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‘Paper Seas’.

Polar Adventures in the Contemporary German Novel by Sten Nadolny and Christoph Ransmayr¹

1. The journey across literature

As an ancestral imaginary figure full of cultural resonances, travel has always been the object of frequent discussions and analyses.

Either in the form of a pilgrimage or an exile, an adventure or a quest, travelling constitutes the oldest metaphor of the precariousness of human existence and, more importantly, of our longing for knowledge. As such, it represents a trajectory inevitably oriented *towards* death; at the same time, it appears as an attempt to overcome the inevitable defeat of the tragic human fate. If, on one hand, human life itself can be seen as a path towards death, on the other hand, man's eagerness for knowledge can be considered as another journey, an ideal act of resistance through which the most meaningless life can acquire a sense and a destiny.

Moving towards a determined goal means to go against the eternal oscillations of the scythe (a mythological representation of death which reminds us of Sisipho's eternal and senseless movements in the underworld). According to a legend, Sisipho's son Ulysses², who was far more cunning than his father, also went to the Underworld but succeeded in coming back and, as in *Odyssey*, Book XI, he was able to tell the story of his adventurous trip. Becoming the object of a story Ulysses's journey was thus

¹ The author has presented an Italian version of this paper at the conference "Viaggio e letteratura" at the University of Salerno (October 2004) and published in *Viaggio e letteratura. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi*, Salerno, (27-29 ottobre 2004), edited by M. T. Chialant, Padova, Marsilio, 2006, pp. 277-287.

² See Károly Kerényi, *Gli dei e gli eroi della Grecia*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1963, vol. II, p. 85-86.

transformed, according to Hans Blumenberg, into a "rejuvenating movement of life and meaning"¹. In this way the character created an archetype, a constant image of European culture². As Vittoria Martinetto wrote:

there is no journey without a story. There is no story without a journey. [...] If we consider human existence itself as a journey of discovery, the journey and the need to talk about it were born together³.

Since Homer, the journey therefore not only constitutes a popular subject of many literary works, but is also the metaphor of narration itself⁴. Writing and travelling are two different but equivalent ways to create knowledge, to challenge the impervious and the unknown and to confirm the human sovereignty over the world. According to Jacques Derrida, there is no society in which the history of writing is not woven with the history of mapping the world (creating paths, being 'on the road')⁵.

In modern literature, however, this circular relationship between facts and words, this metaphorical correspondence between travel and literature, has lost its positive value, "its capacity to

¹ Hans Blumenberg, *Elaborazione del mito*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1991, p. 107.

² See Piero Boitani, *L'ombra di Ulisse. Figure di un mito*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1992, p. 11-39, in particular p. 36.

³ Vittoria Martinetto, *Naufragi, prigionie, erranze. Poetiche dell'eroismo nel Nuovo Mondo*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2001, p. 9.

⁴ Todorov considers the «basic form of story», i. e. «the nucleus without which it would not be said to be a story», like «the difference between two similar but not identical situations». Tzvetan Todorov, *La letteratura fantastica*, Milano, Garzanti, 1977 and reprints, p. 167. Even Lotman regards the idea of movement in space as an essential part in creating a plot. See Jurij M. Lotman, *La struttura del testo poetico*, Milano, Mursia, 1972, p. 273-282. All translations into English have been done by Paola Gheri, the author of this paper.

⁵ See Jacques Derrida, *Della grammatologia*, Milano, Jaca Book, 1969, pp. 147-195.

signify knowledge"¹. Certainly, we still travel and still talk about our travels, but the routes traced and followed by us no longer tell us our way back home. Far from leading us towards a house or a hidden universal truth, the journey reveals the world as an imaginary or a textual construction. Being founded upon the paradigm of Ulysses' discovery, knowledge has in its turn been discovered as a self-created journey among signs, in other words, as a virtually infinite act of writing.

2. Polar Adventures in the novels of Sten Nadolny and Christoph Ransmayr

From the paradigmatic failure of Ulysses' discovery, the novels of Sten Nadolny² and Christoph Ransmayr³ generate two complex allegories of the literary endeavour. The two texts, published only one year apart, re-write the stories of two different 19th century Polar expeditions, combining different narrative genres (historical novel, travel journal and *Bildungsroman*) into a hybrid solution that totally undermines the traditional models of interpretation. In addition to their main subject and to their postmodern narrative structures, what mostly associates the two novels and constitutes the topic of the present study, is their allegorical play with the process of writing itself.

Under the metaphor of the Polar journey (a theme already existing in Romantic literature as the allegory of the modern

¹ See Pino Fasano, *Letteratura e viaggio*, Bari, Laterza, 1999, hier p. 56.

