

WEAKENING THE EXOTIC IN SILKY SEAS. EXOTIC IMAGERY IN ALESSANDRO BARICCO'S NOVELS OCEANO MARE AND SETA

MATTIA MARINO
(Bangor University, United Kingdom)

Sommario

I romanzi Oceano mare (1993) e Seta (1996) di Alessandro Baricco offrono una rivalutazione dell'esotismo in termini moderni. Un'analisi intertestuale delle due opere consente di discutere l'esotismo in Baricco prendendo in considerazione il contesto storico e l'emergere di differenze sociali basate su cultura, lingua, etnia, classe, sesso, genere, sessualità, cittadinanza. In particolare, le teorie elaborate da Friedrich Nietzsche e sviluppate in Italia da Gianni Vattimo e lo sfondo dei dibattiti sull'ibridazione globale pervadono gli incontri con l'esotico presenti nei due libri. L'esotico rivalutato da Baricco ha soprattutto il merito di presentare un indebolimento ironico della prospettiva eurocentrica.

Alessandro Baricco belongs among the most famous and influential Italian authors of the decades around the start of the twenty-first century. His postmodern texts touch upon the redefinition and weakening of the absolute values culminated in colonialism and the crucial tensions of the twentieth century. *Oceano mare* (1993) and *Seta* (1996), the latter filmed in 2007, engage powerfully in the re-evaluation of exotic motifs. The intertextual, interdisciplinary, and intersectional analysis of the two works offers a discussion of the exotic in Baricco, paying attention to relevant philosophical conceptions, historical context, and the intersections of the social differences related to culture, language, class, sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, health, and citizenship. In order to account for all of these different factors, it is suitable to refer to a conception of

exoticism “as an approach to the more generic representation of otherness” (Célestin, 1996:7). The contention is that both novels deploy western discourses on non-western types in an ironic exposure of these discourses’ rendition of alterity.

Firstly, the two texts’ exotic patterns are presented, from *Oceano mare*’s evocations of western imperialism in Africa and the myth of Timbuktu, to *Seta*’s allusions to oriental beauty and far eastern mysteries. The encounter between western subjectivity and exotic otherness plays a crucial role in both works, as condensed in the literary tropes of the silk and the sea. Secondly, the relationships between the texts’ re-evaluation of the exotic and Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy of memory and forgetfulness, as interpreted and developed in the *pensiero debole* of Baricco’s university supervisor Gianni Vattimo, are highlighted. As with Nietzschean philosophy, the two texts embark upon a reevaluation of decadent cultural valuations, particularly imperialistic ones. The analysis zooms in on the cultural memory of exoticism in the author’s historical context of increasing international changes. Baricco’s relativist aesthetics seems to address the concerns derived from actual intercultural issues. Thirdly, the philosophical weakening of exotic images is discussed in relation to the narratives of *Oceano mare*’s young noble lady affected by a mysterious disease miraculously healed in the sexual intercourse with a foreigner, and of *Seta*’s merchant torn between the safety of his marriage in France and the adventures of his journeys to Japan. From a Nietzschean perspective relevant to the cultural decadence marking Alessandro Baricco’s age, *Oceano mare* and *Seta* remediate the discourses of western superiority in a critical and creative way, where the exotic melts in the postmodern characters’ intersections of social positionings.

The two novels are analysed here using a semiotic approach. Textual analysis is a semiotic method, as it examines signs (Eco, 1976:7), precisely not for what, but for how, that is, the ways in which they mean (Sturrock, 2003: 22). Language is only one of the infinite and all-pervasive systems of signs in use (Barthes, 1967:9), and presents a level of abstraction which makes it particularly suitable in the philosophical discussion of being (Saussure, 1983:16). Identity is socially constructed in and through narratives which articulate

meaningful memory (Ricoeur, 1984: 52). Memory is a dynamic process where antecedent utterances and meanings are renegotiated (Rigney, 2006). Using language, or, for that matter, any other semiotic system, involves a dialectics between the available means to create meaning (Lévi-Strauss, 1974:29). In this respect, texts' cultural contexts play a significant role (Lotman, 2001), which hints at the desirability of an interdisciplinary socio-historic-philosophical approach.

Contextualising Baricco's exotic imagery in philosophical, historical, and sociological terms may provide a contribution on his controversial literary works, sometimes discarded as shallow, commercial, and merely fashionable (Ferroni, 2006). Although much appreciated for its innovativeness (Pivano, 1991), his style has been denounced as artificial and superficial (Citati, 1996). However, the use of exotic stereotypes as a weapon against essentialist discourses relies precisely on the ironic exposure of artificiality in contrast to authentic reality or essentially defined truth, as will be discussed in relation to relevant philosophical, historical, and social issues.

