

**Paul Coates**

The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada

ORCID: 0000-0002-0391-9480

## MIGRATIONS AND MIRAGES

## MIGRACJE I ZŁUDZENIA

### ABSTRAKT

Artykuł ten traktuje o stosunku między chęcią migracji a przynętą odległości która może być mirażem w sensie iluzji ale może też istnieć naprawdę, tak jak miraż odpowiada miejscu istniejącym naprawdę poza horyzontem – chociaż horyzont ten bezustannie zmienia miejsce. Robi to czerpiąc z doświadczeń samego autora; z wiersza Mariève Rugo, która urodziła się w Bukareszcie ale wyrosła w Nowym Yorku; z powieści Jenny Erpenbeck pod tytułem *Geh, ging, gegangen*, która traktuje o uchodźcach afrykańskich w Berlinie i o rozwoju stosunku między nimi a emerytowanym profesorem klasyki; i z filmu Roberta Rosselliniego *Stromboli – terra di dio*, którego bohaterka, grana przez Ingrid Bergman w pierwszym filmie który robiła razem z Rossellinim, pobiera się z mieszkańcem tytułowej wyspy po to aby się wydostać z obozu dla ludzi wysiedlonych, ale która potem się przekona iż małżeństwo jej stało się mirażem w obu sensach wymienionych na początku tego streszczenia, bo doprowadziło ją do miejsca mającego znaczenie i fizyczne i metafizyczne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** horyzont, niewidzialność, islam, katolicyzm, Mariève Rugo, Jenny Erpenbeck, Roberto Rossellini

### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the relation between the urge to migrate and the lure of a distance that may be a mirage in the sense of an illusion, but may also, like mirages, correspond to something that really exists beyond the horizon – though that horizon may shift constantly. It will do so by drawing on the experiences of the author himself; on a poem by Mariève Rugo, who was born in Bucharest but grew up in New York; on Jenny Erpenbeck's novel *Geh, ging, gegangen*, which deals with African refugees in Berlin and a retired Classicist professor's developing relationship with them; and Roberto Rossellini's film *Stromboli – terra di dio*, whose protagonist, played by Ingrid Bergman in her first film with Rossellini, marries an inhabitant of the eponymous island in order to escape a displaced persons' camp, only to find her marriage to be a mirage in both of the senses identified in this abstract's first sentence, as it takes her to a place of both physical and metaphysical significance.

**Keywords:** horizon, invisibility, Islam, Catholicism, Mariève Rugo, Jenny Erpenbeck, Roberto Rossellini

### 1.

The urge to migrate often, perhaps always, involves following a signal: one that suggests that the home for which we all long, where we will fully be accepted, really exists as a physical place, and not only in such imaginary or transcendental ones as those known as utopias. Often, perhaps even always (emanating from a blind spot that prevents one grasping the obstacles to successful, which means complete, migration), the signal may come from behind one. In the dusk of one's expectations, the sun one cannot see, because it stands behind one, casts one's shadow a long way forward, into an elsewhere. Such a signal may come as a sound, like the BBC World Service German broadcasts emanating from London and passing over and through our South East Kent home in my adolescence, prompting my identification with the German-speakers

who were their real addressees. As it would turn out, however, that identification, as if continuing Eastward through and beyond Frankfurt am Main, would follow what must have been a strong signal to the point at which Germany turned into Central Europe, becoming one with such German-speaking Jews as Adorno, Benjamin, Celan and Kafka – addressees who by then were all dead, Celan having committed suicide in 1970 – or the Polish Jew who would be the subject of my Ph.D., the great Symbolist Bolesław Leśmian. The signal that comes as a sound may assume the form of other language, enabling one to do things impossible in one's own, like German's creative and playful *Komposita* or its habit of sending the organizing verb to the end of a sentence and so allowing the speaker to ride it like a surfed wave breaking exhilaratingly on a beach. Feeling one's way into another language may mute the strength of the sounds and associations of an environment one may feel hems one in, such as those of class, which one betrays in the UK – and which betray one – the moment one opens one's mouth and is class-ified. The urge to learn another language, that fruit of inner emigration, could cue in actual migration, or a series of moves that may seem endless. As Baudelaire knew (see 'Le voyage'), and as is stated in a migrant prayer quoted by Valeria Luiselli in her *Lost Children Archive* (Luiselli, 2019: 30), 'to arrive is never to arrive'. A mirage of a final destination may indeed haunt and mock the migrant Mexican children lost in a US border desert in Luiselli's tremendous novel, its persistence beyond the horizon meaning it never really arrives. No wonder she speaks of the lost children as being followed by 'sound-mirages' (Luiselli, 2019: 330), and stages the final finding of some of the children, as if by echo-location, in a canyon named for Echo.

