

# SAILING OFF ON THE ADEL: ALESSANDRO BARICCO'S METALITERARY TRILOGY (PART 2)\*

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*This study argues that the metaliterary aspect constitutes a fundamental and unifying concern within Alessandro Baricco's first three novels. The author's leaning towards a self-reflexive mode of representation is demonstrated by the endings of *Castelli di rabbia* and *Oceano Mare*. However, this aspect pervades all the main thematic strands of both novels, amounting to a consistent vision on Baricco's part. This also relates to the author's views on the relationship of the general public with art and culture, as illustrated in Baricco's newspaper articles and musicological essays. A similar vision applies to the author's third novel, *Seta*, which, though it does not include an explicitly metafictional epilogue, can in fact be seen as a daring and coherent metaphor of the role and development of fiction in the last few centuries.*

## *Oceano Mare*

Although it is probably Baricco's best known and most widely-read novel, *Oceano Mare* appears to be the least original from the point of view of metaliterary exploration. It mostly repeats and amplifies themes and concepts that we have already encountered in *Castelli di rabbia*, while at the same time containing the seed of ideas that will be developed further in *Seta*.<sup>1</sup>

As was to be expected, the ocean itself is a wide metaphor which, if we can squeeze it into a definition for working purposes, represents all-encompassing, all-engulfing reality, the terrifying 'out there'. The novel is a theorem aiming to prove what we had already been taught through the images of the train and glass in *Castelli di rabbia*:

L'unica persona che mi abbia davvero insegnato qualcosa, un vecchio che si chiamava Darrell, diceva sempre che ci sono tre tipi di uomini: quelli che vivono davanti al mare, quelli che si spingono dentro il mare, e quelli che dal mare riescono a tornare, vivi. E diceva: vedrai la sorpresa quando scoprirai quali sono i più felici.<sup>2</sup>

Reality corrupts, it kills our soul and humanity. Literature is presented as an alternative mode of exploration, a way of acquiring an equivalent kind of knowledge while retaining,

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or indeed developing, our human dimension. In literature there is piety and mercy and sense, while life, the *oceano mare*, has none. And whatever truth there is, it comes at a cost: 'la verità si concede solo all'orrore' (*Oceano Mare*, p. 120). 'Questo, mi ha insegnato il ventre del mare. Che chi ha visto la verità rimarrà per sempre *inconsolabile*. E davvero *salvato* è solo colui che non è mai stato in pericolo' (ibid., p. 122).

This is an obviously Conradian concept. As we shall see, *Oceano Mare* contains an explicit reference to Joseph Conrad's first novel. Its even stronger relationship with this author's most famous work, however, becomes most apparent when we compare the passages quoted above with Baricco's discussion of *Heart of Darkness* in an afterword to the 1995 Feltrinelli edition of Conrad's novel:

Kurtz è l'uomo che sceglie di entrare nel cuore della tenebra e non ne esce mai più. Marlow è l'uomo che si ferma sulla soglia della tenebra, e si salva: 'Sarebbe stato troppo buio ...' dice, per giustificarsi di aver sepolto per sempre le ultime parole di Kurtz. Sarebbe stato troppo buio.<sup>3</sup>

This is also, however, an archetypal concept. Both the sea and Almayer's Inn, in fact, present characteristics identifying them as 'regions of supernatural wonder', as described in Joseph Campbell's classic study of the archetypal initiation paradigm in literature:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.<sup>4</sup>

Almayer's Inn is a space contiguous with, but distinct from, the *oceano mare*. It has its risks, but also its rewards: 'non è un posto perfettamente sano, stante la vicinanza pericolosa col mare, ma [...] anche è un posto da non crederci tanto è bello, e quieto, e leggero, e struggente, e finale' (p. 153). It is a liminal place, the space of fiction, or more generally art: 'Questa è la riva del mare, Padre Pluche. Né terra né mare. È un luogo che non esiste' (p. 92). This will be made abundantly clear by the explicitly metaliterary ending, but is also hinted at by the intertextual reference. In Conrad's first novel, the title *Almayer's Folly* punningly refers to both the psychological condition to which the protagonist will be led by the ruin of all his (day)dreams and to an actual edifice, a newer and grander building that was to embody Almayer's new commercial prosperity. The building is never put to use, never even properly finished (hence the ironic name with which it was referred to by the unsympathetic white crews of visiting commercial ships) and appropriately ends up in smoke, as Almayer marks the utter destruction of all his hopes by setting fire to it. By contrast, the survivors from the Inn in *Oceano Mare* will, in different ways, end up by being saved, or at least by being at peace with the world, in marked contrast to the destiny awaiting those who have been 'at sea'.

The structure of *Oceano Mare* provides the reader with an easy map on which to follow the different characters' drama and development. It is a simple structure, consisting of three *libri*. The first, 'Locanda Almayer', introduces the various characters, with their reasons for being at the inn. With their respective rooms, each character also acquires a daemon-like or angel-like child, who appears to be the exteriorization of the character's inner life: 'Ci sono certi che lo chiamano angelo, il narratore che si portano dentro e che gli racconta la vita', we had been told in *Castelli di rabbia* (p. 117). The second *libro* is entitled 'Il ventre

del mare', in itself a clear allusion to the Belly-of-the-Whale myth, which, as indicated by Campbell, emphasizes how the hero's venturing forth, eventually leading to his initiation, is 'a form of self-annihilation'.<sup>5</sup> To depict his journey to the heart of darkness Baricco adapts the episode of the raft of the Medusa, giving us a tale of horror and despair meant to explore the uttermost limits which can be reached by man's inhumanity to man. As always in Baricco, it is the human dimension that defines any sort of experience. The horror of the raft episode is mostly caused, and certainly compounded, by the absence of human solidarity (*Oceano Mare*, p. 117).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, as we return to the inn at the beginning of the third *libro* we are immediately presented with an image of all the lodgers reacting to the disquiet caused in them by the raging sea by remaining together in the lounge.<sup>7</sup>

The title of this third book, 'I canti del ritorno', points in the direction of a (not at all uncommon) meta-artistic interpretation of the paradigmatic initiation story, as the boon the returning hero is able to bestow on his fellow men is to share his newly-acquired knowledge. A series of eight short chapters wind up the stories of the five original lodgers at the inn and of the two characters involved in the raft episode (the *dénouement* of whose story will also take place at the inn), and reveal, if not the identity, the (metaliterary) function of the mysterious guest in the seventh room. The two women characters are the only ones who find themselves at the intersection of the two groups of stories, as they are in themselves guests at the inn but also are, or become, the lovers of the two sea survivors. With a neat rendering of the *eros* and *thanatos* opposition, one of them will thereby find love, the other death.