1. Silky Seas

In *Oceano mare*, the Almayer Inn hosts seven guests gravitating around the exotic trope of the sea. Plasson and Bartleboom intend, respectively, to paint the sea and to write an encyclopaedic entry on the limits of the sea, to which aim they yearn for the knowledge of the beginning and the ending of the sea. Ann Deveria and Elisewin, accompanied by the writer of prayers, Father Pluche, look for a remedy to their ills in the sea, as the former is a slave to her desires and the latter suffers from a mysterious disease amounting to an obsessive anxiety *vis-à-vis* the transience of being. Thomas, who changes his name to Adams after his adventurous stay in the African capital of Islam, Timbuktu, waits to kill Ann Deveria to take revenge on her lover, André Savigny, who murdered his beloved in the exotic extreme situation of a shipwreck. As their lot is sealed, the writer who wanted to say the sea finally leaves the last inhabited room, while the inn dissolves behind him in an unforeseeable turn of postmodern irony.

In contrast to a stable ontology positing the dichotomy between familiar selfhood and exotic otherness, transience is symbolised by the central image of the sea tide, where the succession of ever different waves makes it impossible to define identity in an essentialist way. The sea is the overarching metaphor of *Oceano mare*, as is evident from the title and from the very first chapter, where the sea as the image of truth is presented, challenged, and, ultimately, overcome. The apparent perfection and exactitude of the sea landscape is associated with the idea of truth, which, however, is suspended by the presence of the observer striving to achieve a representation of truth, suggested by the image of the painter, Plasson, who is:

come una sentinella – questo *bisogna* capirlo – [...] a difendere quella porzione di mondo dall’invasione silenziosa della perfezione, piccola incrinatura che sgretola quella spettacolare scenografia dell’essere. [...] Basta il barlume di un uomo a ferire il riposo di ciò che sarebbe a un attimo dal diventare *verità* e invece immediatamente torna ad essere attesa e domanda, per il semplice e infinito potere di quell’uomo che è feritoia e spiraglio, porta piccola da cui rientrano storie a fiumi e l’immane repertorio di ciò che *potrebbe* essere, squarcio infinito, ferita meravigliosa, sentiero di passi a migliaia dove nulla più potrà essere vero [...]. (10)

Remarkably, the words emphasised, “*is necessary*”, “*truth*”, and “*might be*”, succeed one another in a sequence which conveys the inexorable transit from necessity and importance all the way to mere possibility. By virtue of his being a particular observer, thus endowed with the oxymoronically “simple and endless” power of observation, the subject deploys the force of imagining “myriads of stories” which, unfolding in a plurality of possible interpretations, question the monolithic truth of being as a stable whole, in contrast to the partial and ephemeral being of the individual observer, characterised as a “small door”. Emphasised by the alliteration, the idea of door, *porta*, is etymologically related to the Sanskrit word for *bearing*, *bhara*,

present in the Greek word *metaphor* and marked in the *p-r* and *f-r* consonant combinations in neo-Latin languages, as well as in the *b-r* consonant combination in Germanic languages. Both the Italian words *porta* and *forza* and their Sanskrit etymological relatives *bhara* and *bala* are very similar, as the concept of bearing implies precisely the use of force. The image of an open door, then, is particularly emblematic for the power of imagination, from whence infinite possible particular stories overflow, in contrast to the static majesty of the whole of being.

In *Seta*, silk is both an exotic fetish and a metaphor for the transience of being, as is the sea in *Oceano mare*. Silk is the means for the protagonist, Hervé Joncour, to escape from the military career envisaged by his father, the mayor of a late nineteenth century French town. He becomes a silk trader and gains a wealthy position thanks to which he settles down with his wife in a comfortable villa. However, silk unsettles his routine when an epidemic affecting the cocoons makes it necessary to trade with Japan. In this estranging scenario, the exotic patterns of silk and oriental beauty are interwoven, as Hervé falls in love with a woman whose beauty is described as silky. Her loyalty to her partner and his wife's premature death are entwined in a narrative where he eventually revels in the illusions which surround the ideal of eternal love and stability.

The instability of being is represented by the cycle from cocoon to silk, which suggests the inescapability of transience. Counterpointed by the description of the Japanese war landscape where all entities are doomed to the fate of perishing, transience finds its objective correlative in silk trade, which is characterised from the incipit as distinctively female in contrast to male essentialism:

“benché suo padre avesse immaginato per lui un brillante avvenire nell'esercito, Hervé Joncour aveva finito per guadagnarsi da vivere con un mestiere insolito, cui non era estraneo, per singolare ironia, un tratto a tal punto amabile da tradire una vaga intonazione *femminile*” (7, emphasis in the original)

In striking opposition to male stability, femininity symbolises mutability. The hypnotic depiction of silk's cycle (8) resounds in that of trade's cycle (9); in both silk and trade, everything flows and returns in different forms with the same force of being. This is synthesised in the ironically male character of the silk trader Hervé Joncour, whose trading journeys echo the flow from cocoon to silk. By extension, all entities are revealed as all but essentially stable, as their form undergoes the female cycle of transience.