On the other hand, the signal to depart may come as an image, like the ones transmitted (also from behind) by projectors, calling one to a place beyond the horizon, perhaps the real (but also unreal) one from which it came (Hollywood), like a mirage seductively blinding one

to its possible dangers and unattainability, as every one of its horizons slips away before one. Each Hollywood movie bears within it, like a watermark, the title of one of its products: 'Lost Horizon.' 'Shopping for a better country' (to borrow a title from Josip Novakovich's description of his own earlier life) may be a response to the idea that better always lies beyond the immediately visible, is the enemy of the tangible good, and on top of that is the kind of good one can buy. The pre-migratory look is one that is never haptic, only dreams of being so. For many, the world over, the desired country may seem to be America, though it is really America as it both found itself and dissolved into fantasy (flew up in the air on the verge of destruction, becoming a mirage, walking on air, like a cartoon figure who has just stepped off a precipice); it did so just before it could fall off its own edge, that is, at its Westernmost point: at and as Hollywood. After all, most of the migration to the United States has been East-to-West, a pattern then replicated and continued within the intra-continental movement of a populace itself pushing Westward, to grow up (or never grow up) with the country. To arrive at that point, though, as was shown paradigmatically by (nomen est omen) Nathanael West in *The Day of the Locust*, is to meet the intangibility of the dream; to forget that no factory, however possibly gold-laden its adjacent hills, could ever mass-produce anything as elusive or convincingly part of us as dreams, that there are no dreams that money can buy, not even at the spot designated for their purchase, the psychoanalytic couch. The money capable of doing that was either fool's gold or found only in the pot of gold somewhere over the rainbow: as if there was only one rainbow, and not a multiplicity pointing misleadingly to different sites; as if one could ever escape the storm to which the rainbow was a pendant. For the dreams of migration were of course ones of escape, often pursued with a recklessness matching the extremity of the situation they compensated. 'One is always nearer by not keeping still' – words uttered by Thom Gunn, himself a British émigré in the US, as

the implicit philosophy of motorcyclists disappearing over the horizon, into the distance – may have been the epigraph to the quest. Migration is the travelling hopefully that thinks it will arrive, that forgets that – as Elizabeth Hardwick put it – ‘when you travel your first discovery is that you do not exist’ (Hardwick, 1979: 5). The migrant’s curse is to become a ghost passing through everything.

## 2.

Modern migration is individualistic. Whether the target nation-state knows the migrant is coming, as part of an immigration process usually shaped either to recruit talent or reunify families, or not – as he or she may have set out on their own accord, either driven by traumatic experiences or trusting to luck to help over the hurdles to a life that is more prosperous and will enable one to do more for one’s family – the many ships safely bringing almost a whole community to an Ellis Island are a matter of memory, ancient modern history, immigration laws and quotas having tightened in the meantime everywhere, and many of the boats employed now being barely sea-worthy and able to cross the Mediterranean, let alone the Atlantic. The migrant ships of the Mediterranean land as and where local politics tell them they can. Should groups come, they will now be moving en masse from an immediate situation of catastrophe, such as war, earthquake, famine, environmental collapse. Even here things get complicated, however, as those who come often include a significant proportion of the better-off members of their societies, those able to afford people-smugglers’ fees, or with relatives sending funds from beyond the border, while other community members (poorer, usually older, less able to face the vicissitudes of often gruelling travel) find themselves languishing for years in refugee camps, their wait for a chance to enter a Promised Land at times rivalling the forty desert years of the children of Israel. Given

this reality, some would be happier if the term ‘migrant’ were replaced with ‘illegal immigrant’. And yet what can indeed be called the queue-jumping of such figures becomes understandable and even forgivable, for all its suggestion of entitlement, when one considers the Northern countries’ low refugee quotas and the excruciatingly long waits endured by migrants taking the legal route.

In any case, whatever the status of the individuals following its path, modern migration differs from the age-old one of non-human groups. Consider the Romanian poet Mariève Rugo’s reflections on seeing a flock of Canada geese crossing the sky as an age-old sight, ‘as though the journey/ were immortal’.

