prospette critiche

paradigma della partnership attraverso la rievocazione di uno dei suoi simboli archetipici: la Dea. Al centro di questo processo complesso ma rivelatorio vi è quindi la figura della Goddess, da un lato ampiamente celebrata, ma dall’altro anche intensamente e minutamente indagata a livello filosofico, mitico e antropologico, nei primi tre saggi fra cui ricordiamo “Journeys in the Goddess Cosmic Dance” (pp. 15-21), di Antonella Riem, che apre la raccolta. Cancellata per secoli dai panorami occidentali contraddistinti dalla domination, la Dea si dimostra invece un modello sorprendentemente vitale e vitalistico, capace di rieremergere con forza come archetipo, e proprio in virtù del suo essere archetipo in senso junghiano si trova oggi testimoniato sotto forma di “a powerful ancestral image residing in our souls”, e anche di “a long-forgotten ancient reality” (ibidem, p. 19). Non è un caso infatti che il titolo del convegno e del volume non sia incentrato sulla dea, ma descriva invece un risveglio (richiamato dall’aggettivo awakened) di una nutrita selva inglese di varie aree del mondo (e dialetti e culture, language and education towards erudition with bombast and tend to abandon rigorous argumentation for ostentatious name-dropping).

Il volume The Goddess Awakened confina momenti creativi e critica letteraria con elegante equilibrio, allargando lo sguardo su mezzi espressivi diversi, come fotografia e danza, teatro e critica, narrativa e musica, poesia e scultura. Un plauso a tutti coloro che hanno contribuito alla realizzazione di questo progetto multidisciplinare di alto livello internazionale, unito all’auspicio che vi siano presto nuovi momenti di ‘risveglio’.

Daria Tunca


Conducting linguistically-oriented research into African literature can be a frustrating activity. A typical novice begins his or her quest for secondary sources with much enthusiasm, but is rapidly forced to realize that very few studies have specifically addressed the role played by language in African fiction. If persistent, the scholar eventually crosses a small number of books and articles on the subject; however, many of them soon fail to live up to their promising titles, as engaging introductions often give way to uninspired analyses and questionable conclusions based, for example, on the number of adjectives contained in a novel or poem.

Against this rather disappointing background, Chantal Zabus’s The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel stands out as a notable exception. Indeed, Zabus’s thought-provoking work strikes a rare balance between linguistic investigation and literary evaluation, and testifies to its author’s exceptional capacity for comparative analysis and critical assessment. Furthermore, in an age where academics all too often confuse erudition with bombast and tend to abandon rigorous argumentation for ostentatious name-dropping,
African Palimpsest strikes the reader as a remarkably lucid and innovative piece of scholarship. First published in 1991, the book has recently been reissued in the form of a second enlarged edition. This new version provides useful updates, insightful elaborations and revisions of the arguments contained in the first edition, but the pioneering methodology that informed the original publication remains untouched.

The main objective of the study, as its title indicates, can best be described with reference to the metaphor of the palimpsest. In its literal sense, a palimpsest is a writing surface on which a text has been erased to make room for a new one. According to Zabus, this explanation also applies to the West African novels that she examines for, “behind the scriptural authority of the European language, the earlier, imperfectly erased remnants of the African language can still be perceived” (3). This metaphor aptly mirrors the result of a linguistic practice known as “indigenization”, which consists in expressing local -- here, African -- concepts, thought-patterns and linguistic features through the former colonizer’s language. The prime purpose of Zabus’s work, formulated in its opening pages, is to investigate “how indigenization is achieved” (4) in Anglophone and Francophone West African novels.

The attempt at literary decolonization inherent in the act of indigenizing language in fiction immediately brings to mind the well-known idea of “writing back to the centre”, first formulated by Salman Rushdie and subsequently developed by Ashcroft et al. in The Empire Writes Back (1989). The concept has since become a keystone of postcolonial studies, but Zabus resists any naïve celebration of the notion by announcing her intention to study the counter-productive effects of this strategy along with its creative facets. In a similar critical move, and despite her defence of creative writing in African languages, she also explicitly rejects any “idyllic, bucolic [...] return to the [...] roots of African culture” (118).

