very interested in exploring that part of my heritage, my history, my roots, which we had not been taught in school or at home. We had been very divorced from the indigenous Native American cultures, and so I read about Aztec and Native American thought. Also, by that time, I had formed a relationship with the Indian pueblos, specifically Taos. I am very interested in their worldview inasmuch as I feel it belongs, in part, to me. It starts showing up, I think, in the symbols that I use, for example in the indigenous symbols that come from the archetypal lagoon. It was part of the process of writing *Bless Me, Ultima*.

And, of course, the animals—the fish, the owl ...

Yes, absolutely. Animals play an important role in the *cuentos*, in the folk tales I heard as a child growing up. By the time I started writing *Bless Me, Ultima*, I began to manipulate them so that I could use them the way I wanted. The owl is most often associated with witchcraft—a witch takes the form of an owl to travel. I grew up listening to all these stories, so when I present Ultima her anima becomes an owl.

I was surprised to see Ultima attending mass. After all, she has all the trappings of the bruja.

Well, the *brujas* are often in the front row in church every Sunday, you see. That's not a problem!

Incidentally, I find the scenes involving Antonio and his friends absolutely splendid—the brutality, the harshness, the way children have of coming directly to the point, with no regard for each other's feelings. This, again, reminds me of Call It Sleep.

Yes, I do portray this world of violence in the novel. People have pointed it out to me: "You kill a lot of people!" It starts in death and ends in death, and there are deaths in between. Probably, I was reflecting how I felt as an observer. As a child, I think, I was already an observer. I used to look closely at things. I did not know I was saving them to write about them but I noticed people and events and I felt that they were very important. One thing that became part of the novel is the brutal aggressiveness of the children that I grew up with. We had very good manners at home—I was taught very good manners at home—but the world of the playground at school and then, later on, when we played baseball or went fishing or just went out together in the summer, was very aggressive. And so my schoolmates are portrayed as animals. One is called Horse. Another one is Bones because the kids say his family gave him raw meat to eat.

I was at a dance in my hometown, recently, having a good time. We had gone to a reunion and we were talking about how it was to grow up. And that fact was sustained because some of the men of my generation, remembering back, actually said, "We don't know why we were like that. We were lucky we survived." It was rough growing up. We learned who to watch out for. You didn't keep a grudge but you never turned your back on the guy that could really arm wrestle you to the ground.

Let me ask you about the rest of the trilogy, Heart of Aztlán and Tortuga.

Heart of Aztlán takes place in Albuquerque. In 1952 my family moved to Albuquerque, and so I tried to capture the sense of living in a barrio in

that city. Also, I was very interested in the mythology of Mexico that the Chicano Movement was drawn to. I looked at the legend of Quetzalcòatl, the deity of the Toltecs and later of the Aztecs and the Mayas, the god of art and illumination and wisdom and agriculture, asking myself if it was possible to use myth in a contemporary setting.

Then I wrote *Tortuga*, which is set in a hospital for crippled children. When I was sixteen my back was broken in a very serious accident. I was paralyzed and in a hospital for a whole summer, and was never expected to walk again. It was a very difficult story to write but probably *Tortuga* is my best written novel, although not as widely circulated or loved as *Bless Me, Ultima*. "Tortuga," by the way, is the name the kids give the boy because of the body cast. That's why they call him Tortuga.

Folk tales and mythology are very important in your fiction, aren't they?

Yes, they are. One novella, *The Legend of the Llorona*, is about one of those mythical creatures of our folk tales. Another one, *Lord of the Dawn*, is about Quetzalcòatl. Right now I am working on a new play, titled *Matachines*. The *matachines* dance for feast days. They were used by the Franciscans to convert the Indians. I have a new novel, *Albuquerque*. The setting is urban and contemporary. The theme of assimilation is very strong. Now the Chicano is more urban, more middle-class, producing more professionals and, therefore, losing a great deal of the culture. How is our culture to be maintained?

The eternal American dilemma. What about the world of the llano? This world entered literature for the first time with Bless Me, Ultima. You wrote about it as of something on its way out. Has it changed? Is it disappearing?

Well, it is and it isn't. In the urban setting, more and more of the children go to high school and learn only the Anglo American experience. They don't experience some of the traditional ceremonies and rituals with which my generation grew up. We had the language. I think the question for us is, can we take some elements of that culture and portray them in literature, so that our community sees their reflection and perhaps understands their importance and their value? If the artist portrays part of those traditions, then perhaps all is not lost. Many young people in school are becoming interested because everybody looks for their roots at one time or another. Who am I? Where did I come from?

What about the language?

Recently I had a very sad discussion on this subject. We were at a party in Albuquerque, talking to a Chicano who is a linguist. His commentary

was that in another generation we will have lost our language. Possibly, my generation is the last one to keep it, as we are shifting more and more to English. At the same time, you see in the community young people who have these interests—some are studying Spanish, others are doing art work or arts and crafts or theatre. Spanish is still alive in a very positive way right now.

The same thing has been happening within the Jewish American community. Generation after generation, the problem that Jewish American writers have had to face is that, more and more, Jews in America are losing some distinctive aspects of their culture. It seems that American intellectuals are going through this agony of swimming against the tide, trying to rescue ...

The word “rescue” is very important: trying to “rescue.” There is a difference, however. We Chicanos are on our own territory. I think that in many respects, that territory has disappeared for the Jewish writer.

This is very true. Native Americans have an even older claim to that same territory, and they are facing the same ...

The same thing, yes. There is the gloomy prediction I gave you, and then there is the bright side. At the very moment that we speak of this current that assimilates everything into itself, there is in the United States a strong multicultural movement. Many groups are at a point in time where they are declaring their identity. They are asking questions about it. They want part of that identity to be reflected in the schools and in the universities. The Chicanos want their literature in the curriculum. In that way we will resist complete assimilation. The positive thing is that there is a real search and need for roots in our country, and empowerment of those roots. You can't just feel good because you are a Chicano or a Native American. You must empower that community so that it can preserve itself, so to speak.

At the same time, it is also very important not to aim at particularization. The common ground with all the groups is just as essential.

Yes, of course. That's true all the time.

After all, the idea of America is what has brought so many together—not all, but most. It's a fascinating moment in history because it is a time of new balances.

I think so too. So far, the arena has been mostly in the universities where the minorities and the feminist groups have sought to be represented in the curricula as part of the offerings of the universities. In the case of the Chicanos, the country has not yet recognized our struggle. It's just on the verge. But after so many years, I think they are beginning to recognize it.

Why so?

We could spend many days talking about the why-so. Some people estimate that there are twenty millions Mexican Americans in the United States, and we are now beginning to be recognized. America is beginning to see this group as a big market. Chicanos are beginning to be recognized as the border people between North America and South America. Many of these things have been known for a long time but have never really affected positions of power in the United States. One very obvious way by which this is illustrated is in literature. They just haven't paid attention or caught up with Chicano literature. In the past two or three years, some anthologies have included our work. A few publishers have begun to publish Chicano writers. It's going to come. It's a very exciting time to be alive and to be writing!

Well, you've got a headstart on everybody!

[Laughing] Well, I have quite a few books around.

What is the relationship between Chicanos and other groups of Latin origin in the United States?

For the writers of my generation, let's say the first wave of Chicano writers, it is excellent because we all came together and we all know each other. Even now, I know the Puerto Rican writers of New York and the Central American writers in San Francisco. We have been working together for many years, for example in organizations like the Before Columbus Foundation, which is multicultural. It has been around for years, giving yearly book awards to writers. We haven't been sitting still—we have been doing things! One young man from Florida, a Cuban American writer, Virgil Suarez, wrote me for a story to put in an anthology.¹ Now it's Latino writers—not just a Chicano, not just a Puertorriqueño, but a Latino anthology. Even with the new generation we have linkages because even if we don't know them as well as we knew the old writers on a friendly, personal basis, they know our work.

Is there a Latino culture in the United States or are the various cultures distinct, although closely related?

No, they are distinct. I thought that you asked the question along literary lines—that is, do writers know each other. And that's how I responded. No, the cultures are distinct. But we feel tremendous affinities. That's why I say that, at least in my generation, the affinities we have with the Nuyoricans and the Black writers are very close. With the Puertorriqueño writers, we share the language—which not only connects us in the United States but also connects us to Latin America, South America and Mexico.

What about Europe? What about Spain? Is Spain an important factor in your culture?

No. We have not been connected. Chicano writers *per se* have not been connected in any way to what is going on in Spain. Quite the contrary. In a recent essay that I wrote, titled «The New World Man», in which I discuss the Chicano Movement, my growth as a writer, and where I am now, I suggest that one of the things we did during the Chicano Movement was to declare independence from Anglo America. And by that I mean that I wrote from within. I wrote about my place, my community, my people—and that in itself is a declaration of independence because it's "new."

The Chicano Movement was very emphatic in saying, "We have our identity." That was the first step of the declaration of independence. I was in Spain to deliver this paper and I said, "The second Declaration of Independence, which I make now, is from Spain!" Because in the United States they label us Hispanic, as if Hispanic meant having origins directly from Spain. Instead, our origins are the *mestizo* origins of the New World: we are part Indian and part European. And in order to clarify that identity we have also to tell the Spaniard, "Don't look at me in your image. I have my own image! That's the one I have to portray and those are the values that I have to show in my literature—and that is finally my identity."

That's a long answer to your question!

In a sense, it is a very American answer: You have used the major American episteme, the Declaration of Independence. You have used it four times. Of course, Spain for you is a very faraway homeland. It's many centuries away.

Yes. It is so far away that the reason I called my essay «The New World Man» is because I have to give up those identities in order to find my own. And my identity is New World. I have to look at my roots, right beneath my feet. They have been there now for a long, long time, from all those multicultural people that came into New Mexico.

What about Spanish literature? Do you read Spanish literature?

No.

Not any more than you would read, let's say, Greek or Russian literature?

Right. Not any more. If I were going to be drawn to another literature, my greatest affinity right now would be for Latin American literature. I have read more García Márquez, Vargas Llosa and Eduardo Galeano, recently, than any Spanish writer. These people have more to tell me about those roots that I am seeking and that history that I am seeking. And I

think it is important to clarify why we are seeking it. It's because we have been so divorced from it, you see? The minute we enter the Anglo American school system we have to give up our identity. We have to acquire the language and the literature, the customs and the traditions of the Anglo American society. And so we go through all that time without knowing any of our own history or our records, without seeing it in school or seeing that it has value. That is the struggle now in the United States. The multi-cultural community says, "We also have value, we also have an identity if you would just present it in the classroom." There is nothing wrong with it. That is a very crucial element, I think, if other people are to look at our Declaration of Independence and make some sense of it. Otherwise they say, "So what's new? Everybody should be independent." There is a setting that we have, a historical setting, that is important to understand.

You were talking about your affinities with the Blacks. Would you care to elucidate?

Well, historically, the Chicano Movement followed immediately after the Civil Rights Movements, which the Blacks led. Perhaps we learned a lot from that—and when in the mid-sixties the Chicano Movement started, we already had a model, so to speak. In my case, I also had friends. When, after publishing in 1972, I began to travel around the country and joined various organizations, I began to meet some of the Black writers who are my contemporaries and discovered that our relationship *vis-à-vis* the Anglo American society is the same. We have been the "invisible men," the invisible people, as the Blacks have been the invisible people.

The history of slavery is different from the history of the *mejicano* in the Southwest, but there are also many communalities. So, over the years, meeting people like Toni Cade Bambara and Ishmael Reed, many of the Asian American writers from the northwest coast, I have become aware of the affinity which we share and of the brotherhood that we feel. We feel that we are on the cutting edge of the struggle for cultural survival.

After these beautiful words, let me thank you for your time and for sharing your ideas with me.

Thank you. I've enjoyed it.

Endnotes

¹ Cfr. Hijuelos *et al.*, eds., *Iguana Dreams*. 222-26.



Corrales, northern New Mexico

DOUBLES: STRATEGIES OF SENSE PRODUCTION IN RUDOLFO ANAYA'S "THE MAN WHO FOUND A PISTOL"

The theoretical premise of this study is grounded on one of the axioms in the hermeneutic perspective of structuralism and semiotics alike, namely, that the literary text functions as a self-sufficient mechanism of communication; hence, the primary attention accorded to this mechanism in the search for the text's meaning. The *modus operandi*, therefore, is initially inductive. The analysis of the double as the overriding structural paradigm leads to an interpretative hypothesis which a second stage, intertextual in character and concentrating on relevant contextual elements, further supports and expands—this hypothesis being that “The Man Who Found a Pistol” constitutes a profound metanarrative statement of aesthetics on the part of an author who straddles two languages, two cultures, and two literary traditions.

“The Man Who Found a Pistol” was first published in 1992 in *Mirrors Beneath the Earth: Short Fiction by Chicano Writers*. It was later included in *The Anaya Reader* (1995) and then in *The Man Who Could Fly and Other Stories* (2006). For the purpose of the present analysis, a brief summary of the fabula may be helpful.

While walking along the irrigation ditch near his house in Corrales, as he is wont to do, a nameless, solitary man, a teacher at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque about whom there are rumors of an old, tragic hunting accident involving his brother, discovers a pistol in the grass. He picks it up, and takes to carrying it in his pocket. Eventually, he buys bullets for it. When his wife deserts him, the man asks a local boy to come stay in the big house because he is now afraid to live by himself. One winter night the boy wakes to a loud knocking. When the man opens the door, the boy sees the man's double standing at the entrance. The man shoots at his image and falls dead, the pistol at his side. The boy picks up the gun, throws it among the weeds, and runs away.

The story is told by an also nameless first-person narrator who learns it “piece by piece” from Procopio, the local cantina bartender, and, to a lesser degree, from the local well digger—an appropriate source of information for anybody interested in unearthing remote happenings.¹ The present discussion will begin by focusing on the initial segment of the text, specifically, on the first sentence of the first paragraph:

““This was the man who found the pistol,” Procopio said as he pushed the newspaper across the bar for me to read” (140). This initial sentence includes



most of the primary structural elements of the story. It also anticipates the dynamics to which the story entrusts its deepest significance.

Interestingly, the very first phrase (“This was the man who found the pistol”) throws the reader back, as it were, to a previous statement: the title itself, “The Man Who Found a Pistol.” Instead of being propelled forward, one is thrown back toward a textual absence. The empty space between the title and the beginning of the text invites one to try to fill it with the reason, or reasons, for the progression from *a* pistol to *the* pistol. Implicit in this progression are a number of elements denied the reader, the most relevant of which is that both the speaker (Procopio) and the listener (the anonymous first-person narrator, as is revealed at the end of the sentence) are already cognizant of the fact about which they will presently converse. In other words, the initial segment of the story institutes an implicit connection between the present and the past. This connection will prove to be a pivotal factor in the overall strategy of sense production.

The first sentence introduces the three main characters in the story. These are the man who found the pistol, Procopio the bartender, and the narrator. Only the bartender has a name. His name, it must be noted, is that of the 6th century Greek historian Procopius. It should also be noted that the triangle of the principle characters replicates Karl Bühler’s communication model, with Procopio as the sender of the message, the man who found the pistol as the object of the message, and the narrator as the addressee.² The presence of the newspaper, which is one of Procopio’s props in his strategy of message giving, reinforces the paradigm of communication already apparent in the first sentence. At the same time, the presence of the newspaper is of little help to the reader since the news itself is withheld: the news, which the reader will learn only toward the end of the story, that the man who found the pistol is now dead.

Most interestingly, the conclusion of the first sentence (“for me to read”) alters the recognized communication model. As both listener and reader, the addressee of the message reveals himself to be the narrator of the story and, therefore, the first-degree source of the overall message. His function in the model, therefore, is double. As the intratextual listener, he looks backward. As the narrator, he looks forward, toward the extratextual addressee.

The implicit system of communication identified in the interaction between the title and the initial syntagm of the first phrase is homologous to the system identified in the first sentence as a whole. In fact, the message constitutes a continuum that expands simultaneously toward the past as well as toward the future. In the process, the sense of the message is modified. The nature of this change is inherent in the presence of the two narrators and, specifically, in their different narrative models. Procopio “has worked in the village cantina many years; he knows the stories of the village. ... He doesn’t embellish the story; he just tells it. If you listen, fine; if you don’t, there’s always another customer at the bar” (140). The larger setting (the village), the specific setting (the cantina, with its social function

as the community's gathering place—its watering place, one might say), the anonymity of the listeners ("another customer"), the fact that Procopio does not enrich his tales, are all elements that point to the tradition of oral storytelling. Anaya makes this clear from the very beginning: "He doesn't *embellish* a story, he just tells it" (emphasis added). Procopio, the local historian, does not embroider his story with information or observations relating to himself. He is the objective, detached recorder of facts that are known to him. To use the terminology suggested by Gérard Genette, he is the perfect intra-heterodiegetic narrator.³

The unnamed first-person narrator, on the other hand, immediately establishes his role as (again in Genette's terms) an extra-homodiegetic narrator. He is totally extraneous to the story of the man who found the pistol. Unlike Procopio, he has never met the man. His closest approach is when he drives "by [the man's] home, with the old, weathered barns": a place that "looked deserted and haunted in the sharp January wind" (142), and which even the blackbirds have abandoned—perhaps an intertextual intimation that he is denied not only thirteen ways of looking at what he came to see but also all possibilities of contact. Unlike Procopio, however, the first-person narrator "embellishes" the man's story with constant references to his own reactions to the tale. In other words, the story he tells is the story of himself in relation to the original one of the man who found the pistol.

This is made explicit from the beginning of the second paragraph: "The story of the man who found the pistol reminded me of something that happened to me years ago" (140). Paragraphs 2 to 5 are entirely devoted to the secondary story of the narrator who found an axe in a brook and, sensing "a presence" (140), put it back in the cold water.⁴ This prolonged narrative tangent is intended to establish a parallel between the man and the narrator. As the text progresses, the relevance of this parallel is reinforced: "I began to understand that the man was much like me" (141); "The story of the man who found the pistol became an obsession" (142); "Something in the man's story seemed to be my story" (144); "My own work began to suffer; I became even more obsessed with the story" (144); "He was like me, or like any other man who wonders how the past has shaped his destiny" (145); "I felt I knew what the man had thought" (145); "We listen to the tale and secretly whisper, 'There but for the grace of God go I.' ... I felt I knew the man as if he were my brother" (147).

Moreover, the tangent regarding the double-bladed axe establishes a parallel between the first-person narrator and Procopio, in that both tell a story. The difference, however, is that the latter never leaves his place behind the counter at the cantina, whereas the former constantly roams the countryside in search of some meaning to give the story of the man who found the pistol. Procopio has specific, intratextual listeners (the narrator himself, as well as any other customer), whereas the first-person narrator has no identifiable audience. Most important, Procopio does not present himself as an individual with his own particular feelings and personality;

on the contrary, the feelings, personality, and family situation of the first-person narrator dominate his telling. Clearly, the two models are, on the one hand, traditional oral storytelling and, on the other, the self-centered, highly personal perspective of modern narrative technique. While the first excludes the presence of the narrator as an element intrinsic to the story, the second places the narrator and his performance in the foreground. Beside playing a significant role in the strategy of sense production, as we will see, this double narrative perspective is structurally consistent with the overriding paradigmatic presence of doubles in a story which is based on the presumable guilt over his brother's death that obsesses the man who found a pistol, and which culminates in the apparition of the man's *Doppelgänger*.⁵

The paradigm of the double is introduced in the third paragraph when the narrator recalls the "handsome double-bladed axe" he found in the Jemez River (140). Not all occurrences of this paradigm are so explicit. An example is the hare-lip (that is to say, the "double" upper lip) of the boy who witnesses the final tragedy. Whether explicit or implied, however, doubles persistently recur at various levels throughout the text. To begin with, two analogous incidents take place, concerning the discovery of two weapons. There are two wives: the man's, and the narrator's.⁶ There are two rivers: the Rio Grande and the Jemez. Two communities are referred to: Corrales, a village in a "pastoral valley" (141) that is the main location of the story, and the nearby city of Albuquerque. The paradigm of the double is also present in the biethnic and bicultural population of Corrales, with Procopio, Primo, Primo's hare-lipped nephew and the well digger as representatives of the original Latino inhabitants, while the university professor from Texas represents the more recent influx of professionals, often of Anglo origin. (The singular position and function of the narrator in the community will be discussed later.) Furthermore, as was remarked, the obsession of the man who found a pistol is duplicated by the narrator's obsession with the former's story. Both roam the banks of the Rio Grande in a fruitless search for meaning. Both repeatedly pose unanswerable questions to Procopio. In the penultimate paragraph, the narrator summarizes his emotional involvement in the story of the man: "Procopio had told me only sketches of the man, but I felt I knew the man as if he were my brother" (147). These last words bind the concept of the double to that of universal brotherhood in suffering.

Most important from a structural point of view, there are two narrators. As a result, there are two stories: the story of the man who found a pistol, and the story of the man who became obsessed with the story of the man who found the pistol. Accordingly, there are two addressees or, more precisely, two types of addressees: the intra-diegetic *destinataire*, and the reader.

This, however, does not necessarily mean that there are two, much less thirteen ways of looking at the story of the man who found the pistol. To both Procopio and the narrator, the man's story is equally bewildering, an

unsolvable mystery impervious to reconstruction and understanding. Both narrators share the conviction that the past “haunts us,” that “[g]hosts of the past come to haunt our lives” (145), and that its reconstruction is subject to the uncertainties of relativity. In their common frustration at the impossibility of making some sense of the story, the two narrators reach analogous conclusions. Procopio, the historian, is unable to escape today’s prevailing sense of the relativity of reality and, consequently, of the relativity of any message. In the story of the man who found a pistol, Procopio sees only a baffling composite of conflicting possibilities: “‘Who knows, A ghost from the past. Maybe just the boy’s imagination’” (147). The modern narrator, who focuses on the present and on its interaction with the future, faced with the same unanswerable query, also admits defeat in his concluding words: “What is the future, I thought, but a time that comes to swallow what we make of life” (147). Even by joining forces, therefore, the traditional storyteller and the modern narrator are unable to solve the mystery posed by the past.⁷

Let us go back to the opening sentence: “‘This was the man who found the pistol,’ Procopio said as he pushed the newspaper across the bar for me to read.” At first, his gesture could be perceived as a sign of authority; in retrospect, however, it reveals itself to be an act of resignation. Procopio, the traditional storyteller and, as such, the repository of “truth,” gives way to the riddles of relativity, and leaves the task of making sense of reality to his successor, the modern(ist) storyteller. In turn, conditioned by his acknowledged lack of authority, his successor can tell the *meaningless* story of a man who found a pistol and died because of it, only by turning the story into the tale of his own doomed search for the eluding meaning.

Anaya’s modernist narrator, however, is definitely *sui generis*. To appreciate the special nature of his storytelling, as well as its relevance within the overall mechanism of sense production, one will have to look at him in the light of his position and role in the community.

One of the sets of doubles observed in the short story is the dual character of the inhabitants of Corrales: the Latinos on the one hand, and the outsider, perhaps of Anglo origin, on the other. The first-person narrator is not readily placeable in either ethnic and cultural category. Integral to the structural strategy of the text, in fact, is the difficulty in conclusively associating the narrator with either group. His leisure, as well as the mention that his “own work began to suffer,” would seem to place him, both professionally and economically, outside the old, rural Latino community. Presumably, he is an intellectual, maybe even a colleague of the man who found a pistol. At the same time, his sensitivity to the “presence” and his realization that “one must return to the circle of the family to stay in balance” (141) suggest that he is part of the Latino culture. The question then arises: Who is this central character, listener and teller alike, protagonist of the story only as a witness *manqué*?

It is more than tempting—in fact, it is inevitable—to view the narrator as a personification of the author himself. Indeed, the text directs the reader

to see him in this light not only by the precise allusion to *Tortuga* (“The mountain reminds me of a giant turtle. When I was a boy, I had killed a turtle, and when I look at the mountain, I am sometimes reminded of that incident,” 142), but also by the use of the author’s own familiar surroundings and habits.⁸ This strategy is a constant in Rudolfo Anaya’s poetics. From *Bless Me, Ultima* to his more recent works, it is to be found in most of his fiction, poetry, and plays. The function of this discreet, at times barely perceptible self-referentiality is to bring attention to the presence of the narrating voice not so much as a cultural mediator or a spokesperson for the Chicanos but, rather, as a storyteller once again addressing his people; a storyteller ostensibly different from the Procopios of Anaya’s tradition (Modernism has swept over Corrales, too, reaching deep into the cozy adobe kitchens where storytelling used to take place) but one who is still imbued with the sense of his time-honored social function within the community; a storyteller all too aware of his responsibility toward the changing literary expectations of his audience and yet, at the same time, mindful of his responsibility toward that which his people have not forgotten and must never forget, be it simply the scent of burning *piñon* in the fireplace. A storyteller, in short, who knows which chords to strike in order to capture and retain his audience’s attention, and knows how to orchestrate the echoes that his homey words evoke in his reader’s mind.

One such resonance is created by the title of the story. To a Mexican American reader, the words, “The Man Who Found a Pistol,” can hardly fail to reverberate as an echo of “con su pistola en la mano,” the famous line in “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez”—literally, “with his pistol in his hand.”⁹ Once this resonance is struck, a stream of associations follows. Like Gregorio Cortez, the man who found a pistol grew up on a ranch in Texas. He, too, had a brother who presumably died of a gunshot, and in circumstances that suggest a degree of responsibility on the part of the surviving sibling. His wife, like Cortez’s wife Leonor, eventually left him. He, too, traveled back and forth across the Rio Grande, preferring, as did Cortez, the South side (“That’s why he had moved to Corrales, to be away from the city where he worked,” 141). The man’s story is transmitted by word of mouth, as was Cortez’s. After his death, his story was reported in the newspaper, and while it never achieved the notoriety of Cortez’s flight, apprehension, and trials, and certainly did not develop into a legend, it too became a matter of widespread interest in the community.

To be sure, there are as many inverted parallels to Gregorio Cortez’s story in “The Man Who Found a Pistol” as there are parallels. To begin with, the man’s pistol does not belong to him, whereas Cortez had his own pistol (not “the,” let alone “a” pistol) in his hand.¹⁰ Unlike Cortez, who was a superb shot, the man handles the gun as a peculiarly unfamiliar object (“His hands were trembling;” “He weighed it in his hand and then looked around;” “he sighed when he slipped the pistol into his pocket,” 143; “His hand was always in his pocket, as if he were making sure the pistol was still there,” 144; as Procopio says, “I think he was afraid to fire it;” 144;

“ ‘He tried to get rid of the pistol, He begged Primo to take it, saying he was afraid something bad was going to happen,’ ” 145). The lonely man is repeatedly shown as being fearful, whereas Cortez strikes fear into others.¹¹ Again unlike Cortez, who was endowed with such a winning personality that even his jailers readily took to him, the man was “melancholy” (142) and “spent most of his time alone” (141), “brooding over what he could tell no one” (145); he “had grown more moody and introverted” (144), and “the people let him pass in silence” (146).¹² Obviously, he is not a Border hero figure. In the final “shootout” scene, the narrator says of him, “ ‘This time he held the pistol in his hand’ ” (146). This is the only explicit reference to the Gregorio Cortez *corrido*; yet, unlike the popular hero, the man uses the gun against himself. Finally, whereas the ballad’s hero repeatedly challenges his pursuers by proudly declaring, “Yo soy Gregorio Cortez,” the man remains nameless to the end.

Mr Anaya has not volunteered any information regarding the possibility of a conscious use of “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez.” This hardly matters in the present discussion because, whether by design or not, the echoes are there—and they do resonate. What does matter is the fact that the model of “El Corrido” functions as a backdrop to “The Man Who Found a Pistol,” in the same indirect manner that characterizes the use of the Odyssey in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, of the New Testament in *The Old Man and the Sea*, or of the Song of Solomon in *The Sound and the Fury*. One does not find in this short story any of the stringencies of a mechanical adherence to the myth, nor any of the rigidities attendant certain implementations of T. S. Eliot’s peremptory bidding to pursue Joyce’s “method.”¹³ Rather, one perceives in “The Man Who Found a Pistol” a lesson long learned and assimilated, that is to say, the balanced combination of similarities and dissimilarities between the anonymous anti-hero and the established Border hero, between the present-time protagonist and the mythical model figure; as well as the controlled manipulation of the reader’s inclination to identify with the hero, and his awareness of his inadequacy to measure up to the model. In other words, whether or not they were consciously embedded in the story, the intertextual suggestions prompted by the *corrido* function as powerful reminders of a specific local culture which, if it cannot aspire to the universality of the Greek or the Biblical prototypes, still does enhance the story of the man who found a pistol with the richness of a widely shared experience. As the narrator confesses, “[s]omething in the man’s story seemed to be [everybody’s] story” (144).

Clearly, the story of the man who found the pistol is very different from that of Gregorio Cortez, although it has much in common with it. It has none of the heroic, and none of the simplicity of motivations that are typical of the traditional *corrido*. At the same time, Anaya’s short story taps on a universal, rather than a regional paradigm of inadequacy *vis-à-vis* the heroic paradigm. Arguably, the tight homology between the message and its source, between the story told by the narrator and his own story as the narrator, points to the changed socio-cultural circumstances within which Anaya’s tale addresses itself to its contemporary audience.

“The Man Who Found a Pistol” is not an autobiographical work of fiction. The first-person narrator is not Rudolfo Anaya, notwithstanding the clear use of his persona on the part of the author. In fact, it is exactly a “persona”: a storyteller who, like Anaya, has shouldered the task of talking about, talking to, and talking for his people, and does it in a manner appropriate to the modern storyteller that he is. As a highly crafted story that deceptively appears to be constructed according to a traditional narrative technique, “The Man Who Found a Pistol” is a complex example of Modernist writing that delivers its message through the subterranean undermining of the very premises it proffers.

Endnotes

¹“The Man Who Found a Pistol,” 141. All quotations refer to the 2006 edition.

²For Roman Jakobson’s elaboration of Bühler’s model, cfr. *Linguistic and Poetics*. For further discussion, cfr. Pagnini, *The Pragmatics of Literature*.

³Cfr. Genette, *Figures III*.

⁴The concept of the “presence,” particularly in proximity of a river, is a recurring topos in Anaya’s work. It first appears in *Bless Me, Ultima*.

⁵The apparition of the *Doppelgänger* is prepared by the rich isotopy of the preternatural, with six occurrences of *haunt*, *haunted*, and *haunting*, five of *ghost*, three of *strange*, two each of *presence*, *curse*, and *obsession*, and one of *mystery*. For the concept of isotopy, see Greimas, *Du sens* 10.

⁶The function of the two wives is one of opposition but also, on a more subtle level, of similarity. Whereas the wife of the man who found the pistol leaves her husband (“Maybe [she] became afraid [of him],” 145), the wife of the narrator shows concern (“Why are you so nervous?,” 144). At the same time, she distances herself from her husband’s obsession, not by abandoning him, as the other woman did, but by forgetting the key episode which, in his mind, links the narrator to the man who found the pistol (“But she had forgotten,” 145).

⁷The narrator’s question, “How could a man who’d had so much beauty around him do what he did?” (142), is purposely ambiguous. While seemingly implying suicide, it could also refer to some other violent act.

⁸See the passage about the narrator and his wife “driving up in the Jemez Mountains” (140) in a wooded area provided with tables for picnics along the bank of a stream. Mr and Mrs Anaya often pass through just such scenery on their way to and from their cottage in Jemez Springs.

⁹Cfr. Américo Paredes, “With His Pistol in His Hand.”

¹⁰During his flight, Cortez carried two guns: his own, with which he had killed W. T. (Brack) Morris, the sheriff who had tried to apprehend him, and Morris’s own gun. This he later exchanged for the gun of Ceferino Flores, a friend who helped him (Paredes 72). Typically, the *corrido* only mentions his pistol. Aside from the *corrido*’s tendency to essentialize the narrative, the implication is that whatever gun Gregorio Cortez used, it immediately became *his* pistol.

¹¹Cfr.: “Venian los americanos / más blancos que una paloma, / de miedo que le tenian / a Cortez y a su pistola” (Paredes 155).

¹²The legend (not the *corrido*) has it that, while bringing his wounded brother to their mother’s house in his buggy, Cortez met a posse. When he calmly told them who he was, “[t]hey all looked at him and were afraid of him, because they were only twenty or twenty-five, and they knew that they were not enough. So they stepped aside and let him pass” (Paredes 41. Cfr. also 42). In Anaya’s story, the same effect is brought about by a somewhat different cause, that is to say, the uneasiness (not necessarily the fear) felt by the community at the man’s uncanny behavior.

¹³Eliot 153.



Beautiful Valley, northeastern Arizona

THE DESERT AND THE SEED:
THREE STORIES BY RUDOLFO ANAYA

Rudolfo Anaya's accomplishment as a master craftsman has been somewhat overshadowed by his steadfast example as an author deeply imbued with his native Chicano culture, and by an *oeuvre* rich in absorbing mythopoeic value. While by no means intending to underplay these essential aspects of Anaya's work, in the present paper I will further the argument recently put forth in my discussion of "The Man Who Found a Pistol" and focus on the writer's welding of various cultural heritages into one composite—one that makes use of different aesthetic languages, as in his recent *Seraphina's Stories*, which superimposes the *One Thousand and One Nights* paradigm onto colonial Santa Fe and grafts local onto universal themes creating a new, complex world of the imagination. To this purpose, I will discuss three stories ("Absalom," "In Search of Epifano," and "Children of the Desert"), concentrating on Anaya's manipulation of literary conventions and on his subtle transformation of some of their established semantic functions.

These three short stories share a number of common traits. They all take place in the desert. In all three, the function of nature is consistently atypical *vis-à-vis* certain literary and ideologic conventions. Two have a woman as the main actant, while in the third, the protagonist of which is a man, the woman is once again the positive pole in the gender opposition. Thematically, all three develop from or around an unfortunate love story. Moreover, the ending of "Absalom" and that of "Children of the Desert" are almost mirror-like: in each, the couple quarrels, after which, the man in the first story drives recklessly away, has an accident, and dies, while the man in the second story drives recklessly back toward his woman, has an accident, and dies. The old woman who is the protagonist of "In Search of Epifano" also drives away into the desert in search of love and dies, although not as a consequence of an accident. All these correspondences, and several others, suggest that these stories may have been conceived as a triptych—a hypothesis that the rather close dates of publication (1985, 1987, and 1990) conceivably corroborate.

Whether or not this hypothesis is correct, the three stories, independently of each other and with no loss to the individual sense each of them produces, display a singular consistency of means, all pointing to a remarkable consistency in the organization of meaning. In



each component of this admittedly limited medioscopic sample of texts, meaning is not dependent on their aggregation. Once identified, however, this overall consistency allows us to delve deeper into the workings of each text, thus revealing further levels of sense in Anaya's only apparently linear stories.

"Absalom," published in 1985, concerns an unfulfilled woman who after her divorce moves from New York to the desert south of Be'er Sheva. While visiting the Tomb of Absalom, she meets a North African whom she names Absalom. The two become intimate. The woman, whom the narrator names Tamar, is initially fulfilled by the new lover. Then, after a quarrel caused by basic differences over their respective gender roles, the man leaves in anger, and dies in his car. Every day, on her way to work, the woman "sees the mangled wreck" left to rust in the desert.¹

Several structural elements are compounded in this story, namely, a series of references to the Second Book of Samuel, the paradigmatic oppositions culture vs. nature and men vs. women, and the historical opposition Arabs vs. Jews.

The title obviously refers to the Bible but only midway through the narration do we find the first passage relating to Samuel. This is a reference to the Tomb of Absalom in the Valley of Qidron, where the two lovers meet; the naming of the man as "Absalom" by the woman is consequential to the circumstances of their encounter. Then comes the naming of the woman: "we might say her name is Tamar, a seductive, intriguing biblical name" (161). The African's "long hair" further connects him to Absalom. There is the Pillar of Absalom, where for the first time the woman hears the African's voice. In her passion, the woman cries, "Absalom! Absalom!" (162), an echo of King David's cry over the death of his favorite son (2 Sam. 19: 4). Then there are the Bedouins' words: "The hand of God seemed to reach down and grab the North African by the hair. His car, faster than any horse, went out from under him" (162)—a passage very close to Samuel's: "[Absalom's] head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away" (2 Sam. 18:10). Finally, the death of the African ("he died ... pierced by the shaft of the steering wheel," 163) graphically recalls that of Absalom: "[Joab] took three darts in his hand, and thrust them through the heart of Absalom" (18:14).

Clearly, the story is intended to be read bearing the Second Book of Samuel in mind; however, there is no analogy between the two episodes. The biblical Tamar was not Absalom's lover but his sister. The family drama involving David and his offsprings—Absalom, Tamar, and their half brother Amnon, her violator—is absent, and there are only two brief mentions of King David.² Surely, it is not on the diegetic level that the function of these scattered references to the biblical story can be appreciated.

The deferment in pursuing the initial biblical allusion intensifies the reader's curiosity as to the reason for the title, while at the same time

bringing attention to the present-day concerns. Here, the three oppositions—culture vs. nature, men vs. women, and Arabs vs. Jews—alternate in presenting a seemingly inescapable set of dualities. All are introduced at the very beginning of the story:

After her divorce she moved to the Negev, south of Be'er Sheva. There in the Israel desert, she found the solitude she sought. She would awaken early in the morning to greet the sun, to smell the fresh air, which held the scent of fruit blossoms. Later, the breeze would smell of sand, rocks, desert heat, and the faint body sweat she thought must be of the shepherders. (159)

Every linguistic sign present in the opening paragraph is referable to one of the polar oppositions, and the same holds true for practically the entire text. Some elements are active within more than one opposition. For instance, the Bedouins, although pertaining to the pole of culture, are closer to that of nature than their counterpart, the Hassidim; there is a marked difference between the water used by the settlers to grow their fruit trees and “the dark water of the desert” (162) “surging deep beneath the earth, gurgling in darkness” (163). Allowing for the ambivalence of certain elements relative to their immediate context, Anaya prevents his system of binary oppositions from being reduced to a rigid mechanism.

This is most evident in the treatment of the woman. “[S]he began to believe that men were essentially passionless” (160). Her husband “had pursued ambition, the making of money, the goal of profit” (159)—“but of his soul he gave nothing” (160).³ All her former lovers, including the priest who with his touch had released her “deep, rich woman smell” (161), held back from her.⁴ Having “lost her soul, or the passion that is the fire of the soul” (159), she leaves the “sterility of the city,” where she has known only the “common frustration of passion denied,” and moves to Israel—not the Israel of the “commitment to the land and the nation,” of the “burden of her people’s history” (160), which does not move her, but the Israel of the desert, where she can attain the solitude she seeks because, in the words of the narrator of “The Man Who Found a Pistol,” “One has to be alone to know oneself” (141).

As it soon becomes evident, the gender opposition, seemingly postulated as primary in the first sentence of the story, develops into a variation of the culture vs. nature opposition. The imagery associated with the first opposition totally pertains to the second: all the men she has met were unable “to drink from that stream of passion that ran beneath the flesh, deep in the soul”; none of them was ready to share her “true desire” (160). In men, culture has stunted nature.

Not so with the Bedouins, the “dark shadows on the rim of her life” (160). She was keenly aware of them, for hers was not the solitude of the celibate—the solitude that the initial sentence seemed to indicate as her drastic solution to the loneliness created by the gender duality. Her nights

are made restless by “the acrid odor,” “the faint body sweat” (159) she associates with those “dark men of passion she did not know, a dream that could not be shared” (160). Speaking to them is not “allowed. They kept to their world, she to hers” (159). These words, which conclude the second paragraph, reintroduce the cultural barrier—a warning that the woman does not heed because, for a moment, the forbidden dream of shared passion seems to turn into reality. The call of that faint body smell anticipates the African’s “strong ... man smell” into which her “woman’s fragrance [is] released” (162).⁵ “They made love, a dark, physical love that broke the bonds of separation, ... a love fulfilling intense need.” A new phase has begun. “[S]he became his woman He draws ecstasy from my soul,” she thought; “his love is like fresh water in the desert” (162).

Culture, however, again raises its barriers. “Manhood was [the African’s] creed, his vision of life. Her own rich and complex creed flooded over her, and suddenly the world was old, and as bone dry as the desert” (162). The desert, which with its “dark water” running beneath the earth had seemed to offer the ultimate hope of passion, is again “filled with ghosts, as are most places on earth” (162). These words point to the futility of the woman’s flight. They also indicate the delusion intrinsic to any conceptualization of life along lines that do not allow for the coexistence of opposites.

Toward the end of the story, a question is posed:

What is the stream of life beneath the flesh of woman? Is it like the waters of the Qidron Valley, surging deep beneath the earth, gurgling in darkness until it rises at the Pool of Shiloah to refresh the gardens of the City of David? Or is it a stream of deception, drawing the man to drowning? (163)

The implicit answer is that the stream of life both refreshes and deceives, because life is always one with death. Polarization, the exclusion of one or the other of the two poles, leads to sterility.

But why the Qidron Valley, why Absalom, why Tamar?

In fleeing to the biblical desert, the present-day Tamar chooses a mythical world over the real world. She elects to isolate herself from the real Israel as well—the Israel of history, besieged by its present-day problems “as are most places on earth.” She intellectualizes the desert, seeking in its extremity the solution to the complexity of the city, its opposite, and investing it with the function of providing the solitude in which she hopes to recapture her lost soul. In so doing, she invents the desert to suit her emotional needs. Her name is quite apt, since Tamar means palm tree—a plant that lives in the desert. The biblical associations underscore the woman’s estrangement from reality. By equating her lover with King David’s son, by investing him with Absalom’s beauty, she invents him as a paradigm of perfection vouched for by Samuel’s words.⁶ Like the biblical Tamar, who after having been violated disappears into her brother’s house and is heard of no more, the present-day Tamar obliterates herself, if

only for a while, in the shadow of her invented Absalom: "She asked no questions" (162). Through myth, her distance from what she has left behind acquires a temporal, and not only a spatial dimension.

The Second Book of Samuel provides the key to see this woman as she decontextualizes herself, and vainly tries to enter the world of myth.

In the second story, "In Search of Epifano," an elderly woman travels in her old Jeep through the Sonora desert toward the land of the Tarahumara to find what may be left of the ranch built by her great-grandfather Epifano. Her search is prompted by what she takes to be his call to reconnect to her place of origin. At dusk, she finds the place: "There, below the spring where she stood, ... was the hacienda. Now could be seen only the outlines of the foundation and the shape of the old corrals" (181). She beholds an Indian, "a tall, splendid man" (181), perhaps the very one who appeared to her at her wedding and then was gone before she tied herself to the passionless man whom she later divorced. Now, her thirst quenched at the spring, the woman (who is dressed in white, "the color of desire not consummated," 181) knows that she "ha[s] come home, home to the arms of Epifano." Then, "in the dying light of the sun, a blinding flash filled her body. Like desire, or like an arrow from the bow of the Indian, the light filled her and she quivered. The moan of love is like the moan of life."⁸

The story is structured according to a three-tier time frame. The present (level A) concerns the woman's last day in her travel through both the desert and her life.⁹ A second time frame (level B) concerns her life prior to the final voyage—the wedding, the birth of her two children, her loveless marriage, the separation ("Years later she left her husband, ... left the dream of southern California, where there was no love in the arms of the man, no sweet juices in the nights of love pretended"), her art ("She sketched, she painted"), her travels to the south ("each year in springtime, she drove farther south" toward the goal marked on her map—"the place where Epifano's hacienda once stood," 180). The third time frame (level C) concerns her family history, that is, the scanty information about Epifano ("His picture was preserved in the family album, his wife, a dark-haired woman at his side. Around them, their sons," 178). Significantly, this album is all that the woman takes along in her last voyage in preparation of the final ritual; because, as the narrator in "The Man Who Found a Pistol" realizes, "one must return to the circle of the family to stay in balance" (141).

The temporal structure of the story is best described as three concentric circles, with the time frame of the present constituting the outer rim.¹⁰ The two inner circles do not follow in reversed chronological order, from level A to B to C. The more remote circle is introduced before the one concerning the woman's individual past: that is to say, we move from level A to C then to B. With perfect symmetry, at the end of the story, level C again keeps the woman's past from reaching the time frame of the present.

This temporal structure, which intimates that the woman is indifferent to her own past and only interested in her great-grandfather's, suggests

the figure of a funnel, with the central hollow representing the woman's empty life. The symmetry of the construction underscores her quest for meaning away from her barren life. It further highlights her success: "She had come home, home to the arms of Epifano."

The figure of the circle emerges also on the lexical level. First the woman sees "vultures circl[ing] in the sky" (179); then we learn that she had "left the circle of pretend" (180); finally, she sees the shadows of Indian women, "a circle of women," moving silently around her (181). The lexical level validates the figure of the concentric circles: first an image of suspended wait that will end with her death; then an image of her constricting past; ultimately, an image of the liberating acceptance she achieves.

Both directly and metaphorically, all time levels are dominated by the most comprehensive icon in the story—the desert. *Desert* occurs 24 times, and is accompanied by a wealth of attendant lexical occurrences relating to dryness, dust, heat, dirt, solitude, silence, emptiness, immensity, etcetera. *Death*, with which the desert is archetypically associated,¹¹ occurs 7 times, and is metonymically underscored by the presence of vultures. Three times we have *bones*—Ross Calvin's "frail, blanched relics of death."¹² *Old* occurs 10 times, in reference to the woman, her Jeep and her map, Epifano and his corrals, the "old days" and the "old ceremony." The woman knows she will soon become "a spirit of the desert" (178).¹³ She is "a moving shadow" (179), she notices "the shadows of the palo verde and the desert willows," and at the end has a vision of "other shadows" (181)—yet another instance of miniaturization of the number three pattern. Irregardless of this array of life-negating elements, the archetypal function of the desert as death-dealing is repudiated. In fact, "In Search of Epifano" results in a life-giving message. This is made progressively evident by the woman's journey away from California, the conventional world of emotional plenty, and into the desert. There is "urgency" (177) in her progress, there is a desperate need (180), because only in the desert can she find the fulfillment she never found in her husband, a man of "little desire or passion" (179) who "never understood the desire in her, ... never explored her depth of passion." Only in the desert can she understand the voices in her dreams that "spoke in her soul," Epifano's "resonant voice imparting seductive images of the past" (180).¹⁴ Only in the desert can she find meaning—a meaning analogous to that conveyed by Georgia O'Keeffe through her images of bleached bones:

... the bleached bones [are] my symbol of the desert. To me they are as beautiful as anything I know. To me they are strangely more living than the animals walking around—hair, eyes and all their tails switching. The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert tho' it is vast and empty and untouchable—and knows no kindness with all its beauty.¹⁵

Under the scorching sun, the "[s]weat streak[ing] her wrinkled skin," the old woman feels alive—there is pleasure in the commingling of sweat

and dust.¹⁶ The dry air burns her nostrils but it also brings “[a] scent of the green ocotillo” (178), and when she reaches the spring near what is left of Epifano’s hacienda “[t]he smell of the air [i]s cool, wet” (180). The thirst she has suffered throughout her travel is quenched by the “precious” water of the pool “where Epifano had once wet his lips.”¹⁷ She knows that “there is no life in the desert without the water that flows from deep within the earth,” and when she stoops to drink she does so “like a cautious animal” (180), like the desert cat or the deer whose tracks she sees by the pool—equally precious signs of the life that the desert nurtures. Like “desert seeds,” her forefathers sought the “precious water of desire” in California, but she has returned to quench this deeper thirst, her “desire from within” which only the “peaceful quiet, the mauve” of the sun setting on the desert can satisfy (181).

On his first “epiphany,” Epifano had brought her a silent “warning” against tying herself to an emotionally barren man, but she had “hesitated, then she had turned and said yes to the preacher’s question” (180). After years of unfulfilled yearning for love, she heard Epifano’s voice spurring her to return to her life-giving roots; and each spring (the season when the desert “blooms like a garden,” as Anaya writes in *Tortuga*),¹⁸ she set out in search of him. Finally, near the spring where her family had first taken roots, Epifano reappears. This time the woman is ready for the encounter. Still clad in white, the symbolic “color of desire not consummated” she wore all through her life, she now sees that Epifano “w[ears] paint” (181), and knows that her life-long desire will be fulfilled.

“Old desert plants are tough,” writes Anaya, again in *Tortuga*: “they’ll take root most anywhere.”¹⁹ Contrary to both the letter of the diegesis and the prevailing lexical display, “In Search of Epifano” is not a story about dying but about living, not a tale of death but a tale of life. As Mary Austin wrote, “[d]esert is a loose term to indicate land that supports no man,” but “[v]oid of life it never is.”²⁰

“Even in the sand the seed of love could grow” (17). This is the message conveyed by the third of our short stories.

“Children of the Desert,” published in 1990, is about a lonely man who works in the oil fields of southern Texas. Whereas the woman in “Epifano” was “ready for death, not afraid of death” (177), he fears the desert, which he associates with death; when traveling through it, he hides bottles of water for fear of getting lost and incurring fatal dehydration. Every Christmas he spends a week in a brothel in Juarez. One day he meets a waitress, also very lonely, and brings her to live with him in his trailer. Unlike the man, she thrives in the heat and tries to teach him that they are both “children of the desert” (15). When she tells him of the “bubble” that their love makes her feel inside her, the man, wary of any attachment and scared that her “bubble” is but a deadly mirage, strikes her and runs away. At the entrance of the whorehouse, he tells an old woman about his pain. She draws a line in the sand, makes two balls of spittle in the mud on either side of the line

(one for *hombre* and one for *mujer*), makes a third one in the middle, and the three balls fuse into one: “‘Amor,’ she said” (17). The man rushes back home, has an accident, and is fatally hurt. He crawls to the trailer but finds it empty. “He looked across the silent sand and understood” (17).

To an even more pronounced degree than in “Absalom,” the system of duality is central in “Children of the Desert.”²¹ However, unlike in “Absalom” where duality, which stresses separation, remains unsolved, here it carries a message that points to unity.

Within this system, the gender duality functions oppositionally both on the diegetic level and as regards the protagonists’ attitudes toward the desert. Whereas the man senses a haunting presence in it, the woman’s first words are, “‘The desert’s all we got. It’s both mother and father. Lover and brother’” (11). Her metaphor of the bubble points to life: “‘It’s here, between us,’” she insists. “‘It’s the most beautiful feeling on earth’” (15).

The other dualities serve as eidetic reminders of the central paradigm of the couple. There are the bodies of “two Mexicans,” through which the death motif is first introduced (10). There are the twin elements of two pairs of earrings. There are two generic locations (south Texas and Mexico), two cities (El Paso and Juarez), two balls of spittle and mud, two sides to the line drawn by the old shaman.²² Owing to the perfect balance of the number two figure, the impasse between the two actants is heightened by the static quality inherent in duality. Only by reaching beyond number two toward the dynamism of number three can the impasse be overcome. This is the sense of the shaman’s simple magic—a magic keenly reminiscent of Genesis. The two little balls, representing the *hombre* and the *mujer*, become one when they fuse with the “Semilla,” (16) the outcome of love. It is the message of God’s first words to the archetypal couple: “Be fruitful.” Understanding comes too late for the man, but not too late for him to experience a final “calmness” and to see the desert as “a space opening and receding” (17), not as an emptiness that brings only death but as a life-giving space. “Even in the sand the seed of love could grow.”

The protagonists of these three stories are all nameless, an indication of the paradigmatic nature of their respective roles.²³ All are lonely, emotionally unfulfilled, and achingly driven in their search. They all look to the desert for an answer to their existential malaise. Most important, the journey through the desert is always indirectly postulated as symbolic of life itself.²⁴ The desert, however, means something different to each: for the woman in “Absalom,” it is the space where to find solitude; for the old woman, it is the space where to connect to her roots and, therefore, where to “know” herself; for the man, it is the stage where he must play out his inner conflict.

What they actually find varies. The present-day Tamar finds not the solitude she thought she wanted but a temporary resurgence of emotional vitality. On the contrary, the old woman finds what she sought—connection with her long-lost roots, and self-knowledge. The man discovers that in

seeing the desert only in terms of death, he has lost out on life. Ultimately, they all find in the desert an illuminating message. A “message from the desert,” indeed—as spelled out in the subtitle of Anaya’s novel of 1996, *Jalamanta: A Message from the Desert*.

“Land of *nada*, kingdom of *nihilo*,” wrote Edward Abbey. “God knows there’s plenty of both out here. But it’s a positive nothingness, as an idealist would say, rich in time, space, silence, light, darkness, the fullness of pure being.”²⁵ Abbey was expressing a concept shared by many southwestern writers of the twentieth century.²⁶ Not surprisingly, the reversal of the traditional, Eurocentric view of the desert as life-denying space runs through most of Rudolfo Anaya’s *oeuvre*. The peculiarity of Anaya’s contribution is that he expands the tenet of the desert as life-giving well beyond the local horizon, and that, through language, he challenges literary as well as ideologic conventions.

In *Isis in the Heart*, a poem privately printed in 1998, he syncretized disparate elements from the Egyptian, the Greek, the Biblical, the Hindu and the Aztec mythologies, bringing them together to stress the basic oneness of the world’s beliefs. Among these elements, the desert starkly stands out: “... the priests of Karnak walk in desert dust, / reminding all, the Sun’s path is life itself.”²⁷ These two verses, which trenchantly summarize Anaya’s convictions, are a powerful concentrate of the writer’s mythopoeia.

An author who combines the directness of the bard with the complexity of the modernist writer, in these stories Rudolfo Anaya couches his message in terms that force the readers to abandon the well-trodden paths of conventional literary communication, and to find their way through the thickets of linguistic inventions.

We shall concentrate on one major example concerning image clusters related to love.

In affirmation of the divide between “pure” love and “impure” love (witness Titian’s paradigmatic—as well as enigmatic—“Sacred and Profane Love”), western literature traditionally resorts to different semantic sub-fields to refer to love as opposed to sex—or, when this word was still tabu, to “passion.” (The larger field is, one should presume, that of temperature.) The two sub-fields are distinguished, quite prosaically, by a question of degrees. Conventionally, love is warm (when tepid, it is not yet love—and, possibly, will never grow to be), whereas sex is hot—an open-ended, downhill path which in literature often leads to hell, and in sermonic literature always does.

Anaya challenges this convention and, indirectly, the ideology at its origin. *Love* is mentioned ten times in “Absalom,” three in “Children of the Desert,” and five (three of which in absentia) in “Epifano.”²⁸ *Passion* is present six times in “Absalom” and three in “Epifano.” Sex is never mentioned, although sexual encounters devoid of emotional involvement do take place in these stories—see the present-day Tamara’s unfulfilling affairs and the man’s bouts in the whorehouse. A comprehensive

investigation would be required as to Anaya's lexical choices concerning love, but it is worth noting that at least within the present limited sample of his writing, love and passion are interchangeable, stressing the indivisibility of eros into different categories based on the assumption of the superiority of spirit over matter.

A point in case is the positivity of sweat in connection with both love-making and the heat of the desert in all three stories. I shall indicate just one instance from each: "At night, when the breeze blew in from the desert, a trace of the acrid [body sweat of the Bedouins] made her restless" ("Absalom," 158). "Sweat and dust, the scent commingling. She felt alive. ... Sweat and pleasure, they came together" ("Epifano," 178). "She lay in bed ... glowing with the sweat of their love. ... She is the desert, he thought. She thrives on the heat and sweat" ("Children of the Desert," 12).²⁹

These last words cannot possibly apply to the man. At the end of this scene, "Sweat dripped from his armpits, trickled down his ribs. He thought of the piles of bones around the side of the trailer, bones he had collected over the years" (14). The instantaneous connection between his own ribs and the rib cage of a dead animal arching out of the sand confirms the death-oriented association between sweat and desert in the man's mind.

When the woman says, "I love the heat," his reaction is, "The heat of the desert [is] death" (13). After they make love, the trailer becomes to him "[h]otter than hell" (13, 14); he looks out at the "hot, burning land" and again equates the desert with hell. Then the woman talks about the "bubble," and he can only look at her in distaste: "[S]he was ... covered with sweat and rubbing herself, in dreamland, and the trailer was hot as an *oven*" (italics added). The Latin word for oven is *furnus*, from *fornix*, meaning an opening; hence, *fornicatio*. Through etymology, Anaya reveals the hidden nature of the man's unconscious equation of passion with sin.

Anaya's use of the color red is equally ambivalent. Red, the color of fire and, metonymically, of extreme heat, from the conventional perspective of the man is also the color of sin and, consequently, of hell. He first meets the woman when he stops at the roadhouse "to clean up" on his way back from his yearly week of debauchery—a rite of expurgation ironically reminiscent of the Communion, officiated by a "flirtatious" waitress wearing "bright red lipstick" (11, 14). In connection with the presence of red objects in the trailer, this color starts a chain of associations which, through sex and the desert, ultimately leads to hell. In the background of the man's mental and cultural attitude loom Isaiah's words: "... your sins be as scarlet, ... they be red like crimson" (1.18).

From the woman's perspective, instead, red is the color of blood, that is to say, of vitality. Even the plastic flowers and the curtains for their trailer are red, as are her nails, her lipstick, her dress, her earrings. But she is no Whore of Babylon, as the man might be tempted to see her: rather, she is a woman who has chosen life over death—and red, the color of coursing blood, is the color of life. Blood, of course, can also indicate death but the

man's only association with blood ("When he spit he saw the red stain of blood," 17) occurs after the budding of his comprehension brought about by the old woman's "spit."³⁰ His physical death coincides with his spiritual birth. The color red, therefore, presides over both life and death, linking the beginning and the end into an inextricable unity.

Unity is communicated also through the juxtaposition of traditionally oppositional elements. We find an illuminating example of this strategy in "Absalom" when the woman and the African meet, and the beginning of passion is made to coincide with the end of the day, the oncoming darkness is heralded by fire, and the enmity between Jews and Arabs is suspended by prayer:

The western sun began to set on Jerusalem. At the Western Wall the faithful prayed; in the blue mosque on the Temple Mount, the prayers left their resonant silence on arabesque walls ... Jerusalem was alive with fire, a white, burning city in the sunlight. ... The city was alive with prayer, alive and glowing with vibrant, living fire.³¹

Parallel to the system of fire images, Anaya creates a second system related to water. The contradiction is only apparent. As there is no opposition but, rather, cosmic harmony among the four classical elements—air, fire, earth, and water—so there is no opposition in Anaya's use of both fire and water to express love. In "Absalom," the woman's passion is a "stream ... that ran beneath the flesh, deep in the soul" as is life itself: "What is the stream of life beneath the flesh of woman?" (163). The African's love is "like fresh water in the desert," his voice is a "clear, quick water ... the voice of life, the dark water of the desert" (162). Similarly to the man in "Children of the Desert," the old woman in "Epifano" dies after attaining what she sought: water, as "there is no life in the desert without the water that flows from deep within the earth" (180); and, through "[t]he water of desire" (181), attaining the ultimate sense of life: connection with one's roots, which also reach deep into the earth, deep into the hot desert.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the woman in "Children of the Desert," so markedly associated with red, has blue eyes. Red and blue—symbolically, fire and water: two elements that to our collective thinking are mutually exclusive. But it is the task of the artist to challenge collective thinking, to undermine conventions, to say "No!" (in thunder, like Melville) to whatever separates that which is one. To strive for understanding and, thereby, attain harmony. This is Rudolfo Anaya's role as an artist, which he accomplishes by means of his masterful use of language.

Endnotes

¹ "Absalom," *The Man Who Could Fly* 163; all quotes from Anaya's stories refer to this edition, and will be indicated parenthetically in the text. This passage anticipates the writer's moving contribution to *Descansos*: "The cuentos of the people became filled with tales of car wrecks" (31).

² On her way to the Tomb of Absalom, the woman “walked beside the Arab houses, which clung to the hillside, daring the dark presence of eyes that knew she was a daughter of David” (161)—a passage intended to strengthen her association with the biblical Tamar. Cfr. also: “... the gardens of the City of David,” 163. A further possible reference to King David is the fact that unlike Absalom, whose name combines the concepts of “father” and “peace” (quite a misnomer, one could say), the North African is “a man sometimes at war” (162)—therefore, at least linguistically, closer to David (a “man of war,” 2 Sal. 17:8) than was his favorite son.

³ “Who has taken charge of our lives? ... We know we have been manipulated, and in the resulting change we feel we have lost something important.” Cfr. Anaya, “Mythical Dimensions/Political Reality” 28. See also *The Legend of the Dawn*.

⁴ “Did he save himself for God,” the woman asks, “as the others saved themselves for fame or power or greed or wife at home?” (161).

⁵ Cfr. “the fragrance of a woman,” “[a]n erotic fragrance,” *Jemez Spring* 21, 23.

⁶ “But in all Israel there was none to be so much praised as Absalom for his beauty: from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him,” 14:25.

⁷ “In Search of Epifano” 181. White is also the color of the robe of the “desert wanderers”; cfr. *Jalamanta* 4.

⁸ An interesting convergence: “She sat and gazed at the desert, the peaceful, quiet mauve of the setting sun” (181), and “There, in that desert, sitting alone in a knife edge of shade, I felt more sentient than I have anywhere, any time—at home, at ease, fascinated, entranced ...” Thus does Ann H. Zwinger give words to an almost identical situation and an analogous emotional experience—the sense of “homecoming” that the desert gives to those who care enough to listen; “Space and Place” 66.

⁹ It also includes the flashback of the delay in Mexicali while her Jeep is being repaired (177).

¹⁰ The figure of the circle in connection with the number three also appears in reference to one aspect of the landscape. This occurs in the very first paragraph (“She was following the north rim of el Cañon de Cobre,” 177), then again in the middle of the story (“... following the north rim of el Cañon de Cobre,” 179), and finally at the end (“... las montañas de el Cañon de Cobre,” 181).

¹¹ As it is locally: see the warning toponym, La Jornada del Muerto, mentioned in *Rio Grande Fall* 160, 161.

¹² Calvin 48. This icon is present in “Absalom” (“suddenly the world was old, and as bone dry as the desert,” 162; see also the “rust[y], ... twisted wreck” of the African’s car, 163). It is present also in “Children of the Desert” (“Sometimes he would find sun-bleached bones, and he would feel compelled to take one back to his trailer,” 10; “... the bleached bones of those who had died [in the desert],” 13; “He thought of the pile of bones around the side of the trailer, bones he had collected over the years,” 14).

¹³ In “Children of the Desert,” the man “clearly” sees his dead mother in the desert, “her red lips taunting him” (15). In “Absalom,” the Bedouins “do not come near” the “mangled wreck” of the car (163). Ghosts haunt the “lonely and desolate Llano”—a desert in its own right—in “The Silence of the Llano” (47), “The Road to Platero,” and “A Story.” They are present in several of Anaya’s stories set in Mexico.

¹⁴ Cfr. “[the woman] heard a voice, ... Fulfillment, the voice whispered, fulfillment” (“Absalom,” 162).

¹⁵ O’Keeffe, “About Myself” 1939. Quoted in Pollitzer 226.

¹⁶ “She knew how to live in the sun, how to ... survive, ... how to be alone under the stars. ... In the cool of evening her pulse would quicken.” Night is “her time in the desert,” replenishing her while she looks “at the swirling dance of the stars” (178). The “molten light before night” inspires her to do one more sketch of the desert (179).

¹⁷ Significantly, most of the occurrences relative to water are concentrated in the final segment of the story when the woman reaches her goal. See the earliest occurrences: "In the Indian villages, there was always a welcome and fresh water" (177); "she yearned for a drink of water" (179).

¹⁸ *Tortuga* 204.

¹⁹ *Ibidem* 184.

²⁰ Austin 3. See Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*.

²¹ Anaya was to use this system also in "The Man Who Found a Pistol," a story involving a *Doppelgänger*. See "... the ever-present Double," *Isis in the Heart* 24.

²² In this passage, one can read as well a symbolic miniaturization of the geographical duality marked by the Rio Grande.

²³ Cfr. "[Absalom] was not his name, of course, that's what she called him. Just as we might say her name is Tamar" (161).

²⁴ Cfr. "[T]he desert seems barren at first, but it isn't. When you look close you can see the life which lives in it" (*Tortuga* 165).

²⁵ Abbey, *Beyond the Wall* 46. Thus Stephen Crane: "I walked in a desert, / And I cried, / 'Ah, God, take me from this place!' / A voice said, 'It is no desert.' / I cried, 'Well, but- / The sand, the heat, the vacant horizon.' / A voice said, 'It is no desert.'"

²⁶ Cfr. "The landscape around us became mirrored by a similar emptiness within, an internal emptiness of silence. ... The frantic human need to talk over a silence had disappeared. We were utterly alone, three people in a nothingness, and that was enough. For all we knew, the rest of the world could have ceased to exist." Douglas Preston, *Talking to the Ground* 150. See also Charles F. Lummis: "... when the ineffable sunshine of that arid but enchanted land falls upon [the] wondrous domes and battlements with a glow which seems not of this world, the sight is such a revelation that I have seen strong men sit down and weep in speechless awe," *Some Strange Corners* 11.

²⁷ *Isis* 14. As a locus of Anaya's imagination, Karnak recurs in *Jemez Springs* 6.

²⁸ Cfr. "She had married young. She had thought she was in love" (179); "there was no love in the arms of the man, no sweet juices in the nights of love pretended" (180).

