

The Subject: freedom

“The modern world... increasingly abounds with references to a Subject. That Subject is freedom, and the criterion of the good is the individual’s ability to control his or her actions and situation, to see and experience modes of behaviour as components in a personal life history, to see himself or herself as an actor. *The Subject is an individual’s will to act and to be recognised as an actor*” [Alain Touraine, *Critique of Modernity*. Basil Blackwell Inc., Cambridge Massachusetts, USA. 1995, 207.]

Alain Touraine’s statement rests on the idea of the individual as a construct that emerged in the Renaissance, in a concept first put forward by Burckhardt as early as 1860 and developed by Greenblatt and other thinkers into what John Martin has described as “a site onto which broader institutional and political forces are inscribed” [Martin, in Whitlock, b2000, 6]. Yet Touraine sees the individual as the trigger to a bipolar modernity he attributes with having “two faces... [that] gaze at one another: *rationalisation* and *subjectivation*” [Touraine, 1995, 205]. I would like to examine the dual torque implied in this conflicting influence on the individual’s lust for freedom and self-perception as a free agent, or “actor”. In a society such as Spain, newly democratised, historically and culturally aligned to a certain extent with the Maghreb yet aspiring to a place within the European West, this conflict has interesting connotations in terms of how diverse Others negotiate the ideal of the Subject “freedom”. I will compare *Industrias y andanzas de Alfanbui* by Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio and “Ahlán” by Jerónimo López Mozo with briefer reference to *El carrer de les camèlies* by Mercè Rodoreda and “La orilla rica”, by Encarna de las Heras.

In 1860 Burckhardt formulated his original statement with regard to the Renaissance in Italy:

“Man [sic] was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation – only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man [sic] became a spiritual *individual*, and recognised himself as such.” [Burckhardt, 1990 (1860), 98]

Although fiercely debated since – not least the circumstance that *woman* would have to wait virtually half a millennium longer to tear off a similar emancipatory veil – his words refer to a distinctly Western cult that valued original creation and individual self-consciousness. This formed the dominant feature of the rise of humanist thought and separation from feudalism that would come to constitute our perception of modernity. The *rationalisation* – especially the development of empirical thought during the Enlightenment – and the *subjectivation* – a key feature of many aesthetic movements – come into being simultaneously, according to Touraine, in a complimentary relationship, like the Renaissance and the Reformation: “Man was certainly part of nature and the object of positive knowledge, but he was also a subject and a subjectivity. The divine logos that

haunts the pre-modern worldview was replaced by the impersonality of scientific laws, but also – and simultaneously – by the I of the Subject” [Touraine, 1995, 206].

In the Spanish situation, these “two faces” were present on both sides of the political divide: the *subjective* element of Romantic fascist thought utilised heroic myth and Marian symbolism combined with its pragmatic objective of reinstating a neo-feudal society like that imposed by the *latifundista* landowners in the thirties, in which a chosen few could reap the labour of the masses. On the left, such *rationalization* was ideally harnessed to organise production so as to benefit the largest number of people possible while the *subjective* could be indulged in numerous ways such as the freedom to create or participate in society according to an individual’s free choice, or the burgeoning of individual initiatives.

Attempting to situate some of the characters from the chosen works in these terms raises questions: what world does Alfanhuí inhabit and how can he move so freely within it? Can Larbi and Kawtar participate in this cult of the individual? In what sphere do they exist? And what is the impulse that fuels Cecília’s quest? To say they are all simply searching for freedom ignores the socio-political fabric they form part of and within which the concept of freedom itself should be analysed.