Ann Deveria is the sacrificial victim: throughout the book she is at the receiving end of the other characters' quest for knowledge and artistic rendition and acts as a critic, as audience, and as the voice of common reason. All the other survivors from the sea or the inn have a clear metaliterary or meta-artistic function.

First in the series analyzed in the third *libro* is Elisewin, the other female character, and the one who most directly enacts Campbell's paradigm. Elisewin is the structural narrative equivalent of Mormy in *Castelli di rabbia*, but her story is given a more successful outcome. Like Mormy, she suffers from a pathologically enhanced sensitivity which makes it impossible for her to participate in life. Consequently, her doctor orders a make-or-break kind of treatment: she is to travel to the sea and be immersed into it. But she does not make it all the way there. The intermediate stop at Almayer's Inn will cure her illness and, during a night of passion with Thomas (*alias* Adams), the damaged and vengeful sea survivor, she will become, quite literally, the receptacle for the stories that he had acquired in his travels, and for which he had paid so dearly. She is then able to bring these stories to Langlais, a minor but crucial reader-representative character, who, we are explicitly told, is their rightful owner (p. 144). As ever, Baricco is interested most of all in upholding the rights of the reader. It is for the reader that literature exists, not as a 'tautological', author-centred enterprise.<sup>8</sup> This is a fundamental theme in Baricco, and continued to be at the core of his reflection on literature and art in general, even while it was expanded and assumed a new focus, in the series of articles in *La Repubblica* in 2006. In discussing an 'intuizione preziosa' by Goffredo Parise on how the 'new' writing (in 1974) seemed to be based on communication rather than expression, Baricco acknowledges how this may have created a sense of loss and degradation in some practitioners of literature:

D'improvviso la parola scritta spostava il suo baricentro dalla voce che la pronunciava all'orecchio che l'ascoltava. Per così dire, risaliva in superficie, e andava a cercarsi il transito del mondo: a costo di perdere, nel commiato dalle sue radici, tutto il proprio valore.

But ultimately he is also asking us to understand how this may correspond to a new set of principles with a validity of their own:

Dico questo: privilegiare la comunicazione non vuol dire scrivere cose banali in modo più semplice per farsi capire: significa diventare tasselli di esperienze più ampie, che non nascono, né muoiono, nella lettura. La qualità di un libro, per i barbari [i.e. for the new generations of readers], sta nella quantità di energia che quel libro è in grado di ricevere dalle altre narrazioni, e poi di riversare in altre narrazioni.<sup>9</sup>

The tale of Elisewin's companion, Padre Pluche, has a similar audience-oriented ending, except that the source of his stories is a very personal, even amusing kind of relationship with the divinity, as attested by the very particular prayers of which he is the author (pp. 149–59). He returns home from the inn in order to ease Elisewin's father's last moments with tales of his daughter's recovery and new life:

Io gli racconto  
e lui muore  
ma è morire un po' meno  
morire così. (p. 157)

On a higher level, the parallel between the outcome of the storylines of Elisewin and Padre Pluche enacts and introduces the concept of literature being the modern substitute for religion as the primary instrument through which man tries to come to terms with the terrifying mystery of existence. In the final pages of the novel, this concept will be made explicit by the man from the seventh room: 'Se il mare non lo si può più benedire, forse, lo si può ancora *dire*' (p. 225).<sup>10</sup> In reply to questions from the assembly of the inn's daemon-children to whom he is speaking (through an interesting device, we find here an author/narrator figure instructing the characters' consciousnesses about the meaning of their stories), the mysterious guest explains that the quest for the right way of 'saying' the sea could, theoretically, lead to one single word. He is adamant, however, that this word can never be *mare* (p. 226).

A quest of this kind is precisely what informs the storylines of two of the main characters and guests at the inn, the painter Plasson and the academic Bartleboom. In different ways, they are both trying to express the sea: the former by painting it, the latter by identifying where it ends. As with the artist-figures in *Castelli di rabbia*, the author invites us to take a sympathetic view of their struggles while at the same time becoming aware of the fallacy inherent in them. Disappointed with a pseudo-realistic and commercialized mode of representation (he used to paint rich people's portraits), Plasson is now trying to paint the sea with the sea (i.e. with sea water).<sup>11</sup> But of course, to the undiscerning, uninitiated (or maybe just sane) eye, the result is a series of completely blank canvases. Towards the end, however, Plasson does get closer to the only two modes of artistic representation whose validity we feel Baricco is prepared to endorse. First, items 25–32 in the catalogue of Plasson's works compiled by Bartleboom are untitled portraits of sailors

(eight in number, like the eight characters to whom the final *libro* of *Oceano Mare* dedicates one chapter each), i.e. the sea is here represented through its traces on human lives. Then, after a painting of a lake, an indication that the painter, worn out by his quest, is about to change tactics entirely, the final four items represent the artist's left hand, which is, we are specifically told, the hand with which Plasson painted. In the end, the artist resigns himself to portraying not some sort of objective reality, the great 'out there', but himself and his own artistic instruments. Having reached this point, Plasson dies 'sereno, in quieta solitudine e con l'anima in pace' (p. 178).

