

The Postcolonial Epic of the Voiceless Epic Project, Silencing and Narration in Frankétienne, Raharimanana and Roland Rugero.

*À la lueur d'une chandelle moribonde,
j'écris encore mes cris et mes silences.
J'écris, donc j'existe.¹*

What Is Epic? Epic As Genre and the Epic Project

- 1 A quick review of the definitions of epic shows how the concept behind this word is probably easier to understand than to outline clearly; most of them focus on either the stylistic traits of the genre, or on the main themes and the characteristics of its protagonists. Cecil Maurice Bowra encompasses both of these aspects by writing that: “An epic poem is by common consent a narrative of some length and deals with events which have a certain grandeur and importance and come from a life of action, especially of violent action such as war”², while Margaret Beissinger, Jane Tylus and Susanne Wofford add the importance of the hero's challenge for the community by stating that the epic is: “a poetic narrative of length and complexity that centers around deeds of significance to the community. These deeds are usually presented as deeds of grandeur or heroism, often narrated from within a verisimilitudinous frame of reference”³. Loveday Alexander notes that the term epic “embraces at least three sets of correlatives: literary form (verse narrative); scale and scope (length; complexity; ‘a certain grandeur’); and values (‘heroic’)”⁴. The epic as genre is therefore defined by a certain style (verse narrative of a certain length), a certain character (a hero) and a certain theme (a challenge, an individual quest that is related to the larger community to which the character belongs).
- 2 To understand the possibility of contemporary forms of narration of inventing the epic to come, however, we need to go beyond the definition of epic as genre, and investigate the possibility of other genres to take up the “epic project”, the immortal tendency of literature to represent the challenges a community has to face through the individual quest of a hero. From this perspective, the epic poem is only one form of the several distinct forms that the epic project can take, and has taken; to see if another genre can engage in the epic project, then, we should not focus on the poetic aspect of epic, also because, as Lukács writes: “it would be superficial – a matter of a mere artistic technicality – to look for the only and decisive genre-defining criterion in the question of whether a work is written in verse or prose”⁵. We should rather focus on the scale, scope and values of the epic project, to define epic as a narrative literary work (whether in verse or prose) which focuses on a human character who has to face a (heroic) challenge, which is representative of the challenges of the community he or she belongs to. This definition is in fact valid both for the ancient epic poems and for the modern and contemporary forms that the epic project has taken, which I will analyse further in the following pages.

The Modern Novel As Modern Epic

- 3 Once we have distinguished between the epic as a genre and the epic as a project, it is certainly easier to understand that the decay of the epic poem does not entail a decay of the epic project, which is as present as ever, but rather a transformation of its

characteristics. A new genre had to assume the weight and the possibilities of the epic project, and this new genre has been the modern novel, which Hegel has defined “the modern bourgeois epic”⁶.

- 4 Lukács has said that “the epic and the novel, these two major forms of great epic literature, differ from one another not by their authors’ fundamental intentions but by the given historico-philosophical realities with which the authors were confronted” (*TN* 56). Genres are in fact strictly related to a peculiar historical, cultural and poetical context, and they can therefore rise and fall, when they lose their power of representing reality, to be replaced by other genres more fit for the purpose. As Michael McKeon writes:

Conceived as integral structures, genres have a temporal and spatial existence that defines the scope of their identity; conceived as parts of greater wholes, genres have a structural existence in relation to other integral formations. That is, genres are formal structures that have a historical existence in the sense that they come into being, flourish, and decay, waxing and waning in complex relationship to other historical phenomena.⁷

- 5 The novel is therefore born out of the decay of the epic and the romance, as “a momentary negation of the present so intense that it attains the positive status of a new tradition”⁸, as McKeon writes elsewhere, to represent both a different reality and a different subject. According to Bakhtin, who dedicated the first essay of his *Dialogic Imagination* to the opposition between the epic and the novel, this modern genre has a completely different distance from its subject of representation:

The novel took shape precisely at the point when epic distance was disintegrating, when both the world and man were assuming a degree of comic familiarity, when the object of artistic representation was being degraded to the level of a contemporary reality that was inconclusive and fluid. From the very beginning the novel was structured not in the distanced image of the absolute past but in the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality.⁹

- 6 This passage also shows once more the importance of the context; the decay of the epic and the rise of the novel have been caused in fact by a deep epistemological and ideological shift which challenged absolute authority both in the fields of knowledge (thanks to the new scientific method and to empiricism) and in the fields of experience (thanks to the newly-acquired possibility of social mobility), and which was also reflected in the changes of scope, thematic and subject of the modern epic represented in the modern novel. The novel provided in fact both a form and a hero for this new reality: a narrative which focused on the daily life and challenges of the common person, the common Western white man mainly, to show his (many) achievements and his failures, his own progress into his own story and into history. As José Ortega y Gasset notes:

If the epic figures are invented, if they are unique and incomparable natures, which in themselves have poetic value, the characters of the novel are typical and nonpoetic; they are taken, not from the myth, which is already an aesthetic and creative element or atmosphere, but from the street, from the physical world, from the living environment of the author and the reader.¹⁰

- 7 The passage from the epic to the novel is also a passage from the past to the present. Bakhtin writes about the epic that: “the world of the epic is the national heroic past” (*DI* 13), and more importantly that: “the formally constitutive feature of the epic as a genre is [...] the transferral of a represented world into the past, and the degree to

which this world participates in the past” (*DI* 13). Ortega also specifies that “the epic past is not our past. [...] it is not a remembered past, but an ideal past” (*MQ* 274). The novel, on the other hand, “comes into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present” (*DI* 27). Furthermore, while the past of the epic is perceived as whole and incontestable, and the genre according to Lukács “gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within” (*TN* 60), the novel has to deal with an incoherent object, and seeks “by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life” (*TN* 60).