The source of this problematization of writing in either mother- or other tongue is an acute awareness of the political significance behind any West African novelist’s choice of language. Having established the inextricability of the linguistic and political spheres in the African context, Zabus then devotes a section to language policies on the continent. This impressively documented survey provides a necessary link between the theoretical basis of the book and the case studies it presents. Indeed, this chapter examines the mechanics and effects of language politics – here called “glottopolitics” (17) – in Francophone and Anglophone West Africa. It is argued that, because of the uncompromising imposition of French in countries such as Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire (the French colonial system was more repressive than British indirect rule), French-speaking African writers have tended to be less audacious in their linguistic experimentations than their English-speaking counterparts. Similarly, since pidginized French has hardly been left any room for development on the continent, the medium is even less frequently found in novels than the elaborate pidgins of Nigeria and Ghana, which mix English with local languages.

The next chapter explores the literary use of these English based-pidgins – and more particularly the Nigerian variety –, from the first fictional representation of the language in Joyce Cary’s Mister Johnson (1939) to its use in novels by Cyprian Ekwensi and Chinua Achebe. Based on careful linguistic observation, Zabus convincingly asserts that the forms of pidgin found in most West African narratives only qualify as “pseudo-pidgin”, in that they retain superficial characteristics of the language but do not display features that are less easily accessible to non-pidgin-speaking audiences. Importantly, Zabus goes beyond mere formal analysis to expound on the functions of pseudo-pidgin in literature. For example, she demonstrates that the language is frequently stigmatized and attributed to idiots or illiterati, but can also act as a medium of interethnic communication – and hence favour integration – in urban settings.

The following chapter focuses on more radically innovative works, whether resulting from intentional linguistic experimentation or not. First, an examination of the prose of Yoruba writer Amos Tutuola reveals the presence of a high number of calques from his mother tongue in his novels, due to his rudimentary knowledge of Standard English. Zabus then borrows the notion of “relexification” from creolist Loreto Todd to describe the technique employed by authors who have consciously allowed their native languages to influence the English or French of their writings. In Todd’s definition, “relexification” refers to the simultaneous use of English vocabulary and indigenous structures and rhythms. Here, the term is adapted to denote a deliberate strategy of decolonization, which consists in the creation of a new register through the insertion of lexico-semantic and/or morphosyntactic features of African languages into former colonial ones. Based on this theoretical framework, Zabus discusses two more experimental novels, Gabriel Okara’s The Voice (1964) and Ahmadou Kourouma’s Les Soleils des indépendances (1968). She then probes into specific forms of lexico-semantic relexification, including the use of proverbs in several Anglophone Igbo novels and that of Akan traditional material in Ghanian Ayi Kwei Armah’s Fragments (1969). In the ensuing critical appraisal, she contends that relexification is a highly ambivalent strategy for, while it may allow the postcolonial writer to subvert the dominant colonial language, it can also contribute to the revitalization of the European tongue at the expense of the African one “in a perversely neocolonial fashion” (171).

The final chapter is devoted to ways of “shadowing”, i.e. ways of identifying the gap between mother tongue and other tongue in europhone texts, either by tagging an explanation onto an African-language term (a method known as “cushioning”) or by providing immediate areas of context to allow the reader to guess the meaning of an African expression (a technique named “contextualization”). Zabus emphasizes the artistic and semantic problems engendered by the presence of African words in europhone texts and then, through a discussion of Ken
Saro-Wiwa’s imaginary “rotten English” in Sozaboy (1985), she investigates the potential of creolized forms of pidgin to bridge the gap between target and source language. In a stimulating concluding chapter, the author predicts that former colonial linguistic media will increasingly be “othered” by African writers, and that indigenization, although a necessary phase, will eventually give way to African-language literature, which will then be translated into European languages. The palimpsest, in other words, will ultimately “host the trace of a visible original” (211). It seems entirely appropriate that Zabus’s groundbreaking study should end with a bold look towards the future, since her scholarship shows the way forward for interdisciplinary studies. The African Palimpsest applies linguistic concepts for the analysis of literature in a most precise and creative way and thus remains, almost two decades after its first publication, unsurpassed in both scope and incisiveness.