



*Murderous Visions of Relativity In the Novels *Das Parfum* and *Oceano mare**

by Mattia Marino

BEYOND MOURNING

Social rites attempt to fill in the bodily gaps left by death. The aesthetic rituals of the novels *Das Parfum* (1985) by Patrick Süskind and *Oceano mare* (1993) by Alessandro Baricco come to terms with death in representations of murder which convey a relativist conception of being as presence, based on creative and critical dissent from the social resentment revolving around the dualist consent of life as absolute essence and death as absence. Both novels present death in ways which deviate from the mourning conventions derived from the socially constructed distinction between life and death. An interdisciplinary approach, where philosophical perspectivism and post-structuralism, sociological intersectionality, and historical hybridity are integrated, suits to the intercultural analysis of intertextual relations within these literary works, that is, of their embeddedness in the western cultural intertext of life and death. Although the two novels seemingly belong to very different contexts, they can be discussed in the wider context of western post-modernity. Their metaphors of scent and sea, associated with murders, converge in aesthetic rituals which celebrate the cycle of being in death.

The present analysis of these two novels intends to discuss the critical representation of death in a literary reworking of inner sense perception and outer natural landscape, respectively.



Das Parfum and *Oceano mare* offer two different relativist metaphors of being, which provide a critique against the ideology of progress through the complementary images of internally perceived scents and externally moving waves, where the normative consent of linear progression gives way to elusive transiency both perceived subjectively and occurring on a cosmic scale. The idea of progress suggests the subject's control over the absolute essence of life and resentment against the dark cosmic force of death, which it is necessary to exorcise by means of rituals meant to self-referentially reinforce the illusion of control over living bodies despite the loss of the dead. The ritual exorcism of death in the form of mourning marks continuity between the moral ideal of salvation, where the loss of the dead is handled as the passage of the good souls to the spiritual world, and the modern ideal of progress, where death is a moment for the living to realise the ultimate value of ever-improving material life. Both salvation in morality and progress in modernity encompass absolutist conceptions of life and death as essentially distinct from each other, either as preparation and passage to spiritual salvation, or as enjoyment and privation of material progress; both ideals are normative, either in ethical or in physical rules. Whether spiritual or material, linear progress gives way to circular recurrence and relativity to perception in the metaphors of scent and sea, where life and death are presented as presence and return of presence in ever different forms, which it is possible to embrace in the characters' creative dissent beyond all consensual norms.

Textual analysis is a semiotic method, as it examines signs (Eco, 1976: 7), precisely not for what, but for how, that is, the ways in which they mean (Sturrock, 1986: 22). Language is only one of the infinite and all-pervasive systems of signs in use (Barthes, 1967: 9), and presents a level of abstraction which makes it particularly suitable in the philosophical discussion of being (Saussure, 1983: 16). Using language, or, for that matter, any other semiotic system, involves a dialectics between the available means to create meaning (Lévi-Strauss, 1974: 29). In this respect, texts' cultural contexts play a significant role (Lotman, 1990: 124-125), which hints at the desirability of an interdisciplinary socio-historic-philosophical approach. In the socio-historical context of the early twenty-first century, global-local hybridity involves a renegotiation of identity and memory beyond the historicist ideology of progress, with its dream to minimise death by maximising techno-scientific control (Claeys, 2005: 273). As postcolonial societies question the ideal of techno-scientific rationality, associated with the imperialist violence overcome by enhanced hybridisation, the rationalist concept of death as physical loss is inadequate. Death as absence belongs to the rationalist ideology of biological life as absolute essence.



This form of essentialism legitimises heteronormative male privilege and the colonisation of non-modern societies in the name of the improvement of health and social conditions. In the 1980s and 1990s, marked precisely by intensive postcolonial discussions, *Das Parfum* and *Oceano mare* represent death as constitutive of being as presence, beyond the distinction between essence and absence.