On the face of it, Bartleboom's quests do not come to much, either. In his search for the perfect woman, to whom he had been writing one letter after another before he had even met her, he is at first taunted with the expectation of success, but then it all turns into a rather farcical situation, again gently mocking human aspirations to the attainment of the absolute. In the end, he gives up all thought of marriage, but, like Plasson, he will die a man at peace with himself. The same lightness of touch, the same serene, self-effacing approach to life had led Bartleboom to accept with fascination, rather than with disappointment, the realization that the encyclopaedia of limits he was compiling was in fact destined to remain an endless task. One catalogue that he did compile, however, is the list of Plasson's works, a lasting tribute by one hankerer after knowledge to another, and a key element for the reader's understanding of the novel as a whole. The compiling of catalogues has, in fact, the same function here as in *Castelli di rabbia*, of a preliminary, makeshift way of at least coping with the ineffable: Thomas who starts being able to tell his stories only after he has spent some time in Langlais's perfectly ordered and regulated garden (where he is reborn as Adams); Ann Deveria's father's list of imagined horrendous deaths for every single one of his acquaintances, as his only way of reacting to his own painful and protracted death (p. 78); the encyclopaedia as a device 'per dimenticare il gran mare di latte che intanto ti frega' (p. 84).

Bartleboom and Plasson are, we are told, two complementary pieces of the same puzzle (pp. 70–75). Just as Plasson is looking for the 'beginning' of the sea, as a handle that will make its representation possible, Bartleboom specifically came to Almayer's Inn to find its 'end'. But in the event it is Elisewin who confidently declares her newly-acquired knowledge not of 'where' the sea ends, but of the pragmatic fact that it 'does' end. This, the implication is, is all we really need to know (pp. 142 and 52).

In contrast with the peaceful outcome granted to both Bartleboom and Plasson, the two sea survivors (Thomas and the outwardly successful but remorseful Savigny) will play out their drama to the full, and their tragic stage will be Ann Deveria's body. Their descent into hell had left them irremediably marked ('davvero *salvato* è solo colui che non è mai stato in pericolo'). Humankind, it is well known, cannot bear very much reality. As Padre Pluche respectfully suggests to his Creator, the most expedient way to salvation is of a fictional kind:

No, ve lo dico, perché dovesse capitarvi di nuovo, sapete poi come regolarvi. Un sogno è roba che funziona. Se volete un consiglio, quello è il sistema buono. Per salvare qualcuno, nel caso. Un sogno. (p. 159)

As well as the danger of reality, the Thomas-Savigny story also serves to highlight its elusiveness, as in the second book the same events, told first in the voice of Savigny, then

in that of Thomas, differ in a couple of aspects. These diverging details pertain specifically to the issue of human culpability. Was the raft abandoned on purpose, or through ineptitude? In this instance, there is agreement on the first interpretation on the part of Savigny and Thomas, who are both victims in this respect. The second, more conciliatory possibility is advanced by the narrator (p. 101). Did the crew steal the barrel of wine from the officers, and then start the first night of massacre on board the raft in a drunken frenzy (p. 104), or were they given the barrel by the officers to make them drunk (p. 115)? Was Savigny being strangled by a man who was, paradoxically, at the same time crying out for mercy, in which case his killing of the man would have been in self-defence (p. 105), or was it cold-blooded murder (p. 115)? Most importantly, Savigny makes no explicit mention of what is the crucial horrific act from the point of view of Thomas: the seemingly gratuitous killing of the latter's woman. (Was it an attempt to kill Thomas himself? We shall never know.)

One way of resolving this contrast is the one adopted by Savigny, as he attempts to drown all awareness of guilt in a hieratic celebration of the sea as an all-encompassing reality beyond good and evil (pp. 108–11). Another is, of course, the good old-fashioned cover-up by which the upper classes impose their ordering, rationalizing constructs on the lower classes as the Truth. Savigny's horrific experience will be turned into a best-seller, a 'delizioso libretto' affording old society dames the chance to feel the kind of strong emotions that in no other way could form part of their lives (p. 204). However, if the transformation of Savigny's tale into a 'delizioso libretto' is certainly demeaning, Thomas's inability to tell this one particular story leads to destructive violent action:

Se avessi una vita davanti a me, forse la passerei a raccontare questa storia, senza smettere mai, mille volte, fino a quando, un giorno, la capirei. Ma davanti ho solo un uomo che aspetta il mio coltello. E poi mare, mare, mare. (p. 119)

In *Oceano Mare*, in fact, we find the same underlying thesis of the shielding function of literature as in Baricco's first novel, though with a shift of emphasis from the literary medium itself (literature as glass) to the literary producer. The discussion, in the final pages of the novel, of literature as a structural substitute for religion is, in fact, paralleled in the opening scene by the figure of the painter as a sentinel guarding us from too much reality (a paradoxical thought that, as we have seen, will be explained and justified in the rest of the novel):

La spiaggia. E il mare.

Potrebbe essere la perfezione — immagine per occhi divini — mondo che accade e basta, il muto esistere di acqua e terra, opera finita ed esatta, verità — *verità* — ma ancora una volta è il salvifico granello dell'uomo che inceppa il meccanismo di quel paradiso, un'inezia che basta da sola a sospendere tutto il grande apparato di inesorabile verità, una cosa da nulla, ma piantata nella sabbia, impercettibile strappo nella superficie di quella santa icona, minuscola eccezione posatasi sulla perfezione della spiaggia sterminata. A vederlo da lontano non sarebbe che un punto nero: nel nulla, il niente di un uomo e di un cavalletto da pittore. (p. 9)

La sentinella se ne va. Il suo dovere è finito. Scampato pericolo. Si spegne nel tramonto l'icona che ancora una volta non è riuscita a diventare sacra. Tutto per quell'ometto e i suoi pennelli. E ora che se n'è andato, non c'è più tempo. Il buio sospende tutto. Non c'è nulla che possa, nel buio, diventare *vero*. (p. 11)

Such strong sense of relief at the staving off of the *vero* is retrospectively explained, in the raft episode, by the demonstration of the theorem that 'la verità si concede solo all'orrore' (p. 120). These opening pages, however, can also be profitably set alongside what is one of the most typical, and probably most famous passages in Baricco's œuvre as a whole, the one in which the narrator comments on Elisewin's journey to the sea, which her father has arranged to take place by river so that it could be a mediated journey, a gentle sliding to water through water:

[...] quanto sarebbe bello se, per ogni mare che ci aspetta, ci fosse un fiume, per noi. E qualcuno — un padre, un amore, qualcuno — capace di prenderci per mano e di trovare quel fiume — immaginarlo, inventarlo — e sulla sua corrente posarci, con la leggerezza di una sola parola, addio. Questo, davvero, sarebbe meraviglioso. Sarebbe *dolce*, la vita, qualunque vita. E le cose non farebbero male, ma si avvicinerebbero portate dalla corrente, si potrebbe prima sfiorarle e poi toccarle e solo alla fine farsi toccare. Farsi *ferire*, anche. *Morire*. Non importa. Ma tutto sarebbe, finalmente, *umano*. Basterebbe la fantasia di qualcuno — un padre, un amore, qualcuno. Lui saprebbe inventarla una strada, qui, in mezzo a questo silenzio, in questa terra che non vuole parlare. Strada clemente, e bella. Una strada da qui al mare. (pp. 51–52)

This passage in itself sums up Baricco's creed of the redeeming—because—mediating function of art. As if in answer to a prayer, the chapter (and page) concludes with Elisewin's arrival at the inn and her first glimpse of the painter-sentinel, planted right there inside the sea.