*As the phone rings,  
I stand on the porch,  
caught by the high wild voices  
measuring the distances  
of evening, a skein  
unwinding through sapphire air,  
crossing the pink feather  
of a jet as though the journey  
were immortal. Watching.  
my eyes sting and fill  
with images of my mother  
who always left before I spoke –  
a sudden blurring  
as the long black arrowhead  
disappears beyond the cedars,  
gone where I can’t see  
but feel the faint trail of sound  
as in a recently emptied room,  
the air chills, recedes  
into a space like silence  
in which the phone rings and rings.*

The quasi-immortality Rugo mentions could be that of animal and avian migration in general. Unlike human migration, its rhythm is one of repeated departure and return, the only need regulating it being the timekeeping one of the seasons. Whenever humans migrate in similar fashion, it is as in pre-modernity, shadows adhering as closely as possible, as hunters, to non-human packs, gaggles, flocks. Modern human migration usually follows or seeks a one-way passage; if successful, all that returns to the point of departure may be letters, photographs attesting to the migrant's material success, or money orders attesting even more strongly to the same achieved status. Modern human migration may follow established-known trails – from Western Africa to Libya, for instance, and then beyond, towards Europe, as Libya implodes politically – but usually seeks greater prosperity. The refugee, of course, by way of contrast, seeks safety, often at short notice, wherever possible.

For Rugo, the sight of migrating birds evokes thoughts of a distant destination, and by association, the psychic and physical distance between herself and her mother. The phone that keeps ringing suggests irrevocable separation, as if there would be no point picking it up, as the person at the other end now speaks, or has always spoken, another tongue, be it literally or metaphorically. The other person, like the birds, may have vanished from sight, but for a while a sound, or its possibility, persists, even though the splitting of sight from sound marks a cleavage in being that seemingly renders the poem's speaker at a loss, helpless, out of sync with any and every situation, the unity of consciousness seeping away in the wake of that of the body. In leaving before the poem's speaker spoke the mother established a pattern of pointless reply. Like the birds, she would be irrevocably over the horizon before one could speak, her appearance in the present like a mirage.

A similar experience of lapses in communication, albeit without the extra charge of familial emotions, befalls Richard, the retired former East

German Classics professor who is the protagonist of the Jenny Erpenbeck novel *Geh, ging, gegangen*, which I will consider more fully shortly: ‘Richard weiß noch, wie es sich angefühlt hat, als er zum ersten Mal auf Dienstreise in Amerika war. How’re you doin’? Mir geht es gut, danke, und wie geht es Ihnen? Aber ehe er seine höfliche Antwort überhaupt zu Ende gesprochen hatte, waren der Verkäufer oder der Doorman oder der Kellner schon längst woanders.’ (‘Richard still remembers how it felt when he took his first work trip to America. When people asked how he was doing, he started to explain that he was doing very well and tried to ask the same of them, but before he could finish the salesman or doorman had already moved on.’) Thus in the end ‘[n]ach zwei, drei Tagen war Richard ganz durcheinander vom Fremdsein.’ (‘After two or three days, Richard was beside himself with the foreignness.’ (Erpenbeck, 2015: 230; Erpenbeck, 2017: 185) Since it is not always clear where Erpenbeck stands in relation to Richard – at times he functions as a mouthpiece, at others the narrator’s relationship with him is the hovering one of style indirect libre, while at yet others he is the object of a condescension whose origin is also unclear (‘Selbst Richard (...) weiß, was das bedeutet’; ‘Even Richard (...) knows what this means’ (Erpenbeck, 2015: 226; Erpenbeck, 2017: 185)), and in the end is indicted for having declared the childlessness of himself and his wife Christel a joint decision, whereas it was really his – it might be worth remembering the similar sense of alienation in the USA voiced by the great Polish film-maker Krzysztof Kiesłowski. Whether or not, and to what extent, in Kiesłowski’s case it related to his many childhood family moves or his early loss of his father can only be a matter of speculation. Whether or not Richard’s reaction can be related to an anti-Americanism long pervasive on the German left, to which he may be thought to belong either through his former East German citizenship or through assimilation to Erpenbeck herself, also from the GDR, is something about which one can only speculate also.

Just as several such encounters with doormen or salesmen would have caused Richard to lose the habit of attempting to communicate with them, so in Rugo's poem as the phone rings there is no motion to pick it up; the self is paralysed, and motion belongs to the departed mother and the birds. No wonder the next poem in the sequence, Rugo's 'Epilogue for my mother', asks 'was there some garden where we could have held / conversations full of listening?', describes the mother's last words as 'your last communiqué', and apostrophises her 'you keep glistening from the mirror's other side/ where everything's reversed and dim'. Migration may affect those left behind as a kind of death in the family, and all one may know thereafter – whether the departee survived the passage or not – is his or her ghost, rejoining an increasingly ghostly community only as a revenant. It may indeed be true that 'when you travel your first discovery is that you do not exist'. To recall the terms of Rugo's volume title, it may be that the only afterlife is memory.

