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From Water to Dust: A Dehydrating Essay on Erri De Luca[1]

Myriam Swennen Ruthenberg

Until less than a year ago, Erri De Luca's name was associated more frequently with a political past linked to the extra-parliamentary "Lotta Continua" than with his remarkable, hard-to-classify short prose.[2] A bricklayer during the day, a self-taught biblical scholar and astute translator of—and commentator on—the Ancient Hebrew Bible during the evening and early morning hours, Erri De Luca is rapidly becoming somewhat of a phenomenon on the Italian literary scene. His writings are as refreshingly limpid and fluid as his skin is marked and dry. His literal translations from Ancient Hebrew, *Esodo/Nomi* (*Exodus/Names*) and *Giona/Iona* (*Jonah/Iona*)—a translation of *Kohelet* (*Ecclesiastes*) is forthcoming—and his Bible-inspired, thought-provoking reflections in *Una nuvola come tappeto* (*A Cloud for a Carpet*), represent only one aspect of De Luca's artistic range.[3] He is also the awe-inspiring creator of pages pierced by white bolts of lightening, concealing dark coves of memory, such as in *Aceto, arcobaleno* (literally, *Vinegar, Rainbow*). His hand is found resting on that space where the pen makes its first incision on the page in *In alto a sinistra* (*Upper Left*). In *Pianoterra* (*Groundfloor*)[4] his feet sometimes walk the war-ridden soil of Bosnia, where once a month he used to deliver food and medical supplies on behalf of "Caritas Cattolica." De Luca's writings force the reader's gaze inward, and call for reflection. Those who are willing to be "docili," "docile" in its etymological sense of "willing to be instructed," as is De Luca when he writes (*Una nuvola* 9), will at times hurt themselves on the knife that hides beneath the textual surface. At other times they will be rocked by the rhythm of the elements or by the voices that emerge from the volcanic stone of the Neapolitan author's house in the Roman countryside. At all times Erri De Luca moves, unnerves, consoles and touches all five senses.[5] His writings, whether directly or indirectly inspired by the Scriptures, are suspended in the a-temporality and a-spatiality, the "non ora, non qui" ("not now, not here") of universal truth.[6]

What follows are "prove di risposta," attempts to answer—attempts to ask, perhaps—some of the questions provoked by the prose of a man who has read Borges with as much depth as he has

Walser, Mann or Kafka, to name a few, yet claims to know nothing.[7] Like the Book that lies at the base of Erri De Luca's writings, so its fractured, distant reproductions, invite us to question, comment and interpret, rather than explain, define and accept.

"Kedem:" the Hebrew word means "east." It also signifies a beginning, "what comes first" (*Una nuvola* 109 and *Giona* 39 n 73). "Kedem" is where the sun rises, where the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates meet. At the confluence of these two rivers a first civilization was born, and with it emerged the first Universal Book, the Bible, in the first Universal Language, Hebrew. Towering over the fertile valley of Tigris and Euphrates stood Babel. When it crumbled, the pages of the Book shriveled and its Language dissipated in a multitude of tongues. In *Exodus*, De Luca informs us, it is the wind from "kedem" that splits the Red Sea in two and provides a dry passage for the people of Moses (*Giona* 41 n 82 and *Exodus* XIV, 21). That same dry desert wind carries the plague of locusts into Egypt (*Giona* and *Exodus* X, 13), before a forceful west wind blows them into the Red Sea (*Exodus* X, 19). When the Hebrew word for "east" and "what comes first" appears in the Book of Jonah (the prophet who was thrown into the sea and swallowed by a whale), "kedem" is again a desiccating east wind. "Kedem," the east, is associated with both water and "the dry."[8] It is beginning and end.

The theme of liquidity versus aridity runs through the veins of all of De Luca's writings and is particularly dominant in *Giona.* In *Una nuvola*'s episode of Babel the implications of the coexistence of this oxymoric couple are far-reaching for De Luca's views on, and hence use of, the ancient Hebrew language in particular, and his own literary language in general. De Luca's writings make the biblical past and the biblical language resurge in a modern narrative that is both fresh and ancient, liquid and arid, so to speak.