### *Seta*

The painter-sentinel prologue and the measures taken to shield Elisewin's sensitivity in *Oceano Mare* are further linked by the introduction of a concept which will prove fundamental in Baricco's next novel. There is nothing on the painter's canvas, just as in the landscape he is portraying there is nothing resembling the smudge of pink that eventually finds its way onto that same canvas from the lips of Ann Deveria. Or rather, there is nothing 'che si possa vedere' (*Oceano Mare*, pp. 10–11). In the same way, Baron Carewall, who describes his daughter, with her pathologically enhanced sensitivity, as a veil of silk, sets out to have her surrounded by her element, having her room wrapped in silken tapestry with soothing, non-dramatic images, from which all human characters are of necessity banned (except as distant, ethereal figures treading on air). In itself, we are told, silk thread differs from all other types of material in one crucial respect: 'che non lo vedevi, ma lui c'era' (*Oceano Mare*, p. 15).<sup>12</sup>

*Seta* picks up the main themes expressed in Baricco's first two novels and attempts to be in itself that translucent, transparent medium which art had been said to be, in various ways, in *Castelli di rabbia* and in *Oceano Mare*. Its minimalist text could in itself be seen as that attempt to 'say the sea' in ever fewer words to which the author-character refers at the end of *Oceano Mare* (p. 226). It is the sort of representation that could quite legitimately find its way on to the tapestry in Elisewin's room.

### 'Un libro fatto di niente'

Pietro Citati's opinion that '[n]el mattino in cui scrisse *Seta* Alessandro Baricco immaginò che tutta la letteratura del mondo fosse scomparsa ... Come Flaubert, voleva scrivere

“un libro fatto di niente” ...’ seems to have obtained Baricco’s endorsement,<sup>13</sup> as it is quoted on the back cover of one of the paperback editions of *Seta*. Yet the latter, more illuminating, part of the quotation actually contradicts the first part. If this ‘libro fatto di niente’ is essentially a Flaubertian project, then it is hardly an intertextually naive product. And in fact, while there is nothing here like the flaunting intertextuality of *Oceano Mare*, reference to Flaubert himself is made by Baricco on the very first page of *Seta*, and then repeated later (p. 21) as part of the contextualizing setting. Although the mention of *Salammô* and of other events has ostensibly the function of helping to define the year in which the story narrated in *Seta* begins (1861), we should remember Baricco’s oft-repeated warning that the vaguely nineteenth-century, ‘foreign’, setting of his novels is mostly a distancing device. We are therefore more than justified in seeking to ascribe a rather more symbolic function to the reference to Flaubert. To this effect, at least two lines of interpretation may be usefully pursued.

The first is the one pointed out by Citati, of Flaubert’s wish expressed in a letter to Louise Colet dated 16 January 1852:

Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c’est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style, comme la terre sans être soutenue se tient en l’air, un livre qui n’aurait presque pas de sujet ou du moins où le sujet serait presque invisible, si cela se peut.<sup>14</sup>

But as with Citati’s reference itself, the usefulness of this parallel seems to remain limited to once again stressing the idea of the lightness and invisibility of literature as medium, rather than pointing in the direction of Baricco’s more specific adherence to a project. In fact, in a textbook which was in use in some Italian universities in the early 1980s, Flaubert’s letter is quoted as being used by Alain Robbe-Grillet in support of his view on the need to play down the importance of the ‘story’ or ‘plot’ in a novel, seen as a consolatory device meant to lull readers into a false sense of security about the comprehensibility of the world in which they live.<sup>15</sup> As we know, Baricco’s own agenda could not be more different from that of the ‘difficult’ and ‘alienating’ *nouveau roman*. For him, the story is the thing, and in fact the ambitious quality of his enterprise may be seen in his attempt to have it both ways: to attract the audience by fulfilling, to the best of his ability, the narrative pact, and at the same time to draw attention to the ‘flimsiness’ and necessary distance, or non-correspondence, between the literary medium and reality, which remains safely out of reach.

For the second line of interpretation, we may turn to Baricco’s own ‘esternazioni’ on Flaubert, and particularly to a remark made *en passant* in an interview in which, being asked for his opinion on the new freedom of movement offered by the internet, with the possibility of following alternative links, Baricco reveals a surprisingly conservative attitude, advocating the author’s right to remain fully in control of the narrative path he is creating:

La filosofia del link mi affascina, lo amo di per sé, come la filosofia del viaggio e dello scarto. Lo scrittore, però, viaggia fra i limiti della sua testa, e per la lettura la cosa affascinante è ancora sempre seguire il viaggio di uno. Credo che, di fatto, poi Conrad facesse questo: apriva delle finestre, entrava, si spostava. Flaubert faceva questo. Ma è egli stesso che ti detta il viaggio e tu segui.<sup>16</sup>



Baricco's affiliation with Flaubert (and with Conrad, an explicit presence in *Oceano Mare*) is therefore revealed as being of a very basic, essential kind: Baricco sees himself, and the writers he admires most, as 'openers of windows'. This of course leads us straight back to the underlying metaliterary assumptions which we have highlighted with respect to *Castelli di rabbia* and *Oceano Mare*. It also explains the otherwise rather peculiar choice of *Salammô* as the novel to mention within the Flaubertian canon. Far from being a 'libro fatto di niente', this work is in fact a gory, decadent tale of wars, massacres, and human sacrifices, which will provide the basis for Italy's first internationally-famous feature film, *Cabiria* (1914); not a soothing, ethereal representation, but an assault on our senses, famously starting with a pantagruelic banquet which was soon to degenerate into a slaughter of horrendous cruelty of both men and animals. It is, however, a perfect illustration of the 'window' theory, allowing us to explore inhuman horrors without having our soul, our fundamental humanity, crushed by the experience.