### 3.

When writing of Jenny Erpenbeck's 2015 novel *Gehen, ging, gegangen* one might be tempted to follow the lead of F.R. Leavis's critique of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, which itself draws conclusions from arguments about that novel cast in dialogue form by Henry James. Major reservations about this particular work by a novelist he respected deeply prompted James to have one character in his dialogue reject it completely, and Leavis envisaged carving out of it a more successful, slimmer work entitled *Gwendolen Harleth* and focused on the trials of an initially arrogant English girl aided in her distress by Eliot's eponymous hero (Leavis, 1972: 143-4). In the case of Erpenbeck's work, what might be extracted in the process might be less a novel focused on one of its characters – as hers is on the growing acquaintanceship with African refugees of a retired East German Classics Professor –

than an anthology of the dense, poetic, essayistic musings prevalent in the early portions of the novel in particular, correlating such things as transitions, the idea of the underground, and the contrast between Odysseus' incarnation as 'No-Man' (as his crew-members clung to the bottom of the cyclops' sheep to remain invisible and save their lives) and the African refugees' desire to become visible. These are just a few of the strands of an impressively densely-woven network of topics concerning identity and its definition. Similar thoughts congeal around the word 'border', one of the most resonant noting that in mathematical terms a border is where signs often reverse their values (Erpenbeck, 2015: 48) – a remark that implicitly picks up the question of the relation between those whose skins are coloured black and those who are called white.

In perhaps Erpenbeck's densest network of interconnections, reflections on the relationship of surface and depth, which include that superficial thing known as skin, tie together fugally references to the underground town in Rzeszów in which Jews hid during World War Two, the criss-crossing (*überkreuzen*) of motifs in the music of Bach, the extension of the idea of criss-crossing (*überkreuzen*) to designate the relationship between the hopes and wishes of white sympathizers and black refugees in the Oranienplatz camp (Erpenbeck, 2015: 45), and Richard's reflection that '[e]r weiß noch nicht einmal, ob die Zeit da ist, verschiedene Schichten und Wege übereinanderzulegen oder um sie, genau im Gegenteil, voneinander zu trennen' ('[h]e doesn't even know yet if time exists for the purpose of making various layers and paths overlap, or if it's to keep things separate' (Erpenbeck, 2015: 51; Erpenbeck, 2017: 38)). Implicit in Erpenbeck's reflections on passages below the surface seems to be an equation made more explicit in the *Lost Children Archive* of Valeria Luiselli, who says in a final note on her sources: 'I reappropriate certain rhythmic cadences as well as imagery from Homer/Pound, in order to establish an analogy between migrating and descending into the underworld' (Luiselli, 2019: 380).

The underworld is the appalling probable destination of those migrants and refugees who lose their lives in the Mediterranean; and Erpenbeck's presentation of Richard's apparently idyllic neighbourhood as haunted by the unfound corpse of a man who drowned in the lake nearby seems almost to posit the existence of an underground conduit along which corpses float between the Mediterranean and Berlin, DOA.

Comparisons of the novels of Eliot and Erpenbeck may be justified primarily by the way each seems to founder on the lack of complexity of their authors' imagination of the foreign cultures they privilege idealistically, be it the Jewish one in Eliot's case or the African Islamic one in Erpenbeck's. Erpenbeck uses the fiction writer's liberty to shape an imaginary scenario that not only makes a laudable case for hospitality towards refugees but also creates the illusion of adequately reflecting a somewhat less simple German situation in which asylum-seekers come not just from Africa but many other places, do not all clearly qualify as refugees in the terms set out in the UN charter, and even when they adhere to Islam (like her novel's refugees) represent both its best and its worst aspects: not one mention is made of the anti-Semitism rife in the predominantly-Muslim cultures of the Middle East, something the German government may prefer to ascribe to the regimes prevailing in the countries from which they stem, but present also in certain of the hadith of popular Islam (preached once notoriously even in a Montreal mosque by a visiting Lebanese imam) that prophesy endtime scenarios in which rocks and trees disclose the presence of Jews hiding behind them to enable Muslims to kill them. Not to mention the Islamist terrorism that has garnered more media attention: as I write (June 20<sup>th</sup> 2019) a man identified by the American ABC news network as 'a Syrian refugee' has been arrested for plotting to blow up a church. The African Islamist terrorist organization Boko Haram is named only once in this novel, and only in Richard's notes, with no explanation or discussion. The anger informing Erpenbeck's attempts to educate

