

Donata Federici Monesi***The Zigzag Way di Anita Desai. London: Vintage. 2005. Pages 182.***

Set in a gloomy, mesmerizing and almost timeless Mexico, *The Zigzag Way* traces the journey of an American scholar of Cornish origins, Eric, into the depths of his past. Almost an extended metaphor for the uneven paths a displaced person has to follow to grasp the multi-layered nature of his own experience, *The Zigzag Way* offers a powerful insight into a man's attempt to resurface the scattered pieces of his identity, yet providing an ironic counterpart to the systematic appropriation of native cultures by anthropologists and ethnographers, whose nativist, patronizing attitude has often worked as a measure of their own distancing from dubious pasts, but also as a paradigm for the practises of containment and colonization of the other which ultimately always imply a reduction to an exoticist, indigenist view of the difference.

As many other characters of Desai's fiction, the protagonist of the novel is an outsider, trying to make sense of his past by inscribing it into another, larger experience of migration and exploitation, that of his ancestors and of the Indian natives employed in the Mexican mines of the early 20th century; to a certain extent, as Splendore suggests (1), the book reconfirms Desai's favourite narrative mode as one of 'de-orientation', consisting of giving textual form to a character's (usually a foreigner, an outcast or an individual at odds with the society he or she lives in) sense of displacement, a condition experienced by the author as a representative of the postcolonial writer who "[...] is more likely to be a cultural traveller, or an 'extra-territorial' than a national" (Boehmer, 1995: 233). However, this condition does not imply a rejection of local and national themes in favour of a wider, global perspectives; it rather offers a privileged standpoint over the past and what has been left behind, a "broken mirror" (Rushdie, 1992: 10-11) that renders a richer, wider vision of the past since the latter is reworked upon and given a textual form through the medium of imagination (2).

The title of the novel is taken from a book Eric reads during his Mexican retreat, referring to the zigzagging route that Indian miners had to take in order to resurface from the pits of the earth to avoid being hit by currents of hot air; in a broader sense, it stands for a wider reconsideration of how the 'otherness' of our past can be better grasped by adopting an oscillatory movement, aimed at discarding any fixed idea of time. In other words, while challenging the traditional Western vision of history as a linear sequence of events, marked by the colonizers' appropriation of minor, subaltern histories and shaping of other people's pasts, Desai rather seems to hint at a consideration of history as a blurred territory where life and death constantly overlap, where past and present mingle as if they were equally worthy components of the same hybrid texture; to a certain extent, the light-hearted ghastriness of the setting of the novel, as well as the cosy amiability bestowed by the Mexican people on the dead on the "Día de los Muertos", the day in which the living celebrate the

return of the dead on the earth, seem to contribute to a gradual revival of the past, which enters the present and gives it its peculiar shape.

In the novel, the protagonist's enquiry into his past is paralleled by a wider investigation into Mexico's pre- and post-Columbian past, which eventually resurfaces a history of exploitation and subjugation of the local people by the European colonizers; Desai's choice of an apparently passive, subservient character like Eric seems to stand as a warning against all the risks inherent a pseudo-scientific approach to 'other' cultures, motivated and underpinned by Western discourses of civilization that eventually deprive the natives or the colonized of any kind of agency; to a certain extent, through Doña Vera's attitude, who basically 'goes native' without ever trying to communicate with the Huichol people, the novel provides another satirical account of how imperialistic, nostalgic views of a 'nativeness' that does not really exist, or rather, is a product of postcolonial thinking and discourse, may represent a hindrance to a real encounter with people whose histories have been silenced by centuries of foreign domination. In other words, Dona Vera's attitude stems from a radical rejection of European history of exploitation and colonization, yet leaving no room for the natives, who cannot eventually speak for themselves, since their words are perpetually silenced by the colonizers' voice (Spivak, 1995: 25). Dona Vera's attitude is quite similar to the ones displayed by Matteo in *Journey to Ithaca* (Desai, 1995) or by the sociologist David in "Scholar and Gypsy" (Desai, 1998); the former's passive adherence to Eastern modes of life and behaviour falls into the typically Western *cliché* of an exoticist representation of India as a land of mystical experiences of self-regeneration, whereas the latter's search for the 'primitive' in modern India discloses a nostalgic longing for an authenticity that can only exist in his books.

Far from offering a resolutive ending to the question of an objective analysis of our as well as other people's histories, as well as distancing itself from the utopia of a scientific, univocal representation of other people's cultures, the novel seems to hint at the difficulties inherent any representation of the past, especially when it is marked by experiences of displacement, migration and colonization; however, the author seems to suggest that the "memories and nostalgia" (Desai, 2004: 34) which inevitably underscore the condition of a displaced person, deriving from a sense of loss for the lost source of one's own experience (Fludernik, 1999: 48-49) are not eventually useless "excess baggage" (Desai, 2004: 34) one has to get rid of in order to look forward to the future, but rather some necessary baggage each one of us has to carry, as a useful evidence of the past as well as an honest opportunity for a future of peaceful and fruitful collaboration among cultures.

NOTES:

1. The definition of "de-orientation" was used for Desai's prose and narrative technique by Paola Splendore at a one-day workshop held in Pordenone

(Italy) on 10th March, 2006 as part of the series of conferences "Dedica" on Anita Desai.

2. In the above-mentioned passage Rushdie uses the metaphor of the "broken mirror" to describe the medium by which the migrant or expatriate writer tries to reproduce the vision of his lost homeland: "It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (Rushdie 1992: 10-11).

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