Both the images of the sea and silk are marked by an unusual re-evaluation of exoticism. Taken at face value, the sea and silk are literary tropes where stereotypes of essentially defined selfsameness and otherness converge in the sensational experiences of sublime waves and fabrics. The two novels revolve around the dichotomy between idyllic natural and urban settings in western locations, on the one hand, and wild and dangerous adventures in places remote from civilisation, on the other hand. Conversely, far from implying an objectively true distinction between superior normality and inferior strangeness, the images of the sea and silk are deconstructed in powerful metaphors of irreducible fluidity, rather than rigid dualism. Such revaluation of otherness is particularly significant in relation to its specific philosophical and historical context of postmodernity.

2. Wakening Weakening

Baricco's university mentor, the philosopher Gianni Vattimo elaborated the so-called weak thought with reference to the weakening of monolithic truth in the postmodern context of mass communication:

Nella società della comunicazione generalizzata e della pluralità delle culture, l'incontro con altri mondi e forme di vita [...] significa fare esperienza della libertà come oscillazione continua tra appartenenza e spaesamento. È una libertà problematica, [...] facciamo fatica a concepire questa oscillazione come libertà: la nostalgia degli orizzonti chiusi, minacciosi e rassicuranti insieme, è

sempre ancora radicata in noi, come individui e come società. (1989/2000:19-20)

In this connection, Vattimo refers to Friedrich Nietzsche's emphasis on interpretation, rather than objectivity. Postmodern society is marked by the co-existing tendencies of assimilation and exoticism ("belonging and estrangement"), the two sides of the spectrum ranging from essentially defined identity to otherness. From this perspective, the awareness of multiplicity awakens a weakening of the absolute ideal of a Home, constructed in dialectical opposition to stigmatised alterity. It is against this philosophical background that the two novels re-evaluate the representation of exoticness. The apparent stability of the mass of water and of the adventurous western man travelling to Japan gives way to the multiplicity of ever changing interpretations, represented in particular by the ceaseless motion of the waves and the cycle of silk, associated with female otherness. This relativist multiplication of unstable perspectives in weak thought, symbolised by the exotic tropes of the sea and silk, rests on Nietzsche's philosophy.

As elaborated by Vattimo in Italy (and others elsewhere), Nietzschean critique weakens the authority of both moral and modern norms, opening up an existential dimension where it is possible to unleash creativity without the restraints imposed by exoticist conventions of normative selfhood and stigmatised otherness. Through the seductive lens of historicism, the "specific contribution of natural science and technology" plays a prominent role in most accounts of progress: the (nineteenth) century was "steam-powered, iron-clad, telegraph-linked, gas-lit, inoculated, photographed, irradiated and anaesthetized", providing an unprecedentedly solid "rationale for the conquest, exploitation and even extermination of 'backward' peoples and races in the name of 'progress'" and its advancement, supposedly for the benefit of the colonised (Claeys, 2005:273). In the service of ever more aggressive European nationalism and imperialism, numerous theories from the then more than ever legitimacy-seeking social sciences employ a natural scientific rhetoric to present history as moving from grottos to modern cities, where non-European exceptions to socio-historical evolution

are represented as grotto-esque, that is, grotesque anomalies in urgent need of correction. Nietzsche's philosophy lays bare the grotesqueness of this cumulative model of knowledge, which judges societies where techno-scientific practices are not suitably emancipated from the sensual fantasies of artistic creativity as ultimately inferior. Grotesquely, modern techno-scientific rationality amounts to a monstrous degeneration of the metaphorical biological disease constituted by the moral system of justice, as argued by Nietzsche in striking opposition to historicism.

Nietzsche's critique of historicism exposes the continuity, rather than any epistemological rupture, between the discourses of techno-scientific systematisation and moral absolute valuation. Drawing from Platonic rationalism, which pervades all of western thought, historicism posits the essentialist and normative distinction between two ways of knowing, that is, rationality and belief. Rationality is the pure and natural essence of normal knowledge, whereas belief is artificial knowledge based on arbitrary judgments which are impure, distortive of natural facts, arbitrary. Morality makes absolute valuations which transcend reality in the name of the metaphysical and ahistorical laws set by God. Conversely, techno-science allows for a systematisation of natural facts and historical events, which enables ever better forms of organisation, where past mistakes would not be made again, but serve to show the need for alternatives which take organisation onto ever higher levels of social evolution. Modern techno-science marks an emancipation from and a rupture with moral absolutism, in the historicist discourse.