her fellow countrymen and women even prompts an overstating of her already strong case as she drops dark, tersely intemperate hints of parallels between the workings of the modern German state and National Socialism, remarking ‘und die Kosten werden vom Volk der Buchhalter den Objekten des Abtransports als Schuld zugeschrieben werden, wie das auch in anderen Zeiten, wenn Deutschland irgendwen hat abtransportieren lassen, üblich gewesen ist’ (‘this country of bookkeepers will be aghast and blame the objects of the transport for the expense, as used to happen in other periods of German history, with regard to other transports’ (Erpenbeck 2015: 258–9; Erpenbeck 2017: 209). Later she will show her protagonist not only reading a newspaper that describes a refugee supporter as exploiting them to promote his LGBT agenda but apparently buying into its alarmist rabble-rousing, as ‘Richard sieht wahrhaftig eine düstere Zukunft über Deutschland heraufziehen, sollte dieser Unterstützer mithilfe der Flüchtlinge, die aus der jugendlichem Übermut und politischer Verblendung auf dem Dach stehen und pinkeln, ins Kanzleramt putschen.’ (‘truly does see a bleak future looming for Germany should this supporter, helped by refugees who out of youthful exuberance and political blindness are standing on the roof and peeing, succeed in staging a coup that lands him in the Chancellor’s seat’ (Erpenbeck, 2015: 273–4; Erpenbeck, 2017: 221).

Erpenbeck’s novel may focus on Richard, far and away its most fully developed character, but as noted above even the attitude to him is slippery, the focalization blurring on occasions, and for reasons about which one can only speculate (a somewhat mechanical expression of a desire to avoid excessive simplicity and even saintliness of characterization, as Richard becomes a benevolent figure supporting refugees and persuading his friends to do likewise?) she even compromises him at the very end by showing him as having lied about a key aspect of his marriage. At the same time, her presentation of the refugees only as they interact with him in very basic English or German makes it impossible for them to

manifest much complexity, to be more than simple, one-dimensional victims. Moreover, the size of her cast of refugees – chapter 54 lists the majority of them one-by-one in connection with the state's denial of their applications to stay, naming Ali, Khalil, Zani, Yussuf, 'Hermes' (Greek names of this kind being applied to some refugees by Richard, whose Classicist training shows through), Abdusalam, Mohamed, Yaya, Rufu, 'Apollo', Tristan, Karon, Ithemba and Raschid – tends to reduce their portraits to snapshots. Inadvertently, and despite Erpenbeck's intention of making them visible, such strategies partly obscure and even silence them. The nearest thing to complex characterization occurs around the question of whether Osarobo arranged or facilitated a break-in at Richard's house using knowledge of his brief absence at a conference, but it is left unanswered. Leaving it hanging may usefully raise the question of whether Richard or the reader are prepared to give Osarobo the benefit of the doubt, but this comes at the cost of imbuing him with the blankness of an enigma.

Erpenbeck's novel therefore seems to address the refugee and migrant crisis, but then ducks the challenge it sets itself by ignoring its origin in multiple sources and places and concerning itself, like her protagonist in his research, only with that black African part of the Islamic world that was horribly persecuted and forced into boats to cross the Mediterranean as Colonel Gaddafi's revenge upon Europe for bombing Libya, the explicit rationale for this policy mentioned by her (Erpenbeck, 2015: 238). This partial representation of the crisis would not be problematic if it did not compromise her powerful denunciation of a lack of compassion in the German populace, as that populace's negative reactions partly reflect the fact that the new arrivals are clearly not just all refugees, an incalculable number of them having crossed borders less out of fear than an understandable, perennial human desire to achieve a more prosperous life using whatever opportunities are available or can be seized. The partial nature of Erpenbeck's focus, a

largely inevitable concomitant of the realist novel's concentration upon individuals, can be seen also in her treatment of Islam. Thus she has one character (Raschid) state that anyone who kills is not a Muslim, a statement many Muslims in various officially Islamic states would contest: many an Islamic jurisprudence mandates capital punishment for any Muslim brave enough to convert to another religion or no religion at all. When Awad mentions being pushed into the boat that took him to Italy, apparently in execution of the Gaddafi policy mentioned later in the novel, his compulsion on these grounds has little in common with the experience of the many asylum-seekers exploited by people-smugglers. An arguably far more representative figure (one Erpenbeck strangely first presents as a thin nameless man with a broom in a dreamlike chapter of Richard's recollections that has the effect of derealizing a situation just as common as the ones on which she chooses to focus) is the thin and initially nameless figure with a broom who speaks not of persecution but of simply seeking better-paid employment in Europe to better fulfil his duty to provide for his family back home. After all, the path to Libya had been a well-worn one for West Africans seeking greater economic opportunity, until the collapse of the Libyan polity rendered it an inferno ruled by gangs and militias, and despite knowledge of the dangers some still follow the route to it, believing, or hoping against hope, that their luck will hold.