- 8 By looking at three contemporary works by Francophone authors, I will outline a further change in narrative strategies and in the “heroes”, in the passage from the modern novel to contemporary postcolonial works that seem to aim at a new kind of narrative about a new kind of hero, which could give rise to a new manifestation of the epic project.

The Postcolonial Contemporary Epic

- 9 Even though Bakhtin sees the novel as a genre that is “by its very nature, not canonic (...) plasticity itself [...] a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established norms to review” (*DI* 39), the Western modern novel is indeed felt as canonic by postcolonial writers, who often feel the need to find a different structure, or at least of working from within the structure of the novel to reshape it, in order to represent the reality that is the subject of their works. If the passage from the epic to the modern novel was marked by epistemological and ideological changes, from the “distanced image of the absolute past” to a “fluid” and “inconclusive present-day reality”, the passage from the modern novel to the different forms that postcolonial writers have offered in the last century continues this process, because it has to represent the even more fluid and inconclusive reality that is the subject of postcolonial literature.

- 10 It must be said that the evolution and the rise of the novel is as strictly related to the historical changes in Europe, as it is to the formation of empires outside of Europe. Quite significantly, many indicate the publication of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* as the birth of the modern novel, “a work whose protagonist is the founder of a new world, which he rules and reclaims for Christianity and England”¹¹, and who is “explicitly enabled by an ideology of overseas expansion – directly connected in style and form to the narratives of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century exploration voyages that laid the foundation of the great colonial empires” (*CI* 70). The proximity between the rise of the novel and the rise of empires, it must be said, is far from being only thematic or stylistic; it is rather born out of a shared “ideological configuration”, to use once again the words of Said:

Without empire, I would go as far as saying, there is no European novel as we know it, and indeed if we study the impulses giving rise to it, we shall see the far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism. (*CI* 69-70)

- 11 It is no surprise, therefore, that postcolonial writers have manifested a certain discomfort in using the novel as the form of their own narration, which has brought them to a much wider use of other genres, or to the reinterpretation of the structure of the novel through forms that have at times pushed the limits of the genre so far, that it

is hard to recognize them as novels. To analyse the change which occurred in the passage from the modern novel to the postcolonial forms of narrative that could represent the next step in the evolution of the epic project, I will start by outlining the subject of these works, the new kind of hero it is meant to represent, before discussing the narrative structures of this new form of narration.

The Hero of the Postcolonial Contemporary Epic

12 If we look at postcolonial literatures as a whole, we will see that there is very little that can be generalized upon them, since they obviously speak for different realities with disparate historical and cultural backgrounds, using different languages and forms of narration according to the profound distinctions that characterise them. If there is, however, one thing that most of these literary works do share, it is the kind of subaltern heroes they depict, which contrast deeply with the epic heroes, and with those of the modern novel. To outline the peculiarities of the characters of the postcolonial contemporary epic, I will therefore analyse the subaltern heroes that are the protagonists of the works chosen for my corpus, Frankétienne's *L'oiseau schizophone* (1998)¹², Raharimanana's *Za* (2008)¹³, and Roland Rugero's *Baho!* (2012)¹⁴, and in particular their common voicelessness, or silencing.

13 Rugero's Nyamuragi represents a double mutism, the one he chooses as a child, and the one forced upon him by his society, while Frankétienne's *Prédilhomme* is jailed by a dictatorship, which wants to stop him from proclaiming his dangerous truths in form of poetry to the people, what the regime considers a "bacougnerie de recettes migraineuses assaisonnées d'épices érotiques et d'ingrédients pornographiques..." (OS 15). Raharimanana's *Za* is in between these two characters, as his voice is affected both by a physical mutilation and a metaphorical one, since he is also jailed and fired from his work as a teacher, for teaching the "liberté mauvaise" (ZA 36). The heroes of these works, as those of many other postcolonial epics, must therefore fight their own struggle without the first weapon of every narrator: their voice. What their silence represents, however, shows different aspects of the same mutism.

14 Nyamuragi's mutism in Rugero's work is a key to the impossibility of common understanding between people in a country whose history has been characterized by tragic events that still affect a present in which fear and revenge seem to be the only two forces that regulate human relationships. As previously mentioned, Nyamuragi was not actually mute as a child, but had rather chosen not to speak:

Alors qu'il était encore très petit, à quatre ans, sa mère l'avait amené voir une parenté aux connaissances aussi vastes qu'utiles, pour le diagnostic de cette maladie. Le verdict était tombé : le garçon était bien portant, il ne voulait tout simplement pas parler ! Il n'y avait rien à redire, tout était clair. (BA 21)

15 However, Nyamuragi does indeed become mute later on in the work, and what silences him is the society he lives in, in two different but not diverging ways. On the one hand, he is metaphorically silenced by the murder of his parents, which shows him that he cannot trust people, and makes him despise words, because of their powerlessness:

De cet état de fait, il avait déduit une chose : l'homme est tout-puissant. Il faut le craindre. Et au fond, la crainte est une interrogation inavouée. Il avait fait un vœu, la boucler, et s'était muselé dans un silence épais comme la laine de ses agneaux, comme la grosse tête de son bélier. Depuis, il méprisait la parole, il croyait dans les gestes et la matière, car ses parents n'étaient pas morts d'une longue litanie, mais de machettes et de

haine, de cognée mortelle. (BA 30)

- 16 On the other hand, he is physically silenced by the *mupfumu* who had been called to heal him. According to the healer, in fact, his mutism was caused by a condition which could only be cured through an intervention, but it is this intervention which will indeed damage his vocal tract forever:

De son vivant, sa mère l'avait amené consulter de nouveau le guérisseur, le *mupfumu*, pour déterminer avec certitude l'origine de son mutisme. (...) Le sage homme avait trouvé que c'était grave : l'enfant qu'on lui présentait avait l'*ikirimi*, une triste maladie qui bloque la langue et empêchait Nyamuragi de parler. *Ururimi*, la langue. Le guérisseur prescrivit à Nyamuragi une opération où il farfouilla dans son gosier, lui coupa quelques veinules, et lui administra pour la suite des feuilles amères à se gargariser chaque matin. Le petit garçon saigna et devint réellement muet. (BA 29-30)

- 17 What is even more important, though, is that in all of these moments there is always one voice missing, not only physically but also metaphorically. Nobody listens to Nyamuragi, nobody asks him why he does not speak, and he does not speak because he knows that his words would not be listened to, that nobody would believe or understand him. And this impossibility of communication, much more than any physical condition, is the real reason behind the mutism of Nyamuragi:

Il aurait bien voulu dire à sa maman qu'il ne voulait pas à l'origine parler, mais la brave dame n'y aurait rien compris. Elle le croyait victime d'un sort. Ce qu'avait d'ailleurs confirmé avec clairvoyance le guérisseur. Il fallait l'en guérir ! La cure prescrite avait été soigneusement suivie. Tout ceci fit qu'il ne put vraiment plus parler. (BA 30)

- 18 We have more evidence of this impossibility of mutual understanding, when Nyamuragi finally decides to speak, and is (almost) able to pronounce his first and only word in the whole book. After having been chased and caught, after the tortures he has undergone, he finally decides to admit to a crime he is not responsible for, just to put an end to his suffering: "Moutonnement, le muet a accepté son sort, il n'oppose plus de résistance, oui il est tout, le Mal incarné, qu'on abrège ses souffrances, qu'on le gracie ou qu'on l'achève au plus vite" (BA 43). He says "Ego!" (BA 42), which in Kirundi means "yes", or rather: "L'acquiescement du terrorisé qui, humblement, au-devant de la mort, reconnaît à son seul compte les fautes de toute l'humanité" (BA 43). And of course, the Latin *ego*, meaning "I", an affirmation of the hero's identity, resounds in the only word pronounced by this protagonist.

- 19 However, this admission, far from putting an end to his tragedy, paves instead the way for a double misunderstanding. The people surrounding him, in fact, understand "Ejo!" (BA 42) rather than "Ego!", because of a defective pronunciation: "sa langue, dans une détente qui lui est peu familière, a laissé rouler le son ejo. Dans l'esprit du malheureux s'était pourtant formé *Ego!*" (BA 42). And this word is so ambiguous that it leads to hours of discussion about what Nyamuragi actually meant by *ejo*, a term used in Kirundi both for "yesterday" and for "tomorrow": "Des lèvres de Nyamuragi est sorti le mot *demain* ou bien *hier*... C'est selon." (BA 43). And the consequence is that Nyamuragi's words only become noise: "de ce muet qui parle, on en déduit bruits !" (BA 44).

- 20 These noises are also at the basis of Frankétienne's work. The Haitian author has in fact constructed his own poetics from the recovery of these *bruits* which have to be taken as *débris* of meaning, as fragments of the chaos the author has chosen to represent. This is what brings Philippe Bernard to define his aesthetics as "une

esthétique du délabrement” (UV 6), or has Frankétienne has put it himself, “*esthétique des poussières*” (OS 677), which does not only focus on the ruins of Haiti, but even derives its form from them.

- 21 The epic hero of Frankétienne’s work is the poet Philémond Théophile, better known as Prédilhomme, whose poetry is considered as dangerous by the regime. During his arrest, the accuser tells the poet: “*Votre esthétique du chaos absolu et votre théorie sur la lumière des catastrophes conduisent inéluctablement au sida culturel*” (OS 17). Prédilhomme is therefore arrested, and his word stolen: “*Vous n’avez aucun droit à la parole. Votre sort est déjà scellé...*” (OS 14). The zozobistes make sure that his books, “*tous les exemplaires de votre merdophonie*” (OS 18) are burnt, to avoid any contagion of the brain: “*La contamination est déjà au coeur de la Mascarogne. Il nous faut protéger la jeunesse contre le virus schizophonique...*” (OS 18).