An awareness of the differences between Flaubert's and Baricco's tales of the geographical and chronological Other (*Salammô* is set in and around Carthage in the third century BC) is therefore a necessary prerequisite, both qualifying and highlighting the similarity between the two authors' artistic projects. Flaubert's Orient is opulent, cruel, and starkly visible. Baricco's Japan turns out to be no less cruel, but its defining characteristic, we are told from the start, is its invisibility.

#### *The Invisible Which is There*

'Com'è la fine del mondo?', Baldabiou asks Hervé Joncour when he returns from his first journey to Japan. 'Invisibile', is Joncour's reply (*Seta*, p. 29). We are offered no explanation for this definition, except perhaps on an artistic level, in the paragraph that follows: 'Alla moglie Hélène portò in dono una tunica di seta che ella, per pudore, non indossò mai. Se la tenevi tra le dita, era come stringere il nulla' (p. 29).

The invisible which is there is a recurring theme on several levels in *Seta*, creating an interesting incorporation of the attempted mode of artistic representation (minimalist, transparent) with its subject matter, silk. Even Pasteur, who lurks in the background ready to descend like a *deus ex machina* and unveil the mystery of the silkworm eggs' disease, thus helping to negate the need for further journeys into the Unknown, is working with microscopes 'capaci di vedere l'invisibile' (p. 48). Rather predictably, achieving a vision of the invisible is the leitmotif of Joncour's progress within the story, from his fixing his eyes on 'il parco che non c'era' (his own little imitation Japan, which he proposes to build — p. 65), to his being allowed to glimpse the end of the world in another sense of the word (as the Japanese village to which he is travelling is destroyed by war — p. 68), to the gift of tongues and sight he is found to have achieved at the very end:

Col tempo iniziò a concedersi un piacere che prima si era sempre negato: a coloro che andavano a trovarlo, raccontava dei suoi viaggi. Ascoltandolo, la gente di Lavedieu imparava il mondo e i bambini scoprivano cos'era la meraviglia. Lui raccontava piano, guardando nell'aria cose che gli altri non vedevano. (*Seta*, p. 100)

Seeing (or hearing) things nobody else can perceive is the hallmark of the artist. And Baricco is not being entirely truthful when, in his desire to fend off American attempts at

closure in the proposed filming of *Seta*, he insists that ‘il protagonista non ne trae nessun insegnamento. Capisce solo che l’esperienza umana è inspiegabile’.<sup>17</sup>

### *Colours*

The theme of invisible reality is paralleled by another recurring motif, that of the blank medium. In fact, the English word ‘blank’, in its etymological kinship with the Italian ‘bianco’, offers a ready clue for the interpretation of such signs as the white kimono worn by the girl offered to Hervé Joncour as substitute lover during one of his journeys. By contrast, the real love he aspires to possess wears a vivid orange, while the negative force opposing his desires, Hara Kei, wears black. The theme of art as a transparent, blank medium is, of course, also reinforced by the name of the metaliterary go-between, Madame Blanche.

Given these signals, it is difficult to accept Fulvio Senardi’s view of *Seta* as a simple turning back to ‘una nozione più tradizionale del narrare’.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Senardi himself, in his important and perceptive essay on Baricco, while seeing in *Seta* primarily an attempt to escape ‘la dichiarata militanza nelle schiere del “pensiero debole”’ in order finally to give us an image of the world, cannot help finding in this short, ethereal work a vague metaphorical and symbolic character, and even a certain ‘prospettiva metaletteraria’.<sup>19</sup> My contention is that the latter aspect is, in fact, at the same time less obvious and more pervasive in *Seta* than in Baricco’s first two novels.

### *The Metaliterary Dimension*

Over and above the individual elements discussed above, it is the very plot of *Seta* which makes it a coherent metaliterary parable, centred around the figure of Baldabiou. Like Mr Rail in *Castelli di rabbia*, Baldabiou is an entrepreneur dealing in a translucent material that tries to deny its materiality, for Baricco the metaliterary metaphor *par excellence*. But compared with Baricco’s previous explicit and implicit artist-figures, Baldabiou is an even more daring self-reflexive concept, the metaliterary function being, in relation to this character, both more encompassing and less openly advertized. Mr Rail constructs his own story, sets off on his journeys, has his own exotic affair — until his wife Jun, with a twist comparable to the one that we shall observe in *Seta*, takes over these characteristics (and is in fact the one left holding the metafictional manuscript at the end). Baldabiou, the disturbing character (‘Belzebù?’) who penetrates the heretofore unambitious town of Lavilledieu, a figure who likes nothing better than to teach and to have secrets to tell (*Seta*, p. 13), is an author looking for a character to enact his adventures for him. He finds this in Hervé Joncour.

Not once but twice does Baldabiou take over Hervé Joncour’s life. For eight years in a row, Joncour is shipped off to Northern Africa to buy silkworm eggs; then, after the epidemic that had ruined the European eggs has spread south of the Mediterranean, he is sent to face the even greater Unknown: Japan. On both occasions, the decision has been Baldabiou’s. The ever passive Joncour — who has been rescued by Baldabiou from a military career that had never been entirely his own choice — simply ‘lasciava che

quell'uomo gli riscrivesse ordinatamente il destino' (p. 16). His first journey to Egypt is like the skeleton or the outward shell of Elisewin's in *Oceano Mare*: he goes, sees things, comes back, has stories to tell. In keeping with the minimalist, would-be transparent tone of *Seta* there is no heightened sensitivity to be soothed here, no night of passion (yet). But the name of the ship on which Baricco's characters leave, or are supposed to leave, for their first, or only, metafictional journey is the same throughout the author's self-reflexive trilogy: the *Adel* (*Castelli di rabbia*, p. 209; *Oceano Mare*, p. 50; *Seta*, p. 15).

