

**AN ALMOST (ALREADY) FORGOTTEN BOOK? MARTEL, NO
MARVEL!...**

THE HIGH MOUNTAINS OF PORTUGAL BY YANN MARTEL, 2016

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Motto:

"Once our consuming curiosity has been satisfied, we put the book down...and we immediately forget who committed the crime! (...) We have a novel by Agatha Christie - one of the many she wrote - and we ask ourselves: «Have I read this one?»"

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"Peter and Odo do not move for a long time, not for the fear of the rhinoceros, but because they do not want to miss anything they have just seen, as any move could bring about oblivion."

Yann Martel, The High Mountains of Portugal

I found these mottos after writing the first paragraphs of this text, like a reaction to a Facebook comment: "The Great Gatsby", a forgotten book?"

Indeed, speaking in a minimalist way, the title "with oblivion" would be the least in agreement with Fitzgerald's novel. At least until now, when I propose a book that has just appeared translated into Romanian, "The High Mountains of Portugal", which I obviously have just read... A book that, in the editorial hurricane, risks to remain forgotten before being promoted in an appropriate way...

In Martel's non-conformist novel, there is a lot of anti-dogmatic philosophy on Agatha Christie's books ("Gospels of the «absence», the good sister of Oblivion!), closely related to... the true assassins of Jesus Christ! In fact, it is about the speech... of a ghost (or a projection in the mind of a forensic pathologist who had to carry out the autopsy of his own wife!), as you will surprisingly find out, because Yann Martel is full of surprises and provokes the one who comments on it not to reveal it, otherwise it would be like telling a movie to someone just before it starts...

But let us climb the "mountains" of Portugal!

For those who read "The Life of Pi" (or, who saw the movie!), expecting a new Martel "demonstration" was normal! And the literary climbing in the so-called mountains of Portugal (a kind of Dobrogea Mountains in our country) will not disappoint you, although you might say in the end that you wanted something more, as if it had ended too suddenly!

Although... it is a book that (still!) starts hard, like a Ford in 1904, sorry, Renault (I had already forgotten!, I had to go back to that page! But it may have been a 1903 model!) reaches an autopsy where an old lady is sewn inside the corpse (the old husband!) and ends by dating a God of Oblivion (in the form of an extinct rhino, the Iberian rhinoceros, disappeared in 1600!), accompanied by Death, Death which is one of the main characters!

Actually, there are three parts, "Homeless", "Towards Home" and "Home"... Three different time periods (1904, 1939, 1981-1983), different characters, if we do not refer to the time of a diary belonging to a priest in the seventeenth century, discovered by Tomás (the character in the first part, Martel's characters being themselves superheroes, but not Marvel!), but you will see that there are some more or less mysterious ties, which, beyond any metaphysics of history and oblivion, will bring them all together. In fact, it will bring us all together, those who will be involved in the existence and oblivion of the book!

And maybe we will all be tempted somehow, as a protest towards the destiny, let's go back (or start reading the books from the end to the beginning), as it happens to Tomás in the first part, to Rafael in the second part, or to some villagers from Tuizelo, a key locality in the construction of the story (in the photos they look like a Romanian village), in the third part, when they were attending a funeral... It is a choice that reminds us of Calvino's "The Baron of the Trees" (I was about to write Aldani!)... But, better, God forbid!

Tomás loses his girlfriend and child after an epidemic, causes the loss of Rafael and Maria's daughter (the main characters in the second part, besides the doctor and his wife), Peter also "loses" his child and niece, but especially his wife (literally, killed by cancer) in the third part, but he will find a friend from the primates' world, Odo the chimpanzee and especially the home of his ancestors when he "returns" from Canada to Portugal, somewhat irrationally, leaving a quite important political career...

Ultimately, it is a book on Love (Love as a house: "with many rooms") and about Death, about a certain way of being near the Sacred, relating to existence, evolutionism, alienation (as Ursula K. Le Guin mentioned somewhere, referring to self-alienation!), even assuming in another way... the new original sin! The discourse I was referring to above says: "No wonder the rudimentary spirits believe that Jews killed Jesus - it is more available, more concrete. But in the theological reality, the Anonymous was the one who killed Jesus of Nazareth. And who is this Anonymous? (...) The Anonymous is you, it is me, it is us all. We killed Jesus of Nazareth. We are the crowd. We are the Anonymous. It is not the Jews' guilt that pass through history, but our guilt, it belongs to all of us. But how quickly we forget about it! We do not really like guilt, right? "

The ghost - character continues a few pages later: "We are all living in a detective novel and we are its victims. The only modern literary genre evolving into the same high moral register like the Gospels is the detective novel, which is considered a minor genre. If we overlap Agatha Christie's novels over the Gospels and put them into light, we will observe correspondences and congruencies, concordances and equivalences. We will discover common patterns and narrative similarities. They are maps of the same city, parables of the same existence.