Thus we see Richard learning the names of the capitals of various West African countries, but only a few basic facts about Islam. An enumeration of its five pillars, a charming story about Jesus' birth that nevertheless recalls the more preposterous medieval legends about his childhood, plus Raschid's statement, are virtually the only elements mentioned. Since even they appear only briefly, Erpenbeck seems to display the sentimental and even condescending attitude for which the differences between religions do not matter, as if one could not imagine anyone weighing them against one another and choosing one or another

on the basis of believing it to have the strongest truth content. Religion becomes acceptable only through identification with culture, something that may be hardly surprising, as in a secularized world only culture is sacrosanct. Here, as so often in consumerist post-modernity, the encounter with another culture seems often to be a matter of savouring differences of cuisine, as Richard learns to cook new foods. From this constricted perspective, the conversion of so rigorous a logician as C.S. Lewis, upon grounds re-traced in the opening chapters of his *Mere Christianity*, would be inconceivable. It is hardly surprising also therefore that the novel's protagonist is identified as an atheist. Moreover, differences within Islam, including the fundamental one between its Shia and Sunni forms, pass unmentioned: tolerantly or patronisingly, one assumes they all lead always to peace, despite the antagonism between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia. Erpenbeck appears not even to be aware of such arguments as those made by Aayan Hirsi Ali, herself a former Muslim, who distinguishes, on the basis of the division within Muhammed's career, between a peaceful Islam of Mecca and a violent one of Medina (Hirsi Ali, 2015: 13-23), contending that Islam has not yet been able to 'do what Judaism and Christianity have done – question, critique, interpret and ultimately modernize its holy scripture' (Hirsi Ali, 2015: 90). Erpenbeck's position may be preferable to religion's splenetic denigration by a Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins, but it shares the new atheists' ignorance about religion in general and individual religions and their interrelations in particular (for instance, Islam's polemical denial, six centuries after the event, that the Crucifixion even occurred). There is simply a difference in forms of distortion: where they tar all faiths with the same brush, she whitewashes the only one she chooses to address. The implication of her choice of case-study, the part she chooses to metonymize the whole addressed in her generalizations about German attitudes, is that all migrants are to be designated as refugees (Flüchtlinge), a choice of nomenclature which simplifies a far

more knotty reality and opens the door to self-righteousness. If it were indeed that simple, policy-makers would richly merit all the sarcasm she lards upon them, as if all were simply mouthpieces for the frequent hard-heartedness of a political right determined to be hard-headed, and whose worst representatives are not above exploiting to racist ends modern and postmodern fears concerning the sustainability of an identity defined through culture, state institutions, nationality and ethnicity; and yet all four of these blur when various borders (of self-understanding, community and nation state in particular) become porous, as they had done already with mixed effect in Erpenbeck's own East Germany once it began to be integrated into the Bundesrepublik. East German originally herself, she would have been well-placed after all to have extended her pregnant reflections on borders towards the one at the friable edge of consciousness and connecting othering to an often primal fear to which many people other than right-wingers are prone. For her novel's melodramatic simplification goes against the grain of her gift for devising complex poetic and philosophical scenarios, and this failing too recalls George Eliot, in particular her depiction of Zionism, in *Daniel Deronda*. Novelists of great intelligence and compassion, neither Eliot nor Erpenbeck are immune to donning blinkers in the service of passionate advocacy of a higher cause: just as *Daniel Deronda* is inferior to *Middlemarch*, so *Gehen, ging, gegangen* is a lesser work than Erpenbeck's *Heimsuchung* or *Ende aller Tage*. The crisis of Africa and the Middle East is reflected in part in a poll taken by the BBC's Arabic Survey, which estimated that in a range of countries including Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Libya, Lebanon and Yemen one fifth of the population is thinking of emigrating, a figure that rises to half in the case of Sudan ([www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com)) (accessed 24/6/2019). Given these statistics, one might want to expand the range of reference of the term 'failed state', as polities with such a high proportion of citizenry wishing to leave clearly desperately need profound political change and/or a Marshall

plan initiative from Northern states currently little-inclined towards such generosity. Deriving in large part from conflicts within Islam and between forms of Islam and modernity, and spilling over with poetic justice into countries that also bear a partial, long-seated responsibility for it (colonizing Europe, the USA, Russia), the crisis has become a true, tragic Gordian knot. Erpenbeck does not so much cut it all as cut out some of its strands. However good her intentions, she abuses the liberty accorded fiction to distort the reality with which she claims to engage.