² Sten Nadolny was born in Zehdenick on Havel in 1942. A son of the writers Isabella and Burckhard Nadolny, he published his first novel *Netzkarte* in 1981. Since then he has received several literary prizes and has published other novels (including *Selim oder Die Gabe der Rede*, 1990) which attained wide acclaim amongst critics and readers.

³ Christoph Ransmayr was born in Wels, in Northern Austria in 1954. *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* was his first novel for which he received the Elias-Canetti prize. He became famous only through his novel *Die letzte Welt*, published in 1988, which was hailed as one of the most significant texts in contemporary narrative writings.

hybris)¹, writing is now represented and understood as the narrator's unfavourable and disastrous journey.

The 19th century is the starting point of both novels. The exploratory endeavours and the great technological achievements of this century (for example the invention of new means of transport) have created the illusion that - as Ransmayr writes in the *Preface* to his novel - "the world has become smaller and a trip, let's say, along the Equator or to the Poles, is now only a question of money and flight schedules. But this is a mistake", because beyond this illusion, "distances [...] remain immense". A flight path is not a roadway, and we "humans, physically speaking, are only walkers and runners"².

These short reflections present the question which Ransmayr's work, and also Nadolny's novel *The Discovery of Slowness* (a title which is already an oxymoron)³ try to answer. Both novels in fact address a controversial issue in modern literature: that is to say,

¹ Not only in *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley, which can be considered a forerunner of the novels being discussed, but also in writings such as *The Ballad of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) by Samuel T. Coleridge or *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) by Edgar Allan Poe, we find a close connection between the *hybris* of writing and that of travelling to discover new lands. While sailing to the Arctic, Captain Robert Walton, who is the 'frame narrator' of *Frankenstein*, relates in the first letter to his sister, how he as a young man wanted to become a writer as well as a polar explorer. Only after he had failed the former he decided to become a sea-adventurer and to lead an expedition to the North Pole. The *Postscript* in the novel to *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym* (also an adventurer) reveals that, after the protagonist mysteriously disappears among the glaciers of the South Pole, he leaves behind drawings which are discovered to resemble actual Arabian letters of the alphabet that signify the verbs 'to be dark' and 'to be white'. When compared to Pym's destiny these signs seem to point symbolically to his undeserved longing for man's prohibited and inaccessible knowledge.

² Christoph Ransmayr, *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*, Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 1987, p. 9. Abbreviated in the text as SE plus page number.

³ The title can be considered an oxymoron as, in modern epistemology, discovery is usually associated with speed and not slowness.

the enormous distance created by the scientific and technological progress of modern culture, between human beings and their experience of the world.

To the human 'walker' a flight path can only appear as an ideal road, an abstract line as unreal as the space crossed by the high speed of a train or a steamship. The world disappears under these lines and these graphic designs, of which the 19th century explorers and mapmakers were so proud. It retreats into a map, vanishes behind a curtain of signs (routes, meridians and parallels) and of names, by which it is totally erased¹. Anyone who aspires to conquer the white spaces of the Pole (and eventually to discover the mythical Northwest passage), in fact only wants to mark its white expanses with flags and nomenclatures, in the eventual attempt to exorcise an unbearable *horror vacui*. Nevertheless, the modern Ulysses of the two novels will not be able to (or perhaps they will just refuse to) defend themselves from the fascination of this horror, and will disappear in the nothingness of the age-old glaciers.

3. The Pole and writing

John Franklin (1786-1847), the English naval officer and explorer whose biography is followed by Nadolny, recognises in the Pole the only place „where time doesn't go too fast", which he identifies as "his homeland and not Lincolnshire or England"². Here, 'slow'

¹ In *The Terrors of Ice and Darkness* the newfound land gets the bombastic name of "Franz Josephs Land" and the same treatment is given to the bays, the peaks and the fjords: "the litany of names lengthens day by day while Payer's companions become weaker and weaker" (SE, p. 219). Measuring, baptizing and suffering, they have rended the ice desert legible', while the land still remains inhospitable, inhabitable and impervious. Exploration doesn't disturb the silence of the ice, baptizing doesn't make it more welcoming, and neither does the initial hightened welcoming back to Austria of the survivors make any difference to the dying monarchy, not even the discovery of this Arctic archipelago. The Arctic expedition bitterly concludes with the leaders disillusioned and the Franz Joseph's Empire on the verge of war.

² Sten Nadolny, *Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit*, München, Piper, 1983, p. 183 (abbreviated in the text as EL plus page number).