Then, it is again Baldabiau who determines the change in Hervé Joncour's destination. And once we have accepted that in *Seta* the metaliterary aspect is if anything even stronger than in Baricco's previous two novels we may also find that here the tale of the ways in which literature has attempted to interact with reality acquires a diachronic dimension. Just as literature in the modernist period was finding it necessary to go beyond the boundaries of traditional realistic representation, in the same way Baldabiau realizes that if Lavilledieu's silk mills are to survive, 'dobbiamo arrivare laggiù': Japan, the end of the known world (*Seta*, p. 16). And this is where something conceptually rather daring begins to happen, something which we might want to describe using a typically Barricchian term: the 'scollamento' between the author's intentions and the character's story.<sup>20</sup>

'Questo non è un romanzo. E neppure un racconto. Questa è una storia.' One way of interpreting this authorial indication, which is prominently displayed in the novel's paratext (on the back cover of the BUR La Scala sixth edition), is by observing how close the story of Hervé Joncour is to Campbell's monomyth paradigm examined above in relation to *Oceano Mare*. And the reason it is so close to the paradigm is that its elements have been stripped to the minimum. There is the call, with the clarion sounded by Baldabiau. There is the journey, a trek across the world whittled down to half a page of names and figures: the ultimate attempt at pure denomination, and as such repeated each time almost identically. (Only the name of Lake Bajkal keeps pointing towards different forms of the absolute: *mare, il demonio, l'ultimo, il santo*.)<sup>21</sup> There are helpers and obstacles in the quest for the silkworm eggs, the ultimate boon that Hervé Joncour will bring back to his town, thus making his own fortune and that of his community. But what started as a commercial enterprise soon turns for Hervé into a much more personal kind of quest, as his spirit becomes captivated by the mistress of his Japanese supplier, a girl dressed in orange silk whose eyes are of a surprisingly western shape (p. 25 and *passim*). And this is where the character begins to take over from its creator. Whereas Joncour's journeys to Northern Africa and his first two expeditions to Japan had been made following Baldabiau's directives, on the occasion of the third journey this authorial figure is beginning to show some hesitation, and looks to his character for an indication of how the narrative should develop (pp. 48–49). The fourth journey is entirely Hervé's decision, a decision which is indeed taken at a time when a series of events had made further travel to Japan unnecessary from a commercial point of view, and even inexpedient. By this point, the role of an astounded Baldabiau is simply to make the journey possible by framing his fiction around his character's newly-acquired self-determination:

Baldabiau comunicò agli allevatori di Lavilledieu che Pasteur era inattendibile, che quei due italiani avevano già truffato mezza Europa, che in Giappone la guerra sarebbe finita prima dell'inverno e che Sant'Agnese, in sogno, gli aveva chiesto se non erano tutti quanti un branco di cagasotto. (p. 66)

This brings to completion the progressive emancipation and take-over of the character from the author. On the diachronic metaliterary scale to which we alluded above, we are now firmly in the late 1990s. Two years after the publication of *Seta*, José Saramago will give his Nobel acceptance lecture on the subject 'De como a personagem foi mestre e o autor seu aprendiz'.<sup>22</sup> Also, from this point onwards, Joncour's quest will serve almost entirely a personal rather than communal purpose. In keeping with the modernist and postmodern tendency to find that the path towards Truth ultimately leads inwards rather than outwards, and that the assiduously sought Other is nothing but a form of the Self, the inexplicably western shape of Hara Kei's woman's eyes is an important anticipation of the story's final epiphanic moment.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the letter in Japanese received by Joncour once historical events leading to the forcible 'opening up' of Japan, as well as technological advances in Europe, have made it definitely impossible for him to travel to the Far Eastern country any more is a central node from which two main interconnected lines of reading are seen to depart.

By inviting Joncour to make love to the mysterious woman by making love to himself, this letter on the one hand brings to culmination a love affair entirely conducted through a series of vicarious actions (from the drinking from the same spot in the same cup, to the girl in the white — i.e. 'blank' — kimono being offered as a substitute lover for one night), thus highlighting the essential mediating function of literature, which becomes a surrogate more real (at least insofar as being directly achievable) than reality itself. On the other hand, we return once again to the introspective quality of any successful search. In the event, both these themes are amplified to the power of two by the revelation that the letter was a totally fictional construct, and that its author had in fact been Hervé's wife, that Hélène whose defining characteristic had been that of having the most wonderful of voices, and who had all that time been Joncour's faithful lover and companion — except that, of course, by the time Joncour comes to a full realization of all this, Hélène has passed away.

Thus, the boon which is to be the ultimate reward of Hervé Joncour's journey is subject to a constant process of redefinition, in a way which reminds us once again of the elusive signified of contemporary philosophy, as well as perhaps hinting at the changing goals of fiction over the three centuries since the rise of the novel: at first, it is the silkworm eggs, a practical, communal, clearly definable goal; then, it is the individualistic, unobtainable object of a romantic passion; finally, it is (self-)awareness.

The latter point provides a revealing indication of how Baricco uses the device of repetition for semantic purposes. Having finally come home to stay, and having heard from Madame Blanche a translation of the Japanese letter, Joncour has his own lake created in his backgarden. Like Bartleboom and Plasson, he is now ready to live the rest of his life at peace with himself and with the world 'sotto la tutela di una misurata emozione':

Ogni tanto, nelle giornate di vento, Hervé Joncour scendeva fino al lago e passava ore a guardarlo, giacché, disegnato sull'acqua, gli pareva di vedere l'inspiegabile spettacolo, lieve, che era stata la sua vita. (p. 93)

We are back to Hervé Joncour, the spectator of his own existence. However, within the space of only seven pages, by the time this passage is repeated as the final paragraph in the novel, both the character and the reader will have been jostled out of their comfortable

assurance of possessing all the necessary knowledge and understanding by the occurrence in quick succession of the three most shattering events in Hervé Joncour's life: Baldabiau's departure, the death of H  l  ne and, finally, the discovery of the letter's true authorship. Of these three occurrences, however, it is the first which most openly reveals this novel's radically metaliterary aspect, bringing to completion the emancipation of the character from its author.