Industrias y andanzas de Alfanhuí, a pastiche of picaresque, fairy tale, romance, spaghetti western and *Commedia dell’Arte*, constitutes a coded critique of the Franco regime. One of the clearest features that marks this novel out from the socio-realist novels of the nineteen-fifties is its fantastical ambience and the almost dreamlike freedom with which its protagonist can move through his world. Seemingly effortlessly, Alfanhuí bypasses formal education, the need to work, or have money – even the need to eat. The novel simply does not deal with these things. Yet to make this point is to judge his character in terms of realist notions as if dealing with another product of the same contemporary period. Instead, Alfanhuí operates within a kind of moral reality, obeying the rules of a certain moral code. In the first part of the novel, he learns, alone and in apprenticeship to his master, what is good, which constitutes a reflection of ideal Republican values. Alfanhuí’s education is based on observation and experimentation, similar to the curriculum proposed by anarchist Ferrer i Guardia’s rationalist and secular *escuela moderna* of several decades earlier. It is this innate moral precept that drives him into conflict with Don Zana, revealing the lack of any apparent realist motivation to spark the showdown [pp. 133-36]. It is useful to recall how *rationalisation* and *subjectivation* simultaneously operate within the construct of the individual, and on both sides of the political divide. Touraine says: “The idea that the subject is an ethical principle is a challenge to both the idea that reason should control the passions, which is a constant from Plato to the ‘rational choice’ ideologues, and to the idea that the good means performing one’s social duties” [Touraine, 1995, 211].

Alfanhuí, as the book’s hero at the plot climax, is performing a moral challenge to fascism on two counts. First, by carrying out a ‘reasonless’ attack on Don Zana, he is challenging the classical logos of Plato’s chariot, the idea that reason, the charioteer, should control the two horses of spirit and appetites, and drive them by his willpower along the straight and narrow. Second, although ruled by his passions, there is a sense that he is following a moral precept, acting out his individualism by “performing one’s social duties”, that he is performing the good. Yet this moral imperative is anarchistic, clearly going against the grain of Francoist conservatism. In this sense, at

a deeper level than any symbolist features of the book, Sánchez Ferlosio profoundly criticises the ruling ideology through his protagonist's "will to act and to be recognised as an actor" [ibid, 207].

Alfanhuí's character is defined by this "will to act", combined with a falsely childlike air of innocence. Yet he digs into and questions aspects of his surrealist world, such as his symbolic foray into the abandoned house [p. 123-127] where he uncovers Spain's history, buried by the Franco regime. The house, typically Spanish, of a single storey around a patio, encloses a graveyard of "carros viejos y medios carros y ruedas sueltas y ejes y llantas" ["old carts and half-carts and single wheels and axles and tyres", p. 123] as well as a disused carpenter's bench – symbols for the death of progress in Spain. The house is enclosed in a thick tangle of briars, through which Alfanhuí must climb, like the prince in *Sleeping Beauty* in his attempt to reawaken Spain. "Entonces vio que debajo de él no había más que ramas y ramas y un vacío oscuro" [124]. Francoist Spain has rewritten history and left only this impenetrable entanglement of branches (storylines) filling the now-dark vacuum of its past. The mansion's interior is all white with gold trim, "Todo era blanco y oscuro" ["It was all white and dark." p. 125], suggesting the shutters have been pulled to on Spain's former seventeenth-century greatness. Room by room, he travels back through Spain's history. In the first room, he finds a mirror and candelabras, two symbols of an important nineteenth-century artistic debate, mimeticism versus enlightenment: should art simply reflect life or somehow attempt to illuminate it, to educate the viewer or reader? In the next room, a faded rose on the floor, symbol of the Spanish Workers' Socialist Party (PSOE), suggests the dried blood of Spanish workers and also the death of the romantic ideal of a workers' utopia. The worm-eaten work by Abbé Lazzaro Spallanzani, an eighteenth-century Italian physiologist, and forerunner to Pasteur, comments on the state of Republican progress, built on Enlightenment advances. It reflects the way the Regime has destroyed anything to do with progressive education. We are told that, had they not been burned in his Master's house [the Republic], these works would have been bequeathed to Alfanhuí [here representing Spain's youth and the future]. Finally he enters a room containing a white clavichord. It has been colonised by bees and appears to be made of gold. This is a clear reference to Spain's seventeenth-century colonial grandeur. Alfanhuí (and Sánchez Ferlosio) appear to see this industrious activity in a positive light. It is worth remembering that at the time this novel was written, the concept of colonisation was still free of the values attributed to it by Edward Said, so this image represents the cultural riches that have been lost, destroyed or enclosed by the regime. In all of this, Alfanhuí represents an active agent, the Subject, whose character, moving within his own surrealist world, is defined by his "will to act and to be recognised as an actor". The Subject freedom is defined subversively as the desire to undermine the repressive hegemonic apparatus of the Franco regime.