John can finally find a home but, during his third expedition in 1847, he also finds his death there, disappearing in the Polar expanses. John Franklin's disappearance into nothingness is not very different to Josef Mazzini's destiny, who is the main character of Ransmayr's novel. This novel, which is a reconstruction of documentary and invention, narrates another 19th century expedition to the Arctic Polar Circle¹, while incorporating the adventures of a contemporary character.

The great grandson of a member of a past expedition, born in Trieste in 1948, Josef Mazzini follows the route marked by his predecessors, but in the winter of 1981 he gets lost among the glaciers of Spitzbergen. Declaring himself to be a friend of the missing man, the narrator tries to throw light upon his mysterious end, not only by writing his story, but also by weaving it into that of the first expedition and rearranging the testimonies previously gathered by Mazzini. To these two adventures, both converging into the Pole, the narrator adds his own story, which is this time totally set in a 'paper' world.

The three journeys structure the text according to a complicated telescope perspective. The first one, the Polar expedition of 1872, presents itself as the failure of a search for knowledge that had been inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment: „They had lost their ship, and only brought with them the nomenclature of islands buried among the ice-fields“ (SE, 261). A century later, the second journey takes the same route as the first one, only with a more disenchanted, but also more creative, spirit. Since he does not want to enrich science or history with any new discovery, Mazzini overturns the linear sequence of exploration–tale and writes the account before making the trip, transforming a story, which has now totally revealed its limited truth and usefulness, into a game of invention:

¹ This refers to the 1872 expedition with an Austrian-Hungarian team led by Julius Payer and Carl Weyprecht. The journey concludes two years later with the discovery of the Arctic archipelago having being baptized at that point as "Franz Josephs Land".

Mazzini said that he was, in a sense, renewing the past. He invented stories, imagined occurrences and events, took note of them and then, finally, he verified if, in a recent or remote past, real precursors of those stories had ever existed. Mazzini concluded that that was the method followed by the most futuristic novelists, but only in an inverse chronological sequence. In this way he was able to test the veracity of his positions through historical research. It was a way to play with reality (SE, 20 e s.).

Such an overt negation of the real sense of events leads us directly into post-modernity. We are in the Eighties. Mazzini knows that 'to discover' does not really mean anything else than to write, and he knows, after Lyotard, that history is, at the end, only a narration. Being tired of the infinite 'textuality' of a reality covered with signs, he goes to the Pole, to the only 'page' which has been left white, searching for an authentic experience, perhaps the only one that is still possible. Here he mysteriously disappears, and in the only place which has remained empty, a third journey starts, the journey of the narrator who gathers Mazzini's notes and, differently from him, complies with the ancient *hybris*, managing to colonise the 'desert fields' of the pages:

Desert fields. New land. With those notes, I did what a discoverer does with his own land, with the gulfs, the promontories and the canals (ridges/straits) without a name: I baptized them. Nothing must be left without a name. (SE, 186)

The necessity to write and to finally give a name, a fully narrative conclusion, to Mazzini's disappearance, so that to subtract him (and the whole world) from the unknown emptiness¹, generates the novel entitled *The Terrors of Ice and Darkness*. At the same time, the novel declares the failure of its own aim. Its (post)modern

¹ See Chapter I entitled "Aus der Welt schaffen" (SE, 11-15), which signifies in English "To make it disappear from the world".

narrator understands with bitterness that he had been seduced by the temptation of a discovery travel. As the narrator states:

I won't put an end to anything, nor will I make anything disappear: did I fear that my research would end like this? I am slowly starting to orient myself in the abundance and banality of my material, interpreting, in always different ways, the data gathered about Josef Mazzini's disappearance and those about ice, conforming myself to all the different versions as if I were a piece of furniture. (SE, 274)

Like the 19th century explorers who, induced to travel by their scientific passion, totally lost reality and bargained their ship, their health and even their life for a nomenclature, the narrator, travelling towards the end of the story, does not only lose reality but also his own trust in the value of the story itself. In its place, he discovers a universe made of indistinguishable/possible routes in the infinite space of literature, and leaves the scene like a disconsolate „chronicler who lacks the consolation of an end“ (SE, 275).

Ending with these words, the novel does not solve the enigma of Mazzini's disappearance; rather, it delivers us the failure of he who, travelling across „paper seas“, had still wanted to label them with names. In the inconsistency of his own enterprise, the narrator suffers the extreme consequences of that hermeneutic model of which he is an heir, and which was in the past the very foundation of adventure, of its narration and of the „consolation of the end“ as a refound homeland.

