**'The novel is ethnography': *Shantaram*, by Gregory David Roberts**

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Prompted by criticisms of anthropology's role and responsibility in European colonialism, and the doubts about accuracy of representation in a male-centered discipline coming from feminist anthropology, anthropology went through a reflexive turn in the 1970's. Fruit of this turn were the 'Writing Culture' debates surrounding issues of representation, objectivity and power relations—dominance and inequality—which brought the ethnographer and ethnographic texts under the spotlight: they were to be "looked at" rather than merely "looked through" (Geertz, 1988:138). The boundaries that were believed to be clear cut between objectivity and subjectivity, truth and fiction and science and literature, collapsed. With the *prise de conscience* that a True representation of the Other by objective means was merely an illusion, anthropologists started experimenting with style and form. They turned to Literature in search of a different and new way of better representing—or indeed evoking—cultural realities. The license that novels gave to include emotions and personal value judgments in the work of the anthropologists was regarded by some as necessary as well as liberating and fully embraced with the rise of the ethnographic novel in the field.

Leaving objectivity hypocrisy aside, ethnographers felt they could better fulfill their task of narrating social realities. Together with this experimentation, a rising anthropological interest in literature felt natural to some. Poyatos suggested 'literary anthropology', a practice of looking at literature as being a valuable resource for anthropological data, since a text is always produced in context, and therefore the 'nonverbal communication' could reflect 'cultural codes' of interest to anthropologists (1988:129). The anthropological approach to literature is still underdeveloped, yet there is an increasing awareness of connection between anthropological and literary endeavors, as well as increasing experimentation in how anthropologists can engage with literature, how to read literature anthropologically. The questions surround, *inter alia*, where the boundaries between ethnography and the novel lie, whether these

indeed exist and whether there is any fruitfulness in making these two meet. In order to tackle these questions, the statement 'the novel is ethnography' will be discussed with reference to the novel *Shantaram* written by Gregory David Roberts (2003).

Before reaching the beginning of the novel, the reader stumbles across a first page revealing the praises the work has received. One reads:

"If someone asked me what the book was about, I would have to say everything, everything in the world" -Pat Conroy

*Shantaram* is based on the life-story of the author, Gregory David Roberts. In its driest form, it can be said the plot is about Lin's story—representing the author—and how after escaping prison in Australia he ends up in Bombay, India, which slowly becomes his home. The plot and work has however, much more to it.

Agreeably with a praise on the cover, *Shantaram* does have:

'.....the grit and pace of a thriller' - Daily Telegraph

Lin, introduces himself as "a revolutionary who lost his ideals in heroin, a philosopher who lost his integrity in crime, and a poet who lost his soul in a maximum-security prison" (2003:3), painting a messy and contradictory imagine of himself. This self-inconsistency is further transmitted throughout the novel with the character's actions. The open and honest presentation of an individual's manifoldness is, arguably, what makes the novel capable of being about "everything in the world" and having the grit mentioned.

It is this capacity that literature has of transmitting the messiness of human life that Rapport (1994) believes necessary in the anthropological agenda. He argues that the human condition is the tension between the "orderly and formal on one hand, and the gratuitous, random and free on the other" (Rapport, 2005:1) and the oscillation between these two realms. Reality is random, chaotic, and gratuitous; we try insistently

to order, define and shape it as to give it meaning (*ibid*:2), creating personal realities and self-narratives. Rapport argues that, in anthropology, a discourse between 'diversitarianism of *ethos*' and 'universalism of *anthropos*' has been mainly focused on the former (2007:257) and reclaims social scientists to bring to center stage the global individual: Everyone. By acknowledging every human as an individual meaning-maker of their own life-story narrative, culture becomes a "vehicle of intersubjectivity" (*ibid:*263). Devereux suggests an ergodic hypothesis: "each man is a complete specimen of Man and if one studies him on all levels, his total behavior is a complete repertoire of human behavior" (1978:178). As an individual will only ever truly know oneself, introspection seems to be the means through which one comes to know the human condition. If individual nature is human nature, then "by looking inward it is possible to imagine what being any other human being might be like" (2007:264). Social realities come to being the externalization of individual's introspection as the latter dictates actions of the agent-in-the-world. Acknowledging this, a social environment becomes a multiplicity and the individual becomes the only one who is looked at.

Writing, Rapport (1994) posits, is a tool used to create order in one's life, a time and space to pause from the flow of life, distance oneself from experience, closer to a meta-experience, and reflect. The novel and the ethnography are therefore corresponding enterprises, analogous writing exercises. If by means of writing an individual tries to order one's life, and every individual is constantly creating a self-narrative (a reality), and the human condition is the oscillation between the orderly and the chaotic, writing becomes a universal 'mode of thought' rather than merely a production of texts (Rapport 1994:19).

Individuals are universal writers of selves and worlds, whether they make novels or other texts, whether they keep this privately in their minds, or whether they choose to share through speech.