²⁹ Cfr. "I am a curandera who knows the magic of love, / potions of desert dust, profuse sweat of lovers ..." (*Isis* 6).

³⁰ The equation of blood with life is at the base of "Epifano" as well: "She was [Epifano's] blood" (180).

³¹ "Absalom," 161. Cfr. "The morning sun had just cleared Sandia Crest, filling the Rio Grande Valley with a golden hue, the same aura that often shines on Jerusalem, a sheen on Temple Mount," *Jemez Spring* 5. On a lesser scale, the penultimate paragraph of "Epifano" presents an analogous fusion: "... in the dying light of the sun a blinding flash filled her being. Like desire, ... the light filled her and she quivered" (181).



The ruins of the Franciscan mission at Pecos, northern New Mexico

LE DIECI E UNA NOTTE DI SERAFINA

È il gennaio del 1680. Una Santa Fe – ancora un villaggio – nel New Mexico da quasi un secolo conquistato dagli spagnoli. Palpabile, pur nella morsa del gelo, il fermento degli indiani nelle zone circostanti; avvertibile la loro nascosta presenza, mascherata come richiami di coyote dalle colline incombenti. Prigionieri con l'accusa di complotto, dodici indiani; fra di essi Serafina, la giovane figlia di un capo. Se dichiarati colpevoli, gli accusati saranno uccisi oppure, pena ben più temuta, mandati in Messico a morire nelle miniere d'argento, lontani dalla loro terra. Davanti al caminetto acceso nella residenza del Governatore, Serafina, novella *Shahrazād*, fa con lui un patto. Gli racconterà una fiaba, e se sarà di suo gradimento, la mattina successiva lui libererà uno dei prigionieri; e così per undici sere. Ogni mattina, davanti alla piccola folla infreddolita divisa tra coloro che concordano con la politica di pacificazione del Governatore e coloro che ne vogliono la cacciata perché troppo remissivo con gli indiani, uno ad uno i prigionieri vengono rilasciati. Tranne Serafina: che il Governatore, per non consegnarla all'Inquisizione la quale l'accusa di eresia, e di conseguenza mandarla alla morte, trattiene come prigioniera del potere secolare.

Il romanzo si arresta prima della grande rivolta indiana dell'agosto di quel 1680. Il destino dei due immaginari attanti principali resta ignoto, quasi a indicarne la scomparsa nel tragico gorgo degli eventi imminenti ma fuori campo. Opera aperta, dunque, *Serafina's Stories*, ma soprattutto romanzo *sui generis*. Nella produzione dello scrittore, infatti, questo volume si colloca in una posizione programmaticamente ambigua. Si tratta di un'ambiguità non di senso bensì di carattere poetico in quanto, fin dal primo impatto col testo, investe una problematica relativa ai generi letterari. Definire *Serafina* all'interno di un genere letterario specifico è infatti, più che impossibile, inane. Confluiscono qui almeno tre generi: il romanzo storico, il modello narrativo delle *Mille e una notte*, e l'opera didascalica. Tre modelli la cui combinazione già denuncia la spinta sperimentale dello scrittore, nonché la sua visione multiculturale anche a livello letterario.

Strutturalmente, *Serafina's Stories* è costituito da venticinque capitoli seguiti da un epilogo. I capitoli dispari perseguono, in stretta progressione cronologica, la storia – della durata di tredici giorni – ambientata a San-



ta Fe nel gennaio del 1680. I capitoli pari sono invece costituiti da dodici *cuentos* (o racconti orali nella tradizione popolare ispanica) che, se pure spesso modificati, sono chiaramente riconducibili a repertori folklorici passati in alcuni casi dall'India, poi dalla Persia, e quindi, attraverso la Spagna, approdati infine nel Nuovo Mondo. I dodici *cuentos* sono narrati da Serafina, questa coraggiosa ragazza pueblo prigioniera del Governatore della cosiddetta *tierra adentro*, o Nueva Mexico. A mo' di conclusione, l'epilogo ricostruisce succintamente il quadro storico che il romanzo 'storico' ha ricreato attraverso personaggi immaginari («The actual governor of New Mexico at the time was Otermin. This is not Otermin's story», 200); la colonizzazione di queste zone dell'America settentrionale da parte degli spagnoli; il conflitto fra le autorità civili e i francescani, interessati unicamente alla conversione forzata degli indiani; i prodromi della sanguinosa rivolta che nell'agosto del 1680, dopo più di ottant'anni di dominio spagnolo, portò alla cacciata degli invasori; la definitiva riconquista del territorio nel 1692-93 da parte degli spagnoli. Sotteso alla ricostruzione v'è il continuo commento dello scrittore a questa drammatica pagina della storia americana, e il suo invito a guardare, oltre che indietro, in avanti: verso la reciproca comprensione e il reciproco rispetto.

Nessuna delle tre dimensioni narrative prevale sulle altre. Lo stesso modello didascalico, egemone nell'epilogo, viene narrativizzato all'interno del romanzo storico attraverso sia il discorso interiore del Governatore sia le discussioni che i due personaggi principali conducono, con sempre maggiore comprensione reciproca, prima e dopo la cerimonia serale del *cuento*. Nel suo complesso, dunque, *Serafina* si presenta come un testo modulare, i cui elementi compositivi interagiscono, solidali, alla creazione di un'opera che dal nucleo diegetico chiuso in uno strettissimo giro di giorni, chiuso nel villaggio di Santa Fe assediato dalla neve e lontanissimo da quella che per gli europei è la civiltà, l'unica forma di civiltà, si allarga a investire secoli di storia, a suggerire senso metaforico da secoli di saggezza e di proiezione epistemica popolare, a collegare mondi remoti nel tempo come nello spazio. L'ambiguità, pertanto, non riguarda il senso globale dell'opera. Consiste piuttosto nella coesistenza di generi letterari diversi, e pertanto nella strategia autoriale di costringere il lettore ad accettare un quadro letterario, storico e ideologico irriducibile a una lettura a senso unico; consiste nella lezione di un'esperienza di lettura omologa al senso finale di un testo che addita all'armonizzazione degli opposti: vincitori e vinti, oppressori e oppressi, verità storica e verità dell'invenzione, verità assoluta e verità relativa.

Senza buonismo, tuttavia; senza edulcorazione degli orrori se non come, anch'essa, confessata invenzione – Don Antonio de Otermin, lo avverte la stessa voce narrante, fu altra cosa da questo Governatore comprensivo, aperto anche se tormentato dai conflitti epocali; così come il tradizionale lieto fine inerente al modello delle *Mille e una notte* si alterna con quello, ad esso oppositivo, del romanzo storico. Storia e fantasia, dunque, cristianesimo e fede ancestrale, modelli letterari occidentali e oralità indiana, in

un contrappunto che mima gli eterni conflitti culturali, sociali oltre che personali fra dimensioni oppostive, ma che lo scrittore – egli stesso bilingue, egli stesso di cultura composita – indica con questa sua opera come (forse) passibili di conciliazione. E infatti:

We must depend on ourselves [the Governor] thought. Depend on our neighbors. This is the land of legend, Cíbola. The land the Aztecs of Mexico called Aztlán, their homeland. Now it is ours, for better or for worse.

Ours, all of us, español, indio, criollo, mestizo, castizo, mulatto, chino, lobo, gíbaro, zambo or whatever we call ourselves. We must become one people. La raza de la Nueva México. (59-60)

Da che mondo è mondo, si sa, è il vincitore a decidere come da quel momento in poi lo sconfitto si dovrà chiamare, chi dovrà essere, che cosa dovrà insegnare ai figli, e in che lingua. La distruzione dell'identità del vinto è sempre stato e sempre sarà il passo successivo a quello della conquista. Quando il Giappone invase la Corea, per chi veniva scoperto a parlare coreano c'era la pena di morte. Gli schiavi africani scoperti a parlare la lingua nativa non venivano ammazzati perché dopo tutto costavano, ma presi a scudisciate; se recidivi, venivano *sold down the river*; solo se 'irrecuperabili' venivano impiccati. Quando nel 1848 gli Stati Uniti invasero il Messico e si annesero mezza California, mezzo Texas e tutto il territorio che adesso si chiama Arizona e New Mexico, da mattina a sera i contadini che per generazioni avevano lavorato quelle terre vennero a sapere (ma glielo dissero in inglese, il che creò qualche problema di comunicazione) di essere 'Mexican Americans': sorta di tragica rivalse della storia, perché quattrocento anni prima, come ben sapeva anche Trilussa, coloro che in quelle terre abitavano da diecimila anni si erano ritrovati ad essere 'indiani'. E ne sanno qualcosa quei nostri concittadini sudtirolesi che da un giorno all'altro sepperò di essere diventati, oltre che italiani, 'altoatesini'. Il censo, tuttavia, è restio a star dietro alle evoluzioni dell'epistemologia e tanto più dell'ideologia; per cui, ancora a distanza di quarant'anni, la dizione 'chicano', con la quale la parte politicamente più attiva della popolazione americana di origine messicana oggi si autoidentifica, non trova riscontro ufficiale: non interessa, a Washington, che con questa dizione i chicani facciano risalire la loro storia ben più indietro rispetto alla creazione del Messico come nazione indipendente nel 1821, ancor più indietro rispetto alla conquista e alla colonizzazione spagnola nel Cinquecento, e affermino una sia pure indiretta discendenza dagli aztechi; indiretta perché filtrata da una plurisecolare *mestizaje*, una mescolanza di sangue e di storia che la dizione 'americani di origine messicana' cancella, e che è invece essenziale al senso di sé che dagli anni Sessanta del Novecento, sulla scia del Movimento per i diritti civili degli afroamericani, il Movimento Chicano lotta per sviluppare in questa grande minoranza che la cultura egemone ha fatto di tutto per minimizzare.

Una lotta per l'autodefinizione e, alla lunga, l'autodeterminazione politica non può non passare anche dalla parola scritta, e in special modo dalla letteratura: il segno del passaggio di un individuo come di un popolo – il segno dell'«esserci stato», dello *esserci*. Essenziale, in questo, l'opera di Rudolfo Anaya, il quale nel 1972, con *Bless Me, Ultima*, dette voce a un mondo che la cultura egemone relegava in un limbo di irrilevanza, e che pertanto la letteratura canonica largamente ignorava. Da allora, grazie soprattutto ad Anaya, questo mondo è diventato una componente ineludibile del quadro letterario attuale degli Stati Uniti.

Il ruolo di pioniere, di portabandiera d'un gruppo che stia cominciando ad affacciarsi alla scena generale, sempre comporta un sacrificio. Lo scrittore che sente profondamente la propria responsabilità nei confronti del gruppo, che si rivolge a un pubblico culturalmente svantaggiato rispetto a quello al quale la *sua* cultura, il *suo* valore come artista potrebbe ambire, è costretto a venire a patti con un quadro referenziale minoritario – e ben sa che agli occhi della cultura egemone tale operazione gli costerà perché, puntualmente, quello svantaggio culturale gli verrà addebitato.

Diviso tra le opposte pulsioni della spinta ad uscire all'esterno e del richiamo della relativa sicurezza interna, il ghetto, sia esso fisico o mentale, tende a risucchiare al proprio interno. È quanto avvenne a James Baldwin, il quale a un certo punto della sua folgorante carriera sentì di dover rientrare nei ranghi, pena la perdita di presa sul suo mondo originario che pure tanto aveva fatto per aprire all'attenzione esterna; per cui, anche a livello del linguaggio, lo scrittore si adeguò a certa demagogia nera, pagando quella limitata e limitante concezione politica della realtà afro americana in termini di perdita della capacità di superarne la facile, riduttiva autoghettizzazione. Non è certamente questo il caso di Rudolfo Anaya, il quale ha sempre saputo coniugare il proprio ruolo esemplare all'interno della sua comunità con la spinta ad aprirla all'esterno – ma ad aprirla (ed è questo un punto essenziale) alle proprie condizioni, vale a dire senza mai ricorrere alla svendita dell'identità del gruppo. Perché l'opera di Anaya è rivolta, specularmente, verso entrambe le culture; con diversa accentuazione a seconda dell'occasione (e su questo torneremo), ma pur sempre con il chiaro obbiettivo di includere piuttosto che escludere; non soffiando sul fuoco del separatismo, del vittimismo e dell'autoghettizzazione, bensì indicando la via ben più difficile della convivenza nel rispetto reciproco.

Pioniere, dunque, Rudolfo Anaya; ma forse ancor più mediatore: attraverso, da una parte, l'esempio di un lucido rigetto della facile demagogia da *barrio*, e dall'altra l'esempio di una scrittura che, se davvero ascoltata, rivela una valenza che travalica i confini settoriali. Ben lo dice Antonio Márquez, secondo il quale l'opera dello scrittore libera la letteratura chicana «from the confines of 'ethnic' or 'regionalism' literature», sorretta com'è da quella che il critico chiama «the crux of Anaya's philosophical and artistic vision» – «mythopoesis–myth and the art of myth making»¹.

Talvolta, con l'occhio a un destinatario specifico, privo di un retroterra culturale in grado di cogliere riferimenti sia storici sia letterari culti, Anaya costringe la propria immaginazione entro i confini dell'accessibilità del messaggio. È il caso di *Curse of the ChupaCabra*, un libro rivolto «to all those seeking a path of liberation», vale a dire «our young people» presi nella morsa della droga («We cannot afford to lose our best minds and the future they represent»)². In questa prospettiva fondamentalmente didattica vanno viste anche le varie opere per l'adolescenza – e così l'epilogo di *Serafina's Stories*, che non ha certo la pretesa di porsi come qualcosa di più d'un sunto di storia 'patria' per giovani (e magari non più tanto giovani) i quali della colonizzazione del Southwest sappiano poco o nulla.

Ma è proprio qui che si incrociano, creativamente, le strade che il nostro scrittore percorre. Dodici dei capitoli di *Serafina* costituiscono delle elaborazioni, spesso arricchite di innesti intertestuali, di fiabe appartenenti al folklore universale e dunque accessibili sia all'adolescente sia alla persona colta; capitoli che, in un'ottica di rigide distinzioni di genere letterari, non potrebbero trovare spazio in un romanzo tradizionale. A loro volta, gli altri dodici capitoli, se pur marginalmente relativi ad eventi storici, sono tutti prodotto di fantasia, per cui la loro rilevanza documentaria è minima. In altre parole, la giustapposizione di questi tre generi letterari è condotta sulla base di una omogeneità di discorso largamente accessibile e non specializzato. La lettura sintagmatica, pertanto, risulta 'facile', in linea con quell'aspetto della produzione di Anaya volta ad un pubblico di media cultura. Ma è proprio in questa operazione di giustapposizione di generi che Anaya in quanto scrittore sperimentale si misura con un livello culturale ulteriore, richiedendo al lettore delle competenze d'ordine paradigmatico che recuperino la 'facilità' del piano diegetico a una significazione più profonda. Che è quanto avviene in *Bless Me, Ultima*, in *Heart of Aztlan* e ancor più in *Tortuga*; e forse, in misura minore, in *Jalamanta*. Più che un segno, la prova della complessa realtà culturale dell'autore, che si riflette in tutta la sua opera e che trova in *Serafina* la sua forse più ampia manifestazione.

Serafina's Stories, dunque, come metafora della composizione degli opposti, o se vogliamo delle alterità. Personaggi e costumi tipicamente spagnoli così come realtà folkloriche afferenti al mondo nativo americano vengono innestati sul tronco di storie risalenti al medio come al lontano oriente. Nella riscrittura (che sempre mima l'oralità) di racconti colti dalle tradizioni folkloriche più diverse, re, regine e corti spagnolesche, giganti e picari, si integrano con scenari naturali del Southwest, con animali parlanti che attengono alle fiabe russe o mitteleuropee così come ai miti delle origini pueblo. Analogamente, la doppia realtà culturale di Rudolfo Anaya e dei suoi conterranei, il suo e il loro bilinguismo, non può e non deve richiudersi in una scelta (e tantomeno in una scelta forzata) basata sull'esclusione dell'altro. La storia non deve escludere l'immaginazione. I nostri modelli culturali non devono escludere quelli degli altri. Questa, fatta con la discrezione che si conviene a quel maestro ch'egli è, la lezione

di Rudolfo Anaya: un intellettuale che ha sempre coniugato la specificità della propria riaffermata identità, la sua orgogliosa, ribadita realtà di chicano, con l'altrettanto fortemente ribadita, l'altrettanto profondamente orgogliosa realtà di uomo universale.

Note

¹ Márquez 45, 52.

² *Curse of the ChupaCabra*, n.p.



Jemez Valley, northwestern New Mexico

THE MOUNTAIN LION

Churned slush from the first snow of December covered the dirt road. “You better get a coat,” Patricia said, hugging herself in her parka. We were outside the gate, waiting for Rudy and the dogs. “This time of the year, when the sun goes down it gets pretty cold.” I went back in and got my coat. Rudy was calling the dogs in from the orchard. Chica and B.J. scrambled up the steps. They frantically slid on the polished floor and scabbled at the door. We went out, and Rudy closed the door. “Good thing you got your coat,” he said. We joined Patricia, who was stamping her snow boots on the ground.

The dogs had dashed out of the front yard and were shrilly barking up the road toward the woods. They did not get into the woods but stayed on the muddy road. B.J. conscientiously left his mark every few steps.

“You are not afraid the coyotes will get them when you let them out?” I asked.

“They stay pretty close,” Patricia said. “We don’t let them stray.”

“Chica!” Rudy called. “B.J.!”

The two dachshunds ran back, danced in front of us to show how good they were, and dashed back ahead. Every so often they turned their head to make sure we were following.

Jemez Springs was fast sinking in the limpid blue shade of dusk. Only the top stone wall of the eastern mesa still glowed red. The rest of the valley was in the shade.

The muddy road curved left, cutting the slope just below the woods. Down by the river, a small pickup truck rattled over the bridge, turned, and stopped behind a house; from its corral, a horse raised its head to watch. Along the narrow strip of bottom land, motionless blue curls of smoke stood over some of the homes. A rhythmic hollow noise traveled clear across the valley, bell-like in the empty space. A voice called. Again it called, then was silent. Beyond a line of naked cottonwoods, a stretch of the river shone steel blue. Now the top wall of the mesa across the river was a dark red.

“Beautiful evening,” Rudy said. “Nice and cold.”

Down the road, a man and a woman were coming slowly in our direction. “I didn’t know they were back,” Patricia said. “They must have just arrived.”



Ahead of us, the dogs stopped abruptly at the edge of the road, trembling in the cold evening air. One tiny paw drawn limply back, they sniffed at something on the ground. Then they pulled back, growling, the short front legs pattering nervously. B.J. gave a short bark, then they turned and ran back to us. Tail tucked between the buttocks, they walked behind us, right at Rudy's heels.

We came to the spot. Deep in the frozen snow between two juniper roots was the track of a huge paw. The black cuts of the claws faced the road and the valley.

"It's a mountain lion," Rudy said. He looked around. "And a big one, too." He bent over the round track, then looked up the slope. No other track was visible in the thick underbrush. "Must have been pretty hungry to come down this close." The dogs milled around, whimpering.

Behind us, Patricia was greeting somebody. Rudy raised himself and went over, neighborly warmth in his voice. I caught a glimpse of a tall blonde woman and a huge Indian with a black cowboy hat.

I stared at the lone imprint. Only one track—no other sign left in the snow. As if the creature had appeared out of nowhere, and disappeared into nowhere. No, that was wrong: It was *my* nowhere, for here *I* was the stranger. And I knew nothing—not how it had come, not where, and how, it had disappeared. All I could do was to remember that faraway footprint in the sand, that lone footprint not yet canceled by the tide but already filling with water seeping up from the pressed sand. I felt like the hopelessly citified Robinson Crusoe that I was, totally incapable of telling whether the imprint I was looking at was that of a left or of a right paw, of a front or a back paw. I was impotent in front of this chilling sign which others—perhaps Rudy, perhaps the big Indian with whom he was talking—surely were able to read, and to place within the scenery, within the animal's hungry search for food. All I could envision was the rim of the looming mesa leaning over the narrow canyon now completely sunless. I could hear the alien noises from the meager valley bottom. I could smell the sweet fragrance from the corrales rising in the cold air to where the lion stood, deciding. Then, suddenly, the decision: the jagged terraces and crevices that dropped to the talus, the pristine snow muffling the successive jumps, the silent skulking down the steep wooded slope, down to the aliens' trail where it had to stop, listening, watching—sniffing. Deciding.

Then what? I could go no further. I could not follow it to the lonely corral, to its terrified prey. Where had it disappeared? Was it still nearby, hiding among the junipers and the *piñones*, watching us—watching *me*?

All the things I did not know. All that I missed. All that I would *never* know. The track stared back, mutely drawing me in, mutely pushing me away.

"Mario, we are going back."

I turned. The other couple had gone. I could see them slowly walk down the road. Soon they would reach the curve, and disappear.

"You up to some blueberry pancakes at the Deli?" Patricia knew my weakness.

Chica and B.J. were running happily toward home, their long ears flapping. Once in a while B.J. stopped to reassert his proprietorship on the territory. At least this much I knew.

“You didn’t recognize Scott Momaday, did you?” Rudy said.

“Shoot–no,” I said.

“I wanted to introduce you but you didn’t hear me.” He laughed. “We could see you were lost after your first puma. Come on, let’s go warm up at the restaurant.” The snow underneath the junipers was blue now, the darkness thicker.

I kept looking back.



White Sands, southern New Mexico

THE SOUL OF THE SOUTHWEST

The Soul of the Southwest. How trite this very notion. How suggestive of proneness to *clichés* and to lack of taste—worse, to intellectual bad taste. You hear these words, “The Soul of the Southwest,” and immediately you are thrown in the midst of the Empire of Kitsch, Southwest style. Flat wooden coyotes, mostly pink or blue, a red bandanna around their neck, silently howl at an imaginary moon in front of every other clothing store. Signs for all kinds of commercial establishments, from motels to drugstores to restaurants to service stations to candle shops, sport images of cacti, yucca plants, rattlers, broncos, and Gila monsters against a compounded background of mesas, canyons, sand dunes and open-range vistas. T-shirts, mugs, car decals and velvet paintings reiterate over and over again the same set of icons, all of which recycle their apparently inexhaustible potential as visual signifiers purporting to convey the essence, the very *soul* of the Southwest. You cannot escape their perpetual presence, their uninspired and uninspiring predication. So ubiquitous are they, so mechanical is their conventional visual force, that you despair of ever be able to claim a stake of your own—as new, as almost unbearably new as this timeless land strikes you, where everything seems to already have been taken over by the commercial disposition.

A walk down Santa Fe’s San Francisco Road or any of the other streets lined with that town’s highly tooted one-hundred-plus art galleries is sufficient to appreciate how permeable is the dividing line between kitsch and art, between the spruced-up calendar and the innovative canvas, between the leader placed in the window to snare the Texan or the Californian tourist, and the picture intended for the discriminating eye. In fact, the subject of most of the art you find in these galleries is always the same: canyons, buttes, spectacular sunsets, cacti, *ristras* of red peppers, dry arroyos cutting through a plain of sagebrush. In short, the land. And whether by resorting to long-established icons or by attempting to identify new ones, all these visual constructs proffer themselves as capturing the soul of the Southwest.

In advertising, the need to simplify is paramount. The tourist industry has made an art, so to say, of the use of reductive icons: Paris is the Tour Eiffel, Venice is a gondola, Rome is the Coliseum, Egypt is the Pyramids, America is the Statue of Liberty, Africa a pride of lions. The Grand Canyon



is the favorite shortcut to communicate the message that the Southwest is beautiful, and that you should take advantage of our convenient organized tours. But as comprehensive as all of these icons intend to be, and as vivid and enticing are the mental pictures they produce, they barely scratch the surface of the reality they suggest. The Motor Vehicle Authority of Arizona has chosen the omnipresent image of a saguaro silhouetted against the setting sun to highlight the license plate of that state—but how do you get to the real Sonora desert that lies beyond that image? Its New Mexico counterpart has picked two stylized mesas (and, recently, a hot-air balloon) to serve the same purpose for the Land of Enchantment—but what do these mesas tell us of the real New Mexico? Is there a *real* Albuquerque under the blue sky dotted by the colorful floating affairs in the ubiquitous icon of the balloon fiesta?

In order to reach whatever is hinted at by the established visual or conceptual shortcuts to the Southwest, one must try to ignore all that deadens one's sensitivity to its reality, and undo the effect of the leveling stereotypes perennially recycled by the combined interests of the industry, the media, and the calendar art painters. One must look with new eyes at the very objects that a profit-motivated perspective has chosen as icons of the Southwest. For recognition is not enough: we must try to *see*. A difficult enough endeavor, so engrained is the conditioning we have to contend with. Moreover, stereotypes do have, after all, a foundation of truth.

The traditional icons of the Southwest are almost exclusively related to nature. This is not the case of Europe, where man-made features predominate as universally recognizable signifiers. As popular as the Gulf of Naples, the White Cliffs of Dover or the Norwegian fiords are as icons of these areas, they are outnumbered by the products of human genius—the Tower of Pisa, Big Ben, the Bridge of Sighs, Saint Peter, the David, the Monna Lisa, the Acropolis, Notre-Dame, the castles of the Loire Valley and of the Highlands, the Brandenburg Gate, the Kremlin Red Square, and so on. Possibly, a more evenly balanced ratio of man-made monuments and scenic views can be found as icons referring to certain areas of the East Coast, the South, and California, where the Empire State Building, the ironwork balconies of New Orleans, and the Golden Gate Bridge compete, with alternate success, with the Niagara Falls, the Mississippi River, or Big Sur.

As far as the Southwest is concerned, however, with the exception of the Pueblo Bonito ruin, the Taos Pueblo adobe conglomerate, the Alamo, and some mission churches, seldom does a building appear in the traditional visual presentations of the region. Somewhat ironically, it is in the present-day denomination of some of the most spectacular natural areas in the Southwest—above all, Monument Valley—that we find any reference to human activity. Otherwise, understandably enough in a region that man has not been able to completely alter in its original configuration, an array of natural features reigns as the compounded system intended to communicate the Southwest. Within this system, one icon is as good

and as relevant as the next. It can be a canyon, a mesa or a butte. It can be a saguaro, a yucca or an expanse of purple sage. It can be a rattlesnake watching you from underneath a bush, its raised rattles warning you to pass on. It can be a skulking coyote or a frantic roadrunner—at which point one has to push back the superimposition of their cartoon spin-offs, Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner, and try to ignore them as the powerful factors in the stereotyping of western reality that they are.

Indeed, there is no end of icons programmed to stand for the Southwest. As a result, this bombardment of visual banalities makes you wonder: Where does this elusive and yet almost physically palpable soul dwell?

In the early days of my roaming over this land, how often did I say, “Here it is. This is *it*,” only to walk one mile deeper into the country and having to say, “*This* is it.” It appeared that there would be no end to my search. I felt it in a deep canyon blue with bright shadows, and then in a shallow *cañoncito* silver with mesquite; the next day I saw it in a narrow gorge choked with boulders fallen from the white rimrocks. I felt it in the faraway mesas, their flat tops promising a peaceful reach toward the sky, until I got to the crumbling talus and the threatening sheer wall took that promise back and what seemed I was about to find had retired. I saw it in the striped mudstones of the Painted Desert, and in the pinnacles sending their penciled shadow for miles and miles over the red land. I felt it in the pink-lipped arroyos. I touched it in the silver bark of a fallen cottonwood, and then again in the golden alamos lining the precious trickle that winds its way among shiny black boulders. I saw it in the dry plea of the saguaro and in the stiff swishing of the purple sage, the dusty wake of one distant driver slowly hovering, slowly settling back. I sensed it in the cool, liquid sky of dawn, and always—almost aching—*in* the yellow, then red, then purple, then mauve, then violet, then blue immensity of sunset and dusk, before the obsidian sky allows a last streak of red to linger so *your* soul can rest, and be ready for tomorrow’s renewed miracle.

With time, I began to see it in the sagging chain-link fence of a Pancake House parking lot, scraps of black plastic caught in the wire, tiredly flapping, tiredly giving up. Then I knew that my search was over, because the soul of the Southwest is all around you—even in the parking lot of a diner. Even in the carcass of a sheep abandoned where months ago it was hit by a car.

To feel this, to understand this beauty (perhaps a better and certainly a less trite word for “soul”), you don’t need the accolade of the established perspective, be it the view imposed by the conventional iconography or the view consolidated by high culture. All you need is to cease looking for a confirmation of the beautiful postcard picture; to (vainly) vie with Ansel Adams or David Muench for your own image capable of catching this beauty.

It is not a question of picturesqueness. The Southwest is not picturesque—not even the calendar art painter can reduce it to the homey dimension of the picturesque. Nor is it “sublime.” Its soul is not *up there*,

graciously accommodating our habit of assigning first, second, or third row seats to this or that aspect of nature. The dark gorge, the towering peak or the thundering waterfall are no more “sublime” than the cracked earth of a gray stretch of desert, the cone of ashes of a small dead volcano or a tuft of rabbit-ears weeds by a ditch. Here, the categories of our aesthetic traditions make no sense because beauty is everywhere, and everything is equally beautiful. The last lines of the Night Chant, the Navajo ceremony intended to restore one’s balance, tell us why:

In the house made of dawn,
 In the house made of sunset light,
 In the house made of rain cloud,
 With beauty before me may I walk,
 With beauty behind me may I walk,
 With beauty below me may I walk,
 With beauty above me may I walk,
 With beauty all around me may I walk.
 In beauty it is finished.

For there is no order of beauty in nature; there is no hierarchy, no scheme of relevance. But as this chant also makes clear, the primeval quality of this undisturbed landscape (where it *is* undisturbed), the immanent presence that we call its soul, must be approached with delicacy and respect, because it is *alive*. It breathes. It gives of itself, but you need to pray for it to make itself known to you. And it is jealous of its world.

A few years ago, the old dirt road through Chaco Canyon was paved; within one year, the once palpable spirit of this silent place, the heart of the long-lost Anasazi culture, was gone. Surely, I felt, it had moved further out on this immense mesa, down one of the ancient straight paths that radiate for hundreds of miles from Pueblo Bonito and that are visible only from the sky. Now I know better. Now I know that to feel it again I don’t have to walk far among the clumps of *chamiza*, careful not to disturb the rattler. All I have to do is to pick up a striped red and black shard half buried in the sand, and pray, “... may I walk. May I walk with beauty before me ...”



Stanley Crawford at home in Dixon, northern New Mexico (1988)

“UNBECOMING AN EDUCATED MAN AND BECOMING
A KIND OF PEASANT”: STANLEY CRAWFORD’S DOUBLE WORLD

The subject of the pages that follow is an extraordinary example of both creative and existential integration of different cultures, languages, and traditions—the epitome, if you will, of the present-day man of the Southwest. Stanley Crawford is an internationally known and respected novelist, essayist, and memoirist, who in 1988 won the Western States Book Award for Creative Nonfiction with his *Majordomo: Chronicle of an Acequia in Northern New Mexico*. At the same time, Crawford is known as a grower of garlic in his small family-run farm in Dixon, New Mexico, a village in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains some twenty miles south of Taos. Here, in 1970, this San Diego-born writer and Rose Mary, his Australian wife, bought a piece of land, built with their own hands the house that has been their home ever since, and turned their small property into a garlic farm. Here, according to the demands of the seasons, Crawford alternates farming and writing.

An Anglo in an almost entirely Hispanic environment; an intellectual who for nearly forty years has been an active member of a small, closed-in farming community; a political activist constantly locking horns with the Los Alamos establishment; a postmodern novelist whose New Mexico trilogy is a moving, insightful account of life in an enclave devoted to subsistence agriculture; a masterful, innovative manipulator of the English language, whose toil-hardened hands have earned him the trust of his Spanish-speaking neighbors who have repeatedly saddled him with the key position of *majordomo* of the local *acequia*, or irrigation ditch: this, succinctly, is Stanley Crawford—a complex individual who has successfully combined two ways of life that are so different as to strike one as almost mutually exclusive; the culmination, in short, of the coming together of different cultures, languages, and historical experiences which the Southwest represents.

Before discussing Crawford’s work as well as the role he chose to play as part of his adopted community, let us listen to the story of this most interesting experience in the words of its protagonist.



An Interview¹

Stan, how did you become a writer?

Well, that's an odd one. I know that, quite young, it became very important to me to write in a kind of satirical vein. For a couple of years, a friend and I made up little satirical magazines. This is what every kid did, coming into consciousness in an absurd world, at a time when we were seeing the newsreels of the concentration camps and going through H-bomb drills in school. My writing and our ghoulish, violent little magazines were one way to cope with these news we were getting into our very gentele Southern California suburb.

Later, when I was in college, it came to me as a choice that either I could write or I could paint. My mother was a painter, a failed painter. She didn't really realize herself. Anyway, rather late in college, I made the decision to write rather than paint. Painting involved hanging something up and letting people look at it, which was a terrifying thing to put yourself through, or so I thought. Writing was something I could do privately. It was something I could do to attempt to cope with something in the world that disturbed or troubled me. But I didn't get terribly serious about that until my first and only, actually, job (aside from the odd teaching jobs) as a technical writer. This was at the beginning of the space race, in the early Sixties, when I worked briefly as a very inept technical writer for one of the early aerospace firms. I was not given a great deal to do. I had to revise and re-write technical reports.

What do you mean by "inept writer"?

Well, I had to re-write these technical reports. This was a very exciting time in language, except I didn't quite realize it. It was at the time of Sputnik—well, a little later than that—and the first American space stuff. The engineers were coping with all kinds of new problems in language and in their electronic and mechanical reality. They would write these reports, which were virtually incomprehensible to anyone except themselves, and I was expected to turn them into good English. It was an impossible task. As time went on, I revised them less and less because the engineers really knew what they were talking about, and all these new words like *input* and *output* which us, English Department people, consider sins against the language, were the words that they needed. We didn't have any words that we could give them for these new electronic computer processes that they were attempting to name.

That's why I said I was an inept writer. I was faced with a very challenging situation, and I didn't actually realize how challenging it was until afterward. I did not have to work very hard because there wasn't really a great deal to do. I would clean up the reports and organize them, and then I would spend the rest of my workday writing a novel, if you want to call it that.

What type of novel was it?

It was a James Bond satire. This is kind of interesting because I got my B.A. in English from Chicago and then an M.A. at Berkeley, so I had a standard English Department training, and there were two implications: one, American Literature hardly existed; two, if you were interested in writing yourself, you never spoke about it. It was virtually a taboo subject. So I came out with a very "high English" literary background, which has always made it difficult for me to deal with American literature. I still feel inept there. But I discovered, as everyone else did at that time, Ian Fleming. Then I discovered people like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett—the whole thriller, detective story genre—and I was astounded by the narrative energy of these things, badly written as they were. Well, I had a brief fling. That's what I read on the job, and my first book was basically a James Bond satire, which never saw the light of day.

Did you ever finish it?

Yes, I finished it. Probably it exists somewhere in a trunk. I had a lot of fun writing it, and that was the first time that I had fun writing since I was a kid. And that was important. The second book was a Young-Man-Going-to-Europe thing, and that was very bad. I don't think I ever finished that.

I only worked for that job for about fifteen months, and I was transferred (to great expense to the company and to great profit to myself) fifty miles from Los Angeles to Riverside. They paid me 1,400 dollars to move my pathetic possessions, so I was able to quit that job early. I had intended to work only long enough to save enough money to go to Europe and write for three or four years. In the early Sixties this was already an old-fashioned thing to do but, you know, when you are young you don't know what's old-fashioned. But I did it and I went to Greece. I taught briefly in Athens but there was no point to that—I only needed the money. Then I moved to Lesbos, to the village of Molivos, the contemporary Greek name of Mithimna. It is a little Venetian village with a fort on the top looking over to the Turkish coast. Well, I met people there like Ignazio Silone, William Golding, Peter Green. Peter became a friend. There were a couple of other writers also, off and on, and this was the first time that I met and spent any time with writers. That summer I wrote *Gascoyne*. Peter Green was my second reader at that point, and he helped me connect up with an English publisher. I should say that summer, the summer of '62, I believe, or '63 ... I may have my dates off. In fact, I think I wrote *Gascoyne* in the summer of '64, because it was accepted the winter of '65. Somewhere in there. Peter Green read an early draft and liked it, and told me who to send it to. Jonathan Cape was about third on the list. That's how I got started.

So if you don't count your first book, the one à la Jan Fleming, Gascoyne was your second book?

Really the third. I'd spent a lot of time on the second one, the one of the young man going to Europe.

After this, did you take some time off?

I went to Paris. I was in Paris when *Gascoyne* was accepted. I don't think I wrote well in Paris—most of the time I don't write well. I went back to Greece and to Crete. I think it would be '65, Fall of '65, when I wrote my second novel, *Travel Notes*. That winter. Again, I may be a year off. That one, again, was published by Cape, and by Simon and Schuster in New York. Then I had what seemed to be like an eternally long time—it was only a couple of years before the third novel, which I wrote mainly in San Francisco but I finished here in Dixon.

This would be The Mrs Unguentine?

Right. The *Log*. I have trouble finishing things. My old method of writing used to be that things would come in a blinding flash, and I would work non-stop for five weeks and it would be done, but then I would take a year to finish it because the ending was never right.

When we moved to San Francisco, I was in such a state of cultural shock coming back to the States after a long time that I stopped writing completely for about six months. In fact, I had not spent very much of my more or less adult life in the States. Then, when I resumed writing, more came to me very fast and very intensely but, again, I had trouble finishing. It took me another year. It was the first year here in Dixon when I finished *Log*.

Then we built the house, and all that. Back into farming, and everything. So the next one did not come until '75 or '76, which again seemed like a very long time.

Then there was Some Instructions.

Which in fact I wrote first. I was given a house in Santa Fe for a month, which was a real godsend, and I wrote most of it there until my time was up and I came home and finished it here. And again it took what seemed a very long time to whip it into shape.

Was there anything else between Some Instructions and Mayordomo?

There have been two novels. One was quite bad. It was turned down by Knopf. I don't know how you turn a bad novel down well, but I took it truly badly. I thought they turned it down badly. That was about 1980.

Did you know yourself it wasn't good?

Well, I didn't think so at that time. Now I know it was.

Did you go back to it and re-worked on it?

Well, it sort of recycled itself into another one which I wrote—almost a variation on it, which I wrote in '84-'85 or '83-'84, I can't remember. Which I was happy with, and I submitted it again to Knopf—and they didn't like it. They weren't nice about it. I didn't send it anywhere else. I wasn't confident enough about it. I sort of felt I had solved some of the problems I had not solved with its previous incarnation, but most of the friends I showed it to were not particularly moved, so, again, it's in a trunk somewhere and I don't think I'll ever ... It doesn't have what to my mind a book needs, which is some kind of magic. But it was useful, actually. It was a stream of consciousness kind of thing, and was set in New Mexico, which probably was the first book that I really set in New Mexico—not in Dixon but in an imaginary Albuquerque. And I can't remember what I was working on when *Majordomo* came into existence but I think I may have been tinkering with that when the *Majordomo* project came into being.

Actually you have been writing steadily. There have been pauses but there has been no significant break in your production.

No, I write every winter. That can mean from October, an hour or two in the morning, until June. Increasingly, it's meant more like December until April at the worst—or at the best. It gets really hard in the Spring because the claim of the farm gets heavier and heavier. The two really don't go together. You know, if you spent the morning at the desk and then you go out into the field, you're going from a relatively abstract one- or two-dimensional world out into a four- or five-dimensional world, and you can hurt yourself or you can make mistakes very easily.

Mistakes as a farmer?

Yes. You can make physical mistakes. You can have accidents. This is what it does to me. Writing makes me very absent-minded and very mental, you might say, or intellectual or whatever. It interiorises me.

It's kind of interesting. I have suffered a sort of reversal of values through all of this. I think that most people see something like farming as being relatively low on the scale of human complexity. Now, what society honors, of course, is intellectual and artistic achievements of a high symbolic or abstract content—and rightly so, in many ways. In a sense, society honors very specialized achievements. Now I began to see things a little differently. One day a painter friend, Dennis Larkin, who used to live down the road, set up his easel right up their upper window. We used to park our old

pickup in the orchard there. We'd wash our vegetables in the orchard and load the truck up and keep it in the shade. Dennis thought this was a charming see—he painted somewhat realistic paintings but they were heightened in an almost surrealistic way. So he painted this thing called *Crawford's Orchard*, with the truck and the trees and a bench on which we have our washtubs. And I found this a very interesting experience because I realized that, of course, the painting is a terrific simplification and abstraction of everything I know. I know much more—I know what goes on in that orchard and that truck and with those washtubs, and the elaborate process that leads to that over the seasons; and you can carry it even further over the millennia that farming in these ways carried out. So I began to see artistic representation in a large sense as involving a degree of simplification and abstraction that was, again, fascinating; yet, looking at it from the other side, which I had stumbled into in the course of unbecoming, you might say, an educated man and becoming a kind of peasant, I began to see the real complexity of that life.

In writing, when you isolate yourself in a room with whatever your machinery is, dealing with language, that most complex of abstractions, you eliminate a lot of the multi-dimensional facets of, say, the life out there in the garden or in the farm. The point that I was going to make is that those moments of transition, when I have to come inside in the winter, often when I start writing I get very depressed—and that's because I have to abandon the very rich, sensual world out there that I have become habituated to in the summer, and in which I move around constantly. So I'm almost in a kind of mourning, having to exchange that summer life of physical work and incredibly rich sensations for a piece of paper, a pencil world, a word processor. But then, at the end of the writing season, which ends anywhere from, say, March until June depending on what I am working at, then I have to go outside—and I have to re-habituate myself to the multi-dimensional complexity of working with crops, with the earth, with machinery, with time in a different way. Time that's imposed on you. When you are writing, you create your own time; but when you're out there you have it imposed on you in a very strong way, and that transition is also very hard. I don't get depressed—I get frustrated, then, because it's as if I have to expand my mind again in another way. So it seems at times that I spend most of my writing in making these long transitions!

This is very interesting. Both of your activities are dictated by the seasons. During the winter, your hands hibernate along with your farm. You pull in. It's a form of further isolation from everything else.

Well, I discovered that there is such a thing as too much isolation ... I need a little time for that, but it's very tricky to isolate yourself while your children are growing up.

Tricky? I find it almost impossible.

When the kids were very young, I'd say, Oh, I'll get away from it all. But I wasn't happy being away from it all. You know, there is a kind of balance. You do want a certain amount of distraction because, after all, the random is an important factor in what makes us spark. If you shut yourself off in the random and turn off the telephone and chase the kids away and don't see anybody, you may find yourself in a very dead and non-creative place. So when I'm feeling most positive about it all, I almost welcome the distractions, as long as they only take so much time. However, if you fight them, you may destroy too much. You know, you are always going to have distractions of some sort. I'd as lief have somebody drive up the driveway at the wrong time when I am writing—it's much more efficient for me to go out and be pleasant and deal with them than to throw a tantrum, which involves a lot of distractions.

How do you manage to combine the two activities?

Discipline. There's no other way. Even as small a farm as ours requires continuous attention and hard work, no matter how easier today's mechanical help makes it. But writing also requires hard work. One has to fit both in. It's not easy. And it pays very little! But to have another activity is essential to writing. In my opinion, the writers that are mass-produced in these university Creative Writing courses end up not knowing anything outside the little academic world that raised them. And their writing shows it.

Right. Do you have a new project for the next winter?

I do have a number of prose pieces scattered around—essay type things I have written over the years, and for the most part never published because they are too long, too original. There was no place to publish them here. I haven't looked at most of them for a very long time so they may look as bad as I once thought they were. But maybe they'll look better! And the Los Alamos essay that I talked about earlier, maybe as a kind of centerpiece to that. So what I'm kind of planning to do is to work on this collection. But it doesn't mean I'm done with fiction: I would like to write something but I don't really know what. In order to finish *Majordomo*, I had to deny myself the pleasures of writing fiction because I had been putting things off too long. And *Majordomo* was difficult to write in a new sense. The difficulties always take a new shape, but this particular difficulty was that I can work out for two or three days, and then I would have to drop it in exasperation and come back to it a week later.

In exasperation for the demands of your job as a majordomo, or of your writing?

No, just the demands of writing non-fiction prose, having spent most of my life writing what I felt like as a fiction writer; the demands of reality

within the body of experience I was trying to write about. I could not make it up, and that was very frustrating. So I had to walk away from it every three days, often for a week. I would go back to whatever fiction I was working on, and I would kind of relax there and get involved with that. But that was becoming too habit-forming, and I had to stop it.

So I'm not certain, really, what's there. I have spent last winter working on a fiction which is—I don't know what it is. It's probably something that will go into a box but I felt I had to do it and now it's done, and I don't have to worry about doing it.

You know, Dixon is not a place where to be writing with an eye to the market. I mean, the media of course makes such distances irrelevant in one way, at least from the point of view of consumption, but we also have a fairly steady stream of remarkable people coming to the area so we often feel at the center of things, you might say. One of the reasons for leaving a place like San Francisco and coming to a place like this was that I did not want to become a writer writing for a market, a writer who was doing anything just to keep in print. I'm not interested in that. It has taken me a long time to get to this point and maybe it won't last, but I feel that what I have to say as a writer isn't going to take a lot of words and probably isn't going to take a lot of books, and so the other way that we make a living is a reflection of that.

Of course I would like to have a year to be able to write. I would love to write in the summer when you can keep the doors open and you feel better and you can jump in the river instead of farming, but ... When I was in Europe, and I was very lucky as a young writer, I had that time. I know a lot of people would never have that time. My first book was bought for the movies and for a lot of money at the time, and so from my first book I had the prospect of almost unlimited writing time. You know, I can write twelve months of the year seven days of the week, which is what I'd like to do. What I discovered was that I didn't have that much in me to write because perhaps I had come from a relatively protected, isolated middle-class suburban existence in southern California, where things were extraordinarily pleasant but the main events of life were conducted somewhere else, off-stage—people never died, they seemed never even to be born.

I had a lot of living to catch up with, and that also has to do with coming to a place like New Mexico, doing the things we are doing. The waste is not a waste—it's what I feel good about it. Sometimes we feel, Yes, it's a horrible waste. But when I try to be a little wiser, I suppose, I feel that it all gets recycled, it all gets used. The Los Alamos material, which seemed to take an awfully long time and effort, trained me to write the ditch work, trained me to observe what I was experiencing and then to take note of it a day or two later. So it wasn't lost. And I'm not finished with it. I'll go back to it.

And the obsessions of the fictions that I had been writing seem to go nowhere but maybe eventually they'll go into something. I felt that actually,

with most things I've written, even though in terms of pages the final books seem very small, somehow it's a summing up of some kind of problem I could not even positively articulate that I set for myself several years before and finally, eventually, has some kind of fruition in this form.

How distant are you, as a man, from the subject matter of your fiction?

As far as humanly possible. I mean, that's the illusion that I seem to be able to create when I've written these things. What I feel like, or have felt like with the set of four novels that have been published, is that I have played the part of an actor, and the lines come to me as an acting part. Which is to say that I'm very far from the person I imagine myself to be. Later—five or ten years later, when I read these things—I can then say, "Ah yes, I know where that comes from." But in the course of writing them it seemed to me almost as if I were being possessed by this voice.

And the voice tends to be a satirical one.

Yes. Almost without exception, there haven't been any good voices that have not been satirical. So, obviously, this is how I grind my axes. Probably the *Log* is the least satirical of the books, the most rhapsodic. In fact, I would not consider that a satirical novel. *Gascoyne* is satirical or a pastiche, it's a kind of fake detective story because it doesn't really have a plot—which is what the movie makers discovered when they tried to turn it into a film script. There is no real plot there—there is an *illusion* of a plot.

I am not a good architect in that way at all. I must not believe in plots, even though I read plotted books quite gleefully. I've spent one winter reading John Le Carré, to whom to my surprise I became quite devoted. With his many limits, he's a masterful, a wonderful writer; there's something quite marvelous there. The second novel, *Travel Notes*, is satirical again—of what, I'm not certain. So is the third one, *Some Instructions*, although the way it was finally edited, with my consent, does not appear to be a novel. The sections were contiguous. It was written as a flow—it came to me that way. But when Knopf got it, they suggested that all the sections be numbered and that they be titled. And I liked that. So, it is a fiction. Whether it is a novel, it's a topic for a seminar.

So, Mayordomo was your first published venture into a different genre.

Right.

I understand a friend of yours convinced you to write it because he saw how deeply involved you were in your work as the majordomo of the acequia.

Well, this was an Australian family friend who visited with us just before going back home, where he died. Before leaving (we didn't know whether he knew he was ill or not), he stopped to say goodbye, and he was here for a few days. The time was March and we were cleaning up the ditch, so I had to supervise the crew. I finished at five and came back home. We were sitting around, and he said, "Well, show me the ditch." So we climbed up the bank, and the ditch was cleaned out. No water. Nothing much to see. We walked up and down a bit, and he said, "You know, Stan, you ought to write about it." I said, "Yes, I know, but I don't know how. I know everything I need, I just don't know how to write about it." And that was that. And he went off the next morning to San Francisco and then to Australia.

The way this conversation was taking place, it planted something in my head, I guess. We had one more day to go, which was to clean the ditch up from this place next door up to the dam. It was a Saturday. A relatively small crew. And I just remembered everything. This was my Los Alamos training, I might say. I remembered everything from the beginning, from the morning until the end. We finished in midday. I came home, and thought about it. The next day or the day after I sat down and wrote down a long-hand account of it from my point of view. This was what was missing in my Los Alamos writings: there was no point of view. There wasn't anybody there—it was just words. Judgments. I took the part of a character, as the Marlow with this ditch crew, supervising this crew. Wrote it out in long-hand in the back of a notebook, writing let's say Japanese-style or Hebrew-style from the back of the book forward, kind of saying to myself, "I didn't really want to be writing this, this wasn't happening ...". Then, as you probably know, the first day I put the water on, the ditch broke and we had to fix it. So I just kept writing it—every time we did something to the ditch, I would write it up in the same way within a day or two. I learned from Los Alamos I could very profitably wait for a day and sometimes two days because in that time you learn what obsesses you, what interests you, because this is what you go to bed with and what you wake up with. So I kept doing that. I think I may have missed one day in the course of one year. Well, after I started typing it up in the Fall, I wrote well into the next summer because I did not know what shape the book would have and how long it would go. I think I read a bit of it to Rose Mary who got very excited—this after ten years of her reading my things and not being excited ... And then I typed what became the first chapter and sent it off to Gus Blaisdell of the Living Batch Bookstore in Albuquerque. He called back and said, "Hey, for heaven's sake, if North Point Press doesn't take it and the UNM Press does not take it, I'll publish it!". That was on the basis of twenty odd pages. North Point then looked at it and they did not like it. Then Gus trotted it over to Beth Hallas [of the University of New Mexico Press], and she was very interested. That's how *Mayordomo* got published ...

The Works

When, in 1970, Rose Mary and Stanley Crawford left San Francisco to begin a new life as garlic farmers in the backwoods of northern New Mexico, they knew perfectly well what they were giving up. They were turning their backs, respectively, to a promising career in the theatre, and to a distinguished future as one of the foremost postmodern American writers. They knew that this momentous decision was to drastically change their lives. Rose Mary started anew, making herself a highly respected name in the world of regional theatre as a playwright, actress, and teacher, while Stanley made himself over by "unbecoming an educated man and becoming a kind of peasant." For both, it was a costly process; so costly, in fact, that as the passage quoted above indicates, occasionally they are tempted to see their new life as having turned to be a "waste." However, this temptation is short lived. In fact, if on the level of daily life the "educated" and the "uneducated" men do clash, the former having to bow to the needs of the latter, in the long run they merged to make of Stanley Crawford a more complex and complete individual than he was before the great 1970 watershed. As he said, "I had a lot of living to catch up with."

Farming, trying to make ends meet, as well as getting more and more involved in local politics over environmental and economic survival issues, gave Crawford the schooling in life he had missed before moving to New Mexico. All that he learned as a farmer and as an active member of what amounts to a besieged (one might even say, a doomed) community poured out in his writing, lending it a new, definitely palpable sense of compassion for the human lot.

Crawford's early books were marked by a fundamentally postmodern aesthetics that gave the first person narrating voice a ludic, disenchanted, totally decontextualised perspective. *Gascoyne* and *Travel Notes* display all the characteristics of postmodern narrative—the parody of different literary genres variously combined, the instability of facts and of personal relationships, an inconsequential discourse that constantly trips the reader in his vain search for some stable ground of psychological or diegetic development. Neither levels of expectations on the part of the reader are satisfied, as an ironical mixture of surrealism and hard-core police novel *à la* Mickey Spillane distinguishes the first of these two books, while the second one proves a dizzying pastiche of mystery and travelogue. Both novels exhibit an amazing command of language, both flaunt the author's astute manipulation of the literary taste of the period—for there is no question that the early Crawford was on a par with the most celebrated postmodern writers of the time: John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, Stanley Elkins, or Bruce Jay Friedman.

At least in part, the move to Dixon changed all this. The adjustment. The house to be built—having to learn from a local farmer how to construct an adobe dwelling. The farm to be tended. The back-breaking work in the field. The need to establish a constructive rapport with the new commu-

nity. It was a long while before Crawford was able to write again. When he did, the masterful manipulator of language had acquired a new dimension. His rapport with the world around him—with nature, with history, and with the people—had become deeper. His perspective had changed. Consequently, so had his aesthetics.

The title of the first book Stanley Crawford published after his move to New Mexico is very much in line with the previous novels' tone: *Some Instructions to My Wife Concerning the Upkeep of the House and Marriage, and to My Son and Daughter Concerning the Conduct of Their Childhood*. A small jewel of parodic writing, *Some Instructions*, although set in the contemporary world of machinery, supermarkets, and trash classification systems, ingeniously mimes the 18th century pamphlets on Good Husbandry and Correct Behavior. What is new is that the typically postmodern abdication of all moral and social commentary gives way to an apparently playful but in effect unmistakable, if silent, denunciation of this obtuse and emotionally barren husband and father.

In *Log of the S.S. The Mrs Unguentine*, published in 1971, playfulness vanishes. The guiding tone is now one of deep understanding of human suffering, and of intense sympathy for the individual's hopeless struggle against an incomprehensible fate. With all its bizarre inventiveness, there is no irony in this splendid novel, perhaps Crawford's crowning achievement in fiction.

Playfulness as a means to underlay the hidden message reappears in the most recent novel, *Petroleum Man*, published in 2005, conceptually a sort of sequel of *Some Instructions*. Here satire runs both above and under the surface of the first-person narrator's discourse, damning, on the one hand, present-day American values as understood by the narrator, an arch-conservative industrialist, and, on the other, his egotistical attempts at conditioning his grandchildren along the lines of what he considers the "real" world.

Seen in their spaced succession, Crawford's works of fiction show that by becoming a farmer and by shouldering his responsibilities as an active member of the community (in other words, by "becoming uneducated"), this "educated man," who had learned all there was to learn about the craft of writing, had learned how to infuse a deeper sense of life into his craft.

Stanley Crawford the fiction writer is giddily, almost recklessly imaginative. Stanley Crawford the essayist and memoirist is sober, pensive, at times almost lyrical—although he occasionally indulges in passages of charming self-irony. The difference in literary stance between the two writers is the result of the transformation of the early intellectual hippy into an intellectual farmer, whereby the young cosmopolitan grafted himself onto the trunk of an old, peripheral Hispanic culture that for centuries has known only this narrow, barely supportive valley—a culture forever focused on fighting for the little water that descends from the mountains, runs past these meager fields, and two miles further down throws itself into

the chasm of the Rio Grande. An Anglo who cast his lot with a Spanish speaking community, Crawford had to win the trust of his neighbors by learning their language, by getting to know their culture, and by sharing their economic plight. At the same time, he had to maintain his own integrity as an "educated man."

The result of this growing process was the New Mexico trilogy, which includes *Majordomo: Chronicle of an Acequia in Northern New Mexico* (1988), *A Garlic Testament: Seasons on a Small Farm in New Mexico* (1992), and *The River in Winter: New and Selected Essays* (2003). Until *Petroleum Man*, for over twenty years Crawford did not publish any fiction. Fiction, the only genre that the writer had ever practiced, now only provided an occasional source of relief from the bounds of referential reality—a sort of respite from the renouncement of the freedom of imagination. For nothing is "invented" in the three panels of the triptych. The entire trilogy concentrates on the author's life as a farmer—the daily chores in the fields; the pressing decisions concerning crops; the machinery that needs fixing or replacing; the politicking conditioning the farmers' markets where the Crawfords sell their produce from the back of their truck; the trite jokes about vampires that the buyers feel compelled to make, and to which the sellers patiently submit.

At the same time, the trilogy concentrates on the author as a member of his community—his responsibilities as *majordomo*, which require that he organize and supervise the crew for the maintenance of the *acequia*, and that he apportion the water among farmers (his neighboring *parciantes*) who for ages have been locked in their feuds over the precious trickle. With equal attention and respect, the New Mexico trilogy addresses both the small and the large issues around which the life of the community rotates—the beavers that during the winter have dammed up the ditch, the neighbor's horse that again knocked down its fence, the curtailing of one's basic rights consequential from historical marginality. Crawford writes about the destruction wrought on the land by developers who care nothing about the cultural and economic integrity of northern New Mexico, and about the political dynamics that ignore local interests to accommodate (and benefit from) interstate financial and economic schemes. He writes about how to plant his various types of garlic, about the vanishing art of making mud floors by hand, and about the organization of political protest in Los Alamos, the citadel of technological, life-destroying power. He looks at things that are so small that one must bend to the ground in order to see them, and he looks at things that are so large, so distant, and fundamentally impalpable that only the eyes of the mind can perceive them.

The telling detail, and the overall view: these are the abiding ingredients of literature, sustained by the controlled passion that urges the writer to tell it as he sees it: "*Majordomo* was a book that had to be written," Crawford once told me. "Somebody had to write about these lives and about this world ... One of the reasons to write is to fight the oblivion to which those who are emarginated are condemned. But we also write—or at least,

I write—as a form of defense of my own individual reality. Television and the movies have taken over the role that used to be the storyteller's. It is to the media that now we entrust the invention of our collective myths. These myths, however, do not speak of you or me. They don't speak of my neighbors, of their drama when the little water we have is sold in order to fill swimming pools in Los Angeles. And it is about the owners of these pools that today's myths speak. That's why I must defend myself. I must re-appropriate my role as storyteller, as creator of myths—which is the role of the writer.”

Crawford's world as depicted in the trilogy is the same world that John Nichols, another Anglo who has cast his lot with the Hispanic culture of northern New Mexico, wrote about in *his* New Mexico trilogy and which was brought to national attention by his best-known novel, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, later popularized by Robert Redford's adaptation into a movie. Dixon is only a few miles from the Taos of the tourists and of the devastating ski runs; it is only one hour away from Santa Fe, where the water, which is essential for the farmers' survival, is sold away for the idle pleasure of rich Californians. It is also the same world that in 1944 Robert Bright wrote about in *The Life and Death of Little Jo*, where we have an analogous northern New Mexican village, the same subsistence farming, the same marginality vis-à-vis the State capital, the same impending threat of development.

We are faced here with a universal paradigm: the eternal struggle of man for water and, therefore, for survival. In the present context, I will mention only two Italian books well known to American readers—Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* (1933) and Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1946): their authors being, respectively, an antifascist exile from the Abruzzi mountains, who told the story of a village deprived of its water by the Fascist authorities; and a doctor and artist from Turin, confined by the regime in the backwoods of the Italian Deep South and forbidden to cure the malaria ridden peasants. As Stanley Crawford says, this is not a paradigm that the graduates from the schools of Creative Writing know anything about. Only when he became a *parciante* among *parciantes* was he able to tap the timeless source of universal truths that the land has in store for those who elect to work it, and are humble enough to listen to it. Only when he came down to earth—literally, as well as metaphorically—did he develop into the complex writer that we know now.

Let us listen to this passage from *Majordomo*—a passage born out of a personal experience that only a farmer could internalize, and only a great writer would be able to express:

Pitchfork in hand, I walk up the winding channel to meet the descending water. By the time it gets here the flow will be pushing a large roll of debris, and I will walk it back down through my place and into the next if need be, to fork out as much as I can. The ditch is about four feet wide through here. The fine sand on the bottom glares

in the sun. All is quiet. This is a strange wait ... something will arrive here at this place by means of this channel, soon, perhaps very soon, unless something has gone wrong up there—a tree could have fallen across the ditch, a bank could have collapsed. I am about to walk a little further up when a brown and grey tongue slips into view around a bend and rolls towards me, its dry leaves hissing softly, twigs snapping, approaching ... Here and there the tongue pauses, jammed by a dam of its own making until freed of its accord or until my efforts release it. The water behind the first twenty feet of floating dry leaves is the brown of coffee and cream.

Some time ago, at the Santa Fe farmers' market, I was waiting by the Crawfords' truck while the last buyer was considering her purchases. We were going to have lunch together after the market closed, and I stood nearby, watching Stan and Rose Mary beginning to close shop. What I could see was a tall, lean, Anglo-looking couple of farmers going through the typical motions of produce sellers—helping their last customer choose her bunch of garlic and her garlands of dry flowers, discussing the price, giving advice about storage, patiently smiling at the inevitable joke about vampires. I tried to put myself in the buyer's shoes. Did she know that this lanky farmer who weighed her bunch of garlic, wrapped it up, handed her the package, took the money, gave her change, and courteously said goodbye, was one of the most extraordinary writers of his generation? Certainly, the buyer gave no sign that she did.

Then I turned my question around. Would a reader of *Log* or of *Some Instructions* or of *Petroleum Man* who may have ignored the flaps of these novels have any idea of how its author makes his living? How could she know that every spring this writer, pitchfork in hand, helps clear a ditch of the choking winter debris in order to let the water flow, then runs ahead of it and, one after the other, raises the gates of his and his neighbors' little fields—a *parciante* among *parciantes*, a farmer among farmers? She could not know. Unless, of course, she is from this area—in which case she might wonder about the vaguely familiar, craggy face that looks at her from the dust-jacket; then suddenly she might remember the hardened hand that once, at the Santa Fe farmers market, handed her a bunch of garlic from the back of a truck. If the two images connect, she may realize that there is no contradiction here. She may understand that, actually, this apparent *mestizaje* is a perfect example of the deep integration of languages, cultures, and traditions that makes of the Southwest the unique world that it is.

Stanley Crawford may not have become a better farmer for having sacrificed, at least in part, his vocation as a writer, but he certainly became a greater writer for having embraced the lot of the farmers of his elected community, for having chosen to share their life. Integration of diversity, rather than its negation, is the key to human richness. This is the lesson that Stanley Crawford silently teaches—through his books, and from the back of his truck.

Endnotes

¹This is part of an interview that took place on August 1, 1988, in Dixon, New Mexico. My family and I had met Stanley and Rose Mary Crawford the week before in Albuquerque at a mutual friend's reception in honor of Henry Roth. They invited us to visit with them at their home in Dixon, and that was the first of many a visit that in the course of twenty years have brought the two families together both in New Mexico and in Florence.

Transcribing this tape proved quite a task. Repeatedly, our eight year old daughter barged in, screaming in delight over some of the discoveries she was making around the farm. From their wire pen just outside the studio window, the geese often raised their deafening cacophony. The ladies' rattling in the adjoining kitchen, as promising of delights to come as it was, added to the background din. At one point, the combined joie de vivre of daughter, wives, and geese succeeded in canceling out what Stan was saying—a sort of spontaneous, unexpected rendering of a passage in his second novel: “The tape recorder, purchased on a previous trip around the world, is proving to be a more limited device than hoped. Such a machine, which records all sound indiscriminately, can only fit, I see now, a situation in which all sound can be controlled or, as it were, be made to perform; and this would mean throwing the raw, brute moment right out the window” (*Travel Notes*, 47-48).

These acoustical obstacles, however, as maddening as they turned out to be for the transcriber, did not interfere with the writer's discussion of his beginnings as a young expatriate novelist, as a self-made peasant in northern New Mexico, and as an author struggling to combine his call with his responsibilities as a farmer and as the majordomo of the acequia that runs by his field. The result is a candid self-portrait of the artist in the process of “unbecoming an educated man and becoming a kind of peasant.”



St. Anthony church in Dixon, New Mexico

DA GASCOYNE A LOG OF THE S.S. THE MRS UNGUENTINE:
DALL'ATTUALE AL CAPOLAVORO

Di Stanley Crawford ci accorgemmo in Italia una quarantina d'anni fa quando nel 1968, con meritoria tempestività, la Garzanti tradusse il romanzo d'esordio, *Guascoyne*, uscito due anni prima. Il clima editoriale era allora – in America come, a rimorchio, da noi – quello della caccia al postmoderno di sperabile successo commerciale. In Italia, tuttavia, al romanzo pochi fecero caso; e da quel momento, fino alla traduzione di *Log* da parte della Palomar nel 2005, fu un silenzio assoluto. Alla fine degli anni Settanta trovai da un libraio milanese dell'usato una copia di *Some Instructions* col celebre timbro triangolare di un'agenzia letteraria: quanto restava, evidentemente, di un tentativo di riproporre lo scrittore al nostro pubblico; tentativo purtroppo andato a vuoto, forse anche perché *Instructions* è un'opera la cui valenza postmoderna, a differenza di quanto avviene in *Guascoyne*, è troppo nascosta e troppo colta per un pubblico attratto soprattutto dalla novità ufficiale.