#### 4.

Towards the end of Erpenbeck's novel, some of the refugees say they will not date German girls, lest it be thought that they are doing so only to obtain a passport. Over sixty years earlier, during Europe's previous, even larger crisis of the displaced – in the aftermath of the devastation of homes and homelands in World War Two – Roberto Rossellini dramatized in *Stromboli, terra di dio* (1949) (to use the title of the Italian version of this film, which represents Rossellini's intentions far better than the RKO-edited one also in circulation, which he disowned) the story of a cultivated Lithuanian called Karin (Ingrid Bergman) who is held in a displaced persons' camp and has no such scruples over how she escapes it. Thus she is willing to marry an Italian soldier, Antonio, of a very different class, a fisherman from the eponymous island, who serenades her from the other side of the barbed wire. Upon arrival in his homeland, however, she discovers herself in a sense imprisoned anew, in the village beneath the island's looming volcano, which she will attempt to climb, seeking a way out via the other side of the island, at the work's end. In a sense Rossellini's war trilogy continues, albeit this time under the aegis of love and divine providence, as a volcano bombards a village and lumps of molten lava crash through roofs and pepper alleyways,

driving a whole community to wait out the explosion in boats bobbing on the sea.

Karin first appears seated on her bunk-bed in the displaced persons' camp. When she goes outside in response to the soldier's song he pronounces himself crazy about her and proposes marriage. Her sober reply is that he hardly knows her; what if she turns out to be different than he expected? When he pantomimes hitting her, she – an older woman looking at someone she describes as a boy – makes light of it: you'll spank me, she says, smiling. Her decision, she then tells a companion as she walks away, will depend on the result of her visa application to Argentina. On appearing before the visa board, she admits to having entered Italy on false papers, but says she was fleeing the Gestapo. For her, as for Erpenbeck's refugees, Italy is a place of transit. The economical cut to the marriage ceremony immediately after her unsuccessful interview indicates just how instrumentally she views a marriage whose course Rossellini will present as demonstrating the truth of the officiating priest's words, which back up the opening epigraph from Isaiah ('they found me who sought me not'), on the way the marriage will effect divine grace. Those critics who deem the ending ill-prepared therefore appear to have forgotten the priest's words, and may not know St. Paul's statement concerning the Christian's possible contribution to the salvation of his or her spouse: 'For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save *thy* husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save *thy* wife?' (I Cor. 7.16, Authorized Version) For whatever reason, the Hound of Heaven is pursuing Karin.

Arriving in Stromboli, Karin rapidly learns that her new home's poverty and barrenness have provided many with an incentive to emigrate. Those of its inhabitants who have returned from America have done so only because they wish to die in their homeland. Greeting her and Antonio, the local priest terms the land harsh, and his list of the places to which inhabitants prefer to emigrate begins ironically and, for

this film, pointedly with Argentina. While on the boat to the island she had been alarmed by accounts of the continued activity of the volcano towering above the village. Now she is told that seven years earlier only a saint's intervention had halted the advance upon the village of its lava's flow. When Antonio says that the villagers brought fresh soil and vines from elsewhere to replace what the volcano destroyed, Karin may well see herself as just such a sacrificial transplant. On waking the next day, she tells Antonio 'I belong to another race', almost as if her desire to go to Argentina had expressed a desire to follow the Nazi racial ideologues known to have fled there; as if the visa board had been right to say, before hearing her case, that she was the biggest of liars, or her internment in the displaced persons' camp, among a group including a German speaker, reflected reasons other than the flight from the Gestapo she herself had described. (And thus to some degree, albeit here in an undertone rather than centrally, *Stromboli, terra di dio* forms a diptych with Rossellini's dissection of the afterlife of Nazi ideology in *Germania, anno zero* (1947-8).) 'I'm not an animal', she declares, as if she considered the islanders sub-human, and is convulsed by tears. A high-level shot of her amidst buildings underlines her feeling of entrapment, as if, in another of the work's ironies, her position is indeed that of an animal, caught in a maze, crying 'I want to get out'. Her sensitivity to the fate of such creatures as rabbits and tuna suggest that her rejection of animal status accompanies an unconscious fear that it may be the only one she has left, or that any human ever has. 'God has never helped me' is her response to the priest's exhortation to have patience: should she be able to persuade Antonio to save his money, eventually she might even be able to afford emigration.