The Book of Jonah is one of the most puzzling biblical stories retold in *Una nuvola* (103-11). In *Giona* the story is also the subject of a remarkable double translation (one a simple, fluent and readable text and one a hyper-literal word-for-word translation accompanied by the Hebrew text). It is preceded by a summary and a commentary of the biblical tale and followed by a reenactment in dialogue format between Jonah and an enigmatic interlocutor named "Aher."

The story of Jonah is worth summarizing. An irate God calls upon Jonah to travel east to Nineveh and "cry out" against the wicked city. Jonah refuses and goes in the opposite direction. At Jaffa he embarks on a ship, but God brings on a great storm that threatens the life of the sailors. Jonah feels responsible and declares his willingness to die; he offers to be thrown overboard, so the waters will calm and the sailors' lives will be saved. This is, indeed, what happens. But

Jonah too is saved when swallowed by a "large fish."[9] After three days and three nights in the fish's stomach, he is spewed onto shore. He proceeds to Nineveh and prophesies its destruction. The fearful city repents, God takes pity on its people and withdraws his vow. Jonah is so dismayed that, while sitting in the shade of a booth, he asks to die. Instead God provides him the shade of a ricinus tree, the leaves of which are eaten overnight by a worm. As the sun rises higher on the horizon, an eastwind dries out the plant completely.[10] Again Jonah asks for death. God's reaction is a rhetorical question: "If you cared about a plant that grew and withered overnight, a plant for which you did not work and that you did not grow yourself, why should I not care about a great city of twenty thousand people and animals as well?"[11]

De Luca's lucid commentary on the Book of Jonah focuses on Jonah's name; it dwells on the implications of the chosen prophet's refusal to obey the will of God; it questions a God who repents for having punished Nineveh, who doubts and retracts his promise; it lingers over the fact that this is the only biblical text ending in a question. I would like to draw attention to Jonah's eastward and westward movements, the displacements between water and "the dry." This last word, in Hebrew "hayabbasha," is, De Luca points out, used in the Scriptures exclusively as an emergence from water: it surfaces in *Genesis* I, 9, when God creates "the dry" from the waters;[12] in *Exodus* XIV, 16, during the crossing of the Red Sea; in *Joshua* IV, 22, when the Israelites pass through the river Jordan; finally, the word "hayabbasha" makes its appearance one more time in the fluid contextual surroundings of the Book of Jonah (*Giona* 26 n 24 and *Esodo* 68 n 190).

When Jonah is first called upon to go eastward to Nineveh, he moves instead in a westward direction, towards the sea, from where he plans his escape. The opposite of "kedem," the west, is associated with water. Instead of constituting his end, the sea's waters conceal his salvation: a "large fish" becomes his protective vessel, until it spews Jonah onto "dry land." The city of Nineveh in the East, in the primordial valley of the Tigris and Euphrates, more precisely "on the intersection of the Tigris and one of its side rivers, the Khoser" (16 and 79), is menaced with extinction. When it repents, a repenting and forgiving God averts the city's fate. In other words, Jonah's destination, Nineveh, a land in "kedem," in the east that is beginning, is threatened to be turned to dust, yet associated with water through the rivers that feed its banks.[13] Furthermore, it is east of the city gates where Jonah seeks solace. It is there where the ricinus tree grows, withers overnight, and is dried by the east wind. Last but not least, the Hebrew names of "Iona" and "Nineveh" are associated with water and "the dry." "Iona," De Luca explains in the introduction to the homonymous book, means "dove," and is the same word that is found

to designate the dove that is released from Noah's ark after the flood. "Nineveh" is called "city of blood", "ir haddamim" (15). But "adom" (blood or red) and "adam" (earth, soil) share the same root in Hebrew. The coexistence of water and "the dry" is more explicitly present in the dialogue staged between Aher and Jonah, following the translation.