I cinque romanzi che costituiscono, finora, la produzione narrativa di Crawford condividono con l'estetica postmoderna l'impostazione ludica, la mimesi parodica di generi letterari diversi e diversamente combinati, l'istituzionale instabilità dei fatti, i quali slittano sul discorso confondendosi, contraddicendosi, spiazzando il lettore a proprio agio soltanto là dove si offrano certezze. Opere colte, quelle di Crawford, ma che ben nascondono codesta cultura sotto le più varie maschere sbeffeggianti, e il cui sostrato intertestuale, avvertibile in filigrana, va dal connubio fra surrealismo e il giallo *hard-core* alla Mickey Spillane in *Gascoyne*, alla parodica commistione di poliziesco e diario di viaggio in *Travel Notes*, al serio, paradossale trattatello di economia domestica in stile settecentesco in *Some Instructions*; e parleremo più avanti di *Unguentine*. Perché «l'idea», dice lo scrittore, «era di creare opere che non fossero ripetizioni o variazioni su tema, bensì testi autonomi, impostati secondo un'invenzione sempre nuova». Dove giustamente l'eco poundiana, più che a quella postmoderna, rimanda alla prassi modernista.

In questi romanzi, Stanley Crawford sfoggia una straordinaria padronanza di mezzi espressivi analoga, e spesso superiore, al linguaggio degli autori postmoderni di riconosciuta statura, rispetto ai quali Crawford ha soltanto avuto il torto, diciamo così, di restare troppo a lungo in silenzio ed essersi pertanto sottratto all'attenzione critica e, soprattutto, del mer-



cato. (Romano Bilenchi amava ricordare la formula di Curzio Malaparte per il successo: «Se voglio che *Kaputt* e *La pelle* rimangano in libreria, devo pubblicare un libro all'anno»). Ma Crawford era uscito di scena, come narratore, anche perché i suoi ritmi creativi non sono mai stati quelli richiesti dalla macchina editoriale: nel mondo dell'industria editoriale, forse ancor più che in quello sentimentale, lontano dagli occhi vuole veramente dire lontano dal cuore. Nel caso del nostro scrittore, questo è vero tanto per l'Italia, dove il suo nome è stato subito dimenticato dopo la prima traduzione, quanto per gli Stati Uniti, dove i primi due titoli sono ormai introvabili¹.

Crawford non parla volentieri dei suoi primi libri. «Ciò che scrissi da giovane», diceva qualche anno fa con la sua voce profonda che della lenta parlata del Southwest ha il ritmo anche se non l'accento, «era animato da un'estetica che alla voce narrante in prima persona affidava una prospettiva disincantata, ludica, decontestualizzata. Oggi, a distanza di anni, la mia prospettiva, e quindi la mia estetica, è cambiata. Oggi il mio rapporto con l'ambiente – con la terra, con gli altri, con la storia – è più stretto. Più concreto». E infatti la particolare combinazione di saggistica e di scrittura di sé, inaugurata con *Majordomo* e portata avanti negli altri due pannelli del trittico, presenta uno scrittore molto diverso da quello che per qualche anno aveva gareggiato in spericolatezza narrativa con i più celebri nomi del postmoderno. Questo secondo Crawford è posato, pensoso, si espone in prima persona quanto bizzarro e imprevedibile era il primo; ha movenze e cadenze di ascendenza classica – si sentono echi di Melville, si avverte l'esempio di Thoreau. Non rinuncia alla sferzata dell'ironia, spesso rivolta su se stesso, e che anche quando scaturita dall'indignazione si leva da un fondo d'intensa partecipazione, di approfondita meditazione. L'antica maestria del linguaggio è invariata, ma si distende qui in pagine di controllato eppure ammaliante lirismo, impensabili in almeno quattro delle opere narrative – dove l'eccezione è *Unguentine*, il capolavoro.

È questo il risultato di quel decennio di intenso, faticoso lavoro di trasformazione da una sorta di intellettuale hippy a un intellettuale contadino; il risultato d'un cambio di prospettiva per cui il giovane cosmopolita si innesta sul tronco di un'antica cultura ispanica che da secoli conosce soltanto quella stretta, povera valle, quella cultura agricola di sopravvivenza in eterna lotta per quel po' d'acqua che scende (quando scende) dai monti incumbenti, trascorre, e va a gettarsi, fiumiciattolo da nulla, due miglia più a valle, nello strapiombo dell'irraggiungibile Rio Grande. Da questa esperienza, *Majordomo*: splendido libro che parla della Acequia de La Jara, il nome fittizio del canaletto – parte dell'antica rete d'irrigazione – del quale Crawford, anglo in una comunità ispanica, è stato per anni l'amministratore; il *majordomo*, appunto. Un libro che parla del lavoro di manutenzione, dell'organizzazione delle squadre di contadini che debbono ricostruire gli argini rovinati dai castori o dal cavallo di un vicino apertosi un varco nel suo recinto; parla della delicata opera di erogazione del preziosissimo liquido fra i *parciantes*, i contadini che da generazioni ne dipendono per

sopravvivere; parla delle lotte e delle fazioni, delle rivalità secolari che il *majordomo* deve gestire, delle amicizie anch'esse secolari delle quali deve tener conto. E questo a poche miglia dalla Taos dei turisti, dei ricchi, dei devastanti impianti sciistici; a un'ora da Santa Fe, la capitale dove si orchestrano i grandi giochi della svendita dell'acqua agli speculatori che vogliono 'sviluppare' il West, e così facendo uccidono l'antica cultura che da cinque secoli sopravvive intorno alle sue esili ma vitali *acequias*. È il mondo di cui aveva scritto John Nichols in *The Milagro Beanfield War*, e che il film trattone da Robert Redford ha fatto conoscere al di fuori della ristretta cerchia degli immediatamente interessati; lo stesso mondo del quale nel 1944 aveva scritto Robert Bright in *The Life and Death of Little Jo*: un analogo villaggio nelle Sangre de Cristo Mountains, la stessa povera agricoltura, la stessa marginalità, le prime avvisaglie (già negli anni Quaranta) della minaccia di 'sviluppo'.

È un libro, *Majordomo*, che dice la terra e l'uomo che la lavora, e lo dice come pochi libri del Novecento hanno saputo fare. Ci voleva questo intellettuale californiano fattosi contadino, ci voleva questo *enfant prodige* del romanzo postmoderno perché alla fine del ventesimo secolo la storia eterna del rapporto strettissimo dell'uomo con la terra venisse ridetta con tanto intensa poesia, con tanto misurato lirismo; e insieme, con tanto acuto senso della specificità di quel preciso ambiente, di quel preciso momento storico. Così come ci era voluto un medico e pittore torinese, mandato al confino dal regime fascista in quell'ignoto paesino lucano, per dire un'analogia storia – per ricordarci, con analogia precisione e poesia insieme, quel rapporto dal quale da tempo la scrittura si era allontanata. *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* è in effetti l'unica opera a cui *Majordomo* può rapportarsi – e senza che si debbano fare, come si dice, 'le debite proporzioni'. Due grandi, due grandissime opere, accomunate, *affratellate*, da una consimile umiltà nei confronti d'un soggetto di rilevanza universale; nate entrambe nel momento in cui, appunto con umiltà, l'autore si è fatto tutt'uno con quel paesino arroccato sulle bianche crete dilavate, tutt'uno con quel miglio e mezzo di canaletto tortuoso ora secco ora provvido della bruna acqua fangosa.

Un libro, *Majordomo*, scritto «per combattere l'oblio a cui sono condannati gli emarginati», come dice Crawford; per contrastare l'azione livellante dei media, ormai unici creatori dei nostri miti collettivi, dai quali gli emarginati sono esclusi. Perché lo scrittore, di nuovo nelle parole di Crawford, deve riappropriarsi della sua funzione di *storyteller*, e dunque di creatore di miti.

Una funzione disconosciuta, oggi, in quanto la letteratura di serie satura il mercato, il grande mercato editoriale che controlla il successo attraverso la rete pubblicitaria su giornali e riviste asservite, impone l'uniformità del gusto, e pertanto tacita gli scrittori che rifiutano di mettersi in riga. Per questo, nonostante alcune ottime recensioni anche sulla stampa nazionale, ben pochi a New York conoscono Crawford, conoscono *Majordomo*: che cosa ha da dire, a un newyorkese, un contadino che scrive di canaletti d'ir-

rigazione, della coltivazione dell'aglio, di contadini ispanici alle prese con la siccità e la fame? Lo stesso newyorkese magari ricomprerà *Fontamara*, che aveva letto al college perché non trova più quel vecchio paperback e sa che il sistema aveva a suo tempo decretato trattarsi di un libro da avere; ma la stessa storia (e detta, per di più, con una ricchezza di linguaggio della quale Silone, con tutti i suoi meriti, proprio non era dotato), se viene da quella lontana provincia che è il New Mexico, resta ignota ai più. Tanti, negli Stati Uniti, credono che il New Mexico sia una parte del Messico. E a chi importa, dopo tutto, dei contadini messicani?

Ecco allora un nuovo Crawford, all'apparenza più consapevole della propria funzione; più 'impegnato,' come usavano dire da noi qualche decennio fa quei critici che l'impegno ('il ruolo dell'intellettuale') riconoscevano soltanto se inquadrato politicamente. In realtà, fra il Crawford della trilogia e quello di *Unguentine* (e anche di *Some Instructions*) nulla è mutato per quanto riguarda la straordinaria maestria del linguaggio – un linguaggio duttile, capace delle più sottili sfumature, al contempo ricco e fulmineo, intenso, ironico, padrone delle modulazioni più classiche e insieme delle più spericolate invenzioni sintattiche. Né diversa è la capacità di cogliere, come un creatore delle arti visive, il dettaglio eloquente, il colore, il tono che dà alla scena la sua unicità e pertanto la sua memorabilità, così come la capacità di creare atmosfere inquietanti anche sulla base della commedia.

Ma v'è di più, ed è l'empatia, la controllata compassione per chi soffre, si tratti del contadino diviso fra istinto di sopravvivenza e senso di responsabilità per il vicino, o si tratti di una povera donna – questa povera Mrs Unguentine che affida al suo folle, improbabile diario di bordo il racconto di una vita ingrata. Una compassione mai declamata, ma che nasce dal profondo: essenza vitale che, come l'acqua della Acequia de La Jara, quanto più è preziosa tanto meno viene sperperata, tanto più fa tutt'uno con l'esistenza quotidiana. Questo scrittore che con rara perizia si muove tra resoconto e invenzione, tra osservazione e fantasticheria, guarda all'umanità con la partecipazione di chi sa d'essere parte integrante del quadro che va dipingendo: non come protagonista bensì come figura *inter pares*, come *parciante* dello stesso destino, della stessa risicata porzione di vita.

L'ironia di cui si è detto, e quindi l'atteggiamento parodico degli altri quattro romanzi (incluso l'ultimo, *Petroleum Man*) si rivela allora, retrospettivamente rispetto alla trilogia, come qualcosa di molto diverso dall'atteggiamento ludico di tanti dei portabandiera ufficiali del romanzo americano postmoderno, presso i quali il gioco della decostruzione del senso resta fondamentalmente fine a se stesso, e comunque soltanto cerebrale.

In tutte le opere narrative di Crawford, il senso sprigionato dalla parodia va invece in una direzione che è nascostamente sociale, direi quasi umanistica, illuminando della sua spettrale luce forzata storture collettive, incubi culturali, la succuba sottomissione all'assenza di valori. Quello di Crawford, in ultima analisi, è un umanesimo che a volte, per meglio

comunicare, si traveste nel suo opposto: l'agnello, se si vuole, che veste della pelle del lupo – ma un agnello, beninteso, armato dei denti affilatisimi di una micidiale ironia. Come, splendidamente, si rivela in *Some Instructions to My Wife Concerning the Upkeep of the House and Marriage, and to My Son and Daughter Concerning the Conduct of Their Childhood*, parodia del trattatello settecentesco di economia domestica con il quale Crawford mette in atto un'operazione linguisticamente e ideologicamente depistante: struttura sintattica obsoleta, lessico antiquato, impostazione comportamentale culturalmente superata – ma con scarti che stranio il già straniato, forzando il destinatario ad una fruizione ulteriormente mediata dell'ironia. Vedi, ad esempio, la sempre inaspettata irruzione di qualche elemento del quotidiano contemporaneo – la lavatrice, l'aspirapolvere, il trattore, il supermercato – all'interno di un mondo culturale da antiquariato, secondo un mini-sistema idiolettico che mette in luce la costante sfasatura ideologico-linguistica dell'anonimo estensore di queste folli 'istruzioni'.

In *Log of the S.S. The Mrs Unguentine*, l'operazione letteraria è più modernista che postmoderna perché, vivaddio, mai si ha la sensazione di essere coinvolti in un meccanico gioco delle tre carte. Certamente la dimensione intertestuale, pietra angolare dell'estetica parodica postmoderna, è anche qui chiarissima. Come non sentire, già nella frase iniziale («The name is Mrs Unguentine») un rimando al «Call me Ishmael» di *Moby-Dick*? Come non vedere una *stultifera navis* in questa chiatta, palcoscenico esclusivo dell'intero sviluppo diegetico? Come non risalire da questo impossibile giardino galleggiante al mito dell'Eden? Tutto ciò non si risolve però in un'abile, financo abilissima eppure piatta mascherata, come tanto spesso avviene nel postmoderno, ma è parte strutturante d'un sistema di cartelli indicatori disseminati lungo un percorso, costantemente a ostacoli, a suggerire paradigmi di portata universale; sì che l'immediatezza e la specificità del dettato sfonda, senza forzatura alcuna, nel generale e nell'eterno. Questa povera donna segregata, umiliata, concussa, che dice il suo impossibile, financo farneticante giornale di bordo è anche, oltre a Mrs Unguentine, la Donna. Il suo insensibile, egocentrico marito – Mr Unguentine, il carceriere che neppure sa di esserlo – è anche l'Uomo. Questa coppia improbabile, condannatasi a un silenzio durato una vita sul suo artificiale giardino galleggiante, è anche la coppia primigenia – che cosa si dissero mai Adamo ed Eva, se mai si dissero qualcosa? Il modello, a questo proposito, tace.

E tuttavia, pur riconoscendo ad ogni passo le risonanze paradigmatiche di cui l'ora disperato ora rassegnato affabulare della donna è pieno, la tentazione di una lettura prevalentemente metaforica è sempre ricacciata dalla straordinaria fisicità, dalla quasi emozionante concretezza di ogni singolo passo. La pagina, ogni pagina, ci mette di fronte all'assurdo, e al contempo ce lo vanifica come tale perché lo rende totalmente convincente. La *suspension of disbelief* non è qui momentanea bensì costante. In piena coscienza di essere coinvolti in una storia impossibile, trascinati in un

mondo impossibile, avviluppati in una realtà impossibile, non possiamo non fare nostro ogni gesto, ogni parola, ogni senso: l'emozione (questo è il miracolo dell'arte, della vera arte) rinuncia alla ragione. Noi diventiamo la donna – la sua sofferenza, il suo senso di un destino ineludibile, la sua stanchezza così come i suoi rari momenti di illusione e financo di felicità, diventano nostri. E si badi bene: bastano poche pagine perché l'esigenza di verosimiglianza si dilegui, perché i requisiti della razionalità scompaiano e tutto, di ciò che la donna ci dice, diventi 'vero'. Ecco forse il messaggio, com'è d'uso dire, che questo libro silenziosamente ci fa avere. O almeno, uno dei suoi possibili messaggi.

Quale sia il significato di *Log of the S.S. The Mrs Unguentine* sarà dunque responsabilità del lettore ipotizzare. Più giusto peraltro, e certamente meno azzardato, parlare di 'significati.' Perché il libro ci sfugge costantemente di mano, si fa leggere di momento in momento come una storia di avventure marine; come una *pièce de résistance* affabulatoria; come un'allegoria della vita; come la parodia d'una caccia a un'invisibile balena bianca su una caricatura del *Pequod* con tanto di papere, capre, vasca coi pesci rossi, uccellini e, addirittura, con una donna a bordo. V'è qui il Conrad di *Almayer's Folly*, v'è la *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* coleridgiana, v'è il *Robinson Crusoe*. Si fa leggere, questo libro senza pari, secondo le più delicate modulazioni: ora un passo di toccante poesia (il giorno annuo di libertà della donna, distesa su una zattera a bere il sole sul quieto assito sciabordante); ora, subito dopo, lo *slapstick* del marito che quasi si evira saltellando sulla ringhiera. Ecco il lungo, angosciante racconto della gravidanza isterica, che sfocia nel surreale del marito che partorisce. Ecco lo strazio dell'abbattimento di tutte le piante, e la loro sostituzione con alberi meccanici. È folle, questa donna, o siamo folli noi a crederle? Dacché non v'è dubbio: Crawford, senza sforzo alcuno, ci costringe a crederle.

Sarebbe limitante avventurarsi in conclusive ipotesi interpretative di questo testo eccezionale. Più giusto suggerire di abbandonarsi a una lettura che non ne leghi la gratificazione al raggiungimento di una qualche certezza, ma gratificazione trovi nella semplice successione di queste pagine dopo pagine di straordinaria incisività e di altrettanto straordinaria umanità. Finché poi, magari, al di là delle immagini attraverso le quali, con il suo jamesiano 'occhio del pittore', Crawford ci ha incantato, un intersecarsi di disegni globali sovrapposti come in un geniale palinsesto potrà forse risaltare all'occhio della mente, e farsi senso. Farsi *nostro* senso: provvisorio, temporaneo, mai definitivo, e tuttavia appagante. Com'è dell'arte. Della vera arte.

Note

¹ *Some Instructions* e *Unguentine* sono stati riproposti dalla University of New Mexico Press, che meglio delle case editrici istituzionalmente commerciali riesce a rispondere alle esigenze di un pubblico minoritario e di 'culto' locale.



Main street, Cimarron, northern New Mexico

CIMARRON, NEW MEXICO

Il fronte della prima grande tempesta di neve di novembre ci insegue, scuro; nero. Immenso. Ogni tanto guardiamo nello specchietto retrovisore: si sta avvicinando. Ma ormai siamo quasi fuori del Colorado – non manca molto a Raton. Resta la lunga gola che taglia il bastione dove finisce il Raton Pass, e poi sarà la piana dorata del New Mexico. Siamo in ritardo, ma non possiamo correre perché anche se la strada è stata sgombrata della neve caduta ieri, nelle curve in ombra l'acqua scesa dai dirupi è ghiacciata.

Finalmente usciamo dalle montagne. Sulla piana immensa, ecco l'ultima luce, l'oro radente del sole. Siamo a casa, anche se casa dista più di duecentoventi miglia. E comunque, stasera faremo sosta a Taos.

Dietro di noi, il bastione delle Rockies sembrerebbe aver fermato il fronte che ci insegue da Denver. Ma ci sono ancora quasi novanta miglia a Taos, col basso sole color sangue fra due strisce nere di nubi che ci guarda venire – sparisce, riappare, di nuovo sparisce al lento saliscendi delle brulle groppe scure. Ogni tanto, il nero ritaglio vuoto di qualche *corral*.

Poi, scollinata un'ultima groppa, il sole è scomparso. Contro la striscia nera, solo una piatta chiazza rossastra. Che poi è viola. Poi è svanita. È buio, ormai. Niente macchine, niente abitati. Route 64 corre deserta nel fascio ansioso dei fari.

La radio dice che il fronte sta arrivando. Non una luce, neanche lontana. Fra noi e Eagle Nest, la mappa dice che ci sono cinque miglia tutte curve di un canyon. Un canyon strettissimo. Probabilmente ghiacciato.

Poi il cartellone: Cimarron 2 mi.

Qua e là nel nero, tre, quattro lumi dispersi. L'avremo passato? Andiamo avanti. Ma neanche più un lume. Forse stiamo per entrare nel canyon ghiacciato. Torniamo indietro, e adesso vediamo l'insegna luminosa – St. James Hotel. Come un dono.

Qui erano di casa Billy the Kid e Wyatt Earp, la banda di Jesse James, Clay Allison, Buffalo Bill, Black Jack Ketchum. Dove ci morirono ammazzati ventisei – qualcuno dice ventisette – fra desperados, banditi, giocatori d'azzardo. Frederick Remington ci dipinse, Zane Grey ci scrisse un romanzo. Il St. James Hotel. Cimarron. Nomi custoditi, fin da ragazzo, nella memoria delle cose sognate.

Alle pareti del vestibolo, la testa enorme di un bisonte, un puma pronto allo scatto, l'abbraccio gigantesco del palco di un cervo. Stampe, foto



scolorite degli anni d'oro. Un paio di bacheche con pistole, staffe, vecchi dollari d'argento. Una enorme cassaforte d'epoca.

La scelta, ci dice la ragazza, è fra la depandance moderna – tutti i comfort – oppure qui, nel vecchio edificio dove nulla è cambiato. Dove ogni stanza ha il nome di uno dei vecchi frequentatori.

Qui, naturalmente.

Ci tocca la 1, al pianterreno. Da stipite a stipite della porta di mogano, l'arco pendulo di un grosso cordone di velluto rosso avverte di entrare con rispetto. E incorniciata sulla porta, la foto di Pancho Griego, un pistolero messicano che nel 1875 fu ammazzato giù al bar da Clay Allison, un attimo prima che Griego potesse ammazzare lui.

Griego ci guarda freddo. Capiamo: è camera sua. Dentro, lunghe tendine di pizzo alle due finestre, un letto alto con coperta di broccato rosso stinto, sedie Eastlake, consolle con catinella di porcellana a fiori, carta da parati scolorita. Una piccola cassapanca dove posiamo la nostra prosaica valigia.

Entriamo nella sala da pranzo. Siamo i soli clienti. Un tempo, ci dicono, questo era il saloon. La carta da parati è bucherellata da fori ad altezza d'uomo, e così i riquadri di stagno pressato del soffitto. Ci guardiamo: fatti quando? Comunque sia, siamo al St. James Hotel. Siamo a Cimarron. Arriva la prima portata.

Nel vestibolo (sempre soli: la ragazza è sparita), inseriamo il CD con la storia dell'albergo. E veniamo a sapere che nella camera 18 ci si sente. La 18 non viene mai data a nessuno. Vi abita un giocatore d'azzardo che dopo aver vinto, giù in sala, l'intero albergo, tornò su e sulla porta di camera venne fatto fuori.

Con qualche sbalzo di corrente – forse è la tempesta che si avvicina – il filmato prosegue. Interviste con ex impiegati dell'albergo, racconti di incontri con lo spirito, ricostruzioni dell'evento; considerazioni quali convinte quali dubbiose di gente del luogo. Tra di esse, quelle di Roger Smith, il presente proprietario. Il quale poi arriva – alto, asciutto, giacca di felpa scozzese. Si siede a chiacchierare, ci offre una boccia di buon vino. Abbiamo fatto bene, dice, a non infiltrarci nel canyon di notte. Ci vuole un nulla per finire fuori strada.

Per due ore resta a parlare con noi.

Disprezza Bush. Studia la storia locale ma la vede in un contesto generale. Parla del West che scompare. Un intellettuale che in questo mondo di cacciatori detesta la caccia – vorrebbe togliere tutti quei trofei dalle pareti, ma non può permetterselo perché i clienti si aspettano di trovarceli. E il discorso scivola verso la camera 18.

Ci crede e non ci crede. Conosce bene il valore commerciale di quella storia, di quel CD che ha trovato già fatto quando ha comprato l'albergo; ma non si sbilancia. Qualcosa, però, potrebbe esserci ... Quei vecchi impiegati sembrano convinti ...

Gli domando della camera. È sempre chiusa, dice. "Could we see it?" gli chiedo. Mi guarda, attento. Poi alza le spalle. "Might as well." Mia mo-

glie, un po' riluttante, ci segue su per le scale. Dirà poi che, non nella camera ma nel corridoio, qualcosa ha avvertito.

Saliamo al primo piano – scale anch'esse di mogano, guida rossa. Ci fermiamo davanti alla porta della 18. Niente fotografia, qui. "I sort of play it safe," dice Roger, sorridendo. Ci indica il sovrapporta; fra il bordo della cornice e il vetro smerigliato c'è un bicchierino sporco. "You see, I keep him supplied with whisky." Alza il braccio e prende il bicchierino. "Two days ago, when I came up last, it wasn't here. He puts it out when he runs out of it." Ci guarda. "You want to go in?"

Faccio cenno di sì. Apre, accende la luce. Entriamo.

La stanza è piccola, più piccola della nostra. In mezzo, la struttura sfasciata del letto. Una parete è sfondata, e il pavimento è coperto di calcinacci. Su un cassettone uguale al nostro, mezzo coperto di calcinacci e con lo specchio rotto, una bottiglia di whisky vuota, un paio di bicchierini sgorati. Roger posa quello che ha preso dal sovrapporta. "I leave him a bottle about once a month. Tomorrow I'll have to come back up."

Vorrei sentire, ma non sento nulla. "Maybe too many people," dico. Annuisce. "Too much light, maybe," dico.

Spenge, richiude la porta. La chiave stride nel silenzio.

Lenti, i passi affondano muti nella guida rossa del corridoio, delle scale che scendono nel silenzio.



John Nichols in front of his house in Taos, northern New Mexico (1992)

“PROLETARIAN BY CHOICE.”
AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN NICHOLS

The interview took place on November 12, 1992, in the writer’s home in Taos. Nichols, who had recently separated from his wife and, as part of the settlement, had given her his old house, now lived (as he still does) in a rather humble dwelling near the center of town. This was the first time we met. It was a very cold morning, and the small house looked like it could hardly keep out the chill descending from the mountains. Once inside, however, the cramped quarters welcomed me with the warmth of the hundreds and hundreds of books piled everywhere, and soon I was enfolded by Nichols’ radiance and energy. Every so often he would spring up, come back with yet another one of his books on which he drew his signature smiling face, and then he inscribed the volume with either an exhortation to keep on fighting for a better world, or an invitation to come back and go trout fishing with him in the Rio Grande gorge or walk up the slopes of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and maybe sight a puma or a bear.

I have never climbed down to the bottom of the gorge with him, nor have I toiled after him under the golden aspens, let alone beyond the timber line. I am too lazy to do any such thing, and John’s heart advises him to somewhat reduce his exertions. His joie de vivre, however, is unchanged, as are his beliefs. In this respect, little, if anything, has changed since that day fifteen years ago. This interview could have taken place last week.

...

Once I was going to learn Italian because I was given a grant by the Rockefeller Foundation to go to Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio on Lake Como.

And you didn’t go?

No. Life was too complicated. I was doing many political things. Then two years later I thought: Wouldn’t it be great to spend a couple of months in Italy? I called them up and said, “Hey, is that offer still good?” And they said, “No.” They didn’t like my politics by then. I’d become really radical.



But they asked me to apply for a financial grant for thirty thousand dollars. They said if I just applied they'd give it me.

I said, "I appreciate your offer, but I just sold my first book and it's doing great, and I made thirty thousand dollars this year so I don't need the money. Yet I have a couple of friends who are fine writers but they are broke. So could I have them apply for the grant if you want to give that money away?" And the Rockefellers replied, "No, don't bother." What they wanted to do was give the award to somebody who already had a public name so that the Foundation would get a lot of publicity. I gave them a bit of shit over that. I said I thought their attitude really stank. Giving the money to people who already have money seems stupid to me.

Yet the Rockefeller Foundation became interested in you?

Yes, once I became known. Nobody knew me before *The Sterile Cuckoo* was published, but that book got a lot of play, lots of reviews. It was translated into several languages, purchased for paperbacks, put out on film option, it became a Literary Guild alternate. My picture was in ads in the *New York Times* every week ...

Why did you move to Taos?

For political, cultural, environmental reasons. It's a long story. My mother was French, from Brittany. My great-grandfather was a well-known French writer named Anatole Le Braz. He wrote about Brittany, the Breton people and Breton culture. My mother, however, was partially raised in Barcelona because my grandmother had married a French representative of Standard Oil in Barcelona. Hence, Spanish culture and Catalan cultures were also a big part of the family's culture.

On my mother's side you're dealing with a real *mezcla* of culture, language, and place. Brittany and Catalonia probably have a lot in common with northern New Mexico in terms of minority cultures struggling against majority cultures.

I myself was born in Berkeley, California. My mother died when I was two, and I was raised in the US. There was a great conflict between my father and my European family. My French relatives wanted me to be raised there because they thought Americans were Philistines. Instead, for three years, after my mother died (when my father was fighting World War II), I lived with cousins in Smithtown, Long Island, near New York City. Then my dad remarried a woman from upstate Vermont, and I spent one year living with her in Montpelier, Vermont. After my dad returned from overseas, we moved all over the country. We lived in Berkeley again for a while, then in Connecticut for a year, then in rural northern Virginia for several years.

Was this owing to your father's profession?

Partially. My dad worked for the CIA for eight years, so we lived in Virginia where he could commute into Washington. I attended a private school in Windsor, Connecticut; then I went to a small men's college in upstate New York near Utica. I didn't go to Europe for the first time until I was twenty years old; that's when I finally spent time with my grandmother in Barcelona and Alicante, Spain, where some of my cousins still live.

What about your father's family?

My Dad's mother, Cornelia Floyd, was a direct descendant of William Floyd, a Revolutionary War general who signed the Declaration of Independence for New York State. William Floyd had a house and estate on the south shore of Long Island. That house stayed in our family from 1710 up to the present day. When my grandmother finally died, in 1978, the family gave the house and the six hundred acres around it to the US government as a historical monument and a conservation area.

I grew up visiting the Floyd estate every summer. The house was incredible—I played cops and robbers using flintlock pistols and old muskets from the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. Uniforms from the Civil War hung in the attic. I learned all about the Civil War from old *Harper's Weekly's* stored in trunks up in the attic. We had our own graveyard, where relatives had been buried from 1720 until the present. My mother is buried there, my grandmother, my great aunts and uncles going back to William Floyd.

So our family had a very strong historical memory in a way that eludes most Americans, who mostly live with obliterated family histories. Not me. I grew up very aware of family history, both on the European and the American sides.

Now: The family was at least trilingual and tricultural. For sure everybody on the European side spoke multiple languages. Aside from English, my dad spoke French and Russian fluently. So I always had an affinity for multiple cultures. In fact, I feel uncomfortable in a monocultural, monolingual, monogloss type of situation.

Yes, I am a middle-class person and I was raised in a middle-class life, but I don't have much interest in the trappings of North American middle-class existence.

I take it that eventually you connected with your family in Europe.

When I graduated college, I spent a year with my grandmother in Barcelona, writing a novel and learning to speak Spanish and French. Then I lived in New York in what's now called Soho. But in those days it was Little Italy West. I had an apartment on the corner of West Broadway and Pen Street, below Houston—a trucking district, a working-class neighborhood. My neighbors were either Italian or Puerto Rican or working-class white. I loved that multiethnic neighborhood. I got to speak lots of Spanish.

When I married and had a kid, we moved to East 7th Street, which is mostly Ukrainian.

Are we getting any closer to your move to New Mexico?

Be patient. I told you this is a long story. In 1969 I wanted out of New York because I was broke and it was a harsh place to raise a child. I didn't even have enough money for an office where I could write, so I was writing in the local donut shop or over at the study carrels of New York University on Washington Square. Plus, I had been raised in small towns and was tired of the hurly-burly of the big city.

But where to move to? A big factor in the decision was this: From 1964 on I'd been involved in the antiwar movement, and I wished to continue leading a politically active, left-wing life. Hence, I wanted to relocate to where this type of activity was going on. And in New York I had been reading a lot about New Mexico and Reies Tijerina's land-grant movement . . .

Tony Hillerman wrote about this in The Great Taos Bank Robbery.

Maybe, but that would probably be a superficial treatment of Tijerina's movement, which climaxed with the June 5th, 1967, armed courthouse raid in Tierra Amarilla, a town two hours west of Taos. Tijerina's followers were angered because in 1906, with one stroke of a pen, Teddy Roosevelt had taken much southwest territory held in common by land-grant heirs, and turned it into national forests or public domain. What Roosevelt didn't rob, small claims courts had stolen from indigenous people ever since the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the Mexican-American war.

So Tijerina sparked your interest in the Southwest?

Partially. During that time, in the late 1960s, New Mexico was the 48th or 49th poorest state in the US. Essentially, the state resembled a colonial country because a very small percentage of the population controlled most of the wealth, and a majority of the people, who were either Native American or Chicano, were poor and struggling for their basic human rights. Tijerina's movement was part of their struggle. So I felt New Mexico would be a really important place to continue political work.

I got in touch with Betita Martínez, who ran a newspaper called *El Grito del Norte* in Española. The paper was an organ of the Chicano and the land-grant movements. I could buy it in Manhattan at the 8th Street Bookstore near my home. Before I moved there, I understood that New Mexico was one of the few places in the US, aside from our inner cities, where you would be living pretty close to the Third World simply because of the state's poverty and the exploitation of its citizens.

Also, New Mexico was a multicultural society, with many languages. Every Indian pueblo had a different language. There was a real *mezcla* of

indigenous populations. A majority were Spanish speakers, composed of old-time New Mexicans and more recent workers from Mexico. Too, the Anglo culture of Taos was interesting because it incorporated immigrants from many different areas of the country. Then add the homesteaders who had been in the state for generations.

I.e., New Mexico was *not* a monocultural, middle-class Anglo bastion. It was a fascinating mixture of people and cultures and history.

And ...?

And my sympathies lie with the majority of the earth's population that don't get much of the pie. Half the world lives on the edge of starvation. And since the mid-Sixties I've spent much of my life being politically involved in various struggles for human rights or economic rights or environmental rights. And Taos, New Mexico, was a good place to do that.

Which is the simple "New Mexico" answer to your question on why I moved to Taos. When you ask a New Mexico resident a question, he or she always begins with, "Well, you know, my great-, great-grandfather moved here, he was a peddler who sold things from a wagon, and then his daughter Effie married so and so, who was the first cousin of Eloy Trujillo, you know, whose granddaughter was related to Frankie Martínez and Roberto Archuleta ..." And so forth. It always takes an hour to get your simple answer.

Forgive me for being obtuse, but I'm still not exactly sure how you actually got to Taos.

When I was sixteen (in 1957), I won a contest in my Connecticut prep school for writing an essay on "What Democracy Means to Me," and the prize was a trip to Roswell, New Mexico, to a convention of the National Association of Student Councils, something like that. Unfortunately, forty-eight hours before I was to get on a bus, the organization's headquarters telegraphed saying that I couldn't come because my school had neglected to pay its ten dollars dues for that year. Dammit! But I decided to go out West anyway. I took a Greyhound to Albuquerque, and then spent a week in Taos, plastering an adobe house for the brother of a farmer that I worked for in Virginia who lived in Taos. The *brother* of my boss lived in Taos.

Then I traveled south to Portal, Arizona, which is in the Chiricahua Mountains of southeast Arizona. There I worked for room and board at a research station run by the Museum of Natural History. I also wound up fighting forest fires—which was wonderful. All the people I fought fires with were either Chicanos from Rodeo, New Mexico, or Mexican nationals. On a couple of Saturday nights my new pals drove me down to Agua Prieta, a border town opposite Douglas, Arizona, and we'd go drinking and roustabouting around over there.

That summer was quite an adventure for me. When I returned back east in August I wrote a first novel—a *novella*, you'd call it—set in the Southwest. *The Journey*. That really began my literary career.

Was this novella ever published?

No, God—no! Actually, it's a nice little piece of writing. I found the manuscript last year when I was sorting through trunks of my papers. I read bits of it. Very Hemingwayesque, but pretty well written, and quite attuned to the land and culture of the area.

So you first came to New Mexico, and Taos, in 1957?

Yes. Then my wife, my son and I moved to Taos for good in 1969. Understand, from 1965 on I'd been trying to write heavily political books. Even before the Viet Nam war I had been politicized by a 1964 trip to Guatemala to visit a friend for a couple of months. That journey changed my life forever. I'd never been in a country that was so poor. I'd never been in a place where people deliberately maimed themselves in order to beg. I'd never been where people were so openly exploited. It seemed half the female population engaged in prostitution because that was the only way women could survive.

I had also never been in a country so completely controlled by the United States. The United Fruit Company ... or had it changed to Standard Brands by then? The US controlled the telephone companies, the railroad, you name it.

I'd never been in a country where people hated North Americans so much. Guatemalans were very bitter about the 1954 CIA-supported coup that overthrew the Arbenz government and installed Castillo Armas as dictator. I arrived in Guatemala in 1964 at the end of a state-of-siege launched by the newest dictator, Méndez Montenegro. Revolutionary groups were active: the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes, led by Luis Turcios Lima and César Montes, and another group led by Yon Sosa—they are all dead now, I believe.

And the most powerful effect of that visit on you was ...?

I came out of Guatemala very disillusioned by the United States, by United States history, by everything that I had been taught in school: That we were the great, benevolent guardian of freedom and democracy all around the world. Guatemala really put the kibosh on all that malarkey.

We keep taking detours from your actual 1969 arrival in New Mexico. I feel that this interview has become a mirror image of the Milagro Beanfield War: an endless parade of detours!

True enough. But all of this history is part of the journey to New Mexico. After 1964, I read about the history of Guatemala, and that led me to read about the history of the United States, Central America and Latin America. And I began to learn about my own country. Nobody had ever taught me the dark side in school. They had taught me that the Pilgrims arrived in America and sat down and had Thanksgiving dinner with the Indians, and everybody loved everybody, and the Indians gave the Pilgrims corn, and the Pilgrims gave the Indians turkeys or something in return. But actually the Pilgrims arrived and started committing genocide on the native populations.

Then I read about the history of US involvement in Southeast Asia, which led me to become an anti-war advocate. And I started writing books that were basically anti-war books. I came to look at the world from a Marxist-Leninist perspective and I tried to put all that into my literature. But I had no idea how to do it. To say the least, I was not a very sophisticated thinker. I was very naïve.

Perhaps you protested too much ...

Hey, from about 1965 to 1974 I wrote seven or eight novels, all of which had real political axes to grind, and none of which ever got published. Thank Christ! They were all very angry. In print I grabbed people by the scruffs of their necks and said: "Up against the wall, honky motherfucker, Black Power's gonna get your mamma!" That kind of thing. I wouldn't even send the novels out because they were so angry and nihilistic ... and so *badly* written.

Did you really feel they were badly written?

Sure. I wasn't *totally* stupid. I've always had *some* criteria about what makes a book function as a work of art. But I just couldn't figure out how to make those political books function. I was so angry that my novels just disintegrated. A book might be a good piece of propaganda, but little else. I'd have a character at a cocktail party. I would set up this New York cocktail party the way Scott Fitzgerald might do it, elaborate and lyrical. Then my main character would suddenly wave his hands and tell everybody to shut up, and proceed to deliver a drunken dissertation on the history of imperialism in Indochina from the advent of the French to the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution. This rant would go on non-stop for fifty pages.

That probably did to your novel what it did to the party.

You better believe it! Also, at that time I was trying to redefine my life, my roots, my foundations, my political philosophy, my *male* philosophy, blah-blah-blah. I got married. But in those days traditional bourgeois marriage was out so we had to try and learn a completely different kind of

relationship as defined by, say, the feminist movement. I became a house husband. I would try to write and take care of our son while my wife went to school trying to “find herself.” It was a turbulent time. The 1960s in New York. A very difficult, wonderful time because I started re-educating myself from scratch.

I read books that I never would have read in college. Like Charles and Mary Beard’s *Rise of American Civilization* or Ida Tarbell on the history of Standard Oil. Or William Shirer’s on *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Suddenly, I realized there is a whole other way of looking at World War II. For example, if you look from a Soviet perspective it seems evident the West deliberately allowed Hitler to re-arm, believing the Nazis would attack the Bolsheviks, which would be a good way of get rid of the commies. In this country you would never get that sort of perception.

I read history books that suggested the Pacific war with Japan did not start at Pearl Harbor. It began in 1850 or ‘52 when Admiral Perry sailed into Tokyo harbor and threatened to level the city if the Japanese did not sign an open-door policy with the US. From that moment on the Japanese and the United States were locked in a struggle for resources in the Far East bound to result in war. Pearl Harbor was simply the Japanese way of trying to get the jump on the confrontation that was bound to occur between two imperial powers.

In those days, this perspective was news to me.

So your first two novels were hits, then for years you didn’t publish a third book?

Exactly. In fact, I rarely got books as far as the agent because I knew they weren’t working out. Then—at last!—I moved to New Mexico and began writing for a magazine called *The New Mexico Review*. Investigative and muckraking articles about land and water struggles in northern New Mexico. All contributions to the magazine were voluntary. The *Review* lasted from 1968 to the end of 1972. I never earned a nickel writing for it, but I did research, interviews, I became involved in New Mexico politics, history, society. Of course, all that knowledge eventually went into the background of *The Milagro Beanfield War*, my third published novel (in 1974) that was to become the albatross it still is today, still hanging from my neck.

Unfortunately, by then the lack of money was a problem. In 1965 I had earned 35,000 dollars, but by 1970 all I bagged was two hundred bucks for the Japanese translation rights of *The Sterile Cuckoo*.

Did you get discouraged?

Sure. And at this time I was also conflicted about the purpose of writing in the United States. America is one of the few countries that trains its

cultural workers to believing that politics and art don't mix. This means, essentially, that *left-wing* politics and art don't mix. But *all* art is political. Yet ever since the McCarthy period in the 1950s, much art and culture in this country has been fairly reactionary.

Elsewhere, an artist is by definition a political human being, usually in conflict with their government. Which is why many of the respected writers in Latin America have spent half their lives in exile or jail, some have even been tortured and executed for their writings.

So my torment was increased by a sense that writing in the US was a fatuous endeavor. Better that I should spend my life on the barricades and become an organizer more immediately involved in the struggle.

Is that what happened for a while?

Not really. Maybe I was too chicken. I could never quit writing. It's sort of like if you are an alcoholic you are an alcoholic, right? You can't stop drinking. And I was a writer, like it or not. But it wasn't until I sat down and wrote *Milagro* that I finally admitted, "OK, you're a writer, John. Face it. Now: *Figure out how the fuck to write well in the vein that you want to write in.*"

Like, I finally realized, as I should have all along, that writing can and should be a visceral political action. I mean, where do revolutionaries get their sensibilities? Where do they get their ideas? How do people grow into vibrant beings eager to work for social change? Much of it is done through reading and writing, right? You read *The Capital*. You read *The Wealth of Nations*. Maybe you read the collected works of Mussolini and they influence you to become a fascist. But you *read*. A person comes to power for some reason—and often that reason is they read a lot of books. Bertold Brecht once wrote, "Young man, reach for a book, it is a weapon."

Probably listening comes first. People didn't need to wait for the Collected Works of Jesus Christ.

Well, okay ... but I bet Jesus was illiterate. Anyway, when the *New Mexico Review* died, I said, "Let's give it one more shot, and if writing doesn't work out I better figure another way to earn a living." I mean, I had growing children, I had obligations. So I blammed out the first draft of *Milagro* and sent it off to the agent. The agent gave it to a publisher. The publisher said, "Yep, we'll print it," and ponied up ten thousand dollars. *Hello?* From writing the first word in November of 1972 to when it got accepted in February, 1973, was what—four months?

What a miracle! I had been working on seven novels for ten years and nothing had happened. Then suddenly I resurrected my career. *Milagro* obviously grew out of all those years of being politicized, then trying to write a polemical book. But still ...

Maybe by now you had your political experience under control. Your humor, for example.

I've never had *anything* under control. But, yes, I did make an effort to be funny in that novel because my previous books had been so totally *not* funny at all. You catch more flies with honey than you catch with vinegar. I didn't feel funny when I wrote *Milagro*, but I said "You better try and be entertaining, Juanito, or you're a dead hombre." Then when the book was published I felt it was so humorous that the politics were lost. Hence, over the next four years I wrote *The Magic Journey*, which I like more as a novel. It's less humorous but packs a bigger wallop (*I think!*).

Magic Journey is the culmination of my struggle to discover how to mix politics and art in some kind of polemical literature that's effective and closer to what a novel ought to be. I often feel that *Milagro* is too easy for people to read, it allows them to remain oblivious to the true nature of class struggle. However, you can't read *The Magic Journey* and emerge from it ambiguous about capitalism or cultural genocide. Or class struggle. You just can't. You can with *The Milagro Beanfield War*. I've had people come up to me and say, "God, John, I loved your book, but we got funny little people like that in our town too, you know, ain't there who!"—on and on and on, and you just sit there, red faced and embarrassed.

Still, you must feel proud of Milagro.

Fair enough. But if I had a shot at rewriting that book, I would be more disciplined. The writing is very loose. I am a sloppy writer. I rewrite my books twenty times, and usually after I've rewritten them twenty times I throw them away because they're no good. I bet I've written fifty books and I've only published about fourteen of them. Or fifteen. So I panicked once *Milagro* was accepted after only a couple of drafts. I said, "You gotta let me rewrite it." They gave me eight months. In that time I rewrote it twice, I believe, then I had to turn it in. The novel received mixed reviews. It sank like a stone.

I thought it was a big success.

Hardly. It sold maybe eight thousand copies. They did a second printing, then had to remainder most of that printing.

So it was the movie that made it popular?

Milagro was published in 1974. Ballantine did print a paperback, but no edition contained very many copies. The book stayed alive by word of mouth. It became "an underground cult classic"—it's the words that were used. Nobody ever heard of the book for years, but it stayed alive. Some high school would use it for a sociology course. A few college literature

classes picked it up. And Chicano studies programs. Organizers used it to politicize people in a way that was palatable to them.

The book went nowhere for a long time, yet it stayed in print. And Ballantine was very helpful. Every time the book was on its death bed they'd issue another press run. Modest, say ten thousand copies. Which, in a nation of 250 million people, is very small potatoes. A book of mine that sold better was *The Nirvana Blues*. It sold about fifteen thousand hardcover copies, I think, probably the most copies I've ever sold in cloth. I'm what's known in the publication trade as a "mid-list writer." Which is essentially the kiss of death.

So the movie came out and ... what happened?

Not much. As I recall, *Milagro* the novel didn't sell that many more copies. But by then it was finally selling at a sort of steady rate. The movie itself was a financial disaster. I'm surprised, in fact, that the movie didn't *kill* the novel. It had limited theater release, then went right into video. I believe the film was more popular abroad than inside the country ... especially in big-market venues like Haiti and El Salvador!

The movie did get the book translated into a half-dozen foreign languages because Robert Redford had been the director. That was cool.

Were you pleased with Redford's interpretation?

Actually, I didn't sell it to Redford—I had no intention of letting him make it into a movie. I gave the option to a little-known producer named Moctezuma Esparza. We were putting together a small film for public television with me doing the script for Writers Guild minimum wage. The project was planned as a PBS effort for maybe 500,000 dollars, max. But Redford kept bugging Esparza, and finally Esparza gave in and signed a joint venture agreement with Redford. This blew the project way out of proportion. Certainly, I lost any control I might have had.

I'd sold the book for a song to the movies, but now it was converted into a twenty-million-dollar epic that was a total commercial flop. Nevertheless, you know, in the end it's a lovely film.

And very different from the novel.

Por supuesto. Movies are by definition very different from novels. Novels like *Milagro* are large, ponderous things; movies are short stories. If the movie wasn't very different from the novel, it would be a total piece of shit.

Yes. But take Kyril Montana, the undercover agent; he is a much more complex character than in the movie.

I *hope* so. There's very little time for character development in movies. Especially in a film with as many characters as *Milagro*. The problem

with putting that book on screen was that everyone agreed it had to be an *ensemble* piece, giving equal weight to many characters. I said, “No, let me write a movie on Joe Mondragon, I don’t want to deal with fifteen or twenty characters in a two-hour movie, because they’ll all come out as simplistic caricatures.” But everybody who ever worked on that movie—and they worked on it for fourteen years—said, “No, it has to be an ensemble piece.” I think Redford did a great job, given the limitations imposed by having too many characters thrashing around in a very small box.

However, as a political statement it is better this way. It’s a collective statement.

Yes, it is. But with that many characters in the novel, for a film you have to merge some of them, then throw out ninety percent of the rest, and then you *still* have too many for a two hour film. You can just hope to create *one* character well, and that is the character of the town. If you could make a miniseries out of *Milagro*, say to run for two hours in five nights, you might come closer to a sense of the novel.

American Blood is a very strong political statement.

There’s an abrupt segue. Yes, for many years I wanted to write a novel about the rise of industrial capitalism in the US from about 1870 to the current day. It was to be a modest little egomaniacal enterprise! I was going to end it with the My Lai massacre in Viet Nam in 1967. I would begin with the Sand Creek massacre and the killing of the buffalo. The way we rubbed out the buffalo always seemed to me a perfect metaphor for how our capitalistic society functions. *American Blood* was going to be a huge book about the violence underlying our culture and history, both the actual violence, and also the violence caused by our greedy consumption of the planet’s resources.

When you are only six percent of the world’s population that consumes thirty or forty percent of the earth’s resources every year, creating fifty percent of the globe’s solid waste, that’s a pretty violent country. We do so much damage to the planet to meet our material needs. The average American creates, what, five pounds of garbage a day? Give or take. The average Italian creates one and a half pounds of garbage daily—you’re coming from Italy, and you probably think that Italy is really fucked up. The US does seventeen times more environmental damage than India, even though we have but a third of India’s population. We do eleven times the damage of China, despite having only a fourth of China’s population. When the Soviet Union was a larger country than ours, we still did two or three times the damage of the USSR. The only people that outstrip us per capita in doing damage to the planet are the Swiss.

And in terms of daily violence—people murdering each other or crashing their automobiles—nobody can compete with us. We are Number One because we try harder.

And so finally you published American Blood.

Yes, but only the petite version, not the mega-version I had in mind. In preparation, I spent maybe eight years taking notes. I read 100 books about the history of the United States. Then I finally realized that my life was so complicated it would take me ten years to write that big book. So I selected the central metaphor and wrote a novel that is probably more visceral than the macroscopic historical overview I originally had in mind. The short version is difficult for people to read. It begins with forty pages of atrocities in Viet Nam, and then moves on to this country. Those opening atrocities are probably a mistake because they make people think the novel is about Viet Nam, but it's not. It's about the United States' daily culture of violence, and what that does to people, humanity, biological resources.

Usually by page five of *American Blood* your average reader has thrown the book against the wall.

Are you writing anything right now?

I am *always* writing something 'right now.' One book, *An Elegy for September*, came out in June: it's a small, quiet novel about changing seasons, both natural and human.

A non-fiction work, *Keep It Simple*, is due out in December. It's the second part of a trilogy begun in 1990 with *The Sky's the Limit*. The third volume will be called *The Holiness of Water*.¹ Each book is a radical environmental essay accompanied by my own photographs. Those are projects I'm currently working on.

What about new fiction-in-progress?

Well, for five years I've been working on a ponderous novel that should be part four of the New Mexico Trilogy that includes *Milagro*, *The Magic Journey*, and *The Nirvana Blues*. This novel started out as a fifteen-hundred-page tome with millions of characters, dealing with the corruption of the democracy, the collapse of the banking system, the extinction of species, the overdevelopment of resources leading to apocalypse ... and so forth. It focuses on the 1988 US elections. I've had great fun satirizing our so-called 'two-party system.' But so far I can't make the book come together. I do draft after draft after draft. I've given it to my editor a few times and she has always virulently rejected it. She refuses to give me any money to keep working on it.

The last time she rejected my jeremiad was in June. In July I began writing a different novel, a ribald satire about marriage: *Conjugal Bliss*. For the moment it feels like a flip, shallow, vicious satire. I just sent a draft off to my editor because I need a break. Now I'm trying to put together *Holiness of Water*. The editor will read *Coniugal Bliss* and tell me it's a piece of crap, and then I'll go back to the drawing board.

Apparently, my publisher is going to bring out a hardback facsimile edition of *Milagro*, and maybe *that* will earn a few bucks and save me.

Do you ever write short stories?

Not anymore if I can help it. I have published two short stories in my life, that's all. And those were in literary journals, nobody paid me for them. *An Elegy for September* was abridged and published in *Playboy* magazine, which is the first (and last) time any fiction of mine has gone into a national magazine of stature. But that was an accident. I don't know how to gear stuff toward magazines.

Why? You are not interested in the format?

True enough. Short stories just don't interest me very much.

How come?

I don't know. They are too *short*. They don't encompass big worlds. I like work that is more panoramic. I like Hemingway's short stories, and some of Fitzgerald's, and I really liked Primo Levi—I remember reading a wonderful book of his, *Moments of Reprieve*. But I don't *think* in short stories. I don't have that kind of a mind. Or that kind of discipline.

What about poetry?

Please! I couldn't write a decent poem if you paid me a million dollars. But I have done a number of screenplays. For about eight years I worked on scripts in Hollywood. They were interesting projects. I worked on three films with Costa-Gavras: I rewrote *Missing*, which earned four Academy Awards nominations and actually won an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay. I worked with Louis Malle on *The Magic Journey*, and with Allan Pakula on *The Sterile Cuckoo*. I wrote several drafts of *Milagro* for Redford—in fact, I actually shared a credit for that screenplay, my only credit ever. I spent two years laboring for CBS on a miniseries about Pancho Villa and the Mexican revolution. I wrote a film for Karel Reisz, the director of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Our movie was about Haitian boat people and the new reactionary US immigration policies of the Reagan administration, which are pretty repressive, probably like Italian immigration policies towards Albanians. The film was never made.

Screenplays are a very concentrated type of writing.

Yes. Screenplays are a lot like short stories. A script is like trying to write a sonnet, hoping to cram everything into ... fourteen lines? Sixteen lines? What is a sonnet? Fourteen lines? Help me, I'm illiterate.

Yes, fourteen lines.

As a discipline, I like screenwriting. Usually, I have worked with a director, so that's a whole different process. I always write here in Taos, however, though I have gone out of town occasionally, to Paris or New York or Hollywood, in order to talk with the directors or the producers. Or else the people involved in a project come here to talk in Taos. People love to come to Taos.

I wonder why.

Beats me. But, believe it or not, I've even had friends come all the way from Italy!

Endnotes

¹ Written for a proposed photo-essay, *The Holiness of Water*, has not been published except for portions that appeared in *New Mexico Magazine* in 1992, and as part of *Dancing on the Stones: Selected Essays* (2000), 15–23.



The Rio Grande Gorge near Taos, New Mexico

LUI E LA RAGAZZA:
JOHN NICHOLS E L'ELEGIA PER UN SETTEMBRE

È tempo si presti maggiore attenzione, da noi, a John Nichols: questo scrittore geograficamente periferico (vive a Taos, poco più di un'ora – andando piano – a nord di Santa Fe), e tuttavia nel cuore del dibattito forse non propriamente letterario ma certo politico e culturale degli Stati Uniti. È tempo che si riprenda a leggere la sua opera: perché dei suoi quasi venti volumi tra romanzi, opere sull'ambiente e scritti memoriali, soltanto il primo romanzo (*The Sterile Cuckoo*, del 1965) e quello più famoso (*The Milagro Beanfield War*, del 1974) sono stati tradotti in italiano, rispettivamente nel '70 e nell'88. E si trattò del resto di traduzioni motivate in via primaria dall'originario successo commerciale: in quanto alla prima, dall'entrata di *The Sterile Cuckoo* nella lista dei best sellers, e per la seconda (la data della traduzione è rivelatrice) dalla riduzione cinematografica prodotta da Robert Redford nello stesso '88. Come a dire, furono le consuete scelte obbligate di un'editoria, quale la nostra, troppo spesso a puntuale rimorchio dei criteri sempre più commerciali dell'industria editoriale americana; scelte pertanto solo in seconda istanza dettate da considerazioni di qualità letteraria e di interesse e rilevanza culturale. E poiché negli Stati Uniti, dopo *Milagro*, Nichols aveva fatto meno cassetta, ecco che da noi, a differenza di quanto avvenuto in Germania, in Olanda, in Spagna e in vari altri paesi anche non europei, nient'altro è stato più tradotto; e con l'eccezione – pur grata – della ristampa nel '94 della traduzione di *Milagro*, dobbiamo registrare, noi che siamo invasi dalla più trita paccottiglia made in Usa, un pressoché totale silenzio su John Nichols; interrotto soltanto, di recente, dalla traduzione di *An Elegy for September*, un romanzo breve di delicata intensità che, ci auguriamo, darà l'avvio a un discorso critico su questo scrittore da noi neanche mai iniziato.

Il nostro silenzio, sia editoriale sia di attenzione critica, corrisponde del resto al relativo silenzio che negli stessi Stati Uniti da tempo circonda lo scrittore.

L'inizio, in America, era stato folgorante. Tante le traduzioni in Europa, nell'America del Sud, financo in Giappone; anche se piuttosto scarsi risultavano i contributi critici di valore. Poi però il silenzio, o quasi: silenzio di critica – dato che i critici, pedissequi, non fanno che attuare le direttive dei mass media, a loro volta sempre più al soldo dall'industria editoriale; e silenzio, appunto, dell'industria. Non è un caso che la sua



ultima uscita con un importante editore di New York (*Coniugal Bliss: A Comedy of Marital Arts*) risalgia al 1994. Da allora, Nichols ha pubblicato soltanto presso piccole o medio-piccole case editrici del Southwest e della California. Troppo irregolare, infatti, Nichols. Troppo militante. Troppo dichiaratamente irriducibile ai riti pubblici della letteratura quale concepita dall'industria editoriale e dai media perché Madison Avenue non decretasse irripetibile un nuovo *Milagro* e non esiliasse lo scrittore dai propri palcoscenici. Nonostante lo sviluppo di una sorta di culto nei riguardi di questa figura così poco allineata al sistema (o forse proprio per questo), nella ormai dominante ottica promozionale John Nichols si era esaurito come cavallo sul quale l'industria avesse interesse a puntare. Per qualche tempo lo scrittore aveva costituito una eccezione; poi, conti alla mano, gli fu chiusa la porta in faccia.

La motivazione 'culturale' era semplice: a Nichols era stato facile affibbiare la riduttiva, fatale etichetta di scrittore 'regionale'. Per Madison Avenue, 'regionale' – e pertanto marginale, pertanto fondamentale ignorabile – è tutto ciò che è al di là di un raggio di quattro ore in macchina da New York (Tony Hillerman, ridendo, va oltre: 'regionali' sono tutti gli scrittori tranne quelli di New York). Non è 'regionale' John Updike, il quale scrive della sua Pennsylvania e rientra dunque nella grande area metropolitana della costa orientale. Lo era invece un Wallace Stegner, scrittore di analoga levatura letteraria, il quale era solito scrivere della sua California; il che faceva di lui, ancor più riduttivamente, uno 'scrittore del West'. Il regionalismo può servire quando applicato a gruppi etnicoculturali secondari (nel linguaggio della *political correctness*, 'minoritari') – ed ecco allora che Rudolfo Anaya, nome di punta della letteratura chicana, nel '95 fu 'preso' dalla Time Warner, che sperava così di assicurarsi una bella fetta del pubblico ispanico; poi però le proiezioni di vendita, questa iattura dei nostri giorni, evidentemente erano risultate un po' troppo ottimistiche, e dopo neanche dieci anni Anaya è dovuto tornare a pubblicare in provincia.

Periferia, dunque. E per fortuna: perché è soprattutto lontano dai centri di potere della East Coast, da quel grande laboratorio per la manipolazione del consenso letterario, che in America la piccola editoria trova ancora degli spazi di libertà; è soprattutto alla periferia che trovano la loro libertà tanti scrittori i quali, per scelta oppure per condanna, restano fuori dal sistema.

L'America che legge ha infatti degli antidoti, potenti se pur minoritari, alla totale dipendenza da Madison Avenue: una persistente fiducia nella funzione di rottura della letteratura; tanti piccoli editori alternativi, indifferenti ai meccanismi del consenso costruito attraverso i grandi mezzi di comunicazione; una puntigliosa libertà di giudizio; e, perché no, una sorta di orgoglio locale, o 'regionale', nel ribellarsi alla massificazione controllata. Se pur schiacciati dai colossi dell'industria, questi benemeriti editori semisommersi resistono alla omologazione del gusto, alla concezione del libro come 'prodotto'. Mai vedranno i loro libri recensiti sulla *New York*

Review of Books, la *New York Times Book Review*, il *New Yorker* e testate affini, ma potranno contare su una rete di informazione alternativa, quasi sotterranea, la quale consente a tanti scrittori di raggiungere un loro pubblico e sfuggire alla politica di silenziamento della diversità messa in atto dall'imperante industria culturale – questo sciagurato ossimoro che presto neanche avvertiremo più come tale.

Fra questi scrittori, John Nichols: una voce irriducibile al silenzio – se ne condividano o no le idee, se ne apprezzi o meno il dettato. Uno scrittore al quale non importa più se la critica 'che conta', quella che 'fa opinione' dalle colonne di testate a distribuzione nazionale e nei programmi televisivi da costa a costa, non si occupa più delle sue opere. E perché dovrebbero (e anche se volessero, non sarebbe loro concesso) parlare di uno scrittore 'regionale'? Nichols sa benissimo perché; ed è anche contro quel 'perché' che lotta.

Per cui, il mezzo silenzio: il brusio tenace di un sottosistema appunto semiclandestino, la fedeltà di un pubblico che sa dove e come cercare i libri (non certo i 'prodotti') suoi come di tante altre voci che si ribellano, che resistono, che non cedono. Ed ecco quanto imbarazzo dovrebbero provare quei pochi che in Italia ancora leggono, a farsi dire, a farsi imporre che cosa leggere – a farselo dire attraverso gli strumenti controllati dagli stessi che le loro 'proposte d'acquisto' selezionano su ordine di Madison Avenue.

Per riprendere allora il discorso su Nichols, in Italia lasciato a mezzo quasi vent'anni fa anni, converrà ripartire da *Milagro*, romanzo che felicemente integrava le dimensioni letterarie e culturali primarie nell'opera di Nichols: l'impegno nei riguardi dei diseredati, un gusto per il realismo magico che nasceva dalla lunga frequentazione della cultura ispano-americana, l'intensa partecipazione alle problematiche inerenti alla difesa dell'ambiente naturale, ed una vivace, gioiosa vena umoristica. In *Milagro*, il sapiente amalgama di tali dimensioni faceva sì che la rivolta, dapprima individuale e poco a poco collettiva di questi poveri contadini del New Mexico settentrionale contro gli interessi di chi vuol ridurre la loro valle a un campo da golf, si sviluppasse con una leggerezza di trattamento e di dizione che è lontana dalla seriosità con la quale analoghe tematiche venivano presentate negli anni Trenta, quando il romanzo proletario dominava la scena letteraria americana. Se pure a suo modo marxista-leninista, Nichols non brandiva in quel romanzo, né oggi brandisce, i sacri testi che sono alla base della letteratura di protesta sociale. Sullo scontro fra la cultura anglo condizionata dal profitto e quella, legata alla terra, degli americani di origine messicana, Nichols – almeno in *Milagro* – non costruisce un teorema sociologico né tantomeno ideologico. Non predica, non inveisce, Non sbandiera. Ecco allora che la (regionalissima) lotta dei diseredati a difesa del diritto all'acqua – bene inestimabile, per un'agricoltura di mero sostentamento quale quella praticata sulle prime pendici delle Rocky Mountains – acquista dimensioni paradigmatiche; si fa (e come non pensare a *Fontamara*?) una battaglia fra vittime e oppressori, fra Bene e Male. Se qui, una volta tanto, vincono i 'buoni', meglio così: non

solamente per le aspettative del destinatario, il quale spera, legittimamente, in un lieto fine, ma perché il tono di eroica saga folklorica e la sapiente costruzione della fiducia del lettore nella dimensione magica indicano fin dall'inizio che non siamo di fronte a un racconto/documento. I conflitti economici, sociali e politici sono reali; reale, concreto, è l'ambiente nel quale questi conflitti si manifestano; ma nonostante le splendide pagine 'realistiche', il trattamento è quello di una favola, di una bella, bellissima favola la quale rimane tale proprio perché sappiamo che, nel mondo della referenzialità, per fermare la distruzione dei campicelli dei poveri non serve a nulla guidare un trattore dei 'cattivi' attraverso tutta la *mesa* e farlo precipitare (e quanto ne godiamo!) nel baratro del Rio Grande. Nel mondo della referenzialità, queste storie finiscono, di solito, con la vittoria degli sfruttatori e non degli oppressi. Nel mondo della immaginazione, l'inversione del calcolo delle probabilità non è un tradimento della Storia bensì un invito a sognare quello che sarebbe giusto fosse.