- 22 The writer has to even eat his own book, physically and metaphorically:

Quand vous serez fatigué de lire et de relire votre livre, vous aurez faim, vous aurez soif. Mais vous n’aurez plus rien que les sordides nourritures de vos fantômes malsains. Vous n’aurez plus rien que le livre. Votre livre. Vous finirez par le bouffer feuille par feuille. Vous serez contraint d’arracher les ailes et les plumes de votre oiseau maudit. Vous les sucerez. Vous les mâcherez. Vous les avalerez. Vous les vomirez ensuite avec les sécrétions de votre âme subversive et perverse. Et finalement, vous en mourrez! (OS 19)

- 23 The punishment inflicted to the writer is a death by swallowing of his own words, which are considered as a medical condition, a virus, which could infect other people by instilling in them the idea of freedom, and which could also be responsible for their author’s death. In Prédilhomme’s silent words even become an epidemic, though this time in a positive sense (OS 311):

L’épidémie de la parole

transfuguescence dans le récitatif des braises cérémonielles et la
diction poétique des ailes de convoitise.

Parole fictive	musique aveugle
muettes mutations	gestuelles indicatives de
meurtres	génocide en bémol ou en dièse
	la massacraillie vindicative [...]
	sans prologue ni dialogue
	sans

cri ni préavis.

- 24 The writer becomes therefore an “*homme-orchestre*” (OS 438), who has to make the hurricanes speak, and to use the “*dissonance*” as “*une tentative de réconciliation*” (OS 750). And even if the very first words that are printed in a different format seem to prove that this is impossible: “*Échec du mot*”, “*Nouvelles interrogations*”, “*Le cauchemar*” (OS 14), the work itself is the proof that words have not failed.

- 25 Frankétienne opens the first page with a fake quotation which tells us about the power of words and about their silence: “*Les mots sont plus savants que nous, d’un infini savoir qui diffuse en silence la sève subtile de l’âme et le suc vibratoire de la vie sans frontières*” (OS 13). This is the kind of writing which he describes as an “*écriture qui bouge*” (OS 707), which moves both the word and the world forward, by inventing a new voice, a new way (OS 800):

Quand la voie Initiatique fait Une voix nouvelle

- 26 Frankétienne's silence becomes therefore an "ultravocalité", as the title of another of his *spirales* seems to suggest, and which finds an echo in one of the proverbs used by Rugero in his *Baho!*: "*Kuvuga menshi siko kuyamara / Beaucoup parler n'est pas épuiser les mots*" (BA 86). His ultravocalité is finally a poetic of eloquent silence, arguably the only possible choice for the reality and the times he depicts (OS 804):

Le silence Devenir écrivain Qui êtes-vous ? Un poète pour notre temps

- 27 *L'oiseau schizophone* is in fact closed, as it was opened, by a silence which is both metaphorical and physical, represented by the swallowing of the tongue: "La métaphore ultime me dévora la langue l'indestructible abîme d'un vagin de silence le naufrage immobile de mon île suspendue au balancier de la mort un ténébreux phallus crucifié dans la nuit des sacrificateurs" (OS 812).

- 28 As previously mentioned, the main character of Raharimanana's *Za* could be seen as a synthesis of Nyamuragi and Prédilhomme's silences, because he suffers a double voicelessness: a physical and a metaphorical one. He has in fact physically lost his ability to speak, as his narrating voice clearly signals, and as he tells us himself: "les mots se font la belle à travers mes dents pourries, essappement que Za ne peut boucer. [...] les mot coulent de ma bouche, les mots pourrissent dans ma bouche, mon palais est trop saud, mes mots sont trop camembert" (ZA 20). He has, however, also lost the agency of his speech, because he has been jailed, like Frankétienne's Prédilhomme, and he has been removed from his teaching position:

ILS m'ont interdit de cours; Za disent-ILS corrompt vos zenfants de la patrie; Za leur apprend la liberté mauvaise [...] Za a enseigné *La sute, La peste*. Za a connu la sute et la décéance, Za suis une peste maintenant; [...] Za a vu les minitaires refouler mes mots dans ma bouche – à coups de canon, à coups de crosse; [...] Za a perdu la parole; Za a perdu longtemps la parole; cez moi, mes élèves me ramenaient; cez moi mes élèves me déposaient auprès de ma femme; elle aussi avait perdu la parole [...]. (ZA 36)

- 29 He also informs us that he could speak very well once: "Za parlait avant comme dikisionnaire cyclopédique: bon phrasé, bonne poétique, vous applaudissez, vous vibrationnez" (ZA 17), but those words are lost, they have been taken out of him with violence, to "unroot" his own thoughts with them: "Vous comprenez d'un coup qu'ILS n'ont nul besoin de vos aveux, qu'ILS veulent simplement que vous vous taisiez. De vous-même. De par la racine de vos pensées" (ZA 50). This forces him to a journey back towards his own language, turning the book into a "cahier d'un retour à ma langue natale" (ZA 17). This journey becomes thus a rediscovery, or rather a reinvention of a language and of an identity at the same time: "Ma langue à Za est à reconstruire. Ma langue à Za par personne n'est dite, santé, lue ou sanscrite. Za a tout à réinventer. [...] Za n'arrive plus à bien écrire. Za n'arrive plus à être ou ne pas être" (ZA 18).

