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Moroni, Mario. *Il libro dei primati* / *The Book of Primates*. Trans. Mario Moroni with Olivia Holmes. Guernica World Editions, 63. Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2023. Pp. 83. ISBN 978-1-7718-3815-3 (paperback) $20.

Where do the borders of fabulation meet the boundaries of the real? And who will cross that line? Readers might expect to find the first question raised in the works of Italo Calvino or Jorge Luis Borges, to name two well-traveled culprits. Cartographies of language and myth certainly inform Mario Moroni's peripatetic *Il libro dei primati*, a book that eludes easy categorization or, for that matter, easy review.

First, it should be noted that Guernica has published the work in a bilingual edition. I say "the work" and "the book" because the normal modes do not adhere to it. The book contains both poetry and prose (and at times combines the two, alternating between them in single chapters, but also using a more prosaic, free-verse style as well as offering a poetic, recursive style of prose to readers). As such, the translation must contend with a diversity of modes, and Moroni and Holmes perform the job admirably. Furthermore, the book is well paginated, offering a page of Italian with its English "mirror" beside it; a novice reader of Italian who, stumbling upon a word or phrase, may then consult the English text without, in most cases, turning the page. In practical terms, the transition and pagination work well together and perhaps help readers to navigate the aforementioned formal confusion of the work, albeit inadvertently.

To return to the first question: Moroni explores the boundaries where fabulation meets the real in many ways. These include typography, where the spacing of text on the page invites the crossing of borders (between prose and verse, for instance). It occurs again where the text ends and illustrations appear, printed between sections of the book, where readers find a historic map of the state of Maine, or the state of New York, or a drawing or painting. Is it a multi-media book? Yes, insofar as these illustrations help readers to map shifts from location to location. In doing so, the illustrations also help readers to follow other shifts in narration, tone, and characterization.

Now, for the second question I asked: who crosses the line between fabulation and the real? *Il libro dei primati* develops a surrogate for the reader as it proceeds. In the early chapters, the book is subjective, relying upon impressionistic, discursive narration. At times the passive voice is used, as if the narration, and even what is narrated, were emerging from a numinous space, somewhere outside and before time. This is the first section, in which

the state of Maine is figured as an elemental space, quasi-mythical and also before the legend is told. New York, on the other hand, is associated with the complexity of the apparent, the layering of language as opposed to the first, elemental attempts at speech or story.

In the later "New York" sections, the surrogate I mentioned earlier appears. We meet the "absent visitor" and the "uncertain traveler," the "passenger" and the "wayfarer." Has the figure emerged from the primal time associated with "Maine," a figment of the very act of narration? Or is this figure a response to it – a witness to its becoming? The embodiment of society, incarnated in words and stories, and a carrier of their historical burdens? As the text increasingly alternates in the final sections between prosaic time and poetic time, it is safe to assume that the "traveler" is a composite of these forces, part poem and part prose, part indigenous person and part immigrant (yet never, it seems, a colonizer), and all reader.

The "New York" section begins with one of the more compelling examples of this figuration (and an example that perhaps veers closest to the territories visited by Calvino in *Invisible Cities*). After playing with the American habit of adopting names that resonate with the classical world (Athens, Rome, Naples, Sparta, etc.), the narrator explores the relationships between maps and actual places, words, and things. Often a premise for fabulist departures, Moroni offers a twist. What if that is a ruse? The unnamed figure of the traveler appears, thinking that the word offers access to the past, and takes the "bait." Here the narrator plays the role of chorus and exposes the truth: in endlessly naming and renaming, we trick ourselves into thinking that we are making "history" when in fact we have stumbled (naively?) into the future.

A review cannot tell where the path will lead for the countless readers who have yet to meet Moroni's book. It is a philosophical work, and a beautifully written work. Its Italian is modern and terse, yet lyrical all the same. I can tell, however, where Moroni's book led me in the end: to a book nearly one hundred years old – *In the American Grain* by William Carlos Williams. In that work, Williams revised and revisited canonical chapters of the American story, beginning with the Icelandic Sagas and continuing through the 1800s. He redeems Columbus, reviles Hamilton, offers a native, provincial version of Poe, and so forth. Unabashedly experimental in its modernism (and dated, at least today, by Primitivist excesses), Williams' book asserted the priority of the local and regional stories over national mythologies, championed the homespun against the mass-produced; it also challenged readers to reinvent how the parts – the words, the memories, the people – become a

whole (or if such totality is even attainable). Elevating the local, embracing the future – these were the hallmark of Williams' ingenuity and career.

In *Il libro dei primati*, Moroni offers a more gentle, sympathetic attempt at a comparable project. Using two examples – Maine and New York – he contrasts modes and memories in order to create something new and forward-looking (yet also mindful of history). Building stories from local iconographies, integrating animals, peoples, and things into a project that is inseparable, in some way, from its places, he explores the elemental processes of poetics and narration, story and myth.

In conclusion, I would avoid the terms meta-fiction and postmodernism as descriptors for what Moroni offers in this book. Just as the broad, critical terminology of Modernism blemishes, more often than not, the individual appeal of the specific author in question (would anyone dare confuse William Carlos Williams with Gertrude Stein, or Ezra Pound?), our recent or contemporary vocabularies do not always suffice to encompass a work like Moroni's. And this is precisely where its intelligence resides – in the figure of another traveler, the writer, who is an outsider looking in upon our world, an immigrant among colonists, and wondering which is more true – the fable or the real.

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