Although the Arabic world experienced its own Renaissance while Europe languished in the supposed "dark ages", this did not result in the same revolution of originality and individualism. The Moroccan societies depicted in "Ahlán" and "La orilla rica" appear as subsistence feudal communities. Both de las Heras and López Mozo show the highly politicised relationship of Spain to Morocco, of Europe to Africa: a right-wing, rationalist pragmatism disguised within subjectivist patriotic fervour. The *primer prólogo* in "Ahlán" presents the European right wing's overt policy of closing the borders between Africa and Europe, making of Europe a *fortaleza* [fortress, 22], and opting for the model of Greek Hercules, who separated the two landmasses, over Jewish Moses, who created pathways through the seas. Yet Kitty Calavita reveals that such assertions are a smokescreen. The right is more interested in maintaining a cheap, dependable supply of labour

without having to outlay expenses to safeguard workers' health or wellbeing. The same concerns are operating as existed under Franco, a direct result of the regime's attempt to create a feudal society that would support the wealth of an elite. Such expendable, feudal labour, instead of coming from Andalusia and the poorer regions within Spain, must now come from outside Europe and will be employed on low-return jobs in which Spanish workers are no longer interested. Calavita comments:

“...they fill critical niches in the economy – usually those that have been vacated by Spanish workers... immigrants are concentrated in agriculture (33 %), construction (15 %), domestic service (15 %) and the tourism industry (11 %)... ...immigrants in Spain provide not just a supplemental workforce, but a particular kind of workforce, i.e. one that will do the jobs, and under conditions, that local workers no longer accept despite double-digit unemployment.” [Calavita, c2005, 68]

So while the official (right-wing) European line advocates border closure, it coexists with a pragmatic laxity of border control that allows illegal workers to enter Europe, thereby ensuring a continuous supply of low-cost, expendable labour that will guarantee the European lifestyle within acceptable production costs. In this context, Mimun Unacer plays the part of feudal overseer, safeguarding the interests of his European overlords. While not in any sense in the pay of the European establishment, he still ensures European quotas in illegal labour are met to satisfy his own greed. It is worth comparing the contrasting perspective on European immigration presented in “La orilla rica” and “Ahlán” from a Moroccan point of view. While Moroccan society in both plays is portrayed as a feudal society, in “La orilla rica”, emigration to Europe represents the chance of the individual to achieve freedom, a better life and an escape from the slavery of a subsistence existence. However, “Ahlán” foregrounds this dream with its two prologues, the one showing the official European view, the other graphically illustrating the very real probable result of any emigration attempt: death by drowning. In its structure*, “Ahlán” recalls a Greek tragedy with the introduction of the Tiresias-like figure of Nachib in the second prologue foregrounding its major themes. In Scene I, Larbi, the hero, appears centre stage. Like the hero of Greek tragedy, he embodies a single fatal flaw: in this instance, his inability to kill, or use violence to achieve his ends. Yet it is precisely this fact, his abhorrence of violence, that makes him unworthy of playing the classical, brave hero, able to defeat endless, conveniently dehumanised foes to win his damsel. The source of his humanity – his *subjective* side – is dominant over the cold, *rational* strategy of Jadicha and her other sons, making him a truly heroic individual.

Larbi, a Moroccan individual chasing his dream of a better life, framed in a western context, signifies the epitome of the Renaissance individual moving from identification within a corporate body to the self-realisation of his own identity. As Virtudes Serrano states:

“Poco a poco, el joven marroquí deja de ser un elemento del engranaje del tema de la denuncia social para cobrar vida propia; pasa de ser el personaje indocumentado, al que le ocurren las cosas, para cobrar aliento propio con el que poder mostrar su horror interior... A partir [del muerte de Paisa] se individualiza su personalidad, sus reacciones tienen nombre propio, porque el receptor ha de comprender que el otro también posee individualidad.” [Serrano, in López Mozo, 1997, 12]

* Its twenty-one scenes, two prologues and one epilogue equal the twenty-four chapters of a Homeric epic in number.