> It was beautiful to see the sailors . . . dig a breach in the walls of waves in order to find a haven. They dug with their oars: the book that recounts their adventure takes the verb of bricklayers and places it in the hands of sailors. It is the only time this happens in the Scriptures . . .(76)

Commenting on the book in which he is himself the protagonist and a narrator, Jonah explicitly blends two apparently opposed semantic fields, that of bricklayers and that of sailors, by commenting on their common action expressed by the Hebrew verb, "vayahteru," "and they dug" (*Giona* 28 n. 32). Water and "the dry" both contain each other's opposite.

Life itself bows to this law of amalgamating antitheses. Water is end, but also life, and "dry" is a beginning, but also a parting from life. This false dichotomy is confirmed by the prophet's account of life inside the whale's womb-like cavern as he relates it to Aher:

> Jonah: The waves ceased their banging. All was quiet inside. Under my feet and above me I could hear a slow, strong heartbeat that followed the pace of my own breathing and made me drowsy. I let my body be rocked, and I regressed in time: I was a child on a swing, a baby in a cradle. Even further back in time I was inside a sack of placenta. I heard my mother's heart beat while my bloodstream followed its rhythm (77-78).

Birth is a movement away from water and towards aridity, as the second part of the dialogue confirms:

> The membrane around me became limp. I felt it on top of me as it started pushing me out. KUM KUM KUM.[14] The chamber's heart was beating stronger now. I tried to resist being pushed out of that comforting warmth, the quiet dark and the gentle rocking. Then a loud noise, dry air, a blinding light outside hit my face. Covered with algae, I made my first steps (79).

Through the semantic connotations of Jonah's name and actions, and those of Nineveh's name and location, the thematic matrix of liquidity versus aridity has thus far been expressed horizontally. It is, however, possible to tilt the east-west line and retell the story vertically: Babel, it appears, does just that. Indeed, in *Una nuvola,* the very image of the tower of Babel as a "dry" construction in the "wet," fertile valley of Tigris and Euphrates presents the composites of begin-

ning/end, water/"the dry," "kedem"/west in much the same way as does the Book of Jonah.[15]

Erri De Luca's account of Babel, summarized, is as follows (I paraphrase): at the moment of the confusion of tongues, a few bricklayers stay behind on top of the tower. Beneath them, to the east, flow the rivers that gave life to them and to generations before them, while to the west they can make out the Red Sea. The only language they know is that which their ancestors spoke, ever since the construction of Babel began: "Their language," writes De Luca, "had been reduced to the jargon of bricklayers"(16). Their idiom "si era asciugata," it had dried out just like the mortar of their trade under the baking sun. One of them initiates the descent. As he makes his way down, he discerns in front of him the sun-bleached, dried bones of his ancestors. All around him the walls are cracking, small crevices are widening, the stones are coming lose from the mortar. "While he was forgetting who and where he was, so much was he concentrating on the downward spiraling return, he happened to see in a dream the valley and its future" (16). He saw the confusion around him, the empty tower, people whispering to each other, trying to communicate. "He heard the murmur of voices that had become as incomprehensible as the Tigris and the Euphrates" (16-17). People were aimlessly wandering around, living in a universal memory loss. "They carried with them a language that had just barely sprouted, the gift of a language that wanted to be elaborated, written and sung." De Luca concludes: "There was a tower in Shin-Ar, it was demolished in Babel. When we say 'tower of Babel', we confuse a structure with the name of its collapse; we mistake a ship for the tempest that sinks it" (18-19).