Historicism hides the part of creativity in being. Nietzsche criticises the attempt to put constraints on creativity (Deleuze, 1985:47) in both moral and scientific hierarchies. The belief in God conceives of creative pride as the ultimate sin, as the only creator is the maker of the universe. Similarly, techno-scientific rationality conceives of creative instincts as secondary to the need for adaptation, that is, conformation to the environment, which it is necessary to master according to the laws of logics. Actually, the creative will is being as such, as every entity wills to be as it is, regardless of ethical or logical norms for the conservation of any stable order, or else it simply would not be at all. The force which recurs eternally in all

forms of being is becoming, or change, involving the creation of ever different forms. The artistic will appropriates itself of the ever different forms of being by eternally changing the values of reference, instead of respecting the unchanging laws of either ethics or logics. The historical shift from a moral to a techno-scientific epistemology is marked by the continued alienation of social organisation from the artistic will, which makes it necessary to engage in a reevaluation of all values.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), the Nietzschean theory of language as intrinsically metaphorical and of reality as experienced in ways which are inescapably mediated by language is applied in the critical discussion of morality in the context of the emergence of modernity in Europe. In this light, the punishment of immorality is conceptualised as the means for sustaining and nourishing a collective memory of what is perceived as moral justice. In turn, moral justice is understood as a construction whereby the powerless resentfully take revenge of the powerful. In this context, the powerful are those who linguistically name reality from their perspective, of whom the powerless take revenge by turning language against them and founding a whole gamut of moral principles upon this distorted language. Moral principles, then, as well as the scientific knowledge which replaces morality in modernity, consist of linguistic interpretations of reality which masquerade as real facts and travel from one generation to the next in the commemorative enforcement of moral rituals. Nietzsche made an intervention in the political issues raised by the emergence of modern western societies which accomplishes a philosophical demystification of religious *and* scientific ideologies, as a passage from the twenty-fifth section of the third part emblematically exemplifies:

[...] physiologisch nachgerechnet, ruht die Wissenschaft auf dem gleichen Boden wie das asketische Ideal: eine gewisse *Verarmung des Lebens* ist hier wie dort die Voraussetzung, – die Affekte kühl geworden, das tempo verlangsamt, die Dialektik an Stelle des Instinktes, der *Ernst* den Gesichtern und Gebärden aufgedrückt”.

Far from overcoming dogmatism, the modern reliance on science is yet another form of worship which represses the vital force of forgetting conventions and creating artistically. Both religion and science impose forms of rigid memory which define an absolute order and condemn all deviating entities. As sensed by Vattimo, among others, this sort of relativist sensibility is particularly significant at the historical juncture of globalisation.

Historically, the enhanced process of globalisation in the latter twentieth century is a tendency responding to the devastation caused by the world wars and avoided in the Cold War (Mazlish, 2006:33). The last decade of the twentieth century is a crucial moment in the weakening of previous systems of reference. Since such cases as the international mobilisation around South African apartheid in the 1980s, it has become apparent that state policies are increasingly affected by global tendencies (Stearns, 2010:147). In this respect, boundaries separating western selfhood from exotic otherness are revealed as artificial. In fact, the reduction of economic and political barriers in the 1990s made borders significantly less rigid than before. Weak thought celebrates exactly the weakening of strong definitions dividing the alleged eternal norm from the exceptions.

In Baricco's novels, both the exotic motifs of the sea and silk are deployed in powerful representations of change, rather than a stable reality. Absolute truth is denounced as a murderous ideal in the representation of a shipwreck off the coast of Senegal (101), exactly in the middle part of *Oceano mare*:

“[...] la verità si concede solo all'orrore, e [...] per vederla abbiamo dovuto distruggerci l'un l'altro [...] che verità è mai questa, che puzza di cadavere, e cresce nel sangue, si nutre di dolore, e vive dove l'uomo si umilia, e trionfa dove l'uomo marcisce? Là sulla riva [...] io immaginavo una verità che era quiete, era grembo, era sollievo, e clemenza, e dolcezza [...] Ma qui, nel ventre del mare, ho visto la verità fare il suo nido, meticolosa e perfetta: e quel che ho visto è un uccello rapace, magnifico in volo, e feroce. [...] Non era questo che sognavo [...] quando sognavo questo.” (120-121)

The chiasmic formula – “this is not what I was dreaming [...] when I was dreaming this” – conveys the horror disclosed inside the sea, where truth, imagined on the shore as a sweet maternal womb, appears as a blood-thirsty predator. This striking contrast marks the distinction between the perspectives *before*, *inside*, and *after* the sea (119), which stands for the horror of destructive instability, presented with the topical rhetorical digression of a sea-survivor’s tale. Yet, in the central part of the text, one more difference comes to the fore regarding the perspective *after* the sea, as evident from the succession of the two distinct narrations by Savigny and Thomas. While Savigny’s perspective can be defined as *over and beyond* the sea, Thomas’ can be distinguished as *under and behind* the sea.

The former’s is a relativist viewpoint, whereas the latter’s is an *inconsolable* (122) nihilism. The two *postmarine*, alias postmodern, perspectives represent the possibilities available to those who survive the shipwreck, that is, the horror of the apocalypse where the transience of the sea reveals the imaginary character of absolute truth. This apocalyptic horror of absolute g(o)od’s death is set against the Conradian scenario of colonialism, marked by the presence of the king’s governor Schmalz on a mission to the “new colonies” (113), and finds expression in the story of young Léon dying suddenly assailed by the horror of the situation, in particular of the loss of his mother, and old Gilbert desperately kissing his corpse (106-107), of which both Savigny and Thomas are eye witnesses in the shipwreck. The horror revealed by the sea is that the absolute dichotomies of life and death, young and old, man and woman, and, ultimately, good and evil are imaginary, illusionary, relative to the perspective of the subject.