- 30 The book begins with the main character and voice of most of the work, excusing himself for his words:

Eskuza-moi. Za m'eskuze. Si ma parole à vous de travers danse vertize nauzéabond, tango maloya, zouk collé serré, zetez-la s'al vous plaît, zatez-la ma pérole mais ne zetez pas ma parsonne, triste parsonne des tristes trop piqués, tristes parsonne des à fric à bingo, bongo, grotesque elfade qui s'égaie dans les congolaises, longue langue foursue sur les mangues mûres de la vie. (ZA 9)

- 31 More than simply excusing himself, Za is apologizing for what is seen not only as a fault, but as a sin: “Za vous prend la parole: pécé ô pécé, huitième pécé, parole prise et raclée dans vos gorzes, parole prise et ciée sur votre langue, Za vous prend les mots et Za ne sait qu'en faire” (ZA 10), and if Za's words are considered as a sin it is because he has no right to speak, he has no right over his own words: “Za vous prend les mots, pardon, pardon. Za a pas le droit, pas le droit à la parole. Gros pécé, tabou zusqu'au bout des bouts” (ZA 10), and again: “Pas le droit à la pérole: ô tabou, huitième pécé zusqu'au bout des p” (ZA 12).
- 32 His own name has been considered as a mutilation, an “amputation” of the personal pronoun “izaho”, meaning “I”, which would therefore already signal “un *moi* incomplet”¹⁵. Nonetheless, Za does speak: “blessé à la racine des pensées, dénudé, Za peut parler maintenant, Za ne cesse de parler” (ZA 78). His words, though, like Prédilhomme's, are a form of active silence, a force which intends to deconstruct the language of the people who have stolen them: “Za me plante ici comme le sourd silence qui vous creuse ulcère dans le ventre; Za vous sème des mots muets et déconsonne vos paroles” (ZA 32). However, the real reason for which his words have lost any power, like Nyamuragi's, is that nobody listens to him anymore: “Za peut parler mais qui donc m'écoute?” (ZA 78), showing once more the impossibility for the hero of postcolonial narratives of communicating with the world surrounding him.
- 33 The subalternity of the epic hero of postcolonial narratives can be manifested in several ways, but one of its most common and certain most fruitful metaphorical representations is through the voicelessness of the main character, as in these three works. These three epic heroes share in fact a forced silence, a linguistic mutilation which is the primary demonstration of their own subalternity: it is a physical mutilation in Rugero's *Baho!*, in which the main character Nyamuragi is mute, a metaphorical one in Frankétienne's *L'oiseau schizophone*, in which the poet Philémond Théophile, known as Prédilhomme, is silenced in jail, and both a physical and a metaphorical linguistic mutilation in Raharimanana's *Za*, in which the protagonist and narrator has lost both his voice and the power of his words. However, in all these cases, the silence is always imposed by and due to the society they live in, and to their powerless position within its structure.
- 34 The hero of the postcolonial epic is therefore neither the superhuman semi-divine hero of ancient epics, nor the common man climbing the social ladder of the first modern novels, but rather a subaltern hero, whose epic challenge consists mostly in fighting his or her way out of the limits imposed upon him or her by a society, largely shaped through the paradigm of the protagonists of the modern novel.

The Structure of the Postcolonial Contemporary Epic

- 35 Parody, changes in the structure of narration and the “explosion” of the limits of a genre, have often been indicated as the signs of a change to come in literary structures, predicting and engendering the rise of a new form. I will trace these signs in the corpus, since all the three works I analyse in this article have an ambiguous relationship both

- with the novel and the epic as genres, and respond to both in critical ways, although the paratextual notes on the covers of two of the works already define them as novels¹⁶.
- 36 In these works, we see in fact a parodic take on both the traditional narrative forms, through the construction of micro-epic adventures of the main characters in both Rugero and Raharimanana, and the deconstruction of the novel form, mainly in Raharimanana's *Za*, through forms that have been also characteristic of the post-modern novel, but which are used here with completely different motivations. We also see, however, a more drastic solution heralds the dawn of a completely different genre, Frankétienne's *Spirale*, incorporating only a few characteristics of the novel and of the epic to build something absolutely original, which could show us one of the directions that could be taken by postcolonial contemporary narratives to replace the modern novel.
- 37 At the level of the narrative structure, Roland Rugero's *Baho !* presents the traditional epic path of the protagonist, and is constructed as a micro-epic adventure in prose, in which the parodic aspect mainly resides in the reason of the epic fight of the hero, whose only intent was to defecate. Nyamuragi approaches the young girl Kigeme to ask her to lead him to her house, to use the toilets, but his mutism and the widespread fear in the country, due to several rapes committed in the previous months, lead to a huge misunderstanding which turns Nyamuragi into the scapegoat of the village. His epic challenge consists therefore in fighting his own way out of the prejudices, the fear and the need for revenge that seem to inhabit the village, and the country, to bring back justice and peace to both.
- 38 Significantly, in contrast with the epic tradition, the hero has to fight here against the community he represents, or rather he has to defend himself from them. Although he is in fact fighting for their freedom, he will never be recognised as a hero, but rather as the representation of the evil force that has destroyed the community, and even when he is saved by his uncle, it is more because of his being part of the family than for an acknowledgement of his actual innocence.
- 39 Through an apparently simple structure, Rugero's work hides a double tension between the forms of the past and a different form of narration. The use of proverbs at the beginning of the chapters is only apparently a cliché, because the proverbs rather than being used as simple hints to local folklore are indeed part of the story and help the text move forward, as one of these confirms, by suggesting that: "*Umugani ugana akariho / Le proverbe brasse ce qui existe*" (BA 73).
- 40 There is also a curious split in the role of the protagonist. Reading Rugero's work we are in fact often unsure of whose story we are reading; although Nyamuragi is certainly the epic hero, the "vieille borgne" (BA 9) – which allows Rugero to allude to the traditional figure of the blind storyteller in the history of epic – is much more than a simple observer of the scene. She is at times a blind bard, the voice through which we are told the story of Nyamuragi, and both the opening and the close of the story focus on her, rather than on Nyamuragi. The two seem to share the role of protagonist, as they share their senses: if one cannot see from one eye, the other cannot speak. Significantly, though, it is through their wounded senses that we perceive the impossibility of communication that affects the rest of their community, while they seem to be the only ones with clear vision and a clear voice.
- 41 Raharimanana's *Za*, defined as "presque une aventure picaresque"¹⁷, shares with