On the contrary, Franklin's story, told along the chronological thread of the events by a narrator less problematic than that of Ransmayr, appears much more linear and positive. Misunderstood and oppressed by those of his age and by his own father, for his incorrigible slowness, the young John soon sets sail, choosing, among all the elements, that which is most resistant to velocity: the sea¹. He becomes a naval officer and takes part in the historic

¹ “A ship, surrounded by the sea, was something that one could study” (EL, 57).

battles of Kopenhagen and Trafalgar. Disappointed by war, in which he recognises a brutal corollary of abhorred velocity, he decides to devote himself to adventure and to the exploration of new lands. Nevertheless, for each expedition that he happens to be leading – from Australia to the arctic coast of the Pacific – John must confront himself with other inevitable aspects of a violent and fast civilization: exploitation, hunger, death or the barbarous cannibalism of his own travel companions. Like Ransmayr's explorers, John pays with pleasure the price of so much destruction, for the sake of giving a name to „mountains, rivers, promontories and bays“ (EL, 240). But at this point, the champion of slowness, judged by some critics as a far too positive enemy of the inhuman progress of civilization¹, starts to show a very contradictory personality². Flattering his own vanity to 'sign' at all costs the unexplored lands, Franklin actually passes on the side of the fast, the violent and the protagonists of English colonialism. Despite his dated slowness, he cannot do without writing, and it is in writing that he transforms the earth into „an absurd thing“, i.e., in the words of his uncle Matthew, captain of the *Investigator*, into a geographical map which „transforms reliefs into plains.“ (EL,

¹ See for instance Ralph Kohpeiß, “Sten Nadolny: *Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit* (1983)”, in Id., *Der historische Roman der Gegenwart in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: ästhetische Konzeption und Wirkungsintention*, Stuttgart, M und P, 1993, pp. 147-198, in particular pp. 175-176 and Id., *Sten Nadolny. “Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit”*: Interpretation, München, Oldenbourg, 1995.

² Certain contradictions in the novel are briefly examined by Claudio Magris, “Verteidigung der Gegenwart. Sten Nadolnys *Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit*”, in Paul M. Lützeler (ed.), *Spätmoderne und Postmoderne. Beiträge zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*, Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 1991, pp. 82-90, Werner von Koppenfels, “Sten Nadolny, *Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit*”, *Arbitrium*, 3 (1985), pp. 324-328 and Uwe Wittstock, “*Der Autor und der Leser: Sten Nadolny, Das Erzählen und die guten Absichten*”, in Paul M. Lützeler (ed.), *Poetik der Autoren. Beiträge zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*, Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 1994, pp. 262-278.

82)¹. As a matter of fact, geographical maps have contributed to textualize our perception of the world:

Only after the invention of print and the extensive use of geographical maps favoured by print, human beings, thinking of the cosmos, the universe and the „world“, started to see it mainly as something that was in front of their eyes, as it was represented in modern printed atlases; that is, a wide surface or a series of surfaces (sight only offers us surfaces) ready to be „explored“. The ancient oral culture only knew a few „explorers“, even though it had travellers, adventurers and pilgrims².

The novel does not tell us if John Franklin's nostalgia for the Pole originates, in the same way as that of Mazzini's, from the vanishing of a land reduced to a „mere onomastic theory“³. Nevertheless, it is not by chance that, the closer John approaches the Pole, emotionally at first and then physically, the more Nadolny's text becomes focused on the problem of writing and on its relationship with travel. The idea of writing a report of his first two arctic expeditions „seemed a hazard to John, but this was more of an advantage, also because his aim was analogous to a long journey“ (EL, 268)⁴. Furthermore, the same idea was also a sort of

¹ The semantics in the English translation misses out some of the play on words of the original German text: „Eine Karte ist im Grunde etwas Unmögliches [...] denn sie verwandelt Erhabenes in Ebenes“ (EL, 82). In this sentence „Erhabenes“ means "things high up", which could refer to "mountains", or metaphorically, "sublime experiences". In this way the sentence implies that a geographical map minimises something that could be a sublime experience.

² Walter J. Ong, *Oralità e scrittura. Le tecnologie della parola*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1985, p. 107.

³ Giorgio Bertone, *Lo sguardo escluso. L'idea di paesaggio nella letteratura occidentale*, Novara, interlinea, 1999, p. 97.

⁴ "Writing was tiring, but it was like a sea voyage: it gave him the energy and the hope he needed, which sufficed for the rest of his life. Whoever had a book to write couldn't despair for long (EL, 269-270). This idea is a

mission aimed at „converting“ and convincing even those who „doubted,“ that the slow „life and navigation system 'à la Franklin“ (EL, 197)¹ was the right way of being in the world. In this sense writing, even when it goes against velocity and conquest, is nevertheless an act of conquest, which crushes the 'other' and the 'elsewhere' under the weight of a verb or an image: „What [John Franklin] knew by personal experience was transformed by verbal language into a kind of image“ (EL, 270).