Il lieto fine con il quale si conclude questa metafora della svendita del Southwest alla divinità del profitto resta niente più che l'illusione – il sogno – di un momento. Nei due romanzi successivi, *The Magic Journey* (1978) e *The Nirvana Blues* (1981), che con *Milagro* formano la cosiddetta 'Trilogia del New Mexico', il tono si fa più duro, più esplicita la rabbia per l'inarrestabile, sistematica distruzione dell'ambiente naturale come sociale. Con tutto ciò, permane l'insopprimibile fiducia dello scrittore nell'individuo, la sua indomita – e pur sempre allegra – volontà di resistere. «May you always have faith in humanity, and the willingness to struggle on behalf of the earth! Hasta la Victoria!» Così, tipicamente, con un entusiasmo raro in un sessantenne, Nichols mi dedicava nel '97 uno dei suoi libri: parole che, pur nella loro quasi adolescenziale retorica, sintetizzavano perfettamente il mondo emotivo e ideologico dal quale nasce l'opera dello scrittore. E infatti, anche in un romanzo più recente (*The Voice of the Butterfly*, del 2001), ritroviamo la lotta in difesa della natura (qui, una specie di farfalla californiana in pericolo di estinzione) e, insieme, della dignità della specie umana: un nuovo *Milagro*, se si vuole, una nuova integrazione dell'impegno politico e dell'amore per la terra, mai paralizzati dalla consapevolezza dell'imparità della lotta e dall'angosciante declino dell'ambiente. E tuttavia, nella dedica a questo volume, già si avvertono i segni della stanchezza, anche se non della rinuncia: «Another bit of political lunacy from the pen of the fast-fading "comical" author».

L'impegno, l'amore per la terra, il rapporto uomo/donna: questi i grandi temi del nostro scrittore. Temi che, variamente intrecciandosi, percorrono anche le molte opere non narrative di Nichols, come *The Sky's the Limit: A Defense of the Earth*, *On the Mesa*, *The Last Beautiful Days of Autumn*, *If Mountains Die*; opere illustrate da sue bellissime fotografie, nelle quali egli parla della splendida natura intorno a Taos, dove dal '69 Nichols (nato in California ma vissuto a New York) si è trapiantato: la profonda gola del Rio Grande, tra le cui rocce a picco lo scrittore va a pescare trote che poi

subito rilascia nell'acqua vorticoso (vedi *Dancing on the Stones*); le montagne del Sangre de Cristo, non ancora del tutto rovinata dagli impianti sciistici; la sempre più rara fauna d'alta quota; quanto resta dell'antica cultura ispanica della pastorizia.

Discendente del firmatario della Dichiarazione d'Indipendenza per lo Stato del New York, erede di una lunga tradizione di impegno per l'ambiente e per la collettività presto confluita nell'adesione giovanile alle lotte dei *campesinos* in Guatemala, John Nichols ha fatto propria la causa dell'antica popolazione di origine messicana e, con essa, quella dell'ambiente. Un ambiente, quello intorno a Taos, di straordinaria ma al contempo delicata bellezza, che lo scrittore dice con struggente consapevolezza del suo precario equilibrio e della sua incombente caducità.

È quanto si ritrova in *An Elegy for September*, questo romanzo che, come lo sintetizzò una volta l'autore, «is mostly air, space»¹; un romanzo brutale e al contempo delicato, a volte scioccante, a tratti tenerissimo, sempre sorretto da una limpida onestà intellettuale. E insieme, un autoritratto impietoso quanto ironico.

V'è chi, in loco, ha avuto a storcere la bocca su questa storia forse fin troppo chiaramente autobiografica d'uno scrittore maturo, solo e malato di cuore, e della ragazzina (splendido ritratto muliebre) che gli si offre: ventata irresistibile di vitalità, squarcio lacerante in un quotidiano ormai infeltrito nella conta delle perdite. Taos è piccola, una comunità ristretta dove tutti conoscono tutti, e anche chi vi è solo di passaggio finisce col trovarsi in mezzo ai pettegolezzi: v'è subito chi, al caffè, ti addita la ex moglie di Nichols, chi ti sussurra come erano andate 'davvero' le cose, chi ti tira verso il partito di lui, chi verso quello di lei. Chi si sente offeso da tanta schietta, esplicita sensualità. Ma leggere *An Elegy for September* come opera autobiografica à clef è riduttivo della sua ricchezza semantica – come accadeva con le opere di Faulkner, che nella sua chiusa cittadina del profondo Sud furono a lungo immiserite a inviperito cruciverba ad uso dei benpensanti locali. In realtà, la chiave di lettura di questa storia è iscritta a chiare lettere nel titolo: si tratta di una elegia, appunto, per l'autunno di un uomo tentato forse per l'ultima volta dall'amore, ma che di amare non ha più né il coraggio né la forza che gli permettano di stare al passo con la prorompente, primaverile vitalità della giovane. Non importa dunque se i dati della narrazione corrispondano in buona misura a quelli referenziali: ciò che importa è la loro verità interna, la forza di convincimento che riescono a emanare nell'ineluttabilità del loro svolgersi testuale. *Questa* – non quella passibile di chiacchiere locali – è la vera storia. Si sarà allora liberi di leggere tale breve avventura esistenziale sul doppio binario della vicenda personale e dell'eterno riciclarsi della natura, con il suo sempre rinnovantesi eppur sempre nuovo conto di perdite previste, di prevedibili incanti, di prevedibili, ineludibili abbandoni; i quali sono tali soltanto nella costretta prospettiva individuale, l'unica alla quale l'individuo può affidarsi. Anche se la consapevolezza del suo limite non può mitigarne più di tanto la tristezza.

Una storia universale, dunque, ma condotta sul filo della concretezza e della specificità. Dove la valenza esemplare, come avveniva in *Milagro* e negli altri romanzi politici con la dimensione ideologica, è un di più che la pagina sprigiona, spontanea, ed ha qui il sapore e la silenziosa rilevanza dell'evento naturale: la pioggia, il vento che spoglia gli aceri dorati, i colori autunnali dei boschi, il falco che vola via con la sua piccola preda invano pianta dallo squittio della compagna; l'improvvisa, terrificante grandinata; il veleggiare alto delle nubi; l'odore di un gregge qui passato giorni fa e che l'erba conserva, così come, ancora schiacciata, conserva l'impronta di dove era stato l'amore. Immerse in quel ciclo tanto più vasto, le aritmiche stagioni dell'uomo e della donna trovano allora una ragione e una coerenza che vanno al di là del dolore individuale e che rientrano, non tragicamente ma solo venate di pulsante malinconia, nella grande legge del tempo. Si fanno, appunto, accettazione. Si fanno elegia.

Note

¹“It's hard not to think of the fact that everything is connected to everything else, that whenever we try to pick up anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the universe”; così lo scrittore rispondeva a una mia domanda su perché non scrive racconti. “The closest I've come to a short story is *Elegy*, which in printed form is stretched out to about a hundred sixty pages but in manuscript form it was about eighty, ninety pages—it's mostly air, space. And I liked that. But it's much harder for me to write down than to expand.”



The Pinal County desert, southern Arizona (photo by Millicent I. Lim)

VISIT HISTORIC FLORENCE, ARIZONA

Finally, Devil's Canyon opens up and the low sun facing us sets the immense plain awash with the golden fuzz of thousands of saguaros. Far back to our left, the serrated outline of the Dripping Springs Mountains is tinted a soft pink.

"Let me take a picture from up here," my daughter says. I stop and wait in the car. Our day's outing to the Salt River is coming to an end. In less than two hours we will be back in Tucson.

Once out of the canyon, the road cuts straight through an endless wilderness of sagebrush, saguaros, ocotillos, organ pipe cacti. Hopelessly outnumbered, its limp, dusty leaves besieged by the stiff branches of the surrounding cacti, an occasional eucalyptus shreds its bark as though in surrender. At the junction with State Road 79 we head south, running parallel to the Dripping Springs. Now the mountains are a fiery pink slashed black by the shadows of the canyons.

A sign topped by a wooden scroll is coming up. We stop to read it. It says, VISIT HISTORIC FLORENCE, AZ. *Established 1866. Inhab. 17,054. 2 mi.*

"Our house in Piazza Indipendenza is three years older than that," Luisa says.

"Take a picture."

"Naah."

We go on. No sign of Florence, AZ. No sign of any human settlement. All we can see, ahead of us at the intersection with a dirt road, is the corner of a high chain-link fence that seems to stretch forever, both ahead on Road 79 and to the left toward the mountains. By now the Dripping Springs are bright red.

"Stop. I want to take some pictures."

She gets out, readying her camera, and walks up the dirt road. I stay inside the car. The pungent fragrance of the creosote comes in through the open window.

Red and blue lights blinking, a police car advances slowly in our direction. I can see both officers look piercingly at us.

While they pass, I smile and wave my hand—you never know. The driver nods. Then, in my rearview mirror, I see the squad car make a U turn and stop twenty feet behind me, its lights going. I poke my head out of the window, holding my smile.



The driver gets out and stands behind his open door. His colleague is talking into a phone. I have seen this scene in plenty of movies. I put as much innocent curiosity in my face as I can.

Thumbs hooked to the gun belt, he slowly approaches. He stops three feet from my window.

"Hi!" My grin is very, very affable.

"Let's see your driver's license."

"Sure." With alacrity, I extract the document from my back pocket and hand it to him. He takes it with his left hand, without taking his eyes off me.

"It's an international driver's license," I say.

His right hand still at his gun belt, he flips the document open with his left thumb and glances at my picture.

"What you doin' here," he says.

Time to play the innocent Italian tourist. I point to Luisa. She is shooting away, oblivious of what is going on. "My daughter is making photographs," I say. My grin is beginning to hurt.

His clear eyes squint a little. "What you takin' pictures of," he says. He stares at me, not moving, my driver's license in his hand. I try not to look at his belt.

I wave my arm around. "Theeze beautiful mountains," I say. "Theeze colors—look how beautiful they are."

He shoots a quick glance toward Luisa. She stands a few feet from the corner of the fence, choosing her best angle. He looks back at me, his eyebrows knitted.

"Why you takin' pictures."

"My daughter is a art student," I say. "She likes to make photographs."

"You a visitor?"

"Oh yes," I say. "I teech Italian at the Tukson University." It is only a partial lie. No reason to implicate the English Department in whatever may be coming. "For one semester. I have come with my family to visit theez beautiful cuntry."

He nods, still looking at me. "You know where you are?"

"In Florenz Arizona," I say. I feel so stupid I could laugh. Right now, however, I don't feel like laughing. "I come from Florenz *Italy*." I give him an expectant smile but it doesn't seem to have any effect on him. He just nods, slowly. He looks toward his car and shakes his head to his colleague, who puts the phone back on the consolle. The officer gives me back my license.

"This is the Arizona State Prison," he says. "You've been takin' pictures of the Arizona State Prison grounds. Guess you didn't know that, did you?"

I swallow hard. "Sure didn't," I say—then I catch myself. "I did not know it. I am very sorry."

"You can't take pictures around here," he says. "You can get in trouble. Big trouble."

“Yes,” I say. “I am very sorry. Thank you for saying it to me.”

“O.K.,” he says. “I unnerstan’, you bein’ a visitor.” The thing seems to be over. “You like this country?”

“Very much. It is beautiful.”

Luisa comes back. “What’s going on here?” she says.

I tell her, speaking in my new Pidgin English. Her eyes twinkle. “My daughter speaks English much better than me.” The officer nods. He is about to turn around but I stop him.

“Officer, I would like to ask you. Can you tell me why Florenz Arizona has theez name? Perhaps someone from Florenz Italy gave it the name?”

He shrugs. “Don’t think so.” He looks vaguely toward the graying wilderness. “They say one of the first guys to settle here named it after his daughter. Or maybe his wife—I dunno.”

“Maybe she read Florence Nightingale,” Luisa volunteers. The officer looks stolidly at her. I don’t know whether she feels more embarrassed for her father or for the policeman. Or possibly for herself, having to witness her father’s performance.

“No more pictures around here, young lady.” The tone is not humorous. He touches his hat. “Have a safe trip.” He turns, walks back to his car, and gets in. He doesn’t turn on the ignition.

I start moving. A moment later he moves too, slowly following us at a distance. After a while the fence bends sharply left toward the dull purple of the Dripping Springs.

In the gathering dusk, the blinking lights become smaller and smaller. Then they are gone.



Tony Hillerman at home in North Valley, Albuquerque (1991)

THE CASE OF TONY HILLERMAN. AN INTERVIEW

This interview took place in December, 1990, in the writer's home in Albuquerque. It was the first time we met. Since then I often visited him in his new home in North Valley. We had become friends. We often talked of having him and his wife Marie come visit us in Florence—a project that never materialized. The last time I saw him, in November 2007, we discussed the possibility that I translate his memoirs of World War Two into Italian. In the course of later calls, he sadly admitted that due to his failing health he was having increasing difficulties in working on this as well as on other projects.

On October 25th I thought of calling him. However, it was late in the night—and then one always thinks there is plenty of time ahead of us; so I postponed it to the next day. The next day, Tony was no more.

This interview—the first of many conversations we had in almost two decades of friendship—has never appeared in English. I offer it in its original form, and in its entirety, as a belated adieu to an extraordinary storyteller, and a marvelous man.

Mr Hillerman, how did you become a mystery writer?

I really intended to become a novelist, not a writer of mystery stories. I had been a newspaperman, a journalist, for seventeen years. I decided that I would try to write something book-length, as it would be simpler to try to write a mystery because they are shorter and they have a sort of skeleton, a form. And if I could do that, then I would move to the next step and try to write a novel of character. That's how I became a mystery writer—trying to learn how to write.

Before going into journalism, did you intend to become a writer?

Yes, I guess so. I always liked to read. Unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of other skills in a lot of writers. I'm bad at mathematics, I'm very poor at fixing things, making tape recorders or computers work, or things



like that. And I think you're sort of forced into the business by the inability to do anything else! Well, I might also add, I grew up in a circumstance that valued storytelling—a tiny town, Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, a village of about sixty or seventy people, in the Depression between World War I and World War II. A community built around a Benedictine monastery and a cotton gin. Very few people lived there. Most of the people around there were Potawatomi Indians. We had a farm. My mother was a good storyteller and my dad ran a little crossroads store, and people would come and sit on the front porch and tell stories. And you noticed that people who did it well were admired.

Were you good at storytelling?

Even as a child I had a good imagination. I was always daydreaming.

What prompted the choice of the Southwest as the locale for your fiction?

Well, I grew up in Oklahoma, which is of course east of here but also rural and thinly populated, relatively speaking. I wrote about the Navajo reservation and the Navajo people because I had the feeling that while I might not be very good at plotting, I thought I was good at describing. And I thought that the Navajos and the Navajo reservation were so interesting that even if my plots weren't very good, the background would be interesting.

Did you conceive of your novels as a sort of saga, or did it just so happen?

I intended to write one mystery novel, and then one Great American Novel! After the first Navajo book, the second book—*The Fly on the Wall*—turned out to be not so good. While writing it, I had the urge to go back to the Navajo world.

How did you become interested in that world?

It started in August, 1945. I was just back in the United States from France, where I had been wounded. I was on a convalescence furlough. I got a job as an oil company truck driver on the reservation. One day I encountered a Navajo curing ceremony, and I became extremely interested.

Were you allowed to participate?

Yes, I was. But then I had to go on.

Was that the ceremony you used in The Blessing Way?

Yes, it was. Actually, it was an “Enemy Way.” The editors had me change the title to *The Blessing Way*.¹

You know a lot about Indian culture.

Yeah, you gradually learn a lot. There are three bases for that. I’ll put them in not necessarily their order of importance. First, when I decided what I was going to do, I spent an incredible amount of time in research libraries, reading, reading, and reading. Two, while I already knew quite a few Native Americans of various types, once I knew what I was going to do I began imposing on them, in effect, by saying, I’d like to check what I learned from reading against the reality of the people I knew: You people still do this? Is this the way you would perform a funeral, or a marriage, or a ritual? So I’d check. And finally—first, but most important of all, I think—when I was a little boy, I grew up with Indians. And when you do that, you learn something that takes years to learn otherwise. You learn it just like everybody else. They were my friends, they were my playmates. They were good, bad or indifferent, depending on who they were. Some of them I liked, some of them I couldn’t stand. Basically, the most important thing that makes Navajos seem different from an urban white man is the fact that they are poor, they grew up in rural isolation, and they have all the attitudes that the poor and the isolated have. Well, I was poor and isolated, and so I grew up with those attitudes. When I walk up to a trading post at Two Grey Hills or some place back in the boonies, and there’s a bunch of guys sitting on the front porch, I *know* those people. They are the same people who sat on the front porch at my dad’s store. And I know just what they are thinking as they’re looking at my car—they’re looking at me, and they are making some presumptions about me. O.K., I know just how to break through that, you see, because I grew up with it. That’s the basic difference: economics.

I would say that your use of the Navajo mythology may strike the reader even more than their poverty does.

You’re right, of course. And poverty is relative. I didn’t have any sense of being impoverished when I was a child, because all our neighbors were poor. That’s the way it is with Navajos. I know they don’t have money, or maybe they are not going anywhere because their tires are worn out, they don’t have any money to buy new tires. But that’s the way the world is, that’s the way with everybody they know. But a lot of the attitudes... for example, the attitudes about water. Jim Chee never wastes water. In Navajo mythology, in the Navajo tabu system, water is respected. You don’t step on water—water runs down a creek, a canyon, a wash, you don’t step where it runs, you step over it as a sign of respect. *We* didn’t waste water—we pulled water out of a

well, and you didn't waste water when you had to work to get it. So, the same attitude is common with me. Another thing. I've always been a religious fellow—not in a pious sense, maybe, but I have always believed in God since I was grown up anyway. Humans tend to go through a period when they either believe or they don't, no matter what they were taught as a child. If they were brought up very religious, they reach a stage they challenge it, they test it; they reject it, a lot of them, or they don't reject it. Since I became a man, I have believed in God. And I've always been interested in other people who do—people to whom religion is important. Important in the sense that it affects the way they behave, the way they live.

Leaphorn is not too affected by it, is he?

No. In a way he is the opposite, I guess, of what you would call a Fundamentalist. He sees their mythology purely as metaphor, as a poetic way of saying, "Stay in harmony, don't struggle against the current, everything that happens has a purpose." He sort of translates the specific do's and don't's of religion into a broad philosophical base. That's the way I see it anyway.

I am particularly interested in the structure of your recent novels, where you have both detectives instead of one or the other as in your earlier books. This seems to be quite a novelty, in the genre.

It is.

It creates two dramatic foci. It de-emphasizes the tenet of the super-human hero in the one-detective structure.

Perhaps it does. It happened more or less by accident. I started with the older, more sophisticated policeman—John Leaphorn—who was a pragmatist, and I guess there's nothing very romantic about him. Anyway, when I was going to start the fourth book, *People of Darkness*, I was interested in setting it on the east side of the reservation, in what is called the Checkerboard Reservation, where the Navajos are all mixed up with other Indian tribes and also various white cultures. And there's a whole galaxy of religions—Mormon, Native American Church, Fundamentalist Christian, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian. Missionaries are thick out there, you see. It's really a mixed-up culture. I wanted to set the story in that environment and put my Navajo in close contact with white materialism. Well, I had a policeman who was too old and too sophisticated in white ways to make it work. This would be nothing new to him. First I thought I would make him a much younger man—I would skip back in time. But I had become used to thinking him in a certain way, so I couldn't seem to make *that* work either. Meanwhile, I discovered that I lost television rights to this character. I had signed a contract some years earlier for film rights

and television rights, and while a movie had never been made, the option had been renewed long enough so that the holder of the option had purchased the television rights to the character.

For what you wrote, or something they could write?

For something that I wrote. They could use my character.

But they could not write stories with your character, could they?

Well, they could have, as long as it was for television. So, I had a double motive. I thought, I don't want to continue using this character if I don't own him anymore, if he's not really, totally my character. And on the other hand he doesn't fit in this book anyway. So, I will start a younger, more naïve, less sophisticated, more purely Navajo policeman, and I'll make him a man who is deeply engrossed in his own religion. Quite different from Leaphorn. That's why I started the second policeman. I wrote three books with him, and then I was signing books one day and some woman was getting me to sign a book for her, and she told me that she couldn't tell those two policemen apart. Well, I don't remember the woman, but I'll never forget how that shocked me. I thought, Have I been kidding myself all this time? And so I thought about it, and I thought, In this next book I'll put both men in, to begin it at least. And I'll see, I'll satisfy myself: Have I really been fooling myself, do I really have two different characters? That was ... What was it, *Ghostway*? No, it was *Skinwalkers*. I think it was *Skinwalkers*. Yeah. And as soon as I started it, once I got both men in I could tell, I satisfied myself: No, they are quite different. That's why I did it. And then, once I did it, I thought, I like it, and I'll try it again. That's how it started. Frankly, it *is* unorthodox. I don't know of anyone else, or in any other genre either, that does it. But it just seems to fit.

Absolutely. There is a kind of straight jacket to the genre—one knows that there's no question that the detective is going to discover "who done it." The way you have it, with both sleuths participating in the discovery, the credit does not go entirely to one. And this brings the story closer to everyday experience, to everyday life ...

Yeah.

... where nobody is so much ahead ...

Exactly.

... of everybody else. Well, what happened to the television rights to Leaphorn?

Someone else came along, wanted to make a movie, and they put up the money and I bought them back. I bought Leaphorn back.

I heard Robert Redford is making a movie.

Redford in fact was ... I'm not sure it was Redford ... Indirectly—eventually. The movie industry is so complicated that I don't even try to understand what's going on. But Redford, about two years ago, optioned all of the Navajo Tribal Police books. He and I got together and talked about it. He decided to make a sequence of three movies based on three books. The first one is now being shot. It's *The Dark Wind*.² It has been modified—it had to be compressed. And we also changed it. We worked Leaphorn into it as well as Chee. Anyway, the filming is finished, and they are editing it now. They intend to release it in 1991, probably in the summer or fall.

And there are going to be two more.

That's their plan.

Who is featured in the first one?

The role of Jim Chee is played by Lou Michael Phillips—no, Lou *Diamond* Phillips. He is typically American: part Philippine, part Cherokee, part Irish, part ... He looks like an Indian, though.

Are you happy with the film?

Well, all I've seen is about two or three minutes. I have seen the script.

Did you have a hand with the script?

No. No, no. I'll tell you—I don't know whether I'm happy with it or not. I'm going to wait and see how it comes out. I don't know how to judge things like that. The two media are quite different. I play the role of the warden in the movie.³

Ah—the character who blow-dries his hair in the latest fashion ...

I don't remember. I don't think they'd pay much attention to that!

May I ask what you are working on now?

I have an older brother who is a photographer, and he and I for years wanted to work on something together. So we are now producing a book called *Hillerman Country*.⁴ He is doing the photography and I am doing the

writing. It is about the kind of country you have been seeing, the kind of country I write about. If we can finish it by the first of February and hand it to the publisher, it will be out in October of 1991. I think we'll have it finished by then. That is what I was doing when you came in—that's what was on the screen in the computer.

Do you also go on with your fiction?

I have three novels that are here, in my head. One of them, five chapters are written. Another one, one chapter is written. And the third one, the one that I will probably write first, exists only as fragments of plot that I haven't been able to get together. I mean, fragments of characters and situations that I haven't been able to push together enough for them to reach critical mass, so to speak.

It seems that you are more involved with this one.

I *am* more involved with it, mentally. The one that I have one chapter written—I may never write it—is one of these rites-of-passage books about going from boyhood to manhood. They are difficult.

Still within the mystery genre?

No, no. And the one that has five chapters written is not in the genre either. It takes place in the Philippines, and in Cambodia—probably.⁵ It concerns the relationship between two brothers and a mother, one brother being dead. As I say, I'm interested in it but I'm not in any hurry to write it, because I really want it to be just right when I write it. And I'm not, now.

Do you know the Philippines and Cambodia?

I know the Philippines a little bit. I went there about four years ago. I went to the places that are going to figure in the book. The reason for the exotic environment was that I meant to put a common man in a situation of total chaos—no law, no order. So I moved the book back in time to 1975, which was two years after the United States had withdrawn from Viet Nam. That was the period when the government of South Viet Nam collapsed, and you simply had a country reduced to total chaos. I wanted to inject my fellow into that ... He would be a man about forty from a little town in Colorado who has gone to Cambodia because his younger brother has died in an accident there, and his mother has discovered that his brother has left behind a daughter by a liaison with a Cambodian woman. The mother wants to bring the granddaughter home. He gets there, rather reluctantly, at the wrong time. I've always wanted to try my hand at that, to see if I could carry that off. I'll get that done someday—or I won't, depending on whether I'll carry it off or not!

It's quite a distance from the Four Corners.

Yeah. But you know, I didn't really set out to be a specialist in the Four Corners or the Navajos. It just sort of happened. I have always thought of myself as a writer and a storyteller. And as you may know, I've written all kinds of stuff. I've written reports for the board of directors of Union Carbide, I've written texts for catalogues, I've written proposals for grants, I've written reports for mental health experiments, I've written a couple of ... five or six bad short stories ...

Why did you say "bad"?

Because I never thought they were very good. One of them won an award—an international competition for short stories concerning crime.⁶ It won second, which was a Scandinavian airline vacation for two. But I think it was picked more because of the descriptive writing than because of the plot. Anyway, I never thought of myself as in any particular category.

No, I understand. I was simply commenting on how thorough a break you will be making with that book from the environment you are usually associated with.

Yes. Well, if you had a really chaotic situation in the Four Corners, I would put it there and save myself all that trouble. But unfortunately it's Law and Order reign! No, I guess I'm as lazy as the next man. You like to do the kind of stuff that minimizes research. But it was the only modern-time chaos that I could think of. That's why I picked that. This was, you know, total, pretty much total breakdown. The law of the jungle.

Do you intend to go back to Leaphorn and Chee?

I intend to write another book in which ... It hasn't been started yet, and the plot is still trying to come together. I think I will have Leaphorn preparing to retire, knowing that Chee will never make a very good standard policeman but thinking he might be very good at what Leaphorn does, and having him transferred into Leaphorn's office and working with him, where you have Leaphorn directly responsible for Chee. This is going to be the circumstance. Then I think I want to have it concern a boy who runs away from a boarding school.⁷ In the winter. And disappears. This is a common occurrence. Nobody knows what has happened to him. And while boys tend to disappear and it's not anything very pressing, I'm going to have this be central to the plot. I am not sure how it's going to resolve itself. Then I want to involve (and this is why the plot hasn't come together yet) a smuggler, a man who has made a profession of smuggling, and has gotten to be good at it. He has already worked for other people and has made himself a nest

egg of bankroll, and he's going into business for himself. And he brings in something—I'm not sure what—maybe it's going to be pre-Columbian art from Central America. Anyway, he's going to lose it. Now I've got to figure out a way to connect these two. I don't know how to do it yet, and I may *never* know how to do it.⁸ Now there's a third element. A man named Louis Hieb, an anthropologist and a bibliographer at the University of Arizona library, an authority on the *koshare*, the clown fraternities of the Pueblo Indians who used to serve—before the white man came—as sort of policemen. They kept the people in line at ceremonials by making fun. Clowns, jokers—they would ridicule people that were doing wrong. They would frighten the children if they were misbehaving. Hieb has given me a whole bunch of information about modern-day *koshare*, 1990 *koshare*.⁹ I want to somehow use a *koshare* in this book, and I haven't worked out how to do it yet.

How do your plots come together? Do you start with a number of unrelated elements, and you sort of enjoy putting them together?

Yeah, I guess you'd say I enjoy that. I've never been able to outline. I've never been able to say, This is Chapter One, here's what happens, and this is Chapter Two . . . I've never been able to do that. Never. I just have the kind of stuff I'm giving you, and frequently I will start writing a book without knowing how it is going to come together. It is a hard way to write a book, but as I get into the story and into the characters, as I get acquainted with this smuggler, as I finally understand why the boy ran away from school and where he's going, then the book begins to sort of come alive for me.

The choice of season, for example, which ends up being so important for the plot. Do you envisage the locale at a certain time of the year? Or does the locale come afterward?

No, it comes before, usually. And that's one of the decisions I must make: What time of the year? This one, for example, I *know* it's going to take place early in the winter. We tend to have a bad, usually pre-Christmas—maybe not this year, but often enough—a bad, pre-Christmas snow storm in that part of the country. And everybody that lives there knows it. Sometimes it doesn't show up but usually it does, and causes all sorts of trouble. People dread it. And that is going to be on the horizon, as I write the story. I know *that* about it, and I know a little bit about where it's going to be. When I get ready to write it, I will go to those particular areas and spend some time there, getting the feeling for those areas again.

Will Leaphorn ever go to China with the lady anthropologist?

[Laughing.] I don't know. I've had some letters about that too. I don't know whether he'd like to go to China. I don't even know whether she'll ever show up again, but she probably will.¹⁰

Well, Mr Hillerman, thank you very much for your time ...

I must say, your home city of Florence ... I've always thought—of all the cities in the world that I would like to see, I think Florence. I've always heard from people who have gone there, that once you've seen Florence, no other city ever quite measures up to Florence.

Endnotes

¹ See “Tony Hillerman: il giallo si addice a Albuquerque,” n. 11.

² *The Dark Wind*, directed by Errol Morris, premiered in 1991. The film received very little attention.

³ In a later conversation, Hillerman humorously expanded on his far-from-successful venture into acting.

⁴ *Hillerman Country: A Journey Through the Southwest with Tony Hillerman* was published in 1991.

⁵ The reference is to *Finding Moon*, published in 1995.

⁶ “Probably,” according to Hillerman, “‘Chee’s Witch.’”

⁷ Hillerman was talking about *The Sacred Clowns*, published in 1993.

⁸ In May, 1992, I asked Hillerman how the story of the pot smuggler was coming along. His answer was, “The smuggler has diminished in importance, in the plot.” Possibly, the writer resurrected him as Jason Delos in *The Shape Shifter* (2006). When I asked him, Hillerman said, “I don’t remember whether I consciously did. But you may be right.”

⁹ Louis A. Hieb is the author of *Tony Hillerman: From The Blessing Way to Talking God. A Bibliography* (1990).

¹⁰ The character of Louisa Bourebonette is present throughout the saga.



Castle Butte. Navajo Reservation, Arizona

ON SECOND MESA, ARIZONA

The uneven ground between the Shungopavi general store and the rim of the mesa was deserted, except for a white squad car parked in the shade of a couple of Russian olive trees. No sound, no voice came from the low sandstone houses around the store. We hadn't seen a single soul while we climbed up the rudely graded road to Second Mesa. Aside from the stern young woman behind the counter, the only people we could see were the two policemen. One, arms folded across his big chest, was resting against the front of the car. The other sat behind the wheel. Both wore fancy dark glasses. They watched us while we parked by the store, got out, and looked around. When we came out of the store, only the first one was looking in our direction.

I walked up to him. "Good afternoon," I said.

He nodded back. "Good afternoon."

I waited a moment to give him time to size me up.

Then I said, "I'd like some information, please."

"Sure," he said.

I touched my old camera strapped to my neck, its case still closed. "I know you can't take pictures up here," I said, "but I wonder if the prohibition extends to the view." I pointed to the immense empty space beyond the mesa rim. "I'd like to take a picture of just the view. Is that permitted?"

"Go right ahead," the policeman said. "I don't care." He nodded back toward his partner. "We are Navajos."

Then it registered. Their tan uniforms were a shade darker than the khaki ones of the Hopi police. And the golden shield on the door of the car said, Navajo Tribal Police. I laughed, shaking my head.

A thin smile rippled through his lips.

I walked to the rim. My wife was already standing there, taking in the desert.

Hundreds of feet below the sheer cliff, the land stretched and stretched—barren, silent, intense, forever brooding over itself. The scorching August sun flattened all reliefs; distance annulled all proportions. Touches of darker tan or gray or red hinted at shallow canyons, gulches, dry arroyos. Far away to the right, Third Mesa was just a thin ripple in the frozen sea of yellow sand and rock.

After a while I took my pictures, although I knew that the light was wrong and that I did not have the right equipment. Then I closed my



camera case. My wife had gone to wait for me in the car. I walked back to the policemen.

The second one had joined his partner outside the squad car. "Nice camera you have there," the first one said. "What kind of camera is that?"

"It's a Rolleyflex," I said. "It's a double reflex camera."

"Never seen anything like that," he said.

"Last year a German tourist had one just like that," his partner said. "Once in a while they have one on Ebay."

"It's a German make," I said. "Want to see how it works?"

I lifted the case from my neck, opened it, and turned the camera toward them. One after the other they leaned over the square mirror. I turned the focus knob back and forth. "That's how you focus," I said.

"Pretty neat," the first one said, straightening up.

"May I take a picture of you?" I asked.

"Sure."

I stepped back and began focusing. I heard a car come up from behind me, and held my finger. The new squad car—also white—came to a stop in the light shade next to the standing one. A burly young policeman in khaki stepped slowly out.

The first Navajo reached out and pulled him next to him. "Come here, Hopi cop!" he said. "Come get a picture!"

The new officer grinned. All three stood facing the camera. I took a couple of shots.

"I'd like to send you a copy," I said. "Where shall I send it?"

"You can mail it to the Navajo Tribal Police headquarters at Window Rock," the first cop said. He looked at me. "Care of Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn." No smile lined his poker face.

"Alright," I said, holding down my own smile. I turned to the Hopi officer. "And I'll send yours in care of Albert Dashee, Jr. Will that be okay?"

"You bet." His large poker face showed no ripple.

I closed the case.

Then I gave them my hand. In turn, reluctantly, they touched it with the tip of their fingers. I squeezed the limp fingers hard, nodded, and went back to the car. My wife was waiting inside, her window open.

"You shouldn't have given them your hand," she said.

"I know. I shouldn't have." I turned on the motor.

"Now they'll worry about you being a witch," she said.

"I know. That's why I did it."

We started moving, our wheels crunching the gravel.

"It wasn't nice of you," she said.

"I know. I'm sorry I did." In the rearview mirror I could see the three officers standing in the shade, looking in our direction.

"No you're not."

"Right." I could see my grin in the mirror.

“It was mean of you.”

I avoided a large hole in the rocky road. From underneath us came the slow staccato of the crunching.

“I guess it was.”



The San Juan River gooseneck, southern Utah

TONY HILLERMAN:
IL GIALLO SI ADDICE A ALBUQUERQUE

Come a volte succede, questo studio è frutto del caso. Tutto cominciò un pomeriggio d'estate di vent'anni fa a Albuquerque, quando – cosa rara, in quella stagione, in quella regione semidesertica – prese a venir giù quella che i navajo chiamano una *female rain*: una pioggerellina insistente, tanto benvenuta per la coltivazione quanto poco invogliante a andare a girare per qualche canyon. Una poltrona, pertanto; e allungando la mano dietro di me alla libreria degli amici nella cui casa passavamo quell'estate, presi il primo libro che mi capitava. Era *A Thief of Time*, di Tony Hillerman.

Da tempo, quando sentivano che mi occupavo di letteratura del Southwest, gli amici del posto mi dicevano, "You must read Tony Hillerman. You'll like it". Una raccomandazione che tendo a ignorare: che ne sanno, gli altri, di che cosa mi piacerà? E un giallista, poi. Io che di gialli ne avevo mai letti sì e no due o tre. Ma quel pomeriggio pioveva – quel giorno era una giornata persa. Così mi misi a leggere. Bastarono poche pagine perché mi rendessi conto di trovarmi davanti a un narratore di alto rilievo.

Da quel momento divenni uno dei milioni di *fans* di Hillerman. Lo conobbi, lo intervistai, lo recensii; assegnai delle tesi su di lui, curai una sua traduzione. Colleziono (per quanto posso, dato quello che costano) le sue prime edizioni, comprese le pacchiane, amatissime ristampe in paperback. Mi rileggo i suoi libri, anche se ormai so chi è l'assassino. E siamo diventati amici. Al tempo stesso, io che continuo a non amare il giallo, mi sono trovato ad estendere il mio campo d'interesse a decine di giallisti della zona, a intervistarli, a studiarli, a scriverne.

Ciò che, lette le prime pagine di *A Thief of Time*, aveva fatto scattare questa molla dalle imprevedute conseguenze professionali oltre che personali, era stata la straordinaria capacità dello scrittore di parlare del paesaggio. E dato che, come per tutti, anche per me il New Mexico è veramente la 'Land of Enchantment', subito perdonai a Hillerman l'inevitabile struttura omicidio/indagini/soluzione del mistero, gli perdonai il previsto meccanismo della *suspense*, gli perdonai insomma la formulaicità dell'impianto; e nelle sue opere (e poi, se pure in misura minore, in quelle dei suoi tanti epigoni) trovo oggi, quando mi vedo intorno queste blande colline tutte ulivi, cipressi e chiesette in cima a un poggio, una sorta di virtuale compensazione alla lontananza dal deserto, da canyon, *mesas*, *arroyos* tagliati nella terra rossa, spazi senza fine.



Ma al di là della dimensione decisamente sentimentale del mio interesse per la giallistica del Southwest, ecco ben presto la domanda: com'era che della diecina di scrittori della zona che allora conoscevo, solo uno non scriveva gialli? E com'era che di tutte le diecine di scrittori delle altre regioni dell'America con i quali ero in rapporto, non uno scriveva gialli? Perché nel frattempo (era il tempo, appunto, dell'accumulo, dapprima inconsapevole, dei miei dati) un altro caro amico di Albuquerque, Rudolfo Anaya, aveva cominciato a pubblicare i primi volumi di una tetralogia di genere poliziesco. Letnografa Teresa VanEtten, di San Juan Pueblo, mi aveva dato un suo giallo, *Dead Kachina Man*. Un'altra amica, Mary Landon Kirschner, che ha prestato il suo nome a un personaggio di Hillerman, mi aveva dato il manoscritto di un suo giallo poi mai pubblicato. E avevo conosciuto Judith Van Gieson, e dopo di lei Steve Brewer. In tutti questi *mysteries*, l'ambientazione era sempre Albuquerque, e le zone circostanti.

I dati accumulanti si davano dunque avvio a una situazione curiosa, costringendomi a una sorta di calcolo statistico privato che, ovviamente, non aveva alcun valore statistico; tuttavia, quei dati erano troppo difformi per non destare curiosità. Anche perché, contrariamente a quanto di solito accade, e cioè che si trova sempre quello che si cerca, io non ero mai andato in cerca di giallisti, né ad Albuquerque né altrove. Ora non più: ora sono io che ne vado in cerca. Ma a quel tempo erano i gialli, i gialli di Albuquerque, che – si fa per dire – cercavano me.

La prima domanda, quella dalla quale parti una ricerca che ormai prosegue da oltre dieci anni, era come mai, per l'appunto a Albuquerque, mi trovassi davanti tanti scrittori di *mysteries*; e quindi, seconda domanda, perché questi scrittori dessero tutti un'ambientazione locale ai loro romanzi. Da queste prime domande discendono varie altre: vi è forse, qui, una qualche tradizione, magari non specificamente di genere poliziesco, che questa moda del giallo abbia alimentato? Forse, viste le date di pubblicazione, potrebbe trattarsi d'un fenomeno imitativo messo in moto dal grandissimo successo di Tony Hillerman? E in che rapporto, comunque, si pone questa produzione con il genere del romanzo e del racconto del West? E ancora: è ipotizzabile una funzione trainante da parte della vecchia serie televisiva di McCloud, il poliziotto di Albuquerque dato in prestito (non ho mai capito perché) alla polizia di New York? O, forse più generalmente, da parte della recente tendenza hollywoodiana di ambientare nel Southwest tante serie di *mysteries* e tanti film d'azione? E se così fosse, che cosa c'è a monte di tutto ciò?

Queste sono alcune delle domande alle quali il mio *work in progress* intende trovare una risposta. È possibile che se delle risposte emergeranno, esse finiranno per toccare più o meno direttamente una parte considerevole della narrativa del Southwest; il che farebbe pensare che il romanzo poliziesco abbia davvero, e non soltanto per una questione di coincidenze fortuite, una sua valenza paradigmatica non tanto per quanto concerne Albuquerque (perché qui il gioco delle coincidenze è innegabile) bensì per l'intera regione. In questa ipotesi, i miei singolari dati di partenza

rappresenterebbero allora una valida traccia (una pista, per restare in carattere) nella quale, investigatore fortunato, mi sarei imbattuto prima ancora di immaginare che mi sarei mai occupato di cadaveri, di assassini, di *detectives*, e dei loro onesti creatori.

Ma cominciamo dall'inizio, secondo quella buona prassi induttiva che è poi anche, nel nostro caso, l'unica agibile. Cominciamo da Hillerman.

Dopo la guerra, nella quale fu insignito di tre medaglie al valore, Hillerman si trasferì dall'Oklahoma a Santa Fe, dedicandosi al giornalismo. Poi nel 1962 rinunciò a una carriera che gli aveva fatto vincere premi e ottenere rinomanza nazionale, si dimise dalla direzione del più importante giornale dello stato, il *New Mexican*, e si iscrisse all'università di Albuquerque: attraverso lo studio della grande letteratura, intendeva imparare a scrivere narrativa. Nel 1970 pubblicò il suo primo romanzo, *The Blessing Way*. Nel frattempo era diventato assistente presso la scuola di giornalismo, poi direttore di quella stessa scuola, quindi assistente del rettore dell'università. Infine, nel 1978, lasciò la carriera accademica per dedicarsi esclusivamente alla narrativa.

Nelle sue semplici origini di ragazzo di campagna (delle quali parla nell'intervista che precede), Hillerman ha trovato le basi della sua salda presa sulla realtà, il suo senso della misura e dell'equilibrio sia personale sia professionale che neppure la celebrità internazionale ha scalfito. Il successo non lo ha cambiato: "I grew up during the Depression", dice; "I have six children" (di cui, va aggiunto, tre adottati), "and I know the value of money. And I know that if you waste it, you pay for it". Quasi si arrabbia quando nei suoi giri promozionali gli editori lo sistemano in un albergo di lusso: "What's the need of this? All I need is a place to sleep"². La stessa casa che si è fatta a Albuquerque è bella ma certo non sfarzosa: le linee semplici del Southwest, mobili rustici, fotografie del deserto, e *kacina*, le sculture lignee delle divinità pueblo. Il ragazzo che ha imparato l'arte del narrare dagli uomini seduti sul portico dello spaccio di suo padre non ha mai rinnegato le sue origini.

Sulla sua stessa figura di scrittore Hillerman ha mantenuto una grande lucidità, riconoscendo che se aveva cominciato a scrivere *mysteries* era stato in quanto, come dice, sono «shorter and ... have a sort of skeleton, a form. And if I could do that, then I would move to the next step and try to write a novel of character. And that's how I became a mystery writer-trying to learn how to write»³.

Con questa disarmante modestia Tony Hillerman rispose, la prima volta che ci incontrammo, alla domanda su come era divenuto scrittore di gialli. Gli avevo espresso la mia ammirazione per le sue opere, ma implicito in quella domanda era il senso della secondarietà del genere – gli dicevo, in fondo, che a mio avviso egli era uno scrittore straordinario *nonostante* fosse soltanto un giallista. Benché con la sua risposta Hillerman stesso mostrasse di considerare il poliziesco un genere minore, la mia domanda tradiva un sostanziale consenso alla impostazione gerarchica, ge-

neralmente anche se non universalmente accettata, che faceva e fa di lui, in quanto giallista, uno scrittore di secondo piano. Avrebbe potuto rispondere con l'aforisma di Cash Bundren, l'umile falegname di Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*, che è meglio costruire un pollaio ben fatto che un municipio fatto male. Ma Hillerman è ben consapevole dei limiti che il genere da lui scelto, e nel quale eccelle, comporta⁴.

E tuttavia la questione critica, per quanto concerne questo scrittore, sta appunto qui: sta nel suo essere qualcosa (o molto) di più d'uno scrittore di romanzi polizieschi, senza peraltro che questo superamento del genere lo collochi – nonostante *Finding Moon* (1995), che non è un giallo ma un romanzo d'azione – in una categoria non riduttiva. La questione critica sembra essere legata alla tendenza di Hillerman di attenersi al suo modello per farne qualcosa di diverso – ma non qualcosa al di là di un genere.

Alla base della produzione di Hillerman v'è infatti un disegno di allargamento dell'orizzonte narrativo rispetto ai modelli classici del giallo; un disegno, che informa ogni sua pagina, a comprendere e a intimamente iscrivere nella diegesi certe dimensioni esistenziali, certe problematiche sociali, certi nuclei di interesse culturale, di solito esclusi dallo scarno schema costitutivo (lo 'scheletro')⁵ del romanzo poliziesco. Un disegno di approfondimento psicologico, e al tempo stesso di espansione della diegesi sì che la sequenza istituzionale – delitto/indagine/soluzione – venga avvertita come facente parte di un continuum più vasto, e non appaia più svilupparsi fuori del tempo e, spesso, fuori di ogni spazio specifico, come è invece il caso in tanti romanzi polizieschi. Questo progetto, non tutte le cui linee erano già presenti nella prima opera, ha comportato la trasformazione di certi elementi strutturali del genere, e l'introduzione di nuovi.

Detti in un ordine che è, al contempo, di visibilità agli occhi del destinatario e di successione cronologica nello sviluppo del macrotesto, elementi distintivi di questo disegno sono l'ambientazione naturale, per cui, con qualche eccezione, tutti i *mysteries* di Hillerman si svolgono nella Big Rez, la grande riserva navajo a cavallo fra Arizona e Utah e, in parte, nel New Mexico; la scrupolosa attenzione prestata ai navajo – le cerimonie sacre, la cultura, l'etos, la mitologia, la loro visione del mondo; la forte presenza di problematiche socio-economiche attuali concernenti la vita della riserva in rapporto alla società egemone; il fitto intrico di pubblico e privato nella struttura attinente alle indagini; e infine la scissione della funzione del *detective* in due figure diverse ma complementari⁶. In breve, è la sistematica violazione di buona parte delle venti regole enunciate da Van Dine.

Vediamoli dunque, questi elementi; in successione, ma pur sempre nella loro stretta solidarietà funzionale.

La prima scelta operata dallo scrittore – la scelta rivelatasi vincente agli occhi del pubblico come della critica – fu quella dell'ambientazione. Con l'eccezione di *The Fly on the Wall*, di *The Fallen Man* (che si svolge in New Mexico) e ovviamente di *Finding Moon*, tutti i romanzi sono ambientati in quella immensa regione del Southwest al cui centro è la riserva navajo: un'estensione per lo più desertica, ampia quanto il

New England e abitata da circa 150.000 Dineh – il Popolo, come si chiamano i navajo nella loro lingua. Con qualche occasionale puntata a Los Angeles (*The Ghostway*, 1984), a Washington, DC (*Talking God*, 1989), e più spesso a Albuquerque, tutte le storie si svolgono nella zona dei Four Corners, là dove i confini tirati a righello di New Mexico, Arizona, Utah e Colorado si intersecano – caso unico, nella topografia degli Stati Uniti – ad angolo retto. È la zona, grosso modo coincidente con il Colorado Plateau, dove le distese aride della Monument Valley e del Painted Desert, il Grand Canyon, Canyon de Chelley, Chaco Canyon e tanti altri canyon minori, Lake Powell, Shiprock, il San Juan, il Colorado River e il Rio Grande, disegnano un paesaggio straordinario, un universo di rocce erose nelle forme più bizzarre, di archi e ponti naturali, gole strettissime e deserti immensi dai colori e le vibrazioni atmosferiche più ammalianti. Un mondo deserto eppure ricco di tracce, da quelle lasciate dai dinosauri alle rovine degli anasazi, che costruivano le loro comunità negli anfratti delle rocce a picco dei canyon, sulle lisce pareti dei quali si arrampicano, vertiginosi, i fori scavati per le mani e i piedi. E ricco, questo mondo, di storia più recente – quella dei navajo quando ancora nomadi, quella degli hopi arroccati nei loro villaggi quasi indistinguibili sulle brulle *mesas* al centro della Big Rez.

Questo ambiente di bellezza senza pari costituisce, più che lo sfondo dei romanzi di Hillerman, la loro essenziale realtà narrativa; così come hopi e navajo, pueblo e zuni, e anglo e *latinos* variamente toccati dalla cultura indiana, costituiscono il *cast* primario dei suoi personaggi. E navajo, in forza alla polizia tribale, sono Joe Leaphorn e Jim Chee, i due *detectives* che, singolarmente o in coppia, funzionano da fulcro drammatico in tutti i gialli. Siamo lontanissimi dalle brume londinesi di un Conan Doyle, dagli esotici fondali di maniera di una Agatha Christie, o dalla generica jungla urbana di un Mickey Spillane.

In effetti, laddove nella narrativa poliziesca la descrizione ambientale si limita di norma a un qualche sparuto elemento che faccia colore, nei romanzi di Hillerman la dimensione descrittiva assume una vitale importanza strutturale. Un'importanza, peraltro, non immediatamente avvertibile. La grande capacità dello scrittore di tratteggiare un paesaggio, di cogliere il mutare impercettibile – o improvviso – delle condizioni atmosferiche, di immergere il personaggio in un contesto naturale e renderne palpabili le sensazioni, sembra a prima vista un esercizio irrilevante ai fini di quella che costituisce la molla del poliziesco, vale a dire lo sviluppo delle indagini. Che relazione può esservi fra l'esigenza di scovare un assassino e l'indugio della scrittura ad osservare, sopra la montagna sacra del Tso Dzil (che sulle mappe è segnato col nome di Mount Taylor – blasfema imposizione colonialista, come quella della bandiera con la svastica innalzata dai nazisti sull'Olimpo) il formarsi di una nuvola – quella immane colonna di tanti colori foriera di pioggia, la desideratissima pioggia che tuttavia si sa bene verrà presto risucchiata dai venti d'alta quota e riassorbita nel grande cielo turchese? Nessuna relazione, apparentemente.

Poi si scopre che quell'apparato descrittivo ha una profonda funzione strutturale, legata al fatto che la voce narrante segue l'uno o l'altro dei due *detectives* navajo, o comunque un qualche personaggio appartenente a quel mondo; e che l'attenzione al paesaggio, la capacità di leggere, semioticamente, i segni che tutto lascia su tutto, costituisce un complesso, connaturato sistema di rapporto col reale. E questo sistema, alla fine, è quanto consente a Leaphorn e a Chee di adempiere alla loro funzione istituzionale e risalire, dopo congrua *suspense*, al benedetto assassino. Il che raramente riesce ai sussiegosi agenti dell'FBI mandati a dirigere, impasticciandole, le indagini⁷.

Ma v'è di più. In Hillerman, il passo descrittivo è funzionale a un livello comunicativo ulteriore rispetto a quello della diegesi o della determinazione di uno stato d'animo individuale. Parliamo di un livello che riguarda una dimensione profonda dell'etos navajo.

Per i Dineh, la bellezza è *hozro*, o armonia: armonia fra l'individuo e il mondo esterno, fra mondo animato e mondo inanimato, senza distinzione gerarchica alcuna, senza prevalenza dell'un mondo sull'altro; è sintonia con il tutto⁸. In tale concezione del reale non v'è posto per categorie, tipicamente occidentali, quali il pittoresco o il sublime. Per i Dineh, la natura non è bella qui e magari insignificante qualche chilometro più in là; se non è stata deturpata dal bianco, se cioè non ne è stata distrutta l'armonia, la natura è sempre e comunque bella. Come dice, splendidamente, il canto del 'Nightway', che si conclude: «With beauty all around me may I walk. / In beauty it is finished».

Nelle sue descrizioni dell'ambiente, sia esso un'accecante distesa desertica, un cupissimo canyon, un roccione a picco o un secco *arroyo* tortuoso, Hillerman non si concede, virtuosisticamente, la bella pagina bensì comunica il valore spirituale, e non soltanto emotivo, che l'ambiente naturale possiede nella cultura dei suoi personaggi. La descrizione diventa dunque attualizzazione di un nucleo etico-conoscitivo che è centrale alla concezione del mondo dei navajo.

Non così, ad esempio, in Manzoni, nostra pietra di paragone della capacità descrittiva. I monti sorgenti dalle acque ai quali Lucia dà il suo patetico addio lasciano poche tracce nella fanciulla: appena fatta la loro maestosa apparizione, vengono tolti come un fondale tirato su per far posto a quello della scena successiva. Hanno assolto alla loro funzione: quella, prima, di stabilire il rapporto di familiarità che l'individuo ha col suo ambiente (le cime sono «note» e «imprese nella mente, non meno che lo sia l'aspetto de' suoi più familiari») e, più tardi, di rinnovarne il senso di rassicurante possesso: quando riappaiono a Renzo nel Cap. XXXVII, egli li sente «come roba sua». La chiusa del Cap. VIII, così come la ripresa finale dei luoghi nati dei protagonisti, sono funzionali allo stato d'animo immediato di Lucia e di Renzo – ma il Resegone e le altre cime, le ville, il castello, il borgo, la campagna tutta, non sono parte di un modello metafisico-conoscitivo. Sono belli perché amati, e amati perché 'propri'. Una volta lasciati definitivamente, vengono sostituiti senza troppi drammi: «già

da qualche tempo, erano avvezzi tutt'è tre a riguardar come loro il paese dove andavano» (Cap. XXXVIII). Lasciamo passare un paio di secoli e, emigrati oltre Atlantico, Renzo, Lucia e Agnese sarebbero diventati dei perfetti americani. 'Anglo', naturalmente.

Ma nell'accettare le condizioni del governo degli Stati Uniti, nello scegliere la loro antica Dinetah dopo la devastante deportazione a Fort Sumner, il capo Barboncita disse: «I hope to God you will not ask us to go to any other country but our own ... Our god created it specially for us»¹⁰. La bellezza della terra dei navajo – la Dinetah, appunto – è dunque d'ordine metafisico, legata cioè al mito delle origini, e pertanto sacralmente condizionante ogni momento della vita dei Dineh. Questo, per via omologica, comunica il registro descrittivo della scrittura di Hillerman.

Registro che Ann Elmo, l'agente letteraria a cui Hillerman inviò il manoscritto del primo romanzo, voleva eliminato in quanto estraneo al modello del genere poliziesco. Lo scrittore non seguì quello sciagurato consiglio e l'editore gli dette ragione, tanto da imporre un titolo che si riferisce a una cerimonia sacra dei navajo e che niente ha a che fare con il mondo del poliziesco¹¹. Da quel momento ebbe inizio lo straordinario successo di Tony Hillerman: successo da ascrivere in larga misura proprio a questo elemento distintivo dei suoi romanzi – il mondo, fisico quanto culturale, dei navajo della Grande Riserva¹².

Pochi *biligaana* (così i navajo chiamano i bianchi) sono riusciti, come Hillerman, ad addentrarsi in questa cultura. Senza dubbio nessuno scrittore è mai stato capace di un'operazione tanto approfondita su questo popolo – un'operazione che è interiore prima ancora che della scrittura. Per quella cultura, quella gente, quell'universo così chiuso e difficile e tuttavia, nella sua rigida marginalità, così esposto all'annientamento da parte della società egemone, Hillerman ha un profondo rispetto: mai, neppure nei suoi scritti saggistici, assume toni predicatori o pose da paladino, ma con la sua opera di misurato, discreto interprete della realtà navajo presso la cultura americana ha scritto una delle pagine più lucide nella storia, generalmente assai buia, dei rapporti fra le due culture¹³.

Più importante in questa sede, i suoi romanzi vivono, strutturalmente, di questa realtà unica. L'uso sapiente e tuttavia mai pedante delle cerimonie, della mitologia, dell'etos Dineh iscrive questa realtà nella storia specifica del testo, sì che i delitti e le conseguenti indagini sono con essa in strettissimo rapporto di dipendenza. La *Big Rez* è il teatro di un dramma che di testo in testo si ripropone sostanzialmente immutato: uno o più delitti precipitano la comunità in un disordine che appare contraddire il tessuto omogeneo generale; come avviene in tutte le varianti del genere poliziesco, l'opera degli investigatori riporta l'ordine – ma (ecco un altro tratto distintivo del nostro scrittore) non prima che le indagini abbiano fatto luce, ancor più che sulla meccanica del delitto, sull'esistenza di fenomeni sociali ed economici di vasta portata dei quali il delitto è soltanto una, soltanto la più immediatamente visibile delle conseguenze. Così,

in *People of Darkness*, la serie di delitti si lega alla grande (e sempre evasiva) questione delle scorie radioattive che sono la tragica eredità delle ricerche di uranio nella regione. In *The Blessing Way* i delitti si collocano nel quadro del controverso uso che, a scopo sperimentale, il Pentagono fa del deserto del New Mexico. In *Skinwalkers* sono i problemi della sanità pubblica, sempre insufficientemente finanziata, a scatenare i tre omicidi. Sullo sfondo di *Sacred Clowns* incombe, di nuovo, la questione delle scorie radioattive, e della continua tentazione di cedere alle richieste del governo di disporne in terra tribale alle quali le deboli amministrazioni locali sono esposte.

Raramente il *villain* di Hillerman è un indiano. Quando lo è, si tratta di un navajo sradicato (*The Blessing Way*, *Listening Woman*, *The Ghostway*) oppure con problemi risalenti alla disgregazione dell'ambiente tradizionale fomentata dall'esterno, come l'alcolismo (*Coyote Waits*). È questo un limite ideologico, se si vuole, che finisce per avere un suo peso nella prevedibilità delle trame di Hillerman. Di solito, infatti, il criminale è un bianco che vive ai margini della riserva – un antropologo, uno storico, un archeologo – e il cui interesse per il mondo navajo è stato stravolto da una qualche forma di avidità professionale. Anche quando è il denaro a costituire la molla del delitto, il colpevole della rottura dell'equilibrio è sempre qualcuno estraneo alla riserva¹⁴.

Se pure un microcosmo isolato e, se vogliamo, 'fuori del mondo', nella trattazione di Hillerman la Big Rez è dunque una realtà sociale, economica e politica complessa ma permeabile – e questa permeabilità, così come la sua specificità culturale, risulta parte integrante della diegesi. I laceranti conflitti socio-economici erano invece eminentemente assenti nel romanzo poliziesco classico, dove la "battle of wits" fra autore e destinatario si svolgeva, come una compita partita a scacchi, all'interno di uno spazio chiuso – una villa in mezzo a un parco, un albergo su una scogliera, uno yacht; spazio che risulta quasi astratto nella sua totale mancanza di referenti esterni¹⁵. Del resto, il mondo esterno è assente anche in certe filiazioni del poliziesco quali, esemplari, le *spy stories* di Ian Fleming: dove, come la tradizionale abilità analitica del *detective* (retaggio poesco divenuto canonico, poi fossilizzatosi in *cliché*) è stata soppiantata dalla capacità dell'agente speciale di maneggiare i *gadgets* più sofisticati, così anche la villa e l'albergo sulla scogliera hanno ceduto il posto a una successione di sfavillanti ambientazioni esotiche – una sorta di ininterrotto video promozionale per località turistiche esclusive che non sono, più di quanto lo fossero le vecchie ville e i vecchi alberghi, in alcuna visibile relazione con il loro contesto. E dove l'allargamento di orizzonte si riduce a un frettoloso ammiccamento verso le tensioni della Guerra fredda, con la Spectre a sigillare la programmatica irrealità del tutto.

Nei romanzi di Hillerman, lo schema del giallo (delitto/indagini/identificazione del criminale/ricomposizione dell'ordine) permane immutato. Ciò che cambia rispetto a gran parte della letteratura poliziesca è il fatto che le pulsioni escapistes del destinatario, titillate dalla conoscenza del-

le regole del gioco e puntualmente soddisfatte dalla fase conclusiva dello schema, vengono qui messe in crisi dalla perdurante consapevolezza – instillata in mille modi lungo tutto il testo – che nonostante la soluzione del mistero e il sospirato arresto o magari la morte del criminale, i grandi problemi di fondo di questa società restano immutati: le scorie radioattive continueranno a venire scaricate sulla Dinetah, i fondi per la sanità pubblica saranno sempre insufficienti, White Sands resterà bersaglio dei missili sperimentali.

Si sviluppa pertanto un interessante fenomeno attinente alla ricezione: la componente escapistica, che nel lettore di gialli è particolarmente attiva, viene orientata a prima vista sulla dimensione esotica dell'ambiente – ed a ciò si deve, come abbiamo detto, buona parte del successo dei romanzi di Hillerman. Ben presto, però, di questo *never-never world* viene rivelata tutta la drammatica precarietà: una precarietà legata alle tante occasioni di infiltrazioni dall'esterno, vuoi d'ordine individuale vuoi, assai più pericolosamente, d'ordine generale; le quali minano, e poco a poco distruggono, l'integrità di quel mondo. Tutto ciò, neanche il lettore più restio a lasciarsi coinvolgere in un discorso di critica sociale può fare a meno di avvertire, in quanto questa critica – che mai è esplicita, mai è autoriale – risulta inerente ai meccanismi stessi dell'indagine. Se si fa esplicita, lo farà attraverso un personaggio: come quando, in *Sacred Clowns*, Jim Chee agisce da privato cittadino e non in veste di pubblico ufficiale, prendendo posizione sul foglio locale contro l'uso di terre tribali per lo scarico di scorie radioattive, oppure riflettendo sugli aspetti positivi e su quelli negativi di certi sviluppi industriali all'interno della riserva¹⁶.

Jim Chee, ancor più di Leaphorn, costringe il lettore a un altro strappo rispetto alle aspettative postulate dai modelli polizieschi tradizionali, i quali prevedono un *detective* fondamentalmente tutto d'un pezzo. Chee è un uomo in difficile, sofferto equilibrio fra due mondi. In quanto poliziotto, svolge un'attività prettamente occidentale: è in possesso di una laurea in antropologia ottenuta alla University of New Mexico a Albuquerque, ed è stato accettato alla FBI Academy in Virginia – occasione alla quale poi rinuncia; al contempo, onorando una lunga tradizione di famiglia, studia per diventare *yataalii*, cioè *medicine man*, e nei suoi tentativi di conciliare le due attività è spesso oggetto di divertiti commenti da parte di altri navajo¹⁷. Angoscioso è il conflitto che Chee vive fra il proprio dovere di poliziotto, cioè quello di arrestare il colpevole e consegnarlo alla giustizia bianca, la quale lo manderà in prigione, e il proprio convincimento di navajo che chi commette un reato non debba essere punito ma, piuttosto, aiutato a ritrovare il suo *hozro*.

La stessa vita sentimentale di Chee conosce analogha conflittualità. Dapprima lo troviamo legato a una ragazza bianca del Wisconsin, Mary Landon¹⁸. Poi, dopo che per entrambi la scelta di una vita nell'alterità culturale si rivela inattuabile, Chee s'innamora di Janet Pete, una ragazza navajo di madre scozzese, la cui carriera professionale la porta sempre più lontana verso il mondo bianco. Si delinea infine, in *The Fallen Man*, un nuovo

interesse per una collega totalmente navajo, Bernadette Mamelito, che il lettore intuisce costituire per Chee una possibile strada verso la serenità; come infatti avviene, col matrimonio, in *The Shape Shifter*. E se si tratterà, oggettivamente, di un lieto fine, questo è in rapporto non a melense aspettative del lettore bensì al tormentato percorso sentimentale di un personaggio a lungo diviso, a tutti i livelli, fra due realtà: quella tradizionale navajo e quella fundamentalmente distruttiva dei *biligaana*.

Tutto questo ha poco o nulla a che fare con la figura dell'investigatore prevalente nei vari filoni del poliziesco. Il privato di Chee s'intreccia con la sua attività pubblica di *detective*, a volte addirittura intralciandolo nelle indagini; e sia pure in misura minore, altrettanto avviene con Leaphorn. Ciò fa sì che, a differenza di quanto accade in gran parte della letteratura poliziesca, le indagini non risultino un fatto narrativo univoco ma si collochino in un quadro di continuo interagire di pubblico e, appunto, di privato. Dove il privato – ecco un altro tratto essenziale – non si esaurisce nella competenza in fatto di belle donne e di vini francesi di un James Bond oppure nella sbandierata muscolarità di un Mike Hammer (dai quali Chee si distingue anche per la singolare scarsa propensione all'uso delle armi)¹⁹ ma costruisce un individuo in tutta la sua complessa, talvolta contraddittoria eppur sempre umanissima realtà; e dove, come si è visto, il livello pubblico ha una rilevanza fondamentale in quanto contesto dell'attività criminale.

Il protagonista di Hillerman (e mi riferisco qui a entrambi i *detectives*) è dunque un personaggio a tutto tondo, che il lettore ormai conosce e che da opera a opera si aspetta di veder continuare a manifestarsi. E questa riconoscibilità di Chee e di Leaphorn in quanto esseri umani completi piuttosto che stilizzazioni di un'unica funzione (compresa quella intellettuale canonizzata dal Dupin poesco e dallo Sherlock Holmes di Doyle) è resa possibile dalla continua, discreta opera di preparazione del lettore a entrare all'interno dell'etos navajo che, romanzo per romanzo, lo scrittore mette in atto.