Roland Rugero's *Baho!* the epic path of the protagonist, and it the structure of the work already proves that it cannot fit within the formal characteristics of the genre of the novel. Opened by an apologizing prologue, "Excuses et dires liminaires de Za" (ZA 9-15), the novel is then composed of seventeen chapters, followed by nine "bis" chapters (named Chapitre 1bis, Chapitre 2bis, and so on), with no direct correlation with the respective main chapters, and interrupted from time to time by five interludes. The clearest example of the impossibility of closing Za's story into a clear-cut format, however, comes from the two epilogues: "Épilogue (avorté)" (ZA 183-186) and "Épilogue (deuxième tentative)" (ZA 246).

- 42 The first epilogue tells us: "c'est ici que Za aurait voulu finir cette histoire" (ZA 183), and it sounds more like a prologue than as an epilogue: "Voici que Za me ronze de l'intérieur pour livrer cette histoire" (ZA 183), "Za recueille les mots qui coulent de la plaie ouverte" (ZA 184), and it closes with an image of awakening: "L'aube dézà. Soleil..." (ZA 186), in which the incorrect pronunciation of "déjà" gives us a sentence which would read "L'aube de Za", connecting this image of awakening to the main character himself. The second epilogue is even more ambiguous, as it is constituted only by points of suspension, empty lines and a verse in the last two lines: "et rire d'onyx et de salive / pierreuse..." (ZA 246).
- 43 The presence of two epilogues, one of which is "aborted" and the other just an "attempt", would already prove the impossibility of closing this story, but this becomes even clearer when we see that even the second epilogue comes almost fifty pages before the actual end of the book, closed by four chapters entitled "Derniers Feuilletts" (Derniers Feuilletts 1, Derniers Feuilletts 2, and so on, ZA 247-295), introduced by these words: "Où votre serviteur, lassé de tous ces épilogues avortés, ramasse les derniers feuillets et vous les livre en vrac" (ZA 247). The author seems to renounce his role of having (and writing) the last word, leaving to the reader his own notes and his attempts at making sense of it all, and calling on the reader to actively take part in the narrative process and in the creative process.
- 44 Frankétienne has clearly indicated this interaction with the reader, and especially between the reader and the text, without any intervention by the author, as the fundamental reading strategy for genre of the *Spirale*. According to him: "rien n'est imposé au lecteur qui peut ainsi évoluer, dans l'espace du livre, sans être contraint d'observer un itinéraire préétabli" (UV 12). In a structure of this kind, "l'œuvre équivaut à un pré-texte (à motivation plurielle)" (UV 11), and the reader is "désormais responsable du destin de l'écriture" (UV 12).
- 45 Probably no Francophone author has proposed a more drastic rupture with the structure of the novel than Frankétienne, who – together with Jean-Claude Figolé and René Philoctète – founded the movement of *Spiralisme*, giving a completely new form to narrative in Haiti. The name chosen for this genre already suggests the idea of movement, and specifically a constant and unceasing movement. As the author writes, in fact: "la Spirale constitue un continuum spatio-temporel dont les éléments d'appartenance sont susceptibles de permutation, de translation, d'extrapolation" (UV 11).
- 46 *L'oiseau schizophone*, according to Rodney Saint-Éloi, is the concretisation of an "œuvre totale – qui assume toutes les impuretés, toutes les voies (voix) et qui se situe au mitan des formes et expérimentations artistiques"¹⁸. The extent of the work – the 812 A4 pages of the first edition, and the eight volumes representing the eight

movements in which it was dispersed for the second publication under the title of *Métamorphoses de L'oiseau schizophone* for Vents d'ailleurs (2004-2013) – only suggest the all-embracing perspective of the work, which is confirmed both in its form and in its content, and which presents itself as “un labyrinthe, une multiplicité de points de vue et de voix, un enchevêtrement de sens, de langues, de signes”, in which “même le silence fait partie de l'œuvre” (UV 11).

47 The very first words of *L'oiseau schizophone* suggest that this work in particular is to be meant as an epic, as we can read in this dialogue exposing the extent of Frankétienne's challenge:

- J'ai écrit une œuvre épique pour cinq siècles et pic à venir.
- Et après?
- Il n'y aura plus de littérature.
- Comment?
- Le livre n'aura été qu'une fleur éphémère de la pensée dans l'aventure humaine. (OS 7)

48 The presentation of the book by the author also informs us that *L'oiseau schizophone* is “le mariage tourmenté du roman et de la poésie, ponctué par une succession de ruptures transgressives. L'interpénétration magique de la fiction, du rêve et de la réalité. Un étrange kaléidoscope. Un cinéma de voix en marche” (OS 11). The author's intent is therefore not just to play with the genres, but rather to create a completely new form of perceiving the literary work, represented by the replacement of the book with the “psykinérama. (...) Le cinéma des rêves en projection concrète. Le cinéma des âmes en connexion directe” (OS 7); a form which goes beyond the novel rather than simply transforming it.