While techno-scientific essentialism posits physical life as the absolute essence of being, a critical ontology of hybrid history poses the force of being as relative to the different perspectives, or philosophical perspectivism (Nietzsche, 1887), of its phenomenological forms, which constitute a structure of consensual meaning from which each of them differs (Foucault, 1969) in the philosophical post-structuralism of its particular intersections, or sociological intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2005). As life as essence is laid bare as a sexist and imperialist discourse, being is relative to perspective. Social rituals provide a space of consent where different perspectives can interact in an orderly structure of conventions, which define identity and memory in terms of language, belief, class, sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, citizenship, health, and age. Each particular perspective is characterised by unique intersections of these socially constructed categories of identity and memory. No absolute hierarchy of values exists, as all perspectives are fatally doomed to death, giving way to ever different forms of being. The awareness of this relativity allows each perspective to accept death by dissenting creatively from the structure in which it interacts with the others, while the lack of such awareness involves both the incapability to cope with death and resentment against those perspectives which do not correspond to the values of reference. The cycle of being and the tension between dissent and resentment are celebrated in the aesthetic murders from *Das Parfum* and *Oceano mare*.

SCENTS OF MURDER

The story of the murderer Jean-Baptiste Grenouille unfolds in eighteenth century Paris, from his birth in the most stench-ridden market, through the lives silenced in his enterprise of making for himself an enchanting perfume, to his suicidal overdose of perfume which makes his worshippers literally eat him. Scent is perceived by the sense ranked as the lowest one in the imaginary essentialism of the herd. Scent's multiplicity and elusiveness represent the occult force of transiency in the subjective forms of being. This inspiration shines through the constant and abundant descriptions of the realm of scent in *Perfume*, as well as in the succession of the characters and in the death of the scent-overman.



Scent represents the transiency of being, where all entities are characterised by their unique combination of scents, and are doomed to pass away with the recombination of scent in ever different patterns characterising other irreducibly unique forms of subjects. The awareness of transiency offers the creative inspiration distinguishing exceptional subjects such as the novel's protagonist, whose status as "Genie" (genius) and "Scheusal" (monster) in relation to the "flüchtige Reich der Gerüche" (the elusive realm of scent) is emphasised from the first page (5). Scent's characterisation as elusive suggests the metaphor of scent as the elusiveness of existence, with the adjective *flüchtig's* phonetic and semantic associations and partial rhymes with not only *Flucht*, but also *Flug*, that is, flight, and *Willkür*, that is, arbitrary will, which is etymologically related to the corresponding terms in Latin and Greek, as well as to the Sanskrit *bala*, that is, force. As represented in the image of scent, existence is irreducible to a static essence, as it is actually a dynamic force.

Scent corresponds to identity (34). The subject is represented as a unique combination of scents doomed to disappear without trace, *spurlos* (5). Being is revealed as meta-essential, or metousiastic, that is, as constituted beyond any ideal of absolute essences in the ephemeral assemblage of decaying scents, perceived by the sense organ regarded as the most "primitiv" and "niedrig" (20) from the essentialist perspective of organised society culminated in modernity, where the abundance of smells characterising Grenouille's pre-revolutionary environment is repressed to serve the ideologies of hygiene, public health, and common good. Far from corresponding to the ideal of essence sanctioned in ideology, identity is elusive and transient as in the unpredictable juxtapositions of scents.

The exceptional subject, Grenouille, is hypersensitive precisely to scent, whose ineffability reveals the insufficiency of linguistic conventions to capture the elusive complexity of identity. The extraordinary awareness of the elusiveness of existence is represented in Grenouille's scentless position, as he "riecht überhaupt nicht" (does not smell at all, 14) and possesses "nicht einmal einen eigenen Duft" (not even a scent of his own, 20). The monstrous genius' position as a subject without scent, that is, without identity, is a metaphor for his hypersensitivity to the elusiveness of existence, accompanied by the insensitivity to the essentialist ideologies governing social and subjective organisation.

The monstrous genius absorbs voraciously all scents and all conventional hierarchical distinctions, until the discovery of the scent which constitutes the "Ende aller Gerüche" (end of all scents, 47) and the principium individuationis of organised society's essentialist hierarchies, which lies in the body of a girl at puberty. All conventional distinctions associated with the dichotomy of good and evil are reduced to the essence of heteronormative reproductive sexuality as the ultimate foundation of organised life. The image of the red-haired maiden with tree fruits alludes to Eve in the Judaeo-Christian myth of origins, where humanity's loss of innocence is determined by the sinful woman who mothers the generations of mortal sinners needing social organisation to enforce God's laws.