Pur nelle loro ben distinte personalità (più istintivo, e più legato alla tradizione ancestrale, il giovane Chee; più acculturato Leaphorn, più critico di certi aspetti del proprio retaggio — più cartesiano, se si vuole, nella rigorosa impostazione mentale), i due poliziotti sono infatti, prima di tutto, dei navajo: i quali hanno acquisito dal mondo dei *biligaana* tanti strumenti conoscitivi specifici, ma soltanto alcuni e ben selezionati valori ideologici. In quanto navajo, essi conoscono i rischi conseguenti alla perdita del *hozro*, il costo del prolungato contatto con il disordine al quale la loro professione li costringe²⁰. Essi attraversano di continuo, in un senso o nell'altro, il confine fra le due culture, facendosi tramite fra i due etos, capaci di distinguerne tutte le sfumature e di muoversi con agio in entrambi i mondi, ma restano sempre attenti a non perdere la loro identità interiore che lo *hozro* rappresenta. Questo fa sì che nei loro incontri e scontri con la realtà bianca, in special modo con agenti di altri corpi di polizia gerarchicamente superiori (FBI, narcotici, polizia di

stato), Leaphorn e Chee siano in grado di mantenere uno spazio proprio, inviolabile agli altri, che permette loro di giudicare e al contempo ignorare il giudizio dei *biligaana*²¹. Avviene così che il consueto conflitto di competenze fra investigatore privato e polizia o fra polizia locale e FBI – locus classico dei romanzi e dei film polizieschi – si arricchisce qui di sfumature culturali e sociologiche che lo salvano dallo scadere nel formulaico. Quando Hillerman mette a confronto una lettura navajo e una lettura bianca di un dato fatto, fa sprigionare una tensione ironica che nasce, al fondo, da un'opposizione di ordine conoscitivo. E la lettura corretta è, immancabilmente, quella dei navajo.

Ma v'è un ulteriore aspetto relativo all'uso di Leaphorn e di Chee che va messo in rilievo in quanto, come accennato, costituisce un'altra rilevante deviazione rispetto alla prassi generale del poliziesco. Nei primi tre romanzi ambientati nella riserva (*The Blessing Way*, *Dance Hall of the Dead* e *Listening Woman*), Leaphorn era l'unico *detective*. Poi, con i tre seguenti (*People of Darkness*, *The Dark Wind* e *The Ghostway*), il protagonista diventa Chee, con Leaphorn assente o in funzione di semplice comparsa. Quindi, con *Skinwalkers*, lo scrittore decise di inserire entrambi i poliziotti; e così ha fatto da allora, con l'eccezione del recente *The Shape Shifter*, nel quale è Chee a fare da semplice comparsa, in una sorta di vacanza premio per il matrimonio. Le indagini sono ormai sempre opera congiunta, frutto di una collaborazione che se pur percorsa da reciproche riserve originate dalle diversità caratteriali, si fonda su una profonda stima reciproca. Il grado diverso (Leaphorn è tenente; fino a *The Fallen Man*, quando v'è una promozione, Chee è sergente) non causa il disporsi del contributo alla soluzione del caso in un ordine gerarchico: il mosaico in cui convergono le tessere intuitive individuali risulta un disegno al quale i due investigatori partecipano pariteticamente, perché, come essi stessi ben sanno, ciascuno ha qualcosa che l'altro non ha, o ha in misura minore; e ciò che sfugge all'uno può essere colto dall'altro, e viceversa.

Il risultato di questo congegno drammatico è che adesso il ruolo dell'investigatore viene smitizzato: né Leaphorn né Chee sono, come suol dirsi nel gergo dei media, dei *supercops*; non lo erano nelle opere nelle quali agivano singolarmente, e tanto meno lo sono adesso. La loro fallibilità li umanizza, e umanizza la loro funzione sottraendola alla pertinenza esclusiva di superuomini dell'intelletto o dell'azione (i Poirot o gli Hammer, per intendersi) e restituendola a quella di investigatori intelligenti e coraggiosi, sì, ma pur sempre e soltanto uomini.

Ecco allora la valenza della 'riconoscibilità' nei romanzi polizieschi di Hillerman: romanzi per più di un verso esotici, e tuttavia capaci di instaurare nel destinatario un meccanismo di identificazione non sulla base di modelli inattuabili, come lo sono spesso quelli proposti dal genere, bensì su quella di una vicinanza emotiva e della comunanza esistenziale.

Nel suo disegno di apertura del poliziesco, Tony Hillerman ha avuto vari maestri, verso i quali riconosce con gratitudine il suo debito. Il primo

nome che fa è quello di Arthur Upfield, un cui romanzo su «a half-breed Australian aborigine policeman who could solve crimes in the desert Outback» lo scrittore aveva letto in gioventù²². Fra coloro che «demonstrated the rich possibilities of the form» egli menziona poi Graham Greene, che definisce «an artist» e un «master craftsman»; George V. Higgins («that Breughel of dialogue»); Eric Ambler («mostly because he never wrote the same book»); e Ross Macdonald per quella che sembra essere la ragione esattamente opposta, e cioè per avere insegnato a «every one of us that, given enough skill with metaphorical language, one plot is all you ever need for as many books you want to write».

Quest'ultima osservazione ci porta diritti al cuore della questione critica relativa al nostro scrittore. È indubbio che Tony Hillerman, egli stesso un maestro riconosciuto del poliziesco, si sia ritagliato un proprio spazio personale all'interno del genere forzandone le strettoie istituzionali, allargandone gli orizzonti comunicativi e ideologici, e aprendolo a istanze di pertinenza della letteratura *tout court*: l'approfondimento psicologico, la funzione descrittiva, il peso del contesto socio-culturale. Allo stesso tempo, nelle sue opere lo scheletro del giallo permane immutato. Resta il cadavere (o la serie di cadaveri), resta chi si dà da fare per risolvere il mistero, resta la catarsi finale; resta, com'è ovvio, la *suspense*, della quale peraltro è scontata la soluzione positiva. E restano certe cadenze nel ritmo della narrazione tipiche del poliziesco – ma non soltanto: certe finali di capitolo a effetto, certo giocare sulla pausa appena prima della rivelazione di un dato importante, certo ammicciare verso il dettaglio eloquente. Tutti vezzi di una narrativa che punta al mantenimento dell'interesse attraverso la tensione diegetica e il ricorrente uso di nessi – solitamente, delle *one-liners* – che ribadiscono la complicità fra voce narrante e destinatario in quanto entrambi in possesso del codice comunicativo.

In qualche misura, il persistere di queste convenzioni nella scrittura di Hillerman può avere ragioni di ordine editoriale e pertanto, in ultima analisi, commerciale. È il caso del finale di *Sacred Clowns*, la cui versione originaria (versione giunta fino alla stampa delle bozze rilegate) vedeva i due poliziotti navajo risolvere il primo dei due omicidi, che era di loro competenza, e lasciare il secondo, irrisolto, nelle mani dello FBI al quale competeva. Nell'edizione definitiva, invece, alcune pagine conclusive imposte dallo *editor* informano, piuttosto frettolosamente, anche sulla fine fatta dal secondo degli assassini.

A mio avviso (ma soprattutto ad avviso dello scrittore), la prima versione era superiore²³. Lasciando quasi provocatoriamente insoluta almeno parte del mistero, la versione originaria rafforzava quella valenza di verosimiglianza, quel senso di vissuto e pertanto di irriducibile all'ordine, che è la sostanza stessa del disegno di Hillerman. Se lo scrittore cedette alla richiesta dello *editor*, fu per ragioni contrattuali – dopo tutto, il libro per il quale era sotto contratto era un romanzo poliziesco, e non sia mai detto che un romanzo poliziesco finisca con qualche filo rimasto in sospeso. Sarebbe come una fiaba che non cominciasse col canonico 'C'era

una volta ...' e non si concludesse con l'altrettanto canonico '... e vissero felici e contenti, ed ebbero tanti figli'. Resta comunque il fatto che, almeno in questo caso, il giallo si rivelò una gabbia dalla quale lo scrittore non fu in grado di uscire.

D'altra parte lo scheletro del giallo permane anche in *Finding Moon*, il romanzo al quale Hillerman affidava le sue ambizioni di uscire dal genere poliziesco («I've always wanted to try my hand at that, to see if I could carry that off»)²⁴. Benché la molla dell'azione sia qui non più l'identificazione e l'arresto d'un criminale ma la localizzazione e il salvataggio di una bambina in fasce, la piccola Lila da sottrarre ai Khmer Rouge assolve alla stessa funzione attanziale di uno qualsiasi degli assassini nei romanzi della serie della Grande Riserva, così come la stessa funzione hanno Moon Mathias e un Leaphorn o un Jim Chee.²⁵ La morfologia narrativa rimane inalterata.

Si tratta, fondamentalmente, della morfologia del romanzo d'azione – una categoria letteraria, più che un genere, dai tratti e dai confini più elastici rispetto al poliziesco, e abbastanza larga da quello comprendere. Soprattutto, una categoria che nel West conserva una posizione di egemonia rispetto ad ogni altra, tanto che con 'western novel' s'intende, quasi per antonomasia, un romanzo d'azione.

Questo può servire a capire il senso che il *plot* («one plot is all you ever need») ha per il nostro scrittore.

Una volta, nella riserva, parlando con una bibliotecaria e raffrontandosi con molta modestia a Leslie Silko, James Welch e N. Scott Momaday – scrittori indiani da lui definiti «artists» – Hillerman disse di sé, semplicemente: «I am a storyteller»²⁶. Lo scrittore sapeva bene che in quel contesto dialogico il termine *storyteller* assumeva connotazioni particolari – connotazioni che si possono sintetizzare con le parole di Louis Owens, un altro romanziere e critico indiano americano: «For the traditional storyteller, each story originates with and serves to define the people as a whole, the community»²⁷. Così definendosi, Hillerman diceva che si sente parte della comunità le cui storie — sia pure di sua invenzione – egli racconta; e dalla risposta della sua interlocutrice si avverte che questo senso è condiviso dalla comunità²⁸. Lapalissianamente, uno *storyteller* – navajo o *biligaana* che sia – è tale perché ha una storia da raccontare. E in un contesto quale quello del West in cui il Modernismo, con i suoi dirompenti modelli letterari, non si è mai avventurato più di tanto, una storia ha un *plot*.

All'interno di questa tradizione letteraria periferica, sganciata dai centri intellettuali e culturali nazionali al punto di essersi sviluppata in modo quasi autonomo (una tradizione relativamente giovane, altamente auto-referenziale come non poteva non esserlo data la lunga scarsità di modelli esterni, e comunque data la loro poca incisività sul terreno locale), il racconto d'azione, nato come *reportage* dal vivo sui fogli delle comunità di frontiera, ebbe a imporsi quale genere letterario dominante. Popolarizzato quindi attraverso i *dime novels* e poi i *pulp magazines*, agli occhi del pubblico nazionale sarebbe diventato il tratto distintivo di quella cultura

periferica, la sua sigla brevettata infinite volte imitata; con il risultato che se ne ribadiva l'emblematicità e se ne incentivava la perpetuazione²⁹. Hollywood avrebbe poi fatto il resto³⁰.

Di questa narrativa d'azione, il *plot* costituisce, ancor più che l'ossatura, l'essenza stessa. Non meraviglia pertanto che Hillerman, un uomo radicato nel West, un «country boy»³¹ le cui letture negli anni formativi si erano orientate soprattutto verso la narrativa di genere (anche se non necessariamente di genere poliziesco) prevalente nel suo contesto, senta come funzione primaria della letteratura quella di raccontare una storia. Ma all'interno di questa realtà, comunque la si voglia valutare in rapporto ad altre meno specificamente regionali, Tony Hillerman si è costruito una statura di scrittore (o, come dice lui, di *storyteller*) di altissima qualità.

Note

¹ L'eccezione è il romanziere Richard Currey. In questo computo, che si riferisce al 1999, non rientrano vari poeti – ai poeti, si direbbe, il giallo non interessa. Successivi aggiornamenti non hanno fatto che confermare la proporzione originariamente individuata.

² Da una conversazione del settembre 2000.

³ Cfr. *The Case of Tony Hillerman. An Interview*.

⁴ Cfr. Goodman, per un dialogo dal quale risulta il senso che il giallista ha del suo status letterario:

“Hillerman: When you sign a book, they apologize, ‘I don’t usually read mysteries.’ Have you heard that a thousand times, Sue?”

Grafton: As if it’s some secret shame. I have to admit it bothers me when somebody asks, ‘When are you gonna write a real book?’

Hillerman: You’ll get over that. When you get as old as I am, you’re glad to write any book.”

⁵ Hillerman, *Giallo*.

⁶ Per la genesi di quest’ultima innovazione, si veda, *supra*, l’intervista dell’autore.

⁷ Superbe le scene in cui Hillerman modula i rapporti fra le varie agenzie investigative, e divertentissima la sottile ironia con la quale i veri esperti locali osservano l’arroganza e l’ignoranza degli agenti esterni; come quando, in *Hunting Badger*, lo sconsiderato dispiego di elicotteri cancella le tracce del ricercato sulla *mesa*. Come lo scrittore, ridendo, ammise in risposta a una mia domanda in tal senso, il ricorrente trattamento ironico dell’FBI riflette l’esperienza diretta del giornalista.

⁸ «In the Native American universe the self is not so distinct from the environment; conversely, it consists of other people, places, and experiences. To forget or to deny that which makes up the self, then, is to lose the self». Cfr. Holt 149.

⁹ Manzoni 143.

¹⁰ Cit. in Hillerman, *The Great Taos Bank Robbery* 15. Per la ‘long walk’, cfr. Bailey.

¹¹ Il titolo scelto da Hillerman era ‘Enemy Way’, dalla cerimonia che si svolge nel romanzo; fu quindi preso in considerazione, e scartato, ‘Monster Slayer’. L’editore impose infine *The Blessing Way*, benché questa cerimonia non compaia nel testo. (Cfr. Sobol 64). Quando nel 1993 Mondadori pubblicò il romanzo nella traduzione di Sara Giuntoli, sorsero delle perplessità sul richiamo che un titolo che parlasse di benedizioni avrebbe potuto avere sul lettore di gialli. Suggesti

all'editore *Il canto del nemico*, che anche l'autore accettò definendolo «the best title», e che è stato adottato nella traduzione in francese.

¹² Analogamente all'impostazione di Hillerman, Teresa VanEtten e Rudolfo Anaya ambientano i loro romanzi polizieschi, rispettivamente, in un pueblo e in una Albuquerque vissuta in prospettiva chicana. Entrambi fanno uso di credenze e tradizioni caratteristiche delle loro etnie.

¹³ Dei tanti riconoscimenti avuti (fra i quali il Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award e il Grandmaster Award, lo 'Anthony' al Buchercon del 1988, il Silver Spur Award, il Grand Prix de la Littérature Policière, un Public Service Award del Department of the Interior), quelli ai quali lo scrittore tiene di più sono il Navajo's Tribe's Special Friend Award e il Center for the American Indian's Ambassador Award. Le opere di Hillerman sono usate come libri di testo nelle scuole della riserva.

¹⁴ In alcuni casi (*People of Darkness*, *The Ghostway*, *Talking God*) vi è un killer professionista, bianco, uno psicopatico la cui storia Hillerman tratteggia con la perizia dell'ex giornalista che ha fatto gavetta nella cronaca nera.

¹⁵ Per la "battle of wits" cfr. Nicolson 485. Anche Stefano Tani parla di «chess moves on a chess board» (20).

¹⁶ Un'analoga riflessione Hillerman fa, in prima persona, in "The Very Heart of Our Country", in *The Great Taos Bank Robbery* 17-18.

¹⁷ Da romanzo a romanzo la trascrizione di questa parola in lingua Dineh varia da *yataalii* a *hataalii* a *hatahali*.

¹⁸ Mary Landon è di Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Quando Mary Landon Kirschner, l'aspirante giallista menzionata poc'anzi, anch'ella di Stevens Point, Wisconsin, domandò all'amico Hillerman se si trattava di qualcosa di più d'una coincidenza, lo scrittore rispose: «You know how writers are. They store all sorts of things in their head». Un altro caso in cui Hillerman ha usato una persona di sua conoscenza è quello di Ernie Bulow, il quale fa una breve apparizione in *Talking God*.

Anche Rudolfo Anaya, come Hillerman, si diverte a inserire nei suoi romanzi, a vario titolo, amici e colleghi, come ad esempio il pittore Frank McCulloch. Anch'io, con una collega e amica italiana, Anna Secco, ho avuto l'onore di dare parte del nome a Mario Secco, un trafficante di droga meritatamente fatto fuori in *Rio Grande Fall*. In *Jemez Spring* sono poi stato coinvolto con altri tre americanisti, uno italiano, uno francese e uno tedesco, tutti studiosi dell'opera dello scrittore, in una spassosa scena semi-accademica. In Anaya, questa pratica ha un valore che va al di là del semplice *divertissement*. Confondendo i confini fra realtà referenziale e realtà dell'immaginazione, sia pure a livello minimale si iscrive in un progetto di mimesi della tradizione orale, la quale parte sempre dalla dimensione del familiare.

¹⁹ Sia Leaphorn che Chee mostrano riluttanza a fare uso delle armi; Chee ha una mira tutt'altro che infallibile, e più di una volta dimentica di portarsi dietro la pistola – tratti che Sonny Baca, il *private eye* di Anaya, ha in comune con Chee. Più decise con le armi, e sempre decisive, si dimostrano certe figure femminili di appoggio: Mary Landon e Rosemary Vines in *People of Darkness*, Margaret Sosi in *The Ghostway*, Alice Yazzie in *Skinwalkers*.

²⁰ «Identity, for a Native American, is not a matter of finding 'one's self,' but of finding a 'self' that is transpersonal and includes a society, a past, and a place. To be separated from that transpersonal time and space is to lose identity», cfr. Bevis. Si noti (in Hillerman, *Giallo*) come lo scrittore vede Leaphorn. Alla fine di *A Thief of Time* Leaphorn chiede a Chee di compiere per lui una «Blessing Way», la cerimonia di purificazione.

²¹ Meno sottile, più violento, ma sostanzialmente analogo conflitto culturale-ideologico con i poliziotti bianchi conoscono Ed Coffin e Grave Digger, i due *detective* neri di Chester Himes. A differenza dei due poliziotti di Hillerman, Coffin e Digger sono in realtà pressoché interscambiabili.

²² Hillerman e Bulow 27.

²³ A conclusione di una conversazione a questo proposito, Hillerman mi regalò una *advance reading copy* del romanzo, scrivendovi: «here's the original ending».

²⁴ Si veda, *supra*, l'intervista con l'autore. Permangono anche in questo romanzo certe articolazioni narrative, in special modo tra la fine di un capitolo e l'inizio del successivo, che sono tipiche della scrittura di genere.

²⁵ Il paradigma dell'individuo restio a ogni legame familiare e recuperato alla domesticità e a un nuovo senso di sé dalla necessità di salvare un bambino accomuna *Finding Moon* a *Lin McLean* di Owen Wister (1898) e a *Three Godfathers* di Peter B. Kyne (1913), dal quale John Ford trasse *Marked Men* (1919) e poi *The Three Godfathers* (1948).

²⁶ Hillerman e Bulow 43.

²⁷ Owens, *Other Destinies* 9. Per i *mysteries* di Owens, cfr. *Works Cited*.

²⁸ «'Yes,' she said. 'We read them and their books are beautiful. We say, 'Yes, this is us. This is reality.' But it leaves us sad, with no hope. We read of Jim Chee, and Joe Leaphorn, and Old Man Tso and Margaret Cigaret, and the Tsossies and Begays and again we say, 'Yes, this is us. But now we win.' Like the stories our grandmother used to tell us, they make us feel good about being Navajos'» (Hillerman e Bulow 43).

²⁹ Da Owen Wister a Zane Grey, da Walter Van Tilburg Clark a Conrad Richter a Clarence Mulford a Edward Hoagland: innumerevoli gli scrittori non locali che si sono fatti un nome a livello nazionale nel genere del *Western novel*.

³⁰ Per un'ampia discussione della narrativa di genere, cfr. Cawelti.

³¹ Hillerman e Bulow 43.



Cochiti, northern New Mexico

NEW MEXICO, TERRA DELL'INCANTO. E DEL POLIZIESCO

Quanto segue intende delineare un *work in progress*, intrapreso da tempo ma del quale non sembra riesca a vedere la fine, relativo al genere poliziesco ambientato nel Southwest, e più precisamente nel New Mexico, la cosiddetta – *et pour cause* – Land of Enchantment¹. Questa singolare focalizzazione critica nacque dall'osservazione che nel New Mexico si rileva una stupefacente quantità di autori i quali, chi saltuariamente chi, più spesso, in maniera esclusiva, si dedicano a questo genere; e che la pratica di scrivere romanzi polizieschi traversa orizzontalmente i confini delle etnie presenti nello stato, includendo scrittori anglo, scrittori *latinos* e scrittori Native American.

Da qui la curiosità di investigare i possibili fattori storici, culturali, epistemologici ed economici che possano sottostare alla persistente popolarità della quale questo genere ha goduto nel Southwest per buona parte del Novecento, e che negli ultimi quarant'anni è assurta nel New Mexico a proporzioni senza precedenti. Il campo d'indagine si è poi presto allargato a comprendere i tanti *mysteries*, sempre ambientati nel New Mexico, di mano non necessariamente locale: in quanto la grande varietà tipologica degli autori (scrittori locali, ma anche scrittori trapiantati, scrittori di passaggio, fino a scrittori che del New Mexico hanno soltanto una conoscenza di seconda mano), rapportata alla generale omogeneità degli esiti letterari, indica che le specificità locali, beninteso oltre a quelle inerenti al genere, tendono a prevalere sugli apporti individuali.

Il fenomeno individuato suggerisce la domanda se possa, o meno, trattarsi di un sottogenere del poliziesco; domanda alla quale, a questo stadio della ricerca, sono restio a rispondere. La mia ipotesi di lavoro, peraltro, sorta da un'iniziale frequentazione di alcuni autori (Tony Hillerman, Rudolfo Anaya, Cecil Dawkins e Judith Van Gieson) è che a proiettare il giallo in primo piano nell'interesse letterario della regione sia una strettissima correlazione fra *storia* locale e *gusto* locale; e dico *gusto*, con trasparente presa di distanza critica, perché il fenomeno studiato – un fenomeno altamente condizionato dalle cosiddette esigenze di mercato – sconsiglia, a mio avviso, dal parlare di estetica.

Una ricognizione, se pur parziale, in due stati limitrofi – l'Arizona e il Colorado – sembrerebbe suffragare l'ipotesi iniziale; ipotesi del resto avvalorata dalla relativa scarsità di romanzi polizieschi ambientati nell'ultimo



dei quattro stati della regione dei Four Corners, e cioè lo Utah, la cui colonizzazione da parte dei mormoni ha reso la sua storia molto diversa da quella degli altri tre stati. Va detto peraltro che il tentativo di identificare i tratti peculiari del giallo del Southwest (e a maggior ragione di un unico stato) al fine di determinare se si distingue dal giallo ambientato in altre regioni al punto da poterne parlare come di un sottogenere a sé stante, non può non tener conto dell'immensa diffusione e commercializzazione del genere, nonché dell'effetto livellante prodotto dalla sua fittissima interazione con il cinema, con i risultanti imprestiti da testo a testo e da autore ad autore, e il conseguente progressivo offuscamento delle caratteristiche originali.

Diecine gli autori, centinaia i testi da vagliare. Il potenziale di continua ramificazione di questo studio, con il corollario d'una virtualmente incontrollabile proliferazione di elementi dei quali dover tener conto, ha dunque reso imperativo circoscriverne il quadro: nel tempo (poiché si deve risalire almeno agli anni Quaranta del Novecento), ponendo allora come limite, se pur elastico, l'anno 2000; e nello spazio, tornando al mio originario New Mexico, ideale paradigma del Southwest in considerazione della sua diversificazione etnica (da qui, il più ampio spettro culturale di praticanti del genere), e data la presenza in loco di Tony Hillerman e di Rudolfo Anaya, i due più influenti modelli letterari oggi presenti nella regione.

Non posso comunque negare il periodico riaffiorare d'un senso di frustrazione davanti all'immensa palude di consumismo e di interessi commerciali nella quale, improbabile studioso di statistiche paraletterarie, ho scelto di avventurarmi. A volte sarei tentato di estrarre il cellulare e chiamare un elicottero – disperato SOS letterario – a tirarmi su, grondante di melma, da questa piatta distesa apparentemente indifferenziata. Resisto, tuttavia, perché spesso ci si imbatte in un qualche grumo di letterarietà, un qualche gruzzolo di vere esperienze emotive e intellettuali da sottrarre al generale destino di provvisorietà che accompagna gran parte di una narrativa intesa a scopo di intrattenimento. Soprattutto, v'è la riluttanza a dichiararsi sconfitti di fronte all'irreversibile volgarizzazione del West, questo mondo ormai universale dell'immaginazione di seconda mano, oggi più che mai alla mercé dello sfruttamento commerciale. Perché anche un aspetto marginale della cultura del West quale la produzione giallistica ivi ambientata non può non partecipare dell'ambigua natura del mito del West. Il West, lo sappiamo bene, è diventato un luogo chiave dell'immaginazione collettiva proprio perché fatto oggetto per quasi due secoli di una gigantesca manipolazione economica e ideologica. Senza questa manipolazione non ci sarebbe il West – il West, si vuol dire, quale pensiamo di conoscere. Senza di essa non avremmo il mito del West. Ironicamente, la nostra stessa operazione mitopoietica, un sottoprodotto di questo sfruttamento, ci rende strumenti della mercificazione del West e complici della sua fine. Dovremo pertanto andar cauti sulla possibilità di riuscire a separare la nostra idea del West dal contesto epistemologico creato da due secoli di manipolazione; e dovremo riconoscere che ogni impegno in tal

senso si basa in realtà su una premessa ai nostri occhi fondamentalmente inaccettabile – la premessa, cioè, che davvero vi fosse un West prima della sua invenzione da parte dell'America bianca, sia anglo sia ispanica; e di conseguenza, che vi sia un West originale, un *vero* West, da riportare alla luce da sotto la cementata concrezione del nostro istituzionalizzato modo di immaginarlo. Al fine di arrivarvi, dovremmo autodistruggerci. Per questo, pur compiacendoci della nostra capacità di vedere attraverso tanta concrezione, ci arrestiamo prima di averla attraversata: perché, al di là, c'è quello che non vogliamo vedere. Perché quello che vedremmo non sarebbe il West.

L'ironica contraddizione inerente a tutto ciò non può sfuggire. La riconosciamo – o dovremmo riconoscerla – quando lamentiamo la scomparsa dello Old West mentre ammiriamo il Canyon de Chelly dal finestrino dell'auto presa a nolo, quando assistiamo compiti alle danze indiane ad uso dei turisti, quando facciamo finta di divertirci alle finte sparatorie tra finti *desperados* davanti a un finto *saloon* d'epoca. È una contraddizione onnipresente, ennesimo esempio della legge della mutabilità con la quale, pur riluttanti, dobbiamo convivere. La nostra, dunque, non è tanto una ricerca del Southwest originale, del Southwest autentico – realtà referenziale elusiva, la cui stessa esistenza sfugge a qualsiasi possibile controllo. È, piuttosto, la ricerca di un originale, autentico Southwest *letterario* – col che s'intende un'invenzione letteraria autentica, un trattamento originale del rapporto, qui studiato *sub specie criminale*, che l'uomo intrattiene con questo particolare ambiente. Essendo il nostro studio focalizzato su dei racconti 'a formula', come li chiama Cawelti, è necessario avere la pazienza di vagliare una grande quantità di romanzi spudoratamente derivativi². Tanto più, allora, bisognerà tenere gli occhi aperti per quegli improvvisi segnali di un ben nascosto tesoro letterario, e seguirne le tracce lungo questi *arroyos* ribollenti d'acqua marrone, su per le gole di questi canyon, su per le rosse pareti a picco di queste *mesas*. Di tali tracce, le opere di Hillerman e di Anaya sono ricche. In questa sede, peraltro, più che sull'aspetto specificamente letterario della loro scrittura è necessario soffermarsi sulla loro funzione trainante.

L'immenso successo internazionale dei diciannove romanzi di Hillerman ambientati nella riserva navajo a cavallo dell'Arizona e dello Utah meridionale, con frequenti sconfinamenti nel New Mexico occidentale, è senza dubbio all'origine della proliferazione di gialli similmente ambientati nella regione dei Four Corners o altrove nel Southwest, e che spesso presentano, come in Hillerman (e in Anaya) dei *detectives* 'etnici'. Ecco allora, quasi in ossequio al programma federale sulle Equal Opportunities, la coppia di *detectives* di Jake Page formata da uno scultore (cieco) anglo e dalla sua donna parte hopi³. Ecco Joshua Croft, l'investigatore di Santa Fe di Walter Satterthwait, che ha una compagna latina⁴; ecco che nei suoi primi otto *mysteries* Judith Van Gieson ha come compagno della sua investigatrice anglo un immigrato argentino⁵. Il Johnny Ortiz di Richard M. Stern è parte latino, parte anglo e parte apache, ed ha una compagna par-

te afroamericana parte anglo – mentre il poliziotto ute di James D. Doss è *single*, il che lascia spazio a sperabili sviluppi sentimentali⁶. Basterà del resto guardare le date di pubblicazione di questi come di tantissimi altri *mysteries* per renderci conto di quanti scrittori esordissero agli inizi degli anni Settanta, sulla scia del successo delle prime opere di Hillerman. Alcuni di questi epigoni sono di origine indiano americana, come Louis Owens, professore alla University of New Mexico a Albuquerque, morto suicida pochi anni fa; o come David Thurlo (il cui *Blackening Song*, del 1995 – scritto, come altri gialli, a quattro mani con la moglie Aimée – è dedicato a Hillerman)⁷; oppure sono cresciuti in un ambiente indiano americano, come Teresa VanEtten (*Dead Kachina Man*, 1986), storica e *storyteller* del San Juan Pueblo. Tanti altri sono *latinos* o anglo. E tutti si rifanno (o hanno la pretesa di rifarsi) all'uso profondamente rispettoso che Hillerman fa della cultura e dei valori navajo, che nessuno di essi però conosce come li conosce Tony Hillerman. Tutti, sorta di *squatters* letterari, delimitano un loro pezzo del cosiddetto *Indian Country*, combinando più o meno abilmente delitti e storia locale, *suspense* e antropologia, indagini e folklore. Così, ad esempio, Micah S. Hackler, un ex pilota che risiede nel Nebraska, si attesta intorno alla riserva degli apache icarilla nel New Mexico nord-orientale, con puntate nel Chaco Canyon – ma distinguendosi, negativamente, per la quasi totale assenza della dimensione paesistica⁸; Michael McGarrity, un ex poliziotto che vive nella sua Santa Fe, sceglie come scenario le San Andrés Mountains e White Sands, poi torna a Santa Fe e nelle Sangre de Cristo⁹; Sheri S. Tepper (con i suoi due pseudonimi, B. J. Oliphant e A. J. Orde), dopo molti *mysteries* ambientati a Denver si trasferisce anch'ella a Santa Fe e sposta la continuazione della sua lunga serie sulle pendici delle Sangre de Cristo¹⁰. Inversamente, James D. Doss, il quale vive nelle Sangre de Cristo ma scrive della riserva ute nel Colorado meridionale; ed anche nelle sue opere, come in quelle di Hackler, la dimensione naturale è ridotta al minimo¹¹. Walter Satterthwait resta invece a Santa Fe, dove ha abitato per anni prima di trasferirsi in Florida, mettendo in berlina il mondo fasullo dell'imperante New Age con il suo personalissimo tono sarcastico; oppure si sposta in Europa nei suoi brillanti *pastiches* storico-polizieschi.

Tornando, a titolo puramente esemplificativo, alla varietà d'origine degli scrittori dei quali ci occupiamo, troviamo Tony Hillerman, nato e cresciuto in Oklahoma ma da decenni residente in New Mexico, prima a Santa Fe e poi a Albuquerque; quindi Judith Van Gieson, originaria della East Coast ma che da tempo vive anch'ella a Duke City. Come del resto Satterthwait, Cecil Dawkins, la Tepper e tanti altri che hanno eletto Santa Fe a loro città d'adozione, magari non sempre definitiva; come Douglas Preston¹². Come James D. Doss, originario del Kentucky, il quale vive vicino a Taos. Siamo chiaramente di fronte a quel tipico fenomeno americano rappresentato dalla facile, talvolta improvvisa appropriazione di una cultura altra: una paradigmaticità che sottende, e in fondo amalgama, i casi personali. Certo è che anche fra i giallisti del Southwest il fe-

nomeno risulta particolarmente diffuso; e questo è forse un segno, come prospettavo poc'anzi, della forza d'urto del modello hillermaniano: nel senso che quell'esempio di grande successo commerciale ha costituito un fortissimo incoraggiamento all'imitazione, indipendentemente dal grado di conoscenza personale con l'ambiente prescelto. Non a caso, fra i tanti scrittori di *mysteries* sui quali ci concentriamo, troviamo ex poliziotti (M. McGarrity, Lee Martin), scienziati (J. D. Doss), giornalisti (Hillerman, D. B. Hughes, J. Page, Steve Brewer, Evan Maxwell), amministratori universitari (R. D. Brown; per un certo periodo, lo stesso Hillerman), insegnanti (S. F. X. Dean, Steven F. Havrill, D. Thurlo), ingegneri (Aileen Schumaker), negozianti (Connie Shelton), avvocati (Manuel Ramos), musicisti *country western* (Kinky Friedman), ex *cowboys* (di nuovo, J. Page), uomini politici (Fred Harris, ex senatore dell'Oklahoma, ora stabilito a Albuquerque). Come a dire, autori che alla scrittura sono giunti forse non tanto per interesse letterario (solamente nel caso della Dawkins l'editore parla, giustamente, di un «acclaimed literary author») ma per probabili motivazioni economiche, e spesso sulla scia di trasferimenti dettati da ragioni di lavoro¹³.

Ma v'è di più. Il numero di questi giallisti, crescente in misura esponenziale, testimonia dell'importanza dell'esempio di Hillerman anche al di là del successo commerciale. Tutta la sua opera è in sintonia con il generale riorientamento epistemologico e con il clima ideologico favorevole alla valorizzazione delle minoranze etniche anche nella narrativa poliziesca. Indicativo, ad esempio, come Micah S. Hackler tenga a far sapere di avere sia pur lontane origini Cherokee, o come Martin Cruz Smith, l'autore di *Gorki Park* e di due thrillers (*Nightwing*, 1977, e *Stallion Gate*, 1986) ambientati nel Southwest, si dichiarì «part Indian». Le stesse date di pubblicazione della tetralogia di Anaya (*Zia Summer*, 1995; *Rio Grande Fall*, 1996; *Shaman Winter*, 1999; *Jemez Spring*, 2005), così come il suo appassionato trattamento della cultura latina nel New Mexico, suggeriscono che perfino il maggiore autore chicano sia consapevole dell'esempio di Hillerman. Come molte delle sue opere precedenti, anche la tetralogia di Anaya è infatti ambientata nella South e nella North Valley di Albuquerque (così lo scrittore chiama Duke City, rifacendosi alla dizione originaria, pre-conquista statunitense), zone entrambe tradizionalmente abitate da americani di origine messicana; protagonista è Sonny Baca, un *detective* chicano; essenziali alla vita sia professionale sia privata di Baca sono i valori tradizionali, inclusa la fede nella magia come controllata da *curanderas* e altre guide spirituali; buona parte della diegesi è infine dedicata alla ricerca da parte di Sonny del proprio retaggio ancestrale – il che lega ulteriormente la tetralogia alle altre opere di Anaya, tutte in varia misura focalizzate sulla riappropriazione dell'antica cultura risalente agli aztechi da parte dei chicani¹⁴.

È possibile che con questo innesto di valori e di costumi autoctoni sulla struttura del giallo Rudolfo Anaya abbia avuto in mente la trasformazione, operata da Hillerman, del romanzo poliziesco del Southwest in un'opera letteraria a più livelli, aperta a ulteriori interessi e problematiche. Co-

munque sia, il risultato globale di questa trasformazione è che i *mysteries* tanto di Hillerman quanto, e forse a maggior ragione, di Anaya sono al contempo qualcosa di meno e qualcosa di più del giallo convenzionale: qualcosa di meno, perché una parte non indifferente della diegesi ha poco a che fare con lo 'scheletro' del giallo, come lo chiama Hillerman (delitto, indagine, e conclusiva restaurazione dell'ordine), tanto che la classica linearità di struttura del romanzo poliziesco può essere qui avvertita come appesantita da un eccesso di informazione superflua; qualcosa di più, proprio perché tale eccesso comunica a livelli estetici e intellettuali di solito estranei al genere.

Tutto questo dà ragione della funzione trainante di questi due autori. Come accennato, i recenti giallisti del New Mexico, ma non soltanto, fanno continuo uso dei modelli di Hillerman e di Anaya. Molti si limitano a sfruttare gli aspetti più convenzionali del mondo prescelto: la storia locale (le rovine rupestri degli anasazi, Kokopeli ingobbito sul suo flauto, un arrugginito elmo dei *conquistadores*); l'ambiente (una *mesa*, meglio se frequentata da fantasmi; un canyon nascosto; l'onnipresente serpente a sonagli); la cultura (le danze indiane, il grande falò di Zozobra, il *kitsch* delle gallerie d'arte di Santa Fe, il clima *trendy* della New Age); oppure echeggiano più o meno blandamente certi problemi attuali quali lo smaltimento delle scorie radioattive, il controllo dell'esercito su White Sands, il saccheggio dei siti archeologici, la droga che arriva dal Messico, gli alieni che frequenterebbero Roswell e il sud-est dello stato¹⁵. Variamente combinato, questo repertorio garantisce nel lettore la reazione più elementare e dunque più redditizia dal punto di vista commerciale – quella, nella distinzione di Viktor Šklovskij, del «riconoscimento» piuttosto che della «visione»¹⁶. Al contempo, il sistematico riciclaggio di icone e di problematiche locali, l'impatto comunicativo centripeto di questa produzione, rafforza, in questo angolo periferico degli Stati Uniti, quella sorta di autarchia culturale che lo contraddistingue.

Altri scrittori, certamente più interessanti, partecipano all'apertura della forma tradizionale del giallo inserendo nel suo scheletro istituzionale un più approfondito contesto sociale. È il caso, per fare un primo esempio, di Judith Van Gieson. Di opera in opera, la scrittrice dedica insistita attenzione allo sviluppo psicologico della sua eroina (come fa Hillerman con Joe Leaphorn e con Jim Chee, i suoi investigatori navajo, e come fa Anaya col suo Sonny Baca), ma soprattutto mette al centro di molti dei suoi romanzi alcune importanti questioni d'ordine ecologico e politico. Questa è esattamente l'impostazione di Hillerman e di Anaya: uno o più delitti, risultato di un intervento criminale su questioni di rilevanza collettiva, con l'investigatore che non si trincerava dietro la propria neutralità professionale ma prende una netta posizione politica. Ed è quanto avviene anche allorché, come vediamo nelle serie di Steve Brewer, di Manuel Ramos o di Michael McGarrity, ci si trovi davanti a più o meno diversificati ripescaggi della formula del poliziotto stanco e disincantato stile anni Trenta e Quaranta¹⁷.

Quasi tutti questi scrittori, così come tanti altri sui quali non possiamo qui soffermarci, seguono l'esempio di Hillerman per quanto concerne l'uso del contesto, in particolare quello naturale¹⁸. Sarebbe tuttavia erroneo ritenere che Hillerman sia stato il primo autore della nostra regione a fare ampio uso di un'ambientazione locale. Lo conferma l'analisi della produzione giallistica nel e del Southwest da prima della metà del secolo scorso.

Si veda, ad esempio, Frances Crane, originaria dell'Illinois e vissuta in varie parti degli Stati Uniti oltre che, anche a lungo, a Parigi. Scrittrice di un certo successo (al suo attivo, tra l'altro, quasi un centinaio di racconti pubblicati sul *New Yorker*), la Crane ambientò alcuni dei suoi molti gialli oggi ormai dimenticati in una Taos ben riconoscibile pur sotto il nome fittizio di Santa Maria. Vario, peraltro, è il successo di queste opere. In *The Amethyst Spectacles* (1944), nonostante i riferimenti alla *plaza* di Taos/Santa Maria, ai suoi *portales* con i venditori indiani e all'immane canyon del Rio Grande, l'attinenza tra diegesi e ambientazione è sostanzialmente inesistente, per cui questa Taos risulta in realtà un semplice, inerte fondale. Più riuscita l'ambientazione in *The Polkadot Murder* (1951), dove certe descrizioni del paesaggio semidesertico circostante, così come quelle degli spettacolari tramonti tipici della zona, risultano funzionali alla diegesi, e si fanno apprezzare per una loro incisiva qualità pittorica¹⁹.

Se della Crane non si parla quasi più e i suoi gialli sono ormai introvabili, diverso è il caso di Fredric Brown, scrittore del Nebraska oggi rivalutato dalla critica, e le cui opere sono state di recente ristampate. Brown visse a lungo a Chicago, dove sono ambientati gran parte dei suoi romanzi, poi per ragioni di salute si trasferì prima a Taos e quindi, in via definitiva, in Arizona; e proprio nelle vicinanze di Taos è ambientato *The Far Cry* (1951), un giallo psicologico di notevole intensità e di eccellente strutturazione, nel quale lo scrittore fa uso sapiente, anche se appena accennato, di un elemento naturale tonalmente ed emotivamente rilevante a livello diegetico:

Night again, pressing against the windowpanes. Silence except for the far wild yapping of the coyotes ...

Those damned coyotes, he thought. No, they weren't new to him. In the years he'd lived in Santa Fe he'd heard them often—never, of course, from his quarters in town, but whenever he'd driven out of town and into wild country. Often at night he'd stopped his car along a road and shut off the engine and the lights to sit there listening, enjoying—or was it enjoying?—the wild loneliness of that sound, the primitive unanswerable yearning in it (58).

La vera antesignana di Hillerman fu però Dorothy B. Hughes, tre dei cui ottimi *mysteries* sono ambientati a Santa Fe, dove a lungo questa scrittrice originaria del Missouri risiedette, lavorando come Hillerman per un giornale locale. Di nuovo come Hillerman, la Hughes aveva, in grado straordinario,

quello che Henry James chiamava il «painter's eye»; dono che le consentiva di dare grande profondità e risonanza visiva alle sue storie. Questo dono, la scrittrice mai mise a frutto come in *Ride the Pink Horse*, un *mystery* del 1946 che si svolge durante i tre giorni della grande *fiesta* di Santa Fe²⁰. Nel magistrale trattamento della Hughes, questo evento folklorico si trasforma in un gigantesco, grottesco carnevale – un assordante labirinto umano che avvolge e depista polizia come criminali, i cui furtivi movimenti vengono ora nascosti ora per un istante rivelati attraverso il forsennato brulicare della folla che, sempre più esausta, sempre più insensibile a quanto avviene all'intorno e sempre più incapace di sottrarsi, ingorga la *plaza*, inonda i vestiboli soffocanti degli alberghi, blocca le tortuose stradine pervase dall'odore pungente del peperoncino abbrustolito che sale dai carretti degli ambulanti. Coinvolto anch'egli nell'inarrestabile sarabanda, mai il lettore riesce a sfuggire al frastuono, alla febbrile, accanita determinazione di tutti, turisti come gente del luogo, di non perdersi un attimo di questa folle baraonda. Ma non si tratta, si badi bene, di color locale, pur nel trionfo sfiancante di colori e odori e suoni esagitati: perché, poco a poco, ci si rende conto che l'intera *fiesta* costituisce una grande metafora dell'insensata, casuale violenza che, pur quasi in sordina, manda avanti la storia.

Una *tour de force*, dunque, di assoluta funzionalità rispetto alla diegesi, e di una tale ricchezza, complessità e tensione narrativa da dare molti punti, a mio blasfemo ma convinto giudizio, alla rappresentazione dell'analoga *fiesta* di Pamplona in *The Sun Also Rises*. Con l'ulteriore pregio di non soffrire di quello snobistico tono da detentore del copyright da parte dell'autore del quale soffre invece il romanzo di Hemingway. Ancor più rilevante nel presente contesto, anche dopo che a lettura ultimata i nudi elementi del dramma hanno perduto parte della loro incisività e, com'è spesso il caso con il genere poliziesco, si sfuocano alla distanza, in *Ride the Pink Horse* l'ambientazione, per quanto inestricabilmente intessuta nella diegesi, resta radicata nella mente del lettore. Resta il vero attante, greimassianamente, del romanzo.

Ride the Pink Horse, forse l'opera più riuscita di questa scrittrice a torto tralasciata dalla critica, rappresenta il giallo del New Mexico di prima generazione (come usa dire oggi) al suo meglio: il che significa, rischiando la tautologia, una storia la quale non potrebbe svolgersi altro che là dove si svolge.

Fin dai suoi primordi, il romanzo poliziesco, focalizzato sulle capacità mentali del *detective* e sulla lunga partita a scacchi che questi gioca, più che col criminale, con il lettore, in quel certame dall'esito scontato fra intelligenze generalmente superiori che Marjorie Nicolson chiamava una "battle of wits", ha mostrato ben poco interesse per la realtà quotidiana, per la specificità dell'ambiente e della comunità, per i problemi della società in mezzo alla quale sia il criminale sia l'investigatore presumibilmente vivono²¹. Tutto questo viene quasi sempre lasciato fuori in quanto considerato irrilevante rispetto alla storia – e giustamente: perché la sto-

ria stessa si svolge in una sorta di vuoto artificiale ad uso di sperimentazione scientifica. Ciò è vero per “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” di Poe come per *The Maltese Falcon* di Dashiell Hammett, per *The Hound of the Baskervilles* di Conan Doyle come per *The Benson Murder Case* di S. S. Van Dine. Al fine di assicurare completa concentrazione sulla sua partita a scacchi, lo scrittore sceglierà un treno (come fa Agatha Christie in *Murder on the Orient Express*) o una villa solitaria (vedi M. R. Rinehart in *The Circular Staircase*); sceglierà uno yacht, un'isola, un albergo in cima a una scogliera, un sito archeologico. Nemmeno le ambientazioni urbane o metropolitane (la New York di Van Dine, la San Francisco di Hammett – e tantomeno la sua allegorica Poisonville) danno mai il senso di essere abitate, di costituire un complesso organismo sociale. Vale per tutto il giallo classico quanto scrive Thomas Godfrey del poliziesco ambientato in una villa di campagna inglese:

Cultural concerns may occupy the writer, but social injustices are never to intrude. Reformers and radicals in English Country House Mysteries are invariably cranks or eccentrics brought in for a bit of color. Any writer in this medium who devotes pages to the plights of pensioners, failure of the National Health Service, or discussions of the merits of capital punishment has missed the point and will soon find himself without a readership, or a publisher²².

Frettolosamente delineate, queste ambientazioni sono dunque nient'altro che dei fondali. Tutt'al più, servono a fare atmosfera: vedi la nebbia londinese di Conan Doyle, la cui funzione mimetica è pari a quella del cartello A FOREST inteso a contestualizzare una scena in un dramma elisabettiano. In breve, i vari Arsène Lupin, Hercule Poirot, Phil Vance, Sherlock Holmes, Mike Hammer o il Continental OP vivono tutti in un mondo fondamentalmente (e programmaticamente) irreali, così come irreali è il controllo intellettuale quanto fisico sugli eventi che essi dispiegano.

Non sto certo suggerendo che l'ambiente come funzione strutturalmente rilevante sia una prerogativa del giallo del Southwest. Quanto suggerisco, piuttosto, è che il giallo del Southwest sembra fare un uso più approfondito e più funzionale di quanto lo sia, in genere, nella produzione ambientata altrove; e sottolineo, doverosamente, quel *sembra* perché a questo punto della ricerca sarebbe azzardato spingersi oltre.

Un esempio al negativo. In *Money Burns*, romanzo del 1991 di A. E. Maxwell (sigla di Anne e Evan Maxwell, una coppia di coniugi che ha al suo attivo numerosi *mysteries* ambientati nella California meridionale, e dunque in una regione morfologicamente molto simile a certe zone del Southwest), l'azione si svolge come di consueto in un'area urbana pressoché indistinguibile da mille altre negli Stati Uniti, e pertanto genericamente familiare al grande pubblico. Fanno eccezione i primi due capitoli, nei quali l'azione – qui irrelata rispetto al resto della diegesi – si svolge in una vicina zona montuosa del tutto selvaggia. Tale incongruenza si può

spiegare soltanto come un marchingegno narrativo, piuttosto goffo a dire il vero, teso a sollecitare l'interesse di quella parte del pubblico che è attratta da un'ambientazione da selvaggio West²³. Ipotesi non suffragabile da prove, ma tutt'altro che peregrina. Si sa bene, infatti, quanto peso hanno gli uffici commerciali delle case editrici riguardo le strategie di vendita dei loro cosiddetti 'prodotti': peso che può iniziare dalla selezione del soggetto, può influenzarne lo sviluppo, e diventa poi totale nella scelta della sopraccoperta, specchio per le allodole che talvolta ha poco o nulla a che fare con il contenuto ma che si reputa di effetto sul pubblico. È il caso di *Shaky Ground* di Steve Brewer, romanzo che come tutte le prime opere dello scrittore è ambientato ad Albuquerque ma la cui chiassosa sopraccoperta presenta uno stereotipato paesaggio di *mesas* rosse e viola con tanto di saguaro – una pianta, fra l'altro, che nel New Mexico nemmeno esiste. Nelle parole dell'autore,

We who write mysteries in the Southwest constantly battle the expectations of publishers, editors and readers. They expect dramatic landscapes and breathtaking sunsets and Native American mysticism and rugged Marlboro Men in cowboy hats. In short, they expect a Tony Hillerman novel ... Oh, I'll throw in the occasional dramatic thunderstorm or sun-pink mountains to remind you we're in New Mexico, but you'll never see a saguaro in my books. Except on the covers²⁴.

Analogo discorso va fatto circa l'incidenza delle considerazioni commerciali sulla scelta del titolo da parte sia dell'autore sia dell'editore. Tipologicamente, il segnale primario attraverso il quale il romanzo poliziesco si propone all'attenzione del pubblico è quello classico (potremmo dire, granguignolesco) che annuncia il genere a chiare lettere, con specifiche indicazioni di lettura afferenti agli istituzionali semi *noir*: *murder, blood, death, poison, gun*, e così via. V'è poi il titolo basato su un gioco di parole, segnale con finalità in qualche modo rassicurante, molto frequentato dato l'imperante gusto della *cutsiness*: vedi *Shoot Don't Shoot* di J. A. Jance, *Here's To the Newly Dead* di B. J. Oliphant, *Tragedy Ann* di Sinclair Browning, *Digging Up Momma* di Sara Shankman, o *Stepwives* di Phillis Stevens)²⁵. V'è infine il titolo che punta a una icasticità diremmo di secondo grado, per cui il messaggio viene lanciato attraverso un doppio vettore di senso. A quest'ultima tipologia, particolarmente rilevante nel nostro contesto, appartiene una serie di titoli alla cui proliferazione si è assistito negli ultimi due decenni e passa: titoli che fanno uso di meccanismi eidetici di istantaneo rimando al West, tanto meglio se selvaggio, financo quando tale rimando trovi scarsa attinenza al testo. Si rilevano infatti ripetute frequentazioni di icone non automaticamente riconducibili al nucleo di istituzionale afferenza al genere poliziesco ma che propongono una perturbante realtà 'altra' che soltanto in un secondo momento, per una appena dilazionata associazione di idee (ecco il secondo, e conclusivo, vettore di senso), conduce al *mystery*. Esempio il caso dell'icona

coyote: *Coyote* (1990 – ambientato a Boston) di Linda Barnes; *Coyote Waits* (1991) di Hillerman; *Coyote Wind* (1994) di Peter Bowen; “Coyote Peyote” (1994) di Carole Nelson Douglas; *Coyote Returns* (1996) di Hackler; *Coyote Revenge* (2000) di Fred Harris; *Way of the Coyote* (2001) di Elmer Kelton; *Coyote's Wife* (2008) di Aimée e David Thurlo; per finire (si fa per dire) con *Coyote*, *Coyote Rising*, *Coyote Frontier* e *Coyote Orizon*, una tetralogia di fantascienza di Allen M. Steele. E così per *shaman*, *canyon*, *rattlesnake* (o in alternativa, *serpent*), *wolf*, per *mesa*, o *cactus*²⁶. A parte i casi di serpente e di lupo, la cui alterità ha radici profonde nell’immaginario collettivo universale, tutte queste icone risultano foriere di pericolo, e sono quindi garanti della titillatoria tensione verso il brivido, motivazione primaria del fruitore di *mysteries* oltre che del romanzo *western*; ma questa tensione hanno acquisito in virtù della continua reiterazione del loro utilizzo letterario, o piuttosto paraletterario, che accanto a quella verso il pittoresco ne ha fissato la valenza perturbante.

Questo ci conduce al punto (provvisoriamente) conclusivo del nostro discorso. È mia convinzione che il carattere distintivo del *mystery* del Southwest, e in particolare di quello prodotto nel New Mexico – vale a dire, il senso preponderante della terra – sia da collegarsi alla tradizione del romanzo *western*; e che molto, pertanto, esso debba al gusto letterario sviluppatosi, per virtù autoctona, nella regione.

Per oltre un secolo e mezzo, il West è rimasto abbarbicato a una sua propria tradizione letteraria largamente impermeabile all’influenza dei modelli della costa orientale e quindi, al fondo, europei. All’interno di una cultura condizionata dal movimento verso occidente (il “Manifest Destiny”) anche dopo la chiusura ufficiale della frontiera intorno al 1890, la letteratura si dava il compito di venire incontro a esigenze e a problematiche che differivano profondamente da quelle prevalenti a est. Fu appunto il romanzo del West, o d’avventura, a venire incontro a tali esigenze ed a porsi così, almeno fino all’avvento del cinema, come il più potente strumento di diffusione dello etos *western*. Derivazione dei resoconti giornalistici che riempivano i fogli delle comunità di frontiera (quante volte anche il cinema ha testimoniato di tale funzione: ricorderemo, per tutti, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* di John Ford), questa letteratura si concentrava su problemi locali, glorificava imprese locali, consolidava epistemi locali. Le storie che raccontava e che tuttora racconta (pensiamo, ahimè, a un Louis L’Amour, lo scrittore non a caso preferito da Ronald Reagan, con quasi cento libri pubblicati e 180 milioni di copie vendute; ma pensiamo anche, con ben altro rispetto, a un Norman Zolinger)²⁷, sono storie di coraggiosi cowboys e di spietati fuorilegge, di grandi fortune e grandi rovesci, di sogni dinastici e dinastie isterilites: storie radicate nel terreno locale, impensabili al di fuori di quel contesto economico e sociale. Il West così ritratto sarebbe poi divenuto un bene di consumo per un immenso mercato di massa: dapprima quello dei *dime novels*, i melensi romanzetti in *brochure*; poi quello dei *pulp magazines*; infine quello dei romanzi del West, o d’azione. È da qui, da questa produzione pre- e para-letteraria fatta di stereotipi, di cliché comportamentali, di pedissequo riciclaggio

delle più viete, autocelebrative impostazioni ideologiche, che è nato e si è diffuso il mito del West. Mito che ha finito per travalicare i propri confini originari, imponendosi come un fattore straordinariamente attivo nell'immaginazione universale.

Secondo John R. Milton,

[...] the genuine, the sincere Western novel is set in the West because its author lives there, because it is the result of his own experience, because it represents the regional environment he knows best ... The writer of the Western novel takes the West seriously, while the writer of the Western does not²⁸.

Troppo rigida e semplicistica l'impostazione dello studioso: non è né il certificato di nascita né il genere ciò che garantisce la serietà d'impostazione. Come abbiamo visto a proposito del genere contiguo del *detective novel*, sarebbe erroneo ridurre il tutto a una questione anagrafica. Quello che fa la differenza non è tanto la 'serietà' dello scrittore nei confronti del soggetto quanto la sua serietà nei confronti della scrittura, il suo impegno nel rispettare la finalità della comunicazione letteraria. È in base a questo che vanno giudicati i vari Zane Grey, Jack Schaefer, Thomas Savage, Douglas Preston e tutti gli scrittori giunti da fuori; ed è in base agli stessi criteri che vanno giudicati gli scrittori locali. Alla propagazione del mito e dunque, in una certa misura, alla deformazione ideologica del West come realtà storica, qualunque essa fosse, hanno partecipato scrittori interni come esterni, scrittori straordinari come semplici mestieranti.

Il discorso vale anche per le arti visive. Tanta della produzione pittorica e statuaria nelle gallerie d'arte di tutta la regione (e qui, incontrastata, regna Santa Fe, capitale del *kitsch*) non fa che riproporre questo mito: ora piattamente, nei suoi aspetti più banali e sentimentali, ora con vette di vera creatività. Da un lato saranno le figurine di donne pueblo di R. C. Gorman, indiano di Taos, abilissimo venditore di fumo, oppure, per mano di altrettanto abili facitori di retorica quali Dave McGary, Vic Payne o C. A. Pardell, i grandi bronzi di piumati guerrieri con lo sguardo affiso a lontani orizzonti di perdute praterie ma imperituri valori; dall'altro, sarà sufficiente ricordare quello che con questo mito ha fatto Georgia O'Keeffe.

Analogamente per quanto concerne la letteratura, dagli innumerevoli mestieranti agli scrittori autentici. Che sono, oggi (per fare nomi che non rientrano nella nostra ricerca e sono tutti, tecnicamente, 'estranei'), Stanley Crawford e Melissa Pritchard, John Nichols o Cormac McCarthy, ed erano, ieri e ancor prima, D. H. Lawrence, Willa Cather o William Eastlake; i quali attraverso la rivisitazione di questo mito – a loro inizialmente distante – hanno scritto opere di alto e a volte altissimo livello. E tutti, siano essi scrittori locali oppure intellettuali qui passati e quindi rimasti perché anch'essi catturati dalla magia della *Land of Enchantment*, sempre hanno fatto i conti con la presenza travolgente di questa terra – la terra degli anglo, la *tierra* dei chicani, la *Dinetah* dei navajo: la stessa terra, varia

come soltanto il deserto riesce a creare. Hanno sempre fatto i conti con il suo ambiente: perché una volta compreso questo rapporto, compreso è il posto dell'individuo nell'ordine delle cose.

Tradizionalmente, il *detective novel* non è un veicolo letterario deputato a indagare il posto dell'individuo nell'universo. Come genere, il poliziesco si pone compiti più umili, aspira a scopi decisamente meno ambiziosi. Il giallo del Southwest, tuttavia, e in particolare quello del New Mexico, da tempo morde il freno. Nei suoi praticanti migliori, si ribella a questa formula restrittiva. Ma anche gli scrittori commerciali, quelli che al ritmo di un libro all'anno fanno uso della formula a scopo meramente economico e i cui prodotti mi sono imposto di studiare, catalogare e dunque, in fondo, prendere sul serio, anche loro, nelle loro più o meno ispirate imitazioni dei modelli di maggior valore, dicono la forza e la persistenza dell'ineludibile richiamo della terra, e la ricchezza delle culture e delle società che essa ospita.

La stratigrafia testuale dei tanti gialli del Southwest finora esaminati indica a chiare lettere che il livello relativo all'ambiente naturale come sociale, quando presente (e lo è nella maggioranza di questi scrittori), costituisce un fattore centrale nello sviluppo della diegesi. Indica altresì che il trattamento dell'ambiente – la cura del dettaglio, l'attenzione alla specificità dei luoghi, la resa del loro senso, della loro capacità di evocare emozioni e, perché no? incanti – si rivela spesso l'aspetto più felice di queste narrazioni, in grado di far emergere la pietra preziosa (quel dato passo, quella data scena, magari quell'intero capitolo) che ricompensa del tempo speso a guardare attraverso tanto materiale derivativo. Fino, appunto, a quella vena d'oro – o, più probabilmente, di turchese – che ripaga di tanta pazienza:

Sue Bright drove her camper over Bert Hart's cattle guard, and stopped to admire the view. There was Cloud Mesa, one of her favorites, never twice appearing the same way. Today, now, its top was black because of a single cumulus cloud between it and the sun; yet its almost vertical sides were by full sunlight cast into bold relief. It was no wonder, Sue thought, that the nearby Pueblo Indians considered Cloud Mesa sacred, spirit-haunted, a living entity constantly reflecting its own moods.

As she watched, the cumulus cloud moved away, and the mesa top suddenly brightened²⁹.

Per quanto con mezzi linguistici non particolarmente raffinati, per quanto non all'altezza della resa di analoghi fenomeni atmosferici in tanti brani di un Tony Hillerman o di una Willa Cather, questo passo di Richard Martin Stern comunica, con limpida efficacia, la complessa interazione di cultura e natura che sottende – o financo determina – tanta dell'attività umana in questa parte del mondo; e in questo senso si fa esemplare della specifica letterarietà del *mystery* del New Mexico. E benché il punto ter-

minale della nostra ricerca sembri costantemente allontanarsi piuttosto che avvicinarsi, forse si può già dire che davvero questa profonda, quasi ossessiva interazione fra individuo e ambiente costituisca il carattere distintivo del *corpus* narrativo preso in esame; e che in questo tratto risieda la maggiore potenzialità di arricchimento all'interno di un genere altrimenti incatenato al formulaico, e quindi destinato alla dimenticanza.

Arricchimento, appunto, letterario: per quel salto di qualità che fa la differenza fra un testo di consumo e, felicemente, l'invenzione.

Note

¹ Per una preliminare discussione dell'argomento, cfr. "Tony Hillerman: il giallo si addice a Albuquerque", pp. 140 sgg.

² «Because formula stories involve widely shared conventions, what one could call a form of collective artistic behavior, we must also deal with the phenomenon in relation to the cultural patterns it reveals and is shaped by, and with the impact formula stories have on culture» (Cawelti 2).

³ Per i *mysteries* di Jake Page, si veda *Works Cited*.

⁴ Satterthwait è inoltre autore di polizieschi di carattere intertestuale nei quali mette in scena ora la celebre supposta assassina Lizzie Borden (*Miss Lizzie*), ora Oscar Wilde (*Wilde West*), ora Conan Doyle e il mago Houdini (*Escapade*), ora Hemingway e gli esuli parigini della 'generazione perduta' (*Masquerade*); in *Cavalcade* il contesto storico è quello della Germania del 1923. *Dead Horse* combina l'ambiente del New Mexico con l'immaginaria ricostruzione di un delitto insoluto degli anni Trenta.

⁵ Con la seconda serie, iniziata nel 2000, la protagonista non è più l'avvocata Neil Hamel ma una bibliotecaria della University of New Mexico a Albuquerque. Per la produzione di Judith Van Gieson (incluso *Mercury Retrograde*, un volume di versi e di prose non nel genere poliziesco) si veda *Works Cited*.

⁶ Per i *mysteries* ambientati nel Southwest di Richard Martin Stern, prolifico autore di *thrillers* e di *disaster novels* estranei alla nostra regione, si veda *Works Cited*.

⁷ I Thurlo hanno all'attivo decine di volumi; per alcuni dei loro titoli, si veda *Works Cited*. Per una esaustiva trattazione tipologica della *detective fiction* da parte di scrittori indiano americani, si veda Gina e Andrew MacDonald, *Shaman or Sherlock? Un insolito caso di collaborazione è The Balloon Affair*, un *mystery* (che anticipa *Rio Grande Fall* di Anaya, focalizzandosi sulla *fiesta* degli aerostati di Albuquerque) scritto da tre amiche di questa città – Marion Wolf, Margery W. Papich e Layne Torkleson – sotto il nome collettivo di Marion Margery Layne.

⁸ I quattro *mysteries* della serie di Hackler tendono a scadere nel finale, con un continuo ricorso a soluzioni di repertorio da *B-grade films*. Frequenti anche le cadute di coerenza interna, segno di una sciatta produzione editoriale.

⁹ Molto curata è in questo scrittore la dimensione naturale: i colori, gli odori, il tempo, l'effetto che il paesaggio fa sul personaggio, il quale viene coinvolto non soltanto attraverso il meccanismo della *suspense* ma anche a livello sensoriale. Per le opere di McGarrity, si veda *Works Cited*.

¹⁰ Sotto i due pseudonimi (e ve ne sono altri) si cela Sheri S. Tepper, prolifica scrittrice piuttosto felice nel tratteggio psicologico, autrice di romanzi popolari di vario genere, dal *romance* al fantascientifico. Per le due serie di *mysteries* ambientati in New Mexico e in Colorado si rimanda a *Works Cited* sotto i due primi pseudonimi.

¹¹ Per i *mysteries* di J. D. Doss si veda *Works Cited*.

¹² Di Douglas Preston, originario del Massachusetts e a lungo vissuto, fino a poco tempo fa, a Santa Fe, va menzionato *Thunderland*, che si svolge nella zona del Lake Powell, in Arizona. Oltre che per le traduzioni di vari *thrillers* scritti a quattro mani con Lincoln Child, Preston è noto in Italia per la collaborazione con Mario Spezi a *Dolci colline di sangue. Il romanzo del mostro di Firenze*. L'opera che colloca Preston fra gli interpreti più sensibili del Southwest è tuttavia *Cities of Gold*, il resoconto d'un viaggio a cavallo attraverso il deserto fra l'Arizona e il New Mexico; meno felice il seguito, *Talking to the Ground*.

¹³ La produzione non giallistica di Cecil Dawkins include romanzi, racconti e un dramma basato su testi di Flannery O'Connor. Qualitativamente minore quella giallistica (si veda *Works Cited*), che soffre di una certa meccanicità di soluzioni diegetiche – segno forse di una non troppo convinta riduzione alla narrativa di genere. La scrittrice contravviene inoltre alla prima regola stabilita da Van Dine, secondo la quale al lettore non deve essere taciuto quanto l'investigatore ha scoperto; il sistematico trafugamento di tali informazioni fa sì che il lettore si vede negata la "battle of wits" con l'investigatore e può solo aspettare, passivamente, la soluzione del puzzle. Per le venti regole di Van Dine, cfr. Marc Lits, 20-22. Per i *mysteries* della Dawkins, si veda *Works Cited*.