It is in this scenery of misery that Savigny takes the lead of the desperate cannibalistic acts determining survival in the shipwreck, as well as the death of so many including Thomas’ beloved Thérèse. Savigny’s “orrenda genialità” (117) represents the unspeakable violence and hubris where rationality and irrationality are inextricably interwoven. Far from ever being absolute, the good and the true are relative to the perspective of their essentialising subject, as they sanction also the exclusion, humiliation, and, ultimately, the

annihilation of their essentially defined Other. The tragic fate which existence bears with it is conflict, as with the waves devouring each other in the mystic harmony of the sea, that is, in the transience of being. Beyond good and evil the divinity to be worshipped can only be an ironically relative truth, that is, the relativist awareness of the *artificial* character of all forms of absolute truth and essentialist subjectivity. With this awareness, it is possible to overcome all conventions of essential truth, so as to engage in the kind of artistic creation envisaged by Nietzsche, and hinted at by Vattimo in the postmodern context of globalising societies.

In *Seta*, the inextricable bond between transience and horror is conveyed through the images of silk trade and civil war, where the tension between the ideal of a monolithic ocean and the presence of ferocious sea waves is echoed. The occult force from which the story flows is an epidemic affecting European production when Japan was still so isolated as to maintain the health of its cocoons, attracting illegal trade from Europe. The main transient scenery which is built as the plot unfolds is the trader's villa, where it is possible to unleash imagination. Ontological doubt takes shape in the relationships between reality and imagination displayed in the love stories told.

The occult force of being is represented by the necessity, derived from the outbreak of an epidemic affecting the cocoons, to trade with the remotest country, Japan. In fact, the transience of being is the occult force opposed to the essentialist ideal of eternity, which is contrasted through the *memento mori* of the epidemic (11), when Hervé Joncour's wish to continue with his daily routine forever is made vain by the need to shift his trading destination so far as to Japan. His same wish for eternity reappears (100) when he finishes trading with Japan, and this time it is his wife's death which makes it vain again. With his partner's death in the end, and the cocoon epidemic taking him all the way to Japan at the start, he has to face the occult force of transience. Unsurprisingly, it is exactly as occult that Japan is represented (17-21), with the attributes of "fine del mondo", isolation and inaccessibility, inhospitality, untrustworthiness, and the mysterious "voce cantilenante" of the Japanese trading partner (25).

In the flux where each and every thing is doomed to disappearing for the very fact of its existence, Hervé's villa provides the appropriate surreal scenery to challenge the essentialist conception of a stable ontology. The villa recalls his Japanese trading partner's palace with semblances as fake as if it were a scene at the "teatro" (42), which is the sensation of fiction cherished by Hervé and his wife (100). There is a park of illusions (86-87), which reminds of Hervé Joncour's route in his cyclical trading journeys to Japan. His "strano dolore" (89) is an exoticist *Sehnsucht* for something never experienced. It is in his villa's park that his life looks like an "inspiegabile spettacolo" (101), which is iterated in the text's last sentence (108). In fact, the elusive scenery provided by the park is the reflection of Hervé Joncour's "assistere" instead of "viver(e)" (10), as in his self-avowedly transient existence as a silk trader he never crystallises in one essential form; rather, his imaginary and real sensations succeed one another in a flux where they are undistinguishable from each other, as both imagined and real things disappear as if in an oneiric vision.

The idea of absolute truth associated with the sea is questioned more radically in the narration unfolding in the surreal scenery of the Almayer Inn in *Oceano mare*, whose ontological instability is echoed in Joncour's villa in *Seta*. While Plasson is an artistic observer, Bartleboom aspires to a scientific representation of the sea. When he arrives at Almayer Inn, he finds in his room the mysterious child Dood, ever contemplating the sea. Bartleboom's scientific disenchantment results in his question to the child regarding the value of his monotonous activity, considering that the sea never changes (20). Interestingly, the child's oracle-like arcane response culminates in the nonchalantly straightforward remark that Bartleboom is nice and, perhaps, after his stay in the inn, he will be less of an idiot. This is only the start of the ironic and radical questioning of the sea's apparently absolute, monolithic, monotonous truth in the novel, which continues when Bartleboom himself contemplates the sea (31-32). While its undulation evokes visual perfection, each and every wave of the sea is different from all others. The wave passes and gives way to other waves, irredeemably different from the wave passed (away); this image represents birth and death as inextricably interrelated, as in the

fascinating and obscure character of Dood, a child whose name is the Dutch word for both death and dead. The waves are presented as a cradle, where scientific observation is no more than a baby, with a derisory paradox. The sea is an elusive cyclical movement (39), which it is impossible to reduce to the absolute perfection of scientific measurement. All that with which the observer is left, is the multiplicity of possible interpretations, as in Nietzsche's and Vattimo's conceptions.