The modern scientific and technological proceedings of perfumery, associated with alchemy and magic, rely on conventional hierarchies based upon the supreme scent of heavenly bliss and innocence not-yet-lost, hinting at the continuity between the religious and the modern essentialist conceptions, of which the former sets the ultimate essence as God's spiritual dimension, and the latter continues the myth of linear progress with the ideal of material beauty, health and wealth. The overmanly, that is, hyperhuman, perfumer criticises the ideologies derived from the essential principle of virginal scent by engaging in the creation of a sublime perfume which achieves the essence of innocence in the ultimate moral decay of serial murders.

He creates for himself a "Duftkleid" (suit made of scent, 231) by means of his critical "Jagd" (hunt, 235), whose victims are those who essentially inspire conventional "Liebe" (love, 240), that is, virgins ripe to serve the herd as mothers and housekeepers. His perfume is a "Duftdiadem" (scent diadem, 246) where:

(w)enn man sich [...] all die Opfer nicht mehr als einzelne Individuen, sondern als Teile eines höheren Prinzips vorstellte und sich in idealistischer Weise ihre jeweiligen Eigenschaften als zu einem einheitlichen Ganzen verschmolzen dächte, dann müsste das aus solchen Mosaiksteinen zusammengesetzte Bild das Bild der Schönheit schlechthin sein, und der Zauber, der von ihm ausginge, wäre nicht mehr von menschlicher, sondern von göttlicher Art (258).¹

The overman is associated with Christ with a "Holzkreuz" (wooden cross, 291), and then "Allah" (301) and, further, "Herrgott" (the Lord) in a "Bacchanal", as well as "Prometheus" (304), wearing his "Duftmasker" (scent mask, 306) revealing "Liebe" (love, 316) as merely a murderous illusion. The intersections between different religious images from eastern and western traditions and those between Grenouille's low social class, asexuality, premature genius, deviancy, and physical disability, along with his offering his body as food for the poor and the criminals of Paris in the end, converge in a relativist revaluation of Christ which, while criticising Christian morality, stresses Christ's and all other religions' prophets' openness to the abject of organised society. The metaphor of the sublimation of murdered virgins' scents unto an all-mighty perfume overcomes the essentialist dichotomies derived from the absolute distinctions of good and evil, life and death.

SEAS OF DEATH

In *Oceano mare*, the Almayer Inn hosts seven guests all irresistibly attracted by the sea. Plasson and Bartleboom intend, respectively, to paint the sea and to write an

¹ as soon as one imagined all the victims not any longer as distinct individuals, but as parts of a higher principle, whose respective properties were melted into a unitary whole, then these pieces should compose, as in a mosaic, an image which is the image of beauty par excellence, and the magic irradiating from it would be not of a human, but of a divine sort.



encyclopaedic entry on the limits of the sea, which makes them long for the knowledge of the beginning and the ending of the sea. Madame Ann Deveria and Lady Elisewin, the latter accompanied by the writer of prayers Father Pluche, look for a remedy to their ills in the sea, as Ann is a slave to her desires and Elisewin's mysterious disease amounts to an obsessive anxiety vis-à-vis the infinite unknown possibilities of existence. Thomas, a naval officer and admiral Langlais' gardener, who, in order to conceal his identity, changes his name to Adams, waits to kill Ann Deveria to take revenge on her lover, André Savigny, who had murdered Thomas' beloved in the aftermath of a shipwreck. Eventually, the writer who wanted to represent the sea through language leaves the last inhabited room, as the inn dissolves behind him. The dissolution of the inn, as well as the disease of the noble lady Elisewin, highlights the caducity symbolised by the central image of the sea tide.

That the sea is the overarching metaphor of *Oceano mare* is evident from the opening chapter, where the sea as the image of truth is presented, challenged, and, ultimately, overcome. The apparent perfection and precision of the sea landscape is associated from the incipit of the novel with the idea of "*verità*" (truth), emphasised in the text. The idea of truth evoked by the sea, however, is suspended by the presence of the observer who strives to achieve a representation of truth, represented through the image of the painter; Plasson struggles to paint the sea using sea water. The man, and Man:

(È) come una sentinella – questo *bisogna* capirlo – [...] a difendere quella porzione di mondo dall'invasione silenziosa della perfezione, piccola incrinatura che sgretola quella spettacolare scenografia dell'essere. [...] (B)asta il barlume di un uomo a ferire il riposo di ciò che sarebbe a un attimo dal diventare *verità* e invece immediatamente torna ad essere attesa e domanda, per il semplice e infinito potere di quell'uomo che è feritoia e spiraglio, porta piccola da cui rientrano storie a fiumi e l'immane repertorio di ciò che *potrebbe* essere, squarcio infinito, ferita meravigliosa, sentiero di passi a migliaia dove nulla più potrà essere vero. (10)²

Remarkably, the words emphasised by the author – "*bisogna*" (it is necessary), "*verità*" (truth), and "*potrebbe*" (might be) – succeed one another in a sequence which conveys the inexorable change from necessity and importance all the way to mere possibility. By virtue of his being a particular, that is, limited entity, yet endowed with

² Is like a guardian – it is *necessary* to understand this – defending that portion of the world from the silent invasion of perfection, a tiny flaw which breaks that spectacular scenario of being. The shadow of a man suffices to hurt the quietness of that which would be at one step from becoming *truth*, and instead immediately turns again into waiting and questioning, by virtue of the simple and endless power held by that man, who is a slit and a crack, a small door through which myriads of stories overflow, along with the huge repertory of that which *might* be, an endless split, a wonderful wound, a path of thousands of steps where nothing can ever be true anymore.



the oxymoronically “semplice e infinito” (simple and endless) power of observation, man deploys the force of imagination in “storie a fiumi” (myriads of stories) which, unfolding in a plurality of possible interpretations, question the monolithic truth of being as a whole, in contrast to the partial being of the individual observer, characterised as a “porta piccola” (small door). Emphasised through the alliteration, the idea of door, *porta*, is etymologically related to the Sanskrit word for *bearing*, *bhara*, present in the Greek word *metaphor* and marked in the *p-r* and *f-r* consonant combinations in neo-Latin languages, as well as in the *b-r* consonant combination in Germanic languages.

The Italian word *porta* is, moreover, linked with *forza* (their Sanskrit etymological relatives being *bhara* and *bala*), as the concept of bearing implies precisely the use of force. The image of an open door, then, is particularly emblematic of the power of imagination from which infinite possible particular stories overflow, in contrast to the static majesty of the whole of being, that is, existence. This is conveyed through the image of the sea landscape spoilt by the presence of the artist, where the problem of the dichotomy between nature and culture finds expression. Such an apparently inimical opposition is condensed in the passage cited above, in several more or less explicit antithetical metaphorical terms: those of the invader and the warden (“sentinella” and “invasion”), the superb scenery and the flaw (“spettacolare scenografia” and “incrinatura”), shadow and bright light (“riposo” and “barlume”), static truth and dynamic questioning (“verità” and “domanda”), whole and hole (“feritoia” and “immane repertorio”), body and wound (the image of the body being suggested by that of “ferita”), and forest and path (“sentiero”). The idea of stable truth represented by the sea is ultimately overcome in the ending of the chapter with the image of the painter: following the cycle of the sea’s tide, he goes to the beach in the hours of daylight and leaves only at dusk, that is, when darkness makes the landscape indistinguishable, and, hence, the ideal of perfect and exact truth cannot possibly find realisation.

The underlying moral is the importance of overcoming the ideal of an absolute moral, as the essentialist ideal of absolute truth, good or value is overcome in a relativist dimension, where the absolute value of the essentialist conceptions of being and subjectivity sustaining any stories dissolves in the relativity of value to the particular perspective of the story told in the whole of flowing stories, which is conveyed in the image of the *ocean sea*, with the multiple unity of the essential absolute and the ephemeral relative. The baron of Carewall and Elisewin’s representation of absolutism and relativism is tied up with Langlais and Adams’ representation of relativism and the nihilism of the sea-womb occult, the abyss abysmal, the shipwreck of disenchantment. In fact, Elisewin moves away from her father to Adams and, then, Langlais, in a narrative which is intertextually related to God-Son’s descent on earth, crucifixion, and resurrection, where the messiah’s universal message loses its absoluteness facing the apocalyptic nothingness which, eventually, gives way to existential relativity. Elisewin’s story starts in the *care walls* of a paradise created by her father, and soon lost when she has to move to the sea, where



she *falls* exactly with the tellingly named Adams. Unsurprisingly, the postmodern remediation of Christ associates him not only with an ordinary woman, but exactly with the prototypical woman, whose name is also evoked by the baron's daughter's own, blamed for the divine punishment of humankind, including the very condition of mortality.

