

INVENTING THE WORLD, UNLEASHING THE WORD

Shelley Temchin

In *L'Invention du monde* Olivier Rolin recounts a day in the life of the world in its infinite variety and triviality. The droning voice of the narrator, an unreliable “I” if ever there was one, crams pages with tirades, speeches, anonymous dispatches from all fronts, and letters—correspondence, that is, but also the ABCs, the Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Deltas, and all the other alphabets sprinkled throughout the text. Its long, looping sentences sprawl with Proustian expansiveness over entire pages, juxtaposing Peoria and Pakistan, metaphysical musings and puns. They may begin in French, morph into a pidgin transliteration of *franglais*, then skid into Spanish. Or the other way around. Along the way, they evoke Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Tom Cruise, Pascal (our narrator is nothing if not a name-dropper) in this send-up and celebration of literature, a voyage au bout du verbe, and of the adjective, the noun, the comma, too.

In some ways *L'Invention du monde* resembles a maniacally re-imagined version of *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Over a hand of whist, between puffs on his Chesterton, the first-person narrator, a writer, announces his intention, to “faire un portrait du monde, plus exactement, le tour du monde en un jour” (30). Our man, like Verne’s, is a cultivated sort who enjoys a good smoke and a round of cards at the club. He, too, has recently dismissed his English manservant and, like Phineas, will hire a man to replace the aforementioned English valet, visit exotic lands, and tangle periodically with a man named Fix. Most important, he will wager that he can conquer the world in record time.

But there the resemblance to Verne’s novel—or any other, for that matter—ends. For one thing, Phineas’ voyage has a starting point, both geographic and temporal, and an ending point. The passage of time is explicitly

noted and is indeed at the heart of the adventure, which is punctuated with dramatic incidents and plot twists, the better to resolve itself, despite temporary setbacks, in a satisfyingly happy ending.

In Rolin's book, by contrast, time is perpetually frozen in the twenty-four hour period of the narrator's pledge. So, while the elapsed time of the events—to call them a story would be misleading—has been compressed from Verne's eighty days into one, the narrative has swelled from under 300 pages to some 520 densely packed ones. At any moment—or rather at any comma or semi-colon—a sentence may be sidetracked in seemingly endless qualifications, specifications, recalibrations of perspective, and circumlocutions that block any narrative movement. The seminal event of the book, for example, begins portentously, “Mais cet après-midi-là, pendant que le soleil, désormais, s'éloignait à toute vitesse du point équinoxial, qu'une lumière fossile, partie il y avait trois cents millions d'années . . .,” seemingly pinpointing one fateful moment against infinite spans of time. But its cosmic imagery is archly deflated by Star Trek-style pseudo-scientific precision mixed with skepticism: “prétendument, du cœur de la galaxie NGC5548 . . .” and then “pleuvait sur le miroir primaire de beryllium d'un satellite immobile, prétendument”—again—“à quelques quarante-cinq kilomètres au dessus de nos têtes, puis de là sur le secondaire en silice fondue promise qu' . . .” Yes, yes, and then? “. . . un maître d'hôtel chaussé de semelles de molleton nous servait le porto dans de scintillants cristaux . . .” and fourteen lines later—still in the same sentence—“. . . mon futur serviteur, peut-être, était en train de nettoyer le carburateur de sa vieille motocyclette Enfield . . .” The main clause is still 12 lines away and distinctly anti-climactic: “ces considerations”—long forgotten, no doubt, by the reader—“me parurent soudain extrêmement tentantes” (27–28).

The setting is likewise problematic. Chapter titles like “Meurtre dans le train Khachouri-Tbilissi (symphonie minuit)” hint at a noir-ish round-the-world escapade. Other titles evoke the cheerfully calamitous wanderings of a modern-day Candide: “Terrible bataille de deux bandes de Raras” or “Il manque une des mains de Reyna.” Others still, a sly, punning sense of humor: “Mammouths congelés dans le permafrost (polar).”

But mystery or adventure fans beware: space, like time, does not function here the way it does in other fictions. A sentence may begin in Washington and end in Seoul, passing by way of Swaziland, its stopping points linked by alliteration or rhyme, perhaps, but not geography. Similarly, the lacerated body of a schoolboy lying next to the house of a police chief in Bangladesh somehow brings to mind the manager of the Cincinnati Reds, who, by the way, has been sent a package of dead fish for failing to settle a gambling debt. Not to mention the movie showing in Buenos Aires that leads to a smarmy anecdote about a police chief in Concord, Massachusetts, who has installed a video camera in the bathroom, and, coincidentally, did you know that one day in Oak Fields,

Australia, a man walked up to a urinal, unzipped, whipped out—no, not *that*, a gun—and shot the occupant of the next stall?

As for characters, other than the innumerable swamis, strikebreakers, cuckolds, street-cleaners, dental hygienists, car park valets *et al*, whose mini-melodramas flit briefly throughout the book, there is a first-person narrator who identifies himself variously as the master of visions, the universal projectionist, and the sigma of sigmas. In fact, as he tells an unnamed muse, “**je suis tout le monde**. Je suis même toi si tu veux, mon enfant, ma sœur” (11) (bold face in text).