49 All these works function either as a parody or as a de(con)struction of both the epic and the novel as genres. And both these strategies have been indicated as the clearest signals that a genre is losing its power to depict an era, and its hero. These words do not have to be taken as another attempt at indicating a possible death of the novel (as the many that have been pronounced already), but they rather point towards the evidence that if the epic project is to take a new form, and one that could speak for the subaltern hero of contemporary postcolonial literary works, this cannot be the novel as it was conceived in modern Europe.

50 Another clarification is necessary: although postcolonial novels have often been interpreted as derivations of the larger postmodern movement – because both postmodern and postcolonial writers have worked on the deconstruction of the Western canon, and of its stylistic structures – the two processes must be clearly differentiated. Some of the forms chosen are indeed shared by both fields, but postcolonial authors have used them with different implications. As Natascha Ueckmann has highlighted about the *Spiralisme*, in fact, “dans le contexte international, il était un contrepoids par rapport au *Nouveau Roman* et *Tel Quel*”¹⁹, and Helen Tiffin already proved that although “a number of strategies [...] are characteristics of both the generally postcolonial and the European postmodern, [...] they are energised by different theoretical assumptions and by vastly different political motivations”²⁰. And these motivations derive directly from the very different realities and subjects that postcolonial writers intend to represent.

Conclusion

51 Through the subjects and the forms of these works we can perceive a line in the transformation of the epic project, both in the genre used and in the subjects and realities represented, which brings us from the epic poem to the modern novel and from the modern novel to postcolonial narratives.

52 According to Lukács, “the heroes of the epic live through a whole variety of adventures, but the fact that they will pass the test, both inwardly and outwardly, is never in doubt; the world-dominating gods must always triumph over the demons” (*TN* 89). On a narrative level this depends on the characteristics of these heroes, often semi-divine beings, links between the human and the divine world, who are able to go beyond the limits of mankind to challenge the gods (or the demons) themselves, or at least speak to them almost on a level of equality; ideologically, however, heroes of this kind are shaped on purpose to fulfil the need of an undisputed and incontestable absolute truth, rooted in the past, that serves the whole community these heroes belong to, and often all of mankind. The heroes of the modern novel are confronted with a much more concrete micro-reality, and the need to fight their own way through the world as individuals to achieve their success, but their journeys still have the pace of those who are sure of their own righteousness, who have faith in constant progress and evolution, and who believe in the present because of the future it will grant them.

53 The heroes of postcolonial contemporary forms of narration have lost these possibilities right from the beginning. They cannot deal with a “national heroic past”, because their past and the past of their nations have been denied and vilified, and can only be recuperated at the risk of nostalgic artificial creations of cultures, nations or societies which have either never existed, or have been lost for too long to be able to actually recover them without a great deal of cultural invention. However, the present chosen by the modern novel is also a time of deprivation for the subjects of postcolonial writing, since their individual rights and the rights of their communities are constantly denied in a present, in which their lives and freedom are constantly at stake, and in which their epic challenges consist mostly of fighting their way out of these limits imposed upon them by society.

54 The only time available to the postcolonial epic is therefore the future, not as the time of narration but as the time that both the subjects and the object of the narration long for; more than a clear direction, it is in fact a longing for something that might be unreachable, a time in which things could finally be different; a future that is implied in the “post-” of postcolonial, and which is very different from the one in postmodernism. While the latter is a self-confident deconstruction in the present of what is considered as past, a confident artistic move towards the future, the “post-” in postcolonial is a not more than a promise of a future that is just as ambiguous and as difficult to achieve as an era beyond colonialism, rather than simply after colonialism. The time of these subjects can thus neither be the past of ancient epic, nor the present of the modern novel, but rather the hope of a different future they are constantly longing for.

55 Ortega draws a parallel between literary genres and zoological species, saying that any genre is limited to a certain number of possibilities and cannot speak for everything and everybody. He writes:

A literary genre, the same as a zoological species, means a certain stock of possibilities; and since in art only those possibilities count which are different enough not to be

considered replicas of one another, the resources of a literary genre are definitely limited. It is erroneous to think of the novel—and I refer to the modern novel in particular—as of an endless field capable of rendering ever new forms. Rather it may be compared to a vast but finite quarry.²¹

- 56 Although some postcolonial works have used the genre of the novel, in fact, they have often stretched the limits of this genre so much that it seems very easy to indicate that the future form of epic narration must be found elsewhere, as Frankétienne tried to show through his *spirale*, offering works that not only challenge the novel but invent a completely different structure of narration that defies the essential characteristics of the novel.
- 57 The reasons behind the shift from the modern novel to postcolonial narratives are similar to the ones that led to the evolution from the epic poem to the modern novel. What happens, in fact, is not a different epistemological and ideological change, but rather a perpetuation of the same challenging of authority: the subjects of this new genre are in fact those to which the social mobility characteristic of the heroes of the modern novel was denied, mostly because of their race, a social construct that became decisive for the lives of millions of people, also through pseudoscientific pseudo-empirical hypotheses which have by now totally been proven to be false. If Bakhtin sees the epic as “the negative pole associated with the monolithic, the monologue, immobility, absolute closure in the past, and crystallization in the canon” and the novel as “the positive pole associated with the plurivocal, the dialogic, and the dynamic”²², I propose therefore to reinterpret this opposition in Marxist terms, in light of the third step that postcolonial narratives seem to offer, as a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, in which both the epic poem and the modern novel function as negative poles allowing the affirmation of a genre paving the way for a positive transcendence of alienation and subalternity not only for the subjects narrated, but also for the people they represent in the real world.
- 58 With the modern novel, Bakhtin told us, “the temporal model of the world changes radically: it becomes a world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not yet been spoken” (*DI* 30). Postcolonial narratives bring this change further, because they consciously refuse to speak that final word, since no final word can be found for the postcolonial reality. What is engendered, through this process, is a narrative which is at the same time “le dire absolu” and “le silence inextinguible” (*OS* 11), because it makes silence speak with the voice of the voiceless.
- 59 Postcolonial contemporary narratives should therefore be considered the third manifestation of the epic project. If the epic poem was a verse narrative about readily recognizable heroes, mostly in between human beings and divine entities, and referring to a national heroic past, and the modern novel was a prose narrative about a new kind of heroes who are common individuals using their own abilities to improve their lives in the present, what the postcolonial contemporary epic is offering is an irregular prose narrative which focuses on subaltern heroes whose epic struggles defy the limits imposed upon them by a society which disregards them and their own right to be represented, to achieve something in and for the future.