In fact, Baldabiau's departure is explicitly motivated by his having finally been beaten by the 'monco'. This was a fictional adversary, a character created by Baldabiau himself who, in playing billiards on his own, would take alternate shots with the use of only one arm. This character's 'unreasonable' overcoming of his creator (p. 94) is a clear indication that we should interpret Herv   Joncour's parable along similar lines. In fact, at the time of Joncour's independent decision concerning his fourth journey to Japan, the structural significance of that gesture as a character breaking away from a traditional author-determined narrative had been signalled by the setting-up of a parallel between Joncour and the 'monco', in the description of Baldabiau's astonished reaction: 'Baldabiau non se l'aspettava. Era come vedere vincere il monco, all'ultimo colpo, quattro sponde, una geometria impossibile' (p. 65).

Thirty pages later, after Herv  's final catastrophic journey to Japan, the impossible becomes reality:

Il 16 giugno 1871, nel retro del caff   di Verdun, poco prima di mezzogiorno, il monco azzec   un quattro sponde irragionevole, effetto a rientrare. Baldabiau rimase chino sul tavolo, una mano dietro la schiena, l'altra a stringere la stecca, incredulo.

— Ma d  i. (p. 94)

Baldabiau always used to say that he would leave Lavilledieu should he ever be beaten by the 'monco', and now he is as good as his word. In Baricco's metafictional tale the author is not exactly dead. He simply discovers one day, to his bemusement, that it is time to get up and go.

If these indications were not enough, Baldabiau's parting shot is a clear invitation to the reader to recognize and take part in the intertextual and metaliterary game:

Il mattino in cui part  , Herv   Joncour lo accompagn  , insieme a H  l  ne, fino alla stazione ferroviaria di Avignon. Aveva con s   una sola valigia, e anche questo era discretamente inspiegabile. Quando vide il treno, fermo al binario, pos   la valigia per terra.

— Una volta ho conosciuto uno che si era fatto costruire una ferrovia tutta per lui.

Disse.

— E il bello    che se l'era fatta fare tutta diritta, centinaia di chilometri senza una curva. C'era anche un perch  , ma non me lo ricordo. Non si ricordano mai i perch  . (p. 94)

With a typically postmodern device, Baricco is here expecting the reader to fill in the gap, as he refers to the characteristic that most clearly identified Mr Rail as an artist-figure in *Castelli di rabbia*. In fact, the reason why Mr Rail's tracks had to lie in a completely straight line was that the only purpose of his train was that it should allow people to experience speed, i.e. to experience life from the safety of a train carriage, behind glass windows (*Castelli di rabbia*, pp. 78–79), a metaphor for the medium of literature. At the same time, the reference to the single, 'inexplicable' suitcase links Baldabiau directly with the

explicitly authorial figure at the end of *Oceano Mare*, the guest in the seventh room, who leaves with one suitcase and a 'borsa piena di carta' (*Oceano Mare*, p. 227). Instructed by the endings of Baricco's two previous novels, one feels ready to bet that if we could take a look at the contents of Baldabiou's suitcase we would find a story featuring characters called 'Hélène', 'Hara Kei', and 'Hervé Joncour'.

\* Part 1 appeared in *Romance Studies*, 25.3, July 2006, 241–55.

<sup>1</sup> See Baricco's own judgement on his novels, in answer to 'Daniela', who declared *Oceano Mare* to be, together with *Novecento*, the readers' favourite: 'Lo so, *Oceano mare* resta forse il più amato. Ho cercato di capire il perché, ma non so bene. Forse lì c'era una forma di poesia che ai tempi amavo molto, e che poi mi è venuto da limare molto, asciugare, che ne so, nascondere, forse. Ma i lettori l'hanno molto amata. E poi forse c'è un'altra cosa: *Oceano mare* è il libro che sta meglio in bilico fra complessità e ordine, tra generosità e rigore. *City*, per esempio, sborda verso il caos, e *Seta* è maniacalmente ordinato, non c'è caos. Però è proprio per quello che io non riesco ad amare *OM* come certi miei lettori: mi sembra un po' troppo "giusto", se capite cosa voglio dire. I libri dovrebbero essere sempre delle avventatezze, dei gesti maleducati, degli errori (se capite cosa voglio dire)' (Internet chat, 28 August 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Baricco, *Oceano Mare* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1993, 2001), p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> Alessandro Baricco, 'Andata e ritorno, destinazione l'orrore', in Joseph Conrad, *Cuore di tenebra* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995), pp. 113–21 (p. 118).

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, 1st edn 1949), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell 1968: 91. 'Il ventre della balena' is the title of Roberto Tarasco's contribution to *Balene e sogni*, the accompanying booklet to Alessandro Baricco, Roberto Tarasco, and Gabriele Vacis, *Totem. L'ultima tournée*, videotape plus book (Turin: Einaudi, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> In a work certainly full of metaliterary references, Claudio Pezzin's indication of this type of dimension in this specific episode, being enunciated rather than demonstrated, still manages to appear somewhat extreme and unsupported: 'Un significato filosofico, quindi, e un significato metaletterario, accostati l'uno all'altro: il ventre del mare, come ventre dell'esistenza, come immissione del Dasein di Heidegger, e allo stesso tempo esplosione dell'Io demiurgico dell'autore, che crea e disfa i fili vitali dei vari personaggi' (Claudio Pezzin, *Alessandro Baricco* (Sommacampagna: Cierre Edizioni, 2001, p. 52).

<sup>7</sup> When we say that literature makes 'sense' compared to life this is, of course, a relative statement. In this same episode at the inn, the characters are made to run around in the storm holding lamps. They are, however, left in doubt as to whether in this way they are helping prevent shipwrecks or rather luring ships to their destruction.

<sup>8</sup> Claudio Pezzin's reading of this element, where Langlais is seen as an Author rather than as a Reader figure, is representative of the general difference between his vision of the metaliterary aspects in Baricco and that presented in this study: 'Così fa Elisewin, che dalla malattia passa alla guarigione attraverso il personaggio di Adams, alter-ego dell'Autore, e infine diviene possesso dell'Autore, personificato dall'ammiraglio Langlais' (Pezzin 2001: 53). Later Pezzin reiterates and makes this reading more explicit by stating that 'Elisewin simboleggia la tautologia del racconto, che dall'autore parte e all'autore ritorna, come discorso dell'Io a se stesso' (p. 55).