In the pathetically hyperbolic sexual scene with Adams, Elisewin absorbs magically all of his stories of the shipwreck's ultimate horror and of Timbuktu's openness.

In the obviously orgasmic end, topically associated with death in the text with yet one more twist of postmodern irony here also suggesting *Christa's* crucifixion, she is resurrected in the Nietzschean over(wo)manly form of a relativist storyteller, soon thereafter joining the lord of the arbitrary called the Englishman in French, Langlais, *A(wo)men(!)*. In fact, while Adams' relativist task as Langlais' gardener was only one step in his nihilist vengeful plan to find André Savigny and murder his lover Ann Deveria, Elisewin embraces the relativity of existence symbolised by the sea tide, where the cycle of the eternal return reveals that revenge is vain (139), while it is the critical creativity of cyclically ever-recurring storytelling which offers meaning and value, in which she engages at Langlais' until the admiral's death while listening to her fantastic stories (145-146). Having learnt from Langlais that "tra tutte le vite possibili, a una bisogna ancorarsi per poter contemplare, sereni, tutte le altre", she can finally go back home with the *wonderful* ("meraviglioso") power, inspired by the transient undulation of the occult sea, to self-critically and self-creatively *invent* ("*i*nventar ...", emphasis in the original) her own story, yet unknown.

The story of Elisewin overcomes essentialism in the intersections of class, sex, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and disability. While an essentialist account of the story of Christ would emphasise his social ascent from his native cave to his success as a preacher, his masculinity and chastity, his adulthood at the time when he starts to preach, his ethnic belonging to the elected people, and his social skills, Elisewin's relativist revaluation is intertextually related to Christ's openness to the lower classes, women and also prostitutes, sinners, children, foreigners, and the ill; Elisewin's own intersectional identity sublimates Christ's creative criticism of the systematic exclusion sanctioned in culture and society. In fact, Elisewin willingly leaves her privileged initial position, and her return suggests her intention to create her own life without relying on her father's *care walls*. She is a woman who becomes an ingenious storyteller during sexual intercourse with a foreigner, as if impregnated with stories. At least equally remarkably, she is only sixteen years old, and she suffers from an unknown disease. Far from suggesting that the sea defeated the disease, the textual elements discussed hint at Elisewin's fatalistic acceptance of the conditions of uncertainty, mortality, transiency, in the embracement of the relativist existential chance of interpretation, representation, narration. Ultimately, the subtle suggestion is that differences of class, sex, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and disability are relative to the interpretation represented in the relevant discursive narrative. Elisewin's



intersectional and intertextual story overcomes essentialism, in the fatalistic openness to the relativity of existence, beyond the ideal of an absolute essence.

As the narrative circle draws to its close, the last guest leaving the inn is the writer, who eventually dissolves in the multitude of stories told as if blown away by the wind on the sea shore. The novel represents being as, paradoxically though it may appear from a non-contradiction rationalist perspective, becoming, transiency, change, that is, a cycle where mourning rituals are vain. Presented as an exorcism of Adams' loss detracting from his enjoyment of material life, the resentful murder of Ann is contrasted by Elisewin's fatalistic acceptance of transiency and her creative dissent from the normative consent which demonises the sea, her illness, and the condition of mortality. Her aesthetic rite does not mourn, but celebrates the transiency of being.

EMBRACING DEATH IN STORIES

The parables of the perfumer and the sea-teller convey a relativist conception of being, which dissents from the consensual distinction between life as absolute essence and death as absence. In the relativity of perceptions and perspectives, being is presence, both in the seemingly stable forms of life and in the elusive forms of death, represented by scents and waves. The critical perfumer celebrates being in an orgy of murder, rather than by conserving life, and the creative story-teller worships the murderous sea in ever different stories, instead of joining the revenge of those who regard death as an injustice. The murderous perspectives from *Das Parfum* and *Oceano mare* offer hyperbolic representations, where rites of mourning are transcended. Whether in the creation of powerful perfumes or in the telling of mesmerising stories, creative dissent from the resentful consent of normality overcomes the perception of death as absence precisely through aesthetic rituals where, in contrast to the exorcism entailed by mourning, death is embraced as fate.

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