Giuseppe Sofò
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NOTES

- ¹ Frankétienne in François Armanet, Max Armanet (eds), *Le Nouvel Observateur, Hors-Série n° 22-23-24: 240 écrivains racontent une journée du monde*, 1994, quoted in Philippe Bernard, “Préface (15^e année de dictature Duvalier)” in Frankétienne, *Ultravocal: Spirale*, Paris, Hoëbeke, 2004, p. 7, henceforth *UV*.
- ² Cecil Maurice Bowra, *From Virgil to Milton*, London, Macmillan, 1965 (1945), p. 1.
- ³ Margaret Bessinger, Jane Tylus, Susanne Wofford, “Introduction” in Margaret Bessinger, Jane Tylus, Susanne Wofford (eds), *Epic Tradition in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1999, p. 2.
- ⁴ Loveday Alexander, *Acts in Its Ancient Literary Context*, London-New York, T&T Clark, 2006, p. 167.
- ⁵ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, translated by Anna Bostock, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1971 (1920), p. 56, henceforth *TN*.
- ⁶ Hegel writes in German: “Ganz anders verhält es sich dagegen mit dem Roman, der modernen bürgerlichen Epopöe” (author’s emphasis); Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 14: *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik 2*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1995, p. 392. The English translation of this work interestingly translates *Roman* as “romance” rather than as “novel” and *bürgerlichen* as “popular” rather than as “bourgeois”, giving a completely different perception of this sentence from the one we have reading the German text: “But it is quite different with romance, the modern popular epic”; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. M. Knox, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, vol. 2, p. 1092.
- ⁷ Michael McKeon, “Genre Theory” in Michael McKeon (ed.), *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, Baltimore, MD-London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, p. 1.
- ⁸ Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, Baltimore, MD-London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 267.
- ⁹ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel” in Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, TX, University of Texas Press, 1981 (1941), p. 39, henceforth *DI*.
- ¹⁰ José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote* (1961), translated by Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marín, in Michael McKeon (ed.), *Theory of the Novel, op. cit.*, p. 277-278, henceforth *MQ*.
- ¹¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994 (1993), p. 70, henceforth *CI*.
- ¹² Frankétienne, *L’Oiseau schizophone*, Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 1998, henceforth *OS*.
- ¹³ Raharimanana, *Za*, Paris, Philippe Rey, 2008, henceforth *ZA*.
- ¹⁴ Roland Rugero, *Baho!*, La Roque d’Anthéron, Vents d’ailleurs, 2012, henceforth *BA*.
- ¹⁵ Dominique Ranaivoson, “*Za*, de Raharimanana” in *Africultures*, February 7, 2008 (<http://www.africultures.com/php/?nav=article&no=7310>).
- ¹⁶ While Raharimanana’s *Za* is defined as “roman” on the cover of the original French version, Rugero’s *Baho!* is defined as “a novel” (Roland Rugero, *Baho!*, Phoneme Media, 2016) and “un romanzo” (Roland Rugero, *Vivi!*, Rome, Edizioni Socrates, 2013) on the covers of the English and Italian translations, but not on the original French cover.
- ¹⁷ Dominique Ranaivoson, “*Za*, de Raharimanana”, art. cité.
- ¹⁸ Rodney Saint-Éloi, “La spirale de Frankétienne ou l’écriture come instrument de subversion” in Frankétienne, *D’un pur silence inextinguible: premier mouvement des Métamorphoses de l’oiseau schizophone*, La Roque d’Anthéron, Vents d’ailleurs, 2004, p. 6.
- ¹⁹ Natascha Ueckmann, “Il n’est vraie parole en Caraïbe que la schizophrénie: Autour du *Spiralisme*” in Ottmar Ette, Gesine Müller (eds), *Worldwide. Archipels de la mondialisation. Archipiélagos de la globalización: A TransArea Symposium*, Madrid-Frankfurt am Main, Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2012, p. 220.
- ²⁰ Helen Tiffin, “Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History” in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XXX, 2, 1993, p. 172.
- ²¹ José Ortega y Gasset, *Notes on the Novel* (1948), translated by Helene Weyl, in Michael McKeon (ed.), *Theory of the Novel, op. cit.*, p. 295.
- ²² Massimo Fusillo, “Epic, Novel”, translated by Michael F. Moore, in Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel, vol. 2: Forms and Themes*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 34.