As if relentlessly, the film brings Karin to a point where she cries out 'if I don't leave I'll go mad'. The local women deem her immodest; her husband appals her by letting a pet ferret worry a rabbit to death; then the community fishermen do so through the killing of the tuna

fish who provide their livelihood. Her husband does indeed beat her, because he feels her behaviour and dress have humiliated him in the eyes of the village. Her attempt to use her sexuality to wheedle money for escape from the priest fails, but she succeeds with the lighthouse keeper. Armed with money obtained from him, as well as some of Antonio's earnings, she sets out to climb the volcano in order to cross to the other side of the island and take a boat to Messina. But as she climbs volcanic gases and the steep, stony terrain make her stagger with exhaustion, losing both suitcase and money. As Peter Brunette rightly notes, '[t]hroughout this sequence, in close-up after close-up, her wedding ring is greatly in evidence'. However, this is less, as he maintains, 'a constant reminder of the social ties that are calling her back to the village' (Brunette 1987: 124), than an embodiment of the source of the force being exerted upon her by her ordeal, of which this climb is the culmination: that of the sacramental realm she entered, albeit unwittingly, when contracting marriage, regarding whose relationship to divine grace the officiating priest is shown to have spoken correctly, for all the formulaic nature of his words. The priest would surely deem it a sign of that grace that her union has been blessed with fruitfulness, as she has become pregnant. Marriage becomes the true mirage that brings onto this side of the horizon an image of the invisible, something experienced also in the unremitting power of the volcano spewing onto earth's surface elements from its unseen, dangerous depths. The point of the ordeal, adumbrated in Rossellini's epigraph from Isaiah, is to bring her despair of earthly relations to a point at which she will cry out to God and then, on waking on the quiet slope the next morning, exclaim 'what mystery, what beauty'. Whether or not she then returns to the village, as she does in the butchered RKO version, matters less than her ability to qualify her statement that the people she has left behind 'are horrible' with the recognition 'I am worse' and her ability to call out 'Merciful God', reversing her earlier complaint concerning God's lack

of mercy. Read allegorically, her walk up the mountain and subsequent repose offer a microcosm of the stages of her life, summed up in two days, the first one characterized by what Bachelard would describe as opposition to the earth, the second, by repose 'in' it (Bachelard, 1948: 2). Whether consciously intended by Rossellini or not, the combination of the prominence accorded her wedding ring during her climb with a smoking mountain may even recall, at the individual rather than the collective level, the divine covenant between Israel and God concluded at Mount Sinai. God's mercy in this case involves showing Karin that relationship persists and subsists even when all relations – be it with a flinty human community, or an equally forbidding nature – seem to have failed: underlying everything, the ground beneath the ground, is the God who seeks a relationship with his children, and who seems to have used Karin's experiences to draw her to him, to enable her to see meaning in her life. Rudolf Thome may or may not have been right to argue (Gansera and Jacobsen et al., 1987: 148) that Karin envisaged life on Stromboli in terms of a 'dream island', but her migration through marriage brings into reality the image of what lies beyond the horizon of expectation, the mirage that corresponds to a reality whose invisibility stands here for the Invisible in general. In her experience at least migration discloses the possibility of a sense of homelessness on earth ending in awareness of a transcendental home, the beginning of a relationship with the Divine. It thus intimates that the growing prevalence of migration in our own age may betoken an intensification of an unslaked thirst for a belonging that goes far beyond the simply economic one that is the primary motive for departure mentioned in the BBC Arabic Survey cited above. When migrants utter the despairing prayer quoted by Luiselli and given in the first section of this piece, one's echoing prayer for them can only be that the voyages that are often nightmares may, like Karin's, end in peace. Rossellini would add: in the divine peace that passes understanding.

Images below: *Stromboli*: Karin climbing the volcano, then finding repose upon its slopes:



**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Brunette P., *Roberto Rossellini*. Oxford University Press New York and Oxford 1987. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1578725>
- Bachelard G., *La terre et les rêveries du repos*. José Corti Paris 1948.
- Erpenbeck J., *Geh, ging, gegangen*. Knaus München 2015.
- Erpenbeck J., *Go, Went, Gone*. trans. Susan Bernofsky New Directions New York 2017.
- Gansera R., Jacobsen W. et al., *Roberto Rossellini*. Carl Hanser Verlag München 1987.
- Hardwick E., *Sleepless Nights*. Random House New York 1979.
- Hirsi Ali A., *Heretic: why Islam needs a reformation now*. Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2015.
- James H., 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation', *The Great Tradition*. (red.) F.R. Leavis, F.R. Pelican, Harmondsworth 1972. 284–303.
- Lewis C.S., *Mere Christianity*. Collins Glasgow 1984.
- Lewis C.S., *Surprised by Joy*. Collins Glasgow 1982.
- Luiselli V., *Lost Children Archive*. Knopf New York 2019.
- Novakovich J. *Shopping for a better country: essays*. Dzanc Books Westland, MI 2012.