As clearly indicated by the incipit and plot of *Seta*, the exotic is associated with femininity, which links ethnic and gender distinctions to each other. In order to discuss further the ways in which the exoticist dichotomy between authenticity and artificiality is weakened in the two novels, it is crucial to turn to the intersections of social differences involved. In laying bare the artificiality of various kinds of social distinction, *Oceano mare* and *Seta* weaken exoticist essentialism and emphasise the power of creativity along the lines of Nietzsche's and Vattimo's philosophy, as relevant in the historical age of globalisation.

3. Weak Exotics

The underlying moral is the importance of overcoming the ideal of an absolute moral, as the essentialist ideal of absolute truth, good or value is overcome in an existential dimension where the absolute value of the essentialist conceptions of being and subjectivity sustaining any stories dissolves in the relativity of value to the particular perspective of the story told in the whole of flowing stories, which is conveyed in the image of the *ocean sea*, with the multiple unity of the essential absolute and the existential relative. This is represented in *Oceano mare* with its meta-literary ontological doubt and its narratological system of characters. Following the narrative line of Elisewin's allegorical journey from the occult disease of Carewall to her healing in the ontologically dubious setting of Almayer Inn, the horror of the shipwreck is remedied, remediated, re-valued, and sublimated in the parables of the many stories interlacing in a self-avowedly artificial dimension of creativity and ironic (self-) criticism. In sociology, essentialist definitions of identity are

deconstructed in intersections of privilege and disadvantage (Crenshaw: 2005). With her intersectional identity and development, Elisewin embodies the relativist weakening of exoticism.

The Baron of Carewall and Elisewin's representation of absolutism and relativism is tied up with Langlais and Adams' representation of relativism and the nihilism of the sea-womb occult, the abyss abysmal, the shipwreck of disenchantment. In fact, Elisewin moves away from her father to Adams and, then, Langlais, in a narrative which is intertextually related to God-Son's descent on earth, crucifixion, and resurrection, where the messiah's universal message loses its absoluteness facing the apocalyptic nothingness which, eventually, gives way to existential relativity. Elisewin's story starts in the *care walls* of a paradise created by her father, and soon lost when she has to move to the sea, where she *falls* exactly with the tellingly named Adams. Unsurprisingly, the postmodern remediation of Christ associates him not only with an ordinary woman, but exactly with the prototypical woman, whose name, Eve, is also evoked by the Baron's daughter's own, blamed for the divine punishment of humankind, including the very condition of mortality.

In the pathetically hyperbolic sexual scene with Adams, Elisewin absorbs magically all of his stories of the shipwreck's ultimate horror and of Timbuktu's openness. In the obviously orgasmic end, topically associated with death in the text with yet one more twist of postmodern irony here also suggesting *Christa's* crucifixion, she is resurrected in the Nietzschean over(wo)manly form of a relativist storyteller, soon thereafter joining the lord of the arbitrary called the Englishman in French, Langlais, *A(wo)men(!)*. In fact, while Adams' relativist task as Langlais' gardener was only one step in his nihilist vengeful plan to find André Savigny with his lover Ann Deveria, Elisewin embraces the relativity of existence symbolised by the sea tide, where the wave-like cycle of the eternal return reveals that revenge is vain (139), while it is the critical creativity of cyclically ever-recurring storytelling which offers meaning and value, in which she engages at Langlais' until his death while listening to her fantastic stories (145-146). Having learnt from Langlais that "tra tutte le vite possibili, a una bisogna ancorarsi per poter contemplare, sereni, tutte le altre" ("among all possible lives, it is necessary to anchor oneself to

only one, so as to contemplate, quietly, all others”), she can finally go back home with the *wonderful* (“meraviglioso”) power, inspired by the transient undulation of the occult sea, to self-critically and self-creatively *invent* (“(i)inventar [...]”, emphasis in the original) her own story, yet unknown.

The story of Elisewin overcomes essentialism in the intersections of class, sex, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and disability. While an essentialist account of the story of Christ would emphasise his social ascent from his native cave to his success as a preacher, his masculinity and chastity, his adulthood at the time when he starts to preach, his ethnic belonging to the elected people, and his social skills, Elisewin’s relativist revaluation is intertextually related to Christ’s openness to the lower classes, women and also prostitutes, sinners, children, foreigners, and the ill; Elisewin’s own intersectional identity sublimates Christ’s creative criticism of the exoticist systematic exclusion sanctioned in culture and society. In fact, Elisewin willingly leaves her privileged initial position, and her return suggests her intention to create her own life without relying on her father’s *care walls*. She is a woman who becomes an ingenious storyteller during sexual intercourse with a foreigner, as if impregnated with stories. At least equally remarkably, she is only sixteen years old, and she suffers from an unknown disease. Far from suggesting that the sea defeated the disease, the textual elements discussed hint at Elisewin’s fatalistic acceptance of the conditions of uncertainty, mortality, transiency, in the embracement of the relativist existential chance of interpretation, representation, narration. Ultimately, the subtle suggestion is that differences of class, sex, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and disability are relative to the interpretation represented in the relevant discursive narrative. Elisewin’s intersectional and intertextual story overcomes exoticist essentialism, in the fatalistic openness to the relativity of existence.