4. The last, melancholic adventurers

The hero's slowness appears thus, in the end, only as an ironic antidote to the violent logic of progress supported by his own travelling and, even more, by his own writing. At the same time, an equally ironic position is taken by the narrator who, moved, as his own character, by the good intention to write a book against progress and velocity, soils his hands with the same shame. Like a skilful „billiard player“², Nadolny strikes home with a stroke that, although aimed at the narrator, ends up sabotaging the text of his own novel³.

The only one who manages to save himself, although *in extremis*, is the character who, in the deep silence of the arctic glaciers, seems to find a death which is a sort of redemption. Before leaving for his last expedition, the sixty year old John meets Sherard Lound again, an old friend and fellow sea-traveller

reiteration of a previous sentence: "Whoever travels at sea cannot despair for long" (EL, 80).

¹ "John's intention was to write a book, a thick book, to illustrate his theory, thereby convincing all the sceptics of the validity of his system" (EL, 268-269). However the idea of having a system on the whole can only be achieved if you are willing to control mother nature and hence people's lives. Moreover John is not able to perfect his theory into a full proof system.

² See Armin Mohler, "Schöne Literatur in der Wende? Am Beispiel von Sten Nadolny", *Criticón*, 16, (1986), pp. 79-82, hier p. 80.

³ "A novel is an idea, that needs to have a conclusion, even when this idea is fast breaking down"; Sten Nadolny, *Selim oder die Gabe der Rede*, München, Piper, 1990, p. 282.

that madness had made mute and immobile as a rock¹. The vision of Lound calmly sitting on the sea shore and silently looking at the horizon, seems to suggest to John that not even his legendary slowness can give him the full and satisfying experience of reality which he has always been looking for. „He has achieved my own aim“ (EL, 294), John thinks of Lound, „maybe he has found the present“ (EL, 295).

On our journeys (however slow they are), we are constantly striving to achieve a future goal, which put us a step ahead of the present moment in which we are supposed to be². John Franklin, being older (and more illuded) than Mazzini (who in his turn seems to have read Derrida), is a hero who moves towards the glaciers of the Pole without completely understanding the reasons of its call, but certainly searching for a „present“ that can only exist beyond travel and its narration, in an absence where, as in Ransmayr's novel, Mazzini can find „his own place“ (SE, 239). His death is not a proper death, i.e. it is not a real and narratable event. Rather, it is an escape from the 'textuality' of the world, as well as of the book itself. Disappearing in the white nothingness of the Pole, Mazzini abandons the maze of signs that is constructed by travelling and writing, and finds refuge into a utopian place where there is no need to travel anymore, because there is no need to write anymore, and vice versa. „He who has found his own place, does not need a travel diary anymore“ (SE, 239), is the

¹ A more detailed examination of the following passages reveals the ironical aspects of the story: “The strange thing was, that the closer he got to achieving his goal, the more unnecessary it became. The total silence, the immense space, what real purpose did it serve? He was the captain of the ship, he didn't want to be a piece of coast or a rock on the shore [...]. The North Pole had become once again a geographical concept” (EL, 196-197). By minimising the Pole as a geographical concept, John is able to avoid the fascination of *horror vacui*. But when he meets Lound, "who is sitting immobile as a rock on the sea shore and silently looking at the horizon" (EL, 325) John rediscovers the old nostalgia for the emptiness and says to himself: "he has achieved my own aim [...] Maybe he has found the present" (EL, 325-326).

² Claudio Magris, pp. 82-83, see footnote n. 1 page 429.

observation of a defeated narrator, revealed by the character's polar enterprise as the last, melancholic adventurer and explorer:

I covered my walls with geographical maps, coastal and nautical maps, papers folded in all the different tones of blue, spotted with islands and crossed by the boundaries of the wharf's limit. I shelter my head with the palm of my hand, I cover the bay, I feel the coldness and dryness of blue, I am among my paper seas, alone with all the possibilities of a story, a chronicler who lacks the comfort of an end (SE, 275).

The blue that German Romanticism used to represent the fascinating infinity of the subject and of his language, becomes nothing more than its own, cold and desolated projection. Finally, reaching the Pole is like the end of a journey of no return made by the characters of the two novels. An end which leaves behind two solitary and sad narrators who, despite having been left without an aim or any possibility of return, cannot do without travelling, an act which will always take them far away from reality and from the present.