¹⁴ «Rudolfo Anaya and Lucha Corpi subvert the genre in order to relay a message. That message is clearly a cultural and/or political one. In both cases the message centers on the Chicano heritage and worldview» (Flys-Junquera 342). Si veda anche Tim Libretti. In un'intervista telefonica, Anaya dichiarava a S. R. Allen che i libri centrati su Baca «are less about genre than they are about Sonny's odyssey through life».

¹⁵ Per il motivo degli alieni (presente anche in *Zia Summer* di Anaya), cfr. *The Mute Strategy* di Dave DeWitt (1979). DeWitt, che vive a Albuquerque, è noto per una pluridecennale attività come autore di libri sulla cucina del Southwest; con molto tempismo, recentemente ha scritto *Da Vinci's Kitchen: A Secret History of Italian Cuisine*. *The Mute Strategy* è l'unica prova narrativa di DeWitt.

¹⁶ Šklovskij 82.

¹⁷ Steve Brewer, un giornalista di Albuquerque ora trasferitosi in California, è autore d'una serie di *mysteries* ambientati nella sua città d'origine. Per i suoi romanzi, come per quelli di Manuel Ramos, un avvocato di Denver, si rimanda a *Works Cited*.

¹⁸ Ne nominiamo alcuni, senza distinguerli per *background* linguistico, afferenza regionale, qualità letteraria o frequenza di focalizzazione sul Southwest, ma soltanto perché anch'essi hanno contribuito, in varia misura, a formare il quadro generale della nostra ricerca. Si tratta di Rudy Apodaca, Ann Campbell, Harlen Campbell, M. E e J. Clayton, Margaret Coel, J. F. Freedman, Martha Grimes, Rick Hanson, Pete Hautman, Lee Head, Rolando Hinojosa, Fred Harris, Mary Elizabeth Hirsh, J. D. H. Jones, Mitchell Kirk, Max Martínez, Michael Nava, Patrick O'Mailey, Nancy Pickard, Ron Querry, Helen Reilly, Ray Ring, Sarah Shankman, Anne Stuart, Edward Thorpe, Mari Ulmer, Stuart Woods.

¹⁹ Vedi anche *The Turquoise Shop*. Altri *mysteries* della Crane (il cui *trademark* è la presenza di un sempre diverso colore nel titolo) sono ambientati a New York, a New Orleans, a Dallas, nella regione della Bluegrass, e in tre casi a San Francisco; chiaro l'intento di fare leva sulla generica riconoscibilità di luoghi a forte valenza turistica. Sulla scia dell'immenso successo commerciale di "The Case of ..." di Erle Stanley Gardner, la riproduzione di un *trademark* autoriale è ormai un vezzo diffuso del *mystery*, sorta di garanzia della genuinità del prodotto. Vedi appunto la varietà dei colori nella Crane o la loro uniformità nelle sorelle Constance e Gwenyth Little, che dopo l'esordio (*The Grey Mist Murder*, 1983) passarono al *black* nei restanti venti titoli. Vedi *death o dead* in gran parte dei titoli di Oliphant e di Orde, il

frequente *shaman* in J. D. Doss, o *wolf* in A. Campbell. Vedi la formula "... Can Be Murder" o "... Can Kill" di C. Shelton (cfr. *Works Cited*) oppure, in S. Brewer, i due monosillabi: quasi l'eco di due spari.

²⁰ Da *Ride the Pink Horse* fu tratto nel 1947 un *noir* diretto e interpretato da Robert Montgomery, con sceneggiatura di Ben Hecht; fra gli altri interpreti, Wanda Hendrix e Thomas Gomez, nominato come «best supporting actor». Nel 1964 il film fu rifatto da Don Siegel per la Tv col titolo *The Hanged Man*. Gli altri due polizieschi della Hughes ambientati in New Mexico sono *The Blackbird* e *The Candy Kid*.

²¹ Cit. in Tani 20.

²² Godfrey xvii. Guarda caso, problematiche relative all'assistenza pubblica nella riserva navajo sono al centro di *Skinwalkers* di Tony Hillerman, mentre anima gran parte dei suoi romanzi il conflitto fra la prassi anglo di punire il colpevole e quella navajo di aiutarlo a ritrovare il suo *hozro*, cioè lo stato di armonia con il creato.

²³ Una situazione analoga si trova nel secondo romanzo di Hillerman, *The Fly on the Wall*, un poliziesco 'politico' di ambientazione quasi interamente urbana «most likely set in Oklahoma City» (Hieb 13; osservazione confermata dallo scrittore). Fanno eccezione due capitoli su ventidue, il 13 e il 14, che si svolgono in un'area montuosa a nord di Santa Fe. La differenza sostanziale è che, in *The Fly on the Wall*, lo spostamento di localizzazione è inerente alla diegesi.

²⁴ Da un'intervista con lo scrittore (Albuquerque, novembre 2000). La posizione essenzialmente eterodossa di Brewer rispetto all'uso del paesaggio del Southwest era del resto già stata dichiarata dal suo *private eye*, Bubba Mabry: «Wide-open spaces are fine to look at, but when you get out there in them, there's not much to do» (*Witchy Woman*, 14).

²⁵ J. A. Jance, vincitrice dello American Mystery Award, è cresciuta in Arizona ma vive a Seattle; questi due poli, rurale il primo e urbano il secondo, si riflettono in due serie di *mysteries* che in un paio di casi confluiscono. Per i romanzi ambientati in Arizona, vedi *Works Cited*. Sinclair Browning vive a Tucson. Per i suoi *mysteries*, tutti ambientati in Arizona, si rimanda a *Works Cited*.

²⁶ Si vedano *The Shaman Sings*, *The Shaman Laughs* e *The Shaman's Bones* (J. D. Doss); *The Bluejay Shaman* (Lise McClendon); *Shaman Winter* (R. Anaya) e, a rimorchio, nella traduzione del titolo di *Skinwalkers*, *Lo stregone deve morire*. E si vedano *The Call of the Canyon* (Zane Grey); *The Canyon* (Jack Schaefer); *Silver Canyon* e *Dark Canyon* (Louis L'Amour); *The Deadly Canyon* (J. Page); *The Dark Canyon* (M. Hackler); *Skeleton Canyon* (J. A. Jance); *Tyrannosaurus Canyon* (D. Preston); *Gallatin Canyon: Stories* (Thomas McGuane); *The Canyon of Bones* (Richard S. Wheeler). *Rattlesnake Crossing* (J. A. Jance); "New Moon and Rattlesnakes" (Wendy Hornsby); *Serpent Gate* (M. McGarrity); *Flight of the Serpent* (Val Davis); *The Snake Tattoo* (Linda Barnes). *Wolf Path* (Judith Van Gieson); *Eye of the Wolf* (Margaret Coel); *Wolf at the Door*, *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing* e *Wolf Tracks* (Ann Campbell); *Wolves Eat Dogs* (Martin Cruz Smith); *Big Bad Wolf* (James Patterson). *The Wild Horse Mesa* (Zane Grey); *The Haunted Mesa* (Louis L'Amour); *Black Mesa* e *Red Mesa* (Thurlo). *Cactus Thorn* (Mary Austin); *Cactus Blood* (Lucha Corpi); e perfino, del tutto fuori di questo contesto, *Cactus: otto storie di crimine* (Massimo Mannucci).

²⁷ Per Norman Zollinger, originario di Chicago, trapiantato a Albuquerque nel 1970 e qui deceduto nel 1999, si veda *Works Cited*.

²⁸ Milton 43.

²⁹ Stern, *You Don't Need an Enemy* 170.



Cadillac Ranch, west of Amarillo, Texas Panhandle

“A JOKE THAT ONLY WORKS IF NOBODY GETS IT.”
AN INTERVIEW WITH WALTER SATTERTHWAIT

This is part of a long interview that took place on November 5, 2000, in the lounge of historic Hotel La Fonda in Santa Fe. Quite fittingly, this is the same lounge where Dorothy B. Hughes, to whom Walter Satterthwait refers in the course of this interview, set part of the action of Ride the Pink Horse, a splendid mystery published in 1946.

I am most impressed by the cultural range of your work. I am particularly interested in the way you graft historical figures onto the genre—Oscar Wilde, Lizzie Borden, Houdini, Hemingway ...

I think that's the reason why my books do as well as they do in France and Germany.

Here's the way it came about. I had done the first Joshua Croft book, *Walls of Glass*, and I wanted to do something with Lizzie Borden. Initially I had an idea for a short story in which she would be vacationing somewhere on the coast of New England, and there would be another murder—an axe murder—and she of course would be suspected. I wanted to have the narrator to be a young boy who had become friends with her, and he would be in effect the Doctor Watson to her Sherlock Holmes as she tried to establish her own innocence. Then it occurred to me that it would be more interesting if it were a young girl, because a young girl would perhaps be able to become more friendly to her. And the more I thought about it, the more it became clear to me that all of this was a better idea for a novel than for a short story. It would be a coming-of-age novel for the young girl. I had never written from the perspective of a woman before but it worked out I think relatively well—the women who read the book seemed to feel that it was fairly accurate. But then, having done that, my agent at the time felt that the publisher would prefer to have another Joshua Croft book rather than an historical mystery. As far as I knew, nobody had ever done a book using an historical character. I think John Dickson Carr did a couple of books in the Forties where he took an historical character and made him in effect the sleuth in his mystery, but I did not know that at the time. I thought I was inventing



a whole new subgenre. Now of course there are four or five people (for the most part, American writers) who are using historical figures as sleuths—Jane Austen, Mark Twain, the brother of Henry Fielding. But at the time, as I said, nobody was doing it.

So, in a sense, you reinvented the subgenre.

I reinvented the subgenre. Well, the agent felt that it was a bit hippy at the time. I think he was mistaken. I think I could have sold it to St. Martin's or, had they not bought it, I could have sold it to somebody else. I no longer have him as my agent. What we did, though, we presented to St. Martin's a two-book proposal, the Lizzie Borden book and then a sequel to the first Joshua Croft novel. For years I've regretted making that decision, because I ended up kind in a treadmill with St. Martin's, and I couldn't get to another publisher. I had run out of money in the middle of the first book in the series, and I had to sign a new contract for two more subsequent books. So it just was a treadmill. I loved my editor there, I think she was terrific, but I'm glad to be out of that.

Are you through with the Joshua Croft series?

I think I probably am. It really depends on how well they do in Germany, where they have been reissued. If they do very well, I would be tempted. I enjoy them. They are fun. And I was having a great time alternating between the Croft books and the historical mysteries. After *Miss Lizzie*, I did another Croft book and I thought, Gee, wouldn't it be fun to do another historical one. So I did the Oscar Wilde book. Then I did two Croft books in a row because I couldn't get the Fulbright grant that takes you, as a mystery writer, to England for a year and gives a very good stipend for mystery writers. I felt that to do the book I had in mind with Houdini, I would have to be in England and do some research there.

That would be Escapade.

Yes, *Escapade*. I didn't get the grant, but I did make enough money to go on my own and spent three months in Exeter. And that was a fun book too, I think, because you take a cozy British mystery and you get an American hard-working type of detective, and play around with two different forms of the mystery.

The British resent the intrusion of foreigners into their genre ...

That book did not sell in England. I was told by my British agent that they felt it was an effrontery on my part to be writing that kind of book.

How very British!

And the fact that it did well in France and in Germany only confirmed that. My wife is British, but fortunately she has the same feelings about the British that I have. She likes them, but she thinks they're mad. She likes London a bit more than I do. Among the European cities, I would rank London third after Paris and Amsterdam but she puts it way up there.

You haven't considered Florence.

You know, I really like Italy. I'd love to go to Florence. The only time I've been to Italy was when I got a free lunch from my publisher in Milan.

Mondadori. They publish those yellow paperbacks ...

Yes. They only bought three or four of them and then stopped buying them. The books didn't do very well. I don't think my books are kiosk material. Maybe the kind of people who buy kiosk books don't enjoy my books. The next one in that series, which I'll start after I'll be finished with the one I'm working on now, the book after *Escapade* and *Masquerade*, is set in Munich in 1933. Hitler will be in it.

Let me try to guess the title. Promenade ...?

Yea—*Lemonade*, or something like that! It will probably be *Cavalcade*. Another one that I'd like to use is *Serenade*, but I would have to set in Venice!

Changing subject. What is your sense of the proliferation of mysteries in this part of the world?

I don't know. When I did the first Croft book, nobody had used Santa Fe as a backdrop for a mystery novel for a long time. Dorothy B. Hughes had done it, but nobody had used it for a long time. At the time I wrote it, there were no mystery writers in Santa Fe that I was aware of. It just occurred to me that such an interesting town was not being used as a character in a book. So, again, I was starting something. As a result—well, not necessarily of my book—certainly there have been many more people writing about Santa Fe. Tony Hillerman was using the Reservation, but he didn't really ...

As a matter of fact, I don't think he has ever used it.

No, I don't think he does. There's a guy whose name I can't remember who used Santa Fe under a different name. He called it something else. They were paperback originals about an Indian sheriff or Indian police officer ...

Oh yes. Richard Stern.¹

Right. I know he used the town under a different name, which made no sense to me. I know that Chandler used to do that—he called Santa Monica something else. Sue Grafton used Santa Barbara and called it something else. But Santa Fe is such a nice town—why not use it? I like Santa Fe, and I like using it.

There is a great deal of irony in your books. Especially in the Joshua Croft series, there is a great deal of social and even political criticism.

This is something that I probably picked up from reading John D. MacDonald, who was doing the same thing about Florida, constantly making comments about the developers and people screwing up the environment in the Everglades. There is a big tradition of that within MacDonald's books, and it just seems that so long as you are not too preachy, it provides you with an opportunity to say something useful. And Santa Fe is such a great town. I mean, I am not as fond of it as I was when I first came because it has changed—every place changes. But it's still attractive. Santa Fe is probably one of the few American cities that I could be comfortable in, because it is sort of multicultural. There will never be a bar called "Hooters" in Santa Fe. There's one in Albuquerque, I believe. When I was in Florida, during the Gulf War, there were signs outside some shops saying, "Go USA!" as if it were a football game. That wouldn't happen in Santa Fe. It's still a nice town in many ways, although it has changed. It's got a lot wealthier, and the division between the wealthy and the poor is much sharper than it used to be. And I don't like the very expensive gated communities up in the mountains. But it's still pretty. And there's still the cowboy mentality, which is fun—the mystery comes out of the western, I believe. It's fun to be where there are cowboys, even though most of them are not real.

You said that you are in the middle of a new book.

It's a serial killer book.² It began as a joke, but as I told my German publisher, it's a joke that only works if nobody gets it. Because it's about a guy who is killing immensely fat women and then cuts them down to size. Basically, it has given me a chance to talk about the whole American obsession with slimness, and also about the fact that in this country there is a huge amount of obesity.

Is that your "modest proposal" à la Swift?

No, no! I don't recommend this! As I say, in a sense it's a joke, because I'm playing around with the whole notion of the serial killer idea but I am also talking about America, obesity, the obsession with slimness. So it's a lot of fun, but in order for the joke to work I have to have it seem

real. I have to have the police procedure down properly and the medical examiner's stuff down properly, the talking to doctors ... It's been sold already to Germany but haven't yet ...

Not here in America?

I haven't looked for a publisher yet. Probably I'll have to publish it under a pseudonym because it is very different from the other books. I think the pseudonym I'll use is C. E. Crawleigh—C will stand for Creep, so it'll be Creep E. Crawleigh. In all of my books there is a certain element of playing around with form, with the parameters and the expectations produced within a reader. It's fun to do that. And so it's fun to do this too but I can't have that much fun—that much *obvious* fun—with the serial killer because it's supposed to be scary. I had to cut things out because they were funny, which I don't usually do. I have been lucky with St. Martin's, to some extent, because they really didn't give a shit about what I did, and I was able to switch from doing the Croft books to historicals. Other publishers would have said, "Don't," we want just the Croft books. But I think that to some extent it may have hurt my career, because there are a lot of people who when they like a book, they prefer the next one to be basically a copy of the first one. As my former agent said, a lot of readers, when they read a book, the same button is pushed, in the same sequence, every time. They don't want any surprises, they don't want any shifts out of the form, anything that would alarm their expectations. I don't think that's true of every reader, but I think it's true of quite a few. Even within the Croft series I tried to make the books different one from another. And because my books are different one from another, that hasn't helped me in the American market. Whereas in the European market, where I think readers are a little more sophisticated, I think it has helped me.

Actually, the last one is a chase book.

Yes, it is a chase book. Which of the Croft books have you enjoyed the most?

It's hard to tell. I think my favorite is At Ease With The Dead ...

That's also one of my favorites.

I think the second chapter, when Croft goes fishing and he encounters the old Indian, is superb.

Thank you. I was living with a Navajo woman at that time, so she was very helpful, actually. My most ambitious book is *Wilde West*. That's my most ambitious one. I had the effrontery to put dialogue into the mouth of Oscar Wilde—and I didn't use any of his ... I invented everything. What an arrogant jerk I was ...

Endnotes

¹ Richard Stern's mysteries set in Santa Fe and published before *Wall of Glass* (1989) are *Murder in the Walls* (1971), *You Don't Need an Enemy* (1971), and *Death in the Snow* (1973). The name that the writer gave Santa Fe was Santo Cristo. Probably because they had been out of print for a long time, Satterthwait was not aware of *The Terrarium* (1976) and *The Crystal Clear Case* (1977) by Santa Fe resident Lee Head. Both mysteries are set in Santa Fe.

² *Perfection* was published in February, 2007. Contrary to his original intention, the writer used his own name for this book rather than the pseudonym he talked about in the interview.



Monument Valley, Navajo Reservation. Northeastern Arizona

“GIVING VOICE TO WHAT PEOPLE ARE THINKING AT THE TIME.”
AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH VAN GIESON

This interview took place on November 4, 2000, in the writer's adobe home in North Valley, an area of Albuquerque that still retains much of its warm, traditional Hispanic character. It was the first time we met.

The Stolen Blue, the first mystery of the Claire Reynier series, had come out in April. At the time, Miss Van Gieson was at work on Confidence Woman, the third book of the series.

Miss Van Gieson ...

Judith.

Judith. Would you care to comment on the mechanics of changing from your first protagonist, Neil Hamel, to the new character, Claire Reynier?

I had written eight Neil Hamel books in the first person. Neil had such a distinct voice that I couldn't see myself writing another first person narration. I also thought it would be interesting to try the third person, getting into the head of my protagonist. But it was a hard change. And I don't think I really got it down until the second book.

What kind of difficulties did you encounter?

Just how to do it. What to say, when to enter into Claire's mind, when not to. She's a very different character than Neil.

With the narrating voice external to the character, what strategies do you implement not to seem to withhold information from the reader?

What you try to do, is present the evidence in such a way that the reader reaches the same conclusions the protagonist does. You don't want the reader to be smarter than the protagonist. But you have to present the evidence fairly whether you write in third person or first person. It's annoying for the reader to feel that something is being withheld so the writer



tries not to do that. Also, you have many different readers approaching a book from diverse perspectives. Some of them are more attentive than others.

One of Van Dine's rules of mystery writing was that you must not cheat the reader by withholding information. You can hide it, you can masquerade it ...

You can't have your protagonist come to her conclusions based on information that the reader does not have.

In terms of this, do you find that there are differences between first person and third person presentations?

The difference I see is that in the third person my plots are a lot more complicated. They can be a lot trickier. I am halfway through with my third Claire Reynier book, and I think they are much more conventional and classical mysteries than the Neil Hamel books were. I'm not sure why, but that's the way they have evolved.

I noticed that you don't introduce the reader inside other characters' mind—I mean, other than Claire's.

There are names for the different types of point of view—first person, third person limited, third person omniscient—and I would say this is third person limited, where you are in Claire's point of view but not entirely. There are comments that the omniscient narrator makes. I try not to do too much of that but it's kind of hard not to. I don't think it really affects the complications of the plot and the different kinds of stories that I'm trying to tell. The Neil Hamel books were a lot of other things besides being mysteries. This series is too, but sometime it seems to me that the mysteries are more complex. And another thing that I do in this series that I really didn't do in the Hamel series, which was probably a function of writing those books in the first person, is going back into the past. Both in *Vanishing Point* and in *Confidence Woman*, the beginning of the mystery starts thirty years earlier and revolves around something that happened a long time ago. And part of that has to do with Claire's job. She's an archivist, so she naturally falls into areas that have to do with history and the past.

I have the impression that there is more social commentary on the part of Neil than on Claire's.

Well, with the first series I was inspired by the P.I. novels of the Forties and Fifties, particularly Raymond Chandler. Neil is a lawyer. Her work takes her into legal matters and environmental issues. When I started the Claire Reynier series she was beginning a whole new life. She is recently

divorced, starting a new job, and has moved to a new place. She has a lot of doubts about herself.

Also, she just moved to Albuquerque. Obviously, her relationship with the context is less deep. Which brings me to another question, concerning your interest in your characters' rapport with their geographical and social environment.

Claire is interested in the geography, but not so much in the social environment. She is aware of her environment but less passionate about it than Neil. She is more intellectual.

Is there the possibility that the two series intersect, and that Neil reappears?

You mean, the way Tony Hillerman combined Leaphorn and Chee?

After all, Albuquerque is quite a small city ...

A lot of writers alternate two characters. But I don't see bringing the two into one series the way Tony Hillerman did.

How do you account for the extraordinary proliferation of interest in the genre in this area? I was amazed, years ago, when I realized how many mystery writers are active in New Mexico.

Yes, there seem to be a lot more mystery writers here than there are in Arizona. I'm sure much of it has to do with Tony Hillerman's success, which has created a market for other writers.

Of course even in Arizona people know about Tony Hillerman. And many writers have staked out their own portion of the Indian Country. Do you find anything unique about the genre in New Mexico?

There are many things about New Mexico that are unique, and it's a wonderful place to write about. It's hard not to be influenced by the beauty and the diversity of the state. Also, we have a small population. There are only about a million and a half people in New Mexico, which may make us more aware of our cultural diversity.

Do you find it reflected in the local literary production?

No, because it seems to me that most of us are so different. I think there are some people who are trying to write about the Native Americans in the Tony Hillerman mode.

Like the Thurlos, for example?

Yes. Or James D. Doss. But some of us, like Steve Brewer and Walter Satterthwait, are very different.

Of course. And it has to do with your personal interests, your personal art. Yet, in your work, as well as in Brewer's and in Satterthwait's, the main character is decidedly critical of what is going on in this society. They have their own ideas about the environment and about local political issues. They don't live only to solve the particular crime they are investigating. And I find this more often in the work of New Mexican writers than elsewhere.

I don't know. Sometimes the last thing a mystery writer wants to do at the end of the day is to read somebody else's mystery! Writing takes much of the enjoyment out of reading, because you can't help studying how another writer does it. I can see some comparisons between Neil Hamel and Walter's Joshua Croft, but not with Steve's Bubba.

What about the trend of the ethnic P.I. and their variously multiethnic professional and sentimental assistants, as we have in Jack Page or Richard Stern and many others?

I think you need to know another ethnic group very well before you can write about it effectively. I don't know the Indian community here well but I know the Hispanic community, and often what I hear others say about it is ...

... clichés?

... not quite accurate. I like to read what these people have to say about themselves.

Has this something to do with the publishing industry? After all, nowadays 'border people' are very much in.

In the 1980's publishers suddenly began to recognize Sue Grafton and Marcia Muller and others who made it interesting to have a woman sleuth. The publishers became aware that women buy books—actually, women buy *most* of the books, and this was a huge audience that they had not been reaching. Presumably, they've also come to the same conclusion about different ethnic groups.

What I'm really interested in doing in the Claire Reynier series, which I think is novel, is writing about a fifty year old woman who is starting a new life for herself. Many people are doing so in this country at an age when they thought that everything was settled in their life. Suddenly they're

thrust into a new situation. It used to be that you had women, like Neil, who were pushing forty, and then you had little old ladies, and not much in between. An intelligent, mature, female sleuth who is living an interesting life. This is something I can do, and I didn't see it being done.

One of the things a writer wants to do is give voice to what people are thinking at the time. If you can do it, you can speak for a group of people who are literate, and may not have a public voice. Then you may have found a market. I am more interested in people exploring their own situation, at this point, than trying to get inside someone else's.

I think that when Tony Hillerman became so successful, the publishers saw a huge market for mysteries about Native Americans.

And of course one can see the difference between Hillerman and many of his imitators.

Even so, the Native American writer Sherman Alexie has been very outspoken about Tony Hillerman. I think Hillerman is a wonderful writer who knows his subject well, but there are some who resent the fact that he writes about Native Americans. Perhaps they don't think he gives voice to their experience.

Do you think that this is true also of Rudy Anaya?

Anaya's books are very popular among Hispanics here, which leads me to believe he captures the truth of their experience. I didn't mean to say anything derogatory about Tony Hillerman, because Tony is a wonderful human being and a great writer. Nevertheless there will be people who will criticize him.

Which of course is also the case with most writers. You cannot ...

... please everybody. One of the things that I've learned is that no matter what you do, there will be people who love it and people who hate it.

Well, Judith, I want to thank you for your time and ...

That's it? I was just getting warmed up ...



Steve Brewer presenting his *End Run* to the famous Sophie at the Clues Unlimited mystery bookstore in Tucson, Arizona (photo by Millicent I. Lim, 2000)

“THE INFIDEL IN THE MESS.”
AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVE BREWER

What follows is part of a long interview that took place on November 6, 2000, in the writer’s home near Old Town in Albuquerque. Three years later Mr Brewer moved to Redding, California.

The conversation touched upon many subjects, beginning with his background (“I was born in Washington State, and grew up in Arkansas—a very good state to come from, but I don’t think I could live there now”); his education at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (“... but you can’t get stirred up trying to write by reading Emerson ...”); his early choice of journalism as a profession; his many years with the Associated Press; his move to Albuquerque in 1987 as a feature writer for the Albuquerque Journal. Then, in 1997, Brewer decided to totally devote himself to writing: “I had three books out by the time I left the Journal. I was turning forty—the usual middle life crisis—and I really wanted to write books and not work for a paper. For my fortieth birthday my wife said, “Here’s your birthday present: quit! Take a year off, and do fiction full time.” That’s how it began. That was three and a half years ago, and I never went back. Now I’m a househusband. I take care of the kids while my wife goes to work at the Tribune as managing editor.”

We then turned to his writing.

Steve, how did you become interested in mysteries?

I’ve always been a big fan of mysteries. From the time I was in grade school, I would just devour books—and even then, I was very interested in mysteries. When we were living in Sheridan, Arkansas, which at the time had a population of maybe two thousand people, they had a pretty decent little public library there, and my mother would take me to the library every week. The old ladies who ran this library had all the adult books in an alcove behind their desk—you had to go around the desk to get to the adult books. Well, after a few years I had read all the other books—thousands of books! Non-fiction, fiction, everything! So my mother told the old ladies that I had her permission to go back and read the adult books.



Not today's kind of adult books, I suppose.

No, no! You know, Charteris' The Saint, and James Bond, and ... I don't even think they had Mickey Spillane—I got to that after we moved to another city. All of that stuff now doesn't seem very adult, but those little old ladies were really very protective, so my mother insisted that they let me read those books. And I did.

How old were you at that time?

I was about thirteen. Maybe twelve. And my dad had always been a fan of mysteries. He was always talking to me about The Saint in particular—it was one of his favorites. And I read Poe, and Conan Doyle—just everything. But mysteries always appealed to me most. That's what I read all along.

What appeals to you in mysteries?

The thing in the genre that appeals to me most is that mysteries are complete stories: there is a beginning, a middle, and an end. There's always going to be a climax, there's always going to be a loose end wrapped up. So much of contemporary mainstream fiction is slice-of-life stories. Often there is no conclusion, there is no wrapping up of the story, so you don't feel you have a beginning, a middle, and an end—you just have a middle. This is one of the things that appeal to me. And I like the action, the dramas that you have in a mystery story. Like the movies that I like to watch. I like crime dramas, things with a lot of action.

And I have always been sort of fascinated by crime as well. When I was a reporter I used to read a lot of *True Crime*. And I covered a lot of crime. I have got a wealth of material from all those years of being a reporter. All these mystery writers have to do a lot of research—they have to ride with the cops, go down to the jails, see somebody booked, just so they understand the whole process. I *did* all that stuff. I have looked down the barrel of a gun. I have seen people get shot. The stuff that happens when you are a reporter, it's all good material now. I probably do much less research than most mystery writers because I've got it all. I've got the hang of it. At least, I think I do!

You also seem to be interested in pushing the limits of the genre.

Yes, I am very interested in that too—and I think this has probably been detrimental to my career. For example, I am extremely interested in the old hard-boiled school—Hammett, and Chandler, and all those guys. This is really my biggest love in the genre. But what I'm doing with the Bubba Mabry novels is writing *comic* private eye novels. Bubba is a bumbler. He wants to be Sam Spade. Always the subtext for Bubba is that he wants to be a tough guy, but he just is not. He can't pull it off.

Well, he does.

He does, but it's often with help. Or with luck. But yes, from the beginning of that series I've been playing around with the genre, injecting humor to the private eye novel. There are not many people doing that.

Your first novel, Lonely Street, is a sort of spoof of what you glance at when you are standing on line at the supermarket and the National Inquirer on display has yet another scoop about Elvis Presley still being alive.

Yes. The starting point for Bubba were two things, really. One was the whole celebrity sighting business. The other thing was a story I did for the newspaper about the old motels on East Central that were bypassed when the Interstate went up, and now they are hotbeds of crime, prostitution, and all sorts of things. As I was doing a story about them I started thinking, This would be a great place where to set a private eye novel. What kind of private eye would live in these cheap motels? And the immediate answer was, Not a very good one. If he were *good* at what he did, then he would choose something nice. So I kept the whole Elvis idea sort of floating around, but I didn't have a story to put it in. Then, suddenly, I did. It all came together nicely, and the Elvis thing gave it such a nice hook that it was easy to pitch. So the second or third editor, whoever worked on it, wanted a series with this fumbling private eye in the red light district in Albuquerque, played for all the comic potential that it had. But I knew from the beginning that I was violating a lot of the rules. Private eye novels are supposed to have this tough guy, hard-boiled and all of that, and here's this soft-boiled kind of guy trying to be *that* private eye.

He doesn't even have the money to afford the hairpiece that Sean Connory had to wear when playing James Bond.

That's right! In a couple of the books, I mentioned in passing that Bubba reads private eye novels to sort of get tips. He really wants to be one of those guys, but he just isn't quite there. Actually, it was long after I started writing Bubba that I discovered that there were a couple of other writers that were doing this sort of thing, where they had a private eye who was not particularly competent. Parnell Hall, up in New York, writes a series about a hard-luck guy called Stanley Hastings, a very similar kind of character. I didn't know about Parnell until long after my work could be found in the bookstores. Frankly, I thought I was doing something completely new. But you never are!

You have endowed Bubba with total intolerance for the missionary type, for the good-doers and the professional preachers. This seems to indicate an interest in society that takes the form of irony as well as disgust.

Yes, there is certainly an element of that. I spent twenty years keeping my mouth shut. When you are a journalist, you have to keep that facade of objectivity at all times. You have to listen to people saying incredibly stupid things while you say, Oh, yes, and take notes. Fiction cut me lose from all that, so I get to take on things that have been driving me crazy for years. There's a whole of that, in *Baby Face* especially.

The rally scenes are great ...

You know, people ask, "What is this book about?" and I say, "It's about all the things you're not supposed to talk about—sex, politics, and religion." That's exactly what I set out to do when I wrote it. In *Witchy Woman* there's also a more direct indictment of the whole New Age movement too, with the commune that Bubba goes out to investigate—you know, white people trying to be Indians. That's what a lot of this is. It's such a load of shit. Especially in Santa Fe. A lot of this happens in Taos too. I can hardly stand it. People are so gullible. And in my opinion, that goes for a lot of organized religion as well. People are just being led around by their noses by those guys. I have no respect for it. I grew up in a very religious, very set Baptist household, and probably until I got to college I considered myself a religious person, I went to the youth groups—you know, all that Bible cant. When I went to college, my eyes got open a little more, and since then I have just grown increasingly intolerant of ...

... intolerance?

Yes, of intolerance. And of organized religion, and pretend religion, and all of that. I would never say to somebody's face, "Your religion is idiotic"—I wouldn't do that. I'm too polite. But in Bubba's books, I get away from some of that. There's a lot of me in Bubba. I don't think I am Bubba or that he is me, although I'm certain that some readers buy into that, but we have a similar background. He grew up in the rural South, and he came to New Mexico from Mississippi. I moved him over one state so that my family wouldn't get all that aggrieved, but it's a very similar upbringing. His mom was like a religious fanatic, which gives him good reason to feel the way he does about the New Age and all that sort of stuff. He has seen what can happen, and how religious fanaticism and insanity are real close to each other. It's really easy to take it too far. And so he's very intolerant. He's probably more intolerant than I am, because I don't care what other people do. I was at a church last Saturday, the first time in years. I walked in, figuring that the roof would just fall in—you know, the infidel in the mess. There was a funeral, and I listened to the two ministers. The first one just read some Bible passages and said nice words over the deceased. And then the other guy gets up. He was like the guys I grew up with in the Baptist church, the fire-and-brimstone kind of a guy ... Forget it. And I was thinking, Please make this end soon! I could hardly stand it.

A lot of the things that piss me off in life I get to exorcise in these books. In *End Run*, one of the behind-the-scenes dealings that sports writers uncover is that some rich businessmen are using taxpayer dollars to build a new stadium and attract a professional basketball team to Albuquerque. It's all behind the scene—the public doesn't even get a chance to vote on it. I hate that kind of stuff. I hate corporate chicanery and political back-room deals and all that. What's funny is that *End Run*, which I wrote two years ago and just came out last month, here in Albuquerque bears me out: they're trying to build a new baseball stadium, with taxpayer money, that will benefit private enterprise. It's the very same thing, which many of the reviewers seem to miss altogether. It's depressing. I came up with this plot, and two years later here we are with the same debate.

Maybe the reviewers don't expect to find this kind of social commentary in a mystery novel. They are not prepared to acknowledge its presence, much less its relevance to the story.

It's another way of pushing the envelope. I think a lot of mystery readers don't want that. Especially the cozy readers. They don't want to read that sort of thing. It's not interesting to them. They are more interested in the puzzle. To me, the puzzle is just what you have to put in to stay within the form. To me, the other stuff is what is important: the characters, the way they interact, the dialogue, and the social commentary. All that stuff is more important to me than the puzzle.

Has this affected your sales? What do your editors say about this?

Well, I've gone through a lot of editors. Most of them have liked the stuff in there. They haven't tried to have me take it out. I think probably what has hurt me more than that is the male protagonist, which is not very popular these days. It's hard to sell. And the humor in the Bubba books. Not so much in *End Run*—there's some funny stuff in it but I couldn't weed it out—and a lot of people don't like that in the mystery format. But I only write the books that I want to write, and not what somebody wants me to do for the market.

For one thing, you don't have ethnic sleuths with ethnic companions. Or border people—half Apache, half Hispanic or half Irish, possibly with a Black girlfriend.

Yes. All of this turns me off. It seems so calculating, kind of aimed at the market. I am reading a lot of paperback originals because I am one of the judges for the Edgar this year, and you get one of these Southwestern novels and, just as you were describing, on the very first page you read, "Dad was an Apache warrior and my mother was a sinewy rancher," and blah-blah-blah. It just turns me off.

In *End Run* there's more of a rainbow. There's a love interest in a Hispanic woman. The protagonist's best friend is a Black guy, because they're both athletes and sports writers. There's a trio of bad guys that work together and one of them is Hispanic, one is Navajo and the other one is White. But I was well into this book before I started breaking it all down like this. This was the way these characters had to be in my mind. This was the way I wanted them to be. It wasn't that I was going, Okay, now I need a Black guy and an Indian and so forth ...

Actually, there is a lot of ethnicities in the Bubba books, even in the early books, but they are not the main characters. There are many minor characters who are of different ethnicities but, again, I don't think I set out to do that. They just sort of fit the characters.

You can't get away from different ethnicities ...

Not in New Mexico.

And that's part of the beauty of this part of the world. But you do seem to stick to an Anglo perspective, without entering a different community and trying to explain what's going on from the inside, as other writers are doing.

I think part of this is just fear. It's hard to get into the head of someone who is so different from yourself. And I think that the longer I do this and the longer I try, the better I become. The Drew Gavin books are third-person, multiple point of view. Which gives you a chance to sort of jump around from head to head, to be inside other people's mind other than the hero's. Whereas with the first person you're always gonna get Bubba's viewpoint, which is an Anglo guy's viewpoint. With *End Run* it's a little more challenging—you know, to move over, to be in a woman's mind for a while. In the next book in that series, the one I am working on now, his best friend, who is African American, really moves to the front of the stage because he is the one who is in trouble and Drew helps him to get out.

Will the various chapters be in first or in third person?

They will be in third person but each chapter will be on a different character. So this chapter will be on Drew, then I might switch to see what's happening to the bad guy or to his friend. It's a lot harder to write that way. I am just beginning to feel that I can do that now. The first person, while it has its limitations, really is easier to write because once you get that voice down, you're set. The most recent Bubba book, the one that will come out next year, was the easiest book I've ever written because his voice is so familiar now, I just sat down and put Bubba on. Now I'm Bubba, here we go! I wrote the book in about six months and my editor did not change a word. Which hasn't happened before. Usually I get *some* changes, but he did not want to change a word. So I think I've got that part down, and now

I am trying to take on the challenge of writing these more complicated sorts of books. And I *have* been trying to branch out for some time. In between Bubba books, I wrote a couple of other multiple point of view type of books that haven't been published yet ...

Also mysteries?

Yes. They are still being shown around. I've changed my agent recently, so those two are sort of backlog work for my new agent to try to sell.

Do they have a new protagonist?

Yes. They are sort of standalones. And if somebody wanted to make one of them into a series, you bet, pay me the money and I'll make it into a series too. As long as you don't kill off the protagonist at the end, there can always be a series. One of those is a caper novel set in San Diego, with many different points of view because, essentially, there are five strangers who are thrown together and they decide to rob a bank; and after they rob the bank, people start to die. That book, I think, will find a home sometime soon. My new agent is really crazy about it.

Then I wrote another book about a guy who works in a homeless shelter and somebody is killing the homeless, and so he sets out to avenge them. That one takes place in a made-up Southwestern city, Desert Springs. I can't have more than these two series in Albuquerque, which is too limiting, so I just made up this city. The idea was to make a town that is slightly smaller than Albuquerque. I needed it to be of a certain size in terms of the homeless problem, and home shelters, and a certain level of affluence versus poverty.

What about the problems related to the three ethnic groups living next to each other?

Well, here there aren't that many problems. I grew up in the South, where everything is about black and white. Everything. Everything! What kind of food you eat, where you shop—everything is about who's Black and who's White. Then I get here, and people here don't seem to care as much. They have lived together for so long that there's a lot more getting along. Walter Satterthwait and I were talking about this a couple of weeks ago. He talked about a place in Kenya where there are so many different groups, divided in as many terms as you can imagine—tribal, race, and so on—that they all get along because there is enough other people around you can always find somebody to look down on. You know, my tribe is better than your tribe but we are not going to fight about it because there are so many of us! And that's really what you have in New Mexico as well. You don't see a lot of ethnic and racial strife here like you do in other parts of the country, because it is just too varied.

This is our impression too, but of course we are total outsiders. Could this be an Anglo impression or an outsider impression? The reason I'm asking is because whenever we have come against probably a lot of resentment, it's been always from either Chicanos or Native Americans.

Really?

They come out with really strongly felt sentiments about social conflicts that we hadn't seen. As outsiders, we have the feeling that when they talk about the Anglos they actually are saying, Look behind your shoulders.

Interesting. Native Americans, of course, have got the worse shake of any ethnic group in this country. There's no question about it. All you have to do is look at the poverty numbers and the disease numbers. They got a terrible deal on the whole thing. And I do think that part of this is that when you are an Anglo, naturally you don't see it in that perspective, you don't feel that you are an oppressor. But I think it is less out here than in other parts of the United States. And I think it is often about class as much as it is about ethnicity, and that a lot of what poor people appear to dispute about revolves around wealth, and the lack of that.

To get back to the subject of mysteries. What do you think of the continuous use of clichés about the Southwest on the part of writers who have only a second hand experience of it? One feels that the Southwest has been turned into a commodity.

Yes. You see a lot of writing that is a Hillerman spin-off. The difference being that Hillerman (Tony is a friend of mine) really got inside that culture, he really understands the Southwest, particularly the Navajo culture, so he's writing from a position of authority. But what you see is so many people who just parachute in and try to write about the whole culture. One of the reasons that Bubba is so much like me—he's an outsider, he didn't grow up here—is that I wanted to have a character who looks at this culture from the outside, who comes in and comments on the way things have developed in this rich heritage state. He doesn't always understand it all. He has lived here as long as I have, according to the fiction, and he's still wondering how things work. And as an outsider, you need two things: one, you need fresh eyes, so that you can see things that people who have lived there all their life don't pay any attention to anymore. And the other thing is, you need room to make mistakes. Because we all do. When you move to a place, it's much more than just finding your way around and seeing how things click. There's all that history, there's all that heritage that you have to absorb over time.

There are people who say that Tony has not actually done such a good job. He himself does not pose as an authority—which is one of the endearing things about Tony.

Yes. He's so modest. He's so humble. But when I read Tony's books, I feel that I get a very accurate image of how life is on the Rez. And everything in my experience with Navajos, which is pretty limited, seems to prove him out. I think that he has done a *really* good job, whether he is one hundred percent accurate or not—I mean, *he'll* tell you that he's not one hundred percent accurate.

You know, after a book is published people will say, Oh, you missed this and that... Who hasn't? You have to allow some latitude in fiction anyway. Some of the funniest moments in my writing career is when some local people come to me (this happened with *Lonely Street* a lot) and say, Oh, I loved your book, it's so funny! That office building where the concert promoter works and that Bubba is watching... That's where I work, isn't it funny! But I made it up. There's no office building just like that, although there are some office buildings in that general area. And this is just a little example. But people read these things and, one, they expect total accuracy, which is ludicrous, and, two, they project their own image of what you tell them. Which is natural. That's part of the contract between writer and reader: I put words on the page, and you use your imagination to set up a story from what I say. But it's just funny how they will take that next step, which is, I imagine what you put down on paper and it's real, it's all real.

And it's me! It's me! Viktor Šklovskij calls this response "recognition" as opposed to "vision."

*I'd like to ask you a specific question. Occasionally, you leave certain issues unresolved—for example, the two bad cops in *Baby Face* who threaten Bubba but are not picked up again. Did you intend to use them in a later novel, and have not yet done so?*

I don't know how much this was intentional. Sometime you just forget to wrap up loose ends. I think I had in my mind at the time (that was several years ago) that I would bring those cops back in another book. I haven't. I liked them a lot. I thought they were really good bad cops: they were colorful, and menacing, and that's what you need. But I never found the opportunity to bring them back. This is part of what is so complicated about writing a series. I used to say, Oh, I like to write a series because it's like writing one big book, an overarching story line, and these are installments. I'm not so sure this is true anymore. I think that each book in a series has to have its own little world, and I don't know how much you can carry over from book to book. I think that in a series like this, beyond the protagonist and maybe his girlfriend, his wife or his best friend—those you have to carry over from book to book—everything else has got to be a whole new world. When I sit down to write the next one, I don't have in mind all of the things that I probably *should* have in mind from the previous books—like those two characters that are already made, and I wouldn't have to dream up a whole new character because I've got this package from before. Because it's a new book. Everything is new. You create it all from scratch. It's an odd

sort of sensation. I think that at the time I planned to bring them back, but it didn't happen.

Actually, you give the reader the sense that the wrapping up should not be total. That neatness of outcome does not reflect reality.

Right. In most books there are too many ends that are loose. Then one of the reviewers of *End Run* criticized that all the loose ends were tied up too neatly. So, what are you going to do? Are you supposed to leave them untied? There's always going to be somebody who is unhappy with it. But I think that within the arc of each story you get to the end and you go: I'm finished. Sure, there are a few things that aren't resolved but that's okay, the big things are, and—I'm done. But you often hear from readers, people you meet at book signings or wherever, who'll say, "Whatever happened to those two cops?" or, "Are they coming back?"

As I just did! One thing I don't like about the classic form of the genre—for example, in Agatha Christie's books—is the typical effect of speeding up toward the resolution, when all the characters are gathered in a room, tensely sitting around and waiting for Poirot's final performance, and everything is wrapped up, everything clicks into place. I find this conventional ending very artificial. And boring, because it is predictable.

Yes. I've never been very fond of the classic type of mystery. I never thought that it reflected real life well at all. At least in terms of America, the hard-boiled school reflects real life much better. Because it's sloppy out there. It's messy out there on the mean streets. You never get to pull everybody into one room and get him to confess. This is a whole bunch of hoopla. It almost never happens. Even the cops will tell you that. Only once in a while they can trick somebody into just blurting everything out. More common, with confessions—you know, criminals are idiots, to begin with—they slip. There's a wonderful story about a guy on the stand describing being held up, and the criminal jumps up and says, "I should have shot you when I had a chance!" Well, that solved the case! And that's a true story. That kind of thing happens all the time. Criminals aren't very smart. If they were, they would be stockbrokers.

There's a scene in Escapade where Satterthwait plays around with the traditional final gathering, and then it turns out that the cops are the criminals. Walter was telling me the other day that the British really disliked the book because he was making inroads into a genre—the Country Manor Mystery—that they consider their own.

There you go. That is one of the reasons I like Walter's writing so much. He does that a lot. He takes historical figures—Houdini, Conan Doyle, Hemingway, Oscar Wilde ... He really has a lot of fun.

Is that what you do, too? Do you have fun?

Yes. The thing is that readers—and scholars too, for that matter—underestimate, when they read a book, how much of what is there is for the writer's own amusement. If you are sitting with the same characters and the same plot six days a week for eight months—which is what it takes me to write and rewrite a book—you better have some fun while you're doing it because if it's only drudgery it's going to show. The book is going to be boring. It's got to interest *me* even more than the person who will read it. You know, I *like* these Bubba books. I find them funny as hell. There's stuff in there that nobody gets but me, but that's okay. As long as I keep selling them, I can amuse myself. And one of the ways you do that is by playing around with the conventions of the genre. I don't know how people can do that if they write formulaic, stay-within-the-lines sort of mysteries. Clearly, a lot of people do that, and I guess they have a perfectly good time doing it. But I certainly don't go, Oh, here's another one—where's the spark? And I think that spark comes from the writer having fun himself in the act of writing. That's what I'm doing: trying to enjoy it, and make the most of it that way.

The tricky part about humor is that everybody's sense of humor is different. And that's one reason why the editors in New York are so spooky when it comes to humor. Anything with humor, they go, Oh, I don't know, I don't know—will people get this? They are really weird about this. Even if they get it, they are afraid.

It's a professional shortcoming. Tell me, is the reader's gender a factor that mystery writers have to take into account?

The average mystery reader in this country is a fifty year old white female—and those ladies want to read about those ladies! So, female protagonists are much more popular—or at least that's the mind-set in New York. I know lots of women mystery readers who are just as happy to read about a male protagonist as they are about a female protagonist, but when you take a book and you try to market it to the publishing houses, they'll say, Oh, this is just "guy" stuff. So it has got harder to sell male protagonists. I am publishing with a smaller house now, Intrigue Press, that is not in New York and is run by a guy. He wants guy stuff, so we are all happy at the moment. And I actually have a couple of ideas for books with a female protagonist that I really want to write, eventually. I have this idea about a female hired killer—that's a different kind of book.

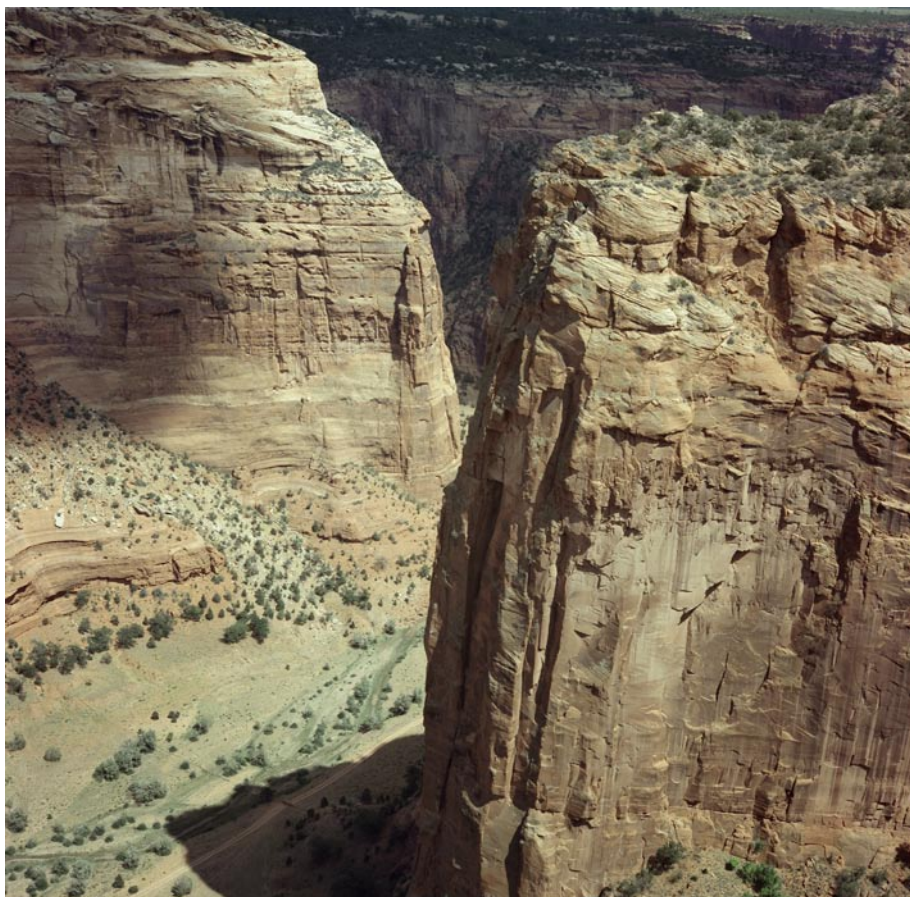
Why is the mystery set in the Southwest so popular?

People are really interested in the Southwest—people who visited here, which is a lot of folks, and people who have never come here but they are just interested in it. There's a whole mystique about the Southwest. In a

lot of ways, it was the last frontier. So if you mention New Mexico—or let's say Arizona, because a lot of people if you say New Mexico they think you're talking about a different country, and in some ways you are—what they get as the immediate reference is the John Ford western. It's *Stage-coach*. It's John Wayne and red mesas and all of that. And it's very attractive. The private eye, for instance, really developed out of the idea of the lone cowboy, the lawman against all odds. That's where we came from. And people still sort of hold to that. On the rational level they don't believe that we are still, you know, either cowboys or Indians running down Central—they know that modern humans are here. But there's that romantic vision of the Southwest.

People expect that sort of western treatment—and a lot of this is Tony's fault! They expect Native American mysticism, and guys in boots, and rural vistas. And I write urban stories, *very* urban stories, set in the Southwest. That's another strike against my career right there: I am not giving people what they expect. But there are lots of writers out here who are catering directly to that—who are writing about the big sky Southwest rather than the mean streets Southwest. So a large part of the popularity of the mysteries set in the Southwest is due to the people from other places who look at the Southwest with these eyes.

As for the popularity of mysteries in general, I think that what we have done here is to come full circle to the very first thing we were talking about, which is stories that have a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the natural progression in a story, when you *tell* a story, when you tell somebody about something that happened in your life. That's the way it works. And it often ends with a punch line. It's innate to us. And people want just that—they want a resolution ...



Canyon de Chelly, eastern Arizona

DUE CIOTTOLI PER STANDING DEER

Virgilio, e prima di lui Caronte. Poi Queequeg. Thalcave. Lucignolo. L'interprete procurato dall'agenzia viaggi. Per l'accesso a uno dei mondi possibili che quello da noi coscientemente abitato sfiora inavvertito, una guida ci vuole. Io, i miei primi passi verso il mondo dei Native Americans li compii sotto la guida, del tutto impreveduta, di Blue Spruce Standing Deer, un pittore Tiwa di Taos Pueblo.

Un giorno, su una corriera semivuota che da Albuquerque mi portava per la prima volta a Santa Fe, alla prima fermata – non eravamo ancora usciti di città – salì un indiano. Tarchiato, compatto come tendono a essere i pueblo, le lunghe trecce nere legate da due nastri color pervinca, i jeans una consueta arlecchinata di schizzi di colore, si fermò nel corridoio all'altezza del posto libero accanto a me, mi fissò un istante, impassibile, e mi domandò se era occupato. Quando si fu seduto, lo scuro viso severo si aprì in un sorriso. “Where in Europe do you come from?” mi domandò. Così nacque la nostra amicizia.

Parlammo (anzi: lui parlò), quella prima volta, di tante cose. Dello scempio dei luoghi sacri fatto da archeologi ed etnologi: “Why doesn't the white man break up his own grandmother's tomb to see what her bones looked like and what clothes she wore? Why doesn't he put his aunt's bones and clothes in museums?”

Parla dell'assenza di documenti scritti nelle culture indiane – a parte quelli, per noi elusivi, dei graffiti e dei dipinti su roccia: “If all of a sudden the American Indians disappeared, it would mean that the vital cycle is completed. Then who would need the documents?”. Parla della *kiwa*, dove si svolge l'educazione dei giovani, dove il ragazzo, fra i cinque e i sette anni, riceve la sua educazione. Lontano dalla famiglia, che può vedere solo in rare occasioni, impara tutto quello che lo fa diventare uomo – impara a pescare e a cacciare, impara il corretto comportamento sociale (il cacciatore divide sempre una parte della sua preda con la *kiwa*); soprattutto, impara ciò che è essenziale, e cioè a conoscere se stesso. “To learn everything else, common sense is enough”.

“What does *kiwa* mean, literally?” gli domando.

“The place where education takes place”, risponde. “That's the best I can translate without having to do battle with myself”.

Parla di quel nucleo della loro cultura che gli indiani non dividono con i non indiani – quel nucleo che rappresenta il loro io più profondo, quello



che il bianco, non conoscendolo, non può portarsi via. “The Hopi people are great at many things but they do something very wrong. They let the white man come inside the *kiwa*, they let him take pictures—they let him take away something that he should not see and know”.

Mi addita, a sinistra, una groppa grigiastra appena più accentuata delle altre. “Santo Domingo”, dice. “Il pueblo è lì dietro, in basso verso il Rio Grande. Grandi orafi”.

La corriera sale silenziosa per l’ondulato paesaggio semidesertico. Poco a poco mi ritrovo al di là della linea di silenzio che dovrebbe dividerci e al di là della quale, sbugiardando lo stereotipo dell’indiano silenzioso, Blue Spruce mi ha fatto passare.

A un tratto gli domando, “Why did you ask me if the seat was unoccupied? Wasn’t it clear that nobody was sitting here?”.

“I tested you”, risponde. “I had to see if you’d listen”.

Il suo racconto si sdipana sereno, fuori del tempo. Un momento parla di secoli fa, un momento di ieri: sta a me liberarmi dell’ossessione delle griglie cronologiche. Quando i kiowa, la nazione guerriera delle praterie dell’Oklahoma, cacciati dai bianchi si rifugiarono in quello che oggi è il New Mexico settentrionale dove adesso stiamo andando, tutte le nazioni li combatterono, anche se non erano guerriere – tutte, tranne i tiwa, il Popolo delle Alte Montagne. Con i nuovi venuti, i tiwa si scambiarono doni, donne, costumi. Quando i kiowa tornarono in Oklahoma, chiesero ai tiwa che dono di addio volessero da loro; e i tiwa chiesero The Vanishing People, vale a dire il bisonte. Per questo, oggi, i tiwa sono gli unici che hanno bisonti nella loro riserva: li curano, li nutrono, li tengono in una zona centrale della riserva (“Maybe one day I’ll take you there”). Ogni anno, in occasione di una festa, uccidono il più grosso e ne dividono la carne fra i membri della tribù per garantire che la forza del bisonte si diffonda fra di loro. Ma una parte, congelata, viene mandata ai kiowa in Oklahoma.

Prima di venire quasi sterminato, il bisonte era The Moving People; poi era diventato The Vanishing People. Perché tutti gli animali, come gli uomini, sono un popolo; e tutti gli animali hanno i loro tratti buoni e i loro tratti brutti.

“What’s bad about the deer?”, gli domando.

Lui ride. “What’s bad about the deer is that it doesn’t have almost anything bad about him. He is strong, and yet he’s fast. He is aloof. He is intelligent. And careful: he always knows if there’s something wrong. To kill a deer, the hunter must be better than him—he must be a great hunter.”

“And what’s bad about the bear?”

“The bear is careless. He’s so big, at times he forgets to be careful. And that’s bad. When the sow has her cubs, she’ll kill you. She’ll come right after you, no matter what.”

“And what’s bad about the horse?”

“His temperament. The horse changes his humor all the time.”

“What about the rattler?”

“The rattler lives the life he has to live. He doesn’t bother you. People are afraid of the snake, but they are wrong. The snake leaves you alone.”

Fu così che quello che avevo sempre conosciuto, in astratto, come il teriomorfismo mi si rivelò essere una realtà quotidianamente vissuta. Fu quello il primo passo per cominciare a cercare di capire, più tardi, la Danza del Serpente degli hopi, o la struttura cosmica dei pueblo.

Eravamo forse a metà strada – una strada che oggi potrei fare a occhi chiusi ma che allora mi era del tutto nuova – e mi porse la forte mano scura, le unghie orlate di indelebili azzurri e rosa. “I like speaking with you”, disse. E mi disse il suo nome: Blue Spruce Standing Deer. “Mario Materassi”, dissi io, stringendogli la mano. Non gli dissi, “It means Matresses”. A torto o a ragione, non mi sembrò il caso.

Era stato il suo nonno materno a destinare quel nome al suo primo nipote. A quell’epoca lavorava alla costruzione della ferrovia di Santa Fe. Una mattina all’alba fu svegliato da altri operai: sul limite del bosco di abeti azzurri un cervo lo fissava immobile. “Spara, spara!” gli avevano gridato i compagni. Ma il nonno e il cervo si erano guardati a lungo, e poi l’animale era scomparso. Oggi Standing Deer firma le sue tempere con il disegno stilizzato di un’orma di cervo.

Capii che mi aveva aperto un’altra porta. Ancora non sapevo (solo più tardi misi insieme le tessere del puzzle) che con la sua stretta di mano mi diceva di sapere che non ero una strega; mi stava dicendo che si fidava di me e che non temeva il mio contatto – a differenza di altri indiani, i quali, prima che imparassi a non porgere la mano, occhi distolti e mano flaccida non nascondono la riluttanza a esporsi a quel pericolo.

Del fatto che per ragioni inizialmente legate al mio essere europeo Standing Deer si fidava di me, avrei in seguito avuto molte conferme. E tutte costituirono delle tappe, al contempo, verso una maggiore amicizia e, per me, verso una sempre maggiore consapevolezza di quanto avessi da imparare.

Divenimmo amici. Ogni occasione d’incontro ampliava l’orizzonte. Una volta, quando con mia moglie e mia figlia eravamo diretti a Taos Pueblo, mi chiese di andare da suo padre, con cui non parlava da tempo perché al pueblo non era piaciuto il suo matrimonio con una donna afroamericana. Dovevo dire a suo padre che presto Standing Deer gli avrebbe rispedito l’abito da cerimonia che aveva preso in prestito tempo prima. “You’ll find him easily. If you can’t find him, ask for my aunt. All you have to do is say my name”. Ed ecco (ancora non avevo imparato) la forte mano flaccida del padre, lo sguardo distolto; la diffidenza. E poi la smorfia di scherno quando avevo fatto il nome del figlio: “Standing Deer. Sure. That’s how nowadays he wants to be called”. Una pausa. Poi, “His name is Herman Suazo. That’s his name: Herman Suazo”. È io, messaggero due volte innocente, lì nel mezzo di chissà quale profondo conflitto familiare. E a chi poter domandare se questo *medicine man* grave, distante, anche lui, come il figlio, con le sue trecce e la sua collana di turchese e la cui foto appare in tutti i prospetti turistici di Taos, aveva per caso a che fare con quel Suazo legato alla celebre

Millicent Rogers, l'ereditiera collezionista d'arte indiana nel cui nome era poi stato fondato il Millicent Rogers Museum di Taos. Domande che si incastravano una nell'altra, spiragli dentro realtà locali fra il privato, lo storico e il leggendario, alle quali quel posto di corridoio libero accanto al mio aveva dato la stura.

Un giorno, Standing Deer si offrì di venire da noi col suo grande tamburo cerimoniale per farmi registrare canti tribali tiwa, kiowa, sioux e comanche, così come canti privati di suo padre ed uno suo, composto per la nostra partenza per Chaco Canyon ("A Chaco sentirai. Ascolta, e sentirai. Sentirete", disse. E così fu). Soltanto in parte, al momento, mi resi conto di quale prova d'amicizia Standing Deer stava dandoci: perché è attraverso il canto che la sua cultura comunica, esprimendo tutta la gamma delle sue emozioni. Vari conoscenti bianchi ci dicevano, "State attenti. Con gli indiani, meglio non dare confidenza". Vi fu chi fece qualche commento acido sulla macchina di Standing Deer parcheggiata accanto a quelle dei nostri affluenti vicini: "Non poteva che essere di un indiano, malridotta com'è". E la conferma era venuta subito, quando in quel cerchio esclusivo di case da milioni di dollari cominciò a risuonare, per un intero pomeriggio, il tamburo di Standing Deer, il suo ritmato, ora alto, ora profondo canto monodico. Chissà se, come a noi, venne loro la pelle d'oca quando Standing Deer passò a un canto con il quale i sioux, la notte precedente l'attacco, tenevano svegli, terrorizzati, i soldati in giacca blu – i cosiddetti 'nostri'.

Capii, col tempo, che ciò di cui oggi i bianchi hanno paura è la diversità di modi di quella che noi chiamiamo la socializzazione: il fatto, ad esempio, che l'indiano possa non peritarsi di chiederti un prestito che entrambe le parti sanno non verrà restituito. (Non però, con noi, Standing Deer. Ma mi diverte ricordare che dopo la nostra partenza tornò entro quel cerchio di case, suonò al campanello, si presentò, e chiese un prestito di cento dollari – che ottenne, va detto ad onore della nostra ex padrona di casa. Senza più farsi vivo, d'altronde: indifferente al fatto che confermava così, in quei bianchi, tutto quello che essi erano convinti di sapere di lui – in un'inversione del tropo del cerchio di carri intorno ai quali, ululando, i 'pellerossa' galoppavano allo scopo di fare da bersaglio, a rafforzamento dell'idea hollywoodiana che i 'selvaggi' fossero, e dunque tuttora siano, stupidi).

Capii così che Standing Deer non aveva bisogno di dimostrare niente a nessuno. Il bianco può tenersi le sue convinzioni, l'indiano si tiene le sue. Il gioco delle parti ha le sue regole, e non vale la pena di cercare di cambiarle. A meno che non si decida di giocare a carte scoperte. Che fu quanto avvenne fra Standing Deer e me – io del tutto ignaro, lui già sapendolo quando mi si sedette accanto.

Così come capii che la linea di demarcazione fra intimità e riserbo passa per vie diverse da quella a cui noi bianchi siamo abituati. Quando sua moglie lo cacciò di casa, Standing Deer chiamò me – che secondo i nostri parametri ero poco più di un estraneo – per sfogarsi e chiedere consiglio. Certo, non mi aspetto più che risponda a una mia lettera; né,

quando ci rivediamo, v'è da parte sua la nostra consueta pantomima di scuse per la mancata risposta. Di queste difformità di comportamento si nutre la diffidenza nei confronti dell'indiano. Ma anche per queste vie sono riuscito a capire il perché di quella sua domanda se il posto accanto a me era libero.

Fu però quando, alla vigilia di un nostro giro in Arizona, Standing Deer mi chiese di compiere per lui una cerimonia allo scopo di riportare la pace fra lui e sua moglie, che si aprì per me la porta più bella. “Nel torrente in fondo al Canyon de Chelley”, mi disse, “prendi un ciottolo che è nell'acqua e un ciottolo che è fuori dell'acqua, e invertili. E chiedi che torni la pace nella mia famiglia”.