The same moral clarity irradiates from them. This explains why Agatha Christie is the most popular author in the history of the world. She gives rise to an equally great interest and her books benefit from a circulation which is as large as that of the Bible, because it is a modern apostle, a female one - it was high time, after two thousand years when men have told only nonsense. And this new apostle (note A.G.S.: the discussion takes place in 1939!) answers the same questions that Jesus answered: what do we do with death? That's because in the detective novels the crime is always elucidated at the end and the mystery is completely unravelled. We must do the same thing with the death of our lives: decipher it, give it a meaning, put it in a context, no matter how difficult it is for us."

Martel does the same, in a way, as he urges his character: he tries to decipher what impact death had on his other characters! Tomás, after the loss of his dear beings, tries to look for a meaning, by deciphering a mysterious passage from the old diary of the father called by no means accidentally Ulisses, which refers to an

equally mysterious object about which we find out (together with Tomás) that it would be a crucifix that has a...chimpanzee as a crucified "being"! It is a sort of...evolutionist putting in the abyss, "something that would have shaken Christianity from the foundations". He decides to look for the artifact in the High Mountains, with the help of his uncle's car, it takes him ten days to get there (in 1981, Peter arrives in ten hours), it is an initiatic journey, he loses his mind after realizing he killed a child in a car accident ("Deus ex machina"?) and he especially has the revelation of the chimpanzee representation of divine humanity: "She is crying like a child, gasping and sobbing, her face full of tears. We are animals subject to hazard. This is what we are and we have no one but ourselves, no one else - there is no superior relationship. Long before Darwin, a priest who was lucid in his madness, met four chimpanzees on an African island forgotten by God and discovered a terrible truth: we are elevated monkeys, not fallen angels. Tomás feels that loneliness is suffocating him."

We know too well what kind of loneliness it is, one that begs for the miracle. The writer leaves Tomas in a broken or almost destroyed, disfigured car, (well, Renault, pardon our frivolity!), I do not remember whether we will meet him again, in a certain sense...

Martel takes us a short time before the outbreak of the World War II, in the night between 1938 and 1939, when the head of the Bragança Pathological Anatomy Department (he, a practising Christian!), more specifically from San Francisco Hospital, he gets some visits, not just like Scrooge...

His wife, Maria Luisa Motaal Lozora and a little later, Maria Dores Passos Castro, an old lady from the countryside, more precisely from the already mentioned Tuizelo, an old woman who came with her husband's corpse in a suitcase! Yes, Martel has humor, even in critical situations! An old woman who asks the doctor for her husband's autopsy on New Year's Eve! What can be found in a man will surprise you in a magical and realistic way! Among other things, "in Raphael Castro's chest and abdomen, a chimpanzee rests and, clinging to its protective paws, a small and brown bear cub."

And I almost stop here, repeating that there are many surprises for the patient reader, adding just another consistent quote from what Maria Luisa tells her husband, giving the writer, the storyteller what belongs to him (and what is the story without characters?):

"I think that, once again, Jesus tries to do us good. A story is like a wedding, where we, the listeners, are the groom who looks at the bride going to the altar. Together, in an act of imaginary union, we make the story be born. This act totally

involves us, just like any wedding, and just as no wedding resembles altogether, each of us interprets the story in his own way, understands it in his own way.

A story questions us exactly the way God questions us as individuals - «and we like it». Stories do good to the human mind. Jesus walked on earth with the calm conviction that he would stay next to us and we would stay next to him as long as he could impress us with his stories, as long as he would leave a mark upon our amazing imagination. And that is why he did not come upon us rushing his horse, but gently riding on a story. (...) We must abandon this reductionist search of a historic Jesus. We will not find him, as it was not there - and not «like this» - that he chose to make himself known. Jesus told stories and lived on by stories. Our faith is the belief in his story and beyond this belief-story there is nothing much. The word of the Lord is a story and the story is the word of the Lord."

Which reminds us that, in a way, God tells each and every one of us, but for each of us he has a different ending, only for some of us the one with "live ever after" and so on.

At first was the Story...

Translated by Alina Beatrice Cheșcă