This essay will thus attempt to join Rapport's efforts to work towards a "kind of post-cultural constitutionalism" (Rapport, 2005: 4), shifting the focus from culture to the individual narrative-creator, suggesting a different way of reading literature

anthropologically. According to Poyatos (1988), it would be possible to read *Shantaram* as a resource for ethnographic information about the time and place when the author wrote, about India and about, for instance, what living in the slums is all about. Instead, I believe that *Shantaram* is a hybrid between a novel, an autobiography and an ethnography, while its para-text calls for an anthropological analysis of the Human and that eschewing Rapport's that endeavor would be constraining.

The method I will be using is one that takes the form of a bricolage, a type of 'listing' and traveling in and out of the book, acknowledging my own arbitrary selection of information, and trying to understand *Shantaram* as the author's external manufacturing—and representation—of his introspection and life-story, both *through* and *with* the book itself.

On the front page of an Australian newspaper, one reads the 'objective' version of the author's escape from prison:

"*Two prisoners who police say are dangerous jumped to freedom from the wall near the main gate of Pentridge yesterday... the men – both self-admitted drug addicts – climbed down a power cord and jogged away from the jail dressed in football jumpers [...] Gregory John Peter Smith, 28, had been working unsupervised doing concreting outside B division where they were quartered [...] Smith and Jolly walked along the roof to the front wall, dropped a power cord over it, and climbed to freedom, only 15 meters from the main gate [...] Police said [...] Smith, serving a total of 23 years, had 'nothing to lose by resorting to violence to resist capture' [...] Smith pleaded guilty at Criminal Court in June 1978, to 24 charges of armed robbery netting $32, 620 [...] court was told that Smith was a brilliant university student who became a heroin addict [...] Smith is described as 178 centimeters tall of medium build.*"

-Conroy (15 December 1989), *The Age Newspaper*

Gregory David Roberts presents the readers of *Shantaram* with his own narrative about this episode;

"*I escaped from prison in broad daylight, as they say, at one o'clock in the afternoon, over the front wall and between two gun-towers [...] I had an extension cord with me [...] we thought we were finished. We heard him laugh and talk on in a relaxed, conversational tone, it was okay. We were safe. [...] The deepest part of that V-shaped trench was a blind spot. [...] I was breathing so hard that I felt dizzy and nauseous. [...] After a few moments, I knew I couldn't do it. Everything, from judicious caution to superstitious terror, screamed at me not to go out there again. And I couldn't. I had to cut the cord. [...] I slammed into the ground, stood, and staggered across the road. I was free."* (Roberts, 2003: 171-178).

Whilst the facts are known, the openness with which the author-narrator presents his feelings evokes in the reader a certain sympathy.

"*Shantaram* is dazzling. More importantly, it offers a lesson... that those we incarcerate are human beings." -Jonathan Carroll, author of W*hite Apples*

The messiness and contradiction here lies in the knowledge that the author-narrator has done something morally wrong, but when presented openly with his feelings, something resonates within us, and we have no choice but to feel sympathetic. The hopes are with the character's success, whereas the feelings evoked by the newspaper article are at most of uneasiness. *Shantaram* is therefore not used by the author to try to justify his past, which is indeed rarely mentioned throughout the novel, but to present a complex image of an individual leading his life. Although the complexity spans over several characters and themes in the novel, the complexity surrounding the author-narrator's identity will take center stage in the following.

Identity, or the search for one, is a pillar theme in *Shantaram*, as when on the run after escaping from prison one's real identity is first and foremost hidden. When the author is presented as the thief—a dangerous man—on the news, his legal name Gregory John Peter Smith is used. However, the author signs his work as Gregory David

Roberts. Within the novel, the main character is also referred to with two names: Lindsay and Shantaram. The main character forges his passport to get into India and uses Lindsay on the passport, and therefore also to introduce himself to the first person he meets in Bombay, a guide named Prabaker. This identity is therefore the cover of a thief and fugitive. On the other hand, Shantaram is a Maharastrian name meaning 'man of peace' that Prabaker (one of the main characters) gives him after inviting Lin to his village, where they stay for three months. These two identities seem to be in opposition to each other, but cohabit within the same individual who oscillates between the two. After receiving his new name and returning from Prabaker's village, Lin gets robbed and finds himself with nothing left. Following this, he moves to a slum in Bombay where he becomes, by accident, the slum's doctor, helping firstly with every day problems and then combating a cholera epidemic: like this, embodying his new identity. On the other hand, he uses his being a white man to work in the drug trade, taking advantage of tourists and later working for the mafia, becoming involved in lots of beatings, stabbings and even wars. On the cover of the novel, the name *Shantaram* is presented with big letters, and closely under it, the name Gregory David Roberts is exhibited. One might assume a link between Shantaram and Gregory David Roberts, and Lin with Gregory John Peter Smith. Perhaps the author, by writing the novel and presenting these two selves, is trying to create a self and a reality closer to Shantaram, rather than Lin. This intuitive aim is further explained by the author during a speech in which he talks about the reasons behind the book. Here is my transcription of the speech posted on-line (Elmoojps, 2006):