In particular, the extratextual associations of Elisewin with Eve, Christ, and Krishna, along with the reference to the African capital of Islam, Timbuktu, suggest the potential for the world religions to overcome their essentialist conflicts in the discovery of their shared openness to the multifarious forms of being. Eve’s – this time messianic and redemptive – female receptivity, Christ’s openness to

the excluded, Krishna's fatalistic acceptance of the eternal recurrence of the same, and the intellectual flexibility of which the Islamic civilisation based in Timbuktu is a historical centre, all converge in the story of Elisewin in the Almayer Inn. In the context of the characters' multilingual European names, the Almayer Inn appears as a utopian image of European relativist inter-culture, where the European identity culminated in the destructive creation of America results, actually, from the dialectical exchange with Africa and Asia. In this respect, the Judaeo-Christian tradition does play an important role; however, this is not the case in an essentialist sense, but in Christianity's relations with African and Asian cultures. Namely, the relativist openness present across the continents and beliefs of the world is a distinguishing feature of European identity, with a great potential in an ever more interconnected and intercultural global system.

In the relativist story of Elisewin, the absolutisms of religion, science and high art are represented by Pluche, Bartleboom, and Plasson, respectively, who are like the three kings eventually worshipping the new messiah of relativity. Pluche embodies the relativist remediation of religion, where there are "tante strade intorno e nessuna dentro" (153) as every different cultural form is valid in its own right, and "preghiera" ("prayer") involves "il profumo dell'attesa" (155), that is, a way to cope with the transience of being and the inevitability of death. In his act of writing extravagantly long-titled prayers, the absolutism of religion gives way to the relativism of representation, facing the condition of mortality and uncertainty. When questioned by the scientist, Bartleboom, about God's existence (94-95), he compares the question to that of the seventh guest's existence, witnessed by none but the inn's sinister receptionist, Dira. Besides associating God with the storyteller in the seventh room, suggesting the divinity of the relative act of storytelling, this utterance hints at the relativity of divinity to the act of storytelling and naming embodied by Dira, as also condensed in her own name which evokes the act of saying.

The ensuing nominalist view of existence as relative to the conventions of language and communication is represented by ten-year-old Dira precisely at Bartleboom's check-in (18), when the title

prof. in his signature means nothing but a name to her, whereas for him it describes his essence as a professor. In fact, Bartleboom's scientific essentialism (35) entails the abstraction and description of the eternal essences of reality. To this aim, he intends to discover the end of the sea, and write an encyclopaedic entry about it. Aged thirty-eight (22), his public contribution as a scientist is accompanied by his private collection of letters for the woman whom he wishes to meet and love one day. His comic parable is accompanied by the symmetrical one of the artist Plasson, who strives to paint the sea starting from its beginning, that is, its eyes (70-75). The only hint comes from the inn's ghastly named child Dood, who states that the eyes of the sea are the ships, which are most of the time invisible due to the sea's closing its eyes with shipwrecks. Ultimately, science and art can only surrender to their relativity in the transience of being.

The elitist essentialism of science and high art is doomed to failure, as both Bartleboom's and Plasson's absolutist wishes to determine where the sea starts and where it ends are ridiculed all along the novel. Among Plasson's white canvases, only one representing a surreal shipwreck seems to be inspired by the transience of being whose emblem is the sea (171-172). As to Bartleboom, his public contribution as a scientist amounts to his being constantly on leave to work on his encyclopaedia, and when he feels he has found his love, he is so confused between her and her twin sister that he ends up with no partner at all. This is narrated in a carnivalesque crescendo of postmodern irony, culminating in his unstoppable laughing, literally, to death. Bartleboom's and Plasson's comic parables suggest the relativity of the absolute values sanctioned in science and high art. With the addition of Pluche, the novel represents the bowing of art, science and religion in front of the relativity of existence.

In *Seta*, relativist ontological doubt takes the literary shape of Hervé's love stories with his trading partner's mysterious woman and with his own wife. He knows that the fascinating western-eyed oriental woman "non morirà" (51), and, yet, he pretends to believe in her imploring message and goes again to Japan. Meanwhile, he passively promises his wife eternal love (53), with the "ragionevole illusione di diventare presto padre" (55). However, the birds kept in

Japan as a sign of eternal love inexorably fly away, thus erasing all illusions of eternity and stability in numerous parts of the text (40-42-57-63-64-67-77-79-91):

“Così vide,
alla fine,
all'improvviso,
il cielo sopra il palazzo macchiarsi del volo di centinaia
d'uccelli, come esplosi via dalla terra, uccelli d'ogni tipo,
stupefatti, fuggire ovunque, impazziti, cantando e
gridando, pirotecnica esplosione di ali, e nube di colori
sparata nella luce, e di suoni, impauriti, musica in fuga,
nel cielo a volare.” (57)

The flying birds hint, by opposition, at the cage of illusions which keep both Hervé and his lover enslaved in their conventionally defined identities as respectively male and female, western and eastern, bourgeois and aristocratic. Although artificial cages of exoticising normativity are built to sustain the illusion of stability, the awareness of the artificiality of conventions allows the unleashing of the creative forces represented by the birds. Far from enclosing being into yet more illusions, artistic creativity is manifested in self-avowedly artificial forms, which enable the subjects to take distances from exotic dualism. *Seta* revels in artificial sensations.