<sup>9</sup> *La Repubblica*, 17 July 2006 (now in Alessandro Baricco, *I barbari* (Rome: La Biblioteca di Repubblica, 2006), p. 96).

<sup>10</sup> Pezzin usefully explains the philosophical paternity of this concept as follows: 'La storia della benedizione del mare da parte del vecchio prete, rappresenta allegoricamente la storia della metafisica, la storia del "mare" dell'Essere, che prima del nichilismo di Nietzsche era qualcosa di oggettivo, presente, sacrale; dopo la fine della metafisica, è finita la sacralità stessa dell'Essere, e resta solo, heideggerianamente, la possibilità di "dire" l'Essere, di dare spazio al logos, come casa dell'Essere, da parte della parola dell'artista e dell'opera d'arte, che "apre" una prospettiva' (Pezzin 2001: 45–46).

<sup>11</sup> As it is possible to gather, among other things, from an important essay by Baricco on 'Palomar e Palomar' (in *Barnum 2. Altre cronache dal Grande Show* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998), pp. 158–64), Calvino's book provides the paradigmatic example for this representational dilemma. Full-length essays could be written

on Baricco's 'difficult' relationship with Calvino, probably exposing a certain degree of miscomprehension on the part of the former towards, specifically, the implicit *pathos* of what in *Palomar* is in fact presented as a predicament, rather than a specimen method. Nella Giannetto's study, *'Oceano mare' di Baricco: molteplicità, emozioni, confini, tra Calvino e Conrad* (Milan: Arcipelago, 2002) makes a start in mentioning Calvino's *Palomar*, *Lezioni americane* and *Le città invisibili* in connection with Baricco's second novel (even though at the time the author was unaware of the use Baricco was actually making of the epilogue to *Le città invisibili* in his final *Totem* tournée). I should like to record, however, one passage in *Palomar* that exposes the inanity of Plasson's enterprise: 'Il prato ha come fine di rappresentare la natura, e questa rappresentazione avviene sostituendo alla natura propria del luogo una natura in sé naturale ma artificiale in rapporto a quel luogo' (Italo Calvino, *Palomar* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), p. 30).

<sup>12</sup> The relationship between this passage in *Oceano Mare* and Baricco's next novel is also commented upon in Stefano Lazzarin, 'Bartleby, Barnabooth, Bartlebooth, Bartleboom. Baricco e il grande oceano delle storie', *Narrativa*, 16 (1999), 143–65 (p. 161).

<sup>13</sup> Citati's review appeared in *La Repubblica*, 7 April 1996. Here I am quoting from the back cover of *Seta*, sixth reprint, BUR La Scala (Milan: Rizzoli, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from <http://www.univ-rouen.fr/flaubert/o3corres/conard/lettres/52a.html>.

<sup>15</sup> See Roland Bourneuf and Réal Ouellet, *L'universo del romanzo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), pp. 37–38 (original title: *L'Univers du roman* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972)).

<sup>16</sup> 'Scrivere, leggere e pensare al computer', Turin, 21 April 1997 (available at [www.mediamente.rai.it/home/bibliote/intervis/b/baricco.htm](http://www.mediamente.rai.it/home/bibliote/intervis/b/baricco.htm)).

<sup>17</sup> See 'Hollywood punta su Baricco. Il romanzo "Seta" diventa film', *Il Giorno*, 29 November 2000 (available at [www.oceanomare.com/opere/seta/seta\\_film.htm](http://www.oceanomare.com/opere/seta/seta_film.htm)): "Per gli americani", spiega Baricco, "la vita è come un negozio. Entri, e devi per forza uscirne con qualcosa. Un insegnamento, un pistolotto finale. Quanti film sono rovinati dal discorso finale?"

<sup>18</sup> Fulvio Senardi, 'Alessandro Baricco, ovvero ... che storia mi racconti?', *Problemi: Periodico quadrimestrale di cultura*, 112 (1998), 261–96 (p. 292).

<sup>19</sup> Senardi 1998: 293 and 296: 'È *Seta*', Senardi concludes, 'una metafora o un lapsus involontario che rivela la difficile partita che gioca con la realtà e con la Storia (non senza un'ombra di opportunismo e un pizzico di furberia) la letteratura, anzi la coscienza intellettuale di questa Fine secolo, tanto traboccante di effimera euforia quanto intimamente perplessa e povera di autentiche energie' (p. 296).

<sup>20</sup> On the term 'scollamento', see Baricco, *L'anima di Hegel e le mucche del Wisconsin* (Milan: Garzanti, 1992), pp. 51 and 60, and 'Vive l'amour, abbasso il cinema', in *Barnum*, p. 155. Claudio Pezzin also sees a strong metaliterary component in *Seta*, but his interpretation differs from the one proposed here in several important details. Pezzin, too, hints at the chronological aspect, though, in keeping with his general thesis, he concentrates on the break occurring at the beginning of the novel, with the disease of the silkworm eggs, as an apocalyptic event, the destruction of a kind of epistemology, corresponding to *fin de siècle* modernism, without, however, looking further to the different modality which postmodern writing adopts within that same epistemological framework. Most importantly, Pezzin's metaliterary interpretation does not focus on the Baldabio-Joncour relationship, but rather it identifies 'la qualità di base dei continui viaggi-tentativi di Hervé' in 'la ricerca di un modo per rendere corporea, effettiva, reale, la forma inconsistente della seta-scrittura, di questo miraggio senza fine' (Pezzin 2001: 72–73).

<sup>21</sup> See *Seta*, pp. 22, 31, 50, 67 respectively.

<sup>22</sup> 'How Characters Became the Masters and the Author their Apprentice' (available on [www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1998](http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1998)).

<sup>23</sup> This aspect is discussed at length in Robert Rushing, 'Alessandro Baricco's *Seta*: Travel, Ventriloquism and the Other', *Modern Language Notes*, 118 (2003), 209–36.