Due giorni dopo, sotto le altissime pareti a picco del canyon, in un punto in cui il verde tenero degli *alamos* attenuava il rosso di fuoco delle rocce, mentre immergevo la mano nell'acqua e traevo lo scintillante ciottolo bruno chiedendo pace fra Standing Deer e Yvette, capii di costituire un anello di una catena dell'essere che fluiva senza posa. Non sapevo – né so adesso – a chi stessi officando, a quali spiriti mi rivolgevo. Una parte di me guardava incredula questo supposto figlio della ragione d'un tratto impazzito che scambiava di posto a due ciottoli, e si faceva prendere emotivamente da quella assurda cerimonia. Il resto di me tacitava lo scettico, si lasciava andare alla corrente che – incredibile – lui stesso stava creando. Come mi rendevo ben conto (ed ecco subito la sintomatologia del linguaggio che mi tradiva: perché avrei dovuto star lì a far di conto? Chi teneva quei conti? Che cos'era che contava?), un bianco che mi stesse osservando da lontano avrebbe visto un altro turista che si rinfrescava le mani nel ruscello, attento a non bagnare la Rolleiflex appesa al collo. In realtà, questo turista – perché altro non ero – stava entrando in una dimensione di pace mai fino allora provata. Ero io che portavo al mio amico la pace che stavo chiedendo? O era lui che, sapendo, me la faceva trovare? E pace da che?

E funzionò, oltre tutto. Al nostro rientro a Albuquerque, fra Standing Deer e Yvette era tornata la pace.

Forse perché adesso sono lontano, purtroppo, dal mondo incantato dei canyon, resisto alla tentazione di credere a un rapporto di causa ed effetto. Ma questo, forse, vuole soltanto dire che ancora lunga è la strada additatami da Standing Deer.



San Ildefonso Pueblo, northern New Mexico

THE EAGLE FEATHER AND THE CIRCLE

The auditorium of the Albuquerque Pueblo Community Center is filling up for the great powwow. Men in jeans—long pigtailed, turquoise necklaces and bracelets—come out with their big drums and place them in a semicircular row at the back end of the floor. A microphone screeches, is turned down, tested again, turned off. A tall, gray-haired man in blue jeans—black pointed boots, black leather vest, a large turquoise belt—comes out to give directions.

Standing Deer gets up from his seat between Luisa and me and motions us to follow him. I ask him if we should leave something to keep our seats.

He shakes his head and starts down the steps. We follow him. He introduces us to the M.C. “These are my friends from Florence, Italy,” he says. We introduce ourselves, and shake hands. “And this is our daughter Luisa.”

“You are welcome to our Meeting of the Nations,” he says. “Standing Deer’s friends are our friends.”

“We are honored to be here,” I say. “Thank you for having us.”

He says something, and Standing Deer translates: “An engagement will be announced at the end. Then there will be the exchange of gifts. You are warmly invited to participate.”

We thank the M.C., and go back to our seats. On the way up the steps, Standing Deer exchanges greetings with several people. They properly nod at us.

Here and there in the audience we can see a few Anglos. After an hour, maybe deafened by the driving rhythm of the drums and by the now shrill, now deep, threatening, hypnotic songs, they will be gone. By midnight we are the only Anglos—here, this is what we are. No other label can fit an Italian-Korean family.

Although it is way past bed-time for her, Luisa cannot keep still. Her ballet-trained feet pound along with the singers. When the M.C. tells the audience to join in and clap, she jumps up, totally swept by the urging rhythm. Her face is radiant.

Suddenly, it is silence. Total, deep, vibrating silence.

Standing Deer leans forward, freezes, his hands gripping his knees. The drummers’ hands hover still in mid air, their drums silent. At the center of the floor, the boy dancer stands stiff, his head bent down.



The whole audience is leaning forward, staring.

“What’s . . . ?” Luisa’s whisper sinks into nothing. Her mother’s hand presses on her arm. “Shhhh.”

The M.C. stands by the boy. In the silence, we can see him talk to the boy.

“Mamma, what’s happening?”

“Shhh.” And the whisper: “We don’t know.”

Standing Deer leans his head sideways toward me, his eyes never leaving the boy and the man down in the center of the floor. “His eagle feather fell to the ground,” he whispers. Then I notice it—the long brown feather lying at the boy’s feet. “He can’t touch it.”

“Why?” I whisper in his ear.

“Nobody can. Only a medicine man can.”

I feel him breathe deeply, once. His hands still grip his knees. “Only one who has danced the Sun Dance can.”

We watch the M.C. talk at length, the boy never moving, his bent head only nodding slightly once in a while. Now the drummers’ hands lie motionless on their drums. Their eyes never leave the two in front of them.

In the silence, the man turns to face the people. No microphone now, but his words are clear.

“Let’s hope there’s somebody,” Standing Deer murmurs. His eyes roam the audience.

A tall, slender man in a black cowboy hat and blue jeans and shirt steps down from the bleachers, walks to the floor, approaches the M.C. A long, soft sigh rises from the crowd.

“He’s a Kyowa,” Standing Deer whispers.

The man and the M.C. talk. Then the M.C. nods toward the audience, and a man walks up to him.

“That’s the boy’s father,” Standing Deer whispers.

The three talk at length, then the tall Kyowa turns to the boy. The M.C. and the father step back. The medicine man begins talking to the boy. The boy nods, his head bent, his eyes fixed on the feather.

“He’s teaching him what he will have to do to purify himself before he can touch it,” Standing Deer whispers. “And how to purify the feather. It will be a long time before he can touch it.”

The medicine man talks and talks. We cannot hear his words.

Then, slowly, he leans down—there’s a suffocated catch in the crowd’s breathing—and reaches for the long brown feather. He straightens up, the feather held lightly by its quill. He nods to the father, who walks up to him.

The collective breathing resumes.

The medicine man talks to father and son. Their heads are down. Once in a while the father nods. Then the tall man steps closer to the boy and, carefully, thrusts the quill back into the headgear. He steps back.

Silently, the father unhooks his belt—a large, heavy turquoise belt—and hands it to the medicine man. The tall Kyowa pulls off his silver belt and puts on the turquoise one.

A murmur of appreciation spreads through the auditorium. Standing Deer leans back. He sighs deeply. "Good man," he says. His hands relax on his knees. "He knows how much he owes him," he says. "That's a three thousand dollar belt at least."

Father and son leave the floor. The tall Kyowa walks back to his seat, the drummers run their hands lightly over the taut skin of their drums.

"So what happened?"

Standing Deer leans over her, and tells her. She looks up at him, rapt.

Abruptly, the drums start again. Harsh, high voices join in, shrill cries piercing the rhythmic pounding. It goes on and on and on, driving, fiercely lulling, tearing through your oneness, carrying you toward acceptance, folding you into not-you, melting you into otherness. Again the sharp, rending screech, the sweet desperate cry that ties everything together, that stops abruptly to let breathing come back so it can start anew, again and again and again. And again.

Now the drums are silent, and so are the voices. A group of women, a red shawl over the head, form a circle and stand still. "This will be the Round Dance," Standing Deer whispers. The M.C. says something in the microphone, and Standing Deer translates: this dance will be for the engagement. He points to a beautiful girl. "A good girl," he says. "Good family. The mother is Tiwa. The father is a Navajo."

The bride-to-be steps forward. She raises her hand in our direction, smiles, motions Millie and Luisa down to the floor. "Go," Standing Deer says. "It's a great honor. And accept her gifts."

"But we don't have anything for her," Millie whispers.

Standing Deer shakes his head. "You go. Go."

They descend the steps, Luisa beaming. The silent hall resounds with the voice of the M.C.: "I want for everybody to meet our guests from Firenze, Italy." He pronounces Firenze perfectly, as I have never heard an American pronounce it—and he has heard it only once. "Little Luisa and her mother Millicent Materassi will dance with us. Her father, Mario Materassi, is up there with Standing Deer. We want to thank them for being with us tonight. We hope they will be back soon." I stand, and bow. An applause envelops us.

The girl and an older woman ("That's her mother," Standing Deer whispers) fold a red shawl over the head of the new dancers, show them how to cover themselves and keep the folds open. Then they step back and make space for them in the circle. The drums start, the singing joins in—and slowly, fluidly, the dance begins.

Rhythmically, it begins. One lateral step, stop; two lateral steps. One lateral step, stop; two lateral steps. The circle moves on, over and over again—one lateral step, stop; two lateral steps. Over and over, all-encompassing, my beloved ones undistinguishable from the other dancers, part of something larger than its components—one lateral step, stop; two lateral steps. One lateral step, stop; two ...

“Look at her!” Standing Deer’s eyes shine. “She’ll have it all her life.”

I put my hand on his arm. “Thank you,” I say.

Round and round the circle flows—a flow of togetherness, the two new dancers dancing for the circle, dancing for all of us, the circle expanding to include us, going beyond us, peace entering us, flowing on, coming from each dancer, coming from the whole, making us whole in togetherness ...

The dance ends, and the girl hugs Luisa.

People rise from their seats, come down carrying packages which they lay on the floor. Through the small crowd gathered around the family, I can see the girl give something to Millie, give something to Luisa, kiss her again. Then the mother comes, hugs and kisses Luisa, talks kindly with Millie. They have danced together on a most most important day. They are sisters. They will be sisters.

On their way up, the people they pass smile at them.

They have been accepted. The dance has united them. Us.

Luisa is radiant. She shows Standing Deer and me the silver and turquoise ring, the bracelet, the necklace. “She made them!” It is almost a scream. “She gave them to me!”

A barely perceptible smile shines on Standing Deer’s dark profile.



Canyonland, southeastern Utah

TOMBE (INDIANE) E TOMBAROLI

Negli ultimi venticinque anni, forse nessuna, tra le tante *querelles* fra la maggioranza occidentale e la minoranza indiana americana, ha colto la solitamente distratta attenzione dell'opinione pubblica quanto quella della restituzione alle varie nazioni indiane dei reperti storici e archeologici riguardanti le loro culture finora conservati nei musei americani. Una legge del 1991 divenuta esecutiva nel 1994 ha imposto ai musei pubblici americani di restituire tutti i resti mortali di loro proprietà, affinché venissero di nuovo inumati secondo i riti specifici della data nazione; e con essi gli oggetti di culto, di guerra e d'uso comune che generazioni di esploratori, avventurieri, missionari e archeologi – insomma, di tombaroli più o meno ufficiali – hanno dissepolto o in vario modo sottratto ai proprietari originari. Questi oggetti sono stati anch'essi ri-inumati, oppure lasciati in superficie nei luoghi sacri affinché il tempo li restituisca a quella terra della quale, per una concezione dell'essere comune a tutte le culture native, essi fanno parte.

Questa legge, impensabile fino a pochi anni fa, è potuta passare perché nell'imperante clima di correttezza politica il Congresso non se l'è sentita di sancire come 'superiore' una concezione dell'oggetto, e tanto più delle spoglie umane, che è tipicamente occidentale. Se la legge non fosse passata, avrebbe vinto una concezione 'colonialista'. Avrebbero – di nuovo – vinto i vincitori. Ne sarebbe sorto un putiferio politico. Così ci hanno rimesso i musei, e con essi la storia.

Da oggi, i cinquecentomila pezzi che andavano restituiti (e sono pezzi di grande valore storico, e talvolta anche estetico) non possono più venire studiati, confrontati, catalogati. La storia degli indiani d'America come intesa dalla cultura egemone non potrà più essere fatta se non sui pezzi (per nostra fortuna molto numerosi) già 'al sicuro' nei musei europei. L'archeologia, in America, è morta.

Della cosa si parlava da anni. Già nell'88 il mio amico tiwa Blue Spruce Standing Deer mi diceva, 'Perché voi bianchi non buttate all'aria le tombe delle vostre nonne per vedere com'erano fatte e come si vestivano? Perché nelle teche dei vostri musei non mettete le ossa dei vostri bisnonni, le loro pipe e i loro accendini?'. Nell'89 Tony Hillerman metteva al centro del suo *Talking God* la tematica della violenza fatta dagli etnografi sulle tombe native. Una tematica che appunto da qualche anno l'attivismo indiano portava in primo piano nella serie di rivendicazioni delle loro genti.



Almeno per quanto riguarda i resti mortali, l'opinione pubblica bianca ha recepito in positivo le istanze di rivendicazione degli indiani. Più difficile rassegnarsi alla perdita degli oggetti, anche se si riconosce quanto poco onesta ne sia stata l'acquisizione. Per il bianco, un oggetto è perfettamente estrinsecabile dal contesto originario – anch'io ho dei vasetti porta-semi dei Tarahumara risalenti a tempi precedenti la produzione per i turisti; anch'io ho le mie punte di freccia, i miei (miei?) frammenti fittili raccolti, stando attento a non farmi vedere, a Chaco, a Puje o a Pecos. Ai nostri occhi, uno stecco con due piume e uno straccetto colorato vale in quanto reperto x in un quadro di reperti analoghi il cui studio comparato consente agli etnografi di ricostruire costanti e varianti nelle modalità di preghiera degli hopi. Non ne sentiamo – anzi, a esser sinceri, ne snobbiamo – l'intrinseco valore di tramite con il Tutto. Se a giro per il deserto ne trovassimo uno conficcato per terra, avremmo la tentazione di portarcelo a casa per esibirlo in salotto; oppure, se proprio siamo persone civili, lo porteremmo a un museo – quando dovremmo invece lasciarlo dov'è, e cercare di entrare in sintonia con la realtà di cui esso è parte integrante in quanto funzionale a integrare *noi*. E così le punte di freccia. Così gli irresistibili frammenti a strisce rosse e nere o bianche e nere.

Come diceva Standing Deer, se d'un tratto gli indiani sparissero, pazienza: vorrebbe dire che il ciclo vitale si è esaurito, e allora i documenti non servirebbero a niente. Ancor oggi, l'indiano non acculturato non vive per lasciare tracce durature bensì per salvaguardare la propria sintonia con l'eterno presente che è il Tutto. Non gli interessano le ricostruzioni storico-scientifiche del suo passato operate dagli studiosi occidentali. La dimostrazione, su base di prove d'ordine scientifico, che probabilmente già venticinquemila anni prima di Colombo i progenitori degli attuali indiani d'America erano entrati nel continente nordamericano attraversando lo stretto di Bering è stata attaccata da Vine Deloria Jr., lo scrittore e attivista sioux, come intesa a negare validità ai vari miti d'origine delle culture native americane, secondo i quali essi emersero dalla terra oppure scesero dal cielo. In altre parole, ancor più che 'scoprire' l'America per primi (e fin qui c'era arrivato anche il nostro Trilussa), gli indiani sono *tutt'uno* con l'America.

È prevedibile vi siano, prima o poi, conseguenze a livello internazionale di questa inversione di tendenza. Tutti i musei dell'Occidente sono forse in pericolo. Forse il plurisecolare saccheggio dell'Africa, dell'Oceania, oltre che delle Americhe, ci verrà presto rinfacciato, e il bottino rivendicato in nome di sacrosanti diritti di proprietà originaria. Siamo davanti a un probabile effetto domino. Forse anche noi potremo farci restituire tutto quello che Napoleone ci ha rubato (e allora, mezzo Louvre potrebbe chiudere); e così tutti i vasi etruschi o apuli venduti dai tombaroli, tutte le tele che celebri studiosi nostrani esportavano arrotolate fra camicia e camicia. Prima, però, dovremo restituire tanti obelischi, tante mummie, tante statue greche – a meno che le ruberie dei romani di duemila anni fa non siano cadute in prescrizione.

Il fatto è che la nuova legge ha reso felici non soltanto le comunità native ma anche gli imbrogliatori. Già tanti oggetti restituiti alle riserve e debitamente ri-inumati sono ricomparsi sul mercato clandestino dell'arte. I prezzi di questi oggetti sono ormai da capogiro, il che rende facile trovare qualche delinquente locale disposto a disseppellire una seconda volta, se non proprio le ossa della nonna, perlomeno il kalumet o l'ascia di guerra del bisnonno. (Standing Deer me l'aveva detto, ridendo: "I love our ways. But I also love the White man's money"). Con una mano, dunque, diamo, e con l'altra riprendiamo, per una sorta di rovesciamento del proverbiale luogo comune dello 'Indian giver'. La storia (quella nostra, beninteso – quella dei vincitori) si ripete.



On the way to Grand Junction, western Colorado

SILVERTON, COLORADO

Il trenino giallo arranca lento su per il costone, sbuffando il suo ventaglio di fumo nero che, a finestrini scioccamente lasciati aperti, a ventate regolari distribuisce fuliggine. Si snoda lungo la stretta curva di uno sprone di roccia, poi quella del successivo canalone; un altro sprone, un altro canalone; e così via, un'ora dopo l'altra, salendo lento, ansante, di costone in costone. Un momento vedi la locomotiva che sembra tornarti addosso; poi il tuo vagone sta cominciando ad attorcigliarsi rigido intorno allo sprone, e vedi la coda che ti insegue, sobbalzando. Un momento dopo il resto del convoglio – quello che avevi davanti, quello che avevi dietro – è sparito; catapultato in fuori nel vuoto improvviso, cento o duecento metri più in basso scorgi l'acqua verde e bianca del torrente che si arruffa nella gola rocciosa. Ti afferi al sedile di legno: ti hanno detto che solo una volta – *solo* una volta, nel 1919 – il treno finì in fondo alla gola. E fai gli scongiuri.

Siamo nel Colorado meridionale, sulla linea a scartamento ridotto Durango-Silverton. Ci vogliono tre ore e passa per salire dai duemila metri e rotti a sopra i tremila. Quando si arriva a destinazione, montagne oltre i quattromila sovrastano la cittadina. Da qui, un tempo si proseguiva con i muli carichi di provviste, di tende, di picconi. Perché, come dice il nome, qui una volta si scavava l'argento a tonnellate. Ora il nostro trenino porta su e giù soltanto un carico di turisti.

Il West è pieno di queste linee nate per improvvisi interessi minerari. Finché durava lo sfruttamento della particolare risorsa locale, la linea era attivissima. Poi, da un giorno all'altro, veniva chiusa; e sui costoni, effetto indelebile della pioggia e della neve, restano le striature sanguigne della ruggine di rotaie, attrezzature, carri merci abbandonati. Fino a questa sorta di rinascita, perché a qualcuno è venuta l'idea di fare della vecchia linea un'attrazione turistica.

Ed eccoci finalmente a Silverton: con scampanellante arrivo all'incrocio della strada principale – niente stazione, niente pensilina, solo una piattaforma girevole per invertire la locomotiva. La quale continua con le sue sbuffate adesso bianche, sempre più lenta, riprendendo fiato.

Come noi, del resto: data l'altitudine, dato il respiro che manca; per cui, prima cosa, un tavolino a cui sederci. ('Come sarà, qui, il caffè?' – la solita domanda senza speranza, il solito ripiegare su un succo di frutta). Ma



l'importante è che passi il fiatone. E le sedie sono comode, l'aria è frizzante nonostante il sole di agosto. La bionda kellerina in crinolina d'epoca annuisce, sorridendoci da quel tavolino lontano. Verrà; con comodo, ma verrà. Ci guardiamo in giro, l'affanno che cala. Siamo a Silverton, finalmente.

Alberghi vittoriani, *saloons*, negozi di oggettistica western. Negozi di candele. Un sellaiò con pretese alla Gucci. Lo studio di un fotografo dove potrei farmi ritrarre mascherato da Jesse James o da Buffalo Bill – con mia moglie, riuscissi a convincerla, da Annie Oakley, fucile nel cavo del gomito.

Ma un fremito d'attesa passa fra i nostri compagni di viaggio dispersi per Greene Street a curiosare, speranzose cavallette, fra i negozi di *souvenirs*. Sono ora fermi sulle soglie, guardano in qua. Ne avvertiamo l'eccitazione. E capiamo: manca poco a mezzogiorno – no, non mezzogiorno: *high noon*. Anzi, *High Noon*. Più attenti di noi, si sono ricordati del prospetto turistico: sta per arrivare la diligenza della Overland Stage Line, e quei tre *desperados* ora comparsi da dietro l'angolo del fabbro ferraio, passo lento e minaccioso e gabbanelloni alla Wild Bunch, tra un momento l'assaliranno. Sul bordo dei marciapiedi, bambini ora non più col berretto da baseball ma con improvvise fioriture di caschi piumati trepidano, in attesa. Le mamme armeggiano con le Kodak usa e getta, i babbi sono in posizione con la loro *camcorder*.

E la diligenza rosso fiammante arriva fragorosa, i quattro bai strigliatissimi si fermano, frenati a fatica, davanti al Grand Imperial Hotel. Da cassetta, la guardia punta la carabina verso i tre che avanzano allargandosi a ventaglio nella strada ora deserta.

Dovrei vergognarmi, lo so, ma queste pseudo avventure sono per me irresistibili. Anche se so bene che mi scaricheranno nel solito *pastiche* storico culturale che gli americani, al cui DNA manca ogni difesa dall'inautentico e dal fasullo, non avvertono come tale. Le mie difese – essenziali fattori, detto pomposamente, della mia identità culturale – mi salvano dal color locale, dal falso rustico del ristorante in Chianti, dagli orologi a cucù, dai crocefissini con tettoietta della Val Gardena, dalla carta da lettere con grottesche rinascimentali, dalle torri di Pisa in alabastro rosa, dai posati, ritmati cortei con tamburi, clarine e alabardieri in costume; mi vietano di entrare nei Musei delle Cere così come nei nuovi inimmaginabili scantinati dedicati ai *serial killers* o agli strumenti di tortura dai quali Firenze (e forse non solo Firenze) è oggi invasa; queste essenziali difese dal cattivo gusto, dal *kitsch* in tutte le sue manifestazioni, qui nel West – ecco il mio problema – non funzionano: non mi si attivano. E mi godo (ma come è possibile?) quello che so benissimo dovrei proibirmi: il falso cowboy, la falsa kellerina in crinolina, il falso pistolero. La falsa (suppongo) prigioniera, che saprò poi essere autentica. Il fantoccio del ladro di cavalli penzoloni dalla falsa forca in Blair Street (mi sono informato: è qui girato l'angolo: andrò a vederlo – a fotografarlo – appena passato il fiatone); o quello del morto ammazzato, coltello piantato nella schiena, riverso sul bancone in un caffè di Manco, qui in Colorado. Partecipo insomma, appena doverosamente

samente distaccato, a quest'orgia di intertestualità immediata, automatica, totalizzante. Che mi succede, qui?

Vorrei tanto raggiungere quel grado ulteriore, forse estremo, di consapevolezza che ci esime dall'obbligo di trovare alle nostre piccole scempiaggini una scusa compatibile con la nostra supposta cultura. Vorrei potermi godere in tutta tranquillità questa finta sparatoria ad uso di noi stolti vacanzieri. Vorrei anch'io, come quei miei giovani compagni di escursione, potermi mettere in testa un casco piumato con penne di plastica, senza dovermi osservare, senza dovermi giudicare. Sarebbe una liberazione. Come lo sarebbe potermi godere il cattivo gusto imperante a Santa Fe, dilagante in tutte le Old Towns rimesse a nuovo o ricostruite, straripante da ogni negozio, da ogni vetrina e da ogni rivista patinata, senza le scuse e le precisazioni e gli apologetici distinguo che mi sento in dovere di articolare – questo mettere avanti le mani, a difesa di chi sa quale dignità personale ormai a rischio. Come importasse a qualcuno.

Comincio a capire quel mio compianto amico e collega, un insigne studioso, collezionista di tele del Seicento (questo ci divideva) e soprattutto (questo ci legava) appassionato di arte tribale africana; il quale si teneva in casa (ma come faceva? mi sono sempre domandato) non so più quanti levrieri, alani, dalmata, fors'anche leopardi di maiolica alti così, rigidamente assisi sulle anche – il genere di orrori che, ad essere sfortunato, vincevi al tirassegno mentre intorno ti giravano le giostre e Rabagliati gracchiava 'Ba ... ba ... baciami piccina sulla bo ... bo ...'. Come faceva, appunto? La stessa domanda, mai espressa, che leggevo negli occhi di mio padre quando cercavo di coinvolgerlo nel mio entusiasmo per l'ultimo Bambara o Senufu che avevamo comprato: Come fai? gli leggevo negli occhi. Come faceva, quel mio amico?

Ma comincio a capirlo. «Mi contraddico? Ebbene sì, mi contraddico», ci insegna Walt Whitman. Il che vuol dire, *io* sono anche questo. Io, noi: il mio coltissimo amico che per qualche sua ragione si riconosceva in quegli impresentabili orrori (parlo per me: col mio amico non parlammo mai di queste cose), io che mi riconosco in questi impresentabili orrori *western*. Che so benissimo essere orrori, ma che mi toccano, evidentemente, più a fondo di quanto riescano a difendermi la mia storia, la mia cultura, il mio supposto buon gusto. Una forma dunque di schizofrenia emotiva, immagino.

Perché mai mi metterei in casa alcunché di questa roba – di più: mai, fuori di qui, prenderei in considerazione questa che so benissimo essere robbaccia. È là, è nel Southwest, che in una certa misura la godo, ultimo anello di una catena di appropriazioni risalenti a chi sa dove, a chi sa quando. Soltanto là. Là dove la mia storia è soltanto una storia di riporto, una storia che mi appartiene soltanto per scelta consapevolmente velleitaria – iniziata, appunto, quando?

Uno vorrebbe poter ricostruire la nascita di quella storia immaginaria. Cerca, per quanto può, di riandare all'indietro. Sente che un colore – un viola, penso, un giallo acceso – ha forse qualcosa a che fare con tut-

to questo. Un'immagine sopravvive da, credo, un *Corrierino dei Piccoli*. Qualcuno me l'aveva comprato: credo anche di ricordare chi: un'amica di mia madre, che un pomeriggio, non so perché, da Fiumetto mi portò al Forte. E c'era una pagina a fumetti di un qualche eroe – non so chi. Tutto è sparito. Tutto, tranne il riquadro – no: i due riquadri – in cui l'eroe si aggrappava a un dirupo contro un cielo viola. E nel riquadro accanto, un cielo giallo. Un cielo che non riconobbi, ma che *vidi*. E quei due, quei quattro centimetri quadrati di viola e poi di giallo sono sopravvissuti per quasi settant'anni, forse a farsi riconoscere in altri contesti, in altre occasioni: gemma di un gusto che poi seppi aveva un nome: 'crepuscolare'; bocciolo di un'emozione ricorrente a certi tramonti; germoglio di preferenze cromatiche che hanno finito col dettare chi sa quante scelte, chi sa quanti viluppi emotivi.

Finché forse, nel Southwest, la fruizione. Il venire a frutto di un processo inconsapevole: una maturazione sotterranea, muta, segreta, che una volta apertasi a forza alla luce della consapevolezza si è assestata, inestirpabile, fra mezzo a tutte le altre piante diversamente germogliate. Inestirpabile, appunto. Chiedendo parità di diritto alla luce, e così imponendo il diritto alla coesistenza, per quanto contraddittoria.

Forse è questo che Whitman intendeva.

Il primo pistolero è a terra, l'eco dei quattro spari limpido nell'aria cristallina. Ora anche il secondo barcolla, cade, sparando a caso il suo colpo innocuo. Giace immobile. Fra un momento si alzeranno, e insieme al terzo e alla guardia balzata giù da cassetta si inchineranno ai nostri sparsi applausi. Replica alle tre.

Buono, tutto sommato, questo succo di frutta. E il fiatone dei tremila metri sta passando.

Che davvero sia cominciato tutto da quel viola, da quel giallo. Da quei colori che non sapevo, allora, erano *questi* colori.



North Window, Monument Valley. Northeastern Arizona

I SAGUARI A NOLEGGIO:
JOHN FORD, ERNEST HAYCOX, E LA VENDITA DEL WEST

La leggenda (forse, la storia) vuole che alla domanda su quanto inglese conoscesse, Akira Kurosawa rispondesse: «Solo due parole: John Ford». (La storia – o la leggenda – prosegue con Toshiro Mifune che aggiunge: «Anch'io solo due parole: Mal-lon Blan-do»). John Ford, dunque, come passaggio – come guado, appunto – all'appropriazione emotiva dell'America; che è poi quanto dire del West; poiché è presumibile che l'autore di *The Seven Samurai*, *The Hidden Fortress* e *Yojimbo* non si riferisse al Ford della produzione ambientata in Irlanda o nei mari del Sud bensì al Ford che, a sfondo delle sue storie di coraggio e di lealtà e di rettitudine (ma anche di stupidità, malvagità e corruzione) aveva esportato in tutto il mondo certi spettacolari paesaggi del Southwest, e soprattutto dell'Arizona¹. Per cui la battuta di Kurosawa potrebbero farla propria milioni di individui che sul western (e chi più e meglio di John Ford si identifica con il western?) in queste ultime tre generazioni hanno fondato la loro prima, e spesso unica, associazione con l'America.

Questo è sicuramente vero per me, che ancor prima di vedere il mio primo film (credo fosse il '46), per anni avevo sentito parlare, in casa, di *Ombre rosse*; e quando finalmente lo vidi, ebbi la rivelazione, se non forse dell'America, certo del mio futuro rapporto con essa. *Ombre rosse* fu il precondizionamento – non importa quanto poi messo in discussione, recuperato, modificato – ad ogni mio successivo atto ermeneutico sull'oggetto 'America'; precondizionamento personale e tuttavia esemplare, con il quale tanto più devo fare i conti in questa affabulazione volta su un insieme di interessi, vuoi letterari vuoi cinematografici vuoi di ordine personale, tutti convergenti su (e irradianti da) il West, e più precisamente il Southwest.

Al centro di questa affabulazione sta, doverosamente monumentale, John Ford, con i suoi film che il Southwest hanno contribuito più di ogni altro fattore a mitizzare. Il discorso, peraltro, prenderà avvio da quanto v'è a monte di *Stagecoach* (qual è il sobrio titolo originale di *Ombre rosse*), e cioè da quel racconto di Ernest Haycox, "Stage to Lordsburg", pubblicato nel '37 su *Collier's Magazine*, dal quale, su richiesta dello stesso Ford, Dudley Nichols trasse la sceneggiatura del film.

Ernest Haycox (1899-1950) era uno scrittore di buon livello specializzato in storie western. Oggi sarebbe praticamente sconosciuto, non fosse per quel suo racconto che dette vita a uno dei film più celebri della prima



metà del secolo scorso. Questo già dice che di Haycox ci si occupa soltanto in quanto ‘fonte’ di Ford, e quindi, in seconda battuta e ad ulteriore suo ridimensionamento, in quanto trascrittore western di “Boule de suif” di Maupassant. I suoi meriti personali, quali che essi siano, restano sostanzialmente ignorati; anche in occasione della traduzione italiana, *La diligenza per Lordsburg*, la nostra critica ha insistito quasi esclusivamente sul salto di qualità narrativa e drammatica del film rispetto al racconto al quale deve la genesi. E in effetti questo salto è avvertibile a vari livelli: dall’approfondimento psicologico delle figure sussunte, alla fortunata creazione di figure nuove (Peacock, il timido venditore di whiskey; Gatewood, il banchiere corrotto; Josiah Boone, il dottore ubriacone); dall’accentuazione della funzionalità oppositiva delle coppie – in termini di classe, in termini di moralità (quella farisea, quella sostanziale), in termini di linguaggio narrativo – alla tesa, serrata costruzione di una *suspense* in Haycox appena accennata, nonché alla precisa identificazione di segni iconici di immediata e insieme memorabile eloquenza simbolica: il bicchierino d’argento del baro, l’asso di picche, i mantelli, le redini.

Non v’è dubbio che *Stagecoach* si avvale di una ariosità di concezione ignota al racconto di Haycox, così come si realizza secondo un sapiente alternarsi di ritmi narrativi diversi che “Stage to Lordsburg” proprio non ha. Da un lato, dunque, l’opera di un maestro della narrazione drammatica, dall’altra quella di un ottimo mestierante. E tuttavia, in questa sede, è doveroso soffermarsi sul racconto originario in sé, prescindendo per un momento dalla sceneggiatura alla quale dette origine.

“Stage to Lordsburg” ha molti pregi – non ultimo, quello di un uso essenziale e diretto della descrizione paesistica, la quale è sempre funzionale alla diegesi:

They rode for an hour in this complete darkness, chilled and uncomfortable and half asleep, feeling the coach drag on a heavy-climbing grade. Gray dawn cracked through, followed by a sunless light rushing all across the flat desert now far below².

Si noterà l’allitterazione onomatopeica basata sulle [d], le [r] e le [g] («drag», «grade», «gray», «cracked») che accompagna la notazione sulla faticosa salita della diligenza, e ne prolunga la eco. E si noterà il raffinato, ancorché appena percettibile collegamento delle due frasi tramite la stessa allitterazione (grade/Gray), che attraverso la solidarietà fonetica sigilla la totale immersione dell’elemento umano nella dimensione ambientale.

Ma è la coerenza prospettica del racconto che qui maggiormente ci interessa – e con ciò s’intende la misura del discorso narrativo nel non travalicare il raggio di percezione imputabile a quel personaggio sul quale la voce narrante finisce con il concentrare la propria attenzione, e cioè Henriette, la giovane prostituta che in *Stagecoach* verrà chiamata Dallas³. Benché il racconto sia detto in terza persona da una voce narrante tradizionalmente extra-eterodiegetica, è su Henriette che questa voce concentra

il proprio interesse, facendo della più reietta delle figure presenti su questa diligenza dei folli il fulcro sia dinamico sia etico della storia. Appartata, silenziosa («The army girl was in one world and she was in another, as everyone in the coach understood. It had no effect on her for this was a distinction she had learned long ago», 190), Henriette è peraltro colei che prende in grembo la testa del piazzista morente e che poi, per il resto del viaggio, sorregge con delicatezza quel peso di morte⁴. Haycox non acuisce, come invece farà Ford, l'opposizione fra le due donne: semplicemente, oppone Henriette (e Malpais Bill – il Ringo di *Stagecoach*) a tutti gli altri, per una scelta di campo ideologico che trae le sue origini dallo etos trasgressivo della Frontiera.

Coerentemente con questa impostazione, Haycox comunica l'attacco degli apache attraverso la consapevolezza che ne ha la ragazza, la quale è rannicchiata sul fondo della diligenza, e quel che sente sono soltanto le detonazioni delle diverse armi da fuoco e il raschiare degli stivali di Malpais Bill sul tetto della diligenza; quel che vede è soltanto quanto passa, fulmineo e frammentario, entro il riquadro sobbalzante del finestrino visto di scorcio: «Henriette saw the weaving figure of an apache warrior reel nakedly on a calico pony and rush by with a rifle raised and pointed in his bony elbows» (197) – scheggia icastica di straordinaria potenza, insieme avulsa dal contesto e sua icona esemplare, riassuntiva del rapporto fra soggetto e oggetto dell'osservazione almeno quanto lo è, in Stevenson, la visione del pirata quasi congelato nell'atto di scavalcare lo steccato, che Jim coglie nella scena dell'assalto al fortino in *Treasure Island*. Trovata geniale: sorta di miniaturizzazione della battaglia di Waterloo di Stendhal, vista non nella sua globalità bensì dalla prospettiva minima di un suo unico partecipante⁵.

In termini di resa drammatica, il costo di questa impostazione (la quale fra l'altro concede all'assalto degli apache appena una ventina di righe di testo) potrà forse apparire assai alto, specie se visto in rapporto alla grande scena dell'inseguimento della diligenza nel film di Ford. Questo climax quasi fuori campo è peraltro una soluzione narrativa di singolare efficacia. Si tratta di una scelta calcolata, analoga a quella finale che esclude dalla percezione diretta la sparatoria fra Malpais Bill e i suoi nemici: ancora una volta, soltanto spari fuori campo a comunicare alla ragazza, nella sua attesa impotente, la loro ambigua informazione circa l'esito dello scontro, e pertanto della sua vita.

Sarà forse troppo sollecitare “Stage to Lordsburg” a dire, con silenziosa eloquenza, qualcosa che magari gli anni Trenta non volevano sentir dire, e cioè che tutto ciò rispecchia la posizione della donna, costretta alla periferia dei fatti e tuttavia al centro della loro percezione. E tuttavia gli elementi per una lettura siffatta sono tutti lì, aperti alla ricomposizione – a disposizione, se vogliamo, degli interessi ideologici del lettore di oltre mezzo secolo più tardi. Così come il lettore di oggi si trova forse più a suo agio nel racconto di Haycox che non nel film di Ford per quanto riguarda le sollecitazioni emotive dei due testi in riferimento agli indiani: il coin-

volgimento anti-indiano, irresistibile nel film (come si fa a non stare per i 'nostri?'), è molto più blando nel racconto, dove gli apache sono i nemici, sì, ma non veniamo invitati dal testo a gioire, come invece nel film, ad ogni indiano abbattuto dal fuoco dei bianchi⁶.

A vari livelli, dunque, il racconto di Haycox esce con onore dall'impari confronto con *Stagecoach*. Opera minore, certamente, ma opera di tutto rispetto. E forse, per certi versi, opera addirittura più attuale del suo tanto più celebre derivato.

Il quale però (ecco il punto) raggiunge una dimensione 'mitica' inaccessibile al pur bel racconto di Haycox. Si tratta di una qualità mitica *dinamica*, nel senso che laddove "Stage to Lordsburg" ricicla il cosiddetto mito del West in una sorta di inerte ripetitività che finisce con l'immobilizzare il lettore in una distanza emotiva che nulla invoglia a colmare, *Stagecoach* costringe il fruitore ad instaurare con quel mito (e pertanto con il proprio io, che quel mito riscopre in se stesso) un fortissimo rapporto attivo. Egli è costantemente sollecitato a mediare tra due letture contraddittorie dell'opposizione natura/cultura, centrale al mito del West, all'interno del quale il primo termine ha valore positivo e il secondo valore negativo, per una costante epistemica lontanissima che trova anche in America innumerevoli periodiche manifestazioni: ad esempio, nella stessa formula riassuntiva dello spirito del "Manifest Destiny", il "Go West, Young Man" di John Babson Lane Soule, dove il West sta per la natura incorrotta, antidoto alla civiltà corrotta. In *Stagecoach* questa lettura è epitomizzata, da un lato, da Gatewood, l'unico vero *villain* della storia, il banchiere ladro, perbenista e jingoista, e, dall'altro, dalla coppia Ringo/Dallas, la cui fuga «across the border», via dalla Lordsburg delle sparatorie e dei bordelli, è vista come la felice realizzazione del mito⁷. Quando però la stessa opposizione natura/cultura si configura nei termini del conflitto fra bianchi e indiani, allora la lettura dell'opposizione non può che rovesciarsi. Il polo natura, finora positivo, diventa negativo, e l'inverso avviene con il polo cultura. Da qui la contraddizione insita nel mito, che essendo storico non può che essere relativo; contraddizione che lo smonta e lo distrugge.

Questa contraddizione (che Ford indagherà con ancora maggiore attenzione in *Wagon Master*, in *Fort Apache* e in *The Searchers*) anima *Stagecoach*, mettendo in moto nel fruitore un complesso meccanismo di ricezione per il quale egli costantemente reinveste nel testo la sua carica evocativa: detto altrimenti, il fruitore, per quanto gli compete, si fa carico di questo scambio senza fine di senso. Come ciò avvenga, è materia di grande interesse.

I vari miti storicamente associati all'America, da quello del Nuovo Adamo a quello della Golden Land, dal mito del West al suo corrispettivo spagnolo dell'Eldorado e delle sette città d'oro di Cibola, a (se vogliamo) il 'mito americano' dei nostri Pavese e Vittorini, hanno tutti avuto un carattere per così dire di accessibilità: sono stati tutti dei miti alla portata della realizzazione. Hanno sempre costituito un invito, un appello – mai un miraggio. E se è vero che, puntualmente, la consumazione dell'accesso

ha significato il disintegrarsi del singolo mito nella disillusione (la Nuova Caduta adamica, la fine della Frontiera, la scoperta che l'oro delle sette città era il riflesso del sole sulla paglia delle casupole di *adobe*, per giungere al pavesiano «Sono finiti i tempi in cui scoprivamo l'America»), è anche vero che l'America ha avuto come costante epistemologica primaria la capacità di riproporre, periodicamente, una sempre nuova versione del suo mito fondante: il mito dell'accessibilità del mito. Vedi, ancora una volta, la Nuova Frontiera kennediana.

L'accessibilità, è chiaro, comporta la necessità della comunicazione: in quanto invito, va spedito. Il neon rosso di *Vacancy* va tenuto acceso, va fatto ammiccare nella notte. Più che con la formula del 'How the West Was Won' (accompagnata dal suo inevitabile rovescio, 'How the West Was Lost'), il mito del West potrebbe dunque esser detto con quella di 'How the West Was Sold'. Venduto in senso letterale, ma ancor più in senso metaforico: come l'idea del West, e non soltanto la sua terra, è stata venduta; come è stata comprata. Come, a tutti i livelli, il West è stato reso accessibile.

In questo senso, John Ford ha costituito uno dei fattori determinanti nella vendita del mito del West. Ford non ha certamente inventato il film western, né tantomeno il mito del West. Ha però saputo dare a quel mito una fruibilità universale fino ad allora mai attinta; e questo, grazie alla sua capacità di dotare le sue opere di uno straordinario senso di autenticità⁸.

Il senso di autenticità (dove l'accento, e non a caso, è su *sensu*) non contraddice necessariamente la valenza mitica di un testo, ma anzi può rafforzarla consentendo con esso un'immediata identificazione. Questo è possibile soltanto se il testo passa con successo il controllo dell'esperienza (giocoforza varia) del fruitore, la quale sola può garantire il riconoscimento dell'oggetto come 'autentico' e pertanto autorizzare l'identificazione con esso⁹. Ford ottiene l'effetto desiderato (e quello dell'autenticità è, in arte, altrettanto difficile da creare di quello della spontaneità di cui parlava Paul Valéry) giocando, senza farsene accorgere, su due tavoli diversi: quello del quotidiano, del noto, del limitato, e quello dell'eccezionale, dell'illimitato, dell'ignoto. Nella fattispecie, da un lato il comportamento 'normale', la rete delle convenzioni sociali, il rapporto pratico con la natura; dall'altro, il comportamento eroico, una natura insolita, degli spazi sconfinati.

Come altri prima di lui, Ford ha reso l'eroe riconoscibile, e quindi 'autentico', facendone *one of the boys*: Henry Fonda nelle vesti di Wyatt Earp è eroico, ma goffo e impacciato nel ballo e nel corteggiamento¹⁰. La grande invenzione del regista è stata quella di attuare un'operazione omologa con l'ambiente naturale. Invece di girare gli esterni in luoghi allora comunemente noti, o comunque assimilabili a una tipologia geografica familiare al fruitore medio, ha scelto una delle zone più straordinarie dell'America, se non del mondo – il Colorado Plateau, e più precisamente (e più spesso) la Monument Valley, dove l'eccezionalità della morfologia geologica, anche senza conoscerne la lettura teologica di cui la investono i navajo, si fa leggere, si fa vivere, come una realtà veramente fuori del mondo e pertanto 'mitica'. Tuttavia, Ford ha attenuato la valenza eccezionale del suo

paesaggio: vuoi con le scelte specifiche, per cui certi elementi visualmente sbalorditivi non vengono mai utilizzati; vuoi con il distanziamento prospettico, evitando tagli e scorci che accentuino l'eccezionalità; vuoi, soprattutto, con il negare all'individuo ogni espressione di meraviglia nei confronti di questa natura, ogni consapevolezza che si tratta, in effetti, di un paesaggio straordinario. Il massimo di consapevolezza del luogo lo si ha in *My Darling Clementine*, quando la ragazza (appena arrivata dal Massachusetts, e dunque da una delle zone visualmente più blande degli Stati Uniti), in piena vista di alcuni dei monoliti della Monument Valley si sbilancia al punto di dire che l'aria, sì, è molto buona.

Uomo e natura sono dunque, in Ford, al tempo stesso riconoscibili e inauditi, noti e ignoti, misurabili e incommensurabili. Il grande regista riesce a non far mai prevalere l'una dimensione sull'altra: come Fonda/Earp è eroico ma anche familiare, così le spettacolari rocce della Monument Valley sono immense, sì, e tuttavia non schiacciano l'individuo, non lo relegano nell'insignificanza; al contrario, si aprono ad accoglierlo, 'posano' dietro di lui, accettano di buon grado di fare da sfondo ai suoi grandi come ai suoi piccoli drammi¹¹. Ford combina gli opposti del mito e del quotidiano fino a renderli inestricabili, e così facendo rende accessibile l'inaccessibile.

Per chi conosce quei luoghi (non parlo di chi vi è nato: parlo di noi – parlo di me), almeno al primo contatto l'ipoteca ottico-ideologica di Ford è prevaricante.

All'inizio, la nota più esaltante è il rapporto violento dei colori: le rocce rosse striate di nero, di bianco, di verde; le contorsioni verde scuro del *piñon*; il giallo dell'*alamo* lungo il nocciola abbagliante dei torrenti schiumosi; l'arido solco rosa dell'*arroyo*; il verde spento del *bosque* lungo l'azzurro del Rio Grande o del Chama; e sopra, trionfale, il turchese del cielo, lucente come quello che gli indiani lavorano. D'un tratto, uno scintillante costone di roccia nera, traversato dalla gigantesca dentiera di un cornicione bianco.

Qui non esistono toni, sfumature, zone intermedie di colore che preparino, suggeriscano, evochino. Qui tutto è in contrasto con tutto. L'aria asciutta in cui ogni elemento è immerso lo lascia sospeso in una luce cristallina che nemmeno la distanza fa variare. Le costanti visivo-concettuali che condizionano la nostra percezione della natura qui non valgono più. In questo scenario antichissimo, tutto è nuovo.

Con una sconcertante contraddizione: la sua riconoscibilità. Perché tutto – ogni roccia, ogni *mesa*, ogni sconfinata distesa di *llano* – lo si vede attraverso l'obbiettivo di Ford, attraverso il pennello di Remington. In cima a quel costone viola mi aspetto compaia una scolta indiana; tra un attimo, fra quei roccioni gialli sbucherà poderosa la cavalleria; su questo greto ombreggiato è appena passato il fragile calessino dell'eroina. So che, dovessi infilarmi per quei dirupi di *slickrock* rossa, coglierei i due *desperados* alle spalle, saprei schivare l'attacco fulmineo del serpente a sonagli.

Dopo il primo momento, tuttavia, il meccanismo di questo *déjà-vu* turba la concentrazione. Condizionato da quest'ottica precostituita, dubito dell'ebbrezza visiva che pur s'impone: quanto è nuovo e quanto di seconda mano altercano, esigono conclusioni contraddittorie. L'atto stesso della percezione mima la violenza dei contrasti di cui questa natura vive.

Finché la visione di secondo grado si attenua, stanca della sua stessa gradicante ripetitività, e resta quella autentica: quella che consente – che impone – l'ascolto del teso silenzio che gli indiani hanno sempre saputo essere il respiro delle divinità a cui questo deserto è caro.

John Ford si è fermato prima di questo silenzio. La sua lettura di quel mondo, legata com'è alla sua divulgazione, non ne tocca i livelli più profondi e più intensi. Di questi, Ford lascia a noi la scoperta e, se ci è possibile, la decifrazione.

Anche di ciò gli siamo grati: di averci aperto la strada, di avercene indicata la direzione. E a lui sempre torniamo per rifornirci gli occhi, oltre che lo spirito, di quel nutrimento che soltanto il West ci può dare e che soltanto Ford, quando ne siamo lontani, è in grado di procurarci. Ed ecco allora la poltrona con vista sul teleschermo, sulla quale si consumano le periodiche cerimonie di rivisitazione dei luoghi sacri – la poltrona, surrogato del sedile della macchina Hertz o Avis o Alamo ferma sul ciglio del dirupo giù per il quale si snoda la strada rossa che porta al fondo della grande pianura: a guardare, oltre il salto di vuoto, le immani rocce rosse dei Mittens che sorgono a picco sulla piana abbagliante. Sotto di noi, lungo i tornanti approssimativi qualche piccolo sbuffo di polvere rossa dal quale ogni tanto si sprigiona un bagliore segna un lento progredire – so che sono altre Hertz, altre Alamo; so che ne scenderanno vacanzieri romani che se faranno conoscere, bambini tedeschi che all'estero hanno il permesso di rompere le scatole a tutti, bolognesi doverosamente spiritosi ('Ma di ben sò, non c'è un albero a pagarlo – e tu che volevi portare Blecky!'). Lì sul ciglio, con un po' di sforzo, cancello le macchine e vedo la diligenza. Così come a casa, all'ennesima visione di *Stagecoach* o di *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, vedo – oltre la diligenza, oltre il carro col tendone a soffietto – il cofano blu (o rosso, o bianco) della nostra Hertz velato di polvere rossa, per un ricambio continuo fra il vissuto e il trasmesso, fra l'esperito di persona e l'esperito attraverso l'arte. La stanza in penombra si schiude allora a quegli spazi immensi, il bianco e nero si lascia tradurre nei colori senza pari – le rocce infuocate che (è sera) sono ormai lilla, la terra bruna, il verde-grigio dei ciuffi di *chamisa*; così come, nel vissuto, gli elementi della scena presente si strutturano nel *déjà-vu* che dà loro quell'ordine e quel senso attraverso i quali, felicemente, per la prima volta ci hanno aggredito, e vinto.

Questo senso, questo ordine, che sono l'impronta di Ford sulla nostra immaginazione, ci condizionano anche dopo che ne abbiamo decostruita la funzione; anche dopo che l'impatto con l'originale ci ha fatto scoprire la sua indicibilità; e se pure quel mondo ci attira proprio perché incomensurabile e pertanto indicibile, quella sua lettura e quindi riduzione e

quindi banalizzazione resta in noi, indistruttibile, convivendo in tutta armonia con la nostra convinzione che di banalizzazione pur si tratta – oltre che, a volte, di un'operazione viziata da una punta di disonestà.

Anche questo va detto: i saguari: i sei o sette grandi cactus a candela-bro che in *My Darling Clementine* (ma anche in *Stagecoach*) la cinepresa coglie più volte in primo piano a inquadrare la distesa del deserto e, sullo sfondo, le grandi rocce. Una presenza incongrua, chiaramente un falso, perché nella Monument Valley di saguari non ve ne sono – si fermano quattrocento chilometri più a sud. Né i saguari crescono isolati ma, come ogni pianta, si diffondono a gruppi; che è proprio quanto non avviene in *My Darling Clementine*, dove compaiono totalmente isolati, e soltanto in prossimità dello stanziamento umano – tanto in prossimità che, con tutto quello spazio a disposizione, i pionieri di Ford hanno fatto passare la ringhiera della veranda dell'albergo, nonché il recinto di un *corral*, a venti centimetri dal tronco spinoso d'un paio di queste piante.

Questi saguari di serra (o forse di plastica) sono stati dunque piantati lì, contro ogni probabilità referenziale, per la stessa ragione per cui in ogni film di Hollywood d'ambientazione italiana i ristoranti devono avere le tovaglie a quadri bianchi e rossi, e in ogni film sulla resistenza francese i *maquis* devono avere il basco e il fazzoletto audoccidentale

Il collo: perché rientrano in un'immagine prefabbricata. È il deserto dei cartoni animati, il deserto di Road Runner e di Wile E. Coyote.

Analoghe incongruità, stavolta d'ordine storico, nello stesso e pur splendido film. In *My Darling Clementine*, Ford ha piazzato in piena Monument Valley un'impossibile comunità anglo con tanto d'albergo, teatro, chiesa in costruzione. Per di più l'ha resa una comunità di cowboys, quando la zona è semidesertica e l'unico allevamento possibile è quello delle pecore; sulle quali infatti le poche famiglie navajo della zona basano la loro poverissima economia. Ford ha invece svuotato la Monument Valley di ogni indiano, eccetto l'ubriaco che sparacchia nel *saloon* all'inizio (e la cui patetica innocuità è sottolineata dal fatto che Earp lo caccia di paese con un calcio nei fondelli), e un paio di comparse che s'intravedono da lontano in due occasioni.

In *Stagecoach*, la manipolazione primaria consiste nello spostamento geografico. La storia di Haycox si svolgeva fra Tonto, nell'Arizona centrale, e Lordsburg, nel New Mexico sud-occidentale. Ford trasferisce l'azione nell'Arizona nord-orientale per poter filmare nella Monument Valley, ma conserva la toponomastica originaria: Tonto, Lordsburg, Dry Fork, Apache Well.

Poiché l'azione si svolge in un tempo leggermente anteriore a quello scelto da Haycox, e cioè, invece che intorno al 1880, a qualche anno dalla fine della Guerra Civile, il reinsediamento dei navajo nelle loro terre (1868) doveva essere già avvenuto; ma Ford aveva bisogno di apache sul sentiero di guerra, non di navajo sconfitti e rassegnati, distrutti numericamente come moralmente dalla terribile *long march* alla quale erano stati sottoposti; ed ecco allora che gli apache Chiricahua di Geronimo,

per un tratto della cui riserva la diligenza deve passare, vengono spostati nella riserva navajo, a centinaia di chilometri più a nord.

Del resto, il tragitto stesso della diligenza (così come quello della carovana dei mormoni in *Wagon Master*) è del tutto folle. Inizia là dove finisce *My Darling Clementine*: stessa strada in discesa (ma diverso steccato – elemento comunque incongruo là dove non vi siano pascoli da recintare), stessa inquadratura; solo che adesso non si vede Owl Rock. Dopo poco ricompaiono i due Mittens, inconfondibili perché davvero sembrano due immani manopole col pollice separato. Verso la fine del viaggio la diligenza ripassa davanti ai Mittens – nello stesso senso; nel frattempo, per evitare d'incontrare gli indiani, si era portata ad alta quota, dove si era imbattuta in una bufera. Il fatto è che nella Monument Valley, la quale si trova su un altopiano, non c'è nessuna alta quota. Così come non c'è un fiume da attraversare: quello più vicino, il San Juan, è a nord – e a nord della Monument Valley non c'è alcuna pianura salina dove poter far fare le corse a indiani e diligenza¹².

Ma Ford poteva andare sul sicuro: prima che i suoi stessi film aprissero le porte al turismo di massa, pochi erano in grado di coglierlo in castagna. E comunque, ha importanza tutto questo? No: decisamente, no. Per la funzionalità drammatica e iconica del film, Ford ha fatto benissimo a reinventarsi il suo paesaggio, a spostare montagne, fiumi, deserti, riserve indiane e stanziamenti bianchi, al fine di dosare polvere e nevischio, di alternare acqua e terra arida, di calibrare spazi vuoti e interni soffocanti; di orchestrare l'improvvisa apparizione dell'«altro». Tutto è permesso all'artista – anche la mancanza di coerenza, se essa è funzionale a un disegno semantico.

Tale non è l'uso di finte piante di saguaro, la cui unica funzione è quella di confermare il destinatario nella sua compiaciuta pretesa di conoscenza. Questo falso – perché d'un falso si tratta – invita al 'riconoscimento', per dirla con Viktor Šklovskij, piuttosto che alla 'visione'; vale a dire, l'opposto di quanto l'arte fa, o dovrebbe fare. Al contrario, l'uso inesatto del paesaggio rientra a pieno titolo nella ricerca di precisi effetti narrativi, rientra nella libertà dell'artista di reinventarsi il mondo. Si può rimpiangere che questo grande artista abbia a volte ceduto alla tentazione di affidarsi allo stereotipo, questa scorciatoia alla comunicazione; si può rimpiangere che così facendo abbia banalizzato il suo testo, e umiliato la realtà che andava mitizzando. Ma anche se siamo in grado di identificare i mezzi talvolta facili con i quali egli ci ha porto quel mondo, anche se conosciamo bene il prezzo che la divulgazione ha esatto a quei luoghi, per non dire ai loro legittimi abitanti, non possiamo non provare per John Ford, al di là dell'ammirazione per l'artista, una profonda gratitudine. È lui che ci ha venduto – no: regalato – il mito. È a lui che dobbiamo la scoperta della sua accessibilità. Il che tuttavia vuole anche dire la dolorosa consapevolezza della sua precarietà. In *Stagecoach*, Ford proprio questo ha detto con la cristallina struttura simmetrica del film. Sarà bene osservarla, per apprezzarne appieno il messaggio.

Cinque i segmenti narrativi primari del testo, che lo scandiscono secondo questo grande ritmo: natura / cultura / natura / cultura / natura.

Primo segmento: Geronimo, i suoi guerrieri che cavalcano furiosamente attraverso un cupo paesaggio avvertito unicamente per primi piani focalizzati sulla terra, «jumped the reservation».

Secondo segmento: la città (Tonto) come concentrato della «foul disease called social prejudice» e della corruzione finanziaria.

Terzo segmento: il viaggio attraverso il deserto.

Quarto segmento: la città (Lordsburg) come concentrato del vizio – *saloons* e bordelli.

Quinto e ultimo segmento: la fuga «across the border» di Dallas e Ringo (che era anch'egli, come Geronimo – e per ragioni analoghe – «busted out [of the pen]»). Come conclude il dottore, «they're saved from the blessings of civilization».

La struttura globale denuncia il lieto fine come illusorio: la simmetria con l'inizio (anche Geronimo cerca libertà «across the border» della riserva – la prigione a cui i bianchi hanno condannato la sua gente, dopo averle portato via la sua terra), oltre che l'equivalenza semantica dell'atto («jumped», «busted out»), indicano appunto la provvisorietà del lieto fine, il suo destino già segnato, già iscritto nella storia. Come quella di Geronimo, anche la fuga di Dallas e di Ringo potrà avere un successo soltanto temporaneo: la civiltà, con le sue ambigue *blessings*, non li lascerà fuggire per sempre.

Questo, per John Ford, è il vero senso del mito del West: la sua accessibilità è quanto ne decreta la fine.

Note

¹ «Almost half of [Ford's] total output has been set in the West (Ford even has his own special location in Utah—the breathtakingly beautiful, craggy Monument Valley)», Kites 323. In realtà, la maggior parte della Monument Valley si trova in Arizona, ed è lì che Ford ha girato più spesso i suoi western. È lì, in particolare, che si trova il cosiddetto John Ford's Point.

² «Stage to Lordsburg» (196). Tutte le citazioni si riferiscono a questa edizione.

³ Haycox potrebbe aver scelto un nome francese per la ragazza in omaggio a Maupassant, il cui «Boule de suif» è uno dei modelli di questo racconto; al contempo, una *nom de plume* francese ben si addice, in ambiente americano, a una donna che dice di sé, «I run a house in Lordsburg» (195). Va notato che l'aver entrambi un nome associato a una lingua diversa dall'inglese conferma la solidarietà sociale oltre che drammatica della coppia centrale, Henriette e Malpais Bill, i due *outcasts*. Considerando l'ostilità verso il Texas e i texani diffusa in New Mexico e in Arizona per tutto il XIX secolo, il nome 'Dallas' conferma la rimozione sociale della prostituta – anche se tale ostilità era caratteristica prevalentemente degli americani di origine messicana, che nel film di Ford sono quasi del tutto assenti.

⁴ Significativa la trasformazione operata in *Stagecoach*: al morto (forse una notazione macabra troppo forte per il pubblico dell'epoca), Ford sostituisce un neonato. Questo permette a Ford di confermare l'idillio Ringo/Dallas come orientato verso i valori della famiglia, pertanto accentuandone la positività sociale. Vedi oltre, n. 7.

⁵ Per la rappresentazione di una scena analoga (assalto a una diligenza da parte di indiani a cavallo su per un pendio lungo un costone di rocce gialle) vedi *The*

Stagecoach di Norman Rockwell, una stampa del 1965. L'artista fece la sua unica apparizione sullo schermo come il giocatore di poker "Busted Flush" in *Stagecoach* (1966), un *remake* del film di Ford, diretto da Gordon Douglas e ambientato nel Wyoming.

⁶ Si parla qui, esclusivamente, dell'effetto semiotico del testo. A livello personale, John Ford, che i navajo adottarono dandogli il nome di Natani Nez ("Tall Soldier"), era molto vicino agli indiani. Cfr. Gallagher 341.

⁷ Con Ringo e Dallas, Nuovo Adamo e Nuova Eva, il mito del Paradiso Terrestre vince per un'ultima volta. Presto, quando lo Eden cercato (e trovato) dai mormoni in *Wagon Master* si ridurrà al giardinetto cittadino di *3 Godfathers*, quando cioè la civiltà che incalza avrà chiuso tutte le uscite, l'unico mito agibile risulterà quello biblico dei tre Magi e del Bambino.

⁸ Giorgio Cremonini, a proposito di *Ombre rosse*, parla di una «naturalizza apparentemente a-linguistica, non espressamente significata» (21).

⁹ Alla fine di *My Darling Clementine*, Henry Fonda/Wyatt Earp si allontana a cavallo per una strada che all'orizzonte passa fra due grandi rocce. Lo spettatore non sa che, oltrepassate Owl Rock e El Capitan, quella strada porta alla Monument Valley, cioè proprio nella direzione opposta a quella che l'eroe dovrebbe prendere. Non sa che alle spalle della ragazza che lo guarda partire (e alla quale l'eroe ha appena dato il suo primo, castissimo bacio) non c'è alcuna comunità, e che la povera Clementine, in assenza di cavalli o calessini, dovrà farsi una ventina di miglia a piedi per arrivare a Kayenta, il posto più vicino. Lo spettatore non sa nulla di questi dati referenziali ma, com'è fin troppo giusto, non gliene importa nulla. Quello che 'sa', in questo istante di conclusiva identificazione con l'eroe che si allontana a cavallo, è che l'eroe ha un rapporto autentico con la donna, la comunità e la natura; il rapporto che un giorno potrebbe avere egli stesso se accettasse l'invito del mito.

¹⁰ Ford ha fatto ben altro per quanto riguarda la idealizzazione dello Earp storico, che non era il cavaliere senza macchia e senza paura quale risulta dal suo tradizionale ritratto agiografico, bensì un avventuriero probabilmente implicato nel *business* della razzie delle mandrie, e un vendicatore assai poco solerte del fratello Morgan, dato che lasciò Tombstone rinunciando a cercarne gli assassini. Con il corteggiamento di Clementine, la ragazza di buona famiglia di Boston, Ford sottrae inoltre allo Earp storico un elemento inassimilabile al mito: Josephine Marcus Earp, la sua moglie ebrea. Cfr. Underwood 125-35.

¹¹ «L'ambiente non è, contiene» (Cremonini 219). Altri interpreti del Southwest, memore dei modelli epistemici della scuola del sublime e quindi del pittoricismo, hanno invece colto di quella natura la dimensione prevaricante. Vedi ad esempio certi cianotipi di Charles Frances Lummis, uno dei primissimi fotografi del Southwest, dove le figurine dei viaggiatori quasi scompaiono sotto il peso delle rocce del Canyon de Chelley.

¹² Questi due esterni furono girati in California, rispettivamente sul fiume Kern e sul lago prosciugato nei pressi di Victorville, a nord-ovest e a nord-est di Los Angeles. Cfr. Leutrat e Guigues 131.



Monument Valley, northeastern Arizona

ULTIMI TANGHI, CON O SENZA LUPI: LE VARIAZIONI SU TEMA DI KEVIN COSTNER E DI CLINT EASTWOOD

Che il western costituisca la forma più diffusa e più amata del racconto epico formato XX secolo è fuori discussione. Modello del quale si sono appropriate anche culture remote, magari agli antipodi di quella d'origine (vedi certe sue riprese da parte della cinematografia giapponese, cinese o indiana, per non dire del nostro 'spaghetti western'), questo genere cinematografico ha colto un momento della storia americana – più o meno, gli ultimi quattro decenni dell'Ottocento e i primi del Novecento – e ne ha fatto il teatro di una rappresentazione profana, ancorché altamente ideologizzata, dello 'io', nella quale ogni cultura si riconosce. E questo, indipendentemente dalla specifica combinazione degli elementi testuali, e cioè, ad esempio, se gli indiani siano cattivi e i bianchi buoni oppure viceversa (com'è il caso di *Dances With Wolves*); se i buoni siano i cowboys o invece i pastori, tradizionalmente divisi dal diverso uso dei pascoli e dell'acqua. In altre parole, il modello resta vitale al di là dei suoi contenuti. Ciò avviene perché, a rimorchio di un'operazione di montaggio mitologico già avviata a metà del XIX secolo a supporto dell'espansione verso ovest, il western ha saputo cristallizzare a modello formale la mistica dell'eroe individuale, impavido davanti ad ogni avversità, sia essa naturale o sociale.

Fin dall'inizio della sua irruzione nell'immaginario collettivo, il western ha messo a punto un sistema pressoché perfetto, fondendo paradigmi culturali di solito mutualmente escludentisi quali la sete d'avventura e il senso di responsabilità civile (neanche Omero era riuscito a tanto, o l'Odissea sarebbe durata quanto ci sarebbe voluto a Ulisse per tornare difilato a Itaca). Da qui il cowboy 'buono', che nel suo peregrinare senza meta e senza fine si ferma quanto basta per dare una mano ai buoni e una lezione – tanto meglio se letale – ai cattivi; vedi *Shane*, tanto per dirne uno. O vedi il paradigma del conflitto natura/cultura, centrale nell'*etos* americano (e oggetto di mero rimpianto nel Vecchio Mondo, dove di natura non è più possibile parlare), che presta al western la sua immensa forza icastica, canonizzata da John Ford. Il resto, le portate fisse del menu, sia esso turistico o di lusso – gli elementari conflitti etnici, le sparatorie, gli inseguimenti, le scazzottate, il rito della sfida finale – lo fanno ora la forza della reiterazione, ora la capacità del singolo regista di inserire quel tanto di nuovo che, senza disturbare l'equilibrio del modello, dia l'impressione di inventare qualcosa.