There is also the insufferable Fix, a carryover from Verne, who pops up occasionally. He thinks our hero is suffering from an Apollo complex, but who are you calling crazy, thinks our man, “comme si je ne savais pas parfaitement ce que c’est, un fou. Comme si je n’en avais pas des dizaines à s’agiter dans le réservoir de mon stylo” (142). Fix seems to be the voice of practicality and common sense, the apostle of a balanced diet and healthy exercise, and a fan of the snappy “**communication**” (bold face in the text)—commercial, clips, surveys, etc.—that our narrator calls “des mots comme des missiles sol-air, standardisés, ultra- légers, portables sur le dos” (360).

The book appears to be a colossal stream—no, torrent—of consciousness, a random collection of knifings, seductions, kidnappings, bull fights, rapes, and fender benders alternating with metaphorical musings about literature and the universe. The ravings of a lunatic drunkard? The sum of all police blotters? The feverish dream of a deranged mage? Yes, all of the above and more.

It all begins with a boastful, pun-filled ode to an unidentified muse. With typical bombast and buffoonery our narrator woos a temptress encountered on top of an elevator in Krasnoïarska: “ô velours noir de la nuit d’Asie soviétique.” Ô you of the V-necked tunic and breasts that I can tell are heavy, dense, and brown, what is your name? Tamara Malkhina? Narquiz Balkhova, the school teacher? Maybe you could teach me Tadjik . . . You probably think I am going to take you for a ride in my hot Jigouli or “te glisser dans l’oreille de glougloutants gazouillants ia tibi lioubliou au soleil couchant sur le Pamir.” Well, I will have you know that I am not some crummy college dean or horny social worker. I am “un djinn, un chaman,” plus the world’s biggest drug trafficker and also the world’s number one cop and I am going to take you on the carpet ride of your life.

The mood darkens in chapter two, however, as our djinn-shaman-drug trafficker-super cop has been replaced by a morose, moderately successful novelist who has had some flops with women, he admits. Worse still, sometimes even the sight of roses brings on mortal anguish: “ces fleurs éprouaient leur sarcasme . . . nous sommes la vie splendide, semblaient-elles me dire, la vie éternelle, nous participons de ce corps immense, sphérique qui roule, les coupes nées des nuages, les méandres des fleuves, les hanches des amoureuses” (18).

In contrast to this insolent throbbing life he sees around him, our narrator has been nagged for a while now by doubts about literature. He recalls the miserable scribbles that have brought him fame and glory but left him drooping before a rose. All the usual stuff: spicy tales of adultery in the provinces, a novel of initiation in which he de-flowers his cousin the day of his first pay check, and—oh yes—a convoluted saga about man-eating robots controlled by a pharmacist driven mad by his lab assistant's rebuffs.

Momentarily distracted from such intimations of inadequacy by one Dr. Shaharuddin Maruf, a "telesophe" he has encountered while thumbing through the Singapore Times, our narrator is heartened by the injunction, in English and in bold print, "**Believe in yourself as a writer**" (24). And furthermore, "Writers should think, think, think! Think positive and have an inquiring mind!" and they should write what they feel is the truth. Chastened, ashamed, he tries to think positive. But think about what? Well, the big issues—unemployment, racism, the ozone layer, everyday life...reviving the grand tradition of social naturalism in the novel with a style that's crisp, concise, TV-ready, taking into account the influence of rock and roll, PR and the diminished attention span of today's public. Now there's a plan.

But while the other card players are babbling about how literature is a lie, there is no reality and so on, our hero is having a revelation, a kind of short-circuit fizzing in his brain: the world is a mass of images and waves, "*une grosse boule de gaz fictif parcourue de flux d'intensité, d'orages d'images*" (27). Momentarily, though, through a book made of ashes, he glimpses "*un monde centaure, mi-lettres, mi-corps*" summoning him. "*Honore-nous! Fais-nous vivre!*" (50). And he immediately assumes his mission: "*Ah, j'avais trouvé ma baleine blanche, elle ne m'échapperait pas*" (28). Gone the simpering, withering scribbler of yore, this latter-day Ahab has been transformed into "*un système nerveux de fibres optiques...l'antenne des antennes, le grand décodeur, le Sigma des Sigmas, l'Alpha et l'Omega...*" (28).

And so he announces to his incredulous whist partners: "*Je vais écrire sur le monde...faire le tour du monde en un jour.*" Impossible, harrumph they. "*Très possible,*" says he, adding grandly, "*En littérature tout est possible.*"

For on that fateful exiquinoxial day, the world has revealed itself entirely to the henceforth omnipresent and omniscient I/eye whose ramblings constitute the text. Call it a dream, call me crazy, he says, but with his "*yeux ultimes, [s]es yeux de beryllium et de silice fondue, [s]es yeux d'insecte géant, de Grand Capricorne*" (31) he sees the entire world in its tiniest details. And the vision is etched in letters of fire in his brain: "*les langues, et avant elles les mots, et avant les mots les alphabets et les lettres et avant même, bien avant les lettres, les flux de particules élémentaires dont le Verbe, tout comme la matière ou la lumière, était fait de toute éternité, constituaient un univers en expansion infinie...*" (47).