In his penultimate monologue, Larbi describes two versions of the future in his past. In the first, he returns to Morocco, strangles his mother – shown as a Mother Courage figure who sends her children to their deaths – and kills Mimun Unacer to avenge his brothers' supposed deaths. It is his way of freeing himself from his mother's scorn and his own feelings of inadequacy at not achieving the western dream, not having been strong enough to kill Nachib, or avenge Paisa. Yet, he is unable to escape fully from his group demographic, as Hans realises, either to return, or achieve his dream of a legitimate life in Europe. Larbi has gained too much humanity, which cements his inability to act. In terms of the Adlerian psychology of birth order characteristics, he constitutes the “dethroned son”, incapacitated for action by his younger siblings, with clear feelings of inferiority. Hans answers Nachib's Tiresias-like sermon at the play's start. He removes blame from Larbi's mother, who is, after all, only interested in a better future for her sons: “Somos animales viajeros, nómadas” [“We are travelling animals, nomads.” 201]. Yet he throws up a challenge to Larbi: “...uno no es de donde nace, sino de donde está en cada momento” [“One is not from where one was born, but from where one is at any time.” *ibid*]. It is an attempt to force Larbi to take responsibility for who and where he is, which Larbi only partially accepts. By throwing his (possible) child out of the window, he asserts his right to remain a foreigner, a condition that forms a major part of his new identity. By accepting this child as his, he would establish roots in Spain, precluding the possibility of his return to Morocco, condemning himself to die on Spanish soil. It is his refusal to accept that he has now established a life in Barcelona, because the reality of this life – less and yet more – as life always is, is so different from his dream. The final question is whether Jadicha and her children are individuals, following their dream to migrate, an undefined dream of “freedom”; or whether, as Hans suggests, they are just animals needing to fulfil some genetic migration pattern. As outside Others, they can only fit imperfectly into the western mould of the individual. In either case, like the play's Spanish characters, they can be said to correspond to Martin's definition of “a site onto which broader institutional and political forces are inscribed” [Martin, in Whitlock, 2000, 6].

The situation of the women protagonists in *El carrer de les camèlies* and “La orilla rica” can likewise be analysed according to their aspiration to the Subject freedom. The specific nature of Cecília's otherness in her own land, as a woman, as Catalan, as a streetwalker, and her desire for emancipation, bears comparison to Kawtar's determination to reach *la orilla rica*. The limited movement Kawtar is permitted in this feudal, religiously dominated Moroccan society is similar to the Catholic patriarchy Cecília must face. Yet Kawtar does not even have available the arduous channel of becoming a sexual Other as a dubious road to freedom while she remains in Morocco. Therefore, her fight to leave *la orilla pobre* is her only hope of emancipation as an individual. Cecília achieves her “freedom” at the cost of marginalising her subjective self, reconstructing her identity on a rational plan designed to take advantage of men's sexual needs. She achieves emancipation: a bourgeois identity with a certain degree of respectability. However, she is ever after marked by the road she has travelled. It forms part of her identity in the world and marks her with a certain stigma, a figurative prostitute's cross. Conversely, her greater humanity is built on this.

Kawtar does not reach this point as she is never able to live in Spain, the cyclical nature of the narrative carries her back. She must confront the same question as Larbi: “¿Y si todavía estuviéramos en Marruecos, si nunca hubiéramos cruzado la frontera?” [“And if we were still in Morocco, if we had

never crossed the border?” López Mozo, 1997, 132] alongside the realisation that “*No nos quieren, no nos quieren,*” [“They don’t want us, they do not want us,” de las Heras, 1994, 49]. Their greatest fear is that they have not arrived anywhere, that they have returned to the same place, or have never left. In the new land, identity is key. While their survival is dependent on hiding their identity, they are at once visually marked as foreigners, excluded from the European project, and their group identity as the Other is reinforced. The greater the horror these protagonists live through, the stronger the link to their own humanity. This is also true of *Alfanhuí*: his confrontation with and “assassination” of Don Zana produces a horror in him that sends him into exile. Yet it is this very awareness of his own bloodlust that completes his education and reconciles a deeper sense of his own humanity within him.

The journey towards identity, for all these protagonists, becomes a double-faced mask, capable of betraying the wearer as easily as it can provide the yearned-for security. The desire for betterment, whether of the material situation of their personal lives, or the liberation of thought from oppression, or a combination of these, throws them into horrifyingly new and challenging situations while experiencing the despair of losing any previous security. Yet it is their determination to act, to seek out a different future and move through the horrors of alienation and isolation, that enables them to balance the two opposing sides of the mask of their identity – the rational and the subjective – regardless of whether they succeed or fail in their quest for that Protean Subject, freedom.

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