As Babel, a monument to uniformity, is reduced to rubble and dust, uniformity dissipates into multiplicity. The descent of Babel constitutes the inevitable attempt to recuperate the uniform past. The future lies behind him, the past in front: the bricklayer's future is a return to "what comes first," to the valley where the seed can sprout in the fertile womb that is the land in "kedem." The collapse of Babel was necessary, for on top of the tower, where the dry air had desiccated the flesh of its builders, and the walls cracked under the dry heat, language too had parched. Nothing could be born from that sterility, neither naturally nor linguistically. It was imperative to move forward in a downward spiral, to where that structure was initiated, before its builders joined in a general amnesia. As De Luca explains: "the dispersion that occurred was providential, because the human race had been reduced to a kind of termitary . . . it had ceased to innovate. The collapse of Babel was inevitable, not so much as punishment, but to allow the human race to be reborn from dust" (*Prove di risposta* 34).

It is not surprising that in the final image of the short, yet most significant chapter on Babel, the biblical tower should be associated

with water: the concluding simile that compares the confusion between the structure of Babel and its collapse, to the structure of a ship and the tempest that sinks it, sustains the semantic pairing of liquidity and aridity so central to De Luca's work.

Erri De Luca's account of Babel inevitably entangles us in the linguistic ramifications of his biblical exegetic discourse. The author's fascination with the ancient Hebrew language and its written repository, the Bible, extends into his own narrative, through ancient Hebrew's formal characteristics. Ancient Hebrew was originally written without visible vowels;[16] a word's meaning changed according to the vowels pronounced to fill the interconsonantic spaces. Hence the Hebrew word for the first man, Adam, contains the same consonants as the related Hebrew words for blood, soil or the color red. For De Luca, with his fascination for all things "first," the first meaning of the words of the first Universal Language as they are found in the first Universal Book constitutes an irresistible challenge.[17] It is to that Language and that Book that the builders of Babel must return in order to find their point of reference: Babel can be read as an attempt to regress to that linguistic stage where the voids between consonants are not yet filled. As such, language can be reborn, rehydrating itself, yet with the knowledge that in the process it will desiccate. Applying this reasoning to the sacred text of the Bible, De Luca writes:

> I have often thought, not without nostalgia, that generation after generation passed this same book on, but read less and less in it, as though one finger, running over only one copy, slowly erased its words. A gentle touch: the sum of many caresses is an abrasion (Aceto, arcobaleno 72).

Let us now proceed towards the beginning and return our focus to the book of Jonah, this time from a formal, linguistic perspective. After an introduction in which De Luca summarizes the story of the rebellious prophet, the translation is followed by the Hebrew text, displayed with the letters going from right to left—Hebrew is written from right to left—and with a second, this time word-for-word Italian translation printed from right to left underneath the Hebrew words. Yet, the pages are being ordered from left to right and turned, like an ordinary Italian text, from right to left. The Hebrew/Italian text is, in turn, followed by a Leopardian "operetta morale" sort of dialogue between Jonah and Aher—"aher" in Hebrew means "the other," but the word's root is also found in "ahar", "what follows."[18] This unusual conversation is a reenactment in dialogue format of the biblical tale. In other words, the same story is told four times and altered with every repetition. Whether it was a conscious act on the part of our author or not, the fact is that De Luca has "dehydrated" his own text: on the level of content, he has forced his reader to read the same story in four different ways. With every rereading, the knowledge gained has

reduced our understanding of the story; we have dehydrated it. Even on a purely formal level, the narrative seduces us into a game of contradictions: it is displayed at once from left to right and from right to left. As readers we have to change our natural tendency of starting to read in the upper left corner, whereas in De Luca's hyper-literal translation the Italian is read, along with the Hebrew, from upper right to left. The Book of Jonah, which can be read as a book about dehydrating and rehydrating, eastward and westward horizontal motion, beginning and end, is cleverly presented with the words displayed in two directions: east to west and west to east, so to speak.[19] As it was Jonah's tendency to go west when he was destined to go east, so we as readers obey our natural tendency to do the opposite and read from west to east. De Luca opens the jaws of the "dag gadol" and lures us inside, only to spew us out out onto a shore, where we are wilting and drying in our attempt to comprehend.