It is clear where this is going: "*Le Verbe se faisait chair, et la chair Verbe!*" (47). And finally "*Je vis que cela était bon*" (51).

The universe exists now only in and by the words of this self-described “divin grammatologue” (31). Seeing, reading, and writing are now one: “je vis, je lus” and then “je lus, j’écrivis . . . **c’est pareil, okay?**” is a leitmotif with variants repeated throughout the text. Cardiac patients playing golf in Paarl, South Africa; a leaf falling in the rain forest of Brazil; a baby-sitter lying, strangled, in Manhattan—all words, all the same. In Saigon a beautiful young girl passes a display rack of roasted dogs—it’s all the same. Meanwhile, in the same paragraph, or perhaps the same sentence, a young mother is reading to her child in Dublin and the Ganges is going up in flames. It’s all the same.

In this planet of words, the writer is at once king, pimp, shoemaker, and unfaithful husband—but also deceived wife and a thousand other things. Empowered by the “electric force” of the words that converge toward him, “Tout cela je l’absorbe, tous ceux-là ou les sens ou les suis” (269). So, of course, he possesses all women, all the oriental sirens, sneaker-wearing blondes, plump peasants, and so forth that he encounters. And not just with his pen, he assures Mr. Fix.

Indeed, this entire planet of words is imbued with sexuality for “on peut aimer les lettres comme on aime les femmes” (517) since word and flesh are one. The long, curved eyelashes of a beautiful woman resemble the letter “ra” and her waist is as slim as an aleph. Alpha has an eye, gamma is genital, and omega has a cute petit cul (517). Small wonder, since in this new version of the creation, Amour, Day, white as paper, has emerged from earth’s generous flanks to unite with Erebus, the velvety, inky dark Night (56). Mother begets son begets mother in a “boucle incestueuse qui produit tout ce qui tombe sous le chef de la copulation du noir et du blanc, dont le Bien et le Mal, l’équinoxe et l’écriture et tout le reste” (56).

All of this is true, our narrator assures us. Good God, could I have made it up? Well, yes and no.

In a post scriptum to this long, exhilarating, but exhausting book, Olivier Rolin describes, with teasing modesty, what he was trying to do: “L’entreprise, l’objectif, consistait donc à décrire une journée du monde, sa prodigieuse diversité, l’unité qui fait que c’est un monde.” Like the omnipotent, omnipresent, and all-devouring “je” of the text, the author was trying to portray the world in all its banality, strangeness, and simultaneity, to create “un équivalent verbal de l’espace et de la multiplicité” (521).

The task was daunting but the solution was stunningly simple, although labor intensive. With the help of advisors and cultural attachés posted all around the world, Rolin amassed an avalanche of daily newspapers covering the events of March 21, 1989. After having them translated from 30 languages, he chose a total of 491 articles relating facts and factoids, earthquakes, crimes of passion, *Ripley’s Believe It or Not*-style record-breaking stunts, and weather reports. The

process of sorting, alphabetizing, classifying, and stitching them into a narrative took two years.

If the organizing principle seems unclear, it is perhaps because its logic owes more to Borges than to Descartes. With explicit references and implicit winks, there is also some Dickens (pathos), Rabelais (ribaldry—lots of that), Rimbaud (vowels), *Moby Dick*, *The Bible*, *le Petit Robert*, *People Magazine*, and a touch of *France 24* all-day television. Combining self-imposed formal constraints and unfettered inventiveness, it recalls Perec, while its virtuosic juxtaposition of burlesque comedy, grandiloquence, religious symbolism, dead-pan gumshoe reportage, and astonishingly beautiful imagery make it seem like an exponentially expanded version of Queneau's *Exercices de style*. It is also reminiscent of Flaubert—not the perfectionist who rigorously weighed the “justesse” of every word but the one who created the feckless Bouvard and Pécuchet and their doomed attempt to master all the knowledge in the world, or even a little bit of it.

The megalomaniacal narrator of *L'Invention du monde* is as self-conscious and self-celebratory as those harmless fools were heedless, though in their separate ways they are all self-deluding. The most important difference, however, is that beneath its comedy, bluster, and excess, *L'Invention du monde* is a matter of life and death. In its opening pages the speaker sees himself as Scheherezade: “Tu me tueras si je ne te divertis pas” (8). This master of words declares himself “celui qui ne s’arrête pas plus que ne meurt le récit, ni que la terre ne cesse de tourner...” for “il n’y a pas de temps, pas de lieu, pas d’histoire ni de géographie qui ne soit un pur jeu de lettres” (519). And yet this story must draw to a close, the book must end. So when those glorious torrents of words “qui ont la lourdeur de la terre et... la liberté des nuages” desert him, when letters fall into empty space, he is abandoned and alone. The joke, the story, and the world end in silence. And so, without further ado, “il se tut.”

Work Cited

Rolin, Olivier. *L'Invention du monde*. Paris: Seuil, 1993.

Shelley Temchin teaches French at Georgetown University. She has written on Flaubert, Sand, Cocteau, and Modiano.

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