In fact, the mysterious lady in Japan can only ritually put a prostitute in Hervé's hands to create an illusory sexual scene (61-62), where they feel as if they were touching each other, whereas it is with the prostitute that Hervé spends the night. After all, such is “la sorte di amarsi” (68-69): as suggested in an anecdote from Hervé and his wife's journeys, it is all about the illusion of eternal reciprocal possession. All illusions dissolve in the end, when Hervé realises that the most intense love letter, supposedly from the Japanese lady, was actually forged by his wife, who, meanwhile, already passed away.

The silk trader's perspective of transience is interwoven with his manager's, the entrepreneur Baldabiau. In fact, Baldabiau's existence follows the flow of his games, mocking the illusions cherished by Hervé's father (12). While the latter conceives of such entities as

female silk and male money as essentially different, Baldabiau reveals wittingly that everything is interrelated in the transiency of being. His departure (102-103), obviously, merely follows the random signs to which he is open while playing the relativist game of his life. Moving from the absolutist perspective of his (God) (F)ather to Baldabiau's relativist one, the silk trader Hervé Joncour discovers that life, indeed, is all a transient game of values relative to the conventional rules of the contingent game; it is not with nihilist despair that he faces the transiency of being, but with peaceful and fatalist flexibility, finally contemplating the images reflected on the clear surface of his park's calm pool.

In associating intersections of social differences to a remediation of the exotic tropes of the sea and silk, Baricco's *Oceano mare* and *Seta* extend Nietzsche's and Vattimo's critique of historicism to all essentialist conceptions of normal subjectivity and exotic otherness. In the context of enhanced globalisation, they draw on the stereotypes surrounding the Far East and Africa as imagined from a western perspective. However, both texts display the artificial character of all conventional distinctions. Ethnic exoticism intersects with gender, class, and health distinctions, in a representation which is deliberately artificial. The two novels denounce their own status as works of fiction through the imaginative use of language condensed in the passages observed. Additionally, the stories interlacing in both texts expose the irreducible multiplicity of possible interpretations, in contrast to easily drawn demarcations of exoticness. The picture is complicated further by the representation of Elisewin's overcoming of class, sex, and health, and by Hervé's disillusionment with class, health, and ethnicity. Along Vattimo's Nietzschean philosophical lines, *Oceano mare* and *Seta* entail a reappropriation of exoticness intended to weaken exoticism.

4. Ecstatic Artificiality

The rhetorical tropes of the sea and silk are central in the exotic images remediated by Alessandro Baricco's novels *Oceano mare* and *Seta*. Ironically, adventures on an African sea and in trading journeys to the Far East do not perpetuate essentialist ideology in these cases.

On the contrary, the artificiality of these stories is displayed in order to denounce the artificiality of all essentialist definitions of identity. This is achieved through the dispersion of the linear plot in the multiplicity of perspectives, albeit in different forms in the two texts.

While *Oceano mare* presents the dissolution of linear narration, also marked by the final disappearing of the author and the Almayer Inn, *Seta* plays with the conventions of love story telling. One by one, the expectations created by the narration are contradicted, as the male western bourgeois subject is deconstructed. Rather than as an adventurous hero, Hervé is portrayed in his fatalist surrender to the instability of existence. Conversely, Elisewin's fatalist acceptance of transience makes of her a postmodern (anti-)heroine, in contrast to the ideals of religion, science, and high art ridiculed in the stories of the other characters of *Oceano mare*. Both Hervé's surrender to the meaninglessness of conventions and Elisewin's creativity as a storyteller suggest the power of overcoming exoticist norms in an embracement of plurality and fluidity. In this light, it is apparent that the accusation of artificiality misses the point of these literary works, where artifice and creativity are not intended to imitate, but to constitute reality, which otherwise does not have an existence of its own outside of the observer's representation.

Oceano mare and *Seta* revel in an ecstasy of artifice. As suggested along Nietzschean lines by Vattimo, the proliferation of different interpretations at the end of the twentieth century offers the possibility to gain the awareness of norms as social constructs and tools which have to be adapted flexibly, rather than upheld as eternal laws defining identity in essentialist terms. In deploying exotic motifs in depictions of identity as intersectional, the two novels demystify both moral and modern dogmas. Far from seeking certainties, their realm of artificiality celebrates an unpredictable dynamism.

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