"*I didn't contact those friends that had helped me and who had seen something in me worth saving and helping [and say] 'I am trying to do the right thing, I've changed my life [...] I finished my prison term, I got out and I didn't contact them to say 'I've been release from prison, I wrote this book' I wanted to have the the book in my hands [...]. And I waited. Eventually, it was published [...] I went to New Zealand [...] There was one friend, we had lived together in a house with 17 people, all artists [...] owned by one man, [who] loved art and helped us financially, spiritually, emotionally. A wonderful man [...] I finally*

*asked, 'how is Peter?' [the owner] 'Peter is gone, he went three months ago'. [...] it suddenly hit me that that was what I wanted to do, I wanted to put this book in his hands, [and say] 'I was worth helping, there was something in me that was worth helping' [....] The 'thing' [the book] itself meant nothing, what I really wanted was to say I love you and thank you for helping me. And I had missed it because I wanted to put the achievement in his hands."*

Although the importance of the book in itself resides more in giving back to loved ones, he does see in *Shantaram* a proof of a change in life, a change in identity aspiring to be closer to Shantaram than Lin.

The duality of the protagonist is also transmitted through the different personalities of the characters Lin is surrounded with. We find him involved with at least three very different groups of people. As mentioned, he becomes very close to Prabaker, who is a poor Indian guide full of good will, great humor and love, who would never do any harm. He also establishes a close relationship with a lot of other slum-dwellers (e.g. Raju, Johnny Cigar, Qasim, Anand, Dr. Hamid) who he represents as being very caring, loving and wise. Parallel to these, Lin is surrounded by important figures of Bombay's underworld activities, such as Khader—the leader—and Abdullah—a mafia killer—as well as other countless characters who do not hesitate in murdering if needed. Prabaker warns Lin:

"'*He is a danger man, Lin [...] This Abdullah fellow. He is very danger man. You better not for any knowing of him. And doings with him are even worsely dangerous also' [...] 'He is...' Prabaker paused, and the struggle was explicit in his gentle, open face. 'He is a killing man, Lin. A murdering fellow. He is killing people for money.'*" (Roberts, 2003: 214).

This arbitrary separation of groups into 'types of people' based on the characters' actions is, however, what the author intends to show as an illusion to the reader,

making a great effort in presenting us with a very human and round picture of the mafia members. They too, are 'good' and 'bad', and oscillate between both realms.

The third group of people ties into another aspect of the author-narrator's search for an identity: the search for a national identity. We find Lin surrounded by a group of expatriates that always meets at Leopold's bar. All of them come from different countries: Karla from Switzerland, Didier Levy from France, Modena from Spain, and Ulla from Germany, amongst others who for different reasons ended up in Bombay and stayed. Through the description of this group, the author-narrator shows the complexity of nationalities and his own search for a country to identify with. Whilst Gregory David Roberts is from Australia, Lin is undercover as a New Zealander and slowly feels a sense of belonging in India. Crucial for this sense-of-home, he learns Maharathi and Hindi, and he manages—with Prabaker's help—to come to terms with the Indian *modus operanti*. Lin is confronted at the beginning of the novel with a lot of situations where his engrained morals and principles do not seem to do him any favor. An example of this is when Lin and Prabaker are involved in a taxi accident at the beginning of the novel, and Prabaker rushes Lin out of there as the other drivers involved in the accident beat the taxi driver and take his unconscious body to the police. The first time Lin experiences this situation he is shocked: "*for him [Prabaker] the incident was like a brawl in a nightclub—commonplace and unremarkable [...] But for me that sudden, savage, bewildering riot, the sight of that driver floating away on a rippling wave of hands, shoulders and heads was a turning point*" (Roberts, 2003:73). However, the second time he experiences the same situation, much later in the novel, the author-narrator consciously throws himself into the crowd: "*I ran into the screaming crowd and began dragging men away from the tight press of bodies. 'Brothers! Brothers! Don't hit! Don't kill!' I shouted in Hindi. For the most part, they allowed me to drag them away from the mob*" (Roberts, 2003: 356). Lin is therefore both Indian and not. The messiness is nicely depicted by the author in the French born character's statement: "*Lin, my body was born in Marseilles, but my heart and my soul were born sixteen years later, in Genova*" (Roberts, 2003: 543).

The character of Lin exemplifies the nature of humankind, oscillating between contradictory realms, in search for an identity, whilst being aware of the fact that the only true identity is found in a multiplicity of identities. *Shantaram* shows how different and contradictory needs, impulses, ideals, even nationalities might cohabit within one person. It can be argued that the novel is an externalization of the author's introspection which enabled the recognition and acceptance of a Reality that is in constant tension and contradictoriness. With Rapport's (1994) idea of 'writing' in mind, my traveling in and out of the novel has allowed me to see Gregory David Roberts as an individual narrative-creator of his own life-story, and revealed the personal function of literature—imaginative and literal— in the author's ongoing reality- creation.

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