The Book of Jonah and the episode of the Tower of Babel dramatically illustrate how biblical exegesis and modern narrative can coexist. Jonah's horizontal displacements between east and west, liquidity and aridity, beginning and end are reflected in Babel's vertical structure with its base nurtured by the life-giving waters of Tigris and Euphrates and its summit dehydrating in universal forgetfulness. It is to the intersection of these horizontal and vertical coordinates that Erri De Luca forces our attention; it is at this crossroad that the ink from his pen starts flowing over the page, pulsating forward to the rhythm of a heartbeat: KUM, KUM, KUM ...

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Antonio Tabucchi who, three summers ago, drew my attention to this "young promising writer." To Erri De Luca go my apologies for extracting the vital waters from his words.

2. For De Luca's involvement with "Lotta continua" see the "Terza pagina" of the *Corriere della sera* of December 2, 1995. See also Erri De Luca's "Una storia di strada" ("A Street Tale") in *MicroMega* 5 (1995): 166-76. The same issue contains an interview by De Luca of Mimmo Calopresti, the director of the film *La seconda volta* (The Second Time), which deals with terrorism and attracted De Luca's severe criticism.

3. From hereon these titles will be used in Italian as, respectively, *Esodo, Giona*, and *Una nuvola*. When referring to the Book of Exodus in general, I will use *Exodus*; when referring specifically to De Luca's translation or commentary, I will use the Italian title *Esodo*. All translations in the text are mine. Quotations will be given directly in English while page numbers refer to the untranslated Italian editions.

4. The volume contains twenty-three short stories written over a period of one year for the Roman Catholic daily *L'Avvenire*.

5. *I colpi dei sensi* was translated as *The Senses of Memory*, (c) Myriam Swennen Ruthenberg. The booklet's poetically charged pages contain five stories centered around the five senses.

6. The reference is to De Luca's first work, *Non ora, non qui.*

7. *Prove di risposta* is the title of a book which combines interviews with De Luca and the author's comments on quotations from his works. It also contains the short story "Voci" and his "Lettere a Francesca."

8. I literally translate the Hebrew word "hayabbashah" as "the dry", following the suggestion of Erri De Luca's Italian "l'asciutto." If a concordance of De Luca's work existed, "asciutto" would figure most prominently alongside "primo".

9. De Luca points out that the Hebrew word often translated as "whale" is really "dag gadol," "large fish" (*Giona* 9).

10. Why God needs to provide the shade of a ricinus tree if Jonah is already sheltered from the sun, is one of the many exegetical problems that have plagued biblical scholars.

11. The Book of Jonah is read on the Jewish Holiday of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Jonah's story is not only about the importance of repentance, but, more importantly, about the concepts of repentance and forgiveness. Jonah seems totally alien to both and has to comprehend them through experience.

12. The word is not to be confused with "land" or "earth" which is "eretz", and which is the name given by God to "the dry," which was created from water (*Genesis* I, 10).

13. It is worth noticing that in the introduction to *Giona,* De Luca relates a brief history of Nineveh. From these pages results that Nineveh was swept away by a flood in 612 BCE, as predicted by the prophet Nahum (17).

14. The Hebrew word "kum" means "get up" or "raise yourself up". The word's onomatopoeic quality makes God's command to Jonah an appropriate imitation of a heartbeat.

15. On this episode I have commented in more detail and from a different perspective in a forthcoming article, "Erri De Luca, il Libro e la Lingua," *Il Veltro* 40, 3-4, 1996: 311-15.

16. The addition of vowels in the form of symbols underneath the consonants is a later development.

17. The capital letters are deliberate.

18. The name Aher is an interesting choice: it means "another person", and is the surname given to Elisha Ben Avuyah (first half of the second century C.E.) after his renunciation of Judaism. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* also gives the alternative "ahor" found in Geonic literature as meaning "retrograde."

19. The idea of Hebrew as a language that is graphically rendered from east to west, came to me as I read Robert Alter's translation of a poem by the Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai. It is entitled "Temporary poem": "Hebrew and Arabic script go from east to west/Latin script from west to east,/Languages are like cats. One must not go against the direction of the fur" (27).

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