I falsi storici sono parte ineludibile del western, a cominciare da quelli di Ford (dei quali si è già parlato) in *Stagecoach* e nelle altre opere ambientate nel West. A volte il falso storico ha una qualche seria motivazione d'ordine estetico o narrativo. Altre volte si tratta di semplice sudditanza rispetto a certi *clichés* culturali. Altre ancora, nemmeno questo, e si tratta allora di vere e proprie patacche, a dimostrazione del disprezzo che la produzione nutre per l'intelligenza del pubblico. È questo il caso di *Dances With Wolves*.

Vediamo alcune, di queste patacche.

1. A cominciare dal 1805, vale a dire ben prima del 1863, data d'inizio del film, i sioux/lakota e il governo degli Stati Uniti avevano stretto almeno cinque trattati di pace, faticosamente negoziati allo scopo di arginare l'espansione dei coloni bianchi nel territorio dei lakota e porre fine ai continui scontri. Il fatto che Ten Bears veda nel tenente Dunbar l'unica speranza per aprire un negoziato con Washington significa ignorare sei decenni di intensa, seppur frustrata, attività diplomatica dei lakota.
2. Ten Bears era il nome di un capo comanche, non lakota.
3. Il film vorrebbe far credere che fino all'arrivo di Dunbar i lakota non possedessero armi da fuoco, delle quali invece disponevano da oltre un secolo.
4. I lakota, popolazione nomadica, si muovevano seguendo gli spostamenti delle mandrie di bisonti, loro cibo principale e fonte delle pelli di cui si vestivano e con le quali costruivano i loro *tepee*. Il film vorrebbe far credere che, non fosse stato per Dunbar, i lakota avrebbero perso le tracce della grande mandria.
5. I pawnee vengono presentati come i 'cattivi', di contro i lakota 'buoni'. Nella realtà storica, i primi erano una nazione agricola e pertanto stanziale, tradizionalmente vessata da quella nomade dei lakota.
6. Nessun guerriero, di nessuna nazione, sarebbe mai andato in battaglia indossando la sua preziosa collana di artigli d'orso, come nel film viene fatto fare ai pawnee. Analogamente, i lakota sono qui sempre visti nei loro abiti da cerimonia – un tocco 'storico' ripreso dai ritratti dell'epoca dipinti da George Catlin, per i quali il pittore chiedeva ai suoi soggetti di posare nelle loro vesti più pittoresche.
7. Contrariamente a quanto sbandierato nella presentazione del film, soltanto uno degli attori era sioux: si tratta di Doris Leader Charge, nella parte di Pretty Shield. Tutti gli altri sono attori professionisti di altre nazioni indiane, ai quali la Charge aveva insegnato qualche rudimento di pronuncia sioux.
8. Ten Bears mostra a Dunbar un antico elmo spagnolo, trofeo della tribù dopo che i lakota, a quanto racconta il vecchio capo, avevano sconfitto i *conquistadores*. Impossibile: all'epoca della spedizione di Coronado, i sioux erano lontani da quelle zone.

Questi falsi storici, completamente gratuiti ai fini dello sviluppo diegetico, risultano tanto più irritanti in quanto *Dances With Wolves* si

presenta (e viene supinamente celebrato) come un film altamente rispettoso della realtà indiana.

In confronto al film di Costner, *Unforgiven*, per la regia di Clint Eastwood, sembra dapprima porsi come un'operazione assai più sensibile alle istanze della verosimiglianza, quasi un tentativo di portare al modello una nuova consapevolezza dell'etos del West e una lettura non stereotipata delle componenti psicologiche del tempo. Tentativo che però a due terzi del cammino il film abbandona per rifugiarsi nella più smaccata reiterazione del modello, con l'eroe che, imbufalito perché il sadico sceriffo gli ha fatto fuori l'amico, torna in paese e ammazza tutti quanti, o comunque tutti quelli che andavano ammazzati. Vendetta, feroce vendetta.

Un'operazione programmaticamente ambigua, dunque. Nulla ci prepara a credere a questo ex fuorilegge ravveduto che riesuma le vesti del killer, quando non riesce più neanche a montare a cavallo; quando per farsi tornare la vecchia infallibile mira gli basta una mezza bottiglia di quel whiskey dal quale si astiene da dieci anni; sia, a maggior ragione, perché il film aveva fatto un ben strombazzato investimento nella creazione di situazioni e modalità che suggerivano un meditato distanziamento dall'etica classica del western – vedi la scena, per la verità di ottima fattura, della riluttante uccisione del primo cattivo.

Non ci vuole molto, tuttavia, per rendersi conto che la formulaicità della parte conclusiva corrisponde a una diversa e forse ancor più sottilmente sgradevole formulaicità in tutto quanto la precedeva. L'impostazione segue qui la moda del rovesciamento delle formule: femminismo, *political correctness*, antirazzismo, un ironico ammicciare sulla mitizzazione del West a mezzo stampa – le nuove formule, cioè, applicate al vecchio modello. È però il vecchio modello che alla lunga prevale, perché è con il 'buono', in verità non poi tanto buono (come esigono le nuove formule) ma profondamente leale (come esige il vecchio modello) che il film impone si parteggi, se non proprio ci si identifichi; dato che nessuno vorrà identificarsi con un eroe il quale, novello Ulisse che ara il suo campicello, sordo per un po' all'antico richiamo della violenza pur se adesso legittima, viene trascinato nel fango da un maiale riottoso. (Qualcuno dirà: splendida metafora della fine del West. Bah ...) Ma irresistibilmente nostalgica, prevista e puntualmente profferta, è l'icona conclusiva dell'eroe ritrovatosi e ritrovato, che si allontana poi a cavallo, senza fretta (quando mai l'eroe se ne va di fretta?) dopo essersi fatta, diciamo così, giustizia.

E allora dovremmo esser grati a Eastwood di non aver avuto il coraggio di fargli sparare da dietro, di aver fatto tremare e infine tacere il Winchester dell'aiuto sceriffo sopravvissuto alla palingenesi finale; risparmiando così da morte sicura non soltanto il suo eroe (troppo signore, nonostante i precedenti, per premunirsi con un colpo di grazia), ma il western stesso.

Preso in giro, storpiato, sfruttato, questo sì. Ma ammazzato, il western, proprio no. Non si tira il collo alla gallina dalle uova d'oro.



Corrales, New Mexico

REFLECTIONS ON A ROADSIDE STATEMENT

I caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of my eye while coming out of a curve—and the way I stepped on my brakes, I could have had an accident. I will not say I came to a screeching halt because I was not speeding. The speed limit on twisting, two-lane Highway 448 connecting Corrales, New Mexico, to the rest of the world is 35 miles per hour, and it is strictly enforced. No one wants to mess with the local cops, born and bred in this farming community fifteen miles north of Albuquerque. At the south end of the road a big sign greets you: “Drive slowly and see our village, drive fast and see our judge.” No one speeds, no one passes on 448.

You drive slowly in Corrales because you are a good citizen. Because you conform. This is a community where until a few years ago the most exciting cultural event was dining at “The Abbey,” an overpriced restaurant where every dish was named after a saint—“San Ysidro Fricassée,” “Santa Ana Veal Cacciatore,” “San Felipe Steak”; where the muzak was one endless Gregorian chant, the décor was one plaster *santo* after the other, and the waiters were dressed like monks. In Corrales, you don’t drive slowly because you want to look around and enjoy the sights. The land is flat here, and the tall cottonwoods hide the rocky mass of the Sandias to the east and the low mesa to the west. Nothing but orchards here, cornfields, horses grazing in their fenced-in pastures, and adobe farmhouses under old cottonwoods. Bucolic. Very bucolic. And boring.

So, while slowly coming out of the curve, I gave a mere cursory glance at the dirt lane branching off from the other side of 448 ahead of me. It was then that in the patch of grass by the road now to my left the standing car materialized. A moment before, when I was facing that patch of grass, it was not there. Now there it was, red and shiny, the hubcaps and whitewall tires sparkling in the sun.

No one was tailgating me or my double take would have resulted in an accident.

Nobody was in the car—I could see flush through the right side window. Nor was anyone near it. The car was parked a few feet from the road in the middle of nowhere, the closest structure a drab clapboard house a piece down the lane. Yet someone had to be looking after the car, for the body was immaculately clean. The sheet of metal that walled up the rear side window had been neatly welded. There was no trace of rust in the chrome



trimmings. The taillight housing was spotless white, and the glass of the windbreaker perfectly clean.

All this I noticed once I got over the first moment of bewilderment that had made me step on my brakes: for in the grass before me rose only the right side of an old, red station wagon—a thin slice of a car, from front bumper to rear bumper, standing there in the grass on two wheels. The front window, had there been one, gave directly onto the cottonwoods, the wire fence, and the cornfields beyond. A Magritte window by State Highway 448 in Corrales, New Mexico.

I was to see that 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air station wagon for the rest of the summer, and then for years afterwards. Furthermore, I have carried it in my eyes ever since. Whoever had put it there by the road knew what he was doing. It was, no doubt, a statement of some sort. But how was one to read this statement? Whoever had gone to the trouble of sawing that car and placing it there did not leave any clues as to his intent.

At first I thought of an advertising gimmick. But what was being advertised? What could be on sale—tires? car parts? the missing half of the car? Or was I approaching a junkyard, such as you can see—wrecked car hoisted high above the shack—on Highway 66 west of Joplin, Missouri? Apparently not, as no signboard was in sight, nor was there a building or even an open space where such business could be conducted. In fact, there was no trace of any commercial activity for at least one mile in either direction. This sliced-up station wagon appeared to be in no direct relationship to any specific referent that I could see. Its function, if it had one, was not to be inferred from any relationship to its context. Poised miraculously upon its two right-side wheels, the car stood alone in regard to both its physical environment and the world of communication. It pointed—that it certainly did—but it did not point to anything that I could see, or even imagine.

When faced with something that does not conform, in the widest sense, to one's automatic expectations, something inconsistent with all acceptable frames of references, one casts about for something analogous, hoping that it may help place the disconcerting element within a comprehensible intellectual framework. So I did just that. I began searching for cars that had been purposely mutilated or altered, in the hope of arriving at the elusive *raison d'être*—at the *purpose*, whatever it might be—of the confounded station wagon.

Once you start looking for something, you will find it. Not surprisingly, either directly or indirectly I found quite a few such cars. The first that came to my mind was Cadillac Ranch, west of Amarillo, where ten garishly painted Cadillacs, half buried at a slant, suddenly surge out of the flat immensity of the Texas Panhandle—although, as I meandered ankle-deep in the mud underneath this grotesque display, I experienced none of the bewilderment provoked by the Corrales van. Like the “Tire of Pisa,” a caricature of the Leaning Tower made of truck tires somewhere in the Midwest, the “Stonehenge of America” struck me, quite blandly, as one

of those pranks that people carry out in order to get themselves or their community in the *Guinness Book of Records*: monstrosities (the Cadillac that stand for prehistoric megaliths, the worn tires that stand for age-smooth marble blocks) born out of the urge to appropriate something majestic but alien, and to reduce it to the level of the familiar.

In time, my collection grew. For years, at the intersection between San Mateo and Gibson in Albuquerque I had driven by a tall arch covered with green tiles supporting a car covered with blue tiles, without ever looking at it. It took the sliced-up Bel Air to make me *see* it; and as it turned out, this “Monument to the American Automobile” was the work of a friend, Barbara Grygutis, a well known sculptor and architect from Tucson, Arizona.

I began paying attention to all sorts of magazines.¹ I found pictures of Chryslers turned into dinosaurs by junkyard artist Jim Cary in Farmingdale, New Jersey. I found one of a Volkswagen Bug turned into a giant beetle by sculptor David Farmrough in Reno, Nevada. I discovered another Volkswagen Bug transformed into a green lawn besprinkled with flowers as a gimmick to promote a landscaping business in the German town of Obertraublig. I came upon a gigantic concrete cube with brightly colored cars stuck at various angles to its sides—a horror intended to help visitors orient themselves in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia; as well as an analogous monolith, sixty cars embedded flush with its sides, in Le Montcel, France. My collection grew and grew. And I began taking pictures.

There is the rear end of a black 1959 Cadillac Coupé de Ville jutting at a slant over the flashy entrance of the Hard Rock Café on West 57th Street in Manhattan, highlighting an otherwise rather drab building. Its tail fins sharply sticking out, the kitschy affair serves as a marquee, that preemphatory emblem of social exclusiveness—a wacky postmodern eye-stopper that moons the passerby into submission to its lofty injunction. For the Cadillac, rather than Roland Barthes’s Citroën Déesse, is the universal “object superlatif” of our age.

There is the front of a blue Volkswagen van, strategically placed a few feet from State Highway 4 in Jemez Valley, holes blowtorched to create a grinning, frightening face that seems about to pounce upon you from out of the woods.

Possibly inspired by the Dezerland Hotel in Miami (“Come to A Whole Carnival of 50’s Fun, 50’s Fins and 50’s Fantasy!!”), there was the front of a pink 1957 Cadillac Eldorado turned into a sofa—a garish, cutesy piece of furniture straight of a Barbie Doll’s dream of elegance in home furnishing, on display at a crafts exhibit in Santa Fe. It cost several thousand dollars—the price not including the swarthy gentleman sitting on it and sipping his soda.

One last example, no more extant, which regrettably I failed to photograph. A few years ago, along Interstate 25 a few miles north of Albuquerque, a huge billboard paraded a forceful ad for a local collision damages lawyer.² Each side of the billboard, which was placed

perpendicularly to the highway, was painted to resemble a brick wall with a big, jagged hole in the middle. Through this hole, on either side of the billboard, protruded the front half and the rear end of a car. While you drove past, for an instant you had the impression that the car was flying through the structure. Of course, the vehicle had been sawed in two and the two halves had been attached to the billboard; the effect, however, was quite impressive, and the function of the mutilated car was as clear as it was univocal. As was the function of another specimen in my collection—a sliced up police car placed by a larger road than Highway 448 as a deterrent against speeders somewhere in the vicinity of the University of Maryland. The caption of the newspaper picture (which was sent to me by a friend who, unfortunately, failed to document its source) specifies that the Maryland State Police was thinking of extending the use of this construct.

My examples, whether first- or second-hand, have much in common. They all pertain to the world of popular mythology that has developed around automobiles—an epistemological system universally shared that ensures ready and unambiguous communication. Moreover, all these cars were altered to convey a message that was either unmistakable or easily inferable. For reasons and purposes of their own, some of these messages made use of the general notion of the car as an instrument of instant prestige, while others (the car flying through the brick wall, the car as a skull) played on the notion of the automobile as a potential instrument of death. Whether as shelter and/or symbol of exclusiveness (the marquee), as token of extravagant luxury (the sofa) or as *memento mori*, each of these mutilated cars sent forth a statement that was either unequivocal or reducible to a narrow range of semantic possibilities.

Not so with the Bel Air station wagon. While also partaking of the mythical associations attending the world of automobiles, this tucked away sliver of a car did not convey any recognizable message. At the same time, the visual statement it produced was very powerful—so powerful, in fact, that one felt it emanated from an equally forceful agency that planned for it to signify independently of any deducible intentionality.

America is strewn with car relics, grotesque eyesores that sometime achieve a totally unintentional aesthetic effect in relation to their surroundings. I will mention just two such cases among many I collected elsewhere in New Mexico. Both cars had been left to rust away where presumably they had died on their owners' hands. One, weeds growing around and inside it, squatted against the Santo Domingo Pueblo trading post. It was an old 1947 or '48 Frazer, perfectly in tune with the huge, peeling mural featuring the omnipresent plumed Indian astride his rearing pony, and the traditional announcement that you were entering "The Most Interesting Spot in the West." The other car, a 1958 Dodge, once a favorite target for shooting practice among the local bravos and now the home of a squawking jaybird, squatted twenty feet from the dirt road that leads to Chaco Canyon. Apart from the thin line of telephone poles in the distance, this relic is the only man-made feature in a radius of maybe fifteen miles on

empty, barren Chaco Mesa. The effect produced by the two relics is quite different; yet, in both cases, this effect was clearly unintended. The only possible reason for leaving these cars where they are was one of economy and, probably, inertia, for it would have been a total waste of money, time, and effort to have them towed away to the wreckers'. After all, in Indian country, cars and animals are routinely abandoned where they fall. The relics at Santo Domingo and Chaco Mesa were left unaltered, except for the presumable salvaging of the parts that could be reutilized. The damages subsequently inflicted on them are the result of vandalism and of the passing of time. On the contrary, the Chevy wagon in Corrales was first—and carefully—mutilated, and *then* deliberately placed where it now stands. Moreover, it was kept in as good a shape as if it had been when in running condition. The tender loving care of a very meticulous owner was visible here, and so much effort spelled intentionality. Cryptic, enigmatic intentionality.

So, I was back to base one. Lacking the code to crack the message, I had attempted to construct a working frame of reference based on specimens that I initially perceived to be analogous to the object that had started me on my wild chase after its meaning. My framework, however, had proved inadequate to answer the nagging questions: Why would anyone slice up a '57 Chevrolet Bel Air, perhaps the most beloved of all American cars? Why lavish such care on a mutilated car? Why place it here? Clearly, I had gone about it the wrong way.

In fact, I had been asking the wrong questions. Unthinkingly backsliding into the dangerous terrain of the intentional fallacy, I had directed all my questions toward the source of the message. If I wanted to unravel the riddle, I better turn to the third element of the communication model and direct my questions to the addressee of the durn message.

Once I shifted gears and asked myself what effect the confounded station wagon had on me, I realized that the primary result of that incongruous roadside apparition was one of defamiliarization. If a non-mutilated car had been parked on that very spot along 448, I would have hardly noticed it. Certainly I would not have risked an accident to take a second look at it, nor would I have continued to think about it. If the Bel Air station wagon became a minor obsession with me, it was precisely because it was not in the dilapidated condition I would have expected of a vehicle that, given its state, should have been on its way to being totaled, which it obviously was not. To put it plainly, it was a car but it was not a car. Or rather, quite maddeningly, it was not a car but it *was* a car.

Like Viktor Šklovskij's half-burned log in the dying fire, my station wagon had been turned, and by that turn had revived the fire—that is to say, it had rekindled my attention and forced me to see it as for the first time. The car had become *new*.

I had come upon the code to crack the message. Evidently, the code lay in the addressee's response which the source of the message had activated by manipulating the universal and, at the same time, very American lan-

guage of cars. Before my eyes, my Nefertiti of a Chevy—splendid on one side, distressingly maimed on the other (but precisely for this reason, unique and impossible to relinquish)—had turned into a piece of modern art.

“The purpose of art,” wrote Šklovskij, “is to communicate the impression of the object as ‘vision’ rather than as ‘recognition’”; and again: “[I]n art, the process of perception is an end onto itself, and must be a prolonged one. Art is a way of ‘feeling’ the object in its becoming.” This was exactly what I had been experiencing. The Bel Air station wagon had *become*, whereas all the cars and trucks and vans passing ever so slowly on this country road simply *were*: static, immutable, semantically inert. These vehicles I *recognized* (“Wait, don’t cross—there’s a car coming!”), while the Chevy I *saw* because it had provided me with a vision.

So there I was, standing on the shoulder of this road in the middle of New Mexico, staring at an object that by all the prevailing cultural criteria of our age could and should have been on exhibit at the MOMA. I could visualize my sliver of a Bel Air enthroned among the Hans Arps and the Ibram Lassaws and the Jasper Johns, finally receiving the intellectual attention it deserved. Compared to my Chevy, how dull, how banal was the Pininfarina prototype of the body of Cisitalia 102 displayed there—how merely a testimony to stylistic development in industrial design! Whereas, in line with the predominant contemporary conception of art, in line with Picasso’s baboon and its toy car muzzle a few rooms away, my station wagon communicated through the traumatic alteration of its accepted, “recognizable” form. It communicated through its own planned, perfectly executed near-destruction—an ironic post-Dada form of self-annihilation that had stripped it of its founding *raison d’être*, that is to say, its functionality as a moving vehicle; and by this very fact had catapulted it into the universe of non-functional, ever dynamic communication—into the universe of art as we conceive of it today. In the world of speed and mobility, the sliced-up Chevy was the equivalent of Duchamp’s spiked flatiron in the world of domesticity.

Paradoxically, had I come upon this station wagon in the Museum of Modern Art, in all probability I would have hardly looked at it because in that context it would have been just what I expected to see. It would have been just another clever trick among many analogous statements. As part of a general exercise in redundancy, the mutilated car would have lost most, if not all, of its impact as a defamiliarizing agent. So pat and so obvious in its official, institutionalized counterfunction, it would have been as undistinguishable among its peers as it had been, prior to its mutilation, among all the other cars and trucks and vans running—or rather, crawling—along 448.

I do not know why the red station wagon was placed where I saw it—and where I have been seeing it ever since, less and less cared-for, I’m afraid. I do know, however, that it presented itself to me as an exemplary twentieth century art construct because it was so alien to the very context within which I saw it, i.e., the particular regional, Southwestern context

where aesthetic expectations are mostly satisfied by the ceaseless reiteration of the beauty of the land and the rugged life of the cowpunchers, by the constant reworking of Latino folkways, and by the romanticized glorification of the Indian warrior on his pony and the Indian woman with her pottery. Only in this context can the mutilated Chevy set in motion the process of defamiliarization. If our station wagon is to communicate, it must do so as a potential fly in the buttermilk set within its rural environment, among the orchards and the cottonwoods and the cornfields and the grazing horses of the Rio Grande valley. Only here its statement, whatever one may take it to be, has a chance of reaching an audience—even at the cost of causing an accident.

Whoever keeps that Chevy on that patch of grass by the road surely is well aware of this. Whoever he is, this enigmatic individual who used to come every day to wipe the dust off his less-than-half Bel Air and to polish it (it has been some time since he last gave it a new coat of paint—now rust, dust, cobwebs and weeds are taking over), its owner, its keeper, its *creator*, must have a deep grasp of the process of perception. Maybe he displays his decoy just for the fun of it. Maybe, armed with binoculars, he has his daily laugh at us all. Maybe, armed with a handycam, he even tapes us, the bewildered victims of his candid camera. Or, perhaps, he chooses to ignore the haphazard coming together of his message and its anonymous addressees. Supremely indifferent to the mechanism he has set in motion while we struggle in the snare of his cryptic message, he, invisible in the groves of timeless Corrales, nonchalantly pares his godly fingernails.

Endnotes

¹ And books. In particular, cfr. *Auto Tattoo* by Germano Celant, and *Autogeddon* by Heathcote Williams.

² A year later the billboard had been removed. When I contacted the law firm, I came up against near-insurmountable difficulties concerning image copyrights raised by the advertising agency.



Grand Canyon, northwestern Arizona

CHARLES FLETCHER LUMMIS ON THE ROAD

Il New Mexico è una miniera di storie, leggende, racconti straordinari. Indiani pueblo, zuni, navajo, apaches Jicarilla e Mescalero, *conquistadores* spagnoli, *cowboys*, avventurieri di ogni razza e di ogni colore, hanno lasciato tracce profonde nell'etos locale; e prima di tutti, i misteriosi anasazi, la popolazione che agli inizi del secondo millennio della nostra epoca visse in centri costruiti nelle spaccature delle rocce dei canyon e che poi, nessuno sa veramente perché, scomparve nel nulla.

Fra le mille storie con le quali ci si trova a contatto in questa terra di estremi contrasti, ve n'è una che ha dello straordinario. È la storia di un fotografo, Charles Fletcher Lummis, un ex studente (mai laureatosi) di Harvard, il quale nel 1884, a venticinque anni, piantò la fattoria del suocero in Ohio (e con essa, va detto, la moglie) e si mise in cammino verso la California.

Una storia tipica dell'epoca, si direbbe. “Go West, Young Man”, aveva esortato trentatré anni prima John Babsone Lane Soule, un giornalista dell'Indiana; proseguendo, “... and grow up with the country”. Parole riprese nel 1865, a Guerra Civile terminata, da Horace Greeley sul *New York Tribune*. Erano gli anni della grande migrazione verso il West, attraverso le immense pianure centrali (“mile after mile of miles after miles”, è il detto), oltre la barriera delle Rocky Mountains, all'inseguimento di una nuova vita in un mondo ancora in buona parte da scoprire. Scoprire, beninteso, da noi bianchi. E come migliaia prima e dopo di lui, Lummis accolse l'invito, e partì. Non a cavallo. Non su un carro. Non aggregandosi a una carovana. In cammino, appunto. Da solo.

Lo immaginiamo (fin qui ci riusciamo) fare il primo passo di quel viaggio – un viaggio ben più lungo di quello delle mille miglia che, diceva Confucio, comincia appunto col primo. Lo vediamo scendere lo scalino della veranda di quella fattoria – la moglie con le mani strette sotto il grembiulone, il suocero le braccia puntate alla ringhiera, lì fermi che lo guardano allontanarsi. Se poi erano usciti a vederlo partire – se non avevano anticipato di quell'ultimo istante una separazione forse definitiva. E lui? Si sarà voltato a fare un gesto di saluto? Gli avranno risposto? Si aspettavano di rivederlo, oppure già sapevano che non sarebbe mai più tornato?¹ Dobbiamo inventarcela, la scena. Tuttavia, dettagli a parte, immaginarla è possibile. Quello che non è possibile, è accompagnarlo per i



centoquarantatre giorni di cammino lungo le 3.057 miglia che lo dividevano da Los Angeles, attraverso regioni completamente deserte, territori di nazioni indigene non sempre amiche, lungo piste sulle quali di quando in quando correva soltanto la sbatacchiante diligenza (si faceva da parte? lo prendevano su?) e, martellando sordo sulla strada di terra battuta, il Pony Express col suo sacco della posta. Impossibile vederla, quella figurina solitaria – l'abbiamo già persa in fondo alla viottola di casa, là dove svolta dietro quel folto d'alberi.

Ma no: è la fattoria – gli attrezzi appoggiati alla parete esterna, le tendine alla piccole finestre quadrate, il filo di fumo che sale dal comignolo, l'odore della pancetta dell'ultima colazione preparatagli, questo sì; sono le figure lasciate dietro, silenziose, forse per sempre, ciò che non vediamo più. Perché stiamo già contando – le miglia sono già 3056. 3055. E sono solo le sette di mattina: prima di sera saranno, quante? L'occhio – il suo, e il nostro – guarda avanti. Siamo *on the road*. E non si torna più indietro.

Quella epopea solitaria fece di Lummis una leggenda nazionale. L'aveva progettata con grande cura. Durante il viaggio, tramite il Pony Express inviò tutte le settimane una lettera al *Times* di Los Angeles descrivendo ogni tappa del suo progredire. Preceduto da questo auto-reportage, quando arrivò a Los Angeles trovò immediata occupazione al *Times*. Così cominciò la carriera giornalistica di quest'uomo straordinario, poeta, autore di quasi quattrocento fra libri, articoli, monografie e traduzioni dallo spagnolo, direttore di due influenti riviste dedicate al Southwest, creatore del Southwest Museum di Los Angeles, battagliero promotore di innumerevoli iniziative a favore degli indiani d'America. Ma Lummis fu, soprattutto, un fotografo di stupefacente sensibilità.

Le migliaia di immagini con le quali documentò la vita e la cultura dei pueblo, dei navajo, degli acoma e degli hopi, dei cui diritti egli fu uno dei primi campioni, costituiscono una preziosa fonte di informazioni storiche ed etnografiche su un mondo che veniva rapidamente contaminato dall'interessata curiosità della cultura egemone. Al tempo stesso, queste fotografie costituiscono un modello di grande rilevanza per quella che sarebbe divenuta una lettura diffusissima degli indiani americani da parte della cultura bianca.

Lummis era entrato in contatto per la prima volta con i pueblo del New Mexico durante il suo viaggio transcontinentale. Tre anni più tardi, colpito da un ictus che gli paralizzò il braccio e il fianco sinistro, fu costretto a lasciare il lavoro al *Times*². Lummis tornò allora nel New Mexico, e dal 1888 al 1892 visse a Isleta, un pueblo sul Rio Grande poco a sud di Albuquerque. A questo periodo risalgono tante delle storie – forse, in qualche caso, delle leggende – che fanno di questa figura un campionario di ciò che, a torto o a ragione, consideriamo tipico del West.

Ad esempio, il motivo per il quale Lummis arrivò a Isleta. Inizialmente, Isleta fu per lui un rifugio dove trovò riparo dalle minacce di morte rivoltegli da un gruppo di *penitentes*, i cattolici fanatici dediti alla auto-

flagellazione, i cui segreti riti sadomasochisti (che includevano false – ma non poi tanto – crocifissioni) Lummis era riuscito a fotografare. E vi era riuscito con un sistema molto in carattere: dei suoi amici di San Mateo, nel New Mexico nord-occidentale, presso i quali era ospite, lo avevano accompagnato fra le montagne vicine e avevano tenuto a bada i *penitentes* con le pistole mentre Lummis li ritraeva. Dopo di che, il giovane fotografo aveva dovuto fare le valige in tutta fretta. (Ma qualche mese più tardi, a Isleta, fu colto in una imboscata; fortunatamente se la cavò, anche se con una brutta ferita alla schiena)³.

V'è poi la storia dell'arrivo vero e proprio a Isleta: una storia che combina tecnologia e superstizione in uno stupendo *mélange* culturale. Claudicante e ancora paralizzato al braccio sinistro in conseguenza dell'ictus, Lummis giunse al pueblo un anno esatto dopo la morte del *cacique* locale, il quale negli ultimi anni di vita era rimasto paralizzato. L'arrivo di quell'uomo singolare, armato di quella misteriosa macchina fotografica, paralizzato come lo era stato il *cacique*, fu preso come un segno delle divinità; e con l'appoggio di una prominente famiglia del pueblo, Lummis venne accettato dalla comunità e divenne parte di quel piccolo mondo immobile chiuso nel suo millenario sistema di vita.

Dalla sua base a Isleta, Lummis prese a girare per il New Mexico e per l'Arizona, interessandosi ad ogni aspetto della vita e dei costumi degli indiani, documentandoli sistematicamente e facendosene interprete presso la cultura egemone, in questo precorrendo lo stesso Edward S. Curtis. Spesso le sue fotografie furono le prime di quel mondo a giungere agli occhi dell'Occidente; e molte delle sue immagini dei navajo, dei pueblo, delle rovine anasazi e di tanti aspetti di quel paesaggio desertico sono ormai divenute canoniche.

Il Museo dell'Università del New Mexico a Albuquerque possiede varie centinaia di stampe originali di Lummis, ed è da questa ricchissima collezione che provengono gli esemplari presentati in occasione del convegno "West o Far West: mito e realtà" tenutosi a Treviso nell'autunno del 1991⁴. Tranne qualche eccezione, sono tutti cianotipi. Lummis non disponeva di una camera oscura: sviluppava esponendo i suoi negativi al sole, e quindi sciacquava la carta impressionata dentro un catino dove un ragazzino indiano versava l'acqua portata dal pozzo dentro una *tinaja*, una brocca di terracotta. Tutto qui, il suo laboratorio fotografico. La qualità della stampa è dunque rudimentale⁵. Quello che non è rudimentale, peraltro, è la precisione strutturale dell'immagine, la sua forza espressiva, il suo intenso contenuto umano e documentario. Da questo velato mondo azzurrino, quasi sottomarino, sorge una sostanza narrativa senza pari. Donne severe, talora bellissime se pur prosciugate dal sole impietoso e segnate dal lavoro senza fine, ci guardano con serena fermezza, riempiendo di dignitosa partecipazione la breve sosta nel lavoro quotidiano che la posa ha richiesto. Uomini rugosi, avvolti nelle loro coperte a strisce o vestiti nei loro logori abiti da lavoro, si fermano per un lungo istante nel loro secolare ritmo vitale, lasciano che ne cogliamo un intimo spiraglio di trattenuta curiosità per il

fotografo e per il suo ingombrante trabiccolo, segni di una realtà diversa, invadente eppure rispettata. O sopportata. Narrano, queste immagini, la muta storia eloquente di una vita dura e tuttavia ricca di valori, e ce ne fanno toccare con mano tanti momenti, ognuno forse incomprensibile se preso a sé, ma che nel loro insieme fanno, appunto, storia.

L'effetto più straordinario dell'opera fotografica di Charles Fletcher Lummis è infatti il senso dell'assoluta compattezza sociale dei suoi soggetti. Fra queste figure austere e le loro abitazioni di *adobe*, le viuzze sterminate, i grandi spiazzi battuti, v'è completa identità. Vediamo gente povera, sì, gente il cui destino di lavoro indefesso precede l'individuo di millenni; eppure anche in queste immagini sottomarine l'individuo risulta integrato, in totale armonia con gli altri e con l'ambiente comune, conscio di un disegno generale che a tutti e a tutto assegna un posto, un ruolo, e quindi una responsabilità. Quindi un valore mai messo in discussione.

Questo, forse ancor più delle splendide immagini delle rovine degli anasazi, di certi canyon segreti e certi paesaggi lunari, questo è forse ciò che più colpisce l'osservatore. Oggi, quando l'ammirazione per la cultura indiana non è più, come cento anni fa, una questione di pionieristiche idiosincrasie personali ma un'acquisizione generale, oggi è facile leggere tutto questo nei volti, nelle parole non dette, nelle pose contenute e giudicanti dei pueblo. Oggi questa ricchezza spirituale è un valore che, se pur lontano, appartiene a tutti. All'epoca di Lummis, si trattava ancora di una scoperta, che se da un lato si appoggiava a certi residui romantici (l'episteme del 'buon selvaggio', con tutte le sue ramificazioni iconiche e letterarie), dall'altro andava a urtare contro le insidiose teorie legate alla ideologia del progresso e della colonizzazione interna, che fungevano da cortina fumogena all'avanzata delle truppe dello sfruttamento.

Con le sue fotografie così come la sua pubblicitaria, Lummis combatté una crociata pionieristica non priva, va detto, di una certa pericolosa ambiguità: perché, echeggiando il Mark Twain che rideva dei suoi innocenti connazionali vacanzieri in Europa, Lummis gridò ai suoi connazionali, "Prima visitate l'America!" – col che intendeva dire, il Southwest. E così facendo contribuì a promuovere una lettura dell'indiano in chiave di oggetto turistico, e dunque 'altro'.

Con tutto ciò, la battaglia di Lummis va apprezzata per la sua insistenza nel proporre un'immagine non eroica dell'indiano. In questo, Lummis andava contro la tradizione di vedere e dipingere l'indiano come guerriero, e pertanto come il nemico, lo scotennatore, il rapitore di donne e di bambini. Tale tradizione, risalente ai tempi dei Puritani, era stata popolarizzata in letteratura (si fa per dire) dai cosiddetti 'romanzi di frontiera' della prima metà dell'Ottocento – e in questo lo stesso James Fenimore Cooper aveva avuto la sua parte. Era poi stata rinsaldata da tanti pittori del West, tra i quali Remington, i quali tendevano a presentare l'indiano come 'altro', se pur magari eroico: un modo indiretto di esaltare chi aveva sconfitto un nemico appunto eroico.

Nel suo lavoro sugli indiani, Lummis privilegiò invece la quotidianità: interni, donne e uomini intenti alle loro occupazioni, bambini che giocano, occasioni rituali anche le meno oleografiche. L'indiano che esce dalla produzione di Lummis è diverso, sì, dal bianco, al quale queste immagini si rivolgono, ma non è l'«altro». Anzi, i rapporti affettivi che traspaiono, la familiarità spontanea con gli attrezzi da lavoro, la decorosa povertà, tutto sussurra una fondamentale comunanza con i poveri contadini ispanici, con la dura gente di frontiera che ben conosceva quella precarietà, l'accettava come normale, e certamente non come ragione di vergogna. Per decenni Hollywood avrebbe poi continuato a capitalizzare sull'immagine eroica (oppure, l'altra faccia della medaglia: quella infida e 'selvaggia') dell'indiano. Ma il successo di certi recenti film di consumo che ribaltano la vecchia equazione manichea ci dice che i tempi stanno cambiando anche per Hollywood. Il tempo, finalmente, sta dando ragione a Lummis. E visitando Isleta, che a parte le antenne delle Tv sulle casupole di *adobe* e qualche auto malridotta non è molto diversa oggi da quella ritratta cent'anni fa da Lummis, ci si rende conto come quest'uomo, con tutto il suo lato avventuroso e spettacolare, fosse riuscito a capire, vivendola dall'interno, l'umanissima realtà del pueblo. A capirla, e a farla capire.

Quando Lummis morì, nel 1928, ormai cieco eppure sempre al centro di tante iniziative, di tanti progetti e tante 'missioni', si lasciava dietro un patrimonio che i decenni successivi avrebbero fatto fruttare ben al di là, forse, delle sue stesse speranze. Tanti libri, sì, tante splendide fotografie, ma soprattutto un modo di vedere, e pertanto un modo di capire. Questa la sua eredità: che si è poi dispersa in mille rivoli, diventando patrimonio comune; entrando, magari senza che noi stessi ce ne rendessimo conto, dentro ognuno di noi.

Non c'è maggiore ricchezza che un uomo possa lasciare dietro di sé.

Note

¹ Lummis divorziò dalla prima moglie nel febbraio del 1891.

² Fra i tanti servizi giornalistici che Lummis fece per il *Los Angeles Times*, uno dei più interessanti, e certamente il più pericoloso, fu quando seguì la lunga, estenuante caccia alla banda di apache di Geronimo. Cfr. *The Land of Poco Tiempo* 113-64. A ennesima indicazione della singolarità del personaggio, questo volume è dedicato "To Eva and Dorothea" – la seconda e la prima moglie di Lummis.

³ Lummis, *Some Strange Corners*, 90-93. Guido Piovene è stato forse uno dei primi viaggiatori italiani a scrivere dei *penitentes*; vedi *De America*, 323-29.

⁴ Tutte le fotografie in mostra, ottenute grazie a Joseph Traugot, studioso di Lummis e all'epoca direttore della Jonson Gallery della University of New Mexico ad Albuquerque, sono riprodotte nel volume *La terra incantata dei pueblo. Fotografie di Charles Fletcher Lummis 1888-1905*.

⁵ Per la tecnica fotografica di Lummis, cfr. Houlihan 2-4.



Puye Cliff ruins, Pajarito Plateau, northern New Mexico

STEREOTYPES OF THE AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE ITALIAN MEDIA¹

In the Fall of 1991 the town of Treviso, near Venice, celebrated the quincentennial of Columbus' arrival in the New World with a series of cultural events focused on the American West. The transatlantic sponsors included the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, the Jonson Gallery, the Department of American Studies (College of Arts and Sciences) and the College of Fine Arts of the same university, as well as the Cultural Office of the Embassy of the United States in Rome. The Italian sponsors were the municipal and the provincial governments of Treviso, the University of Venice, the University of Florence, the Italian Association of North American Studies, an important local industrialist, and a Treviso savings bank—a bank with remarkable clout in the community and throughout the Veneto region. This institution provided most of the necessary financial funding, as well as the impressive premises where the featured events took place. These consisted of an exhibit of original cyanotypes by American photographer Charles Fletcher Lummis; an international symposium entitled “West or Far West: The Myth and the Commodity;” and an exhibit of paintings by Albuquerque artist Frank McCulloch, entitled “Painting the Desert.”

The responsibility for the organization of these events rested primarily on Anna Secco, a well-known specialist in Native American studies, long associated with the University of Venice. I was number two in our two-person team. Although all decisions were taken jointly, for the purpose of greater efficiency we divided between us as much of the organizational work as was possible. A case in point was the media. To ensure adequate coverage, we agreed that Anna would be responsible for all contacts with the local and the regional TV networks and newspapers, while I would concentrate on the national press.

In this talk, I will offer some observations, both specific and general, concerning this aspect of the organization. Designing strategies on how to involve the press and attempting to implement them gave me the opportunity to directly confront certain preconceptions about Native Americans apparently held by many Italians. I observed these preconceptions become operative in everyday business transactions, independently of the personal convictions of the individuals involved. I saw preconceived ideas take on a reality of their own that was totally divorced from their referents—a reality



that was impersonal, abstract and, consequently, unassailable. I saw these ideas shape and dictate the actions of men and women often unaware of the contradictions in which they were caught, while those who *were* aware had little or no control over the way the exploitation of the “Redskin” as a commodity was being effected.

Of our various sponsors, the bank was the only one that had any say in the organization. From the very beginning, it was made clear to us that the bank expected consistent returns in the form of publicity, both locally and nationwide, from its investment in the venture. As a matter of fact, we were made to feel that the success of both the exhibit and the symposium would be measured not so much on the basis of their scientific quality but on the amount of attention we would be able to attract through the media.

In this respect, it was immediately apparent that what our main sponsor considered to be the most valuable asset of our enterprise was the “sale value” of the American Indian. One high ranking bank official was candid enough to admit—though with a self-deprecating smile—that by “sale value” he meant the appeal that the traditional image of the American Indian would have on our projected audience.

Thus, from the earliest stages of our organizational endeavor we were faced with a potentially disruptive dichotomy. While Anna and I, with the support of various colleagues from our home institutions, were interested in promoting a revision of the traditional image of the American Indians as held in our country, our sponsor seemed to be concerned primarily with the amount of interest, of any kind, that we might be able to generate. Although this concern was never spelled out to us in so many words, we were left to draw the conclusion that the more we pitched our appeal to the culturally unsophisticated, the greater were the chances of attracting a wide audience and, therefore, of making good the bank’s investment.

For several months, we negotiated a course of action that would be acceptable to both parties. This implied the necessity of allowing for compromises. In the end, I am afraid our sponsor felt that we had not compromised enough.

Initially, we were off to an excellent start—at least in the eyes of the sponsor. The very first printout we put forth to publicize the Lummi exhibit was highly appreciated by the bank’s officials. It also turned out to be a serious source of embarrassment for us.

One pamphlet included relevant documentary material as well as two articles on Lummi, one written by Joseph Traugott, the curator of the Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque and the curator of the Lummi exhibit, and the other written by me. The pamphlet also included three photographs that would be shown in the exhibit. All of this material we had carefully selected with an eye to the specific audience it was intended for—the media, and a selection of local and national cultural foundations. Unfortunately, we made the mistake of leaving the choice of the cover illustration to the graphic designer in charge of the visual presentation of the exhibit and of the printed material relating to it.

Much to our dismay, the pamphlet appeared with a graphically impressive but historically inaccurate cover. In the middle of a large black expanse, three 25 cent US stamps of the Indian Headdresses series conspicuously illustrated our exhibit devoted to the Pueblo Indians.

Purely from a graphic point of view, our pamphlet was a hit. However, as evidence of our commitment to historic accuracy and to a non-stereotypical approach to Native Americans, it was a humiliating blunder.

Much to the designer's indignant disappointment and the bank officials' controlled grumbles, the headdresses disappeared from all subsequent publications. However, this unwitting blunder taught us that if we wanted to attract public attention at all, or at least enough public attention to warrant the expenses incurred by our sponsor, we had better learn to use the very stereotypes we were out to debunk. If we wanted to "sell" a new (new to our audience, to be sure) image of the Native America, we had to catch our perspective audience's attention by initially using for leverage the popular view of the American Indian as "Redskins."

The problem, of course, was to find a compromise threshold that we could live with. We had to learn to walk a fine line. We rejected the suggestion that an imitation teepee be erected at the entrance of the show, but we ransacked our and our friends' collections of Western memorabilia; and with nary a sigh over the resulting hodge-podge effect, we decked the windows of a prominent downtown bookstore with an array of drums, bows, arrows and arrow heads, pouches, and pipes to highlight an extensive display of books on the American West and on the Native Americans published in Italy in the past ten years. Our sponsor, chafing for a really picturesque touch, authorized an additional expenditure to ensure the presence of a picture-perfect Indian. We contacted Blue Spruce Standing Deer, a Taos Pueblo artist and singer whose long braided hair and austere bearing definitely met the bill. Unfortunately, he was unable to come; and much to everybody's regret, this show of genuine exotica had to be forfeited. Still, we promised the journalists and the TV reporters that, yes, there would be "real" Indians in Treviso on the appointed day, and, yes, they would be available for interviews—but, no, there would be no plumed headdresses. This was disappointing news to more than one eager reporter, but it gave us the opportunity to rectify the impression—of our own making, alas—that Pueblo Indians wear headdresses.

When D-day finally arrived and cameramen and reporters began swarming around the exhibit with all their equipment and cables and extra lights and general air of owning the place, typically making it difficult for us to give the finishing touches to the show, our sponsor's representatives, though trying to couch it in fairly soft terms, could not help voicing their disappointment that except for the impressive turquoise necklace and silver concho belt worn by Joe Sando, the Jemez Pueblo historian, no overt sign of "Indian-ness" was displayed by the other three Indian guest speakers. The very fact that neither Louise Erdrich nor her late husband Michael Dorris were somatically recognizable as Native Americans was, I'm afraid,

held against us, as it proved we had not made the best possible use of the funds earmarked for that purpose. Fortunately, we were able to direct the media toward Ms Erdrich as an author whose work had been translated into Italian, thus ensuring her a certain degree of visibility.

The problems experienced by our sponsor with the final product as we delivered it interest us here only as they reflect the traditional view of the American Indian held by Italian culture at large. For our sponsor, the Native American was a commodity. He was a means, rather than an end. To put it bluntly, the bank's purpose in joining our venture was to re-invest some of its financial gains in cultural activities, as saving banks are required to do under Italian law, while at the same time attracting positive public attention. Our original idea had seemed quite appropriate in meeting the bank's needs. The Native Americans, be they Pueblos or Cheyennes, Comanches or Iroquois, could be counted upon as sure-proof "leader" products on display in front of the store window. Practically, they were to function as cigar store Indians.

The fact was that inside the store—that is to say, in the exhibit and in the amphitheatre where the symposium was held—a different type of American Indian was being presented. None of the traditional icons of the "Redskins" were there—there were no tomahawks, no peace calumets, no teepees. No headdresses. In the eye of the sponsor, the absence of all conventional trappings curtailed the expected cash flow of publicity.

On the other hand, neither the flip side of the coin could be counted upon—namely, the relatively recent image of the Native American as victim and as rebel. This image, particularly dear to young Italians of Marxist-Leninist leanings, was one that for different reasons neither we nor our sponsor were interested in promoting. For the bank, to foster an overtly radical slant, one that implied harsh criticism of the United States and, by extension, of their official allies in Italy, would mean making political waves contrary to its position in the community. For us, a marked political stance would mean being ensnared into yet another cultural trap—the *cliché* of revolutionary wishful thinking and of blanket anti-Americanism.

While all in favor of avoiding this trap, our sponsor became increasingly worried over our attempt to equally steer away from the traditional image of the Native American and its pat stereotypes—a course of action which, in the mind of the bank officials, could only result in an unwanted pre-selection of our audience along culturally highbrow lines. The bank executives with whom we dealt were personally aware of the pitfalls and of the historic thinness of such image—or, at the very least, they made sure of projecting themselves as individuals who were above stereotyping. However, in the superior corporate interest of the sponsor, they felt that we should soft-pedal on anything going counter the established view of the Indians as "Redskins."

It is not possible for us to assess whether, had we aimed at a wider popular consumption, the Lummis exhibit, the symposium, and the other presentations would have received a larger coverage. From our point of

view, the entire event was a remarkable success. Hundreds of secondary school youngsters in Treviso were taken to lengthy guided tours of the exhibits, to the accompanying sound of recorded Indian music. Day after day, Western movies and documentaries, many of them in the original language, were shown free of charge in a downtown theatre. The bookstores sold a considerable number of books on the West and on Native Americans in particular. For two weeks, the Lummis and the McCulloch exhibits were visited by hundreds of viewers. Finally, the symposium, although concentrated in only one day, attracted scholars from as far as Milan, Florence, and Rome.

None of this could have taken place without the help and support of the media.

The Lummis exhibit received very positive coverage by the local TV networks. Three different channels in the Veneto region sent their crews to the opening of the show. Each of them interviewed at least two of our Native American speakers. Joseph Traugott, the exhibit curator, was also repeatedly interviewed, as was a few days later when Andrea Boschi, a well-known journalist and news producer for TG3, one of the three national channels, came down from Milan to film an eight minute program which was broadcasted nationwide at prime time. This program helped considerably in disseminating information about the exhibit and in highlighting its cultural relevance. From a promotional point of view, this was our greatest success. It was all the more important as we suffered a serious setback when *Panorama*, the leading weekly in the country, after assuring us of ample coverage to the point of elaborating a six page service in collaboration with us, at the last minute went back on its word. As Italian weeklies and newspapers with nationwide circulation will cover an event only if granted exclusive rights, thus forcing you to put all your eggs in one basket, so to speak, by that time we heard of *Panorama's* withdrawal it was too late to make arrangements with its competitors, *Espresso* and *Europeo*.

On the whole, however, we received a better coverage than analogous cultural events in provincial venues usually receive.

Apart from short notices and announcements, mostly in the local and the regional press and often unsigned, the full articles on either the exhibit or the symposium, or both, numbered twenty. Thirteen of these appeared in four regional papers. The other seven appeared in *La Stampa* of Turin, *Il Giornale* of Milan, *La Nazione* of Florence, and *Il Messaggero* of Rome. All of these newspapers have nationwide circulation.

Twelve articles were accompanied by at least one photograph from the Lummis exhibit or by a photograph taken at the opening. One regional newspaper devoted a two page spread to the event, for a total of three feature articles and five photographs. Photographs by Lummis also illustrated several of the short notices concerning the show. The fact that most articles were accompanied by at least one photograph testifies to the interest that the media attached to the event.

As we had provided the press with a selection of ten slides from Lummi's portfolio to be used for publicity, the photographs that appeared in print were often the same.

Two in particular turned out to be rather popular: a half portrait of an Isleta Pueblo youth wrapped in a Navajo blanket and wearing a black Navajo hat, and a full figure portrait of an Isleta girl standing in the doorway of her adobe house. Each of these pictures was published by six different papers. A view of Walpi, the Hopi village on First Mesa, which we had chosen for the cover of the exhibit catalog, was published four times.

None of these pictures conformed to the traditional image of the Native American as "Redskin." When a photograph was used, it was always one of those we had provided. The result was that not a single article was accompanied by a visual prop relating to the stereotype. This in itself was quite a success.

I wish the same could be said about the headlines.

The *titolista* (literally, the headline writer) is a very important figure, in that he has the ultimate responsibility of delivering the article to the reader for consumption. His only preoccupation is to come up with a catchy headline. Whether or not the title is consistent with the content of the article is almost irrelevant. In his choice of the title, the headline writer taps his understanding of the average reader's limited interests, and aggressively appeals to his capacity to immediately recognize the message. The *titolista's* referential world is that of *clichés*, of easy-to-grasp puns, of commonplaces often associated with the ephemera of daily information. Headline writers, therefore, are a key factor in the preservation of a communication system based on mechanical cultural responses.

As was predictable, two headlines included the title of an immensely successful movie at the time, *Dances With Wolves*. Three headlines harped upon the word *pellerossa* ("Redskin"): one talked about the "Good Pellerossa," another about the "Redemption of the Pellerossa," and the third about the "Enigma Called Pellerossa." Another headline included the word *stregone*, or sorcerer—a traditional way of referring to the medicine man. Yet another said: "Against the stereotype of the Indian who says Hough." Two more were based on a pun referring to the timely arrival of the US cavalry—a topos of western movies that used to elicit from the Italian audiences the liberating cry, "Arrivano i nostri!" (literally, "Our men are arriving!"). One of the two headlines changed "our" to "their," while the second one changed it to "the Indians." Both headlines played on the reversal of the Good Guys vs. Bad Guys opposition upon which, traditionally, all Westerns are based.

Interestingly, three out of the four national dailies that covered the Treviso event sported a headline that made use of one of the many stock stereotypes about Native Americans. This can be explained in terms of internal competition. The more important the newspaper, the larger the number of pages and, consequently, the greater the need for each article

to vie for the reader's attention—hence, the pressure on the *titolisti* to come up with eye-catching headlines. These often include references to current events to which the average reader is sure to respond. A case in point was Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves*. Although Costner's sappy, politically over-correct and historically incorrect film was only passingly mentioned in four of the articles, it was prominently featured in two bold-type headlines—one of which introduced an article that did not make any mention of the movie.

Rather telling was the difference in the way the authors and the *titolisti* made use of the word “pellerossa.” As mentioned earlier, it appeared in three of the headlines, its tone being invariably matter-of-fact. In the three cases where it occurred in the articles, twice it was put between quotes and once it carried a distinctly distancing tone: “Let's talk about Native Americans (whom we still call Redskins)...” Clearly, the journalists showed an understanding of the stereotypical implications of the word that was totally lost on the *titolisti*, who simply pulled the word out of their overflowing bag of ideologic and linguistic *clichés*, and happily slapped it above articles that questioned the conventional way of perceiving the American Indian, including the use of “pellerossa.”

In fact, the authors of these articles often paraphrased or else transcribed whole passages of information and commentary from the literature we had prepared for the press. While this is common practice among reporters, often stemming from either intellectual laziness or ignorance of the specific subject or both, we felt that in this case the journalists' adoption of the point of view presented in our handouts was not just the result of merely routine hack reportage. The consistency in the ideologic stance characterizing all articles is an indication that the authors meant what they wrote. All articles conveyed a deep respect for Native Americans, a genuine interest in their culture, a sincere concern for their social and economic predicament, and a general awareness of the inadequacy of our established cultural models concerning the American Indian. As one reporter put it at the beginning of his article, “Whoever expects [from the Lummis exhibit] headdresses, peace calumets, palefaces, squaws, and sorcerers, might as well stay home.”

The trope presiding over this sentence is the *litotes*—an affirmation expressed by means of a negation. The author is saying that the American Indian is not “headdresses, calumets, squaws, and sorcerers.” He does not venture to say what American Indian is—he only says what he is *not*.

This is little wonder. For centuries, we (and I don't mean just we Italians) have closed our eyes to the myriad realities of Native Americans, and chosen to believe a generic lie of our own inventing. Now we are beginning to question this illusory reality. The lesson that Treviso drove home is that we are embedded in our culture and in its outdated models. With all our conflicting interests and different points of view, still, all of us—the sponsors, the journalists, the headline writers, we the organizers—had to contend with the ever-present stereotypes. One way or the other, we all

ended up using them. Our sponsors wanted to use them to draw larger and larger crowds. The *titolisti* used them to catch the readers' attention. The reporters used them to show how up-to-date and politically correct they were in reneging them. *We* used them, hesitantly relying on the eloquence of the quotation marks between which we strait-jacketed them, in the dubious hope of debunking them.

It will take time to learn to distrust and ultimately reject the stereotype, this deceptive shortcut to knowledge and communication. However, questioning its validity is a step in the right direction. Treviso showed that many Italians are ready to take this step—and that many have.

Endnotes

¹ Paper read at the 1992 ASA Convention in Costa Mesa, CA.



View from Mokey Dugway, southern Utah

VALLEY OF THE GODS, UTAH

È il posto più bello del mondo, dicono quei pochi dei miei amici che la conoscono. Ancora più bello della Monument Valley, dicono. Più del Canyon de Chelley, più di Bryce, più di Capitol Reef. Più di Canyonland. È, dicono, un immenso dedalo di canyon deserti, nei quali la luce gioca all'infinito.

Dalla prima volta, tanti anni fa, che la vidi da lontano (e allora non ne conoscevo neanche il nome), ho sempre desiderato avventurarmici; per una ragione o per l'altra, tuttavia, non l'ho mai fatto. Bisogna entrarci con un fuoristrada potente; se ti allontani dal sentiero è facile perdersi – bisognerebbe andarci con qualche indiano ute, o con un ranger. Come il mio amico Carl Osborn, con il quale da tempo diciamo che un giorno ci andremo. Chissà.

Da anni ci giro intorno. L'ho vista dalla strada che segue il corso del San Juan, andando da Kayenta a Mexican Hat e oltre, e viceversa. L'ho vista dall'alto, dal vertiginoso terrazzo sul deserto in cima ai folli tornanti ghiaiosi del Mokey Dugway. L'ho vista al tramonto, con le rocce nude dei suoi bastioni prima rosse poi viola poi blu poi grigie, e l'ho vista sotto la pioggia, illuminata da uno squarcio di sole radente che rendeva gialle le rocce. E mai è la stessa; mai la stessa luce – mai il suo muto invito si avvale degli stessi incantesimi, quasi che ogni volta sia un dio diverso ad affacciarsi ai suoi bastioni, e fare cenno.

In questo angolo meridionale dello Utah al confine con l'Arizona, dove la terra è scavata in mille solchi nudi che isolano immensi roccioni e torri e archi e ponti naturali, dove appena allontanatisi dagli stretti terreni coltivati dai mormoni il deserto domina su tutto, anche da lontano la Valle degli Dei è il mondo più deserto. Più austero. E più ammaliante. In questa terra di aperture sconfinite, è proprio il suo essere così chiusa, così impenetrabile all'occhio, ciò che precipita la malia. Ogni volta che la sfioro, diretto altrove, guardo con desiderio la viottola di terra rosa che si stacca dallo stradone, attraversa un secco *arroyo* rosso, curva improvvisa intorno a una groppa gialla di radi *piñones*, e scompare. La seguo con gli occhi, tentato – ma anche stavolta soltanto con gli occhi.

Chissà fin dove arriva, quanto a fondo si addentra. Raccolti nel cuore di quella loro immensa valle di pietra, gli spiriti del luogo possono ben ignorarci – ancor più di quelli di Chaco, anche se ormai già ritirati chis-



sà dove sulla *mesa*, disturbati dai pochi intrusi che sfidano quelle trenta miglia di strada sterrata. Qui, nella Valle degli Dei, se pur così vicina al rado traffico fra Utah e Arizona, pochissimi si avventurano; e il senso del luogo, dice Carl, è ancora intatto.

Forse sta proprio qui la ragione per cui, in tutti questi anni, non sono mai riuscito a fermarmi: più ancora che per la fretta occasionale, più che per prudenza. «Questo è un luogo da ritornarci», dissi, e scappai quasi subito»: così Pavese davanti al campo di granturco della sua fanciullezza, sua ritrovata fonte di mito. Similmente, forse, anch'io corro via oltre la Valle degli Dei. Scappo non perché tema che la mia macchina si fermi nel deserto, o perché qualcuno mi aspetta a qualche ora da qui – scappo, me la lascio alle spalle, per poterla avere sempre davanti agli occhi, miraggio tanto più assetante quanto più riconosciuto come tale. Scappo per mantenermi intatto quell'unico luogo nel mio vagabondare e tornare e rivedere e fare in qualche modo miei quei luoghi. Forse dopo che avrò battuto tante altre strade, tanti altri sentieri possibili di quell'immenso mondo di silenzio, forse ancora mi sarò serbato la Valle degli Dei per un ultimo (ma so bene impossibile) ritorno all'interno del mito. Luogo metafora, come dice il suo nome; termine di un viaggio che potrà compiersi soltanto nell'accettazione della rinuncia.

Che è quanto, col balenare delle loro luci, dicono forse gli dei.



A descanso on State Road 68, northern New Mexico

DESCANSOS

Interstate 25 and Interstate 40, the two major highways in New Mexico running, respectively, North to South and East to West, intersect at right angles in Albuquerque. Quite aptly in a state that is largely Catholic, they form an immense topographical cross that embraces the whole of New Mexico. An accidental curiosity, to be sure—but one suggestive of symbolic implications in a cultural context where, either indirectly or directly, the cardinal icon of Christianity is ever-present: from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, New Mexico's main range; to the village of Santa Cruz and the Santa Cruz River; to Las Cruces, the second city in the state, which owes its name to a thicket of crosses marking the graves of forty pioneers killed by Mescalero Apaches in 1853; down to the *descansos*, the ubiquitous crosses placed on the side of the road by family and friends in memory of a victim of a car accident.

Originally, *descansos* (or “places of rest”), referred to the stops that, in a rustic replica of the Via Crucis, coffin bearers made on their slow, arduous way to the distant church and *campo santo*. Only later, with the advent of the car and the consequent toll in road casualties, did the *descansos* acquire their present-day function as reminders of these tragedies. In fact, while driving through New Mexico, one feels that he is following a sort of Via Dolorosa. For *descansos* are everywhere. You see them, either somber or gaudy with tinsel decorations, whether made of wood or of stone, down whatever road you travel, be it an interstate, a state highway, or a country road. You see them in the desert. You see them up in the high ranges. You see them at the intersections of the main street in sleepy small towns. The land is dotted with their silent presence.

At first, I paid little attention to them. I thought they were no different from all the reminders of an accidental death you come across in other parts of the world. I simply did not look at them. It took me some time to realize that these humble shrines are an integral aspect of New Mexican culture; that they deeply define New Mexican Catholics—their life, their sense of self, their intimate rapport with nature. Then one day, while driving by (it must have been the way the light fell on this particular stretch of road that made me see it), I saw a *descanso* as for the first time, and I felt that it had been waiting for me. I understood that *descansos* silently looked after me, and that I was being passed from one to the next one for protection—



for protection from Doña Sebastiana, *la comadre*, the skeleton armed with bow and arrow, forever searching the land on her creaking *carreta*. And I realized that here, in these hallowed places, I had found yet another avatar of the soul of the Southwest.

A large cross made of small round boulders painted white, an overturned red cup now empty of its candle lying nearby in the dry grass. A slab of sandstone rhythmically shadowed by stalks crackling in the dusty wind. Or it can be a wrought-iron trellis, plastic rosas de Castilla holding on to the grille, a faded Old Glory drooping from a miniature flag-pole. Or a plain wooden cross tilting from a pile of stones, an oval enameled photo nailed to it. Half a mile further down the road, just past that blind curve, another cross has two photos, symmetrically placed at a slant in the shelter of the outstretched arms. The name is the same: Juan and Jose Montoya—or Baca, or Abeya—died here. Maybe they were brothers. Or cousins.

Across the road, a new white cross is held up against a telegraph pole by a length of barbed wire, bright fresh flowers at its base: Doña Sebastiana's latest harvest.

Crosses, slabs, trellises, piles of stones—all staring past the shoulder littered with crushed beer cans, plastic containers, glass shards; past the flattened rabbit skin left by the buzzards for juicier road-kills; past the dark smear on the asphalt, or the blackened streak in the dirt, the dull iridescence of the old oil spill. They all stare, unseeing, past where the tragedy occurred—across the road, beyond the other shoulder, down the yellow infinity of the plain. Or toward the mountains. Toward the snow capped Sangre de Cristo.

I pass these shrines, and drive on. Not far ahead, another *descanso* approaches. I know there will be others on both sides of this stretch, for Doña Sebastiana loves the long reach of State Road 68 north of Española—as she loves it when 68 begins skirting the Rio Grande, on past Pilar, up toward Embudo, up toward Ranchos de Taos. There will be other *descansos* at the bottom of the long *salida*; yet others standing on the edge of the road to the left, the chasm of the canyon forcing you to visualize the final leap. Because *la comadre* is not picky. All she needs is a speeder. She loves young ones—two brothers, or two cousins. And any season is harvest season for Doña Sebastiana.

Now the wreck has been towed away, the gore scoured by the hissing tires, the glass shards scattered by the sucking air. Something, however, was left behind: the crenellated fragment of a red taillight, the rubber lining of a side-window, a busted keychain wrapped around the base of a bush of *chamisa*—no keys left to return home. Half buried in the weeds that choke the ditch is a twisted fender that nobody will ever reclaim. It was here last fall when the peeling white cross still stood straight, and in the red cup the puny flame still wavered after every car whizzing by, after every roaring truck, as if it pleaded to take heed, to slow down; to rest.

I do slow down, for I sense the love of those who raised this *descanso*—raised it here, right here, for all to know what happened. I feel that I am called to share in the communal grieving of which it silently speaks to all who pass by. I am pulled to become part of the community that wants its sorrow to be everybody's sorrow. I will never know how far back in the hills all these stricken homes may be but I do know that, as distant as I am, I am invited to take part in this enveloping *velorio*; that even I, a non-believer, am welcome to join in the praying, the eating, the singing; the sharing. I am made part of the living that each individual death renews. I am made part of life. Because unlike cemeteries, these Cities of the Dead where the dead are hidden away to be forgotten or, at best, remembered in shame and guilt, *descansos* announce that now, once again, after death there is life. There is life right *here*.

From high up, the Sangre de Cristo watch the trickles of red drops ooze down to the yellow plain, and they count their losses. But while they keep track of *la comadre's* work, they go on with their own work, which is to feed life onto their dark green slopes. This spot on the road is where someone was snatched away by Doña Sebastiana, but it is also where those left behind pass everyday on their way to and from work, to and from the store, to and from Saturday night in town. Someone rests here because those who were left behind are always with them, day after day, twice a day. Doña Sebastiana will never be able to take this away, because her victims are still part of the community. Through their community, through the community's lovingly marking the land where they were forced to leave it, they still inhabit the green pastures of life, as yellow and dry as they may be. There will be no forgetting here—no overlooking the anniversary, no neglecting the ritual. The mountains watch, and nod. Because *descansos* spell life. Everyday life.

This is what *descanso* means: Rest. The dead rest with us, we rest with them. We are one. In life.



A specialized bookstore in Albuquerque

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Nogales, Mexico. The infamous steel fence (photo by Millicent I. Lim)

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